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# Let Us March On: LaVilla, Florida, and the History of the Harlem of the South

Christine Sullivan
*Providence College*

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# LaVilla, Florida, and the History of the Harlem of the South

**By**

**Christine Janet Sullivan**

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*For Kevin Sullivan,*

*My hero, my role model, my guardian angel.*

*For Sharon Sullivan,*

*My lighthouse, my inspiration, my rock.*

*For Charles Sullivan,*

*My best friend, my motivation, my forever ally.*

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## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

Nestled along the banks of the Saint Johns River lives a curious city that defines the standard rules and expectations of a city in the American South. Jacksonville, the largest city in the Unites States, with borders nearly the size of the state of Rhode Island, is neither the most glamourous nor the most scenic of Florida's destinations. Since its inception, it has adopted countless monikers: the Winter Wonderland, the Bold New City of the South, Florida's Gateway, and most recently, the River City. The temporary status of these self-professed titles reveals the uncertainty in the city's identity. There is no central narrative to the area, no one story that unites all of its residents and driving motivations. Despite spending fifteen years in Jacksonville, it was not until I undertook this project that I learned about the true impact of Jacksonville's Black Americans. Today, the city remains segregated, with each neighborhood and district remaining insulated and isolated. My mission, as a historian and as a lover of my hometown, is to bridge the gap in the history of the neighborhoods, and find a narrative of Jacksonville history that all Jaxsons can find confidence and pride in.

Despite serving as a national metropolis for nearly a century, Jacksonville and her residents have continually failed to determine a singular narrative or destination for itself and its community. Its conglomeration of unique neighborhoods, many of which began as separate entities from the City of Jacksonville, reflect the variety of stories and backgrounds that have collaborated and intermingled since the nineteenth century. Sections like San Marco and Avondale were central to the aristocratic white Jaxsons, featuring ornate landscaping and monumental homes that overlooked the St. Johns River. Neighborhoods such as Murray Hill and Brooklyn housed poor laborers and employees for their industrial areas, like the lumber yards

and fiber factories. Although such sections were located a few miles away from one another, the economic and ethnic makeup of these communities remained starkly independent and insulated.

Out of all of these Jacksonville neighborhoods, LaVilla was the only community to reach national prominence for its economic achievements and cultural exports. LaVilla, the premier neighborhood for Black Americans in Jacksonville, become a beacon of Black community; its economic and educational success were viewed as examples throughout the entire United States. The independence and self-sufficiency of LaVilla's citizens is best represented through the entertainment and music created in its streets. Throughout this paper, I aim to highlight the parallels in LaVilla's economic and political standing to her musical offerings. For a brief decade of success in Reconstruction to the slow rebuilding of status throughout the Jim Crow era, Black Americans in LaVilla have represented their fight, resilience, and commitment to the American ideal throughout their performances and musical offerings. I argue that the deliberate destruction and abandonment of LaVilla and its history in the later half of the twentieth century represents the greater struggle of Black America to retain its independence and economic foothold in the face of urban renewal and desegregation. Like countless other Black American communities, the successes and achievements were lost to memory, overshadowed by the tales of white domination.

Between the Civil War and the turn of the century, LaVilla was the Reconstruction ideal, an independent, peaceful, and collaborative population of both Black and white neighbors. Chapter one will explore the historical background of LaVilla and her surrounding region, highlighting the differences in Florida's Spanish heritage from the Anglican culture in the other colonies. Jacksonville's infancy during the Civil War is detailed in Daniel Schafer's *Thunder on the River: The Civil War in Northeast Florida*. Schafer paints Jacksonville as a village, slowly

evolving through the influx of Union troops from the North and migrating freedmen and former slaves from across northern Florida. Published in 2010, this source paints a much more nuanced overview of the different racial and ethnic stressors that defined Jacksonville's development. John T. Foster's article, *The Last Shall Be First: Northern Methodists in Reconstruction Jacksonville,* presents the city as desperate for charity, development, and funding from the Northern states. For insight into Jacksonville's failed Confederate soldiers, I will turn to *Carpetbag Rule in Florida*, published in 1888 by Jacksonville native and former slave owner, John Wallace.

For a closer examination in LaVilla's origins, I will highlight the research done by Patricia Kenney in her work, "LaVilla, Florida, 1866-1887: Reconstruction Dreams and the Formation of a Black Community". Her extensive study of Jacksonville and Duval census and voting records reveal a Black populous involved in nearly every aspect of political and economic life in Jacksonville. Black men and women served as educators, law enforcement, and civil servants. LaVilla boasted the first high school, colleges, and technical schools for Black students in Florida, attracting Black intelligence and curiosity from across the state. The importance of education, whether it be academic, spiritual, or musical, can be seen throughout the daily activities and advertisements in LaVilla's newspaper, the Black Star edition of Jacksonville's *Florida Times-Union.* These Black Star papers are essential to understanding the social life and daily activities of Jacksonville's Black population. The *Florida Times-Union* mandated that these papers only be delivered to Black patrons, issuing severe consequences if they were delivered to white Jaxsons.[1] This allowed the Black Star papers to be written by and for Black Jacksonville, free from interference or backlash from white readership. These editions offer the clearest insight

[1] Rodney L. Hurst, *It Was Never About a Hotdog and a Coke* (WingSpan Press, 2008). 63.

into Black Jacksonville's perspective on their city. Additional, the disconnect between the content of the *Times-Union* main edition verses the Black Star edition highlights the disconnect between white and Black experiences and ideology.

Historians often divide the city's history into two categories: before and after turn of the century. In the early hours of May 3rd, 1901, a fire broke out in the LaVilla neighborhood and quickly spread beyond the community's borders and into the greater city. Bill Foley's book, *The Great Fire of 1901*, reveals the scope of the destruction, and the arduous process of reconstruction. Nearly 2,000 buildings were destroyed in the process and seven souls were lost in the blaze. Approximately 70% of the city faced some form of damage, and Foley estimates that nearly 10,000 Jaxsons were left homeless and helpless. LaVilla faced the largest extent of the damage, losing almost $40 million in property.[2] Foley measures the economic impact of the fire and the severe amounts of suffering, but the true value of his piece is found in his evaluation of the positive consequences of the fire. At the turn of the century, Jacksonville was a popular destination resort for Northeastern socialites who were attracted to the gorgeous hotels and railcars operated by Henry Flagler. But for the average resident, Jacksonville was shoddy town, filled with unpaved roads and decrepit wooden structures. The fire destroyed many of these poorly built buildings, leaving room for Jacksonville to rebuild stronger and bigger.

Foley's piece ventures a bit into the rebuilding efforts after the fire, featuring primarily the budgeting and incentives provided by the city council. A clear work of economic history, there is little mention of the fates of those displaced. The displaced are rather lost to history, as most historical work about Jacksonville is dedicated and focused around the actions of the city

[2] Bill Foley, *The Great Fire of 1901* (Jacksonville: The Jacksonville HIstorical Society, 2001). 43.

council, and how they strong-armed independent neighborhoods into joining the larger municipality.[3] But those living in the destroyed LaVilla and neighboring areas were never stagnant, waiting around for someone else to write history for them. Instead, LaVilla quickly bounced back to a vibrant Black community, reaching national fame during its heyday, but receiving little mention afterwards. Smith states that most Jaxsons have no idea that anything historically important occurred in their hometown because "the prominence and legacy of history resides almost exclusively on the Black side of town".[4] Jacksonville public curriculum, city monuments, and even the local historical society pay little mind to LaVilla, writing the area off as the 'Black part of town' with no further consideration of the area's significance, both historically and to modern society.

The autobiographical writings of James Weldon Johnson, NAACP leader and LaVilla native, reveal the deep-rooted respect of education and religion in LaVilla. His writings are perhaps the greatest resource in understanding the transformation of LaVilla at the turn of the century, offering a firsthand account of the consequences and rebuilding efforts after the Great Fire. He devoted his life's work to the people of LaVilla, and his voice still echoes throughout Jacksonville today. Alongside his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, the two were able to achieve international fame for both their musical creations and their commitment to racial uplift and Black voices in art. Their achievements and success are direct consequences from LaVilla's powerful faith and musical networks, who instilled values of commitment and selfless devotion to one's community.

[3] Richard Martin, *A Quiet Revolution: The Consolidation of Jacksonville-Duval County and the Dynamics of Urban Political Reform*, 5th ed. (Jacksonville: Jacksonville Historical Society, 2019).

[4] Peter Dunbaugh Smith, "Ashley Street Blues: Racial Uplift and the Commodification of Vernacular Performance in LaVilla, Florida, 1896-1916" (Tallahassee Florida, Florida State University, 2006).

In his master's thesis, Peter Dunbaugh Smith is one of the few modern historians that looks highlight the major historical significance that LaVilla has had not just in Jacksonville, but to the nation at large. La villa was home not only to the only school for Blacks in Jacksonville, but also to a bastion of Black cultural and entertainment. Smith begins by tracing the origins of vaudeville in Jacksonville, starting with the brass Union bands that had remained in the city after the conclusion of the Civil War. He demonstrates that LaVilla and its main throughfare, Ashely Street, provided a rich environment filled with music of all genres and musicians of world-class caliber. Smith continues his piece by fleshing out the history of vaudeville performances in Jacksonville, focusing specifically on the life of LaVilla native Patrick H. Chappelle, one of the most successful Black vaudeville performers and showrunners. He details his economic success and cultural domination of the Florida vaudeville circuit and his establishment of the first theatres and venues along Ashley Street, located in the main throughway of LaVilla. Canter Brown focuses more on Chapelle's upbringing in LaVilla, a town dubbed "generally pleasant where hundreds of local families enjoyed the chance to advance in life and to associate freely upon something approaching a basis of equality with white residents".[5] The competitive environment among nightclubs and musicians pushed each other to excel, and the city fostered many accomplished artists. One of these random members eventually became the woman known as 'Ma Rainey', the Jacksonville-raised 'Mother of the Blues'.[6]

Perhaps the most well-known LaVilla native would be another blind musician, the iconic Ray Charles. Although he only lived in LaVilla during his childhood, his time in the community

[5] Canter Brown, "'The Art of Gathering a Crowd': Florida's Pat Chappelle and the Origins of Black-Owned Vaudeville," accessed April 8, 2021.

[6] Peter Dunbaugh Smith, "Ashley Street Blues: Racial Uplift and the Commodification of Vernacular Performance in LaVilla, Florida, 1896-1916." 36.

pushed him to improve his musicianship and performing abilities, as he wrote in his autobiography, *Brother Ray: Ray Charles' Own Story.* This autobiography is insightful into the culture and cutthroat nature of the music scene in greater LaVilla area, and features scenes of Charles taking lessons and learning from the older generation of nightclub acts.[7] Charles also discusses the psychological effects he experienced at the hands of racial hatred and mistreatment, similarly to James Weldon Johnson.

The bastion of musical talent that hailed from LaVilla has gone rather unnoticed by musicologists and historians, perhaps because of its location in Florida. Conversations on jazz and blues are typically reserved for the Mississippi Delta or Memphis, skipping over the swampy river city to the East. But historian John Capouya compiled some of the most influential Floridian soul artists in his piece *Florida Soul*. By recounting the songs and backgrounds of these artists, Capuoya explores how Floridian music has its own flavor, combining the ship songs of the St. Johns with the traditional sounds of the Gulla-Geechee peoples, and in pockets becoming influenced by the Spanish and Cuban traditions.[8] He describes Ashely Street in LaVilla as the "Great Black Way", and retells the stories of Cab Calloway's, Duke Ellington's, and others time playing on the 'chittlin circuit'. *North Florida Soul* by Ron Johnson is another piece that studies the musical legacy of the South, but Johnson focuses more on the white folk tradition rather than the work of Black artists. However, his piece is still valuable because it demonstrates the deep mix of musical influences and their history in the region.

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[7] Ray Charles and David Ritz, *Brother Ray: Ray Charles' Own Story*, 3rd ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 2004). 22.

[8] John Capouya, *Florida Soul: From Ray Charles to KC and the Sunshine Band* (Gainesville Florida: University Press of Florida, 2018). 7.

Invaluable work by historian Abel Bartley examines the social climate of the town during the 1940s-1970s. *Keeping the Faith* focuses on the social activism by the Black community during the decades before and immediately after the Civil Rights Movement, and is a key piece to understanding the transition between segregated and 'integrated' LaVilla. The first chapter of the work paints LaVilla as a thriving economic and cultural center, home to some of the largest Black-owned businesses and entertainment spots in the entire Southeast.

For discussions on the Civil Rights Movement in LaVilla, there are several books that evaluate the demonstrations, particularly of the fateful 'Axe Handle Saturday' that resulted in a Ku Klux Klan attack on LaVilla demonstrators at a lunch counter. *It was Never about a Hot Dog and a Coke!,* a personal account by Rodney L. Hurst Senior about the events of the day, retells his involvement as a Youth NAACP leader and a victim of the violent assault perpetuated by the KKK and the Jacksonville Sherriff's Office. This piece is essential to understanding the reality of segregation and the Civil Rights Movement in the face of a historical division and hatred. The first-person narrative places one in the shoes of any average resident, rather than exploring all possible explanations and motivations behind the event. For a more general view of the Civil Rights era in the city, James B. Crooks' piece, *Jacksonville: The Consolidation Story, from Civil Rights to the Jaguars*, serves as the premier resource. This is an exhaustive work, filled with wonderful sources from the city council records and minutes. Crooks works through Jacksonville's most recent history, focusing specifically on the legislative actions undertaken by Duval County to expand their tax base. Eager to turn the newly eligible Black voters into political power, politicians gerrymandered and spliced the city up in a series of confusing deals that ultimately pulled power away from Black neighborhoods like LaVilla, without ever seeing a

return in funding or support. The piece is useful for the project, as it is one of the few pieces published focusing on the modern developments of the city.

Despite the great work accomplished by the aforementioned scholars, Jacksonville is left a misunderstood city with a half-written story. While the research and stories found in journals like the *Florida Historical Quarterly* demonstrate the previous academic attention focused on LaVilla, they remain hidden to the public. The average Jaxson has never heard of the tales of LaVilla, largely due to the lack of historical landmarks and easily accessible histories.

Although historians have written about LaVilla's political struggles or their successful economic development, these issues are kept completely separate from the achievements and success of the music industry in LaVilla. Music historians center their focus on the development of the craft, forgetting that the songs and lyrics produced in LaVilla are the direct vocalization of the struggle to uplift LaVilla. The discipline and passion that was required for musicians to earn a gig in LaVilla is a direct reflection of the discipline and passion that LaVilla parents instilled in all of their Black children. LaVilla's story proves that music and social development are intrinsically linked. They are symbiotic: LaVilla would have fewer music achievements without its self-sufficiency, and LaVilla would not have created its economic independence without her innovative musicians. It is my intention to demonstrate that LaVilla's Black entrepreneurship resulted in a secure economic basis, allowing the community to spend money on leisure and entertainment, particularly via musical performances. I will also demonstrate how the musical achievements of LaVilla's Black musicians directly uplifted their neighbors, creating traditions of commitment and self-determination that defined life in LaVilla.

In many cases, Jacksonville's Black history wasn't just ignored- it was bulldozed. In 1993, the city of Jacksonville passed the River City Renaissance Plan, consisting of $235 million

intended to revitalize the city's riverfront and create new residential and commercial areas. The plan focused on the historically Black Brooklyn and LaVilla neighborhoods, clearing the ageing properties for the promise of new and revitalizing storefronts. In three years, 85% of the original structures had been destroyed, with residents forced to find new homes in different neighborhoods or altogether new cities. LaVilla, the former home to so many of America's greatest musicians, found itself silent, free from even the buildings that whistled alongside the wind. The properties once home to the glimmering lights of a jazz club were replaced with barren fields interrupted with occasional outcroppings of concrete. To this very day, LaVilla's streets are empty plots deemed unworthy of even a tombstone or grave marker that commemorated the life and vitality that once was.

The story of LaVilla parallels far too many of lost Black cities. After enduring the trials of slavery, the freedmen of LaVilla worked alongside their former enslavers to form a better life for their families. While white southerners had to adjust to a new social order, the freedmen were expected to create an entirely new community in a matter of years. They received minuscule assistance from their governments or neighborhoods, relying entirely on the fruits of their own labor and internal generosity. Within twenty years of emancipation, LaVilla's residents had created their own economic and social sphere, generating wealth, opportunities, and social improvement. The three greatest contributors to this development was LaVilla's emphasis on education, a connection with one's faith and spiritual community, and a commitment to artistic achievements.

