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PRESERVING HISTORY AS FLORIDA BOOMS

CHANGE IS COMING TO ‘FORGOTTEN’ FLORIDA
DEVELOPMENT THREATENS MORE OF OLD MIAMI
ALSO: HOW THE HUMANITIES ANCHOR DEMOCRACY
I AM A LARGO HIGH SCHOOL PACKER. We were called the Packers because Largo was a packing center for Pinellas County’s robust citrus crop. But during the last half of the 20th century—because of hard freezes, rapid population growth, high land values, and development—the county’s commercial citrus production ceased. An area once green and fragrant with orange groves is now urban, and the local culture has changed to reflect that. This is a familiar story for much of Florida. Now, our state is again experiencing a population boom, and in this issue of FORUM we ask how our historic towns and areas are trying to hold on to their heritage, culture, and charm.

Just as we celebrate and support efforts to face this challenge, we at the Florida Humanities Council are facing significant financial challenges. The state and federal governments, which provide nearly 85 percent of our revenues, are considering elimination of all our funding. I regard this as an opportunity for all of us who believe in the importance of the humanities to make our voices heard—to let the decision makers in Washington and Tallahassee know what we believe. In an essay that you will find in the next pages, I discuss what the humanities are and why they are so important to the future of our Republic.

Finally, in my first “Letter from the Director,” I want to pay respect to Janine Farver, who, for 16 years, led this organization with grace, intelligence, and a wicked sense of humor. Janine is beloved in Florida and respected across the country. She is not retiring but rather turning her considerable talents to other public service efforts. We would expect nothing less. It is an honor to take the helm from such a wonderful and skilled person.

Steve Seibert
# Table of Contents

2. **How will growth affect what makes Florida special?**  
   *By Barbara O’Reilley*

4. **In Praise of the Humanities**  
   *By Steven Merritt Seibert*

6. **Preserving history as Florida booms**  
   *By Gary R. Mormino*

11. **Fort Pierce: A place that feels like home**  
    *Hometown Florida features*  
    *By Jon Wilson*

12. **Key West: Adapting and Enduring**

13. **Cedar Key: A community that survives**

14. **Gulf County: Change is coming to ‘forgotten’ Florida**  
   *By Michael Lister*

18. **Humanities Alive!**  
    *News and Events of the Florida Humanities Council*

20. **Miami: A mosaic of history and change**  
    *By Paul S. George*

24. **Fernandina Beach: A heritage that sustains a city**

25. **Tarpon Springs: The past is part of the present**

26. **DeLand: A special sense of place**

28. **Polk County: Pride in the heritage**

29. **Pensacola: Spanning the centuries**

32. **Reflections on Florida Poetry—When languages collide**  
   *By Maurice J. O’Sullivan*

34. **My Favorite Florida Place—Fort Pickens: A place of beauty and tension**  
   *By Jonathan Fink*
How will growth affect what makes Florida special?

BY BARBARA O’REILLEY

WE SEE THE EVIDENCE all around us: Building cranes hover over urban construction sites throughout Florida—and new apartment buildings and condo towers stretch up to the sky. Bulldozers move across acres of land in exurbs and rural areas—and new housing developments appear on the horizon. Florida is booming again. The state’s population is growing by a thousand new residents per day, just as it did during much of the last half of the 20th century.

In this issue of FORUM, we ask what effect such dramatic growth and development will have on our historical places—the distinctive neighborhoods, towns, cities, and rural areas that reflect Florida’s cultural heritage.

“Will there be a here, here,” asks historian Gary Mormino, “or will 21st-century Florida become homogenized as more franchise restaurants, big-box stores, and sprawling Med-Rev subdivisions move in to serve yet more residents who are from someplace else?” In his fascinating look at Florida’s modern evolution, Mormino notes that a number of communities are safeguarding what makes them special by protecting historic areas and “preserving their stories for new generations.”

Writer Jon Wilson highlights several communities—including Fort Pierce, Key West, Cedar Key, Fernandina Beach, Tarpon Springs, DeLand, Polk County’s Bartow and Lake Wales, and Pensacola—and describes some of the ways each has been working to retain its historical identity. The Florida Humanities Council has joined this effort by partnering with communities around the state in producing free cultural-heritage walking tours. Called “Florida Stories,” these colorful snapshots of history can be downloaded by going to FLStories.org.

Also in this issue: Novelist Michael Lister, a native of Wewahitchka in Gulf County and “scribe of the Panhandle,” reports that change is coming to a part of the Forgotten Coast long dominated by plantation pine forests. Now cattle ranching is on the way. Lister discusses his role as a writer who “is bearing witness to what was and what is—trying to influence in some small way what will be.”
Historian Paul George analyzes the impact of intensive, large-scale development on the old neighborhoods of Miami. While some enclaves have been fairly successful in protecting historic buildings, he fears that others are in danger of facing the wrecking ball.

Our poetry columnist Maurice J. O’Sullivan provides a thought-provoking look at the impact multiculturalism has had on the language of Florida’s poetry.

Award-winning poet Jonathan Fink, who writes our “Favorite Florida Place” feature, describes the beauty and tension that is ever-present at Fort Pickens.

And, in an elegantly written essay, our new Florida Humanities Executive Director Steve Seibert explores the profound, essential role that the humanities play in our lives. They “tell the stories that tie us together and to the wisdom of the past,” he writes. In doing so, they anchor democracy.

Read on.

BARBARA O’REILLEY is editor of FORUM.

Go to FLStories.org and download our free “Florida Stories” walking-tour app.

Just listen. You’ll hear tales about the places you see and the people who once walked that way.

Free cultural heritage walking tours are now available at FLStories.org for:

- Bartow
- DeLand
- Fernandina Beach
- Fort Pierce
- Key West
- Lake Wales
- Pensacola
- St. Augustine—Colonial
- St. Augustine—Guilded Age
- Tampa’s Ybor City—José Martí Trail
- Tarpon Springs

More cities are added all the time, so stay tuned.
In Praise of the Humanities

BY STEVEN MERRITT SEIBERT

SIX TAMPA BAY VETERANS TOOK THE STAGE to tell their stories of war. One, handsome and athletic, explained how he lost his leg from a roadside bomb explosion in Baghdad. He wears a blade-runner prosthetic and now operates a national nonprofit dedicated to helping veterans improve mental health through physical activity. One suffered traumatic brain injury in combat and, once home, threatened suicide. His wife joined him as they described their joint process of recovery. A Marine told of her rape by a fellow Marine and how she rebuilt her life. She now counsels other victims. After hearing these powerful accounts, the audience was invited to ask questions and tell their own stories.

Part of the national Telling Project, this was one of a series of Florida Humanities Council public programs across the state giving veterans a platform to talk about what their service to us meant. In Orlando, for example, a Gold Star mother described the searing pain in her head the moment her son was shot in Iraq. In Pensacola, a Vietnam veteran described how he tried to numb painful war memories with alcohol. Hearing the stories gave me a profoundly deeper connection with another’s human experience. It changed how I understand the challenges veterans face both in uniform and at home.

In other words, The Telling Project is an exercise in the humanities.

The humanities often slip past our intellectual defenses by appealing first to our hearts. See the play, listen to the lecture, read the book, or watch the documentary and we are moved to see with new eyes or through the eyes of others. We become wiser and more empathetic. What we know to be true might be affirmed—or challenged.

Much of the current educational focus is on the STEM disciplines: science, technology, engineering, and math. These are crucial pursuits, of course. America’s legacy of invention, innovation, and scientific discovery forms a critical pillar of our national success and character. But STEM is not the enemy of the humanities, any more than the left side of the brain is the enemy of the right. In times past, the great mathematicians and scientists were also the great writers and political thinkers. Artists of historical significance—think Leonardo DaVinci—made profound mathematical and scientific connections. The initial humanities disciplines included grammar and logic but also arithmetic and geometry. The arts and sciences have always been two sides of the same coin. In the words of Apple founder Steve Jobs: It is “technology married with the humanities that yield us the results that make our hearts sing.”

Several prestigious medical schools recognize this interconnection. Yale, Stanford, and Harvard, as well as the Universities of Florida, South Florida, and Miami, all provide “medical humanities” programs that train in disciplines such as literature, philosophy, and ethics. Why? Because the best doctors are not just technically proficient, but also understand human nature, can talk with grieving or anxious patients, and have the depth to make tough ethical decisions. Research shows that doctors who are more empathetic “burn out” less, and that their patients trust them more and have better health outcomes. This leads to lower health care costs and fewer malpractice claims, Daniel Orlovich, a physician at Stanford Health Care, wrote in a 2016 article, “How medical humanities can help physician burnout.”
Some of America’s most successful business and technology leaders were initially educated not in business, but in the humanities, according to media reports. LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman earned a degree in Philosophy from Oxford; Carly Fiorina (Hewlett-Packard) in Medieval History and Philosophy; Michael Eisner (Walt Disney Company) in English Literature and Theatre; and Howard Schultz (Starbucks) in Communications. National political leaders follow the same pattern. Some examples, as widely reported: Hillary Clinton, Marco Rubio, and Bernie Sanders were all undergraduate Political Science majors; Jeb Bush majored in Latin American Studies; Ben Carson in Psychology; and Donald Trump in Economics. These lists stretch around the world, but the point is simple: STEM and the humanities are mutually enriching. It takes a surprising breadth of knowledge to operate a hospital, a company, or a nation.

