The History of Our Heritage #1: The Creation of a Village

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The open-air Pinellas County Historical Museum at Heritage Village sits upon twenty-one acres in central Pinellas County. Originally known as “Heritage Park,” this site opened to the public on a ten-acre tract that includes the southern half of the present-day property, bordered by 125th Street and Walsingham Road. The site later expanded to its present size of twenty-one acres. Since the mid-1970s, workers have moved or reconstructed over thirty historical structures at Heritage Village. Funded by the Board of County Commissioners, Heritage Village benefits from the guidance of advisory bodies such as the Pinellas County Historical Commission and the support of non-profit cultural organizations, including the Pinellas County Historical Society. During the summer of 1995, officials changed the name of “Heritage Park” to “Heritage Village” to emphasize the difference between a traditional park with picnic benches and playgrounds and a village that preserves important historical structures.¹

The first site of the Pinellas County Historical Museum dates to 1961, forty-nine years after the establishment of the County in 1912. Ralph Reed came to the area in 1913. Began as a reporter of the then-St. Petersburg Times (now Tampa Bay Times) in 1914, a job he held until retiring from there in 1960, with most of his duties at the Clearwater bureau of the paper from 1932 until 1960 when most of his beat was focused on events at the courthouse. From Sullivan, Indiana, Reed had worked at Paul Poynter’s paper there. Paul and later Nelson Poynter published the St. Petersburg Times. After retiring from the newspaper, Reed became the County historian, hired by Board of County Commissioners in 1961 and given space in the basement of the County courthouse to collect artifacts beginning on April 10, 1961, when he was given a desk and space

¹ Information in this presentation comes from extensive research performed by Schnur that originally appeared in Heritage Villagers: A Social History of the Pinellas Peninsula as Revealed through the Structures at Heritage Village, published in 2004. Subsequent research is maintained by the author in his research files.
and the Pinellas County Historical Commission received its first donation. Reed was not the FIRST County historian, however. In the 1940s, after the County had taken possession of Philippe Park in Safety Harbor and Fort DeSoto along Mullet Key, Commissioners had hired John Blocker. Unlike Blocker, Reed had a more defined mission to develop a full-fledged museum and research collection. In three small basement rooms, he collected old typewriters and other historical artifacts, compiled archival records, and had members of the Junior League of Clearwater there to assist. Reed retired from his second career at the age of 80 in the beginning of October 1975.

The plan to develop an open-air museum took shape in the mid-1970s. The emphasis on American history surrounding the Bicentennial celebration, threats to the Plant-Sumner House, and the availability of the House of Seven Gables propelled the Board of County Commissioners, the Pinellas County Historical Commission, and the Junior League of Clearwater into action. With developers separately planning to build new structures on land then occupied by Plant-Sumner and Seven Gables, local architect Don Williams designed a site plan for the original ten acres of the Heritage Village site that included those two structures. In 1976, the county allocated approximately $60,000 to construct a Florida “Cracker” dwelling that served as the first museum building. Four large moving vans transported archival and museum collections from the basement of the Pinellas County Courthouse in downtown Clearwater to the secure, climate-controlled structures at Heritage Village.

Another name graces the exhibit hall across from our Ralph Reed room. It is named for Roy Helms. Helms started working for the County in 1926 at the courthouse. He oversaw the Photostat machines in the duplicating department under the Clerk of Courts, duties that later included the oversight of records management that had his staff microfilming every official document filed, from closings on houses to criminal and marriage records, often with microfilms available to six county sites by the next workday. Just as Reed preserved the history of the County as a reporter and later County historian, Helms played an essential role in documenting County business. In January 1976, just as he was approaching his fiftieth year of service as a County employee, he passed away in his sleep at the age of 71.
Controversy ensued as the new museum site took shape. Some donors and public officials angrily demanded that items deposited in the courthouse archives should remain in Clearwater—the seat of government for Pinellas County. Others, including preservationists, condemned the relocation of buildings from their original settings. Public officials and concerned citizens had to make a choice of either relocating these structures or witnessing their demise. During its early years, one preservationist lambasted Heritage Village as representing nothing more than a “zoo for buildings.” Members of the Pinellas County Historical Commission and other supporters also had to fight against the common assumption that many citizens held during the early 1970s: “If it’s old, tear it down.” Finally, in an area with few natives and many transplants, residents often knew little about the history of the Pinellas Peninsula. The success of Heritage Village thus required a strong emphasis on public education and assistance from outside organizations, such as the Pinellas County Historical Society. This non-profit organization, established in 1976, supports the mission of Heritage Village, aids in the preservation of artifacts, and promotes scholarship and historical education programs and activities.

An important partner from the beginning has been the Pinellas County Historical Society. Although the Society officially claims its year of incorporation as 1976, the Society’s date of birth actually is November 5, 1975. On that date, the Historical Commission decided to form a committee that would act as “an arm of the museum.” This committee became PCHS. During the early months of 1976, a small group of volunteers laid the foundation for PCHS. Dr. David R. Carr, a professor at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, served as the first acting president. Dorothy A. Edmunds assumed the role of acting secretary. George F. Gramling Jr., the chair of the Historical Commission, also took on a strong role in shaping the Society. By February 1976, they developed the first bylaws and planned for a membership campaign.