# Chapter One

Creation of LaVilla's Black Community

## European Arrival in Northeast Florida

Jacksonville was founded just a year after Florida had entered the Union in 1821. It began as a sleepy rural village, neighboring a popular cow-run and the idyllic Saint Johns River. In the early nineteenth century, the small agricultural community maintained their farms and outside networks despite various changes in imperial control and territorial allegiance. Its subtropical climate kept the air humid and the winters mild. Giant oak trees covered with Spanish moss littered the riverbanks, framing the humming swamps and marshes. Jacksonville teemed with untouched and exotic wildlife, such as alligators, manatees, venomous cottonmouths, waterfowl and fish of all varieties. The soil produced citrus trees, indigo, and berries, and its river access helped maintain a steady fishing industry.

The land had a long history of different cultures and peoples. Before being invaded by the Spanish conquistadors, the Timucua tribe lived amongst this scenery, claiming territory in present day Southern Georgia to Central Florida. They used the land to farm corn, beans, and tobacco. The St. Johns River offered fertile riverbed soil, fish to eat, and alligators and manatees for material products like rubber and pelts.[9] They lived in decentralized tribes, largely free from battles or disturbances until the arrival of the Spanish explorers in the sixteenth century. Legend states that they were the first people lay eyes on the Europeans led by Ponce de Leon in 1513, who sailed along the Floridian coast. The Spanish returned again in 1593, under the command of

[9] Jerald T. Milanich, *The Timucua*, Peoples of America (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999). 33.

Pedro Menendez and claimed "La Florida" for their king and god. They built the city of Saint Augustine in 1565, establishing the longest continually inhabited European city in American territory. The Spanish focused on maintaining protective forts for their waterways and establishing agricultural communities that could sustain their larger cities in the territories. Spanish farmers owned slaves, but they held differing views on racial mixing and stratification, resulting in a slave system based on both race and economic standing rather than color alone. Spanish policy maintained the legality of owning slaves but honored slaves' ability to purchase their own freedom. Free Blacks were able to live unrestricted lives, carving out a class and culture socially higher than the mulatto populations, those with both Spanish and Native American blood.[10]

In 1738, the Spanish governor of Florida decreed Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, now referred to as Fort Mose, the first legally sanctioned free African settlement in the continental United States.[11] The Spanish refused to deport the slaves back to their rival Englishmen, choosing instead to envelop them into their already diverse territory. Many of these refugees chose to convert to Catholicism to show a deliberate alliance with the Spanish Empire and its way of life. Located thirty miles below the Georgia border, Fort Mose was close enough to offer a safe haven to slaves escaping from plantations near the St. Mary's River and lower Savannah marshes. These free Black people helped create a cosmopolitan area, blending traditions from Africa, the native Timucuan people, and the Spanish. These refugees intermarried with the different populations, blended their religious traditions, and formed a viable community

[10] Jane L. Landers, "Traditions of African American Freedom and Community in Spanish Colonial Florida," in *The African American Heritage of Florida*, ed. David R. Colburn and Jane L. Landers (Gainesville Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995),.25.

[11] Darcie MacMahon and Kathleen Deagan, "Legacy of Fort Mose," *Archaeology* 49, no. 5 (1996): 54–6.

for nearly four decades. Free Blacks formed kinship groups through a ritual process called *compadrazgo*, or godparentage networks. These networks would share resources and responsibility, "testified in each other's behalf, working collectively to seek legal remedies in the courts to obtain freedom for their enslaved kin".[12] However, the 1763 Treaty of Paris shattered this vision of freedom. Despite battling off English invasions in 1728 and 1740, Spain could no longer afford to maintain her colony in Florida after the Seven Years War. The British demanded that Spain evacuated the entire colony to Cuba, resulting in a chaotic shift of populations. Spaniards, free Blacks, multiracial Floridians and Spanish slaves set sail for the Caribbean, while British plantation owners and their slaves poured in.[13] Although it was short-lived, Fort Mose helped to establish a tradition of Black self-rule and community free from the confines of the plantation system. There was Black success in northern Florida before American success, Black freedom in the South before the Civil War.

With Florida now under British control, trade between Florida and the southern colonies became easier and cheaper. Commercial activity remained based out of St. Augustine and incentives were given to plantation owners in the mainland and northern colonies to relocate to the area. The low-level land attracted farmers and plantation owners from all over the world, who saw Florida as the final area to develop on the southern coast of the United States. Florida's first plantation was founded in 1767 by John Moultrie about thirty miles south of Jacksonville. He brought with him 180 slaves and established a rice and sugarcane plantation.[14] Other

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[12] Landers, "Traditions of African American Freedom and Community in Spanish Colonial Florida." 23.

[13] Landers. 25.

[14] Daniel L. Schafer, "'Yellow Silk Ferret Tied Round Their Wrists': African Americans in British East Florida, 1763-1784," in *The Afircan American Heritage of Florida* (Gainesville Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995), 72.

plantation owners, such as James Marshall and Francis Fatio, moved across the Atlantic to establish their footing in the new colony. Citrus trees were particularly adept to the climate, and the oranges, lemons and limes first introduced by the Spanish quickly became the major agricultural product of northeast Florida. However, the Union Jack flew for just two decades; after losing her original thirteen colonies, Florida seemed too costly and isolated to merit her colony. Britain returned Florida to Spain in 1783, but the newly formed United States had set its sights on the territory. After several failed negotiations, Spain eventually sold Florida to the Union in 1820, completing the country's control of the southern Atlantic coastline.

**Florida Under the Stars and Stripes**

Once the United States claimed the territory, entrepreneurs and politicians became eager to utilize the territory's resources and waterways. The U.S. government wanted to cater to the politically exhausted inhabitants of Florida, hoping to prevent any mass exodus of the population. The territory was sparsely populated and treated as a lawless frontier until the 1840s.[15] Congress determined to honor the contracts issued by the Spanish government to the remaining settlers, preserving the development of the previous decades. The European planters were allowed to maintain their plantation boundaries, beginning to collaborate with the emigrating American planters and prospective businessmen. Progress was considerably slow, as the lack of railroads, steamships, and air conditioning made it difficult to travel to the southernmost points of the state.

[15] Larry E. Rivers, "A Troublesome Property: Master-Slave Relations in Florida, 1821-1865," in *The African American Heritage of Florida* (Gainesville Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995), 104.

Thus, prospective Floridians focused their attention towards the northern portion of the state. During the 1820s, the new towns of Jacksonville, Palatka, and Jacksonville Beaches were established, about fifty miles south of the St. Mary's River and the Georgia border.[16] Although Saint Augustine was entering into its third century of existence, these new northern Florida cities marked a truly American presence in the face of the old dominion of the Spanish Empire. Jacksonville's name was chosen in honor of the first American Florida governor, Andrew Jackson. Jackson earned his military fame after ruthlessly driving the Florida Seminoles and Creeks out of their native lands in the Southeast. Despite destroying millions of Native American lives, Jackson was the image of brute force and American vigor to poor and rural white farmers, making him an easy selection for the city's namesake.

Early residents of Jacksonville took the modest agricultural beginnings of the village and began to invest in roads and infrastructure that could provide for the community. Farms were established away from the commercial center, focusing on citrus and tobacco production. Incoming settlers focused on the river, which was the source for power, fishing exports, and transportation. Sawmills were introduced by the 1820s, and lumber companies like Byrne and Moody seized on the undeveloped land, cutting approximately 14,000 boards daily.[17] Over the course of a decade, they expanded their operations to nearby bodies of water such as Doctor's Lake and Black Creek. Business and profit quickly accelerated beyond the city's resources, as reports of labor shortages fill the editions of *The Florida Republican* and *The Floridian News*, the active local papers at the time. Employers were so desperate that they openly advertised

[16] Patricia Drozd Kenney, "LaVilla, Florida, 1866-1887: Reconstruction Dreams and the Formation of a Black Community," in *The African American Heritage of Florida* (Jacksonville: University of North Florida, 1990), 186.

[17] "Public Meeting," *The Florida Republican*, September 7, 1854.

positions for "either white or colored men."[18] In one of her letters, Charlotte L'Engle, daughter of a Duval plantation owner, remembers how her father would pay his slaves additional wages to ensure continued production, up to twenty dollars monthly.[19] Jacksonville's proximity to international trade and remote areas of land offered potential escape avenues for runaway slaves, and the struggling plantation owners could not risk losing more manpower.

By 1845, the United States had granted statehood to Florida, approving a constitution that legalized slavery. Although the state had only recently been under American control, Florida was assumed to be ideologically aligned with the rest of the southern states, despite being an abolitionist territory for three hundred odd years. But the decade leading up to the Civil War was ripe with political tension in Jacksonville. The abolitionist leanings of the Whig Party appealed to the vast number of Northerners who had recently relocated to Jacksonville, but they were unable to compete with the newly formed American and Republican Parties.[20] To the Democrats, slavery was of the utmost importance to the Southern economy and abolition would ensure the downfall of the entire region. They were suspicious of the Northern immigrants, accusing them of working against the best interest of Florida. They feared that if slaves were no longer forced to work, the labor shortages felt in Jacksonville would only become more exasperated. Whites could no longer guarantee their social status as rulers if slavery was abolished and that loss of power was devastatingly frightening.

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[18] "Jacksonville Foundry and Machine Works," *The Florida Republican*, April 9, 1853, Volume XV Number 23 edition.

[19] "Papers of Susan L'Engle, 1806-1895" (Papers., American Antiquarian Society, 1892).

[20] Daniel L. Schafer, *Thunder on the River: The Civil War in Northeast Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 34.

**Confederate Jacksonville**

The city of Jacksonville grew slowly until 1860, when its port access became essential for the shipment of foreign Confederate supplies. Without imports from the North, the Confederacy was forced to turn to Cuba and sympathetic Spain for weapons and certain foodstuffs. The St. John's connection to the Atlantic Ocean made it easy to bring foreign ships into harbor, as well as access the southern portion of the state that could receive products from Cuba even earlier.[21] The railroads that converged in Jacksonville were also vital to the survival of the Confederacy. Florida's rich agricultural offerings turned it into the "Breadbasket of the Confederacy" providing meat, corn, potatoes, and molasses to the military.[22] Confederate soldiers built five garrisons and forts to protect the city, but Jacksonville would remain in their control for less than a year.

Quickly after Abraham Lincoln's 1862 order to block all Confederate ports, the Union Navy began to assemble in order to prevent the Confederacy from receiving any international assistance. When the Confederate soldiers stationed in Jacksonville were called to Tennessee after Fort Henry fell, the nearby Union troops took advantage of their absence. On March 4th, the 4th New Hampshire Infantry Unit landed in neighboring ports Amelia Island and Fernandina Island with no resistance. Realizing the hopelessness of their situation, the Confederate generals stationed in Jacksonville arranged a retreat of their military units. Unwilling to aid the invading Union forces, General James Trapier ordered his men to destroy the city's saw mills, iron

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[21] James W. Cortada, "Florida's Relations with Cuba during the Civil War," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (1980): 46.

[22] Samuel Proctor, "Jacksonville during the Civil War," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (1963): 348.

workshops, lumber reserves, and machine shops.[23] Ironically, this decision created the majority of damage experienced by the city during the war. Without any major battles, Jacksonville suffered primarily from a lack of supplies and a shrunken labor force.

The city's downtown area was a rubbish pile, with ignored sanitation protocols, dilapidated infrastructure, and overgrown grasses that made it difficult to navigate the streets. But unlike cities such as Savannah and Atlanta, Jacksonville was spared the overwhelming destruction from Richard Sherman's march. While tattered and worn, the city still gave enough hope for a better future. One Union soldier stationed in Jacksonville told his wife of the city's potential, writing "this is a rich country and it is the place to make money in times of peace…A good many are finding it out, and when the war is over, very many Northern men will move South."[24]

One of the Union regiments stationed outside of the city was the 3rd Regiment of United States Colored Troops, which remained deployed after the close of the Civil War. The presence of Black soldiers in a Southern city angered and terrified white residents. Confederate General Finegan wrote to Richmond, warning of the "danger arising from the permanent establishment of these negro troops…intercourse will immediately commence between negroes on the plantations and those in the enemy's service, and will suffice to corrupt the entire slave population of East Florida".[25] Slave owners were terrified of slave revolts or later acts of revenge. The presence of

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[23] Proctor, "Jacksonville during the Civil War." 341.

[24] Vaughn D. Bornet and Milton M. Woodford, "A Connecticut Yankee Fights at Olustee: Letters from the Front," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1949): 238.

[25] "Finegan to Jordan", March 14, 1863, ORA 1:14, 227-8, Quoted in Daniel L. Schafer, "Freedom Was as Close as the River: African Americans and the Civil War in Northeast Florida," in *The African American Heritage of Florida , 57.*

armed Black men was dangerous and needed to be kept far away from the slave population. If the Union forces could arm the enslaved, Florida would certainly be lost for the Confederacy.

But for slaves, the regiment was a symbol of freedom and power. They promised the forceful end to the slavery system, the destruction of the evils of their world. The Union blues represented a future governmental system that they could soon participate in. These were Black men who were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for a nation that would finally view all men as equal, who were willing to live in a Confederate city filled with hostility and hate, just to ensure that future generations would be able to call themselves Americans. These regiments remained positioned in Jacksonville even after the Confederacy's surrender in order to ensure a Reconstruction that would validate all the sacrifices made by their fellow men.

**Jacksonville During the Reconstruction Era**

As with the rest of the nation, Jacksonville underwent major shifts in social structures, populations, and political ideologies in the wake of the Civil War. Because of its role as a shipping and railroad node, Jacksonville was consistently welcoming new arrivals who were looking to take advantage of the economic and political potential of the New South. Union soldiers who were either stationed in Jacksonville or released from the Confederate prisons in nearby Baldwin came to the city to rest and heal before returning home, with some deciding to permanently relocate to the area.[26] Jaxsons who had fled the city during the Union occupation

[26] John T. Foster and Sarah Whitmer Foster, "The Last Shall Be First: Northern Methodists in Reconstruction Jacksonville," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (1992): 267.

returned to their properties to begin rebuilding their communities, unsure of their newfound political standing as Confederate sympathizers were forced to rejoin the Union.

Further, countless amounts of freedmen traveled in and out of the city, looking to establish a new life free from the confines of their masters and plantations. Many arrived to secure labor positions for the physical reconstruction of the city, repairing the damage sustained to the rail lines and downtown areas. The city's sawmills offered steady employment, as demand for lumber skyrocketed for the nationwide process of rebuilding urban and residential areas after the destruction of the Civil War.

As freedmen poured into the city with visions of their new futures, they were keenly aware of the possibility of violence from their white neighbors. The freedmen had no interest in joining a society that had done unspeakable damage to their people and instead began building a community of their own. The Freedmen's Bureau promised to assist Black families in purchasing homesteads and land in Jacksonville and the surrounding area but struggled to amass the acreage. While the federal government redistributed some of their holdings, most of the land was used for commercial or institutional use. Newspapers praised the progress of the Bureau, writing "the Blacks seem contented, and are themselves taking up very considerable amounts of land at the government offices; for the government still has large tracts of land desirable for immediate settlement. Any man may have a homestead of this land for the asking".[27] But in reality, the Freedmen's Bureau struggled to secure adequate amounts of residential and agricultural property. Many plantation owners refused to sell their land for anything but impossibly high prices. Others refused to sell even portions of their plantations despite lacking the workforce to

[27] "To the Citizens of Florida," *The Florida Times*, May 17, 1866, Volume 1, Number 20 edition.

continue operation.[28] The little land sold to freedmen was largely inhospitable, a mess of swamps or exhausted farmland in far-flung sections of the county. On May 25th, 1867, pastors from the Black Baptist, AME, and Mt. Zion churches organized the Grand Mass Meeting of Colored Citizens of Jacksonville to demand better access to property, education, and suffrage. Father James Page, a gifted orator, preached:

> White men say to us "we have the land and the wealth, and if you will put matters into our hands, we will rule for you." But how did they get the land and the wealth, who cleared off the very land upon which Jacksonville stands? It was done by the bone and sinew of the colored man, and we have an equal title to enjoy and to govern it. If white men will not rent their land to us, – and many would rather let it lay idle than do so – than we will save up money and buy land for ourselves![29]

While the mass meeting failed to change the minds of the majority of Jacksonville land-holders, it did conclude with a mass registration at the Freedmen's Savings Bureau. James Page and other Methodist preachers sponsored weekly advertisements for the bank, encouraging the freedmen to begin to save their wages for financial stability and upward mobility. Their recognition of the importance of financial education was responsible for various lectures given at Black churches and community centers, and within two years of operation, the Savings Bank boasted a membership rate of nearly sixty-five percent of the Black population, an exceptional achievement for a group that had never been granted financial responsibility or independence.[30]

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[28] "Seeing the Responsible Editor," *The Tri-Weekly Union*, August 27, 1874, Vol 5, Number 104 edition.

[29] "Father James Page," *Weekly Floridian*, March 20, 1883, Vol XXIV, No 7 edition.

[30] Joe M. Richardson, "An Evaluation of the Freedmen's Bureau in Florida," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1963): 233.

