In The Beginning:
The Origins of Oakland Park
by PAUL S. GEORGE

Located in the geographic center of eastern Broward County, bustling Oakland Park claimed 27,000 residents by the early 1990s. A residential community with busy retail centers, a large array of warehouses, and small manufacturing plants, the city lies nearly three-quarters of a mile west of the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway and approximately one-and-one-quarter mile west of the Atlantic Ocean. Physically, today's Oakland Park is virtually indistinguishable from countless other residential communities that comprise Broward County. Vacant land is sparse, and memories of its recent rural past have receded.¹

Less than a century ago, the area hosting today's Oakland Park was a dense wilderness dotted with pine trees and palmetto scrub. The city rests upon a coastal ridge, an oolite limestone bluff that undergirds the eastern sector of Dade and Broward counties and represents the only high ground between the Atlantic Ocean and the Everglades. Two feet below the surface of the land lies solid rock. East of the ridge, the warm waters of the Atlantic have proved a seductive lure to generations of residents and visitors. Several miles west of the ocean, the ridge originally gave way to the Everglades, a slow moving, freshwater swamp thirty miles wide and 100 miles long that stretched across the lower Florida peninsula.²

Historically, Oakland Park has been defined, both spatially and commercially, by two artificial features. In the mid-1890s, the rolling stock of Henry M. Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway (FEC) punctured the wilds of south Florida, bringing dramatic changes to the area. Working southward from West Palm Beach in 1896, the FEC's right-of-way proceeded on a slight southwesterly diagonal through the future Oakland Park en route to the Miami River. Nearly twenty years later, road-builders completed the Dixie Highway, the first roadway connecting south Florida with the northern United States. Following the route of a 1906 Dade County rock road through present-day Broward County, the Dixie Highway runs parallel to the FEC tracks. Both transportation routes served as the focal points for a tiny farming community that arose slowly around them. Both, but especially the railroad, served as commercial spurs to farmers and other mercantile interests in Oakland Park.

In 1890, the first concerted effort to farm commercially in the vicinity of the future Oakland Park appeared with the activities of the Florida Fiber Company, which purchased 1,310 acres on the Middle River for the cultivation of sisal hemp, a fibrous plant used in the manufacture of rope and other textiles. The fiber company was headed by a group of Jackson-

Much of Broward County's written history focuses on county-wide events and on the region's larger cities. However, many of Broward's smaller municipalities have unique and fascinating pasts, as well.

Here, Dr. Paul S. George, manager of the Historic Broward County Preservation Board, outlines the earliest years of one such community — today's Oakland Park.

From its first settlement as farmland in the early 1900s, the area took shape as part of the loosely-designated "Colohatchee" district described in Dr. Cooper Kirk's article, "The Vanished Communities of Broward County," in the Summer-Fall 1991 Broward Legacy. By the mid-1920s the region had acquired its present name and further developed into a thriving rural community.

This article is excerpted from "Twentieth Century Journey: A History of the City of Oakland Park," a manuscript prepared by Dr. George as Broward County Comprehensive Survey, Phase XI, for the Historic Preservation Board.
That time a tiny settlement hosting an Indian trading post and the county road's ferry crossing over the New River. Flagler met with Mrs. Tuttle in the spring of 1895, and agreed to extend his railroad to Miami in exchange for the preferred land, as well as additional right-of-way acreage from the State of Florida.

Soon, large work gangs were clearing vast wilderness areas and laying rails through Dade County. The first train steamed into Fort Lauderdale on February 22, 1896; two months later, the first through train crossed the New River on its way to Miami. As part of his agreement with Julia Tuttle, Flagler consented to create a city on the Miami River and build a large tourist hotel near its mouth. Flagler was less committed to developing Fort Lauderdale, which he viewed as a settlement primarily suited for agriculture.