On April 7, 1976, the Pinellas County Historical Society (PCHS) held an introductory meeting in the County Commission Assembly Room of the old courthouse. At this gathering, plans were unveiled for Heritage Park. Members of the Pinellas County Historical Commission invited
representatives from historical societies and other organizations throughout the county, from St. Petersburg to Tarpon Springs. An important step for the Society took place on August 24, 1976, the day that PCHS officers signed their incorporation papers. On January 31, 1977, PCHS received conditional tax-exempt status from the Internal Revenue Service, thus allowing it to operate as a non-profit and raise funds for the Village. Soon thereafter, on March 15, the PCHS board held a special meeting to approve a $5,000 donation to help complete projects at the Village before the June 1977 opening date.

Despite obstacles, challenges, and funding limitations, excitement prevailed as official broke ground and dedicated the open-air museum. Don Jones, chair of the County Commission, told those at the March 31, 1976 groundbreaking ceremony that “we are honoring those people in the past who were good enough to work for the future.” George Gramling, chair of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, saw Heritage Village as the crossroads for “a confederation of local historical societies, rotating exhibits, museum outreach, and education for all and an outreach program into the schools.” In June 1977, commissioners, other county officials, and dignitaries traveled by bus from Clearwater for the dedication ceremonies. They enjoyed box lunches provided by the Junior League of Clearwater during the ride. This ceremony marked the formal opening of Heritage Village as a fully-operational museum with public history programs and exhibits.

Many visitors to Heritage Village mistakenly view the museum as an assembly of “pioneer” buildings. While certain dwellings (the McMullen-Coachman Log House, Daniel McMullen House, Boyer Cottage, etc.) represent some of the oldest existing structures on the Pinellas Peninsula, any characterization of their occupants as pioneers who led simple, agrarian lives fails to provide a complete—or accurate—picture of the social history of early settlers. For example, Captain James Parramore McMullen’s log house served as an early hospital and provided a resting place for those making the long overland trek to Tampa. Members of the McMullen family did much more than farm: As a young child living with his parents in the McMullen-Coachman log house during the 1850s, Bethel McMullen assiduously collected and voraciously read volumes of poetry.
According to family histories, Union troops burned his small library of books during the Civil War when they visited the cabin. Just as Bethel’s photographic memory and ability to recite long passages of poetry continued to amaze family members at gatherings in the early twentieth century, his early years at the cabin included many hours of reading and studying, as well as the plowing of the fields and other “pioneer” activities.

Plant-Sumner House

History of Site before House was Built

- Located near Henry B. Plant’s Belleview Hotel (now the Belleview Biltmore).

Construction Information

- Probably built in 1896 with modern amenities for its time (running water, indoor plumbing, electricity). Exact pedigree of the structure still uncertain.
- Similar in construction to the Plumb House, another “Plant” House bought and moved by the Plumb family.
- Modern kitchen and side porches added to the structure by 1930s.

History of Occupants

- By many accounts, the home originally served as a home for the railroad supervisor responsible for trains coming from the Clearwater city depot to the Belleview Hotel.
- Robert Sumner, a minister who came to the area from Maitland, moved into the home with his family in 1912. Sumner served as the postmaster, a dairy farmer, and a minister in the area.
- A member of the Whitehurst family lived in the house from the mid-1950s until the early 1970s.

Significant Events/Activities

- While living in the house, the Sumners kept several cows on their property and sold some of the milk to neighbors. The 1910 census notes that Sumner had owned a dairy farm while living in Maitland.
- By 1920, Sumner served as Belleair’s postmaster.

Moving of the House to Heritage Village

- By the early 1970s, the house had suffered from extensive termite damage.
- Fearing that the house’s condition might lead to its demolition, the Clearwater Junior League began searching for a suitable location to move the house (within Clearwater city limits). George Mallory donated the structure.
- This house became the first structure brought to Heritage Village.
Vandalism at the park during its early days (late 1976), led to the erection of the fence around the park’s perimeter. There was concern about damage to Plant-Sumner and Seven Gables, the only two structures on the site at that time.

The house had deteriorated to the point that it required both reconstruction and restoration. Many parts of the house were “built” in the mid-1970s to replace areas where termite damage and other deterioration had required demolition.

In February 1977, volunteers from the Junior League of Clearwater painted the house. Work on restoring and rebuilding Plant-Sumner was almost finished by the fall of 1977.

The Plant-Sumner House, constructed in the mid-1890s, symbolized Henry Plant and his family’s contributions to central Pinellas. Located near the site of Plant’s Belleview Hotel—now the Belleview Biltmore—the Plant-Sumner House and other dwellings provided homes for the construction project supervisors and their families. By the late 1890s, the eastern portion of the property sat alongside a railroad line that included a spur connected to the Belleview property. This house served as the residence for the supervisor of the railroad that ran from the Clearwater depot to the Biltmore Hotel project.

