

Transcript

Ben Brotemarkle

Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, is made possible in part by the Department of State Division of Historical Resources and the State of Florida. It's also made possible by the Jessie Ball du Pont fund and by the historic Rossiter House Museum and Gardens in Eau Gallie celebrating pioneer history, the natural environment and women's history. Available for weddings and events at rossiterhousemuseum.org. This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, on the web at myfloridahistory.org. I'm Ben Brotemarkle and coming up on the program, the 1902 Wylie G. Toomer house in Jacksonville.

Tim Gilmore

He was well known; he was a Confederate veteran. He ran for mayor in 1895. So, he was one of the one of the captains of industry in Jacksonville at that time.

Ben Brotemarkle

We'll discuss prohibition and unsanctioned immigration in the 1920s.

Connie Lester

Florida became tied to a transnational black market in the flow of people and liquor.

Ben Brotemarkle

And we'll talk about efforts to remember Union soldiers who died at the Battle of Olustee. All that ahead on Florida Frontiers.

In 1902, successful businessman Wylie G. Toomer built a Colonial Revival style house on the site of his former home, which burned down in Jacksonville's great fire of 1901. Tim Gilmore writes about Jacksonville history at jaxpsychogeo.com.

Tim Gilmore

The house was built for Wylie G. Toomer, who was Co-founder of the Wilson and Tumor Fertilizer Company, who was widely did tumor and Lorenzo Wilson. That company began in 1893 and soon became the largest fertilizer producer in Florida ended up producing more than 1,000,000 tons of fertilizer a year until it was bought by Kermit Agee Corporation in 1971 and closed down a few years after that. So, Wylie Toomer was quite the character he was well known, he was a Confederate veteran. He ran for mayor in 1895. So, he was one of the captains of industry in Jacksonville at that time.

Ben Brotemarkle

Wylie Toomer died in 1906 and his wife, Sue Pipes Toomer, lived in the house for another decade. She left the house to her son from a previous marriage, CN Wilsons, who worked for the Wilson and Toomer Fertilizer Company. Wilsons lived in the home for a short time and then it became a boarding house under Missus Elfie Slade. By 1946 Doctor John Henry Mitchell converted the house into a medical clinic,

which his son, Doctor John Lewis Mitchell, abandoned in 1988. During this period, in the mid 20th century, the neighborhood around the Toomer house changed significantly.

Tim Gilmore

You can look at photographs of the house at different times and see how the house changes. And its really kind of the house becomes, you know, a metaphor for the neighborhood. It was originally at 241 W Ashley Street downtown. This was a few blocks east of the Lavilla neighborhood, and it was close to a corner Church Street and Ashley St. was actually around the turn of the century, one of the most prominent residential areas in the city, and this was this was downtown, you know Duncan Fletcher, who had been Mayor of Jacksonville twice before he became senator, had a mansion there. There were a couple of senators who had had large houses there, so it was close to that intersection. It was a prominent area. And then, you know, as the 20th century war on what happened in really, cities all over America happened in Jacksonville and you had the flight to the suburbs, so it's interesting to look at the house at different time periods when it was built, you know, it's this Colonial Revival style house. When it was built it had two story porches and these grand columns out front, it had a windows block on top of the house. And overtime it became, you know, more utilitarian when the second story storage wasn't able to be maintained, they just removed it, they removed the widows block and so over time as it became Mitchell Clinic, they did a number of sadly kind of predictable things. You know, removing pocket doors, covering up fireplaces, covering up the ceilings and. You know, it was a pretty rough area for a time. It was close to First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, which at this time period was buying up more and more properties and somehow this house hung on. Mitchell Clinic operated until 1988 and then the house sat empty for a few years, but it was much worse for wear, but somehow managed to hang on through those most tumultuous years in the middle of the 20th century.

Ben Brotemarkle

After five years of sitting uninhabited, the house was moved in 1993, 91 years after it was built. New homeowners Mark and Gayle Reinsch relocated the home using an elaborate process. Tim Gilmore.