The entry of the railroad into today's Broward County made the area, for the first time, readily accessible to other parts of the state. This enhanced accessibility brought growing numbers of settlers and visitors to the area. It also led to an agricultural boom, as farming communities sprouted along the railroad's right-of-way, from Deerfield in the north to Hallandale near the southern border of today's Broward County. Each was linked to outside markets by the railroad. With the continuing influx of settlers, Dade County's population rose to 4,955 by 1900, and to nearly 34,000 ten years later. Fort Lauderdale, whose population was negligible in the early 1890s, claimed fifty-two resi-

Henry M. Flagler
Mrs. and Mrs. Monroe T. Whidby (left) and friends, 1906. Whidby followed his brother Tom to present-day Oakland Park in the first decade of the new century (photo courtesy of Fort Lauderdale Historical Society).

Plowing on the Whidby property in present-day Oakland Park, c. 1910 (photo courtesy of Fort Lauderdale Historical Society).

Interior of the Whidby packing house near today's Dixie Highway and Floranada Road, Oakland Park, c. 1910 (photo courtesy of Fort Lauderdale Historical Society).
dents in 1900, and 143 ten years later. With their populations also growing quickly, Dania and Pompano incorporated as towns in 1904 and 1908, respectively. The area encompassing Oakland Park also felt the impact of the railroad's entry in the region, and its recorded history began soon after that event. Thomas "Uncle Tom" Whidby, the first settler for whom there is recorded information, arrived in Fort Lauderdale from Georgia in 1899 at age thirty-four with hopes of restoring his failing health in the area's mild climate. He purchased a parcel of pine and palmetto wilderness near the county road between the small settlements of Fort Lauderdale and Pompano and built a house on a portion of the property. The Whidby tract was located in the northeastern portion of today's Oakland Park. The Whidbys' first winter in south Florida was uncharacteristically cold, causing the discouraged settlers to return to Georgia. Whidby and his wife returned to south Florida in 1901, and built another house on their property. Whidby established his farm near today's Northeast Thirty-Eighth Street and the Florida East Coast Railway tracks, remaining at that location until his death in 1952 at age eighty-six.

The Whidbys counted few neighbors in their early years in the future Oakland Park. Tom Whidby remembered Joe G. Farrow, a part-time resident, as well as a "colored bachelor," whose surname was Poole (Whidby failed to mention his first name). Farrow had come from Georgia to Fort Lauderdale in the 1890s, driving a wagon for the Bay Biscayne Stage Line, and living for a time with Frank Stranahan, who operated the ferry crossing and overnight camp at New River.

There was also a Seminole Indian camp to the northwest of Whidby's property. Nearby was a body of slow-moving water, today's Cypress Creek; the Indians called it Saukee Hatchee. They crafted dugout canoes from the plentiful cypress trees in the region. These vessels were especially suited for navigating the waters of southeast Florida.

Whidby characterized his Indian neighbors as "good people," whom he "trusted... with anything, and they never disappointed me." The Seminoles hunted rabbit, deer, quail, turkey, doves, alligators, bear, wildcats, and panthers in the vicinity of Whidby's homestead. There were five Indian mounds in the area, which were reportedly not burial sites, but markers for areas containing concealed Indian valuables.

Farming was the primary livelihood for the few settlers living along the coastal ridge in that era. These settlers cultivated a wide variety of crops. The region's soil varied from muck in the low-lying marsh area just west of the beach ridge to sandy ground in the vicinity of the railroad tracks, which represented the heart of early Oakland Park. Although the soil and topography were not ideal for a vigorous agriculture, the crop yield, nonetheless, was bountiful, especially for farmers who planted in the rich river valleys. Moreover, tomatoes, beans, and other popular crops did not require extremely rich soil for cultivation. Elizabeth Warren, who came with her family to nearby Pompano in 1899, recalled that her father grew tomatoes, bell peppers, and eggplant commercially, while the family raised "all kinds of vegetables" in their private garden. Other common crops were pineapples, stringbeans, sweet corn, palmetto cabbage, and seagraves. Some citrus groves were also present in the area. Farther south, in the bustling farming community of Dania, tomatoes, citrus, potatoes, peppers, squash, eggplants, beans, peas, cauliflower, and cabbage grew in abundance. Nearby Hallandale offered more than twenty varieties of vegetables.