**LaVilla's Origins**

There were a few plantation owners who decided to sell their holdings to the freedmen. One of the most impactful sales was that of Francis L'Engle, who owned the land bordering the eastern portion of the city. L'Engle was a French aristocrat who married Susan Fatio, the eldest daughter of Francis Fatio, who had moved to Florida from Switzerland and owned the three largest plantations in Northeastern Florida. As one of the eldest European families in Florida, they held great political power and outsized wealth. Francis was a prominent lawyer who was looking to expand his influence in local government and decided to sell a quadrant of property he had purchased a few years earlier in 1856. For the generation leading up to the Civil War, this section of the city had been known as "one of the early aristocratic residence sections of Jacksonville" and was located just to the western bank of the emerging downtown center.[31] The sense of respectability and nobility between the European Jaxsons and Black freedmen would last for the next twenty years, as noted by LaVilla native James Weldon Johnson, who wrote "there was a direct relation between that state of affairs [on racial relations] because Jacksonville was controlled by certain aristocratic families, families like the L'Engles, Hartridges, and Daniels, who were sensitive to the code, nobles oblige".[32]

In 1866, L'Engle divided and sold his property to forty-one freedmen on ninety-nine year leases, ensuring that the land would stay in Black families for several generations. Many of these new leases were subleased to the purchaser's family members, creating a environment of familial and neighborly ties. Several Black families, such as the Benjamin, Hamilton, and McRae clans,

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[31] Kenney, "LaVilla, Florida, 1866-1887: Reconstruction Dreams and the Formation of a Black Community", 191.

[32] James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: The Viking Press, 1933). 14.

purchased several adjacent plots and leases, bringing members of three generations to the new community.[33] The area was called LaVilla and was located within walking distance to the railroad yards, attracting laborers who wished for more industrial work rather than agricultural labor. L'Engle's original lots were divided into quarter-lots and were rather inexpensive, making the area attractive to incoming laborers and families. Once the Black community established a foothold in the area, they began building a town of their own, with resources including a brass foundry, brewery, nursery, and two brickyards.[34] In just four short years, the area had reached a population of over 1,000, over three-quarters of whom were Black Americans.[35] The majority of these arriving families hailed from other areas in Florida, but around twenty percent migrated farther south from South Carolina and Georgia.

LaVilla also attracted young soldiers who wanted to settle down after their duration of service in the city. Pension records from the Union show that thirty-five LaVilla residents had served in the Union forces in some capacity.[36] Young soldiers eager to establish their own households quickly married and LaVilla soon was filled with families and young children. Census records show that the nuclear family was the predominant family unit in the town from the years 1866-1885, with the average age of inhabitants at approximately twenty-one years.[37] These young families kept close ties between their neighbors, and intermarriage between LaVilla

[33] Kenney, "LaVilla, Florida, 1866-1887: Reconstruction Dreams and the Formation of a Black Community." 188.

[34] Kenney. 194.

[35] Joe M. Richardson, *African Americans in the Reconstruction of Florida 1865-1877* (Tuscalosa: University of Alabama Press, 1965). 5.

[36] Kenney. 202.

[37] Kenney. 201.

residents became steady by 1885. Several streets were further developed into the interior of the LaVilla district, highlighting the demand for infrastructure to support the surrounding inhabitants. Early businesses, such as Manuel's General Store and Grocery, served as an informal hub of activity and community organization.[38] The buzz of activity, from neighborhood gossip to community announcements and social gatherings, was palpable on Bay Street, which had become the main commercial street in LaVilla. While the bulk of these establishments were owned by white Jaxsons, by 1886, Black entrepreneurs boasted ownership of several mechanical shops, a saloon, and several groceries and restaurants.

Almost immediately after its development, LaVilla followed the necessary steps to be recognized as its own incorporated town. Once the governor of Florida signed off on the documents, the town held its first election cycle in 1870, with Francis L'Engle securing victory by a decisive margin. LaVilla had boasted Black aldermen, sheriffs, and city council members since its first election in 1866. One of the most essential positions for Black success was the alderman, described as the "voice of the neighborhood."[39] That ability to voice the concerns and desires of the Black population in a government setting was especially powerful, as the alderman was able to appoint public jobs, such as sanitary inspectors, jail guards, and policemen. James Weldon Johnson recalled seeing Black policemen admonish both the young Black and white boys while he was in school.[40] The expectation for white citizens to obey Black armed police officers was a rare in the South, but reflected LaVilla's population density. With a majority

[38] David H. Jackson, "'Industrious, Thrifty and Ambitious': Jacksonville's African American Businesspeople during the Jim Crow Era," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (2012): 464.

[39] Joe M. Richardson, *African Americans in the Reconstruction of Florida 1865-1877*. 134.

[40] James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: The Viking Press, 1933). 7.

Black population, it was expected to see Black men and women in the same variety of roles earned by white Jaxsons. The constant interaction between white and Black neighbors helped to alleviate racist fears of the other group. The first generations of Black elected officials in LaVilla were successful and fair to both Black and white concerns. In total, 37 Black men had served as LaVilla's aldermen between the years of 1884-1887. They were joined by six Black tax collectors, one Black mayor, and five Black clerks throughout LaVilla's independence, serving as visual triumphs of the freedmen's newfound political activism and power.[41]

In the early years of LaVilla's incorporation, infrastructure and social welfare programs were organized and funded by the community rather than the taxpayer. The LaVilla city council did not have the funds or support from the city of Jacksonville to charter schools, homes for the elderly, or services for the critically poor, so the residents were left to establish these services independently from the government. Some of the first organizations to implement these programs were churches. Historically, the Black church network has served as the central focus of the Black community.[42] Churches offered space to vocalize one's struggles and aspirations while remaining free from the stressors brought out by the white community. Freedmen were unable to have an entirely Black government, but they were able to carve out Black-centered spaces in religious spaces.

This network of Black Christian churches was vital to the formation of LaVilla's community identity and future growth. Families who frequented church had access to a network of friends and neighbors who were generous with their time and financial assistance. But the

[41] Kenney, "LaVilla, Florida, 1866-1887: Reconstruction Dreams and the Formation of a Black Community", 201.

[42] Abel A. Bartley, *Keeping the Faith: Race, Politics, and Social Development in Jacksonville, Florida, 1940-1970* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000). 49.

individual nature of LaVilla natives allowed for several different denominations to support their own religious community and practices. The first LaVilla church was Shiloh Baptist, founded in 1866, followed shortly after by the American United Methodist Church, and the Mt. Zion church, which was another Methodist congregation.[43] These sacred spaces gave the Black community a venue to find their specific faith congregation within the Black neighborhood, free from fear of white domination. These church spaces also hosted community gatherings focused on protecting the political rights and freedoms of their members, as they were wary of "the condition they will find themselves in when the military is removed" and Reconstruction efforts had dismantled.[44] These churches also organized funds to build the first school in LaVilla, named Stanton Norman Prep School, hosted charity fundraisers, and promoted entertainment events such as choral concerts and dance receptions.

From its earliest beginnings, music found its roots in the land and individuals of LaVilla. There was music in the ringing calls of the cicadas, the harmonization of the magpies, and the gentle whistling of the palmetto trees. Many former slaves held their spirituals and work songs close to their heart, using them as an outlet of the pain, suffering, and fear. The melodies were contagious and often served as the focal point for different community gatherings and events. The excellence of Black spirituals and songs was known throughout the city of Jacksonville. As the German-British composer Frederick Delius reflected on his time spent in Jacksonville, "I would sit out on my verandah in the darkness of evening and would hear from afar the singing of the Negroes. It seemed to harmonize wonderfully with the glorious natural surroundings.

[43] Bartley. 52.

[44] Kenney, "LaVilla, Florida, 1866-1887: Reconstruction Dreams and the Formation of a Black Community." 202.

Florida's natural scenery and [Black artists's] music gave the strongest impulse to [my own] musical creativity."[45] Music poured out of every aspect of life, from the shipyards, river boats, churches and community centers. It was a communal vocalizing of the confusing and distressing emotions that came from daily life.

Music was also a celebration of Black progress, as performers were now able to demonstrate their ability for their own sake and profit. Black performers had grown in popularity in the decade after the Civil War throughout the nation, but witnessed an explosion in such in the Southeastern United States. As James Weldon Johnson recalled of his childhood, "every good brass band in Florida at that time was a Negro band. I remember going to the state fair at Jacksonville and seeing a review of the state militia, all white. Every contingent in the review marched behind a Black band, for the reason that there were no good white ones".[46] Although the Black soldiers were regulated to a lesser position by who?, both in military action and in pedestrian festivals, their level of skill boasted a talent that surpassed the white musicians. In an environment where freedmen had to wrestle and fight for any allotment of power or freedom, music was one area where Black people had control and superiority over their white neighbors.

The visibility of these bands brought a sense of pride to the LaVilla community. These musicians were not only of superior caliber, but they held respectable positions in the United States armed forces. These Black regiments represented some of the first openings Black men had in the federal system, solidifying them as realized Americans. They represented a hopeful future for inclusion in the nation while still retaining the talents and cultural hallmarks that

[45] Noelle Morrissette, *James Weldon Johnson's Modern Soundscapes* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013). 21.

[46] James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson*. 38.

distinguished them from their white counterparts. Instead of leaving Black musicianship to the memory of the struggles of slavery, they incorporated their songs and melodies into the fabric of free society. They represented the intertwining of Black culture with American citizenship and success, highlighting the compatibility of the two rather than the opposition between them. They served as inspiration to an entire community, particularly James Weldon Johnson, who recalled how for most of his early life he dreamed of nothing more than being a drummer in one of the Black brass bands.[47]

**Beginnings of Black Education in Jacksonville**

Throughout the state of Florida, educational opportunities were severely lacking for Black students in the later nineteenth century. Generations of Black people had been prohibited from any form of education by law, which left the population behind white Jaxsons in specialized skills and literacy rates. Education had never been in such great demand or so desperately needed. Many organizations and churches from the North, such as the African Civilization Society and the Home Mission Society of the AME Church, sent teachers and supplies to establish schools throughout the South. Methodist preachers John Swaim and Timothy Lewis initially traveled south to preach to the Black Union regiments stationed in the Jacksonville area, but remained in Jacksonville in the years of Reconstruction.[48] Their mission was twofold: promote Northern immigration to guarantee a political majority for the Republican Party, and educate the freedmen. They believed that "free schools must go hand in hand with free labor if the South is to compete successfully with northern and western portions of the

[47] James Weldon Johnson. 37.

[48] John T. Foster and Sarah Whitmer Foster, "The Last Shall Be First: Northern Methodists in Reconstruction Jacksonville," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (1992): 280.

republic".[49] Jacksonville freedmen greatly benefited from the work of the Methodist funds and were able to establish four schools during 1865.[50] According to Superintendent C. Thurston Chase, these early classes were taught by "a number of ladies [who] were persons of wealth and high social position at home" but were replaced within the year with Black educators.[51] But Jacksonville preacher John Alvard reported that "no white man with any aid has come near them. We have no one to consult with…yet we have six schools, with an average of thirty pupils each, and motley, torn, miscellaneous books".[52]

Public state sponsored education was a rather recent development in Florida, originating in 1840. In the years of Reconstruction, the entire Floridian school system was underfunded and struggling, regardless of race. White taxpayers refused to pay for Black education, arguing that their money should go to strictly to white schools or none at all. In response, the State Superintendent implemented "a tuition fee of fifty cents per month from each pupil, and a second for an annual tax of one dollar each upon all male persons of color between the ages of 21 and 45".[53] This unequal taxation lasted for eleven years, actively deterring Black children from receiving an education. Newspapers are filled with mentions of vocal protests against this tax, who were deemed "restless agitators" in the white papers and utterly necessary to the Black community.[54] Black men were taxed for the education of their own children as well as white

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[49] John T. Foster and Nicole Brown, "Swaim Family Papers: Civil War Reports and Letters of Recommendation for a Carpetbagger," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 93, no. 4 (2015): 589.

[50] Foster and Foster, "The Last Shall Be First." 278.

[51] Thomas Everette Cochran, *History of the Public School Education in Florida* (Lancaster: New Era Printing Company, 1921). 87.

[52] Larry Eugene Rivers, *Father James Page: An Enslaved Preacher's Climb to Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 132.

[53] Cochran, *History of the Public School Education in Florida*. 89.

children, but the white community assumed no responsibility for the Black youth. The tax remained until 1876, when the new state constitution established separate but assuredly equal school systems, facilities, and faculties for Black and white children. Even the Florida School for the Mute and Blind, located thirty miles south of Jacksonville, was designed so that "the afflicted of both races are admitted to the benefits of this school, and are taught fair and alike, but in an entirely different buildings and at different hours".[55] The new constitution standardized funding for rural and urban schools, introducing public education in Florida. With funding allocated, this helped spur the creation of new schools, resulting in an increase from 676 schools and 28,444 students in 1876 to 1,479 schools and 51,935 students in 1883.[56]

Like the rest of the Southern states, Florida continued to struggle to furnish and advance its educational system for both Blacks and whites. Schools were largely centered in urban areas, neglecting children living in suburban and agricultural areas. The national Department of Superintendents attempted to fill the gap, holding a meeting in Jacksonville in 1896 focusing on the need for more rural institutions. The Department observed that "the more highly educated the people of a rural district, the greater the return, and the greater the fruit of the labor and expenditure", yet the Florida state superintendent, W. D. Sheats, stated that he and the state government were satisfied with their current plan for limited rural schools. Sheats was particularly proud of the educational facilities in Duval County, writing that they offered "the

[54] "Let Us Have Peace," *The Daily Florida Union*, January 17, 1877, Volume II No. 14 edition.

[55] Cochran, *History of the Public School Education in Florida*. 34.

[56] Cochran. 42.

best equipped colored schools in Florida" and that "the facilities for the education of the colored race in Jacksonville are superior to those of most places".[57]

Black students faced even fewer options for their secondary education. There was a great demand for skilled laborers from within the Black community, yet not enough apprenticeships or industrial schools to help diversify the work force. The state of Florida was unwilling to contribute any of the budget for construction or maintenance, leaving the task of building a Black secondary education system to the Black community. Once again, the Black churches and their Northern Methodist ministers were left to raise funds and secure faculties for their own colleges. The Mt. Zion AME church established Edward Waters College in 1883, making it the first independent and first Black college in the state. A few years later, the Bethel Baptist Church established the Florida Baptist Academy, boasting specialization programs and a seminary. The Cookeman Institute received support from the Methodist church as well and focused primarily on producing Black educators and administrators for local schools.

LaVilla's community benefited from the early development of a professional class, made possible by these educational opportunities. Many of their homegrown professionals left Jacksonville in order to earn their terminal degree but returned home in order to improve their community and neighborhood. James Weldon Johnson, the recent valedictorian from Atlanta University, returned to his alma mater, Stanton Normal School in 1894. Johnson served as principal from 1894 to 1902, becoming the single most important voice in expanding the Black educational system in LaVilla. While in college, he won the Atlanta University Oratory Prize for

[57] Timothy J. Groulx, "Influences of Segregation and Integration on the Bands at Historically Black High Schools in Duval County, Florida," *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 40, no. 1 (2018): 58.

a speech highlighting the importance of education in Black mobilization.[58] Under his supervision, Stanton added high school grades, a school band, and a baseball program. Johnson's legacy of educational pursuit remained part of LaVilla's culture, even after Johnson's relocation to Columbia in 1903.

**Annexation of the City of Jacksonville**

The residents of LaVilla and Jacksonville were unprepared for the explosion in their city's popularity. Once the Waycross Short Line opened in 1881, tourists from the North came in droves for a reprieve from the harsh winters. Tycoons like Henry Flagler, who was one of John D. Rockefeller's partners, spent millions establishing the Jacksonville Terminal Company, featuring a railroad line that passed directly through LaVilla's borders. By 1890, the company had raised enough funds to build the St. Johns River railroad bridge, finally allowing major railroad trade and travel along the eastern coast of Florida. Jacksonville had dubbed itself the "Winter Wonderland" and advertised heavily for its newly designed hotels like the Flagler and the St. James. But once tourists arrived, they were greeted with a rather dilapidated city. Jacksonville appeared as "a camp of refugees, soldiers, sutlers, contrabands and floaters combined; a kind of squatter shiftlessness".[59]

Despite being the largest metropolis in Florida, Jacksonville was starved for infrastructure like sidewalks and paved roads, public services like a police force and a fire brigade, and even a reliable source of gas for its streetlights. Jaxsons were desperate for action

[58] "James Weldon Johnson (June 17, 1871-June 26, 1938) A Chronology," *The Langston Hughes Review* 8, no. 1/2 (1989): 1–3.

[59] Duncan C. Ross, "Sporting Item," *Florida Times Union*, April 4, 1883, Vol 2. No. 291 edition.

and continuously begged the city council for quick action to preserve the new fame of their city. With each rainstorm, the "pedestrians through the principal business street were obliged to wade through mud or cross on a few half-submerged planks…and the city being apparently indifferent to the situation" infuriated taxpayers.[60] The city council obstructed any major changes, resulting from a combination of poor leadership and lack of a sufficient tax base.