For over 2,000 years the humanities have played the additional role of anchoring democracy. The ancient Greeks considered competency in the humanities the baseline for self-government. One needed to know certain things in order to perform one’s civic duties. And so it remains today. The humanities are the key to developing the capacity of a free people to govern themselves.

As Thomas Jefferson explained, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free...it expects what never was and never will be.”

Americans have always striven for knowledge. We read and build and invent. We discuss and quarrel and reform. America was born from ideas; we were humanities-driven from the beginning.

A working knowledge of history, law, civics, and philosophy protects our democracy, as does the ability to gently discuss these issues across the divides of race, age, gender, geography, education, and politics. Knowledge of foreign languages and cultures, economics and comparative religion is critical for keeping peace in a global economy. The humanities give us prepared voters, informed consumers, and productive workers. They foster a society that is innovative, competitive, and strong, a point made by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in its 2013 report, “The Heart of the Matter.”

A friend once hosted a gathering of high-ranking officials from the Netherlands. He started the meeting by thanking the country they represented for its critical financial assistance during the American Revolution. The officials expressed amazement that any American would have both the historical acumen and the humility to recognize how much the Dutch were responsible for our existence as a nation. The relationships created at that meeting continue today.

E Pluribus Unum; Out of Many, One. In a free and diverse society, the path to One is through the rich forest of the humanities. Along that path, we become mindful of the lessons of history, the differences in culture, and the power of ideas. Our Republic, including its component parts of business, government, and community, is protected by discovering shared values. Neither tyranny nor mob rule can deceive a people who understand each other—neither tyranny nor mob rule can deceive a people who understand each other. These are essential lessons, and now is the time to embrace them—not to diminish their importance.

The humanities tell the stories that tie us together and to the wisdom of the past. I write in praise because they inspire us to learn, to think, and to understand.

STEVEN M. SEIBERT is executive director of the Florida Humanities Council.
What does Florida do? Florida grows. The U.S. Census Bureau recently confirmed what every commuter and long-distance trucker already knew: Florida is back. Once again, the Sunshine State is attracting a thousand new residents daily. In 2016, only Utah and Nevada grew at a faster clip, and only Texas added more newcomers. Florida, America’s third largest state, is approaching the 21-million plateau. While New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois lost population, and the rest of the nation grew at the slowest rate since the Great Depression, Florida has shaken off its Great Recession blues.

What are the implications of another unchecked Florida Boom, accompanied by frenzied development and a population surge? How do we preserve the things that matter, that drew so many of us here?

Our thoughts first go to the impact upon our once-pristine bays and springs, sugar-white beaches and healthy estuaries. But also, consider the impact on Florida’s cultural heritage. Is it possible to balance pell-mell growth and preserve the diverse and striking architecture, traditions, and quality of life that provide a sense of identity for our neighborhoods, towns, and cities? Can a state possibly reject or alter a culture of growth that created such prosperity and abundance and still maintain the aesthetics that lured so many people to such a magical setting?

The making of modern Florida has come with a steep price: orange groves transformed into shopping malls, villages becoming edge cities, and subdivisions branded with names that signal loss—Panther Trace, Clear Lake, and Paradise Key. Florida’s cities, once glorified by ornate hotels, landmark department stores, and identifiable skylines, have become a blur of glass-paneled skyscrapers, parking garages, and chain stores. Florida’s small towns, too, struggle. Once distinguished by main streets dotted by family-owned cafes, hardware stores, and barber shops, the impact of Walmart, Dollar Tree, and out-migration has been devastating.

In a “Wish You Were Here!” state, one story speaks volumes. “Welcome to Orlando” beamed a 1990s postcard, the greeting emblazoned upon a gleaming downtown. A resident, however, detected a flaw. The purported Orlando skyline only resembled Orlando. The skyline belonged to Halifax, Nova Scotia! The City Beautiful had become the City Indistinguishable!

Amid the latest population stampede, an urgent question arises: Will there be a here, here, or will 21st-century Florida become homogenized as more franchise restaurants, big-box stores, and sprawling Med-Rev subdivisions move in to serve yet more new residents who are from someplace else? Will more gated communities produce gated disunity, or allow new generations a slice of the Florida dream?
A number of Florida communities, sensitive to these questions and concerns, have managed to preserve what makes them special, protecting historic areas and preserving their stories for new generations.

Why should Floridians care about material culture—the 1920s craftsman bungalows of Bartow, DeLand’s 1921 Athens Theatre, the 1860 Wardlaw-Smith mansion in Madison, and Mount Dora’s 1883 Lakeside Inn? Living with and admiring historic structures enriches our understanding of architecture. But it also helps us appreciate how individual homes evolve into neighborhoods and how neighborhoods become communities—and how over time these places and structures stand as sentinels of a different era. We become part of the continuum and imagine elderly grandmothers gossiping on front porches while a Western Union messenger delivers telegrams from distant battlefronts.

Perhaps when we encounter the grandeur of the Everglades City Rod and Gun Club, the Southern gothic charm of the Clewiston Inn, or the neighborhood surrounding East Stanford Street in Bartow, we pause to appreciate old-fashioned craftsmanship and harmony of scale and space.

How did these structures, neighborhoods, and towns manage to survive, even thrive? Above all, dedicated individuals and families chose to invest their energies and futures to ensure a sense of community. Volunteers worked tirelessly to preserve workers’ cottages, immigrant clubs, and silent-era movie theaters. In Fernandina, volunteers converted the old city jail into a history museum! In Bartow, residents rallied to save the august 1909 Polk County Courthouse, understanding that citizens accept the responsibility of preserving a community jewel that will speak to new generations.

But protecting the heritage of small-town Florida has involved more than preserving Queen Anne revivals and New Deal murals. Florida’s historic communities are also bound together by identities largely shaped by the things they once
harvested or produced: Apalachicola and oysters; Fernandina and shrimp; Tarpon Springs and sponges; Clewiston and sugar; Cedar Key and lumber; Madison and cotton; Cortez, Niceville, and Everglades City and mullet; and Bartow, Lake Wales, DeLand, and Mount Dora and oranges. What happens when traditional industries are phased out by new competition, technology, or modernization?

For many years, ice plants and sleek schooners enabled Cedar Key and other coastal towns to ship fresh seafood to consumers. But by the late 20th century, Asian fish farms, air freight, and a state-imposed ban on large-scale net fishing walloped local fishermen. In response, locals learned to farm clams, and Cedar Key emerged as the state’s clamming capital.

A national transportation system meant Tarpon Springs sponges could be marketed as household necessities across America. But scientists perfected a synthetic sponge in the 1940s, making the livelihoods of Greek sponge divers nearly obsolete. As large numbers of non-Greek residents moved into the area, cultural tourism has helped preserve and promote Tarpon Springs’s distinctive Greek signature.

Indeed, tourism and a service economy have become the economic lifeline of many other historic communities. Tourists surf the Internet looking for quaint places to find stimulating new experiences. And some historic Florida communities, like Mount Dora, have also become popular destinations for retirees.

A quality that many of these quaint historic Florida towns and cities share is geographic isolation. They don’t have interstate highways running through or near them. Some cities—Winter Park and Mount Dora, for example—opposed the construction of new highways because of quality-of-life issues. No government agency or social scientist has discovered an antidote to the kryptonite amalgam of six-lane highways and urban sprawl.

Contrast these cities with Orlando. The Florida Turnpike and I-4 intersect with Orlando, bringing almost 70 million tourists to Central Florida, where they can experience America’s ultimate small-town destination: Main Street Disney. But more and more visitors also spend time in downtown Orlando, a district that has been energized by new housing units and urban planners.

Isolation explains why some places avoided development for so long and still managed to blossom, while others merely lingered. Isolation can force inhabitants to organize and unite and think outside the box, breeding cohesion and creativity.

The isolated community of Apalachicola, located at the mouth of the Apalachicola River on the northern Gulf Coast, has survived for two centuries by reinventing itself. The railroad ended its thriving steamboat and cotton trade in the 19th century, but because of ice factories and new canning techniques, the community began harvesting and shipping oysters. Alas, today’s oyster industry has been crippled by the lack of fresh water flowing from Georgia’s Chattahoochee River into the Apalachicola River and Bay, the result of Metro Atlanta’s appetite for the precious liquid. But in recent years, a rush of new investors, artists, and transplants continue to reinvigorate Apalachicola. Attracted by the charm and isolation of the picturesque town, newcomers are reinventing this community. Technology allows them and residents of other isolated towns to think locally but be wired and connected globally.

