

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 Rossitter House Museum and Gardens in Eau Gallie, celebrating pioneer history, the natural environment, and women's history. Available for weddings and events at rossitterhousemuseum.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, La Florida, the Interactive Digital Archive of the Americas.

Amy Anderson

You don't know what you're going to find until you start reading through them. We really hit a treasure trove with some of these documents.

Ben Brotemarkle

We'll discuss the 1968 Teacher's Strike.

Connie Lester

The statewide walkout of 27,000 teachers on February 19, 1968, was the nation's first statewide teachers strike.

Ben Brotemarkle

And we'll talk about the "Bending Toward Justice: Ocoee Massacre" exhibit. All that ahead on Florida Frontiers.

La Florida, the Interactive Digital Archive of the Americas, accessible online at laflorida.org, brings to life the diverse population of Spanish colonial Florida in Saint Augustine. Amy Anderson is project manager for the La Florida Interactive Digital Archive.

Amy Anderson

We love Florida history, so our fundamental goal at the beginning was to be able to share the research, in an interactive and accessible way. So, accessibility is the project goal at its core, bringing the Florida past to the largest audience possible, and by doing that in an innovative way combined with rigorous research, our hope is to increase the curiosity and interest about Florida's early history.

Ben Brotemarkle

To create the different aspects of this digital archive, the La Florida team used records dating back to 1594. As Amy Anderson explains, the Lost Voices portion of the website was recently completed.

Amy Anderson

For this project, we utilize the entire collection of the Saint Augustine Parish Archive. This archive is the oldest surviving parish archive in the United States, including Puerto Rico, with records dating back to 1594, like you said. The documents are sacramental documents in nature, which means they're baptisms, confirmations, marriages, and death and burial. The records are organized into 16 books, and then fourteen boxes, and by boxes, literal boxes with loose leaf pages in them that were not always in order, so that kept things interesting. So, between those books and boxes there's over 8200 pages, and these documents are varying in conditions. Some are worm-eaten and water damaged, a couple are laminated from early preservation attempts, and of course they're in varying languages. Majority are in Spanish, there's about 1000 in Latin because why not? And then a handful are in English. And they're also handwritten, obviously. And what we learned is every scribe is different. So, we had various scribes keeping these records and we do have a couple that are just gorgeous, I mean, aesthetically pleasing documents. We have a couple that are a little more difficult to read, to say the least. For this project, for Lost Voices, our time frame was 1594 to 1821. We felt that cut off for Florida being transferred as a US territory was a good place to stop. But the records do extend until about 1888. So, if for some reason, your passions extend past colonial Florida, we do have some stuff on the site in that area as well.

Ben Brotemarkle

In 2012, the La Florida team was granted permission to transcribe and digitize the Saint Augustine colonial era documents and make them accessible online. The next step was to find funding to translate the documents and make the translations available on the website.

Amy Anderson

So, in 2019, we were ambitious and applied for a grant with the National Archives for \$250,000, and spoiler alert, we won, which was wonderful. And with that grant, and support from the Hough Family Foundation, the Lastinger Family Foundation, and Frankie Duckwall Foundation, we were able to start the next big phase which was transcription and translation. We know a brilliant paleographer based in Sevilla, Star Gonzalez, who agreed to transcribe all 8200 plus pages, she ended up knowing Latin, which you know those pesky documents that I was complaining about? She was not only able to transcribe them for us, but she translated the Latin into Spanish, which really helped streamline our translation process. You know, with one transcriber, 3 translators, and then seven of us working on data registration, which was collecting all possible data points. You know, we had names, ages, races, familial connections, places of origin. Put it bluntly, we had over 30 spreadsheets and some of those had over 250 columns, over 16,000 rows, you know, we wanted to extract every morsel of data from these documents to make sure we didn't miss anything. And then the final step was working with the wonderful tech team in southern Spain, who showed us how to take our data, translate it into a language a database could read, and then migrate it so that it's in the format you see on the site.