Although LaVilla was an independent body from Jacksonville, nearly all of its residents worked or relied on transportation from within Jacksonville's city limits. The shipyards and the railroads were within walking distance from LaVilla but fell under the city's jurisdiction. The city council argued that LaVilla's residents were benefiting from services that they never paid into and set its sights on annexing the neighborhood into Jacksonville proper. Surrounding neighborhoods were also targeted, including the Brooklyn, Riverside, Springfield, and Durkeeville areas. Jacksonville's population immediately skyrocketed, going from 7,650 residents to 17,201 after the borders were expanded.[61] Of those annexed towns, three boasted predominately Black populations who had held the majority in their local governments. Now under the dominion of the Jacksonville Chamber, the Black population was the largest minority, comprising 43 percent of the city's total population after annexation.

However, under the political control of the white government, LaVilla's citizens found their electoral control divided among six districts, diluting their political power. The Black population was effectively disenfranchised by annexation, immediately regulated into the minority despite being the majority of their own government for the past generation. After

[60] "Jacksonville Market," *The Daily News-Herald*, October 2, 1887, No. 1785 edition.

[61] Kenney, "LaVilla, Florida, 1866-1887: Reconstruction Dreams and the Formation of a Black Community." 204.

annexation, Black leaders faced impossible elections, unable to compete with the white majority who despised the political capabilities of the Black community. The Democratic Party had taken advantage of white anger in the post-Reconstruction period and warned of the dangers of Black political control. They had preached disaster for white families if vindictive Black politicians gained seats, accusing them of wanting to seize white assets for Black distribution. Despite these fears being completely unfounded, they found an audience with the white electorate, who chose candidates with their color skin, assuming they would be working in their best interest. Black leaders were effectively shut out from local governance by this redistricting.[62] The city council would not have a Black member for nearly a century, until Sallye Mathis and Mary Singleton were elected in 1967, making history as the first Black members of the century, and the first women, regardless of race, to have ever held the position.[63]

The newly minted city of Jacksonville set its sights on implementing the infrastructure changes it had long promised with the tax funds raised by its doubled population. The city council was operating in a contentious political time of transition, as the dominance of the Republican party became threatened by the rise of the Democrats, who labeled their opposition as Northern carpetbaggers intent on destroying the Southern way of life and blindly helping the Black population. One of the leading Democratic papers, the East Floridian, reported that "the drunked [sic], incited negroes are urged by carpetbaggers to attend all Democratic demonstrations, and are told to look upon all white men as their enemies".[64] Whenever Black Jaxsons attempted to participate in a political forum, the newspapers would report them as

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[62] Kenney. 204.

[63] Barbara Walch, "Sallye B. Mathis and Mary L. Singleton: Black Pioneers on the Jacksonville, Florida, City Council," *UNF Graduate Theses and Dissertations*, January 1, 1988, 11.

[64] "Rule and Ruin," *The East Floridian*, August 1, 1894.

disturbances, ignoring any attempt of the Black population to participate in their representative government.

The Democratic Party fed off of the anger of the white population and promised to limit the expansion of Black rights. The Democratic Party in Mississippi and Alabama had made significant changes to their state constitutions allowing for de jure segregation, made legal by the Supreme Court in 1896's *Plessy v Ferguson*. In Jacksonville, the Democratic Party seized on these political trends. The Party made their position clear during the 1869 election:

> a colored man, as is true of every genuine northern pioneer, should scorn the proffered assistance of any man or any society…the colored man would be good for nothing but to be driven in the field as cattle, unless he is filled with these elements of self reliance and self direction. And what they need as a class, today, is to be thrown upon their own resources, entirely without the least assistance from any one, and left to work themselves up into the best positions of life…when the colored men will be a man and claim position from manly and noble qualities there will be no prejudice against color that will hinder him from any position he is qualified.[65]

The federal government could mandate that the freedmen were now true citizens, but they could not force city or state governments to sponsor programs or initiatives to aid their integration into free society. There would be no funding, no publicity, and no involvement from the Black community in the Jacksonville government. They were treated like an alien community, completely separate from the activities and motivations of the white community. Rather than build Jacksonville together, the Democrats aimed to cement the Black community as the subordinate class. Any questions of Black ability was be swatted away with a condescending statement: if they want it, do it themselves, because the white community would not lift a finger to aid.

[65] "Democratic Assembly," *The East Floridian*, February 17, 1896.

Signs of this separation were immediately obvious in the local press. Beginning in 1867, the *Florida Times-Union*, a white local newspaper, began listing mass times with a distinction between "churches" and "negro churches."[66] This labeling of the "negro church" invoked a sense of other, a subliminal message that these churches were not on the same level as white churches, but also that Black parishioners were not welcome in other churches.[67]

Once LaVilla had been enveloped into the larger metropolis of Jacksonville, the residents were at the mercy of the white city council who paid little heed to their concerns or desires for the future. LaVilla residents had little reason to trust the city, particularly given the local government's decision to push crime specifically into the Black neighborhood even before LaVilla's annexation. In 1887 Jacksonville mayor Jack Quincy Burbridge had established "the Line" by ordering police officers to run any local prostitutes over the border into LaVilla. Located along Ward Street, LaVilla was inundated with prostitutes and brothels, which were unwelcome in Jacksonville. The next year, Jacksonville reclaimed ownership of the area through its annexation of LaVilla, but the brothels remained.

In 1890, the infamous Cora Crane relocated to the LaVilla neighborhood to establish her own brothel dubbed "the Court." The Court was a premiere location along the Bordello District, boasting fourteen bedrooms, a ballroom, and an industrial kitchen.[68] The Bordello District was filled with brothels, attracting customers from the nearby transit stations. Single men would frequent the area, feeding into to the stereotypical view of LaVilla as a listless slum filled with

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[66] *Florida Times Union*, June 8, 1867.

[67] Hurst, *It Was Never About a Hotdog and a Coke*. 93.

[68] Lillian Gilkes, *Cora Crane: A Biography of Mrs. Stephen Crane* (Indiana University Press, 1960). 114.

drunks and petty criminals. In 1888, a white police officer from Jacksonville stated that "if I owned Hell and LaVilla I would rent out LaVilla and live in hell."[69] But Bordello Road became an institution in the area, not because the community asked for it or endorsed a criminal atmosphere, but because the Jacksonville mayor deemed LaVilla and its residents a suitable place for criminal elements not welcome in white Jacksonville.

[69] Kenney, "LaVilla, Florida, 1866-1887: Reconstruction Dreams and the Formation of a Black Community." 201.

# Chapter Two

LaVilla in the Twentieth Century

## The Great Fire

The most important day in Jacksonville's history was arguably May 3rd, 1901. The city woke up to a pleasant morning, warmed by the sunshine that made the state so attractive to the rest of the nation. It was already becoming a hot and dry summer, as the city was experiencing a two-month drought.[70] Morning activities had their typical hum and bustle, with the residents blissfully unaware of the tragedy that was about to strike. Around noon, an errant ember leapt from a small stove at the Cleveland Fiber Factory, located on the western border of LaVilla.[71] It landed on a dried out patch of Spanish moss, which littered the Jacksonville area like dead leaves in the fall. The moss was quickly engulfed and the flames spread out to the rest of the factory. Enabled by the weather conditions of drought and wind, the fire advanced into the streets of LaVilla, moving from the fiber factory to the neighboring mattress factory. Within minutes, several blocks were ablaze.

The Jacksonville fire brigades were immediately overwhelmed. Most of the units operated on a volunteer basis and received little funding from a city government that was hesitant to fund social and emergency services. The fire's origin in LaVilla also hurt the rescue team's response time. Jacksonville thought of LaVilla as a dirty section of town filled with uneducated and unproductive members of society, so the city was not immediately concerned

[70] Bill Foley, *The Great Fire of 1901* (Jacksonville: The Jacksonville Historical Society, 2001). 26.

[71] Benjamin Harrison, *Acres of Ashes: The Story of the Great Fire That Swept over the City of Jacksonville, Florida* (Jacksonville: J. A. Holloman, 1901), educx.

with a small fire that was likely to damage just a handful of businesses.[72] But within the hour, community leaders were faced with the reality of the situation. The fire brigade was quickly overwhelmed with the extent of the blaze, which was immediately multiplied by the strong winds blowing off the coast of the St. John's River. The fire began to march itself through the entirety of LaVilla, indiscriminate to businesses and homes alike. When the flames began reaching the heart of downtown Jacksonville, it seemed as if all were lost. Looters took advantage of the situation, and some businesses were broken into while the police department was preoccupied with the disaster.

James Weldon Johnson's account of the day puts the blame on the police officers for refusing to aid the vandalized storefronts, and instead "ensuring the firemen spent all their efforts saving a low row of frame houses just across the street on the south side of the [fiber] factory, belonging to a white man names Steve Melton."[73] The emergency revealed that Jacksonville's leaders and first responders valued the property of white owners more than the livelihoods of Black citizens. Johnson recalls the day of the fire marking the first time that he was aware of the struggle LaVilla would face in the next century. In the chaos of the smoke and flames, Johnson and his brother were harassed twice by police officers who wrongly accused the brothers of participating in the local looting. It was that moment that taught him that his home had "degenerated into one hundred percent a cracker town."[74]

Over the course of the day, the blaze expanded across two square miles of Jacksonville, resulting in the largest fire ever recorded in the Southern United States. Jacksonville's blaze was

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[72] Bill Foley, *The Great Fire of 1901*. 24.

[73] James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson*. 62.

[74] James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson*. 71.

the third largest fire disaster in an American city, topped only by the fires of Chicago and San Francisco. In one afternoon, the fire had spread throughout the heart of downtown, targeting its economic and social epicenters. Residential and commercial streets fell victim to the swells of flames, which were half-miles deep and wide. The illustrious St. James Hotel, the city's first structure of notoriety, was destroyed within an hour. Crowds of panicked people and livestock tore through the streets, desperately looking to save their livelihoods and family members.

It took rescue workers nearly eight hours to stamp out the blaze, with efforts disbanding around nine in the evening. The fire was so massive residents of Savannah, Georgia reported that they could see the glow of the fire from their own city. The smoke could be seen as far north as Raleigh, North Carolina.[75] In Jacksonville, residents were stupefied. The fire had claimed 2,368 buildings in total, which left approximately 10,000 people homeless in one day. Those properties were estimated to cost nearly $15 million in damage, presenting the nearly impossible challenge of rebuilding.[76] Although only seven casualties were attributed to the disaster, the consequences of the fire affected nearly every downtown Jacksonville resident, many of whom were left homeless with their businesses in ashes.

The rebuilding efforts began almost immediately. The governor of Florida, William Sherman Jennings, authorized emergency funds to go to Jacksonville to ensure its metropolitan hub would not be endangered by the disaster. Jacksonville's port and railroad systems had been essential for connecting southern Florida with the rest of the nation, acting as the main transportation facilitator in the state. State emergency funds were directed to Jacksonville, but

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[75] Benjamin Harrison, *Acres of Ashes: The Story of the Great Fire That Swept over the City of Jacksonville, Florida* (Jacksonville: J. A. Holloman, 1901), cx.

[76] James B. Crooks, "Changing Face of Jacksonville, Florida: 1900-1910," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (1984): 439.

the majority of rebuilding efforts were funded by the vast network of volunteer organizations and religious groups, who had constituted the bulk of Jacksonville's social services in the prior decades. The New York architect, Henry J. Klutho, was tapped to be the leader of the reconstruction process and designed fourteen buildings for city and governmental use in the downtown area. He was also credited with designing the first Jacksonville skyscraper, the Dyyal-Upchurch Building on East Bay Street, which became a visual triumph of modern technology next to the port.[77] The heart of Jacksonville's downtown slowly began picking itself up again, looking unsteadily towards a new century that began with so much terror and loss.

**Jacksonville Schools after the Fire**

Throughout the rebuilding campaign in the early 1900s, white owned and operated structures were prioritized over those in segregated LaVilla. Five out of seven Black grammar schools were forced to shutter their doors, and the Florida Baptist Academy relocated outside of the city. The Edward Waters campus had been completely destroyed and was not rebuilt until 1907. The school was temporarily housed in LaVilla, sharing the facilities with the LaVilla grammar school, resulting in overcrowded classes and strained teachers.[78] The Cookeman Institute's campus was also destroyed, and it was forced to close its doors for three years until it was able to secure a new location in the nearby Murray Hill neighborhood

[77] James B. Crooks, "Changing Face of Jacksonville, Florida: 1900-1910," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (1984): 453.

[78] Crooks. 471.

But despite the massive blow to the Black education system in Jacksonville because of the fire, the overall literacy rate improved from 78.8 to 85.3 between 1900-1910.[79] Black schools continued to suffer from inadequate funding, receiving $31,000 for the 1907 school year while the white schools collected $107,000. The city of Jacksonville allotted over twenty dollars for each white child enrolled, while never spending more than nine dollars on Black students between 1905 and 1910.[80] Black schools were constantly in need of maintenance yet continually ignored, particularly hurt by the lost tax revenue that was spent for rebuilding efforts. The city of Jacksonville was unable to properly fund its school system due to the Florida maximum tax rates and a constitutional prohibition of allocating state funds for local schools.[81] Conditions deteriorated throughout Black and white schools, worsening throughout the Progressive Era. In 1927, the Duval superintendent reported that the Black schools showed "totally unsatisfactory conditions in every respect", and several grammar schools were referred to as "wretched fire traps that should be razed".[82]

The Black community's commitment to education reflects the driving factor of social mobility in the Black community. In the North, the Black intellectual elite benefited from institutions such as Howard and Oberlin Universities, which promoted a liberal arts education highlighting the arts, classics, languages, and patriotic sympathies. Many wealthy Black Americans came from storied bloodlines, old families that had developed a sense of social separation from the rest of the Black population. In the South, there was much less social weight

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[79] Cochran, *History of the Public School Education in Florida*. 23.

[80] Crooks, "Changing Face of Jacksonville, Florida," 1984.

[81] James B. Crooks, "Jacksonville in the Progressive Era: Responses to Urban Growth," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (1986): 54.

[82] "Duval School Report 1927," accessed through the Jacksonville Historical Society.

attributed to one's family line. But in the words of James Weldon Johnson, Black societies continued to separate "into almost as many grades, as regards to ability and capacity…as found among whites".[83] If one was educated and behaved respectably, they could easily be enveloped into the higher echelons of society. Teachers were consistently treated with immense respect and viewed as upper members of the class structure.[84] Participation in cultural events, like operas, lectures, and plays signified that one was a respectable member of society.

Education, whether for specialization, pleasure, or necessity, remained difficult for Black adults to access outside of the classroom. The Jacksonville Free Public Library was constructed after the fire with funding by Andrew Carnegie, and its Kultho design and Laura Street location made it a central feature of downtown. The institution offered nearly 20,000 books to the white population, but regulated its Black patrons to the upper level that was limited to a mere 609 books.[85] Despite the restrictions, Black adults in LaVilla continued to push for educational expansion, exemplified through the great reception and respect given to Booker T. Washington during a 1912 visit to Jacksonville. Nearly 2,500 Black Jaxsons heard Washington lecture on his Tuskegee educational system at the Duval Theatre, and his reception was dubbed "the biggest event that has been witnessed in the city for many years".[86]

Despite the failings of the Duval school district and Jacksonville City Council to provide adequate educational resources for their Black population, the city still offered the most realized

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[83] James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson*. 79.

[84] Willard B. Gatewood, "Aristocrats of Color: The Educated Black Elite of the Post-Reconstruction Era," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 29 (2000): 112.

[85] "Jacksonville Public Library's History," Jacksonville Public Library, October 30, 2019.

[86] The Washington Tour in Florida, *Evening Metropolis*, March 3, 1912.

school system for Black children in Florida. LaVilla was the only neighborhood in the state to offer a full progression of schools for Black students, from day care to college. Although there continued to be obstacles for the Black students, such as tattered textbooks and decaying schoolhouses, many Black men and women living in LaVilla were able to achieve full educations in the nineteenth century. LaVilla reared the first Black lawyers to pass the Florida bar, as well as a significant number of Black physicians, nurses, bankers, and engineers.[87]

**LaVilla's Economic Foundations**

In the years following 1901, Jacksonville was a flurry of activity. Relief funds and rebuilding initiatives guaranteed income and work, and the population exploded in the decade following the fire. The influx of laborers, materials, goods, and transportation routes brought reliable profits and better conditions to the city, strengthening the economy of the entire city. Now armed with experienced business-minded people and an educated population, the Black community in LaVilla was able to share in this economic boom and carve out their own sphere within Jacksonville's greater arena.. Its proximity to both the shipyards and the downtown urban area attracted families from a variety of backgrounds, offering an affordable community to the working- and middle-class Black population. LaVilla's Black majority also promised a community and shops that would cater to the Black consumer, free from the disparaging nature of the white storeowners. The work and achievements made by the first generation of free Jaxsons laid the foundation for the rise of a middle class fitted with their own private spaces that

[87] "Florida's First Black Lawyers," *The Florida Bar*, accessed April 16, 2022.

