

HIDDEN FIGURES

Unsung pioneers who helped transform the Sunshine State

By Peggy Macdonald

FLORIDA MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY



FRANCISCO MENENDEZ

Captain Francisco Menéndez was on the verge of being lost to the mists of time before historian Jane Landers' pioneering research placed him at the forefront of the complex history of transatlantic slavery. In 1726, Menéndez was among a group of men and women who committed the act of "theft of self" by running away from plantations in the British colony of South Carolina to live as free people in Spanish Florida. In exchange for sanctuary, runaway slaves were required to convert to Catholicism and complete four years of royal service before achieving freedom.

Menéndez led a militia of blacks who proved their loyalty in defense of the crown and then successfully petitioned the governor for their freedom. Located two miles north of St. Augustine, Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, or Fort Mose, was designed to protect the walled city against British attacks. Fort Mose was also significant because it was the first free black town in the present-day United States.

The British colonies provided no protections for enslaved families, who were treated as property under the law. At Fort Mose, freedmen and women could keep their families together. Marriages and baptisms were sanctioned by the church.

Landers has continued to chronicle the transatlantic journeys of Francisco Menéndez. Her groundbreaking work on Fort Mose with historical archaeologist Kathleen Deagan led to the creation of the Fort Mose Historic State Park. Although the settlement's structures disappeared generations ago, the history of the United States' oldest free black town demonstrates there were alternatives to slavery in early America, at least in Spanish Florida.

MATHESON HISTORY MUSEUM



AUGUSTUS STEELE

Augustus Steele was one of the first New Yorkers to follow the Florida dream. Born in Massachusetts just five years after the drafting of the U.S. Constitution, Steele lived in New York and Georgia before moving to the Florida territory in 1825, the year after Tallahassee was established as its capital. He founded a newspaper and became an acquaintance of Gov. William Pope Duval.

Steele soon relocated to the Gulf Coast near the future site of Tampa, using his Tallahassee political connections to become a deputy customs collector and postmaster at the mouth of the Hillsborough River, according to historian Murray Laurie's 1999 book, *The Matheson House of Gainesville, Florida*.

In 1834, Steele persuaded Florida's territorial legislature to carve out a section of Alachua County, which once stretched from the Georgia border to Port Charlotte, to create Hillsborough County. Gov. Duval appointed Steele as the first judge of the county he founded. In 1840 and 1842, Steele, a Democrat, was elected to represent Hillsborough County in the territorial legislature.

In 1843, Steele moved up the coast to a 168-acre island. He purchased all the buildings on Depot Key that survived the hurricane of October 1842 for \$227, Laurie noted. He renamed the island Atsena Otie, Native American for "Cedar Island"—now Cedar Key. Steele's fortunes took a turn for the worse in 1862, when the Union blockaded Cedar Key and other Florida ports shortly after the state seceded and joined the Confederacy. Steele evacuated to Gainesville and died in 1864. He is buried at Evergreen Cemetery. His portrait hangs on the wall in his daughter Augusta Florida Steele Matheson's 1867 home in downtown Gainesville.

Business magnates such as **Henry Morrison Flagler**, **Henry Bradley Plant** and **Napoleon Bonaparte Broward** typically receive the lion's share of recognition for shaping modern Florida. But there were countless lesser-known pioneers from Florida's past who made a difference in their communities and established many groundbreaking firsts. In the next several pages, you'll learn of the significant contributions of some of these hidden figures of Florida history.

STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA



MAY MANN JENNINGS

Known as the most powerful woman in Florida at a time when women lacked the right to vote, May Mann Jennings' legacy surpasses her role as wife to Florida Gov. William Sherman Jennings. In fact, she sometimes counteracted her husband's policies, as shown in her successful campaign to establish the first state park in Florida in the Everglades, even though her husband was a major proponent of Everglades drainage during his time in office (1901 to 1905). Royal Palm Park was dedicated in 1916 and became the nucleus of Everglades National Park in 1947.