Ben Brotemarkle

Other aspects of the laflorida.org website include short video presentations about selected residents of Spanish colonial Florida, an interactive map section, and a fun feature that allows users to transcribe e-mail messages into colonial era scripts. Amy Anderson says that the La Florida website is useful for historians, genealogists, and the general public.

Amy Anderson

We spent a lot of time talking about potential audiences for this project when we first began development. We decided we wanted to create a site that had appealed to the widest audience possible. You know, obviously we wanted students of Florida history and professional scholars, grad students, but you know, we wanted genealogists, we wanted people that were interested in Florida. Tourists, you know, you don't have to be getting a dissertation to get something from the site, we anticipate that everyone can find something that they like on the site. And then for the value, I mean these parish records include biographical data for more than 70,000 people. This information includes all kinds of insight into the daily life of Saint Augustine. You know, Ben, I'll tell you a number of these individuals who appear in these records, this is the only time we see them in historical records. And you know I mentioned that there's baptisms, confirmation, marriage, death. There are some people that are born in Saint Augustine, get confirmed, get married, and die. So, we've got them all through the records, and it's almost like time traveling. You're following them on this amazing journey, so I think there's an amazing amount of value. These records show how diverse colonial Florida was. And again, I think a lot of people will get something out of it that again, you don't have to be a professional scholar to get and learn something off of this site.

Ben Brotemarkle

While collating, transcribing, translating, and digitizing these documents, Amy Anderson and the La Florida team were introduced to fascinating everyday people who lived in Spanish colonial Saint Augustine.

Amy Anderson

One of my favorites, just that's on there right now is Luisa de Abrego, and I don't want to spoil too much. I think people should definitely check out the site, but hers is a story. She's a free black domestic servant who boards the ship from Seville to Saint Augustine. It's about 1565. Once she's in Florida, she marries a blacksmith from Segovia, Miguel Rodriguez. First, this is the oldest documented Christian marriage in the continental US, so that on its own is incredible. The fact that it's between a free black woman, and essentially a Spanish conquistador, making it an interracial marriage is incredible. So that document on its own was already outstanding. And then the fact that we found it in the Spanish Inquisition documents housed in Mexico City, where it becomes this bigamy case because she thinks she's got two husbands now, she doesn't know her first marriage was legitimate or not. It's like peeling an onion. You can't, you can't get enough of it. So that was really incredible. And I think it shows the value of these documents, you don't know what you're going to find until you start reading through them. We really hit a treasure trove with some of these documents.

Ben Brotemarkle

One of the most potentially useful aspects of the laflorida.org website is the digital visualization tool.

Amy Anderson

We call it the DVT just because it's obviously a mouthful. Again, we wanted to make the information accessible. So early in our beta testing sessions, you know, we're working with a lot of content, and you were learning a lot of stuff, but there was some points that you just wanted to directly ask a question. So, we created the DVT for that very purpose. On the DVT you can ask questions like how many men versus women were in Saint Augustine during you know, 1594 to 1821. And you'll get an infographic

that shows you the data. And then what's nice, you know, if you start thinking, have more questions to ask it after you get involved, and now, OK, how many of those men and women were enslaved? How many were free? And sometimes the answers are not what you expect. Like you think you know the demographic of Spanish Florida, and then you start playing with the filters and working on places of origin. And then you see that people from Scotland, Croatia, Welsh, Spanish Florida isn't just Spanish. So, it's really interesting and the DVT is a great way to kind of help show those infographics in a different way, and you're able to kind of play with it and start asking thought provoking questions.

Ben Brotemarkle

Amy Anderson is project manager for La Florida, the Interactive digital Archive of the Americas, online at laflorida.org.

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Ben Brotemarkle

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, topics such as book banning and how history should be taught are being debated as political issues right now. Unfortunately, contentious debates about education are not new.