"buttressed battered dignity, nurtured positive self images, sharpened skills, and demonstrated experiences".[88]

As Jim Crow and segregation became embedded in Floridian society, Black entrepreneurs found themselves isolated from spaces they had previously belonged. Organizations such as the Jacksonville Board of Trade and the Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce became exclusive to white membership in 1906.[89] Black business leaders began flocking to the Jacksonville Negro Business League, which was modeled after the Negro Business League founded by Booker T. Washington. They recruited members across the northeast part of the state who could create a "good strong organization to benefit and upbuild the colored race." The League worked to advance the collaboration and success of Black businesses in order to expand their local economy and self-sufficiency, intent to alleviate and overcome the daily obstacles of Jim Crow Jacksonville. Despite its success, the JNBL was rarely viewed as a threat to white business owners. Many white southern believed that philosophy taught by Washington and the NBL encouraged segregation, and white Jacksonville businesses were never intending to serve the Black community.[90]

The League quickly became a central force behind LaVilla's success, earning the city and its residents national praise for their achievements. In 1901, the *Indianapolis Freedman* published a glowing review of the city entitled "Jacksonville in the Lead: From a Standpoint of Negro Business Enterprises". The article highlighted the rapid expansion in registered Black

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[88] David H. Jackson, "'Industrious, Thrifty and Ambitious': Jacksonville's African American Businesspeople during the Jim Crow Era," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (2012): 458.

[89] Jackson. 461.

[90] David H. Jackson, "Booker T. Washington's Tour of the Sunshine State, March 1912," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2003): 258.

businesses and storefronts, and commended the business leaders for "how they were in touch with the pulse of their community".[91] Within the year, the Jacksonville Negro Business League was featured at the second annual national conference held in Chicago. Five years later, George A. Powell, a writer for the *Defender*, commented that "ever since emancipation, Negroes in Jacksonville have set the pace for other parts of the state in their courageous venturing into various types of business".[92] Jacksonville was seen as the exception in Jim Crow Florida, one of the few places were genuine opportunity and economic improvement were possible. According to the *Southern Workman*, "in west Florida the colored people in general do not succeed nearly so well as among the more intelligent, progressive, and liberal people of the eastern section".[93] Within the first decade of the twentieth century, Jacksonville saw the number of Black businesses nearly double from 122 to 342.[94]

LaVilla earned one of her greatest honors in April 1912, when Booker T. Washington visited Jacksonville to celebrate its progress. Washington toured many Southern states, offering speeches and educational philosophy to integrated crowds with much success. The Florida Negro Business League organized Washington's tour of Florida, scheduling his appearance in LaVilla alongside nine other cities. While the trip was a success, Washington's appearance in Jacksonville was jeopardized when a Black man named Eugene Baxter was accused of robbing and killing a white grocer. Jacksonville's racial animosity was at an all-time high, and fears of a

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[91] "Jacksonville in the Lead: From a Standpoint of Negro Buisness Enterprises," *The Freeman*, December 14, 1901, Vol. XIV, No. 50 edition.

[92] *Chicago Defender,* July 1918, quoted in Jackson, "Industrious, Thrifty and Ambitious." 456.

[93] Jackson, "Booker T. Washington's Tour of the Sunshine State, March 1912." 88.

[94] James B. Crooks, "Changing Face of Jacksonville, Florida: 1900-1910," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (1984): 455.

lynching gripped the Black community. However, Washington refused to cancel the event, arguing "that because there was special racial friction it was especially necessary that he should keep his engagements in the city".[95] Thankfully, Washington avoided the worst of the racial hostility, as he was absent from the car that was accosted "by a crowd of excited white men who angrily demanded that Booker Washington be handed over to them".[96] Over 2,500 white and Black Jaxons crowded side by side in the Duval Theatre for Washington's appeals for industrial education, Black economic independence, and racial harmony. He praised the city for serving as an example of Black success stemming from decent conditions and access to educational facilities, but denounced the white community's use of lynching. Washington closed his address with "an earnest and eloquent appeal for better feeling between the races", and the integrated crowd left the event peacefully.[97] LaVilla and its neighbors celebrated with a parade and night of performances and dancing. Newspapers heralded Washington's stay as "the biggest event that has been witnessed in the city for many years", praising the Black community for the great success of the weekend.[98]

The growth of LaVilla's professional class was paired with its growth of its middle- and upper-class Black families. The Black community had been able to cement a permanent hold over LaVilla throughout the past fifty years, stabilizing into a class structure that mirrored that of their white neighbors. It comes at little surprise to find that LaVilla was the home of Florida's first Black millionaire, Abraham Lincoln Lewis. Born in 1865, A.L. Lewis, as he was called, began working in a LaVilla lumber mill after dropping out of the sixth grade. After becoming

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[95] Jackson, "Booker T. Washington's Tour of the Sunshine State, March 1912." 87.

[97] Emmett J. Scott and Lyman Beecher Stowe, Booker T. Washington: Builder of a Civilization (New York, 1918), 9 , quoted in Jackson, "Booker T. Washington's Tour of the Sunshine State, March 1912." 275.

[98] "The Washington Tour in Florida", *Evening Metropolis*, Jacksonville, March 3, 1912.

foreman, he opened the first Black owned and operated shoe store in Jacksonville. In 1901, he and six other Black investors founded the Afro-American Life Insurance Company to immediate success. Black Jaxsons had no support from the government or white-owned insurance companies, and A. L. Lewis' life and death insurance programs were affordable and easily accessible. Its quick success was followed by a succession of branch openings throughout the state of Florida and Georgia, including offices in Tampa, Savannah and Miami.[99] The company helped secure the finances of LaVilla's workers and families, opened three Black cemeteries in Jacksonville, and helped finance land purchases for Stanton Normal School and the Masonic Temple, a Black community center.[100] As the company grew, so did its profits. By 1947, A.L. Lewis was earning around $1,000 a month and owned more property than any other African American in Florida.[101] But despite his personal fortune, Lewis continually served as a community leader and innovator, investing in his hometown. In 1926, he purchased the Lincoln Golf and Country Club, becoming the first club to serve the Black community.

His most successful investment was perhaps a forty-five strip of beachfront property in Nassau County. All of the Jacksonville city beaches were exclusively open to whites until 1935, when American Beach was open under the oversight of the Afro-Am Life Insurance Company. The beachfront resort became a major tourist destination for Black Americans throughout the country, not just LaVilla residents. It became a hub of activity and culture, and was visited by names such as Cab Calloway, Joe Lewis, and Hank Aaron. According to the American Beach Historical Society, A. L. Lewis specifically chose "America" as the title because the beach was

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[99] C. G. Woodson, "Insurance Business Among Negroes," *The Journal of Negro History* 14, no. 2 (1929): 208.

[100] Jackson, "Industrious, Thrifty and Ambitious." 35.

[101] Bartley, *Keeping the Faith*. 65.

intended for all races and colors, as a destination free from the confines and codes of Jim Crow.[102]

**LaVilla's Social Welfare Programs**

Another one of the premier real estate owners in LaVilla was Eartha White, who was known as the "Angel of Mercy" for her humanitarian work within LaVilla. She was born in 1876 and was raised by her adoptive mother, Clara White. Clara was beloved in LaVilla, known for her organization of a soup kitchen and missionary aid for the poor. Eartha had grown up surrounded by the connections built through family, faith, and education in LaVilla. She graduated from the Stanton School in 1893 and moved to New York City as an opera singer. She was employed by the Oriental American Opera Company alongside her childhood friends James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson.[103] After touring in Europe for two years, she returned home to LaVilla, eventually finding herself teaching at her alma mater. At the same time, she earned her real estate license, owned a grocery store, a cleaning service, laundromat, and taxi company.[104] Her deep connections and international experience combined with her entrepreneurship made her a clear choice as charter members of the Florida Business League and the Jacksonville Business League.

The Clara White Mission was one of the most impactful organizations within the LaVilla community. In the early twentieth century, governmental aid was basically inaccessible to

[102] Marsha Dean Phelts, *An American Beach for African Americans* (Gainesville Florida: University Press of Florida, 1997). 13.

[103] "UNF - Thomas G. Carpenter Library - Eartha White Biography," accessed February 22, 2022.

[104] "UNF - Thomas G. Carpenter Library - Eartha White Biography."

Blacks. Essential services such as early childhood care, nursing homes, orphanages, and resources for disabled individuals were completely ignored by the state. Because of this, Black Jaxsons were dependent on the church networks and private generosity. White's social work began in 1902 when she opened the only nursing home for elderly and sick Black Jaxsons.

Now, LaVilla's social structure was practically complete. Through the hard work and education of Black men and women, their businesses and firms were able to flourish in Jacksonville. By serving Black customers specifically, they were able to create safe havens for themselves. It was the Black-owned grocers, saloons, laundromats, and countless other establishments that solidified LaVilla as a place where Blacks could work and succeed without having to experience the humiliation and potential danger that came with working in racially charged, predominately white environments. The prosperous economy helped grow the wealth of the community, and the personal fortunes of a few.

It was through the hard work of the Methodist and Baptist Churches, and the social welfare services organized and funded by Eartha White and the Clara White Mission, that the community was able to provide for its struggling members. The ingenuity, determination, courage, and unrelentless spirit of LaVilla helped define it and its inhabitants as a shining example of Black success in Jim Crow South. Despite all the odds, Jacksonville, the "one-hundred percent cracker town", according to James Weldon Johnson, was able to witness the rise and celebration of Florida's most successful Black neighborhood.[105] LaVilla offers unique insight into Black southern life, not only for its achievements and early development, but for its massive contribution to Black culture and the larger American experience. The physical safety

[105] James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson*. 32.

offered by an all-Black community combined with the economic safety of a thriving economy allowed LaVilla residents to spend their money with increased confidence. Their leisure and entertainment offerings are represented of their own agency, their own purchasing power. LaVilla's cultural successes are directly tied to its Black economic vitality, making the neighborhood known throughout the state as the "Harlem of the South".

## Chapter Three

### LaVilla's Golden Age

No other art form demonstrated the depth, emotion, and vibrancy of LaVilla's people than the music. Music poured out of every corner and window, from family lessons, high school bands, juke joints, and traveling acts. It is through these musical creations one can get a true insight into the emotion and routines of the leading Black community in Florida. LaVilla encapsulated these experiences of Southern urban life perfectly: its foundation was laid in the ashes of slavery, it found its footing in the short period of Black political domination of the Reconstruction, it was home to countless weary wanderers passing through railroad towns, and most of all, it continued to grow and flourish within and despite of the hatred and vitriol of Jim Crow.

Music brought the community together in a joint expression of celebration, grief, and humanity, from restless wanderers searching for fame and success to grandmothers singing alongside their grandchildren in the Sunday choir. The economic generation of the nightclubs and dance halls in LaVilla helped build the careers of countless performers, promoters, and stage directors. Whenever a big name came to the Great Black Way, the Black community of the greater Jacksonville area visited LaVilla in droves to watch. In the South, music was not just a way to make money for oneself, but it also "provide[d] a forum wherein social and cultural changes might both be contested and constructed".[106] Music was educational too, teaching both

[106] Peter Dunbaugh Smith, "Ashley Street Blues: Racial Uplift and the Commodification of Vernacular Performance in Lavilla, Florida, 1896-1916." 22.

discipline and hard work to its students, and lessons of faith, culture, and upward mobility to its listeners.

**Sounds and Songs of the Swamp**

For generations of African Americans who were brutalized by the slave system in the American South, their songs and traditions were all they were allowed to truly own. Their songs told stories of unimaginable lament, but also hidden signs of protest, such as unwavering belief in eventual salvation and avenues to freedom, both literally and figuratively.[107] Over centuries, these musical traditions evolved into a cultural canon of works influenced by peoples from around the world. They reflected the vast diaspora of Black Africans, Caribbean Islanders, and indigenous tribes affected by the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The diversity of sonic landscapes and instrumentation varied throughout the western hemisphere, resulting in a countless array of sounds and future genres.

The musical heritage of the Black American experience is one of the greatest additions to the American cultural cannon. The music of Black America is, in essence, the music of all of America. These songs represent a fusion of old world traditions and myths with new world realities and obstacles. Nearly every modern American style features at least one contribution from this Black musical legacy. The sounds of the American South varied from the Mississippi Delta to the low country of the Carolinas, but the sound of Florida was particularly unique. The early European colonists introduced the foundations of folk music in the mid-sixteenth century, earning nearly an additional century of history and legends in comparison to the English

[107] Ronald Johnson, *North Florida Folk Music: History & Tradition* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014). 12.

Southern colonies. By the advent of the Civil War, Florida had built a distinct sound indebted to a vast array of cultures, particularly from "the Minorcans located in St. Augustine, the Cuban population in Ybor, Seminoles from the Everglades and the African Americans dispersed throughout".[108]

These sounds are reflected most clearly in the "sailing songs" that were sung by the enslaved riverboat drivers that worked on the Saint Johns River. These long and mournful tunes were hummed alongside the wildlife of the Florida swamp. In 1884, Englishman and orange plantation owner Frederick Delius fell in love with the music of Jacksonville's riverbeds, and "never forgot the singing as he heard it, day or night, carried sweet and clear across the water whenever a steam-ship passed".[109] Within two years, Delius had returned to Europe, dedicating his life to becoming a composer. Although brief, his stay in northeastern Florida and introduction to the semi-tropical wildlife and the boatmen's lilting four-layered harmonies defined his career forever. His first work, *Florida Suite*, published in 1886, is credited as introducing sounds "redolent of Negro hymnology and folk-song…not heard before in the orchestra, and seldom since".[110] For the rest of his career, he continued to incorporate the stylization and chord progressions that he had stolen from his slaves echoing through the low flying haze of humidity, obscuring their memory from the record for the sake of his legacy.[111]

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[108] Johnson. 37

[109] William Randel, "Frederick Delius in America," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 79, no. 3 (1971): 346.

[110] Donal Henahan, "Music View; He Served as the 'Pilot Fish' for Frederick Delius," *The New York Times*, June 28, 1981.

[111] Randel, "Frederick Delius in America." 352.

**Spirituals in LaVilla**

One of the most foundational aspects of the Black musical tradition is the inclusion of spiritual traditions. Although the songs include spiritual themes from the African and Caribbean traditions, the majority are heavily built upon Christian messages and biblical themes of promised lands and eternal freedom in the afterlife. These spirituals served as Black oral history, offering a body of collective knowledge and identity passed down through the generations and across the plantations. After emancipation, these spirituals and slave songs served as the foundation of the music used in the Black churches. From the infancy of the Methodist churches in Jacksonville, choirs were integral to services. In 1867, the Mt. Zion Church assembled the first of LaVilla's countless choirs, despite not having a permanent structure to hold their services, emphasizing the linked nature of faith and song.[112] From the infancy of the Methodist churches in Jacksonville, choirs were heavily featured in services. Less than two months later, three more Black churches were featuring choral performances that "delighted our citizens with entertainment, musical, and dramatic performances".[113]

In the same way that these houses of worship functioned as the backbone of LaVilla's familial and faithful communities, they were the birthplace of an unmeasurable number of musicians. Advertisements throughout the nineteenth century installments of the *Florida Times-Union* are littered with invitations for diverse ranges of choirs and musical ensembles. Children's choirs were popular, alongside various all female chorale groups. For many, churches served as the first introduction to the beauty of music and the technical aspects of performance. Additionally, these choral groups served as social events and gathering places for their members

[112] Foster and Foster, "The Last Shall Be First." 278.

[113] "Local Voices," *Florida Times Union*, June 8, 1867.

and audiences at regular performances. These concerts were also a significant factor in maintaining the expenses of the church. Fundraisers were a continual excuse for concerts and free performances heavily encouraged donations to the hosting congregation.

As LaVilla's population began to spike alongside Jacksonville's growth in the Progressive Era, the explosion of church goers allowed for churches to begin featuring traveling performances. Many of them were strictly spiritual, typically performed by another church or spiritual ensemble. But the AME and Mt. Zion churches were also known to host performances of different operas and classical vocalists, viewing themselves as curators of character enriching and intellectually stimulating events. Advertisements boasted of soloists, symphonies, and ballets that were worthy of comparison to European companies. The continual influx of tourists guaranteed a consistent ticket base for events, and the impressive acts featured in LaVilla helped maintain church charities that maintained the neighborhood's makeshift social services network.