Plan your next adventure on Florida’s Historic Coast with the free itineraries and guides at HistoricCoastCulture.com

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Available now for download
Everglades City and its 400 residents continue to languish in splendid isolation, miles from I-75 and the Tamiami Trail. The county seat of Collier County until Hurricane Donna devastated it in 1960, Everglades City enjoys a dreamlike setting on the Barron River and overlooking Ten Thousand Islands.

Travelers adore these communities precisely because they are everything Walt Disney World is not—authentic. Cortez, Everglades City, and Mount Dora do not offer tourists simulated experiences or computerized rides. In a state that attracted 113 million visitors in 2016, a few million take the roads less traveled. They seek new experiences, not merely new places to visit. Huge crowds attend annual seafood festivals and art-and-craft shows because of the settings and the possibilities of discovery.

But can an endlessly fascinating community be loved to death? Witness St. Augustine. Boasting a storied history as a 16th-century Spanish colonial outpost and the oldest city in the United States, St. Augustine has a modest population of 13,000 but is visited by six million tourists annually. As motorists approach the old city quarters from I-75, the built environment is placeless. An economy serving the needs of tourists demands increasing numbers of parking lots and motels that threaten the very historic site visitors are coming to see.

In 1840, 1890, or 1940, Key West would have ranked atop a list of the most charming places in America. Its striking maritime and Caribbean architecture connected generations of Conchs. But profits replaced quaint customs as more and more strangers piled into the city at the end of an archipelago. Today’s Key West, with a population fewer than 25,000, retains the charm of a historic walking city but is challenged by three million tourists who arrive annually by car, plane, and cruise ships.

Coastal communities face special challenges when weighing the benefits of enjoying the quality of life in a small town versus selling out to developers. The weathered wooden fishermen’s cottages and widows’ walks are much admired by locals and tourists—and can be sold for top dollar. These communities have endured poverty and isolation. Can they survive prosperity and climate change?

Floridians stand at a crossroads in 2017. Will we remain shackled to the mantra of growth-at-all-costs or learn to pause and appreciate the serenity of small-town Florida? Florida would be a poorer state without our historic communities. More than ever, Floridians need to understand we are part of something bigger than our zip code or political party. Florida’s distinctive places touch our deepest roots and rekindle special relationships that connect generations.

Once, many communities in Florida seemed frozen in time. In 1930, Tallahassee was a modest city of 10,700 residents, but also a place graced by majestic live oak canopies and churches that still retained the old slave pews. One resident was LeRoy Collins, a future governor. His favorite place was Old Pisgah, a country church where his circuit-riding grandfather preached. He described his affection for the church in words that touch us today. “In the raucous, violent world of today that too often disdains virtues and values, Pisgah whispers slowly. Slow down, take time to see the old and beautiful, to remember and to cherish what deserves to be loved and honored from the noble past.”

GARY R. MORMINO, Scholar in Residence for the Florida Humanities Council, is the Frank E. Duckwall professor emeritus of history at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, where he co-founded the Florida Studies Program.
A place that feels like home

Known as the Sunrise City because of its eastern perch on Florida's Atlantic shore, Fort Pierce has worked hard to preserve an old-fashioned appeal. That’s not always easy in ocean-side regions where relentless development may wipe out traces of the past. But Fort Pierce is nationally recognized for its historic ambiance.

Its origins date to an 1838 Seminole War fort, but its 21st-century downtown is where history speaks. Several walking tours interpret events that happened in or near the central city, and special trails honor author/folklorist Zora Neale Hurston and the group of African-American painters known as the Highwaymen. A third trail will feature A.E. “Bean” Backus, who has been called the dean of Florida landscape art.

Art history is just one aspect, though. Outside Fort Pierce is the Navy Seal Museum, the only such museum in the nation dedicated solely to preserving Seal history. And Main Street Fort Pierce, an organization devoted to reviving downtown, has raised more than $15 million and renovated three historic buildings, says Doris Tillman, Main Street manager.

The star of the show is the Sunrise Theatre, a 1923 building once considered a major Florida cultural center. Renovated and seating 1,200, the entertainment venue has been host to such performers as Willie Nelson, Dave Brubeck, 3 Dog Night, Itzhak Perlman, and Tony Bennett.

Protective ordinances and careful planning help maintain the historic assets. But community spirit and a certain hometown affection may be the ultimate drivers, Tillman says. “The most important part of…the protection and restoration of historic buildings is the bond that is developed where you live—and the feeling of home. It is, in my opinion, the best way to develop your community vitality.”

That energy has resulted in numerous awards. Among the top ones: USA Today in 2015 named Fort Pierce as being among cities with the “most idyllic and historic main streets in America.” That same year, a community advocacy group called Top Value Reviews put Fort Pierce at No. 1 on its list of the 50 Best Small Town Main Streets in America.

Said Tillman: “All of this adds up to feeling this is your home, your heritage, and where you bring your family to raise. It is not a sterile environment of buildings, but a place where so many life paths have crossed.”

Enjoy our free cultural walking tour of Fort Pierce. Just download the app at FLStories.org.
VEN IF YOU WANTED TO – which no one really does – you cannot escape history in Key West. It speaks to you on Duval Street, the main drag where t-shirt shops and fancy clothing stores occupy buildings once redolent with the aroma of hand-rolled cigars, an early industry. It awes you with such sights as the Custom House, a Richardsonian Romanesque mansion towering over Mallory Square.

Closer in distance to Havana than Miami, Key West regularly had Cuban mayors in its early days. One was the son of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, who inspired an 1868 revolution for Cuban independence. When Key West was Florida’s largest city in 1890 with a population approaching 19,000, half the residents were Cuban. The city entered the 20th century as the richest, per capita in the United States.

“Key West’s ability to reinvent itself as industries died and populations shifted has been its key to morphing into what it is today,” says Bruce Neff, executive director of History Markers Inc., a touring company. The Florida Humanities Council has partnered with his organization in creating a free Key West cultural walking tour, available as an app that can be downloaded to mobile phones and other devices. “Change can be a good thing as long as we maintain a memory of where we came from and are cognizant of the path that brought us here today.”

Key West is known for its diversity, its geography, its colorful past, and its penchant for the peculiar. (For example, there is an annual festival honoring Robert the Enchanted Doll, an aged plaything allegedly existing under a curse.) But some critics suggest that the delicate and the exotic are long gone—that tourists have engulfed the island, and that the most impressive structures these days are the giant cruise ships that dock at the port and dwarf everything else in sight. The first such ship docked in 1969. Now, the port can handle five cruise ships at a time, and of the city’s estimated 3.3-million visitors per year, many are passengers.

“Cruise ships are a double-edged sword,” says Neff. “Each ship pours 2,000 passengers onto Duval and surrounding streets. It makes it hard to get around, but locals keep reminding each other that cruise-ship business is the goose that lays the economic golden egg.”

Still, mass tourism has not swallowed the city’s heritage, nor have condos or gated communities.

The Key West Historic District, one of more than a dozen designated neighborhoods, is a 5,400-acre swath that contains about 3,000 historic buildings and the Mallory Square waterfront plaza, Duval Street, the Truman Annex military annex, and Fort Zachary Taylor, a historic military installation. It is the largest historic district of frame vernacular buildings in the United States, according to Neff. City boards and regulations protect the historical integrity of this district.

Urban sprawl is not seen as a big threat because of the small size of the island. Another deterrent to development is the Rate of Growth Ordinance, popularly known as ROGO. The state issues ROGO permits based on hurricane-evacuation models, and this severely limits new construction and expansion.

Key West, with all its charm and kitsch and history, remains a city of change and contradictions. Many artists and writers have tried to capture its essence. But as award-winning Florida author Bill Belleville wrote, “I realize that defining Key West is like mounting a delicate, exotic butterfly in a specimen case in the foolish conceit of preserving ephemera. But then I figure: It probably always was.”
WITH ITS CROSS-STATE RAILROAD clattering back and forth to Jacksonville by the mid-19th century, Cedar Key was poised to become a major Florida port. But then transportation magnate/hotelier Henry B. Plant built a railway to Tampa Bay’s deeper water, and ships bypassed the Levy County port.

But Cedar Key hung on. It’s a community that has refused to surrender—an attitude handed down generation to generation. Through the years, it has survived fire, offshore oil spills, economic storms, and hurricanes. Tropical Storm Hermine caused millions of dollars in damage just last year.

Sometimes its residents have had to reinvent their livelihoods. The 1994 statewide vote to end large-scale net fishing dealt a potential death blow to Cedar Key’s fishing community. But hold on. These hardy folks learned how to farm clams, helping Florida rise toward national leadership in production of the succulent bivalves.