Connie Lester

Most of us think about education in schools from the perspective of our own experiences as children. As adults, however, we know that education has been, and still is, a source of social and political friction. What will be taught, how it will be taught? Who will be taught and how education will be funded roil the public discourse continuously. Beginning with Reconstruction and continuing through the next century, Southern states fought to prevent the education of black and white children in the same classrooms. More than a matter of spatial proximity, the separation of children by race permitted a two-tiered public education that operated against black economic and social advancement in a world where education increasingly determines social and economic status. Although the US Supreme Court ruled school segregation unconstitutional in 1954, Southern states delayed school integration until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Battles also broke out over the teaching of evolution and prayers in the classroom, implementing educational standards for teachers proved to be a lengthy and contentious process. Books in libraries, school curriculum, the drawing of school district boundaries, consolidation of schools, and even school start times also prompted fierce public debate.

Ben Brotemarkle

Now Connie, the Florida Historical Quarterly, has published some insightful articles about education.

Connie Lester

Indeed, it has. As you would expect most of the articles focused on school integration issues, but they often approach the history in unexpected and interesting ways. The quarterly has published several

articles on sports, race, and education. More recently, we have published articles on the long-term effects of the closing of schools in black communities, and the impact of race in higher education. Recently I was reminded of a prize-winning article we published that looks at Florida education as a labor issue. Written by Jody Baxter Noll, at that time a PhD candidate at Georgia State University, the article is titled "We Are Not Hired Help: The 1968 Florida Teachers Strike and the Formation of Modern Florida." The statewide walkout of 27,000 teachers on February 19th, 1968, was the nation's first statewide teachers strike. Although Florida schools were not yet integrated, Black educators and their union, the Florida State Teachers Association, joined white teachers and the Florida Education Association in the walkout. As Noll argues, the strike occurred at a pivotal moment in Florida history, that is the transition of the state from rural to urban political control, and the implementation of a business efficiency model for government. The election of Republican Claude Kirk to the governorship in 1966, highlighted the transformative political potential. As Noll notes, Kirk recognized the importance of improvements in education to attracting jobs to the state. "Florida can't just live on sunshine," he said in a campaign speech. "To convince men with payrolls to come to Florida will tell them education is moving from 37th in the nation to 1st in the nation." In his centering of education, Kirk opened the door to public discourse on the state of Florida schools, a discourse in which the teacher's union, and increasing teacher militancy, would play an important role.

Ben Brotemarkle

How did Kirk implement his plan to focus on education reform?

Connie Lester

Kirk proposed to improve education by trimming the fat with no new funding, and importantly for him, no new taxes to pay for educational improvements. Noll summarized Kirk's position in this way: by viewing education as an investment in Florida's future, Kirk promoted the new conservative belief that an involved government could improve business climates, but his no new tax platform required him to push for tax efficiency-based reform rather than an increase in funding. While teachers supported the governor's call for educational improvement, they decidedly opposed the trim the fat approach. Decades of poor funding did not enamor them to the idea that more trimming would meet the needs. In May 1967, after voting to impose sanctions against the hiring of teachers from out of state, and censuring Kirk in the state legislature, teachers met in Orlando and demanded a special session of the legislature to address education issues. Kirk responded with a 30-minute televised program in which he agreed to appoint a 30-member citizen panel to discuss the issues and make recommendations for the legislature. State leaders defended the teachers, pointing out that their concerns were for outdated textbooks, decrepit buildings, and lack of air conditioning, not salaries as Kirk had claimed. Kirk capitulated and agreed to a special session of the state legislature in January 1968, hoping to avoid a walkout. When the Citizen Committee of businessmen called for a tax increase to fund education, Kirk had the cover he needed. He agreed, but his plan provided for less than half of the increase to go for funding education. In addition, he planned to strip teachers of their autonomy, and place businessmen in positions of administrative authority, replacing traditional educational administrators. Finally, increases in salary were to be based on merit, and teachers would lose continuing contracts. At the close of the special session on February 19th, the teachers walked out. The most active counties in the strike were Dade, Hillsborough, Pinellas, and Duval counties, but all counties participated except Taylor County.