**Music as an Educational Tool**

The original schools established by the Florida Freedmen's Bureau were lacking in all aspects, making musical education difficult at first. But Black students were granted a brief flash of luck under the historically difficult Superintendent Alfred J. Russel, who believed that song was the purest and simplest form of communication. In his 1868 address to the Florida Senate, he requested that musical instruction to be included in the budgetary plans for Black schools across the state.[114] Facing a white social environment where Black intellectualism was constantly ridiculed and undermined, parents used music education to further distinguish their children, to

[114] Cochran, *History of the Public School Education in Florida*. 49.

help them assert themselves as equal in talent and capacity. Black families viewed as musical education as an addition tool to push against the high barrier of entry leveled against Black individuals, making it integral regardless of the expenses and time necessitated. There was intense pressure to not only succeed in their academic field and profession, but in the particulars of fashionable and intellectual taste in music.

Through these lessons, parents hoped to lessen the white community's racist assumptions of ignorance. The pressure to present oneself as worthy enough for respect from whites and the Black elite vacationing from the North would define LaVilla's cultural education for nearly a century. In a community-run column from the 1950s in the *Florida Times-Union* Black Star edition, author Jay Jay continually pleads for parents to monitor their children's recreational time and types of media consumption. He argues that "schools [should] realize how student presentations of operas, art shows, and lectures will help to raise the cultural level of the student body as a whole… It is a fact that while our students are equal to white students in "the Three R's" we lag far behind in areas such as music and art appreciation and the humanities".[115]

Knowledge of the opera, poetry, and the like was an especially useful social skill for the Black middle class. The Black social class structure, while nearly universally divided among comparative economic sections as the white Jacksonville community, was rather permeable due to the infancy of the Black economy and consumer base. Unlike the elite Black families in the North, LaVilla's freedmen originally avoided distinguishing themselves by familial legacy or generational wealth.[116] Therefore, LaVilla's first wealthy Black individuals were either self-made entrepreneurs, role models within the community, or the Black intellectuals working in law

[115] Jay Jay, "Chips Off the Blocks," *Florida Times Union*, April 12, 1956, Black Star edition.

[116] Foster and Foster, "The Last Shall Be First." 278.

or activism.[117] Members of the Black elite classes welcomed individuals from lesser backgrounds in order to encourage the possibility of upward mobility. The diverse background of the intellectual and economic leaders showed the strengthening of the Black community at large. Education in the finer aspects of life such as poetry, classical literature, and the ballet, was a vital component of this elite class; wealth was won and lost extremely easily in the new and emerging evolving economies of the South, but sophistication and class would persist as a marker of a refined and dignified individual.

From the opening of the Stanton School, music, band, and orchestra classes were offered, and within its first ten years would boast nationally recognized Black musical ensembles.[118] Helen Johnson was just one of many mothers who sang in the various church choirs of the Baptist and Methodist communities and offered private instructions on piano, guitar, and voice. There was an abundance of musical literacy in the homes of LaVilla, allowing for both personal and communal advancements, but also consistent streams of income for working Black women. LaVilla's proliferation of artists spanned all age, gender, and socioeconomic classifications, resulting in a city that hummed with musical innovation and celebrated the legacy and lifestyle of generations of Black musicians. For nearly a century, LaVilla was a mandatory stop for the finest of America's Black artists, spanning all genres and all walks of life. Although the melodies have long gone silent, LaVilla's iconic guestbooks and playbills serve as a record of the Black experience, sung by Black artists and sung exclusively to Black Americans.

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[117] Kenney, "LaVilla, Florida, 1866-1887: Reconstruction Dreams and the Formation of a Black Community." 205.

[118] Noelle Morrissette, *James Weldon Johnson's Modern Soundscapes* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013), 41.

**The Music of LaVilla's Favorite Sons**

The Johnson family enjoyed a rather prominent role in their local society, greatly aided by James Johnson, Sr.'s position as the head waiter at the St. James Hotel. The St. James was known throughout the country for its gorgeous ballroom designed by Henry Flagler and boasted glamourous balls and galas throughout the winter season, attracting wealthy Northerners looking for a reprieve from their harsh weather. The hotel was one of the first tourist attractions in the Jacksonville area and advertised itself as the 'oasis of winter wonderland'.[119] As a child, Weldon Johnson visited his father regularly, dining alongside prominent guests and being treated to performances from nationally recognized Black Union Regiments such as the Key West Cornet Band and the Union Brass Band.

At home, music served as the bedrock of the family life and daily activity. The elder Johnsons had met in New York, when James happened to watch a choral concert sponsored by Christ Church. A bright-eyed Helen Louise caught his eye, and her beautiful soprano voice distinguished her musical ability from the other members on stage. The two began their courtship shortly after, and Helen continued to sing throughout her life as a newly-wed and a mother. When the couple moved to Jacksonville, they brought with them an upright piano, which Helen used to provide piano lessons on for both her children and others in the neighborhood. For years, her living room hosted lessons for future legends like Eartha White and Pat Chapelle.[120] Her talent as a teacher inspired her to take a position at the community-founded Stanton School, becoming the first Black female educator in the entire state of Florida. James and Helen raised

[119] Crooks, "Changing Face of Jacksonville, Florida," 194.

[120] Canter Brown, "'The Art of Gathering a Crowd': Florida's Pat Chappelle and the Origins of Black-Owned Vaudeville." 32.

their two sons, James Weldon, born 1871, and J. Rosamond, born 1873, in a modest home located on the edge of LaVilla proper.

As young adults, the brothers fell in love with the opera and with composing their own songs. In 1890 at the age of 17, J. Rosamond moved to Boston to study at the New England Conservatory. After completing his studies, he joined forces with Bob Cole, a Black composer brimming with potential. Together, they founded the American Oriental Opera Company, which became the first black company to perform on Broadway and West End in London.[121] While J. Rosamond was building his industry connections and composing talents, his brother James was enrolled in Atlanta to become a lawyer. But upon completing his law schooling in Atlanta, James moved to New York after graduation in order to join his brother at the company. The brothers were also joined by their childhood friends from LaVilla, Estelle Doresey, a controto, and the lyrical soprano and future humanitarian Eartha White.[122]

The American Oriental Opera Company toured with two shows, a dramatic play and a set of classical vocal pieces. J. Rosamond was most proud of his play, titled *XYZ*, told the story of a Black waiter named Johnson who labored tirelessly at a Floridian resort, only to acquire enough wealth to purchase the property for himself. Although the plot appeared similar to the Johnson patriarch, it was one of many contemporary plays that centered around social upheaval resulting from Black men in positions of power over white men. This was a threat to the social order built by slavery and maintained through Jim Crow. The Johnson brothers wanted to strip the parody and caricature from the Black characters, endowing them instead with fully realized motivations

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[121] Michael Nowlin, "James Weldon Johnson's 'Black Manhattan' and the Kingdom of American Culture," *African American Review* 39, no. 3 (2005): 317.

[122] Peter Dunbaugh Smith, "Ashley Street Blues: Racial Uplift and the Commodification of Vernacular Performance in Lavilla, Florida, 1896-1916." 4.

and capacity. Contemporary white composers relied on stock stereotypes of Black characters, and the white audiences of Broadway never thought to protest or question such portrayals. As their careers and skills progressed, the pair continued to "reappropriate popular Black cultural…self-consciously introducing uplifting African American themes and styles within an economic framework that was defined by white theatrical tradition".[123]

While in Europe, J. Rosamond found himself surrounded by musical genius the likes of himself. Since childhood, John dreamed of hearing his songs on popular radio, but Black composers were not welcome in the producing circles. Undeterred, John used his connections in Europe to form a relationship with the premier American popular composer, Bob Cole. Together, the two men found success through the "syncopated ragtime aspect of coon songs, while James explored the lyrical possibilities of a more dignified use of Black dialect".[124]

Together, the two were able to create some of the best-selling albums of the era, using Cole's lyricism Although J. Rosamond's affinity for ragtime was viewed as the biggest barrier into the music industry, it was his ragtime songs that resonated the most with the general population. These creations earned number one positions across national radio. Alongside popular music, the duo also collaborated on various operettas and longform works. Rosamond's opera, title *XYZ*, is largely accepted as the first all-Black show to be performed in London. The critical acclaim combined with the artistic ingenuity of the pieces should cement Rosamond into the canon of influential Black artists, yet his achievements are all too quickly overlooked for the sake of his brother's legend.

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[123] Peter Dunbaugh Smith. 13.

[124] Morrissette, *James Weldon Johnson's Modern Soundscapes*, 2013. 32.

**A Song for LaVilla and All Like Her**

Despite this, the two brothers share equal credit in perhaps the most important cultural offering from LaVilla's musicians, through the song "Lift Evr'y Voice and Sing". As the dawn of the twentieth century grew ever closer, James Weldon Johnson wrote a poem of hope for the new era, one where the shackles and scars of slavery would be left forgotten to the 1800s. Looking around his hometown of LaVilla, Johnson was struck at the amount of human potential residing in his neighborhood and in his student body at the Stanton Normal School. Inspired by the depth of their perseverance, James Weldon crafted a short poem in 1898.[125] A few short months later, John Rosamond determined that the text would be all the more powerful if accompanied with music and composed a simple tune reminiscent of the worship songs they sang at their Mt. Zion Church.

This song was not a song of lament, regret, or grief. It was not a song of pessimism in the face of the ruin and racism experienced in LaVilla that day. It was not quite a popular song, yet it was not a hymn. If anything, the two created a universal prayer, an assertion of hope in the defiance of complete destruction. In the words of the author, it was just another example of "song and dance acting as both a sword and as a sheaf for the Negro".[126] But in reality, it was an expression of hope and faith in the most universal wording that all could understand. The first verse is reminiscent of other patriotic hymns, professing the idealistic vision of the American dream. The lyrics, pure and powerful, cry out:

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[125] James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson*. 41.

[126] Wilfried Raussert, "Sounds of Freedom, Cosmopolitan Democracy, and Shifting Cultural Politics: From 'The Jazz Ambassador Tours' to 'The Rhythm Road,'" in *Politics and Cultures of Liberation*, ed. Hans Bak, Frank Mehring, and Mathilde Roza, vol. 7, Media, Memory, and Projections of Democracy (Brill, 2018), 198.

*"Lift evr'y voice and sing / til Earth and Heaven ring /*
*Ring with the harmonies of Liberty*
*Let our rejoicing rise high as the skies / Let it resound loud as the rolling sea /*
*Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us /*
*Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us /*
*Facing the rising sun of our new day begun /*
*Let us march on 'til victory is won*[127]

But the second verse reveals the true nature of the piece: to share and find companionship through the depth of pain and history of loss that defines the Black American experience. The words pay homage to the scars of lost ancestors and acknowledge the sheer exhaustion that comes from the unescapable legacy of slavery. The Johnson brothers created space to lament the historical suffering passed down through generations, crying out:

*Stony the road we trod / Bitter the chast'ning rod /*
*Felt in the day that hope unborn had died /*
*Yet with a steady beat / Have not our weary feet /*
*Come to the place on which our fathers sighed /*
*We have come over a way that with tears has been watered /*
*We have come / treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered /*
*Out from the gloomy past / till now we stand at last /*
*Where the white gleam of our star is cast.*

The third verse concludes the song with a final prayer for reprieve and the long-awaited fulfilment of God's promised salvation and freedom. Faith is a form of protection from the dangers of both temptations, and from the indiscriminate violence wielded against Black bodies. The closing lines strike at the bitter irony of the Black American experience; despite having to live in a land filled with racism, violence, and grief due to the United States, its government, and its people, there remains an unwavering love- or pursuit of such a feeling- for their country. The closing verse asserts the Black community's ownership of the American identity, their birthright to the land and to a brighter future:

[127] "Lift Every Voice and Sing | NAACP," accessed March 14, 2022.

*God of our weary years / God of our silent tears /*
*Thou who has brought us thus far on the way /*
*Thou who has by thy might / Led us into the light /*
*Keep us forever in the path we pray /*
*Lest our feet stray from the places / our God where we met Thee /*
*Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee /*
*Shadowed beneath Thy hand / May we forever stand /*
*True to our God / True to our native land.*

The song's debut was held in LaVilla during the celebrations for Lincoln's Birthday on February 12th, 1900. The festival was a highpoint of the year for the Black community, organized by Eartha M. White and praised by the NAACP as a premier example of Black patriotism in the South.[128] The song was performed by five hundred hundred members of the Stanton School choir, under the direction of J. Rosamond. This group of children were the only Black students in Florida with the mere possibility of earning a high school education, serving as the potential future Black leaders of the new millennium. The performance was an immediate success, quickly becoming a standard for Sunday services. In the 1930s, the song served as inspiration for Augusta Savage, a Jacksonville-based Black sculptor. The resulting piece, *The Harp (Lift Evr'y Voice)*, utilizes a line of figures fitted into an upraised hand, forming an organic harp, one instrument of voices united in song. The work is often cited as the finest sculpture produced during the Harlem Renaissance and was featured as the only commissioned piece by a Black female artist in the 1939 New York World's Fair.[129]

The song incapsulates the universal struggle for freedom and salvation that lies at the heart of all Black American culture. The usage of 'evr'y' rather than 'your' is perhaps the most defining aspect of the song: it demands that all people work for freedom, because true, divine

[128] "UNF - Thomas G. Carpenter Library - Eartha White Biography."

[129] Nadja Sayej, "Augusta Savage: The Extraordinary Story of the Trailblazing Artist," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2019.

freedom can only exist if all fight for it. Its simplicist lines are not a mark of a quick construction, but rather a testimony to the deliberate and powerful truth. A call for freedom should not be adorned with concessions or qualifications, for it is the most basic right of all humankind. In 1917, the song was embraced by the NAACP as the Black National Anthem, firmly establishing it as a fundamental example of American identity. Like *America the Beautiful* did in the nineteenth century, the prayer of "Lift Evr'y Voice" reflects that century's hopes for the country's improvement. With the frontier fully settled by the twentieth century, visions of spectacular nature and pursuit of golden fortunes failed to capture the public's imagination. The nation needed a new prayer, one that brought attention back to the people that had been trampled and ignored in the frenzy of American domination and was for improvement over enrichment. In the decades since, the humble song from LaVilla has become the unofficial hymn of the new America, pushing the country and its citizens to become the land of equality and freedom the United States professes to be.

**Black Owned Vaudeville**

Although the Union victory promised freedom for enslaved Black Southerners, there was little certainty about their direction and future. The freedom of movement was entwined with the universal fear of the unknown. Freedmen suddenly could fight for any role they wanted, but they were well aware that the white community was equally as unsure about the proper role for the Black community. The ashes of the antebellum system were still smoldering, and the white population eagerly embraced any opportunity that would prohibit them from the bottom rung of the new social ladder. This manifested itself throughout white spaces, particularly through entertainment. New forms embraced old racist stereotypes and guaranteed a semblance of social

safety, particularly for poor and working-class white populations. These minstrel shows utilized Black face and racist, mocking, language, features, and behaviors. These stock features evolved into caricatures like Jim Crow, Tambo, and Bones, whose inferior qualities and capacities made them the subject of mass ridicule and humiliation. The transitory nature of the minstrel shows resulted in a mix of influences and sounds from the circus, Irish and Scottish bands, and African musical rhythms and stylizations.[130] Minstrelsy popularized the instruments and melodic motifs that originated in Black American ingenuity and tradition, yet the white actors posing in blackface degraded the very people responsible for their music.

Black musicians and entrepreneurs sought to reclaim the minstrel show from white performers who mocked their very existence. Throughout the Reconstruction era, Black artists reclaimed the stage for themselves. They were able to tell their folktales and legends free of the racist and hateful content of the white minstrel show. The first successful Black touring company hailed from Jacksonville, under the direction of LaVilla native Pat Chapelle. A childhood friendship with James Weldon Johnson had exposed him to childhood guitar and piano instruction. His early adulthood was marked by early tours around the Florida Atlantic coast, creating a setlist of songs inspired by minstrel shows, circuses, and Cuban bands, resulting in the first example of Black vaudeville.[131] After accumulating enough capital, Chapelle returned to Jacksonville, establishing his center of operations at an abandoned pool hall in LaVilla.

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[130] Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Songs," and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2009): 16.

[131] Canter Brown, "'The Art of Gathering a Crowd': Florida's Pat Chappelle and the Origins of Black-Owned Vaudeville." 7.