Despite the challenges and changes, including the coming of some condominiums and 500 to 600 tourists checking into the Chamber of Commerce visitor center every month, Cedar Key has managed to retain its historic flavor. The prime reason is its working waterfront, both a historical artifact and a modern, evolved dynamic. “Cedar Key has never been a quaint, quiet little fishing village.

They built boats, they crabbled. It’s an industrial city and it’s a tourist city and an aquaculture farming city,” says City Commissioner Sue Colson.

“It always goes back to the working waterfront, and I hope it continues to do that. People have to be accepting of what a working waterfront is,” she says.

In Cedar Key, an island with a permanent population of 600 to 700, sprawl is not an issue. There is no space for it. “What we have is struggles for sharing the space,” Colson says. “Boaters, residential, commercial people, tourism. These are all things we have in small amounts of space.”

There is a small, walkable downtown with historic buildings. The Island Hotel, for example, dates to 1859 when the building housed Parsons and Hale’s General Store. Colson says the city has good building codes and that there is some concern as buildings decay and fall apart.

“What do we do? We have to factor in sea level rise, too. We’re kind of balancing all that. How much do we invest?”

She also sees a cultural struggle. “[People] came here for a working waterfront. It’s kind of our draw.” And at the same time: “People who live here don’t want it next door.” But Colson, who came to Cedar Key 25 years ago and worked in the oyster industry, believes there are enough supportive people to preserve the working waterfront. “That’s what we are and that’s what we have been.”
Change is coming to ‘forgotten’ Florida

BY MICHAEL LISTER

Spanish moss slowly waves on the spreading branches of ancient oak trees, like the American flags from the light poles lining Main Street. Below, small-town life slowly eases along.

In the heart of town, the smooth surface of Lake Alice is suddenly rippled by a gentle breeze while, nearby, kids play in the park. Their parents sit on wooden benches discussing the momentous and mundane.

Life here has its own rhythm—not unlike the hypnotic way the nearby Apalachicola River tenderly slaps at the swollen, waterlogged bases of cypress trees. Everything is far more leisurely than most other places. People move the way they speak—with a slow, thick southern drawl. The bucolic life lived here is courteous and neighborly, communal and insular—and has been for generations.

This part of Florida is part of the Deep South—far more South Georgia than South Florida. Most everyone here lives on a rural route, many on dirt roads, some on lots only accessible by boat.

The space and pace of life here is conducive to the writing life I lead. This is far more than home to me. It’s my muse, my inspiration, my subject, my paint, my palette, and my canvas.

This is an ecologically unique and diverse area, largely untouched and unspoiled. Pine woods stretch for miles. Gators sun themselves and cottonmouths slither about in dense swamp. Just a few miles away the setting sun streaks the emerald green waters of the Gulf of Mexico and sets the horizon ablaze.

This is Gulf County—home of the small town of Wewahitchka, world famous for Tupelo honey and the Dead Lakes; and the coastal village of Port St. Joe, the small community that now sits where the lost city of St. Joseph did before being decimated by yellow fever and hurricane in the 1840s.

Over the nine decades that five generations of my family have resided in Gulf County, very, very little has changed—and that’s just the way we locals like it.

In many ways, it was the St. Joe Paper Company that prevented Gulf County from changing like the rest of Florida. And for my entire life, both as a native North Floridian and as a novelist, I have witnessed, experienced, explored, and responded to this phenomenon.

While South Florida was undergoing a land boom, St. Joe, founded in 1936 as part of the Alfred I. duPont trust and operated by Edward Ball, purchased mostly forested land in North Florida, where it remained cheap. After the purchase
of a railroad and the construction of a paper mill, the newly formed company ushered in a new era in the Panhandle—particularly in Gulf County.

On the south end of the county, the smoke from the company’s paper mill rose in the blue sky over St. Joseph Bay and the small storied town of Port St. Joe. On the north end near Wewahitchka, thousands and thousands of acres of slash pines grew in serene silence awaiting harvest and their chance to feed the machine.

The paper mill, which was completed in 1938, brought much-needed jobs and an infusion of capital into the post-Depression era of an already depressed area. Its rotten-egg smell—the odor many locals said smelled like bread and butter—on the south end and the managed forestation on the north end ensured that the population of Gulf County would remain small. And it ensured that our little corner of the Forgotten Coast would continue to be forgotten by the millions of tourists and retirees relocating to the warm environs of the country’s southernmost state.

But change has come. The paper mill is gone. And the Forgotten Coast is increasingly being remembered—by tourists, snowbirds, transplants, and now a new industry.

In 2014, the St. Joe Company sold most of its remaining timberland—about 383,000 acres—to AgReserves, an affiliate of the Mormon Church. After the $562-million sale, the Church became the single largest private landowner in Florida. This is good news for the Panhandle, since the Church’s Deseret Ranches in Central Florida is known for its dedication to environmental stewardship.

For the past several months Gulf County locals have been witnessing change. Slash pines have been cut down, loaded on log trucks, and hauled away, but have not been replanted. Instead, the land is being cleared, fenced in, and grass is being planted. Where once were endless lines of planted pines, there will soon be herds of cows grazing beneath the watchful eyes of cowboys—an image that harkens back to Florida’s original Cracker cowmen, the horse-riding cowpokes named for the cracking sounds their whips made as they drove their herds across Florida’s flat, prairie grass plains and wooded rangelands.

Raymond Chandler once wrote that “to say goodbye is to die a little,” and maybe it is. But if that’s true, then to say hello is to live or even resurrect a little. Letting go of what was can be painful, but welcoming what is can be liberating and life-affirming.

Change is as inevitable as time and tide—and just as unstoppable. What concerns me far more than the inexorable change my area is undergoing is how little of its history is being preserved. And I wonder how much long-range conservation of its extraordinary and extraordinarily diverse ecosystem and natural beauty is even being considered. This is where I and other storytellers, artists, citizens, environmentalists, elected officials come in. We all have a sacred duty to do what we can to protect and preserve, to memorialize and immortalize, but no group more than artists.

As a native and a novelist, I not only observe with great interest all that is unfolding around me, I record and react to it, bearing witness to what was and what is—trying to influence in some small way what will be. For if my novels convey anything about North Florida in general and Gulf County in particular it is that this unique and beautiful land is sacred, worthy of honoring and protecting.

I’m a scribe of the Panhandle, attempting to give voice to a land and a people and a way of life that are both threatened and in some ways thriving. I am celebrating it, creating a record of it, penning an ode to it, as it experiences the first tremors of change from which it has been so long been immune. I’m saying goodbye to what has been—and dying a little as I do. But I’m also saying hello to what is—and experiencing new life as a result. A new life that mirrors what is happening all around me in the Great Green Northwest of Florida.

MICHAEL LISTER is an award-winning New York Times–bestselling author of more than 30 books, including literary suspense thrillers, crime fiction, and a detective series that draws on his experience as a former prison chaplain. His latest book is Blood Work about Ted Bundy’s time in Florida.
<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Edition</th>
<th>ISBN</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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Florida Humanities welcomes four new board members

The Florida Humanities Council Board has elected four new members to serve three-year terms:

KURT BROWNING, former Secretary of State of Florida, is the Pasco County Superintendent of Schools and served previously for many years as Pasco’s Supervisor of Elections. Browning has a B.A. in political science and an M.A. in public administration from the University of South Florida. The San Antonio resident and Florida native is involved with the Boy Scouts, United Way, Kiwanis Club, the Pasco Education Foundation, Leadership Pasco, and other civic organizations.

PEGGY BULGER is former Director of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. She was Florida’s first professional folklorist, working many years for Florida Folklife and Folkarts programs. She earned a B.A. at the State University of New York (Albany), an M.A. at Western Kentucky University, and a Ph.D. in Folklife and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania. The Fernandina Beach resident serves on the Florida Folklife Council and is involved in many arts, cultural, and civic organizations.

SARA CRUMPACKER is a former consultant to Al Gore on the National Performance Review and rolled out the FEMA customer service program under director James Lee Witt. She earned B.A. and M.A. degrees at Michigan State University and a doctorate at the University of Virginia, where her dissertation won a national research award. The Melbourne resident served on the boards of the Brevard Cultural Alliance and the Ruth Funk Textile Museum and remains involved in numerous community organizations.

LINDA MARCELLI, a former financial analyst and director of the New York office of Merrill Lynch, is managing director of Lucky’s Real Tomatoes, a national family-owned company. Marcelli has a B.A. from Ohio State University and is a graduate of the Securities Institute at Wharton and the Tuck Institute at Dartmouth. The Gulfport resident serves on several boards, including the USF College of Business Advisory Board, Academy Prep of St. Pete, and the Urban League of Pinellas County.

The Smithsonian is coming to a small-town museum near you

Don’t miss this chance to see the traveling Smithsonian Institution exhibit, “The Way We Worked.” We are bringing it to several towns around the state. To accompany this multimedia exhibit, focused on the relationship between work and our American culture, each museum is featuring special local programs and speakers. For the exhibit schedule, go to FloridaHumanities.org.