A native of Connecticut, Henry Bradley Plant first came to Florida in the spring of 1853. After the Civil War, he expanded his interests in the shipping and transportation businesses. Plant’s trains pulled into Tampa Town by early 1884, and over the next decade he expanded his network to include steamships and an extension of the railroad lines to Port Tampa, along the Interbay Peninsula. He soon began to design an opulent resort—the Tampa Bay Hotel—along the western banks of the Hillsborough River. This structure, presently the campus of the University of Tampa, dominated the skyline of the growing community by the early 1890s.

In the early 1880s, Hamilton Disston had purchased substantial acreage throughout Western Hillsborough, now Pinellas County. Soon, Disston brought in associates and agents to parcel, sell, and develop his holdings from Tarpon Springs to Disston City (now Gulfport). Disston hoped to secure a railroad along Pinellas to serve as a catalyst for his interests, but animosity between him and Plant forced him to look for another locomotive company. By late 1886, Disston decided to visit Peter Demens, a Russian immigrant who had recently taken control of the Orange Belt Investment Company’s line from Sanford to Oakland, near Lake Apopka. Throughout 1887 and
early 1888, workers extended the Orange Belt from Lake Apopka to southern Pinellas, though not to Disston City. A disagreement between Disston and Demens led to a new agreement between the Orange Belt Investment Company and “General” John Constantine Williams that brought the iron horse to the future site of Demen’s Landing.

The Plant-Sumner House’s exact age and original design remain a mystery. A brochure published the Junior League of Clearwater to commemorate the reconstruction of the house at Heritage Village places its year of origin at 1886, with Plant acquiring the home as part of his Belleair development a decade later. Later research by Cathy MacKinnon places the probable period of construction as the spring of 1896, after Plant had acquired the property and the Orange Belt Railway. In redesigning the rail lines, Plant’s crew planned to make the area northeast of the home and west of the former Kilgore family citrus-packing facility a switching area between track lines. Under this assumption, Plant’s interests built the Plant-Sumner House and other nearby dwellings as residences for those erecting the Belleview Hotel or supervising railroad operations. MacKinnon’s conversations with those familiar with the house pointed out that the installation of wires and plumbing probably took place at the time of construction, leading one to assume that construction did occur in the mid-1890s, not earlier.

The house possessed very modern facilities for 1896, such as electricity, running water, and indoor plumbing. Perhaps Plant built these houses with such modern conveniences to entice tradesmen to move their families into the area while they worked at the Belleview Hotel. With seven spacious rooms for a growing family, the house also included picture and plate rails, a built-in china cabinet, four fireplaces, a wood cook stove, and icebox, all desirable amenities at the height of the Victorian era. However, in the early twentieth century, these Plant homes became “eyesores” to those managing the exclusive hotel. Belleview officials sold some of the dwellings at low prices with the understanding that the new owners would move the houses away from the Belleview Hotel.
Robert Sumner purchased the Plant-Sumner House in 1912. The Sumners raised their children in the home and kept cows on their property. In the Belleair community, Sumner held a variety of positions: a Methodist minister, Belleair postmaster, dairy farmer, and veterinarian. In 1934, workers modernized the kitchen and installed a gabled roof and side porches. By 1950, the family added a second bathroom on the west side of the house. For over forty years, the Sumners occupied the “A” street residence.

By the mid-1950s, C. C. Whitehurst moved into the Plant-Sumner House. Native of a pioneer family, Whitehurst lived at the home for approximately eighteen years. During part of that time, he worked at the nearby Kilgore Groves and West Coast Fruit Company. He retired from the citrus industry by the mid-1960s, a time when residential subdivisions started to appear on many of the former citrus groves, and other industrial and commercial facilities replaced many of the old packing houses. As Whitehurst prepared to move to a new home in 1973, members of the Junior League of Clearwater and the Seminole chapter of the Questers learned about the home’s history after meeting with Ralph Reed.

The Questers and League members soon discovered that Plant-Sumner’s new owner planned to burn down or demolish the structure. Massive termite damage had destroyed significant portions of the home. The Junior League received permission to move the Plant-Sumner House by late 1974 from then-owner George Mallory, but needed a new location for the building. After failing to obtain support from Clearwater, the Junior League approached the Pinellas County Historical Commission. Junior League members played an important role in the creation of Heritage Village by lobbying the Board of County Commissioners to create and fund an open-air historical park, and by encouraging their husbands—many of whom occupied positions of authority in Clearwater or county politics—to support this initiative. Intense lobbying by these women to members of the Pinellas County Historical Commission and the Board of County Commissioners saved Plant-Sumner from the pyre or trash pile. Rather than demolition, the house faced a massive renovation and a much anticipated relocation to the site of the county’s open-air museum along Walsingham Road. In 1976 Plant-Sumner became the first house transported to
Heritage Village. The Junior League of Clearwater paid $50,000 for reconstruction costs, and the local chapter of the Questers furnished the dining room and the nursery. Not only did the efforts of Junior League members save this house; their advocacy encouraged the creation of Heritage Village and brought substantial historic preservation grants to Pinellas County during America’s bicentennial.

**House of Seven Gables**

**History of Site before House was Built**
- Located in the area of the early “Clear Water Harbor” settlement.
- Land at the site originally acquired by James Stevens in 1842 as the result of the Armed Occupation Act. Other early owners of the land (before a structure was built) included John S. Taylor and David B. Turner. David Nevins Starr and wife Mary acquired the tract in 1896. Starr retired from his business activities in Rockford, Illinois, and came to the area in search of a warmer winter climate.
- Members of the Starr family visited the area before the arrival of the Orange Belt Railway.

