



## New book traces history of Flagler’s black residents

By Matt Bruce

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*Randy Jaye dug through archives at the Flagler County Historical Society and estimated it took him almost 200 hours to accumulate the information that’s compiled in his book.*

BUNNELL — In 2017, Flagler County historian Randy Jaye was doing research for a book about Flagler County’s centennial when he noticed something. The history of the county’s black people was largely unpublished, documents had not been digitized, and there was no account of it online.

While working on his book, “*Flagler County: A Centennial History*,” Jaye collected hundreds of articles dating back to 1919 that revealed the untold story of Flagler’s black residents before the Civil Rights era. He originally had plans to give his research to county officials.

“But one day I got this idea,” he said during a recent interview. “I had put them all together on Microsoft Word and I had 53,000 words. That’s two-thirds of the way to a book. So I thought, ‘Why don’t I just get it published to get it out there?’”

That laid the groundwork for “*Perseverance: Episodes of Black History from the Rural South*.” The 385-page paperback was released Jan. 7 [2020] on Amazon. The book takes a peek behind the curtain of Flagler’s history and recounts the overarching racial divide that was status quo for rural communities south of the Mason-Dixon Line during the Jim Crow era of laws that enforced racial segregation

in the American South between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1950s.

Jaye interviewed several Flagler County natives and longtime residents, including Espanola native Frank L. Giddens Sr., reverend of the St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church.

“Children need to know something about where we come from,” Giddens said when asked about the importance of documenting the county’s black history. “So it’s very, very big because we’ve got young black folks who don’t care much about it. It means so much to me. I wish to God that we could blow it up as much as we can so that black children see how blessed they are to be where they’re at now, instead of growing up with what I came through.”

Jaye also dug through archives at the Flagler County Historical Society and estimated it took him about 200 hours to accumulate all the information that’s in the book.

Copies of old *Flagler Tribune* articles from 1919 to 1981 provided much of his source material, he said. Jaye sifted through thousands of pages searching for stories about “negroes or darkies,” indicative of some of the derogatory terms publications used to describe black residents in the Jim Crow south.

“What I found was the black story was so suppressed,” Jaye said. “The only thing that was really published prior to the Civil Rights era locally here in Flagler County was bad stuff. Like somebody getting run over by a train or getting arrested somehow. That’s the only time they ever put anything about black people in the newspaper.

“When I reached out and started looking at the regional and national picture, Flagler County was just a perfect microcosm for what happened during the Jim Crow era – even though the county only had a few thousand people living here,” he added. “The story of the way that the *Flagler Tribune* -- what was called the ‘white press’ back in the day -- documented and ignored black history was exactly the same as the *Orlando Sentinel*, Birmingham or the Atlanta papers. It was just a microcosm of the rural south.”

Jaye also delves into Florida history dating back to the 16th century. He chronicled the expeditions of Juan Garrido, a conquistador regarded as the “first person of African descent to travel to the New World” in 1502. Later, Garrido traveled with Spanish explorer Juan Ponce De Leon, who’s often credited with leading the first official European voyage to Florida.

In the first 100 pages of “Perseverance,” Jaye blitzes through the plantation economy, the arrival of African slaves to the New World, the Underground Railroad, the Mala Compra Plantation, Bulow Creek, the Civil War, the American South’s Reconstruction era and into the birth of Jim Crow laws.

That sets the stage for stories of black history specific to Flagler. In November 1920, for example, the *Flagler Tribune* printed “The Famous Christmas Letter to Flagler’s Colored Voters,” a community-wide letter of intimidation that “created almost a panic among the Negro population,” according to Jaye’s book, “and kept many of them from going to the polls.”

Jaye also recounts the lack of educational infrastructure in Flagler for black children in a segregated society. Prior to 1950, the county had no high school for black students, meaning any who wanted to continue going to school beyond eighth grade had to travel to Daytona Beach or St. Augustine, he wrote.

“I kept coming up with the word ‘perseverance,’ because they had to persevere through a lot of negative things,” Jaye said. “Lack of economic opportunities, lack of education, lack of voting because the voting rights were suppressed here. All of these things they had to push through to get to where they are today. And if it weren’t for the Civil Rights era, who knows where we would be?”

Flagler’s public school system didn’t fully integrate until 1972, nearly 18 years after the Supreme Court’s landmark ruling that declared segregation in the public classroom was unconstitutional. The final chapter of Jaye’s book details how Flagler County’s School Board fought for nearly two decades, using legal tactics, to delay integration. Local officials at the time refused to comply even after federal funding was cut off and the district was placed under a federal mandate.

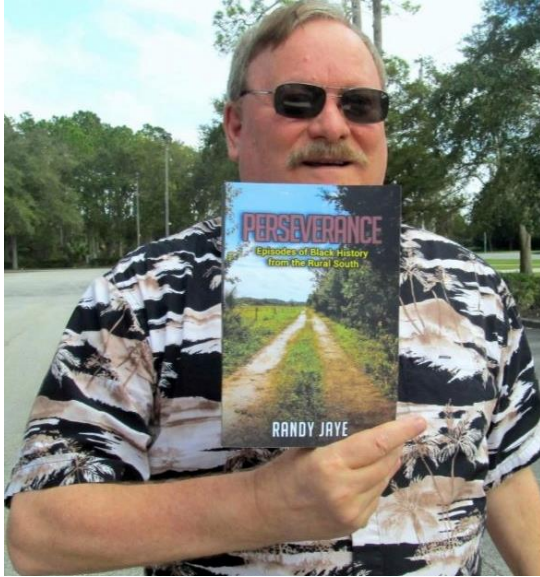
“Flagler County was a last stronghold of white supremacy, so even as the rest of the world was changing, the die-hards were not changing here,” said local pastor Sims Jones.

Jones, a Brooklyn native who moved to Flagler County nearly 20 years ago, ran for a seat on the Palm Coast City Council in 2016. He lost in the primary. Sims pointed to the disparity in the county’s government representation -- there are currently no black elected officials in Flagler -- as a reason why the area’s black history remains important.

“Black people make contributions, black people do things all over the world,” he said. “And it seems like there is an undercurrent in Flagler County to let blacks get but so far. So I would say this book needs to come out and things need to get said, because a lot of blacks had a lot to contribute in Flagler County. But it was kept low-key and underground.”



Miss Carver High and her court ride through Bunnell [in 1958] in a homecoming parade in the pre-Civil Rights era. At that time, Carver High was considered the “black high school.” [Flagler County Historical Society]



Flagler County historian Randy Jaye holds a copy of his new book chronicling black history in Flagler County. [News-Journal/Matt Bruce]



A turpentine crew is at work in the early 1900s. The “woods rider,” who keeps a talley on the cups emptied, is on the horse. One man works the “face” of the tree with a “puller,” while others remove the cups containing the tree resin or gum and empty them into dip buckets. The buckets will be emptied into 50-gallon barrels on wagons, which will haul them to the turpentine still for processing. It was hot, hard work and most of the laborers in the day were black men. [Flagler County Historical Society]



Zeb E. Booe and his wife, the former Ida May Coffing, prepare to ride in a parade in Bunnell in the 1920s. They were driven by Mann Baker, who worked for Tom Holden in his drugstore. Booe came to Flagler County from Indiana in 1913 to operate Haw Creek Farms. He later served as chairman of the first school board of Flagler County and as mayor of Bunnell and Flagler County superintendent of public instruction. [Flagler County Historical Society]



St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church Rev. Frank L. Giddens sits inside the historic Espanola Schoolhouse in Bunnell. [Photo provided/Randy Jaye]