Naples/Fort Myers veterans to tell their stories on stage

Five military veterans will share their compelling personal stories of life and the military in three presentations of “Telling: Southwest Florida” on April 29 at 7 p.m. and April 30 at 4 p.m. at the Wang Opera House, Naples; and on May 4 at 7 p.m. at the WFGU Studio (Florida Gulf Coast University) in Fort Myers. Each performance is free and open to the public and followed with a moderated question-answer session with the audience.

UF College honors Humanities Council for meaningful impact over the years

The University of Florida College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is honoring the Florida Humanities Council for sponsoring and funding a diverse range of programs over the years that have had meaningful impacts “on many departments, centers, faculty, and students within the college.” This inaugural “Nonprofit Partner Award” will be presented on April 21 at the college’s Evening of Excellence presentation ceremonies at UF’s Emerson Alumni Hall. The programs cited include seminars for Florida K–12 teachers, summer humanities camps for high school students, “Gator Tales” productions about the first generation of African-American students at UF, “Telling Gainesville” stage presentations by local military veterans, extension of the Calusa Heritage Trail at the Randell Research Center in Pineland by the Florida Museum of Natural History, and more.
What are teachers doing on their summer vacation?

Nearly 200 Florida educators will be participating this summer in our in-depth workshops on fascinating Florida topics: “Humanities and the Sunshine State: Teaching Florida’s Climates,” in partnership with the University of Florida in Gainesville; “Exploring Colonial St. Augustine: Heritage and Culture” in St. Augustine; “Civil War in Florida: Beyond the Battlefield” in Fernandina Beach; “Imagining Sustainability: Waters, Wonders, Waste” in partnership with Eckerd College in St. Petersburg; and “Calusa, Creeks, and Crackers: Peoples of Florida,” in Bonita Springs.

In addition, some 75 educators from around the country will be attending our weeklong seminars on Florida author/folklorist Zora Neale Hurston in Eatonville: “Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston and Her Eatonville Roots.”

Bring people together to read and share ideas

Nonprofit organizations: Would you like to host one of our new reading-and-discussion programs in your community? The deadline to apply is May 31. Each six-session program is focused on a selected book: Standing Down (written by military veterans) or Citizen: An American Lyric (prose, poetry, and images examining the prevalence of racism and reconsidering the concept of citizenship). These programs are designed to provide a platform for authentic, respectful discussion about topical subjects. Learn more and apply at FloridaHumanities.org.

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THE CITY OF MIAMI contains many historic neighborhoods presently targeted by developers for new, sometimes massive, developments. Here, in this dynamic city, is the archetypal example of the old confronted by the new, of the elements of earlier, simpler neighborhoods now hard-pressed to maintain the fabric of past eras in the face of intensive redevelopment.

This transformation of center-city neighborhoods, like Wynwood, East Little Havana, Brickell, Little Haiti, Buena Vista/Design District, Edgewater, and Downtown has been under way since the early 2000s. It has been helped along by two transformational building booms, which have included the “rediscovery” of these historical components of the urban corridor.

Many of these neighborhoods either predate the city’s incorporation in 1896 or arose from farmland and wilderness in the years and decades immediately following it. In the city with the highest percentage of immigrants of any major municipality in the world, each of these ethnic enclaves has experienced seismic demographic shifts over the past 50 to 60 years.

During that time, there was a massive flight of city residents to an expansive suburbia that arose in increasingly more distant rings around these older neighborhoods. The people who left the old neighborhoods were replaced by new arrivals of differing ethnicities. The old neighborhoods retained housing stock bearing the materials and attractive architectural styles of their earlier eras. But the current redevelopment boom threatens the actual historic buildings in some areas.

Since the dawn of the new century, the redevelopment frenzy has been part of a national trend leading to the revival of center cities. Referred to as “gentrification,” or the purchase and renovation/restoration of housing stock in poor urban neighborhoods by persons of means, this process represents a two-edged sword. On one hand, it has brought vibrant, creative people, often led by fearless artists, back to old neighborhoods long plagued by poverty and crime. On the other hand, this renewal, which is invariably accompanied by a rise in the cost of rents, home prices, and taxes, often forces longtime residents to leave the quarter in search of less expensive areas. Further, gentrification, along with
of history and change

redevelopment, often results in the wide scale demolition of old housing stock.
When the early residents of these neighborhoods leave, much of the personality of their communities goes with them. The building stock is the urban fabric that can outlive the people and remain as a totem of a time and place. These buildings can be salvaged amid redevelopment through the efforts of enlightened, activist groups who organize to protect them.

Such activism can take the form of efforts by neighborhood associations, which are commonplace in South Florida. They can apply to local preservation boards for historic designation. When accompanied by ordinances that put teeth into the designation, this will usually stave off excessive redevelopment. Historic designation can encourage adaptive reuse of historic structures to preserve them while retrofitting them for new, often innovative, uses. Additionally, neighborhood groups can sponsor walking tours of their areas and open homes to tour-goers. They can schedule tree-planting and beautification activities, which often involve large numbers of residents and provide superb bonding and unity-building opportunities.

Examples of these kinds of initiatives and activities abound. Much of the residential portion of Buena Vista/Design District, a quaint 1920s-era collection of homes, was designated historic by the City of Miami’s historic preservation board in 1989, and remains intact. Not only has it withstood the pressures from intensive development just south of it, but also its presence has added luster and value to the entire quarter.

The Edgewater and the Brickell Avenue neighborhoods were not as fortunate, as block after block of handsome residences tracing their origins to the early 1900s, disappeared by the 1980s. However, the Sears Tower, a stunning early Art Deco structure standing just south of Edgewater, offers an excellent example of adaptive reuse. Today it hosts a book store/restaurant, while serving as a centerpiece for the sparkling Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts.

Long dormant and protected by its status as a National Historic District, downtown Miami is bursting with new development, and it has also employed adroitly adaptive reuse of several historical buildings. Historic Morningside, a textbook example of a wonderfully preserved neighborhood located in Miami’s Upper Eastside, offers walking tours and open houses. It also sponsors neighborhood planting days, resulting in the rise of a lush subtropical landscape throughout the area.

East Little Havana is presently struggling with redevelopment issues, as activists have lined up in loud denunciation of the bid by developers and other business interests for what is termed “upzoning.” This would allow for large scale development in the eastern edges of the quarter with the resultant demolition of cozy 100-year-old bungalows. The crescendo of opposition, driven primarily over the concern for the fate of many renters in this modern day “Ellis Island,” has placed this push for upzoning on...
A mural in the Wynwood Art District.

hold for the time being. Moreover, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the nation’s foremost historic preservation group, in recognition of East Little Havana’s historical importance, has placed it on its list of the 11 most endangered neighborhoods in the United States and is actively working to both preserve and further revitalize it.

The City of Miami’s hottest neighborhood in terms of transformation is Wynwood. Developed in the years immediately following World War I, Wynwood, lying three miles north of downtown Miami, was a middle class neighborhood with a robust commercial base. Following World War II, many early residents began moving out while Puerto Ricans, who had recently arrived from the island, moved in. By the latter decades of the 20th century, the quarter hosted many different Hispanic groups as well as a flourishing fashion district. Despite a continuing manufacturing presence, the neighborhood suffered from an impoverished population.

By the late 1990s, art collectors, attracted by low warehouse rents, moved in. They were followed by real estate investors, headed by Tony Goldman, the most important person in the turn-around of Miami Beach’s famed Art Deco District in the late 1980s. He brought art and artists to the neighborhood, a critical ingredient in urban revival. With the opening of the Wynwood Walls in 2009, and its spectacular display of wall art, the neighborhood, especially its southern sector, became a popular destination for residents and tourists alike. Real estate investors also moved in, offering large sums of money for many of the original homes. New restaurants, bars, and other businesses have opened. This radical transformation of the neighborhood’s southern half has priced out renters, as well as artists, as they seek more reasonable places elsewhere, such as Little Haiti and points beyond.

But Little Haiti is now squarely in the sights of developers with plans for grandiose projects amid a Haitian-American population fearful of losing the community they so carefully built in the past three decades in the old Lemon City neighborhood. The fate of culturally rich Little Haiti, which, along with Wynwood, does not possess strong advocates for neighborhood preservation, is uncertain. This is indicative of the challenges of historic preservation in a rapidly evolving community, especially when it comes up against determined developers with ample amounts of money and projects backed by municipal authorities. As much as any city in America, Miami offers broad examples of this challenge.

Miami now stands with America’s most dynamic cities. But with that status comes many of the same questions and challenges faced by other rapidly redeveloping urban areas. In the face of powerful redevelopment forces that have seemingly unlimited resources, how can this city preserve the character of its neighborhoods? How can it protect their earlier architectural styles, unique building materials like Dade County Pine and oolitic limestone, and the cohesion and “walkability” of their layouts? How can these neighborhoods retain at least a semblance of the past in the face of demolition and new construction? That past, and the physical manifestations of it, are important elements that provide us with insights into the place where we live and the people who came before us.