As critical to the development of the Broward County area as the entry of the railroad was Everglades reclamation, a state-sponsored program for draining the wetlands that began in 1906. Advocates of converting the wetlands into rich farming communities had actively espoused the idea since the mid-nineteenth century. As early as 1850, the Congress of the United States had enacted a law awarding to the states their wetland areas for the purpose of drainage. Florida received ten million acres of swamp land under the terms of this act. Shortly thereafter, the state government created the administrative machinery to bring reclamation closer to reality. In 1904, Florida Governor William S. Jennings, a champion of drainage, announced that "his first and chief duty in handling (these lands) was to have them drained and reclaimed." Jennings outlined a plan to lower the water level through the creation of canals from Lake Okeechobee to both coasts of Florida. The movement for Everglades reclamation reached fruition during the memorable tenure of Jennings' successor, Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, Florida's governor from 1905 to 1909. Broward ran for governor on an ambitious platform that championed drainage, predicting that the system of public drainage ditches would drain the Everglades. Once in office, he received assistance for his drainage program from the state legislature. Everglades reclamation began under state auspices in the summer of 1906, as the Everglades, a large dipper dredge, cut a ditch in a westerly direction from the north fork segment of the New River's south fork, and, in the process, created the North New River Canal. A second dredge began cutting the South New River Canal ten months later. Drainage followed dredging as nearby swamp water flowed in the new canals. Workers removed and burned the sawgrass that formerly grew above the watery surface of the Everglades, thereby exposing its rich soil. Tomatoes, sugar cane, and other crops grew quickly in the reclaimed land.

Everglades reclamation dramatically changed the destiny of southeast Florida by significantly increasing the amount of habitable land in the region. Until then, only the coastal ridge and scattered areas of high ground west of it were suitable for settlement. With drainage, settlement began its inexorable push westward, a movement that continues today. Drainage contracts brought additional persons and national attention to southeast Florida. The future of Fort Lauderdale, destined to become Broward County's flagship city, was ensured as produce from newly reclaimed land moved by way of the North New River Canal and the New River to the Florida East Coast Railway for shipment to outside markets. Partly as a result of this new wave of activity, Palm Beach County was created from the northern portion of Dade County in 1909, with the dividing line passing through the northern environs of present-day Oak Park. Drainage also brought a wave of land speculation. After 3,000 new owners of supposedly reclaimed Everglades land poured into Fort Lauderdale for a land "lottery" in March 1911, startled residents decided to incorporate as a town. Four years later, Broward County incorporated, but only after rancorous politicking at the local and state levels of government. The state named the new entity for Governor Napoleon B. Broward, the person most responsible for its early development.

With the creation of Broward County, the area that would later become Oakland Park grew slowly amid a region of small farms called Colohatchee. A small, unincorporated town named Colohatchee was platted between the forks of Middle River in today's Wilton Manors in 1910, but the name was also applied to a much larger region which stretched north from today's Northeast Sixteenth Street to Commercial Boulevard, and west from the FEC railway tracks to Powerline Road. Few
people lived in this large area. Darleen Mitchell, a lifetime resident of Oakland Park, averred that when her grandparents arrived in 1914, there was “nothing there.” Many years later, she still “wasn’t allowed to walk home at night along Dixie Highway, not because of any crime, but because there were wildcats living near the North Fork of the Middle River.”

Even with its tiny population, the area comprising the future Oakland Park hosted a school as early as 1914. Mattie Raulerson Baker, who hailed from Volusia County and held a college degree, opened the Prospect School amid cramped

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The Chadwick home on North Dixie Highway, Oakland Park, 1923 (photo courtesy of Oakland Park Historical Society).