May Mann Jennings was a powerful crusader for women's rights. In 1915, she became president of the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs, whose membership totaled more than 10,000 women. In that same year, the campaign for women's suffrage was starting to gear up in Florida. Jennings convinced the Federation to endorse suffrage, even though it was still viewed as controversial.

Jennings helped establish the first State Board of Forestry and was active in too many state boards and commissions to list here, at a time when "women were either politically disenfranchised or were viewed with skepticism and ridiculed by their male counterparts," observed Linda Vance, in her 1980 University of Florida doctoral dissertation. As the country prepares to celebrate the centennial anniversary in 2020 of the passage of the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote, May Mann Jennings is a finalist to be added to the Florida Women's Hall of Fame.

STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA



MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE

Mary McLeod Bethune also made it her mission to educate African Americans. The 15th of 17 children born to previously enslaved parents, Mary was the first of the McLeod children to be born in freedom.

Bethune's belief that education was the key to opportunity for African Americans was shaped when, as a child, a white girl snatched a children's book out of her hands, telling her only white people could learn to read. Education was a luxury Bethune's family could not afford — their children's labor was needed in the cotton fields. By the age of 9, Bethune could pick 250 pounds of cotton a day. When a Presbyterian mission school for black children opened near the family home in rural Mayesville, South Carolina, Bethune begged for the chance to go to school to learn to read.

Bethune later attended Scotia Seminary in Concord, North Carolina — the first institute of higher education for black women, established in 1867 — and Moody Bible College in Chicago. Her dream to serve as a missionary in Africa was thwarted when the Presbyterian Missionary Board told her that black missionaries were not permitted to serve there. So Bethune directed her energies toward educating girls in Florida.

In 1904, Bethune opened the Daytona Literary and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls in Daytona Beach. In 1923, the school became coeducational and merged with Jacksonville's Cookman Institute. In 1931, the school changed its name to Bethune-Cookman College. Today, Bethune-Cookman University continues to fulfill Bethune's dream of sending black college graduates into the world. In 2020, a statue of Mary McLeod Bethune will replace Confederate General Edmund Kirby Smith's statue in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda.

VOICES FROM THE EARTH



DR. ESTHER HILL HAWKS

Another pioneer in the establishment of Freedmen's Bureau schools in Florida was Dr. Esther Hill Hawks, an 1857 graduate of the New England Female Medical College. At the start of the Civil War, Dr. Hawks — an abolitionist — offered her services to the Union Army. But because she was a woman, she was not welcome as a physician. Instead, Dr. Hawks became a teacher for the National Freedman's Relief Association and joined her husband, Dr. John Milton Hawks, in Beaufort, South Carolina, at Hospital No. 10, a military hospital for the Union Army's first official black troops. Dr. Hawks chronicled her experiences providing medical and educational services to freedmen in South Carolina and Florida in a series of letters collected in the 1984 book, *A Woman Doctor's Civil War*, edited by Gerald Schwartz.

For three weeks, while her husband was on a secret mission to Florida, Dr. Hawks unofficially commanded the hospital as its chief physician. In her diary, Dr. Hawks suggested that she would not have been allowed to run the hospital if her patients had been white men. She also provided medical services at the battlefield. After the Battle of Olustee, Florida's only major Civil War battle, Dr. Hawks treated wounded black soldiers from the 54th Massachusetts Infantry.

At war's end, the Drs. Hawks joined other Union army officers and established a freedmen's colony in Volusia County at Port Orange. Esther founded what may have been the first interracial school in Florida and the nation. Located in Union-occupied Jacksonville, the school served black and white students, but faced resistance from parents. Due to declining attendance in Jacksonville, Esther opened a Freedmen's Bureau school in Port Orange, where she offered her services as a doctor and teacher without pay. Sadly, by 1869 most of the freedmen's families had left the colony, and the school Esther established was torched in resistance to integrated learning. Before her death in 1906, Esther was elected an honorary member of the New Hampshire Association of Military Surgeons.

STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA



VICENTE MARTÍNEZ YBOR AND IGNACIO HAYA

In 1886, President Grover Cleveland dedicated the Statue of Liberty at Bedloe's Island. That same year, Tampa's Ybor City emerged as a new industrial center and safe space for Spanish, Cuban, and Sicilian immigrants. Ignacio Haya, a Spanish cigar manufacturer from New York, and his friend Vicente Martínez Ybor determined that Tampa would be an ideal location for the cigar industry due to its proximity to reliable transportation and its notorious humidity, which "supplied a natural humidior suitable to tobacco leaf," Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta wrote in their 1998 book, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985*.

Martínez Ybor and Haya's planned community included 111 acres of land in a grid pattern, with Havana-inspired brick factories and courtyards; Spanish style wrought iron railings and balconies; and Southern shotgun houses. Martínez Ybor recruited Cubans and Spaniards to start work in his new three-story brick cigar factory, where workers would soon produce premium hand-rolled, pure Havana cigars. By May 1886, Martínez Ybor had recruited almost 220 cigar workers. However, it was a Haya employee who produced Ybor City's first cigar, Mormino and Pozzetta observed. Cuban workers at Martínez Ybor's factory were already on strike because he had hired a Spanish bookkeeper.

"In 1900 Tampa cigarmakers earned \$2 million in wages, making them the highest paid per capita and the most concentrated work force in the state," Mormino and Pozzetta noted. "Even more dramatic was the increase in total product: In 1886 Ybor City operatives produced one million cigars, which climbed to 20 million in 1900 and peaked at 410 million in 1919."

A century later, visitors can discover the history of Ybor City at the Ybor City Museum State Park.

STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA



Buffalo Tiger pinning badge on Don Osceola.

BUFFALO TIGER

William Buffalo Tiger grew up in the Everglades in the 1920s before any roads traversed it. He described his traditional Miccosukee upbringing in his 2002 autobiography, *Buffalo Tiger: A Life in the Everglades*, co-authored by Harry Kersey. Besides learning how to hunt, Tiger eventually picked up a little English, which led to his selection as the tribal spokesperson in 1953.

At the time, the Eisenhower administration was preparing to implement the Truman-era policy of Indian termination, or removal of federal supervision over Native American tribes in favor of complete assimilation. Tiger testified before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Indian Affairs, whose five members included two senators from Florida, George Smathers and Claude Pepper. Tiger made the case that the Miccosukee tribe simply wanted to be left alone. “We just wanted to live on the land the way we had always lived on it,” Tiger wrote in his autobiography. Nonetheless, the federal government was reluctant to recognize the Miccosukees’ sovereignty.

This led to a timely invitation from communist revolutionary Fidel Castro, who had recently become prime minister of Cuba. In 1959, Tiger traveled to Cuba to meet with Castro, who agreed to recognize the Miccosukee Tribe as a sovereign nation, separate from the Seminole Tribe of Florida and the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma.

“He promised us that if we had a hard time living in the United States, our homeland, then Cuba was open for us any time,” Tiger wrote.

Taking advantage of Cold War tensions between the U.S., the Soviet Union and Cuba gave the Miccosukees the upper hand. In 1962, the Miccosukee Tribe received federal recognition. The Miccosukee Tribe elected Buffalo Tiger its first tribal chair, a position he held from 1962 to 1985.

MATHESON HISTORY MUSEUM



Johnson Chestnut was a trustee of Union Academy.

JOHNSON CHESTNUT

In 1845, Florida entered the Union as a slave state. Cotton was one of its biggest cash crops. On the eve of the Civil War, approximately half of Florida’s population was enslaved, including Johnson Chestnut, who arrived in Alachua County in 1854 with Thomas Evans Haile and Esther “Serena” Chesnut Haile. The Hailes relocated from Camden, South Carolina, to establish a cotton plantation on the outskirts of Gainesville.

Although no known picture remains of Johnson Chestnut, visitors to the Historic Haile Homestead at Kanapaha Plantation can view examples of his work throughout the plantation house, built by enslaved laborers between 1854 and 1856. A beautifully constructed dresser Chestnut made is on view in the nursery, where enslaved women likely cared for the youngest of the Hailes’ 15 children.