PAUL GEORGE, who recently retired as professor of history at Miami Dade College, is Resident Historian at HistoryMiami Museum. He has conducted public history tours in many areas of Miami since 1986, including bike and walking tours in each of the neighborhoods mentioned in this article and boat tours of the Miami River and Biscayne Bay. He is a former president of the Florida Historical Society.
Kealing tells us the story of what happened when Elvis arrived in Florida and what role the Sunshine State played in his life and musical career. This is a critical era in the Elvis Saga.

—WILLIAM MCKEEN
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This small city overflows with history, rivaling Florida’s more widely publicized paragons of the past. For example, it is said to be the only municipality in America that has been under eight flags, including the Patriot Republic of Florida banner in 1812 before Florida became a U.S. Territory. That’s just one part of a legacy that goes back to pre-Columbian natives, pirates, and the Civil War.

This northernmost municipality on Florida’s Atlantic Coast, located on Amelia Island, is also called the birthplace of the modern shrimping industry. Did you know a Sicilian immigrant was the first Floridian to use a power-driven boat? It happened here in 1902.

Fernandina Beach also provides a classic study in historic preservation versus development dynamics. Beginning in the 1970s, what had been a quiet, working-class haven suddenly drew new development and a flood of moneyed visitors. The opening of the Amelia Island Plantation, a gated community, opened a door to potential social change and an inchoate crisis of identity.

In response, longtime residents and officials created a 50-block downtown historic district that won designation in the National Register of Historic Places. Later, an alliance of citizens, city government, tourist officials, and a special redevelopment program called Main Street pushed through guidelines to assure growth is managed with an eye toward preservation.

Fernandina contains more than 400 buildings on the National Register of Historic Places. Tours show visitors to such spots as Florida’s oldest lighthouse (1838 vintage); Florida House, which claims to be the oldest continuously operating inn in Florida (1857); the Palace Saloon (1903), said to be the state’s oldest continually operating drinking establishment (and where you can sample a concoction called “Pirate’s Punch”); and numerous dwellings that showcase 19th-century Victorian architecture. Its time-capsule status has placed Fernandina on the National Trust’s list of the nation’s best heritage tourism spots.

“We all understand that not only is our heritage important to help us maintain our core identity, but it is indeed a tool to be used for bringing tourism and revenue to our downtown and to our citizens,” said Phyllis Davis, executive director of the Amelia Island Museum of History. “It is a cycle that feeds itself. The revenue that is brought in helps to sustain the city and the historic downtown, which in turn continues to attract visitors and new residents,” Davis said.

As in other communities with a strong sense of history, Fernandina Beach has residents who are committed to preservation and identity. “One of the things any community strives for is a strong, loyal citizenry. People who care about a place are more likely to take care of it,” Davis says. “They develop a sense of pride and connection that is very difficult to achieve in a ‘cookie cutter’ setting.”

A gathering of people in, or near, Fernandina in the 1940s.

Stores on Centre Street in downtown Fernandina Beach.

Workers unload shrimp at Peterson’s dock, about 1950.

Enjoy our free cultural walking tour of Fernandina Beach. Just download the app at FLStories.org.
The past is part of the present

Sponge boats near the Anclote River docks trace their origins to Phoenician designs 2,500 years old. On a street in a historic ethnic neighborhood, a man gives a friend a one-armed hug, speaking in Greek as the two drift into a shop flooded with the aroma of strong coffee. Therein, the soft clack of dominoes suggests the mellow rhythm of the day. In Pinellas County’s first incorporated city (1887), the past is truly present, and in a profoundly personal way.

Tarpon Springs’s first visitors were northerners escaping winter weather. Anson P.K. Safford, a gold-mining executive and former governor of the Arizona Territory during its wild-west days, arrived in the 1880s. The Victorian house bearing his name survives as a museum.

But the Greeks and their sponging industry molded the city’s lasting identity. From Mediterranean islands where sponging was an ancient profession, they began arriving en masse in 1905 and began to build a sponge kingdom that eventually earned global recognition. It brought in millions of dollars, inspired the motion pictures “16 Fathoms Deep” (1934) and “Beneath the 12-Mile Reef” (1953), and provided an underpinning for cultural tourism. It even inspired the nickname for Tarpon Springs High School’s athletic teams: the Spongers.

The original Greek settlers and their large number of descendants, the ethnic pride they retain, and the history they cherish have provided the best bulwark against forces that could have changed the city’s heritage and culture, says Tina Bucuvalas, Curator of Arts and Historical Resources for the City of Tarpon Springs.

Tarpon Springs leads the nation with the highest per capita number of residents with Greek heritage, about 10 percent of the city’s estimated 25,000 population. And this has helped the city protect an ethnic culture, she says. “One of the greatest reasons for an ethnic community being able to retain their culture is the size of the ethnic community in relation to the mainstream community, and also the presence of ongoing immigration from the originating country or [by] other ethnic Americans.”

Making sure both longtime residents and newcomers know and understand the history remains key to preserving this culture, Bucuvalas says. It’s not always easy, she notes, because many new residents and retirees may have no historic ties to the community. “I see a large part of the [potential threat] as being an influx of new populations who vote and older populations who may not be aware that their heritage is being threatened until it is almost too late.”

But public vigilance still works. For example, most of the plans to change the waterfront and the sponge docks were scrapped in 2014 after several years of often heated debate and strong opposition to the proposals. Tourists still can see the actual culture in action, such as working sponge boats at the docks, rather than a simulation of the historic Greek lifestyle.

The city also has a prominent strip of tourist-oriented restaurants and shops selling sponges and inexpensive souvenirs. Tourism generates an estimated $20-million a year for the local economy, including an estimated $2 million from the sponging industry and its working boats.

Preservation areas include Greektown, a 140-acre neighborhood that was designated a national historic district in 2014. Also: the sponge docks, religious buildings, commercial structures, eating spots, and the site of the annual Epiphany celebration on Jan. 6. Historical buildings, many featured in heritage walking tours, include the impressive St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church, the Arcade Hotel, sponge-packing houses like the N.G. Arfaras and E.R. Meres establishments, and old Tarpon Springs High School. All stand as icons of another time.
Deland was nicknamed “The Athens of Florida” because its founder wanted to emulate the classical city in Greece. Roughly 140 years after New York baking soda magnate Henry Addison DeLand named a tiny settlement after himself, the modern city retains its focus on heritage.

“Realizing our sense of place with our history here helps [people in the community] to identify with and respect the importance of preserving these things that many find attractive about our town,” says Larry French, executive director of the West Volusia Historical Society.

Situated in ripe development territory between ever-advancing Orlando and Daytona Beach, DeLand might have been in danger of vanishing into the netherworld of suburbia. But numerous museums, three historic districts, seven individually designated properties on the National Register of Historic Places, and a vigorous community of local historians have discouraged identity theft.

Stetson University is a showcase, boasting a beautiful campus of historic buildings and its own historic district. Founded in 1883, the university is composed of the oldest collection of education-related buildings in Florida, the school’s historians say. The administration building went up in 1884 and is the state’s oldest building in continuous use for higher education.

A few blocks away, the Athens Theatre, a 1921 building in the Italian Renaissance architectural style, occupies a place of pride: It was built mostly by DeLand craftsmen and workers. Now restored, the Athens is an anchor of the Downtown DeLand Historic District, which contains 68 historic buildings.

Nearby is the downtown’s Historic Garden District, formerly a blighted, early 20th century neighborhood that a visionary urban designer and filmmaker named Michael Arth targeted for revival about 15 years ago. In eight years, Arth restored or rebuilt 32 homes and businesses, successfully pushing back against the forces of new-style development. His work culminated in a 2009 documentary about neighborhood revival. It premiered at—the Athens Theatre.

Besides maintaining its history-rich neighborhoods and buildings, DeLand also offers other connections to the past: trolley tours; walking tours, including a newly introduced Walk DeLand phone app created in partnership with the Florida Humanities Council; restoration workshops; and a busy schedule of arts, crafts, music, and history programs. The West Volusia Historical Society and the Main Street DeLand Association, along with the city government, support all these activities.

Says French: “People who live here and connect with the historical and cultural significance of DeLand’s distinctive identity realize the relevance and uniqueness of downtown DeLand.”

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During the first three years of this decade, Polk County grew at a rate faster than the rest of Florida, and indeed the rest of the nation. Most of its 17 municipalities rode the boom; and Lakeland, the county’s largest city, for the first time boasts 100,000 residents, according to recent U.S. Census estimates.