**Construction Information**
- Seven Gables was built in 1907 on the bluff near the present-day Pinellas County Courthouse, an area with excellent views of Clearwater’s bay.
- This late Queen Anne style home occupied an impressive location in the growing community of Clearwater.

**History of Occupants**
- David N. and Mary Starr were the first occupants of the house. The Starrs also had a connection with John Cheyney, an early settler and “sponge hooker” in Tarpon Springs who played an important role in establishing the sponge diving industry. Cheyney had served as manager of the Anclote and Rock Island Sponge Company as early as 1891, nearly fourteen years before the first Greek sponge divers arrived in the region. Starr’s older brother, Henry, had a daughter named Mabel. This woman, David’s niece, married John Cheyney. David Starr frequently visited with John and Mabel Cheyney during his later years, and discussed business ventures, including Cheyney’s investments in a lumber mill and in citrus and developments around the Lake Butler region.
- After selling Seven Gables in 1917, Starr continued to visit the region. He lived the last six years of his life in Tarpon Springs.
- A number of owners and occupants stayed at the structure through the mid-1920s, including an Episcopal minister named Arthur R. Cornwell who lived at Seven Gables during the construction of his church’s rectory.
Chester and Lucy Masslich owned the building from 1925 through 1943. During part of this period, city directories referred to the structure as “Seven Gables Inn” or noted that the boarding house had “furnished rooms.” The roaming house also included a gazebo by this time. For a brief period, near the height of the land boom, a “binder boys” club met/stayed at the home. These speculators often sold prime tracts of land for handsome profits during the land boom of the 1920s.

Many tenants stayed in the guest rooms at the structure.

Charles and Clara Dietrich acquired the house during the mid-1940s. They came from Ohio by way of Orlando. The Dietrich family sold the house in 1951 and returned to Orlando.

The Hemerick family acquired the house in 1953 and made necessary repairs. They owned the structure through the mid-1970s. Williams & Walker architects acquired the site from the Hemericks, and donated the structure for a planned historical museum that became Heritage Village. This structure and the Plant-Sumner House were scheduled to arrive before the museum complex had even been built.

**Moving of the House to Heritage Village**

- The structure traveled from Clearwater to the area near Walsingham Road on a barge along the Intracoastal Waterway.
- Shortly after Seven Gables arrived at the “Pinellas County Historical Park,” carpenters, members of the Clearwater Junior League, and others donated their time to rehabilitate the structure.
- By the fall of 1977, crews had finished nearly all of the major rehabilitative work on Seven Gables.
- A ribbon-cutting ceremony took place in October 1978.
- People visiting the structure for guided docent tours actually enter what was once the back door, and leave through the front door.

The House of Seven Gables has a rich and intriguing history. James Stevens obtained the land around present-day downtown Clearwater through the Armed Occupation Act. Passed by Congress in 1842, this law brought settlers to peninsular Florida who agreed to live on their land, cultivate at least five acres, build a dwelling, and bear arms in event of another Seminole war. After the property exchanged hands three times, David N. Starr—a retiree from Rockford, Illinois—purchased the parcel in 1896. Eleven years later, his family began to spend their winters at Seven Gables.

Originally perched on a bluff overlooking Clearwater Bay west of the present-day courthouse, this impressive house offered a magnificent view and occupied a prominent location in the
growing city. The elegant residence contained thirteen rooms and seven gables, allowing for a spacious living area that suited Victorian tastes. The interior paneling is made of heart of pine and beaded tongue and groove that provided durability. Excellent materials and sound construction have allowed the house to survive the October 1921 hurricane, as well as other storms.

The Starr family sold the home in 1917. Two years later, a compassionate woman named Annie Kelley acquired the house. By the early 1920s, she allowed an Episcopal minister to occupy the house with his family until the architects could complete a new rectory at Clearwater’s Episcopal Church of the Ascension. Chester and Lucy Masslich purchased the home in 1925 for speculative purposes and rental income. Over the next two decades, a variety of proprietors operated an inn or rooming house at Seven Gables. During the mid-1920s, a group of realtors utilized the house as a social club for dinners, informal meetings, and card games attended by “binder boys,” young real estate operatives who placed a small down payment, or binder, on real estate during the Florida land boom with a promise to acquire the balance within a short period of time. As the land boom came to an end, numerous residents rented the upstairs furnished rooms between the late 1920s and the early 1940s. For example, the Guzman family managed the property in 1931 and turned Seven Gables into a tearoom and rooming house with service that included “dinner on the veranda.”