Tim Gilmore

So, they of course had to lift the house up. They split the house in two. And they put it on the backs of these trucks and moved it across 19 intersections downtown newspapers, you know, couldn't resist the word play. They called it a mobile home, things like that. People came out and it kind of became a parade. They had to take down telephone wires for this whole journey. And people watched it as it made its way to the river, actually. So, it makes its way 19 intersections through downtown. And that's just to get to St. John's River, where it stops for the night. And then the next it loads on a couple of barges, Mark Reinsch, who moved the house, who, who took over ownership with his wife Gayle 1993, and moved the house, describes this moment where it looked like for a second the barge was going to slip out from underneath the house and the house is going to pitch into the river. I don't know if that was very likely, but I can imagine that there were some moments of panic there. So, it's quite a sight this, this. House cut into two pieces on these barges moves under several bridges. You know, journeys down the St. John's River, down the Ortega River and moved on to what was an empty site on Lakeshore Blvd. Which is on the kind of inner West side of Jacksonville. So, you could drive down Lakeshore Blvd it's kind of this, this winding Rd. You could drive down Lake Shore and see it back there behind the trees and probably think that it looks like an old house or something. But you would have no idea this

incredible history that this house has had and this incredible journey across the St. John's River that it made.

Ben Brotemarkle

The original Wylie G. Toomer house burned down in Jacksonville's great fire of 1901 and was quickly replaced in 1902. When that house was lifted and moved in 1993, witnesses said that you could smell burnt remnants of the historic fire.

Tim Gilmore

Mark Lynch still talks about this, newspapers quoted Gayle Reinsch at the time saying that on the site where they moved it from, they excavated it a little bit. Just wondering, you know, what kinds of things they might find? And the thing that they found that really made the biggest impression was this stench that's kind of buried from the great fire of 1901, which, you know, was one of the largest urban conflagrations and U.S. history, certainly in southern history. And I've heard other people describe that kind of thing too, so it apparently is a phenomenon, you know, that dig down in certain places far enough if your elements are right, you can actually get a whiff of this remnants of the fire. From then, almost a century ago, you know now 120 years.

Ben Brotemarkle

After the tumor house was relocated in 1993, it served as a private residence for nearly three decades. The home is now for sale. Tim Gilmore.

Tim Gilmore

When they moved the house, they ended up having to while they were trying to get everything set up and ended up living in an apartment building nearby in Riverside. Unfortunately, a few years in, Gayle Reinsch was actually diagnosed with cancer, and so she passed away, just she was 51 years old. Sadly, this is in the late 1990s. Mark Reinsch continued to live in the house, raised their kids there and I think losing his life wife was really, it was her dream project in a lot of ways. He talks about how he had wanted to build a new house she loved historic houses, and he laughs about it and says she won. So, the house, he has done some really interesting things to it over the years. It still needs somebody who loves it to take it over. He's retiring and wants to move and hopefully the right person will find it and finish the job of restoring it.

Ben Brotemarkle

While there is restoration work left to be done, Mark Reinsch has restored much of the Toomer house to its former summer glory.

Tim Gilmore

He's undone a lot of the things that from an aesthetic standpoint, should never have been done to the house when it was a medical clinic, he actually had the original transom over the front door restored. He had it. But it was in pieces and had to be put back together and he's reinstalled the pocket doors. It's opened up the fireplaces that were covered over the high ceilings have been covered with drop ceilings, so he's really done a lot to bring the especially the interior back to its original feeling and you have to kind of stand there and think, wow, this has been a lot of different things.

Ben Brotemarkle

If you'd like to be a part of the Toomer house's future, the historic home can be yours for \$1.7 million. Tim Gilmore writes about Jacksonville history at jaxpsychogeo.com.

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Joining us now is Connie Lester, associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHES Digital Archiving project and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly. Connie, in the 1920s, prohibition provided an opportunity for those who would illegally import alcohol.

Connie Lester

Prohibition conjures images of speakeasies, bootleg whiskey, and shootouts with government agents, all of which occurred in the prohibition era. Florida had a special role in the era at the 18th Amendment initiated with easy access to Cuba and the Caribbean islands, and a porous 1100-mile coastline with many inlets and shallow waterways, the state emerged as an important conduit for thirsty Americans. As Lisa Linquist Door explains in her 2014 article in the Florida Historical Quarterly, European manufacturers shipped thousands of cases of cognac, whiskey, Scotch, gin, vodka, and wine to Havana and the Caribbean to be smuggled into the United States. Selling for \$4 to \$8 a case in Havana, the price rose to \$65 a case when brought ashore in Florida and increased again to more than \$200 a case by the time it reached inland buyer. But alcohol was not the only thing in the boats quietly coming ashore. In addition to prohibiting the manufacture and sale of alcohol, the United States also enacted 4 immigration restriction laws in 1921 that collectively limited the immigration in a way that favored northern over southern and Eastern European immigrants applying for admission to the country. Prior to 1921, a large percentage of the millions of new immigrants easily moved back and forth between the United States and their homeland. Now many of them were caught in the legal web of the new laws created and found themselves unable to return to their homes in the US after visits abroad. Those attempting to enter the US for the first time likewise found their dream of a new start blocked by the strict quota system. Their dilemma opened a new source of revenue for men already earning top dollar smuggling alcohol. With ships available, the routes well known and the strategies for evading law enforcement already well-established door rights undocumented immigrants as cargo were merely a logical extension of this trade. Florida became tied to a transnational black market in the flow of people and liquor.