Ben Brotemarkle

Connie, the teacher strike was not entirely successful, but it did have an impact.

Connie Lester

It did. Teachers found support and inspiration in other social movements of the period, including the Civil Rights movement. Indeed, the strike brought black and white teachers together in what Noll characterized as a heightened social awareness. The strike had strong support from Florida's NAACP and black newspapers in the state. The strike failed to garner similar support from whites, who fell back on demands for law and order. As Noll concludes, despite their best efforts, Florida teachers failed to convince a skeptical public that they had their children's best interests at heart, and Kirk effectively shifted the debate to one over union control within the state. Moreover, he used gendered language to imply that by striking, teachers who were predominantly women were abandoning their social role. Finally, the public perception of teaching as a low or non-skilled position enabled Kirk to hire unqualified substitutes and minimize disruption of class instruction. Three weeks after the walkout began, it ended with Kirk able to claim that he kept the schoolhouse doors open, making only minor concessions to the teachers. And yet, Noll claims that the strike shifted the ground for public service employees in important ways. In his words, the teachers were successful in staving off calls for merit pay and anti-tenure policies. Their battle against Kirk began as a call for improvements in Florida's education system, but it also became a battle over exactly how education would operate in the rapidly changing state. Most importantly, the teachers also forced the legislature to address the issue of public sector bargaining rights. The writing of a new Florida constitution in 1968 provided a provision for public employees to have the right to collectively bargain, but not to strike. In 1969 and again in 1973, the Florida Supreme Court affirmed the collective bargaining rights. In making these gains, Noll asserts that the 1968 teachers strike transformed Florida into a modern state.

Ben Brotemarkle

And yet the debates about education continue. Thanks, Connie. 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 look at an online exhibit exploring a difficult part of Florida's past, the Ocoee massacre.

Holly Baker

In the weeks leading up to Election Day of 1920, all over the South, African Americans registered to vote in record numbers. Voting efforts in Ocoee, Florida, near Orlando were led by two local black businessmen, July Perry and Mose Norman. Despite threats from the local Ku Klux Klan, African Americans in Ocoee showed up in large numbers determined to vote. On Election Day, November 2nd, a white mob attacked black residents, murdering at least fifty in a conflict now known as the Ocoee Massacre. July Perry was stabbed, shot, and lynched. Mose Norman vanished from a coy never to be seen again. More than 20 black homes were burned down, along with two churches, and one fraternal lodge. More than 300 African Americans were displaced, and their property was transferred to white owners. Until fairly recently, the Ocoee Massacre was a dark secret that no one in the community talked about. Digital archivist and metadata editor Geoffrey Cravero, along with the team at the University of

Central Florida in Orlando, have created a digital exhibit titled "Bending Toward Justice" that brings attention to voting rights through the lens of the Ocoee massacre.

Geoffrey Cravero

Our "Bending Towards Justice" project, or BTJ as we refer to it, is a multi-level digital exhibit that builds on community and academic partnerships that we've established through RICHES, which is our larger umbrella project that stands for the Regional Initiative for Collecting History, Experiences, and Stories. BTJ exhibits present documents, maps, photographs, oral histories, and secondary sources to engage both the public and scholars and dialogues on racial inequality. BTJ envisions multiple digital exhibits, one of which is complete, with several others in various stages of development. The term Bending Toward Justice comes from an 1853 quote from abolitionist Minister Theodore Parker, who said "the arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice." Doctor Martin Luther King Junior modified the quote during the civil rights movement, when he proclaimed, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." This could be interpreted to mean that a passive wait for justice will be rewarded. It could also imply that justice is conferred by those of superior moral, political, or social status on those less fortunate. Our digital exhibit project builds on a different interpretation. The exhibits planned and presented in this digital space document the ways in which African Americans bent the arc toward justice themselves through their everyday lives and under extraordinary conditions.

Holly Baker

The first Bending Toward Justice digital exhibit is titled "Voting Rights and Voter Suppression," and is designed to encourage and facilitate discussion and research on the right to vote, efforts to suppress the vote, and manipulation of voting outcomes.