But rather than allowing the growth explosion to blow away the past, Polk County cities are embracing their history. Bartow’s official city slogan is “Our History Comes to Life.” Lake Wales, famous for the magical Bok Tower site, created a city board to oversee historic resources, and every year thousands attend the city’s Pioneer Days. Lakeland points to Florida Southern College and 10 of its buildings designed by celebrated architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Winter Haven restored the 1925 Ritz Theatre and showcases more than 50 homes on the National Register of Historic Places.

“It is more common to see preservation-related construction work in Bartow than it is to see new construction,” says Jayme Jamison, Curator of Education and Programming at the Polk County History Center. A current example: the recent transformation of 335 East Main Street from an abandoned building to the future home of the Orpheum Theatre and Academy of Performing Arts. The brick masonry building at that site had replaced an 1880s clapboard building that was Bartow’s original Opera House, Jamison says.

Pride in the heritage

Pride is taken in the area’s pioneers, such as storied Florida cattleman Jacob Summerlin, who donated land to build the county seat. The original settler of Bartow, arriving in 1852, was impressively named John Churchill Golding Readding Blount. He showed up with a sense of history, and was credited with naming Polk County after the 11th U.S. president, James K. Polk. Bartow itself was named for Confederate Col. Francis Bartow, killed in the Civil War.

The cities of Bartow and Lake Wales offer historical walking tour apps for mobile devices, developed with the help of the Florida Humanities Council. Lake Wales, meanwhile, is developing programs for the city’s centennial celebration next fall that will include the Smithsonian Institute’s traveling exhibit, “The Way We Worked,” also funded and brought to town by Florida Humanities.

“Our cultural heritage makes up the fabric of the nation and the world. It’s indispensable to the broader context of our lives,” says Monica Drake Pierce, director of the Lake Wales Museum and Cultural Center.

Sometimes development overwhelms the charm (including heritage elements) that attracted people to an area in the first place. Thanks to devoted residents, museums, and government officials, historic names and places in Polk County seem destined for a long life, whatever new development may emerge. Pierce worries more about the natural environment.

“I think the largest threat to the area is the threat to the ecology,” she says, citing scrub forests and pristine spring lakes that developed over millions of years. New housing near the lakes, the straightening of the Kissimmee River, agricultural runoff, and vehicle pollutants threaten ancient habitat, she says. She believes that residents concerned about the environment will naturally also be interested in preserving the cultural heritage. “The people who care for the natural ecology of the area will undoubtedly care about the historical integrity,” Pierce says.

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In celebrating its heritage, Pensacola stretches from the here and now to the distant past: From the cutting-edge Museum of Naval Aviation, for example, to the remains of the 1559 settlement of Tristan de Luna, the Spanish explorer who attempted to establish the first permanent colony on the Florida peninsula.

The city, whose name derives from the Panzacola Indians, declares that its main draw is its history rather than the more typical Florida attractions of beaches, theme parks, and fancy resorts. Much of its heritage is on display in a large central downtown waterfront location.

The Historic Pensacola Village, a collection of 28 historical buildings and museums, offers visions of daily life pioneer industries in the early days, such as lumber, brick making, and commercial fishing. Among the buildings are the 1805 Lavalle House, an example of French Creole architecture; the 1805 Julee Cottage, which belonged to a free woman of color; and the 1832 Old Christ Church. Walking tours, self-guided museum tours, and living-history reenactments are among other ways to get to know the city sometimes referred to as “The City of Five Flags.” At one time or another it was governed by the Spanish, the French, the British, the Confederacy, and the United States. Spanish and French forces battled the British there in 1781.

Ironically, urban sprawl has not diluted Pensacola’s historic identity, but has helped preserve it. “The availability of land and the construction of the interstate has made sprawl very easy, which has also put less development pressure on the historic districts,” says Ross Pristera, historic preservationist at the University of West Florida Historic Trust, which manages the Historic Pensacola Village.

Meanwhile, preservation ordinances protect several heritage neighborhoods: the Pensacola Historic District, Palafox Historic Business District, North Hill Preservation District, and Old East Hill Preservation District. The Architectural Review Board reviews all exterior modifications, new buildings, signage, and other visual elements.

“The review process has been successful, but probably once a year a contentious project with a lot of backing will get pushed through,” Pristera says, noting that outside the historic districts, there is currently no ordinance to protect historic resources. A proposed ordinance would close the gap, but has a long road before approval, he says.

Its historic districts are comfortable places in which to walk, live, and work—elements not only important to

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Pensacola’s heritage identity but to any city that values “realness and sense of integrity where buildings are truly old, where you know history has happened, and you can clearly feel like you are stepping back into another era,” Pristera says.

“At the same time, you can see that the city is not just a time capsule like other cities that rely heavily on tourism. Pensacola is a functioning city that has ups and downs and it is developing slowly,” he says.

Much of the history focuses on personalities, military events, and structures. The Spanish built the first fort here in 1698. Gen. Andrew Jackson captured fortifications in 1814 and 1818, even before Florida became a United States territory. An important Civil War port with Florida’s deepest bay, its entrance was blocked by federal troops that took over its guardian fort, Barrancas. The famous Apache leader Geronimo was temporarily imprisoned at Fort Pickens during the 1880s. (See article about Fort Pickens on page 34.)

Considered the “Cradle of Naval Aviation,” Pensacola saw the first air station established in 1914. Astronauts John Glenn and Neil Armstrong, along with thousands of less familiar aviators, trained there. The city also is the site of the Vietnam Veterans Wall South, 5.5 acres situated downtown.

And nearby are the remains of the short-lived settlement of the Spanish explorer Luna, which a University of West Florida archaeological team is excavating. A few years previously, divers found two of the wrecked ships related to the Luna expedition in Pensacola Bay.

While the Pensacola community puts a strong focus on celebrating its history, its strong cultural institutions are also imagining ways to tell more modern stories. Case in point: a recent exhibit at the downtown T.T. Wentworth Jr. Museum, titled “The Power of Children: Making a Difference.” The traveling exhibit, produced by the National Endowment for the Humanities, offered children and families an opportunity to explore issues of isolation, fear, and prejudice by giving a human face to three major 20th century events: the Holocaust, the Civil Rights movement, and the AIDS epidemic. Those stories were told through the eyes of children.

“Our children are the stewards of the future,” says Margo Stringfield, author, archaeologist, and research associate at the University of West Florida Archaeology Institute. “We want to encourage them to embrace the humanities early in life as a tool that will serve them well throughout their lives.”

JON WILSON, a Florida journalist for more than three decades and regular FORUM contributor, writes historical books about St. Petersburg.
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POETRY IS, ABOVE ALL, ABOUT LANGUAGE, especially the way language helps us understand and interpret our world. Part of that understanding and interpretation can reveal itself in something as apparently simple as a poet’s choice of language. At a time when Latin and French dominated medieval English literature and shaped the way the country conceived itself, Geoffrey Chaucer’s decision to break with tradition and write his Canterbury Tales in English sparked not only a momentous literary paradigm shift but also offered his countrymen an opportunity to re-imagine themselves and their future.

Florida’s rich history of cultures colliding, cooperating, and combining has given our writers an even greater range of possibilities. For the three centuries after the Europeans first encountered La Florida, poets from France, Spain, and England created an extraordinarily rich library of work as they used their native languages to celebrate—or occasionally question—the claims and triumphs of their countries during an unending imperial war of colonial thrones.

Once Florida became a United States territory in 1821, however, new possibilities emerged in a heterogeneous, multilingual society constantly re-inventing itself. While sailing to Key West in 1832, the Haitian-born ornithologist John James Audubon marveled at how creatively a German sailor amalgamated languages and dialects in a sea shanty he sang. Oddly enough, the song extolled the island’s wreckers, the residents who salvaged goods and survivors from ships shattered on the region’s treacherous reefs:

Come ye, goot people, von and all,
Come listen to my song:
A few remarks I have to make,
Which vont be very long.
’Tis of our vessel stout and goot,
As ever yet was built of woot,
Along the reef where the breakers roar,
De Wreckers on de Florida shore.

Audubon’s uncertainty about the English he had learned in his late teens and with which he was never completely comfortable—he would recruit William McGillivray in Edinburgh to help him write his Ornithological Biography—may have led him to mistake the sailor’s heavy accent and idiom for a mixture of English and German.

Later in the century, as Cubans escaping that island’s political instability migrated by the thousands to Key West and Tampa to work in cigar factories, Spanish would once again become an essential part of Florida’s culture. Near the end of the century a Tampa barber wrote down in parallel columns a clever folk song that reflected the curious encounter between the two languages at the core of Florida’s cultural DNA.

A este Quibués llegué yo
cuando en La Habana embarqué,
y al punto me enamoré
de una leidi de Nasó.
Ella me dice, -Ay donó.
Tú espiqui to mi Cubano.
Pero con semblante ufano,
hablando entre col y col,
chapurreando el español,
y yo hablando país y habano.