Charles and Clara Dietrich fell in love with Seven Gables in 1944 and planned to retire there. They moved from Orlando to Clearwater and made some improvements to the structure. However, after seven years in the home, the house and stairs become too much for the elderly couple. They returned to Orlando after selling the house to John V. Neill in 1951. Two years later, Neill decided to sell to a young dentist named Frederick Hemerick. Members of that family kept the house until April 1975, when they accepted a purchase offer from Don Williams and Dixie Walker of the Williams and Walker architectural firm in Clearwater. Williams, a member of the Pinellas County Historical Commission and early developer of site plans for Heritage Village, donated Seven Gables and some of the costs associated with its move to Heritage Village in 1976. The
enormous size of the house and its location in downtown Clearwater required movers to transport it by barge along the intracoastal waterway, an event that attracted a great deal of media attention. Since arriving at Heritage Village, many individuals and organizations have contributed to the restoration of this grand and elegant house to its original Victorian appearance.

**Lowe Barn**

**Construction Information**
- The two-story board and batten home was built along “The Narrows” in the Anona area in 1888, mostly by Wesley Lowe.
- The barn, constructed in 1912, replaced a smaller barn that once sat on the Lowe property. Some of the wood may have come from an earlier structure.

**History of Occupants**
- The Lowe family, led by Captain John T. Lowe, came to the area by the late 1850s. A native of the Bahamas born in 1830, John Lowe’s ancestors had previously lived in the Carolinas and other British colonies. As Loyalists during the American Revolution, some probably fled to East Florida, then to the Bahamas. John Lowe came with family members to Key West as a child in 1840. He married Laura Meares, a native of Nassau. Members of the Lowe and Meares families helped to establish the Anona settlement and lived in the Seminole/Largo area near “The Narrows” of Boca Ciega Bay.

**Moving of the Barn and House to Heritage Village**
- The Lowe Barn came directly to Heritage Village (not through St. Petersburg, like the Lowe House) in late 1976. Work on the Lowe Barn’s restoration was nearly finished by the fall of 1977. One of the earlier structures brought to Heritage Village (along with Seven Gables and Plant-Sumner), the barn arrived as park officials planned to move the McMullen-Coachman log cabin.
- The barn remained on the Randolph site for over twenty years after the Condricks had moved the Lowe House to St. Petersburg. By the early 1970s, plans were made to develop the remaining portion of the original Lowe homestead as part of a condominium complex located at Randolph Farms. The barn was donated to the Largo Historical Society in 1976, and reconstructed at Heritage Village in January 1977.

Members of the Lowe family first settled on the central Pinellas Peninsula by the late 1850s. Many branches of the family lived in the Bahamas during the 1700s and early 1800s. The Lowes looked to the sea for economic opportunities during the mid-nineteenth century. Led by Captain John Thomas Lowe, a small group arrived at “Lowe’s Landing,” a site along the intracoastal
waterway between Indian Rocks Beach and Anona. Captain J. T. Lowe married the former Laura D. Meares, a Nassau native in December 1853. Lowe arrived at a site south of Clearwater harbor, known as “The Narrows,” in June 1859. Family members fought in the Civil War, established citrus groves and farmsteads, and joined other early settlers in developing the west central Pinellas Peninsula.

The Lowe House, built largely through the efforts of Wesley Lowe, became an important meeting place for many pioneer families of Anona. Wesley lived on this property until the 1930s. By 1912, he constructed a larger barn to replace an earlier and smaller one that had existed since the late 1800s. The family constructed a small barn to hold supplies for its growing agricultural operations. The exact date of this original structure remains unknown, though Wesley may have built the barn shortly after the completing the Lowe House in the late 1880s. This original barn sat close to the Lowe House. By 1911, the family decided to replace the small barn with a larger structure, the barn presently located at Heritage Village. Sumner Lowe, then a small child, recalled that the building of the new barn coincided with the uproar throughout the Pinellas Peninsula as residents “declared their independence” from Hillsborough. He remembered helping his father, Wesley, by “handing wood up from the little barn” as the family used some of the best lumber from the dismantled smaller barn for the present barn. Wesley procured additional lumber from Hussey’s sawmill in Largo. The family used part of the barn to store hay and kept horses and cows in stalls on the other side of the structure. Sumner recalled that his father kept a horse-drawn buggy and wagon in the barn before the family purchased an automobile. He later parked his Model T Ford, a gift from his mother, in the barn.

By the time Wesley Lowe died in January 1942, family members had sold most of their land holdings around Lowe’s Landing. Wesley’s death marked the passing of the oldest native of the Pinellas Peninsula at that time. Long before his death, Wesley had met with Abraham Merritt, a magazine editor and publisher from New York. Sometime in the mid-1930s, the Lowes sold the site of the Lowe House and barn to the Merritts, who soon turned the area into a tropical garden. The barn provided an excellent storage area for equipment, fertilizer, and materials required to
maintain the citrus and exotic plants. During this period, Eleanor Merritt lived in the Lowe House. Arnold Miller, his wife, and two sons—Ralph and Ronnie—also occupied one of the former Lowe homes and groves in the Anona area by 1950-1951.