Ben Brotemarkle

So, Connie, despite these new laws, Florida served as a popular destination for alcohol smugglers and for unsanctioned immigrants, right?

Connie Lester

They did, the emergence of Florida as a smuggling center rested on more than its geography. The growth of the state's tourism industry and the easy access to Havana by way of the plant and Flagler Railroad and shipping lines, provided steady movement between Florida and Cuba. For European

immigrants posing as tourists, it was not too difficult to hide in the throng of happy visitors, although officials in Cuba were alert to this pretense, many Europeans seeking passage to the US had enough money to play the happy tourist until their illicit transportation took them aboard for the short voyage to Florida. For immigrants, with means, the trip to Florida could be relatively comfortable with money to purchase passage in a cabin for the voyage, and forged documents identifying them as Cubans, a status that allowed them access to the United States. Some immigrants simply melted into the crowds at Florida ports. One Tampa smuggler, Mario Pelli, ran a highly successful operation with a well-deserved reputation in Florida, Cuba and Europe. Would be clients would contact him at his hotel and restaurant in Havana for passage on one of his eight boats plying the waters between Havana and Florida. He provided the unusual guarantee of a safe landing in Florida, having purchased official protection in Cuba and the US. The smuggling operations were so widely known that one French liner advertised you will clearly see that Cuba is a logical and ideal new world destination. For those old-world immigrants who are eager to avail themselves of the widespread opportunities and advantages and the broad equality of America. But who are, because of filled quotas or other misfortunes, denied admittance to the United States for most smuggle immigrants, however, the trip was dangerous and the end uncertain. Poorer men and women traveling on regular launches between the two countries often hit in coal bins or between cargo crates. Upon arrival, they might pretend to be part of the crew, often assisting regular passengers with their luggage in an effort to come ashore. Those travelling on smaller boats often found themselves in perilous situations. It was not unusual for smuggled immigrants to find themselves offloading crates of alcohol before being allowed to leave as door phrases it the smuggled became smugglers. Immigrants were abandoned on deserted islands and left to starve. Some were placed in the hole of the boat, which sailed around for several hours before the crew abandoned them in a deserted part of Cuba. If the Coast Guard found a smuggler's boat at sea, alcohol and immigrants might be tossed overboard. If they made it to Florida, immigrants were put off in isolated areas with no food and no knowledge of where to go. Many were captured by local law enforcement almost immediately. A 1925 US District Court case provided door with the details of one woman's experience with a smuggling operation out of Tarpon Springs. Adeline Marcinkus, a Lithuanian by birth, had lived in New Jersey from 1907 to 1921, who two children were American citizens. At the insistence of her husband and with the promise he would soon follow, she returned to Lithuania with the children. In December 1922, when he failed to arrive, she decided to make the journey to the US on her own with the children. Fearful that immigration officials would deny her entry, she sailed to Havana and secured passage for Florida. She and the children finally came ashore on the boat of a Tarpon spring sponge diver who was part of a larger network of smugglers. Left on a deserted shore in the middle of the night, the mother and children walked for some 3 or 4 miles until she flagged down a passing automobile. It was a police car. Unlike many other smuggled immigrant stories, we know this one because Miss Marcinkus testified to her experience in a federal case brought against the smuggler.

Ben Brotemarkle

That's an interesting story. So, what were the attitudes like toward undocumented immigrants in Florida in the 1920s?

Connie Lester

This was a period of intense nativism, and there was little sympathy for the plight of these men and women and children. The point of the immigration laws and quotas was to inhibit the settlement of

people most Americans saw as other people unworthy of life in the United States. Newspapers like the Atlanta Constitution described southern and Eastern Europeans in shocking language that denied their humanity. The Saturday Evening Post described them as burglars breaking into the United States. The farther one travelled from the coast, the stronger the animosity toward immigrants. If those living along the coast Express less acrimony, it was because they were realizing such a profit from their exploitation. As Door concludes, the potential of Florida as an entry point enables the flow of illicit alcohol and would be immigrants to become entangled in the process, connecting the state to a transnational commerce and goods and people that included Cuba and that continued despite the passage of laws to prohibit both. In the 1920s, the laws and enforcement officials could not effectively stop either.