I reached this town of Key West when I set out from Havana, and at once I fell in love with a lady from Nassau. She says to me, “I don’t know [Spanish], You speak to me in Cuban.” But with a proud face, speaking diversely, she hardly speaking any Spanish, and I speaking Havana dialect.

While most of the Spanish here is traditional, one line—"Tú espiqui to mi Cubano"—suggests how the two languages would begin shaping each other in an early version of the hybrid popularly called Spanglish.
Today, life and literature have become multilingual throughout Florida. For Miami’s Campbell McGrath, this world of colliding, intersecting, creative cultures allows us to “be what we choose to be,” including “Dixiefried Cubano rednecks” (“Because This Is Florida”). The MacArthur Foundation Genius Award recipient revels in the cross-cultural camaraderie he experiences “At the Royal Palm Barbershop,” with its “travel posters bespeaking identity/Jerusalem and Havana; Miami Beach; three flags for Cuba, Israel, and the U.S. of A.” When he describes in “Eclogue” a stranger asking to cut down the coconuts in his yard and “cart them away for coco frio,” this Chicago-born son of Irish Catholic parents finds a very Floridian way to communicate with the recent immigrant:

In Miami Spanglish he calls me boss,
and I say, Hay un otra árbol más grande atrás,
my Spanish even worse than his poor English.

While McGrath rejoices in these new opportunities, the cultural encounters can also create challenges for figures like the Cuban-American speaker in the wonderfully talented teacher, scholar, and poet Carolina Hospital’s “Prologue”:

He demands a poem in Spanish,
my native tongue.
I used to be a native.

I pry the calendar,
from the waste basket,
the one bearing each month
a black and white photograph
of la isla,
1957,
the year I was born.
(Thank God numbers don’t need translation.)
Images of a childhood,
hotels, churches, bridges,
el tunel, la universidad,
but how do I describe the sound of the batazo at the Coliseum or the smell of humedad in the Old Cathedral in Santiago?
Snapshots, like a dream,
only I can’t make out the colors.

Returning to his roots seems a little simpler for the Florida rapper Lajan Slim who finds mostly comfort in his “zoes,” Haitian creole (Kreyol ayisyen) slang for his fellow Haitians. In “Haitians” the young rapper admires their quiet grace (“Boi dem zoes move silence”) and finds in his wide range of fellow Haitian-Americans—“I got zoes in Broward County/I got zoes in Dade County”—a profound source of comfort:

I’m in the field with my Haitians
Sak kep fet
I’m in the field with my Haitians
Sap pase
I’m in the field with my Haitians
Lajan, Lajan
I’m in the field with my Haitians
Sak kep fet, sak pase to my woes.

As Florida becomes more diverse and the membranes separating languages and cultures more and more porous, we will inevitably find an increasing number of writers exploring the almost limitless possibilities that lie before us. Embracing rather than attempting to limit that potential will allow us to build on our remarkable half-millennial multilingual heritage, the oldest, richest, and most diverse literary tradition in the United States.

MAURICE J. O’SULLIVAN, an award-winning teacher, writer, and filmmaker, is professor of English and Kenneth Curry Chair of Literature at Rollins College in Winter Park.
A place of beauty and tension

AS A PROFESSOR of creative writing and a poet, I am inescapably drawn to tactile and specific detail. I believe that the contours of history and the immediacy of individuals’ lives are best revealed by the telling detail, which is how I have come to find myself staring at a ceiling in 19th-century Fort Pickens on Santa Rosa Island. The ceiling forms a brick arch across the expanse of the room and is covered by what looks like whitewash or plaster. Above my head, white strands of this material dangle like papier-mâché icicles—small stalactites produced by the remains of lime in the mortar liquefying over many years onto the ceiling and walls. The mortarless bricks still hold in place, secured only by the semicircular design of the arc, and that literal tension provides entry for me not just into the lives of soldiers on the Gulf Coast but into the paradoxes and contradictions of American history.

What makes Fort Pickens one of my favorite Florida places is that its beauty and complex history require a visitor to contemplate our nation’s identity. For me, the remains of Fort Pickens serve as a reminder of the continual need to return to the questions surrounding the foundations of our nation. Consider, for example, that the 21.5
million bricks in the fort were laid by almost 200 enslaved workers, many brought to Pensacola from the Mobile and New Orleans areas. Though the design of Fort Pickens and the system of 40 coastal forts built across the U.S. following the War of 1812 was intended to provide seacoast fortifications against “foreign invaders” (as described in the park’s informational guides), I cannot place my hand on the bricks without thinking of the hands of the enslaved men who set these bricks. Every time I return to Fort Pickens I feel two competing emotions: that the literal tension that holds the bricks together is no less prevalent today than it was almost 200 years ago when the fort was built; and that, as Martin Luther King Jr. said more than 100 years after the fort’s construction, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

Additionally, part of the appeal of Fort Pickens resides in its reminder that history is not destiny. Though the fort was built by slave labor, it served as an important Union fort in the Civil War, withstanding a land assault from 1,000 Confederate soldiers in 1861 during the Battle of Santa Rosa Island. Following General Braxton Bragg’s soldiers being repelled from the fort, the Union forces at Fort Pickens bombarded nearby Fort McRee and Fort Barrancas in November and January 1861, nearly destroying Fort McRee and the navy yard. After the Confederates abandoned Pensacola in 1862, Fort Pickens saw no additional combat and remained in Union hands for the duration of the Civil War.

Beyond the mortarless brick rooms of Fort Pickens, additional artifacts extend in every direction from the center courtyard of the pentagon-shaped edifice: A 15-inch Rodman smoothbore cannon, weighing 50,000 pounds and capable of firing a 400-pound shot, stands as a sentry on the Tower Bastion. Battery Pensacola, and the other black-painted and concrete-reinforced batteries built near the turn of the 19th century and later during the Second World War, rise like surfaced submarines throughout the fort and the island. Even the absent section of the fort’s northwest wall tells a story—how, in 1899, a fire broke out in the night, and though the soldiers attempted to douse the flames, 8,000 pounds of gunpowder ignited a little after 5 a.m., killing one soldier and raining fragments of bricks across Pensacola Bay.

Perhaps the most famous story of Fort Pickens, though, focuses on the imprisonment of Geronimo, the legendary Apache chief. When the U.S. Army exiled 400 Apaches to Florida in 1886, Geronimo and 15 of his men were sent to Fort Pickens following a petition initiated by local Pensacola leaders who believed Geronimo’s imprisonment at the fort would serve as a draw.
for tourists to the area. Geronimo and his men weren’t held in prison cells, but resided in what had been the officers’ quarters and were required to do work at the fort during the day. Though they were reunited with their families at Fort Pickens after a year, they were all soon moved to Mobile and then Fort Sill in Oklahoma, where Geronimo died in 1909. One of the informational placards placed within Fort Pickens contains the following quote from Geronimo: “I was born on the prairies where the wind blew free and there was nothing to break the light of the sun. I was born where there were no enclosures.”

Just as Fort Pickens provides entry into Florida’s and America’s past, it is simultaneously very much a part of the community’s present. In the room beyond the officers’ quarters, a young woman in a wedding gown poses in a doorway, her shadow casting sharply behind her as her veil lifts and settles with the breeze passing through the fort. Her photographer, most likely the groom-to-be, fumbles with his camera as the bride leans forward from the doorway like a carved wood figurehead on the prow of a ship. Though closed for several years following the devastation of Hurricane Ivan in 2004 when much of the access road to the fort was literally torn from the ground, Fort Pickens and the Gulf Islands National Seashore have returned as drivers of tourism, conservation, and natural beauty for Pensacola and the surrounding area.

When I first moved to Pensacola in 2006, the fort was only accessible by biking and walking, which created a somewhat otherworldly passage. The remains of the asphalt road, dusted with sand, resembled a stretch of dark ice until it reached a dead end. The visitor had to trudge through the dunes or along the beach the rest of the way to reach the fort. As the road to the fort was rebuilt, many of the amenities in the park returned as well. A campground, perpetually filled with RVs and campers, welcomes barefoot children who pedal bikes on trails and a boardwalk that is surrounded by Osprey nesting in the ashen limbs of barren trees. Fishermen cast lines from a pier not far from the park’s entry. Sailboats and paddle boarders glide smoothly through the bay that was once guarded by Fort Pickens cannons. Activities include history tours, bird walks, ecological studies, and conservation programs to protect sea turtles and nesting birds.

Yet the strongest appeal for me has been and remains the intersecting narratives of the fort’s present and past. Heraclitus, the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, said, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.” Fort Pickens and the Gulf Island National Seashore provide such an entry point for anyone desiring to consider and experience the beauty, complexity, and contradictions inherent in our history.

JONATHAN FINK, professor and director of creative writing at the University of West Florida in Pensacola, won a 2016 Florida Book Award bronze medal in poetry for The Crossing. His latest book, a collection of sonnets, is titled Barbarossa: The German Invasion of the Soviet Union and the Siege of Leningrad.
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