While visitors to the Haas Museum enjoyed the restored Lowe House, the Largo Historical Society hoped to preserve the barn. Lee Dorian established Dorian Housing Corporation and acquired the Randolph Farms property in 1971. Dorian soon planned a new condominium complex on the former Lowe holdings, a large development that kept the Randolph Farms name but eclipsed the rural character of the land and the barn. In 1976, as county officials planned for the opening of Heritage Village, Dorian offered the barn to the Largo Historical Society (LHS) for removal and preservation. LHS officers had received an estimate of $6,000 to move the structure, and agreed to cover half of the costs if the Board of County Commissioners paid the other half. With the PCHC’s approval, the Lowe barn became the third structure moved to Heritage Village (after Plant-Sumner and Seven Gables) and the fourth structure overall (arriving after workers had completed the Phase I building of the Historical Museum). Workers prepared the barn for its move in January 1977, and the PCHC celebrated its arrival by early February. That spring, student members of the American Association of Architects used photographs and drawings of the Lowe barn and the recently-moving Coachman-McMullen cabin to rehabilitate those structures. By the summer of 1977, laborers had completed restoration on the barn, and members of the Largo Historical Society began to place farm equipment and tools in the structure for an exhibit. The Lowe House would rejoin its former neighbor, the barn, in May 1991.

**McMullen-Coachman Log Cabin**

**Construction Information**

- Exact date of construction remains unknown, though it was built no later than 1852. Most family sources place 1852 as the year of construction, though other sources mention earlier years. It was not the first structure occupied by the McMullens, who had certainly established some sort of shelter shortly after the time of their arrival on the peninsula.
- Captain Jim’s family cleared the land and constructed the house.
- This double-pen log house has pine logs originally joined by pegs rather than nails.
Large open porches, a broad stairway, and excellent ventilation (including openings between some of the pine logs) made it easy for James P. McMullen to overcome bouts with consumption (tuberculosis). He wanted cracks “large enough to throw a cat through” to get sufficient fresh air.

- The upper story had its own breezeway. Much of the original furniture was made from nearby materials (including the Spanish moss mattresses).

**History of Occupants**

- Captain James P. McMullen and wife Elizabeth were first owners of the cabin. Throughout the late 1800s, the cabin became an important gathering place for many members of the McMullen clan. James homesteaded on a 240-acre land grant. He spent a great amount of time in and around upper Tampa Bay.

- Captain Jim McMullen operated the first formal school on the Pinellas peninsula.

- Elizabeth was a midwife for many women in the area. She worked on the fields during the Civil War. When marauders threatened them during the war years, Elizabeth and her children spent some time at a fort in the Keystone area, where—according to a family history—she patrolled the fort with musket in hand.

- Along with his brother Daniel, James McMullen engaged in the cattle business in addition to cultivating crops on his homestead.

- Captain Jim founded the Bay View community in an area he probably first visited when he came to the region in 1842. By some accounts, James McMullen and Dick Booth weathered the notorious 1848 hurricane at an Indian mound that partially blew away. The force of the winds may have convinced him to build this cabin away from the waterfront.

- The Coachman family purchased the cabin and surrounding lands in 1901. Members of the Coachman family came to the area from Georgia, though some came to Polk County by the 1880s before moving to the Pinellas peninsula. The Coachmans lived in the cabin through the 1920s (sometimes using it as a summer camp or storage area), and constructed other buildings on the property. A fresh water well was located adjacent to the cabin. Other structures near the intersection of NE Coachman and Old Coachman Road included: H. M. Coachman’s home, the Coachman depot along the railroad lines, packing houses (one burned down in 1951), the sweet shop (located at the intersection of these roads and the railroad tracks), a barn, gardens, and animal pens. By 1937, the Coachmans operated the Kumquat Shop on this tract of land.

- By the time the Coachmans acquired the structure, it needed some maintenance. Windows had shutters, but no glass. The Coachman family filled the cracks between the logs. They added a kitchen and dining room, as well as a large back porch. With the assistance of McMullens, they located some of the original furniture and in February 1936 the Clearwater chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution dedicated the cabin as an historic structure. A bronze plaque was placed on the front wall at that time.

- The Coachman family allowed members of the public to visit the cabin by the mid-1930s. A “congenial hostess” often greeted each visitor by giving them a glass of orange juice and describing—much like a docent—life along the Pinellas peninsula during the early years. After World War II, the structure was closed to the public. For a while,
members of the Coachman staff used the space for their work duties. By the late 1960s, the Coachmans used the cabin as storage space.

**Moving of the House to Heritage Village**

- Long before the establishment of Heritage Village, the Pinellas County Historical Commission held discussions about preserving the log cabin. In June 1961, they discussed the possibility of securing the cabin from the Coachman family and developing a county park at or around the structure. Historian Ralph Reed reported to commission members that the Coachman family did not have any interest to selling or donating the cabin at that time. Since the cabin was generally not used by the mid-1960s, a Commission member decided to contact the Coachman family again in the spring of 1966 about preserving the structure. Commission members even discussed the possibility of having the State of Florida intervene in the interest of preserving the cabin.
- By the spring of 1968, Mack Coachman informed the Commission that the family did not want the structure to deteriorate, but had no plans to have the building or site become a memorial.
- After the arsonist had damaged the cabin, Mack Coachman gave permission for the movement of the log cabin to Heritage Village. During the month of November 1976, the structure suffered from eight fires of “mysterious origin.” After the last blaze, Assistant Fire Chief Dave King considered the structure “a total loss.” A sixteen year-old boy confessed to setting the fires, and was arrested.
- By June 1978, the cabin was placed on its foundation, and an outside firm sandblasted and washed away charred and damaged areas of the logs.
- Restoration of the cabin continued over the next couple of years, with much of the labor performed by workers in the federal CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973) program beginning in early 1979.