Ben Brotemarkle

Thanks, Connie. Welcome. Connie Lester is associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHES Digital Archiving project and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly.

This is Florida Frontiers. Holly Baker has this report on new efforts to remember Union soldiers who died at the Battle of Olustee.

Holly Baker

During the American Civil War on February 20th, 1864, more than 10,000 union and Confederate soldiers confronted each other in a battle near Lake City in Baker County, Florida. Each side began with about 5000 troops, when the three-hour battle was over, 1861 Union soldiers and 946 Confederate soldiers lost their lives at what would be known as the Battle of Olustee during the Battle, 3 Black regiments fought alongside 10 white regiments on the side of the Union Army. Among the black regiments at the battle was the 54th Massachusetts infantry, depicted in the 1989 Academy award-winning film *Glory* starring Denzel Washington and Matthew Broderick. Doctor Barbara Gannon is assistant professor of military history at the University of Central Florida and a veteran of the United States Army. She is also the author of *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic* and *Americans Remember Their Civil War*.

Dr. Barbara Gannon

The Battle of Olustee was the largest battle of the Civil War that took place in Florida. Now it's a very, very interesting story and one which I sort of came upon slowly. I knew about the Battle of Olustee. I knew that the State Park only had Confederate memorials. But they had been put up by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the people who did all of those monuments, it seems. And I had heard a vague rumor the dead were still there. There were some dead from the bag. So, I had a student do an MBA thesis on Olustee and the battlefield and its preservation. So, what I realized he found out was the bodies. There are many bodies still there that they are union bodies that the Confederate bodies were removed and there was talk of a mass grave that was constructed just after the war with the Union dead and it was in a nearby African American cemetery. So, I thought, well, people mustn't know about this, because someone would do something, wouldn't they? And I found out people were very aware of it, and they seemed to be caught up in a bureaucratic inertia about doing anything about the fact that there are all these Union dead. Now people know about it. It's not part of the park narrative at all.

Holly Baker

There's no memorial to the Union dead, nor any mention of them at the visitor's center at Olustee Battlefield Historic State Park. So why has the memory of the Union soldiers of the United Daughters of the Confederacy managed the site until 1949, when the state of Florida assumed control of the grounds, continues to influence the narrative of the battle today? As Doctor Gannon explains, groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy actively suppressed the story of the Union soldiers who died there and opposed a memorial for them.

Dr. Barbara Gannon

They had approved that they could have one thing was 2014 and there was an explosion of local groups, including the United Daughters of the Confederacy, who are still with us, and the Sons of Confederate Veterans, and they opposed it and other Confederate heritage groups. So, it was put on hold. Now there's a new visitor center going to be built there and one of my ideas is to get a memorial for the Union soldiers and also make sure the interpretation at the new visitor center makes their story.

Holly Baker

Doctor Barbara Gannon has enlisted the help of her students at the University of Central Florida in order to bring attention to the Union soldiers who fought and died at the Battle of Olustee.

Dr. Barbara Gannon

And the focus of the class I'm doing now, we know a great deal about it, is to identify what individuals were left behind as dead and therefore are likely in the mass grave. So, we're just identifying who was left behind to advocate and make people understand they were real men who lived and died and served our nation and that they had their own stories. So that's what we're doing in my class now.

Holly Baker

The Confederate soldiers who died during the Battle of Olustee were given proper burials nearby and a monument was erected in their honor, while the Union dead were left in a mass grave and forgotten. Doctor Barbara Gannon and her students are making sure that they're finely remembered and given the honors they deserve.

Dr. Barbara Gannon

There's no memorial to the Union that there. There's only the Union debt. We have found the evidence in the newspapers. So, this is a direct erasure of what I call the interracial coalition that preserved the Union and freed the slaves. It was very conscious, and we're not going to tolerate it. I intend to work as much as I can and I don't think this is a political issue with people of all sides who understand that U.S. soldiers need to be honored, particularly those who gave their last full measure for the United States. But this won't stop until it's complete. And I think there's a lot of dedicated people, faculty and students, and civil war people who have civil war interests who will support us.

Holly Baker

For Florida Frontiers. I'm Holly Baker, public history coordinator for the Florida Historical Society and archivist at the Library of Florida History and Cocoa.

Ben Brotemarkle

You've been listening to Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. Please join us right here again next week. Until then, find us anytime online at myfloridahistory.org and on Facebook at Florida Historical Society. Production assistance for Florida Frontiers comes from Holly Baker and Connie Lester. The program is edited by John White. Have a great week, I'm Ben Brotemarkle.

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