Remodeled into the Excelsior Hall, Chapelle's theater and salon marked the first Black owned entertainment in the South.[132]

As segregation laws tightened across the South in the early 1900s, touring musicians faced increasing difficulty guaranteeing Black audiences, proper lodging, and safe avenues of traveling. When Florida law required that venues allocate separate seating for different races, Chapelle realized the difficulty of selling an adequate number of tickets. He recognized the legal loophole overlooking outdoor venues, and invested in a tent to house his vaudeville performances. These tents were cheaper than property, saving nearly $1,000 in weekly expenditures, and maintained the social dignity of hosting integrated audiences.[133] The tent's popularity exploded, and Chapelle's newly dubbed Rabbit's Foot company was soon selling out across the Southeast. However, segregation laws on the railroads offered a continual threat to the safety and success of the entire company. The company purchased private railcars to house their equipment and employees, yet still faced discrimination and suspicion from legal officials. In 1902, the Rabbit's Foot Company was stopped by the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company, demanding that they obey the segregation laws of public transit. In response, Chapelle filed a discrimination suit against the company in 1911. The Interstate Commerce Commission's ruling stated that "Negro minstrels traveling in private cars are entitled to the same treatment as white occupants of such cars," establishing Chapelle as both a savvy businessman and a civil rights advocate.[134]

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[132] Bernard L. Peterson, *Profiles of African American Stage Performers and Theatre People, 1816-1960* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001): 162.

[133] Peter Dunbaugh Smith, "Ashley Street Blues: Racial Uplift and the Commodification of Vernacular Performance in Lavilla, Florida, 1896-1916". 18.

The company swelled into a multi-tent operation and traveled across the nation, earning high praise after stays in New York, Boston, and Washington. Chapelle employed more Black men and women than any other company in the nation.[135] Although he welcomed integrated audiences, it was essential that all the performers were Black. He took great pride in his hard work, boasting that he was the "only Negro who ran a Negro show without the help of a single white man".[136] He was the largest force behind African American vaudeville, and is known as the "Black P.T. Barnum." He was able to advance the careers of countless vaudeville artists and single handedly popularized an entertainment form that celebrated and honored the Black experience. As a member of the Chapelle caravan, an artist could find financial support, a community of talented and innovating musicians, and enough peace of mind to enable experimental and creative new songs and performances.

**LaVilla as a Foundational Home for the Blues**

One of these artists was Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. During her years in the Rabbit's Foot Company, she was able to introduce a new way of expression. Her lyrics sounded more like moans, and she was billed as a "coon shouter" in her early career. But her phrases swelled with emotion and taboo themes like sensuality, motherhood, and infidelity. Her songs were low and aching with the pain and suffering of generations. Instead of using the brass circus instruments for the melody, she preferred the accompaniment of a lone guitarist or keyboard player.

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[134] "Our Musical Condition," *Negro Music Journal* 1 (March 1903): 137, quoted in Canter Brown, "'The Art of Gathering a Crowd': Florida's Pat Chappelle and the Origins of Black-Owned Vaudeville." 34.

[135] Canter Brown. 33.

[136] Frederick Davis, *History of Jacksonville, Florida, and Vicinity, 1513 to 1924* (1925; reprinted Jacksonville, 1990), 199, quoted in Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged but Right*. 63.

Although her songs were sparse, the space created filled the room with the weight and power of her emotion and voice. In 1910, Chapelle and Frank Crowd, a Black real estate investor, opened the Globe Theatre on LaVilla's Ashley Street, forming a permanent company. There, they featured Ma Rainey as the premier vocalist, who "caught the house from the go and kept them with her".[137] Rainey was the singular woman on stage, yet never submitted to the gendered expectations of the entertainment industry. Her songs crafted stories of women who "explicitly celebrate their right to conduct themselves as expansively and even as undesirably as men".[138] She would go on to record over a hundred records, earning her the moniker as "Mother of the Blues."

Although few tangible records remain of Rainey's stay in LaVilla, the influence she had on her surrounding community is evident. The sounds of the blues permeated every music hall and juke joint in LaVilla. Despite popular consciousness, the blues was not the singular creation of the Mississippi Delta; the earliest documented case of the blues was in LaVilla's own Astrodome Theatre with a Ma Rainey performance.[139] She took the success of this performance and innovation and spread it throughout the Southeast, performing at venues and tent shows alongside the Chapelle company. This diffusion led to the original spread of the blues music across the nation, yet the melodies still remained alive in their birthplace. The main drag of LaVilla, Ashley Street, was filled with juke joints and theaters where musicians experimented on the foundations of blues music set by Rainey. Unemployed musicians packed the crowds of LaVilla's theaters, ready to seize any opening that presented itself in the dozens of nightly

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[137] Sandra Lieb, *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981). 48.

[138] Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged but Right*. 72.

[139] Abbott and Seroff. 68.

performances. One such musical drifter was Blind Blake, a blues pioneer whose original records are lost to time, but influence lives on in modern guitar pick style.

Success as a musician was difficult for any Black man, let alone a blind one. Against all odds, a mysterious figure named Blind Blake found fame as a foundational member of the blues from within the venues of Ashley Street. He is assumed to have been born blind in Jacksonville, and his absence from the historical record suggests a wandering lifestyle, riding the rails to venues along the Southeast. Legend says he died a violent death in the dark corners of a LaVilla nightclub, after prompting one too many drunken brawls. His surviving catalog is scant, limited by the technological capacity of the early twentieth century. Yet his mastery is remembered through his innovative guitar skills, where he introduced the use of counterpoint melodies and alternating thumb positions.[140] Although little can be said with certainty about Blind Blake, one can reasonably assume that the insularly nature of LaVilla imposed by Jim Crow segregation offered enough resources for a disabled musician to achieve a century old legend. Of the few songs remaining from this mysterious figure, recorded by Paramount Race Records in 1927, stands above the rest as a form of autobiography:

> *On Ashley Street, / You get a smile from everyone you meet, / Makes you stroll along with happy feet and / Pass your troubles away. / Take me home / And I promise that I'll never roam, / 'Cause that's the only place I'll ever lose / These awful Jacksonville Blues.*[141]

**Those Ashley Street Blues**

[140] Andrew M. Cohen, "The Hands of Blues Guitarists," *American Music* 14, no. 4 (1996): 458.

[141] Peter Dunbaugh Smith, "Ashley Street Blues: Racial Uplift and the Commodification of Vernacular Performance in Lavilla, Florida, 1896-1916." 45.

Blind Blake was one of countless musicians whose names and contributions have been lost to the sands of memory and time. Jacksonville's position as a transportation center resulted in a new wave of searching artists arriving in the city every week. Strapped with little more than an instrument and a dream, these artists found themselves surrounded by fellow musicians, who were just as good, if not better, than themselves. This resulted in an intense atmosphere of competition and comradery that tied these artists together, forming their own insulated community from within the already segregated municipality of LaVilla. The transitory feel to Jacksonville made it a perfect stopping place for the road weary. Often, LaVilla residents would jokingly refer to the stretch of railroad leading into LaVilla as the "rail of hope" for arriving guitarists and crooners.[142] This secured a steady stream of performers, and a reliable crowd of listeners looking for a late-night reprieve from their haggard lifestyle. Both crowds frequented the juke joints of LaVilla, described by historian Robin D. G. Kelley as the "old downhome Saturday Night Function, a sort of all-night long party at which Black folk have always reclaimed themselves and their pleasures from the depredations of white racism".[143]

LaVilla was soon home to a multitude of award winning Black owned venues and theaters that attracted Black musicians and celebrities from across the nation. Jacksonville's reputation as a tourist destination, combined with the vitality and celebrity that had come from her Black population, resulted in LaVilla becoming a beacon of Black culture and success. The 1946 edition of the *Crisis* featured a seven-page spread on LaVilla's entertainment district alone. For decades, it was known as the "Great Black Way," with performances and lights dazzling

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[142] "LaVilla: Blind Blake Walking, West Ashley Street," June 17, 2012.

[143] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994): 43, quoted in Adam. Gussow, *Seems like Murder Here : Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2002). 46.

enough to rival Broadway's Great White Way in New York. Although long forgotten, LaVilla in her heyday was home to enough tunes and dreams that it was considered just as important a musical center as Memphis and New Orleans. Of the many venues, perhaps none were as beloved as the Duck Inn, located on the corner of Ashley and Laura Street.

The Duck Inn was the first of a chain of properties belonging to the Jacksonville entertainment mogul James Craddock and boasted visits from Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, and countless others. LaVilla residents remember the Duck Inn with great warmth, calling it "more than a hangout. It was a place where fellow of good cheer got together and exchanged ideas…many of the younger fellows who are successful to day had an older around the Duck Inn as his ideal and he tried to follow in his footsteps".[144] Everyone visited the LaVilla joints on the weekends, from young high schoolers, professional leaders, grandparents, and church congregation members. From the 1940s to the late 1950s, venues like the Two Spot, the Strand, and the Genovor's Hall often hosted Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Charles; names recognizable to white audiences, but with shows open exclusively for Black patrons. *Around the Block with Jay Jay*, LaVilla's serialized social column published within the *Florida Times-Union*, remembers weekly events worthy of recount. One such concert, performed by Duke Ellington at the Duval Armory, is remembered in the following column:

> "Aw chile, but the joint really rocked and rolled. They had to be talking about the big shing dig at the Armory which featured Duke Ellington and his aggregation. Everyone in town was on the scene and dug the happenings. The band rocked and rolled and we sweated and stomped thru four hours of sweltering madness. The upper left side of the balcony as per usual was celebrity row and the professionals of Jax turned out en masse".[145]

[144] Jay Jay, "Chips off the Blocks," *Florida Times Union*, March 16, 1952, Black Star edition.

[145] Jay Jay, "Chips Off the Blocks." *Florida Times Union,* August 14, 1954, Black Star edition.

**Preserving LaVilla's Music**

Some of these sounds and stories were eventually compiled by the Federal Music Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The team was directed by folklorist and future titan of Black literature, Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston grew up in Eatonville, the nation's oldest all-Black town located outside of Orlando, but relocated to Jacksonville after her mother's death in 1904. Her father refused to adopt her or finance a stay boarding school, so at the age of twelve, Hurston found herself working odd jobs in Jacksonville. Discarded from the safety of Eatonville, she was introduced to the hatred of racism, remembering how Jacksonville took every opportunity to "remind [her] that she was just a little colored girl".[146] Eventually, she found herself living in New York at the height of the Harlem Renaissance. After failing to find success through her literary works, she turned to anthropology to analyze, understand, and celebrate the nuances of Black culture and art. Early critical acclaim came with the publication of *Mules and Men* in 1935, which was an anthropological work combining the traditions of African folklore with a scathing critique of the racial and sexual violence wielded by the white lumber profiteers in Northern Florida.

As a member of the WPA, Hurston assisted in compiling nearly four hundred different recordings of folksongs, tales, spirituals, and soundbites of Floridian daily life. The Negro Office was housed in the Clara White Mission, placing LaVilla as the backdrop for the categorization of contemporary Black life and the primary archival evidence for Floridian slave narratives.[147] Hurston was able to paint intimate and somewhat magical representations of the different shades that defined Floridan folk music and the Floridian Black experience that far exceed the scope of

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[146] Zora Neale Hurston, *Go Gator and Muddy the Water* (Norton, 1999), 37.

[147] Gary R. Mormino, "Florida Slave Narratives," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (1988): 309.

this paper. Without her contributions, research on antebellum and Reconstruction Florida would be left to secondary sources and biased assumptions. The historical debt owed to Hurston is staggering, but did not go completely unrecognized in her lifetime. A short recording, capturing the first interviews held in the mission, records the following prayer of Eartha White: "Lord, thank you for giving mankind the intelligence to make such a marvelous machine, and for people and a President who cares about preserving the songs that our people sing".[148]

[148] M. Alene Murrell, *Zora Neale Hurston In and Around Jacksonville, FL in the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's* (Lulu.com, 2011). 32.

## Conclusion

### The Way the Music Died

The post-World War II era revolutionized the state of Florida, turning it from a sleepy tropical destination into the center of aerospace exploration, population booms, and a home to a mixture of cultures and people unlike anything in the United States. Jacksonville experienced a similar upheaval in changing population densities and political ideologies. Many Black Americans departed LaVilla and the greater Jacksonville area for the Northern United States, joining the masses of the Second Great Migration. Jacksonville's Naval Air Station became integral to the US's Cold War strategy, becoming one of the largest employers of the city. Mayport, located fifteen miles north of Jacksonville, also expanded its Naval presence, resulting in a near 20% of Jacksonville's population offering some connection or experience in the armed forces.[149] The great number of veterans meant that Jacksonville needed to secure housing for more nuclear families, resulting in an ever-expanding suburban crawl, beginning at the downtown center and extending for nearly a twenty mile radius. As the population density further migrated outwards, the businesses and small shops located in the downtown district suffered economic downturn. However, the influx of wealth in the transportation and shipping centers motivated the city to develop its waterfront and municipalities further, opening up previously established communities to the hawkish and opportunistic eyes of real estate developers.

Like many other urban Black centers, LaVilla was targeted by an onslaught of propaganda under the guise of 'urban renewal'. All Black communities, especially those with

[149] James B. Crooks, *Jacksonville: The Consolidation Story, From Civil Rights To The Jaguars*, Florida History and Culture 26 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005): 248.

higher percentages of poverty and unskilled labor, were painted as ghettos riddled with crime, drugs, and dangerous influences to their pure white neighbors. In 1950, the Florida Theatre, located in the heart of the white urban center, featured a new film, entitled *The Slum Heart of Jacksonville*. The opening screen card reads: "Your city, Gateway to Florida, Potential Metropolis of the Southeast", followed by shots of Jacksonville's premier hotels, neighborhoods, and courthouses. This continues for two minutes, until the screen darkens to read: "But if its heart is bad…". Immediately, the film cuts to visceral images of poverty, filth, and scenes from shantytowns inhabited by Black individuals. Although these scenes were not taken from LaVilla, the directors interspersed the scenes with images of Jacksonville landmarks, promoting the audience to assume the footage was authentic.[150] The propaganda piece was pushing for a general erasure of these slum towns, a forceful eradication and return to the decency of white Jacksonville society.[151]

LaVilla quickly became a victim to these forces, and as more viable housing options opened in further suburbs, the wealthier residents retreated from the once central neighborhood. After the end of segregation in Florida, some upper-class Blacks felt required to leave the more working-class Black neighborhoods, in order to assert their position as true and equal members of the middle class.[152] LaVilla's nightlight reputation, while praised in the Black community, was seen as a den of drugs, gambling, and prostitution to the white community. The celebration of Black musicianship and showmanship was seen as degrading and dangerous to the culture as a whole. Throughout the 1950s, the *Florida Times-Union* was littered with headlines like "Rock

[150] "Slum Heart of Jacksonville: Institutional Racism, 1950's Style | Jax Examiner," July 25, 2021.

[151] "Slum Heart of Jacksonville."

[152] Gary R. Mormino, "Sunbelt Dreams and Altered States: A Social and Cultural History of Florida, 1950-2000," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2002): 5.

'N' Roll is a Dangerous NAACP Plot!", souring public opinion of these successful venues, concert halls, and musicians. As properties opened up, they were seized by investors and the government in one of the most damning acts against LaVilla's possibility of recovery.

In 1959, Dwight D. Eisenhower and his Congress approved the plans for the International Highway System despite the controversy arising from the need to destroy historic neighborhoods for the sake of continuous, coast to coast freeways. The construction program was met with sporadic resistance and protests across the country yet faced little resistance from white Floridian voters. In dense urban areas such as Miami, Orlando, and Jacksonville, politicians advertised the highway system as "slum clearing projects" that would remove the waste for the benefit and convenience of the suburban commuter.[153] Interstate 1-95 was planned to run parallel to highway US 1, connecting the Atlantic coast from Maine to Miami. Its construction was responsible for the destruction of helpless towns and communities that stood in its path, legalized through claims of eminent domain and infrastructure development. Jacksonville's physical and interpersonal shuffling of boundaries and neighborhoods during the construction of the interstate is just one of these stories.

While the construction project stretched through several neighborhoods in Jacksonville, few communities suffered as much as LaVilla. The implementation of I-95 not only forced residents out of their homes, but it divided many workers from their easy access to the railroads and shipyards. Laborers could no longer walk to their shift, motivating them to relocate closer to employment. Many who worked at the railroads would find their steady position slowly phased out, as the implantation of the highway system negated the massive need for rail transportation.

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[153] Evan P. Bennett, "Highways to Heaven or Roads to Ruin? The Interstate Highway System and the Fate of Starke, Florida," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (2000): 457.

The eventual closing of the Jacksonville Line and Terminal left LaVilla without any major industry or employer within its borders. The economic security that had allowed LaVilla to develop into a tourist attraction was now in question.

The clubs and theatres that dominated LaVilla's nightlife for the entirety of the twentieth century began to lose their shine and glamor by the 1960s. LaVilla's wealthiest patrons left the area during the interstate project, creating a dwindling audience. Those remaining in LaVilla were less likely to have the purchasing power to enjoy frequent nights out, only exacerbating the problems experienced by former mainstays like the Two Spot and the Duck Inn. As the patron bases shrunk, concerts and events became less frequent. Working musicians began to leave to find steadier gigs in different neighborhoods or cities altogether. The music of this era reflects the shifting sense of identity and home in America, as genres converged and spawned new forms and stylizations. Music histories attribute the rise of soul music to this era, viewing soul as the synthesis of the religious gospel, mournful blues, and ingenious rhythms and syncopation of jazz.[154] Soul was both counterculture and the ordinary, boasting artists who carved out representation for the Black America in the Civil Rights era.