Captain James Parramore McMullen and members of his family built the McMullen-Coachman Log House circa 1852. The oldest residential structure in Pinellas County, this dwelling served as his family’s residence for the next half century. A bad bout with tuberculosis first brought “Captain Jim” to the area in the early 1840s. As an eighteen year-old man, he suffered from “consumption,” a highly communicable disease today known as tuberculosis. Fearing that other family members might contract this illness, his father decided to send him away from his home in Quitman, Georgia. According to history passed down through the family, young James gathered his bedroll, gun, horse, and dog, and left his home in southern Georgia to recuperate in the Territory of Florida.
After recovering from his illness, Jim told his seven brothers that the area’s climate restored his good health. Each of the brothers McMullen settled in the area for a period of time. In 1844, Jim married Elizabeth Campbell of Brooksville, Florida, and in 1848, he arrived in upper Pinellas to claim his 240-acre parcel received under the Armed Occupation Act of 1842. The McMullens returned to the Pinellas Peninsula by the late 1840s. McMullen decided to build his Georgian-style log house near Alligator Creek on the interior of the Pinellas Peninsula. The McMullens, possibly with the help of slaves, built the structure out of round logs and pegs rather than metal nails. Cypress posts supported the structure, while hand-cut cypress shingles covered the roof. Lacking glass windows, the log house originally had only wooden shutters. A center breezeway known as a “dog-trot” provided stairway access to the second floor.

Captain McMullen, his family, and servants built the two-story Georgia-style house with heart-of-pine logs. They notched the logs to interlock with one another and used pine floor planks. With its central “dog-trot” breezeway and large cracks between the log sides, the house allowed plenty of fresh air to circulate throughout the structure. The porch contained cypress stumps and hand-rived cypress shingles covered the roof. Though possessing a chimney initially made of mud and sticks, the family soon replaced these materials with bricks fired at the site. They built the “sleeping rooms” on the second floor. At a later date and as the family grew, Jim added a kitchen and dining room area as an annex to the cabin. The family also replaced the “mud and sticks” fireplace with one made from bricks. Since Elizabeth served as a midwife in the area, the log house became the first “hospital” along the Pinellas Peninsula. Nearly sixty members of the McMullen family alone were born in the cabin before 1900. Its prominence along the sparsely-settled frontier also made the cabin a de facto stagecoach station during the years before the construction of the Orange Belt Railway. Residents of upper Pinellas who traveled to Tampa on county business frequently stopped at the cabin; many even spent the night.

The exact age of the cabin remains a mystery. Various family interviews and printed sources place the date of construction anywhere between 1848 and 1852. Nancy Meador—granddaughter of Captain Jim and longtime historian of the McMullen clan—claimed that he constructed the
“sturdily built double pen log cabin” in 1848. A 1 February 1940 obituary of Jim’s son, Dr. Bethel McMullen, claimed that the family first occupied this cabin in 1848. One of Bethel’s granddaughters claimed that stories passed down through the generations placed the year of construction as either 1849 or 1850. A St. Petersburg Times story describing the February 1936 ceremony where the Daughters of the American Revolution dedicated a bronze tablet at the log house claimed that Captain James erected the home in 1850. When longtime Times columnist Dick Bothwell visited the cabin to interview family in August 1956, he learned that the McMullens built the house in 1852. Most historians and family members believe that McMullens occupied the present structure by early 1852.

Captain Jim and his sons developed Bay View into a town by 1874. Originally known as “Eagle’s Nest” for the large nest Captain Jim spotted in a tree by the 1840s, the settlement became known as “Swimming Pen Point” as early residents began to bring cattle to the region. James P. McMullen believed that Bay View offered the best location for agricultural development in the Tampa Bay region. As members of the McMullen family grew older, Captain Jim established a family cemetery in 1881 on about ten acres of land southwest of his log house. He probably dedicated this land after the death of Mary Katherine Belcher, his third daughter and former wife of William Alexander Belcher.

The heirs of James Parramore McMullen decided to sell the log cabin and much of the accompanying lands to Solomon Smith Coachman in 1901 or 1902. An article in the 10 April 1902 Tampa Weekly Tribune claimed that Coachman purchased the grove property for $8,100. The Coachman family filled the cracks between the logs in an attempt to “modernize” the residence. Coachman, a grower and entrepreneur, left a substantial impression as one of Clearwater’s early business leaders. S. S. Coachman strongly advocated the creation of Pinellas County. As a leading entrepreneur on the Pinellas Peninsula, Coachman understood the difficulties of conducting business in a distant county seat when a poor transportation system isolated the Pinellas Peninsula from most of Hillsborough County. The log cabin became Coachman’s home office
during the important period of Pinellas County’s history. In December 1911, Governor Gilchrist selected S. S. Coachman as the first chair of the Board of County Commissioners.

The Coachmans lived in the log house from about 1909 until 1921. At that time, they moved into a two-story structure along N. E. Coachman road on the family estate. At some point by the early 1900s, probably about 1910, the family had attached a separate kitchen “cabin” to the original structure, complete with its own fireplace and a second chimney for the cooking stove.