The original Colohatchee Woman's Club building, renamed the Oakland Park Woman's Club by the time this 1953 picture was taken (photo courtesy of Oakland Park Historical Society).
Packing House to be Built Here

Mr. Skipper is a cattle king of Florida and has bought a piece of land near Colohatchee and will begin the erection of buildings for cold storage and meat packing plant. Cattle will be bought from North Florida and will be grazed on the grass here until they are in fit condition for slaughter. We have known Mr. Skipper for many years, and we know him to be a man who does things. He is financially able to carry the scheme out and make good. He is a big cattle man and will be a great factor to our community should he come here. And as he has bought the site at Colohatchee there is no doubt of his coming. He is to start building at once, as we have been informed. There is also another company which will establish a packing house here. To get a great packing house here will mean much to our county and city. It will employ labor and they will earn and spend money. We should encourage them all that we can. It is gratifying to see business men recognize the importance of our county and city. It proves that our growth will continue until we become one of the great cities of the state. Many favor a site near the river plant and it seems to us that that would be a good place for the enterprise. We are much elated over the fact that we are so soon to have another real business here.

This March 10, 1922 article in the Fort Lauderdale Sentinel announced the construction of a beef packing plant. Actually, the facility packed primarily pork.

quarters in her brother's home in the northwest region of today's Oakland Park. Mrs. Baker taught fourteen students, grades one through six, in the 1914-1915 school year. In September 1915, the Prospect School moved east of its original venue, but remained within the confines of Colohatchee, as students received instruction in a converted barn owned by Tom Whidby. The school's enrollment rose to twenty. Children living a mile or two south of the Prospect School attended the Fort Lauderdale School. E.A. Bras of Colohatchee transported them to school in a canvas-covered wagon pulled by ponies. One resident recalled that these children "would jump in and out of the wagon, pick flowers, chase small game and owls, and engage in 'devilments' on their way to school." 17

By 1918, several farming families had moved into the community and established farms. Many built simple pine cottages; some placed rough stucco over the wood. By then, the Colohatchee Woman's Club (today's Oakland Park Woman's Club) was already two years old. Its quarters were located at the Dixie Highway and today's Northeast Twenty-fourth Street. 18

In 1922, the Fort Lauderdale Sentinel reported that a movement was underway by Florida cattlemen to build a slaughterhouse and packing house in the vicinity of Colohatchee. A few months later, the Southeast Packing Company announced that it was constructing an abattoir at Colohatchee, "just north of Fort Lauderdale" on the north bank of the Middle River near the FEC Railway tracks. The structure's tower rose three stories above the verdant terrain. The company imported hogs and other animals from the Lake Okeechobee area by way of the New River. From the mouth of that stream, the vessels carrying the animals entered New River Sound, traveling two miles north to the Middle River, where their cargoes were unloaded at the packing company's dock. While the abattoir was still under construction, the slaughter took place under "convenient trees." The company hauled the finished products by rail to Miami, where they were placed in cold storage. 19

Nineteen twenty-two also marked the year that the Barkdoll Investment Company of Miami, a real estate development firm, acquired 810 acres of virgin land near the north fork of the Middle River. The land, said to have been strikingly beautiful, stretched from the Florida East Coast Railway tracks to the East Coast Canal. Because a great stand of oak trees flanked the north bank of the Middle River, the company decided to name its prospective development Oakland Park. The company began subdividing lots and constructing streets; the two major thoroughfares measured eight feet across; the remaining roads were four feet wide.

The Barkdoll Investment firm also announced that Screen Talent Studios, a

[Image of Barkdoll Investment Company's advertisement in the August 18, 1922, Fort Lauderdale Daily Herald, showing the proposed movie studio.]
moving picture company, had purchased ten acres in Oakland Park on which to build a three million dollar movie studio. Screen Talent Studios also purchased 300 lots for a “Greenwich type” village for “motion picture people.” Studio officials were reportedly planning to move to the area too.