Often, soul is marked as the first time white Americans embraced Black music in the popular culture. However, this statement discredits the generations of inspiration and ingenuity of Black artists who found their work and creation stolen and discredited by white producers and audiences. Black success and cultural contribution in this country has been a part of American music throughout the entirety of its history. But the popularization of soul marked the first time that white audiences, en mass, were willing to seek out and support Black artists and their songs.

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[154] Robert Palmer and Robert Palmer, "The 50s: A Decade of Music That Changed the World," *Rolling Stone* (blog), April 19, 1990.

The generation obsessed with Elvis Presley and his swinging hips were eager to consumer the music and culture that their parents hated. Black music was rebellious, but most importantly, it was cool. It rocked and rolled and was embraced by American youth with open arms.

The white producers and entertainment moguls that had long spurned Black acts understood that by failing to promote performers like Billie Holliday and Ray Charles, they were losing significant revenue streams and the pulse of cultural consciousness. By booking Black artists, they could guarantee a young crowd eager to spend away their money and Saturday nights. Suddenly, they were in competition with the Black owned venues and halls that depended on Black acts and performances. The Black entertainment moguls, such as James Craddock in LaVilla, were now contending against the strongest bankrolls in Hollywood and New York City. For the entity of Jim Crow, they had been immune to this threat. The rise of the Chittlin Circuit and the ubiquity of the *'Green Book'*, a list of Black owned establishments in the Southeast, gave Black entertainment venues a sense of safety. If a Black musician was nearby, they were more than likely to stay at the Black venue and hall. The slow end of segregation lead to a slow demise of these routes of Black owned entertainment. Musicians were no longer restricted to the list included in the *Green Book*, free to stay and perform at whatever establishment they pleased.

By the 1970s, the loss of guaranteed revenue had taken hold of the Chitlin Circuit, and nearly half of the once esteemed venues had shuttered their doors. In Jacksonville, the Two Spot and Manuel's Tap Room closed their doors in the first years of 1970, citing the inability to secure acts and audiences.[155] The once grand Roosevelt Hotel, the favorite stay of Louis Armstrong during LaVilla's golden age, devolved into a dilapidated motel with infrequent

[155] "The Lost Theatres of LaVilla - Metro Jacksonville," accessed March 2, 2022.

clientele. Roosevelt's glory days faded when the Black elite became eligible to stay at the white institutions such as the St. James downtown. No longer restricted to the segregated establishments, the more well-off minds of LaVilla's community dedicated themselves to proving their right to penetrate sophisticated and elite white spaces. While this demonstrated the Black community's agency and desire to imbed themselves in the existing social structure, the unintended consequences of this act are still felt today. Without Black income and purchasing power pouring back into the Black owned establishments, restaurants, and venues, there was no way for these Black businesses to compete on the suddenly equal playing field with their white counterparts.

LaVilla's rare story of success in the face of Jim Crow does not mean that it was a paradise of happiness and satisfaction with the Black experience in America. Rather, its achievements show the remarkable and unwavering fight to secure a better position and future for its residents. LaVilla's vitality stood in direct contrast with the evil bitterness of the racist white community in Jacksonville. The "100% cracker town" that James Weldon Johnson first recognized in the turn of the century had only grown in its political power and violent hatred. This racism was so embedded in every aspect of Jacksonville that the monumental passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was no seismic event. The legal victory did little to change the reality of life for Black Jaxsons. Jacksonville today still bears the scars of slavery and the shame of the Reconstruction failure. Its bridges and parks are named after Klansmen, its streets and statues honor the Confederate leaders.[156] Churches kept their congregation limited to a particular portion of God's children, and school children in Jacksonville remained in segregated schools until as

[156] James B. Crooks, *Jacksonville: The Consolidation Story:* 216.

late as 1971.[157] Meanwhile, the white real estate and industry owners in Jacksonville continued to reap the benefits of deliberately stunted competition from their Black counterparts.

While the KKK reached its height of popularity in the years following 1915's *Birth of a Nation*, the terrorist and racist organization was felt in Jacksonville throughout the entirety of the twentieth century. Florida, like the rest of the Southeast, was home to decades of Klan terrorist action and violence. Jacksonville experienced decades of ballot harassment, lynches, bombs, and other unspeakable crimes during the Jim Crow Era, placing the city under a haze of fear and suspicion of one's neighbors. The KKK was an open secret in the city, with members holding political and economic positions of power in the white community. In 1949, Fuller Warren, a Jacksonville native and standing Florida governor, publicly admitted to being a Klansman in the past, to minimal backlash. During the 1950s, Jacksonville taxpayers voted on seven new names for (all white) schools, each ending as either a Confederate or Klansman. The Klan hosted parades down Bay Street, the main avenue in the white downtown districts throughout the 1950s and 1960s.[158]

As the Civil Rights movement grew national media attention and momentum in the post war era, it was paired with a rise in violent racist extremism. When NAACP leaders or activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in the city, the KKK would host opposing rallies terrorizing the activists. Often, these rallies were protected by the Jacksonville police department, preventing any counteraction from stopping the rallies. J. B. Stoner, a Klan leader and rally organizer, bragged that the Klan was put up in the finest accommodations while staying

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[157] Olga Balderas, "The Complex Legacy of School Desegregation in Duval County: Mims v. Duval County School Board, 329 F. Supp. 123 (M.D. Fla. 1971)," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 92, no. 2 (2013): 216.

[158] Stetson Kennedy and David Pilgrim, *The Klan Unmasked: With a New Introduction by David Pilgrim and a New Author's Note* (University of Alabama Press, 2011, 12.

in Jacksonville and St. Augustine in the 1963 summer.[159] The *Florida Times Union* reported that in September 1963, "about 500s persons, some 50 of them in flowing, hooded white robes of the South's oldest secret society, burned a 15-foot cross and sang 'Dixie' and the 'Old Rugged Cross'" at the Jacksonville Imeson Airport. These rallies were held consistently at the airport, earning the area the nickname "Kapital of the KKK".[160]

One of Jacksonville's most infamous days came at the height of the Civil Rights movement, in the host summer heat of August 1960. LaVilla residents were actively supporting the Civil Rights movements, hosting NAACP mass meetings in the Bethel and Mt. Zion churches. These weekly events were nearly always at capacity, with pews filled with grandparents, teachers, students, and all walks of life. The NAACP Youth Council was particularly active in LaVilla, organizing a series of demonstrations against segregation. The president of the chapter, Rodney L. Hurst, was a LaVilla native and twenty-year old during the heigh of the demonstrations. Later, he would go on to publish a personal account of the events of the summer, as well as several historical works on Jacksonville's Black history and achievements.

Under the leadership of Hurst, the Youth NAACP chapter group visited white churches, grocery stores, and most crucially, downtown lunch counters at the major department stores. Their mission was to hurt the revenue generated by the institutions maintaining segregation, operating under the assumption that economic loss takes precedence over political or ideological loss. Although there were other activist groups working at this time, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the majority of demonstrations in Jacksonville

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[159] "J.B. Stoner : Transcribed Interview," accessed March 31, 2022.

[160] "J.B. Stoner and the KKK," May 29, 2017.

were under the direction of the NAACP. According to Hurst, those in the movement "consider Jacksonville an 'NAACP' town, because of the long-standing relationship and respect held for the organization".[161] Jacksonville's NAACP held much respect for James Weldon Johnson, who had fought for LaVilla's freedom and equality a generation earlier. Hurst recounts how no meeting would conclude until the crowd sang their native hymn, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing".[162]

During 1960, Jacksonville activists focused their attention on the segregation practices of Woolworth, the largest department store in Jacksonville. Located along Laura Street, Woolworth looked out over the Confederate Soldier Statue that lived in the center of Jacksonville's Hemming Park. The store offered shopping, a lunch counter, and a coffee house, with separate counters and hours for white and Black patrons. The students and activists began to sit down at the white counter, which while peaceful, "was deemed a violent confrontation to the racial comfort system in the South".[163] The first sit-in was rather uneventful, apart from a few snarky comments of waitresses refusing to take the student's orders or money. Hurst remembers Mr. Woolworth, the owner of the establishment, a polite and somewhat friendly individual who blamed his segregation practices on the preferences of his white customers, not personal ideology. For the next week, student NAACP members continued to sit at the counter without service. Other adult NAACP members called 'trouble-spotters' watched over the demonstrations, keeping their children safe from the white mobs and law enforcement.

Despite these efforts, violence broke out on August 27th, 1960, in a day remembered as "Axe Handle Saturday" in Jacksonville. Hurst remembers the first signs of trouble from early

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[161] Hurst, *It Was Never About a Hotdog and a Coke*. 31.

[162] Hurst. 14.

[163] Hurst. 37.

that morning; white men in Confederate uniforms milled around Hemming Park, carrying axe handles and bats. Off the corner of Duval and Hogan streets, a white van was parked, emblazoned with a sign reading "Free Axe Handles".[164] Despite this threat and intimidation, the Youth Council unanimously voted to continue with the lunch counter sit ins, this time directed at W. T. Grant Department store, a smaller establishment along Adams Street. However, after the demonstrators took their seats at the white counter, employees cut the lights and closed the entire establishment. As the Youth Council exited the store, they were faced with a nightmarish scene: a mob of nearly 200 white men, swinging ax handles and baseball bats, running straight for them. Chaos broke out as the mob converged, brutally attacking the fleeing Black students. The violence was indiscriminate, leaving the demonstrators and Black bystanders viciously bloodied and bruised. *Life Magazine* published one of the most visceral images on its front cover, showing a policeman stand aside, watching as several white men attacked student Charlie B. Griffin. Griffin was not a demonstrator nor a member of the NAACP until the week after the photo was published around the nation.[165]

The riot in Jacksonville was one of many violent attacks on Black liberty and freedom in the Civil Rights Era. The Jacksonville law enforcement and the Federal Bureau of Investigation stood by as the KKK and Duval's white population brutalized Black Jaxsons. During the riot itself, the Jacksonville Sherriff's Office recalled its forces from Adams Street, instead directing manpower towards LaVilla in order to round up any Black agitators or attackers. Violent skirmishes continued throughout the night, and by daybreak, forty-two persons had been arrested

[164] Ben Brotemarkle, "Historian Reflects on Events of 'Ax Handle Saturday'," WJXT, August 21, 2020.

[165] Hurst, *It Was Never About a Hotdog and a Coke*. 33.

– of which only nine were members of the attacking KKK.[166] Forty years after the event, it was discovered that the FBI knew of the KKK's plans via a confidential informant by the name of Clarence Sears. Despite Sears' warning of the violent plot, the FBI nor the Duval Police Department elected to intervene or forewarn the NAACP Youth Council.[167]

For a brief moment, the images and stories from Jacksonville became the national focus of the Civil Rights movement. The Youth Council did not back down in their operations, instead calling for an entire Black boycott of segregationist services and establishments. At weekly meetings, names of Black individuals who violated the boycott were read aloud, regardless if they were members of the organization.[168] They called for the creation of a Bi-Racial Committee in Jacksonville, but were ignored by Mayor Burns, an ardent segregationist and suspected member of the KKK. The *Tampa Tribune* called this disgraceful act a representation of the 'story of Jacksonville', declaring that "Jacksonville was worse off than other major Florida cities in the area of cooperation between the races…as long as men of reason and good will can sit down together, there is not racial problem which can't be defused before it bursts into violence".[169]

For the past sixty years, Jacksonville and its citizens have continued to perpetuate this story. Rather than reclaim its glory as a premier destination for Americans of either color, Jacksonville leaders continued to dance around direct communication through the color line. The political dominance of the racist segregationists and KKK sympathizers won out, and successfully suppressed the remaining voices of LaVilla and Jacksonville's Black community.

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[166] Brotemarkle, "Historian Reflects on Events of 'Ax Handle Saturday'."

[167] Hurst, *It Was Never About a Hotdog and a Coke*. 77.

[168] Hurst. 59.

[169] "Racial Relations in Florida," *Tampa Tribune*, September 5, 1960.

The summer of 1960 revealed Jacksonville as a city with hatred in its very core, with leaders who preferred violence and ignorance over love and community. While Black Americans remained active and essential parts of Jacksonville's history, government, culture, and vitality, the fear of disrupting the established white supremacy in the City Hall never left.

The policies of urban renewal, infrastructure development, and distribution of Duval taxpayer resources that marked Jacksonville's evolution in the latter half of the twentieth century all came from the understood psychology of segregation and white supremacy. While new white neighborhoods such as Riverside, San Marco, and Orange Park grew in wealth and prominence, the Black neighborhoods of Brooklyn, Murray Hill, and most importantly LaVilla, experienced a near eradication of income and opportunity. Code enforcement of residential and commercial buildings was practically nonexistent, as city officials ignored repeated requests for repairs by LaVilla citizens.[170] By the 1980s, LaVilla became a victim to the crack epidemic and associated rise in crime and thus, over policing. In his autobiography, Ronald D. Small, nephew of Joe Higdon, owner of the LaVilla mainstay Hollywood Music Store, remembers 1985 as the year that crack came to Jacksonville. When he was set up and arrested for possession in 1987, Small recalls seeing "far too many people who I thought left town and come to find out that all the time they were in prison".[171] The crack cocaine epidemic decimated LaVilla's families, friendships, and future.

Without a booming economy, many of LaVilla's buildings and streets slipped into disrepair and neglect. By the 1990s, LaVilla was known throughout Jacksonville as a dangerous and impoverished area that was desperate for some reform. After the city won a bid for a 1992

[170] Tricia Booker, "In the Name of Progress," *Folio Weekly*, June 27, 1995.

[171] Ronald D Small, *The Harlem of the South* (New York: Page Publishing, 2019). 103.

NFL expansion team, the need for a sports complex was compounded with the desire to clean up LaVilla and Jacksonville's waterfront. In 1993, Mayor Ed Austin successfully passed his legislative effort, dubbed the River City Renaissance Plan. The $235 million plan was promised to revamp and preserve the historic nature of LaVilla and other downtown neighborhoods, while demolishing unimportant, aging buildings for the sake of future development. The most successful aspects of the project were the restoration of the St. James Hotel into Jacksonville's new City Hall and the transformation of the Jacksonville Civic Auditorium into the Times-Union Center for Performing Arts. The original Gator Bowl, built in 1928, Jacksonville's stadium located to the east of LaVilla, was completely raised in 1994, replaced by the new Jaguars stadium, which is currently called TIAA Bank Field. TIAA nearly triple the size of the original establishment and cost the Jacksonville taxpayer nearly $112 million dollars for its construction and purchase of the NFL expansion team.[172] Folio Weekly, an alternative newspaper in Northeast Florida, interviewed LaVilla residents displaced by the construction. One stated, "[the city] wants to get all the black people out of here. They don't want visiting football fans to see this side of Jacksonville".[173]

Nearly every other aspect of the plan failed to bring about revitalization or preservation. By 1995, every original structure that had once stood on the beloved Ashley Street had been torn down. The Blodgett housing project was completely destroyed; families were paid as little as $400 in relocation funds and compensation. The original home of James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson was destroyed, with zero consideration of granting it historical preservation.

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[172] James B. Crooks, *Jacksonville: The Consolidation Story, From Civil Rights To The Jaguars*, Florida History and Culture 26 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 385.

[173] Tricia Booker, "In the Name of Progress."

Today, only three of LaVilla's original row houses remain, and even they have been relocated to a different street entirely, where they are now fenced in, slowly decaying, left abandoned as restoration funds dried up and became stonewalled. The Strand, Two Spot, Duck Inn, Gevenor's Hall, and countless other juke joints and lounges have vanished, replaced with broken concrete and trespassing signs.

Walking through the streets of LaVilla in 2022, little remains of the once vibrant community and the 'Harlem of the South'. The LaVilla School of the Arts opened as a magnet middle school and have developed nearly twenty years of nationally recognized bands, choirs, and other performers. The Stanton School continues to live up to the standards of excellence instilled by James Weldon Johnson and his faculty. Thanks to the recent rise in social justice movements throughout the country, many new art instillations featuring prominent Black Jaxsons have been erected downtown, Hemming Park was renamed James Weldon Johnson Park in August 2020.[174]

These token changes are not nearly enough to bring back the damage done by generations of hatred and suppression. If LaVilla's history is truly to be honored, then the entirety of its story should be celebrated. LaVilla was able to produce so many famous and influential leaders and musicians because of the entirety of the community, from the faith, education, and employment opportunities created by themselves. To celebrate one name at the expense of generations of individuals is a discredit to the amazing accomplishments made by Black LaVilla citizens.

[174] Christopher Hong and David Bauerlein, "City Council Renames Hemming Park after James Weldon Johnson," The Florida Times-Union, accessed April 4, 2022.

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