Geoffrey Cravero

The study of voting rights in Florida is tied to the events in the town of Ocoee in the election of 1920. The site of the most violent Election Day in Florida history, and perhaps in national history, Ocoee brought together the volatile issues of race, gender, access to economic opportunity, and access to the ballot in a single place and moment. Understanding the history of voting rights and voter suppression through both the lens of events in Ocoee, and also within the context of national efforts, provides a starting point for understanding the implications of the Ocoee Massacre. The exhibit is divided into 3 phases. The first phase, Ocoee, A Case Study, frames the Ocoee massacre within the context of local, state, and national events that acted to both advance and suppressed economic, political, and social rights of black Americans. This section focuses on the town of Ocoee itself, and the events of 1920 that inflamed the mob action, the efforts of Black Ocoee citizens to rebuild their lives, and the local and national investigations that followed the massacre. We also look at the immediate repercussions of the massacre, including expelling all black people from their homes, the selling of their lands to whites, Ocoee becoming a sundown town, where blacks were not welcome after dark, and the public call to put the incident behind them and never speak of it again.

Holly Baker

The second phase of the Bending toward Justice project focuses on a brief history of voting since 1865 and examines the legislation that expanded and limited voting rights. US Supreme Court decisions,

extra-legal efforts to suppress the vote, and the actions of black Americans to exercise their right to vote.

Geoffrey Cravero

The second phase is broken up into three chapters, expanding the right to vote, which examines constitutional amendments as well as state and federal legislation to expand voting rights, limiting the right to vote demonstrates various methods that have been used to suppress the vote and disenfranchise black voters, such as violence and intimidation, poll taxes, literacy tests, multiple ballot boxes, and denying the ballot to those with felony convictions, and finally shaping voting outcomes looks at how strategies such as redistricting, various types of gerrymandering, a commission government, and current voting controversies such as mail in ballots, voter ID laws, campaign finance reform, and others are implemented to shape the outcomes of elections.

Holly Baker

The 3rd and final phase of Bending toward Justice examines the history of racial equality, voting rights, and social justice. Connecting to the present day, the exhibit explores the ways in which the 100th anniversary of the Ocoee massacre provided an opportunity for reflection. Geoffrey Cravero.

Geoffrey Cravero

We examine what the town looks like today and how the racial dynamics have changed, and we look at national events that coincided with the centennial anniversary commemoration, some of which include the presidential election of 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement, and, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic. We also cover the framing events that led up to that 100 year commemoration, and we provide links and description of other exhibits, community events, newspaper journal, documentary film, TV news, and podcast coverage. And the final chapter is the conclusion where we bring the three phases together to wrap up the exhibit. And in that we've included a song by Ruth King and a poem by Veleda Fluellen that were both inspired by the events of 1920. We have an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources that follows the exhibit, and visitors can move through it in a straightforward manner, or they can select individual sections of the exhibit to view on their own. The broad coverage of the Ocoee Massacre Centennial brought the event from the shadows of history into the glare of public scrutiny, prompting state legislative action. It's now in the regional and national lexicon on democracy and race. Nonetheless, there remains much to be done. The recognition of the Ocoee massacre holds out the possibility for public dialogues on race, democracy, and capitalism. Those difficult conversations have not yet occurred but providing access to the multiple efforts to confront the past during this commemorative year, may provide the opening we need for those fundamental.

Holly Baker

You can find the "Voting Rights and Voter Suppression" exhibit, along with the future Bending Toward Justice projects by visiting bendingtowardjustice.cah.ucf.edu. There are living exhibits that will be added to overtime, so keep checking back periodically for new material. For Florida Frontiers, I'm Holly Baker, public history coordinator for the Florida Historical Society, and archivist at the Library of Florida History in 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 Connie Lester and Holly Baker. The program is edited by Jon White. Have a great week. I'm Ben Brotemarkle.

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