At the same time, *Miami Movie Magazine*, in collaboration with Screen Talent Studios, instituted a thirty-day subscription campaign. Each new subscriber would receive a free lot in Oakland Park. Stirred by this unusual excitement in the region lying to the north, the *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel* boasted that Oakland Park would “become a home for moving picture people...There will be 19 movie artists employed the year round.” Such claims were not readily dismissed in the silent movie era, which corresponded with the first stirrings of the Florida Land Boom. In fact, several nationally known moving picture companies, including one headed by the renowned film maker D.W. Griffith, had already produced films with jungle and South Sea island settings in Fort Lauderdale and the surrounding countryside. Neither the Oakland Park studio or village, however, came to fruition.20

Nevertheless, in August 1922, the *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel* reported that the “Town of ‘Oakland Park’ [is] Now on the Market.” The community was taking shape east of the railroad tracks and north of the Southeast Packing Company’s new plant on the Middle River. By the latter part of that month, the Barkdull Investment Company had sold 417 lots in Oakland Park, and claimed that only seventeen remained. Street paving was proceeding rapidly. Meanwhile, the company had contracted with the Southeast Packing Company to install electric lights in Oakland Park by the fall of 1922.21

Oakland Park opened officially on February 14, 1923. Several thousand persons, attracted by the developer’s offer of a free barbecue, gathered in the piney woods near today’s Oakland Park Boulevard and Northeast Thirty-fourth Street for the opening festivities. Some came from as far away as Fort Pierce and Miami, causing a mile-long traffic back-up on Dixie Highway. Attendees helped themselves to barbecued beef, pork, and mutton. A band from Lake Worth provided music, and a series of speakers addressed the crowd. Broward County’s state legislator, Carl P. Weidling, exclaimed that the new packing plant was the “greatest asset our county had.”22 A Dr. Tiebold, a meat inspector from Miami, claimed that this facility was the finest equipped meat packing plant for its size in the United States.23 Not to be outdone, the *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel* gushed that the community’s official opening represented the “greatest (day) in the history of our county.”24

In the months following the barbecue, many new residents, including Charles Rouse, James “Charlie” Harrison, the Stricklands, and the Newtons, built homes and began farming in Oakland Park. New businesses opened, including Harry Wimberly’s grocery store near the Dixie Highway. With meat sales rising, the Southeast Packing Company began construction, in 1923, of a large smokehouse for curing meats.25

The flurry of activity in Oakland Park was replicated elsewhere in a region and state swept up in the great real estate boom of the mid-1920s. Yet, though this period brought large, elaborate real estate ventures to Broward County, Oakland Park’s boom initially remained true to the community’s rural character. Despite rumors of movie studios and wealthy newcomers, Oakland Park’s population remained overwhelmingly agricultural, and its burgeoning economy largely revolved around the success of its chief industry, the Southeast Packing Company. Not until the boom had passed its peak in the population centers of Florida’s Gold Coast would Oakland Park share briefly in the dream of wealth and glamour that defined the era.

In the next issue of *Broward Legacy*, Dr. George will continue the story of Oakland Park’s early years by discussing the rise and fall of the City of Floranada in the late 1920s.

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Barbecue marking the official opening of Oakland Park, February 14, 1923.
A companion photo appeared in the Summer/Fall 1991 issue of *Broward Legacy*. 
ENDNOTES


6) Burghard and Weidling, Chekered Sunshine, 118-19; "In the Circuit Court of the Eleventh Circuit...," 92.


13) Ibid., 219; Kirk, "Foundations," 7-8; Bill McGoun, A Biographic History of Broward County (Miami, 1972), 8.


20) "Oakland Park Lots to Be Given Away," Fort Lauderdale Herald, August 18, 1922, 1; Katz, "Oakland Park Develops," 1-2; Kirk, "Vanished Communities," 26.

21) "The Town of 'Oakland Park' Now on the Market," Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, 1; "Oakland Park to the Front," Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, August 25, 1922, 1.

22) "Southeast Packing Plant Barbecue a Wonderful Success," Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, February 23, 1923, 1; "Southeast to Have Barbecue at Plant Wednesday," Fort Lauderdale Sentinel, February 9, 1923, 1; "Large Number From Here (Dania) Attend Barbecue," Fort Lauderdale Herald, February 16, 1923, 1.

23) "Southeast Packing Plant Barbecue," 1; The author's search of historical source materials failed to reveal Dr. Tieball's first name.

24) Ibid.

25) "Local Packing Plant To Build Big Smoke Room," Fort Lauderdale Herald, June 1, 1923, 1; Katz, "Oakland Park Develops," 1-2.