Serena Haile inherited Johnson Chestnut from her father, John Chesnut. Johnson Chestnut’s actual surname is not known. A deed on file with Alachua County Clerk of the Court lists Chestnut and other enslaved people who were distributed to Haile according to the terms of her father’s will. They are mentioned by their first names only. After emancipation, part of the process of moving from slavery to freedom involved choosing a name. To this day, descendants of the slave-owning Chesnuts have one “t” in their name, while the descendants of the freedman Johnson Chestnut have two.

After emancipation, Chestnut settled in Gainesville, where the majority of city residents were African American after the Civil War. He was elected to the City Commission and served from 1868 to 1869. He also joined the board of trustees of the Gainesville Freedmen’s Bureau school, Union Academy. Chestnut started a political dynasty in Gainesville, where generations of Chestnuts have served as community leaders. Today, Charles Chestnut IV serves on the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners, where he’s working with local organizations on the lengthy process of truth and reconciliation as the community examines the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow-era lynching in Alachua County.

STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA



JOHN COCORIS

The sponge industry was once centered in the Mediterranean. In the 1880s, John Cheyney transformed Tarpon Springs into a supplier of sponges for the U.S. market, building sponge processing warehouses and christening the first sponge fishing boat. In 1896, John Cocoris revolutionized the Florida sponge industry by making it more efficient. While working for Cheyney, Tarpon Springs' largest sponge distributor, Cocoris and his brothers — George, Constantine, and Elias — introduced deep-sea sponge diving methods used in the Aegean Sea. In 1905, Cocoris brought a crew of Greek divers and equipment to Tarpon Springs to increase sponge yields by diving for them instead of using long poles to hook them. When the first diver surfaced after surveying the area, he reported that there were enough sponges in Tarpon Springs to supply the whole world, according to Tina Bucuvalas' 2016 book, *Greeks in Tarpon Springs*.

By the end of 1905, 500 more Greek divers had arrived in Tarpon Springs. Soon after, the number of sponge boats increased to 100, with up to 1,500 Greek sponge divers employed in the area. The center of Florida's sponge industry shifted from Key West to Tarpon Springs, and the combined output of both cities made sponges the state's most lucrative sea product in the early 20th century, Bucuvalas writes.

Besides transforming Tarpon Springs' economy, the culture changed as well. Cocoris' wife, Anna was the first Greek woman to make her home in Tarpon Springs and their daughter, Stamatina was the first Greek child born there. By 1913, about half of Tarpon Springs' residents were Greek. By 1940, Tarpon Springs' population was 3,402, including approximately 2,500 Greeks. Tarpon Springs had become the world's largest sponge production center, Bucuvalas observed. Today, no U.S. city has a larger percentage of residents with Greek heritage than Tarpon Springs.

STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA



HUBBARD L. HART

Hubbard L. Hart's business got off to a profitable start during the Civil War. Starting in 1860, the steamboat entrepreneur offered tourists the chance to take in the natural beauty of Florida's unspoiled subtropical paradise along the Ocklawaha River on the way to Silver Springs.

It wasn't all smooth sailing for the Hart Line. In her 1873 book, *Palmetto-Leaves*, Harriet Beecher Stowe recounts declining to board one of the Hart Line's Ocklawaha steamers because it looked like a "gigantic coffin." Hart had purchased some of his early, uncomfortable steamboats with Confederate money during the Civil War.

The narrow, winding, canopied Ocklawaha River posed unique challenges for steamboat designers. Stowe called the Ocklawaha River's course "as crooked as Apollo's ram's horn." In order to make the Ocklawaha passable by steamboat, Hart cleared hundreds of trees from the river's banks and bottom. As his tours became more popular, Hart increased the quality and comfort of his specialized steamers, which were so unusual that a scale model was displayed at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, according to C. Bradford Mitchell's 1947 history of Ocklawaha River steamboating, published in the defunct maritime history journal *The American Neptune*.