Coachman also lobbied for a new railroad to crisscross his property. By 1914, workers cleared right-of-way along the route of the new Tampa and Gulf Coast Railroad. Coachman encouraged the company to bring the line through his property at the present-day intersection of Old Coachman and Coachman roads. Straub later claimed that Solomon’s move increased the value of his land “immeasurably.” When opened, the Tampa and Gulf Coast offered stops in Safety Harbor, Dellwood (near present-day Alligator Creek and McMullen-Booth Road), Coachman Station, and Clearwater. By the 1930s, the area around Coachman Station included a substantial grove, family dwellings, a large packing house, and Jessie’s “Kumquat Sweet Shop” near the railroad line. Jessie Coachman possessed a strong entrepreneurial spirit. With passenger trains of the Seaboard Air Line regularly passing along the family’s property at Coachman Station, Jessie and family members erected another log cabin alongside the train station at the intersection of the tracks and roadways.

The Clearwater chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution placed a plaque in front of the cabin in 1936 celebrating it as “The Oldest Existing Log House in Pinellas County.” The Clearwater chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) placed a shrine at the McMullen-Coachman Log House in a 22 February 1936 ceremony. By the early 1930s, members of DAR and other groups interested in the county’s history considered the cabin a “true relic” of pioneer life in the region. A member of the Coachman family had a modern use for part of this “shrine” during this time. Mack Coachman set aside storage space in the log house as a place to
store his growing collection of photography. By this period, the family had added electrical outlets to parts of the cabin and even used an area as a dark room.

Despite attempts to create a “county shrine” or historical park on the premises—or move the log house to another site—the structure once again became a storage room by the 1960s and early 1970s. Nancy Meador, a granddaughter of Captain James P. McMullen, enlightened and entertained readers with her occasional newspaper columns on local history that appeared in the Clearwater Sun. On 21 June 1961, Meador asked her colleagues on the Pinellas County Historical Commission (PCHC) to allow County Historian Ralph Reed to meet with Hugh “Mack” Coachman to discuss the possibility of acquiring the cabin and creating a public park on the site. Although many people in Pinellas referred to the structure as the “Coachman cabin,” Meador reminded her colleagues that they should refer to the structure as the “McMullen log cabin . . . to avoid any inference that the building was erected by anyone other than Jim McMullen.” In the July 1961 meeting, Reed informed PCHC members that Mack Coachman had no interest in selling, donating, or otherwise disposing of the cabin.

In November 1976, an arsonist set at least eight fires at the Coachman estate, with the last blaze badly damaging the McMullen-Coachman Log House and destroying most of its second floor. Mack Coachman’s decision not to sell the property in the 1960s became a flashpoint of controversy in the fall of 1976. Despite prominently posted “No Trespassing” signs at the Coachman, its location left it vulnerable to unwanted visitors. A total of eight fires took place at the Coachman property during the month of November, with the worst occurring on the early morning of November 29. Mack Coachman went by the building at 7:30 and did not see any problems. Less than an hour later, at 8:15 that morning, an anonymous caller notified the Clearwater Fire Department that flames had engulfed Captain Jim’s 1850s-era cabin. The fire scorched branches on a large tree located at least fifteen feet away from the roof. Firefighters climbed atop the cypress shingles to put out flames shooting through the roof. Within ten minutes, the fire brigade brought the conflagration under control, though some of the eighteen firefighters at the scene found smoldering embers over an hour later. Speaking at the cabin, Dave
King, the city’s Assistant Fire Chief, considered the structure “a total loss.” Almost the entire second story had collapsed. By the end of the day, police arrested a sixteen year old who confessed to all of the fires at the Coachman property. The teenager apparently resented that his father had refused to take the family on a vacation; to vent his rage at his father, the boy decided to take his anger out on the cabin near to his house.

The Coachman family decided to donate the building to Heritage Village in 1977. In the late spring, Coachman signed a contract with the Pinellas County Historical Society absolving that organization or the county of any responsibility for further damages caused by the move of the structure. By early July, workers began to clear palmetto and pine scrub from an area of the park. On the morning of July 21, the McMullen-Coachman Log House started its four-hour trip to Heritage Village. As temperatures surpassed ninety degrees, stunned motorists remained patient as the slow moving flatbed truck provided by Edifice Wrecks stalled six times along the way. A family-owned business, Edifice Wrecks covered $1,000 towards the $3,000 moving cost.

Extensive restoration began in 1978, and the McMullen-Coachman Log House opened to the public in 1979 after workers restored this rustic relic to its earlier grandeur. Restoration efforts started after the new fiscal year began in October 1977. Ford received $7,000 from the Board of County Commissioners for the project. Outside organizations, including the Daughters of the American Revolution, also expressed interest in providing assistance. Workers salvaged and reused the original foundation sills from the cabin. By the spring of 1978, laborers placed the charred structure on its foundation and Ford contacted a company that had developed a water-and-sandblasting process to remove charred sections of the logs. As Heritage Village opened the cabin to visitors by 1979.

Thank you for joining us today. I do have time for some questions.