Hart enhanced his success through inventive marketing. Passengers who purchased a daytime steamboat tour, for instance, were bombarded with promotions touting nighttime river trips. As seen in the postcard image of the Hart Line's grand Hiawatha steamboat, the Ocklawaha was illuminated by flame, enabling passengers to admire (and shoot at) wildlife at night. Another postcard shows the Hiawatha on the Ocklawaha in the daytime, with wildlife added in through a primitive form of Photoshop. A flag with a heart design was positioned at the bow for branding. Ultimately, the railroad made steamboat travel superfluous, and the Hart Line steamboats became a Florida memory.

STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA



BETTY MAE TIGER JUMPER

Born in Indiantown in 1923 to a Seminole mother and a French father, Betty Mae Tiger Jumper narrowly escaped death as a young child. Viewed as “half-breeds,” Jumper and her brother, Howard, relocated with their family to a federal reservation after several Seminoles threatened the children’s lives. “The Seminoles believed that the half-breeds were evil ‘Ho-la wa-gus!’ (bad spirits) who could endanger the tribe and bring on bad spells,” Jumper recounted in *A Seminole Legend*, an autobiography published in 2001 in collaboration with historian Patsy West.

Jumper attended a Quaker-run Cherokee boarding school in North Carolina to learn English and receive a better education than was available on the reservation. After graduation, she enrolled in the Kiowa Teaching Hospital in Oklahoma with the goal of becoming a public health nurse and improving the quality of health care available on the Seminole reservation.

In 1946, Betty Mae Tiger married Moses Jumper, a friend and classmate from the Cherokee boarding school. He was the second Seminole to enlist in the U.S. Navy and was on the USS Lexington when Japanese dive-bombers sank it in the Coral Sea. After the war, Moses took to the bottle to cope with his memories of the attack, limiting his ability to provide for his growing family. At the time, many young Seminole men earned money wrestling alligators. On a good day, a wrestler could make \$100 in tips from tourists. Women made Seminole dolls to sell to tourists. Since Moses Jumper was unable to wrestle, his wife took her turn in the alligator pit to support the family.

Wrestling alligators was not the only way Jumper challenged gender norms. In 1967, at age 44 she became the first and only female Florida Seminole tribal chair and the first female tribal chair of any American Indian tribe in the nation.

COURTESY OF JUSTE FAMILY ALBUM



Maria and Viter Juste

VITER JUSTE

Little Haiti’s origins can be traced to a man who fled Haiti after François Duvalier came to power in the 1950s. Viter Juste — also known as the Father of Little Haiti — envisioned a safe space for Haitian immigrants to connect to their culture and their past while creating new lives in Miami.

When Juste fled Haiti, he first moved to Texas and then New York, where he shared a room with other Haitian immigrants. In 1965, Juste’s wife, Maria, and four children joined him in Brooklyn.

“New York was a strange place,” Juste’s son, Carl-Phillippe Juste, recalled in outtakes from the award-winning 2015 documentary, *La Belle Vie: The Good Life*, directed by Rachelle Salnave.

In 1973, the family moved to Miami. Juste described the city as Haiti without the poverty, Carl recalled in a 2009 feature he wrote for the *Miami Herald*.

Carl, an award-winning international photojournalist whose work explores cultural connections among Florida, the Caribbean and Africa, recalls Haitian immigrants routinely coming to the family home in Little Haiti to ask for his father’s help. Because of the assistance Juste offered, he became known as “Pere” Juste or Father Juste.

His dream was to establish a corridor along Northeast Second Avenue with Haitian businesses, churches, and cultural organizations. He coined the phrase “Little Haiti” during an interview with the *Miami Herald*.

“He said, if the Cubans can have a Little Havana, why can’t the Haitians have a Little Port-au-Prince?” Carl said. “That was a little too long. Little Haiti stuck.”

After Juste’s death in 2012, community members worried that Little Haiti’s identity might be lost to gentrification. In 2016, the Miami City Commission responded by officially designating the area that was once known as Lemon City as Little Haiti.