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Historical Background of my Community

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As we are studying our community this year perhaps it will be interesting to go back to its early days before it was a thickly settled suburb of the City of Tampa. So come with me for a little while as we turn back the pages of the past.

It is the year 1868. The little town of Tampa nestles complacently between the eastern shore of the Hillsborough River where it flows into the Bay and the Federal Garrison of Fort Brooke. Its one main thoroughfare is Washington Street which, as you know, runs east and west. Although Sidney Lanier had not yet visited Tampa and written his famous poem "Tampa Robins", in which he alludes to Tampa’s desert strands, I’m sure the sand was here and very plentiful.

On October 10 of this year 1868 Thomas Butler Jackson, with his wife and children moving from Hernando County, staked his claim to a homestead in a virgin forest about four miles northeast of Tampa. Mr. Jackson set about at once clearing ground preparatory to building a house. As he was felling trees he heard the sound of someone else similarly engaged not far away. On investigation he found that a Mr. Aman had taken a homestead just south of his. The street lying between these two homesteads is now called 21st Avenue.

ON KING’S HIGHWAY

Thomas Jackson built a one-room log house which he and his family occupied until the next year when he built a six-room house of the "double pen" type with a piazza across the front and a long walk in the rear leading
to the kitchen and dining room. They chose for their homesite a beautiful live oak grove on the southeast corner of the tract. This was a slight promontory gently sloping down some hundred yards to a beautiful little pool fringed with nodding buttonwoods and the lacy white elder.

Perhaps another reason for selecting this particular spot was the main road, King’s Highway, which skirted the southeast corner of the homestead and travelers coming and going no doubt were visible from the Jackson home. This road had been built during the Indian war connecting Fort Brooke at Tampa with Fort King at Ocala and was probably the main artery of travel to South Florida. I have been reliably informed that this road passes over the same ground on which Benjamin Franklin School now stands (3915 21st Avenue E.). Then, following the contour of the land avoiding the low ground which is now Gary, it passed the two mile branch near its source now called Oak Park Springs, thence on to the fort. The story is handed down that troopers leaving Fort Brooke to go to Fort King often stopped at the little deep pond to empty their whiskey flasks and discard them, so to this day it is called Whiskey Pond.

MADE SYRUP AND SUGAR

Thomas Jackson cleared a good part of his tract of land. He planted a small orange grove but most of it he farmed, and, they tell us, he was a good farmer. In those days families were dependent for what they ate on what they grew, for the most part. I can imagine those South Florida neighbors really knew the meaning of conservation when it came to saving seed, for some of our common vegetables will not go to seed in this climate, and seeds were hard to procure. A good part of the farm was planted in sugar cane, and of course the syrup and sugar were made on the place. I wish I could describe to you as it was described to me the setup for this work. It was all located near the little pond, the mills some ways back from the bank on level ground, as was also the clay furnace with its big boiler. But the sugar house was located on the incline or slope so that the syrup could flow freely from the boiler to the sugar house.

A delightful garden spot on the farm of long ago was called the Clay Pond, this being located between 23rd and 26th Avenues, just east of the Tampa Northern Railroad. As the city began to grow, Mr. Jackson was urged to sell a part of his land but he was essentially a man of the country and did not care to help in the encroachment of the city, and steadfastly refused all offers. Not long before his death he decided to sell a small part of the extreme northwest, the part farthest from his home and he did give an acre for a church edifice at the southeast corner of 34th and 21st Avenue. This was known as Woodlawn Church. Years later when the Methodist Conference decided that it would be better to move the church to Gary, it being believed to be nearer the center of population then, he obligingly paid the Conference $100.00 for the acre he had given.

"OLD GRAY" GOOD ENOUGH

As we have stated, he was a real farmer and up to the time of his last illness, when he was 83 years old, he was able to plow or to hoe a while each day. He did not care for ostentation and left instructions not to hire a hearse for his funeral, that the horse, old Gray, who had served him faithfully was good enough to carry him to his last resting place.
Other neighbors, besides Mr. Aman, who took homesteads on this side of Tampa at about the same time as Thomas Jackson, were: Joseph Robles, whose homestead lay in the vicinity of what is now beautiful Robles Park; Mr. Morris on what is now Livingston Avenue, and Dr. Louis Deshong whose homestead was on the Bradenton road near the Lykes and Hendry Abattoirs. These neighbors were all staking their claims at about the same time. When the time was up in which they could obtain title, they went together up to Gainesville which was the nearest place the Federal Government had for proving land claims. They went on horseback. I do not know how long it took them to make the journey, but sometime when you are dashing up to Gainesville to see a football game perhaps, as you go speeding along over one of Florida's famous smooth-surfaced highways at the rate of 50 or 60 miles an hour, take time to remember these first home owners of our community as they rode up to Gainesville to get title to their homesteads and no doubt your road and theirs will have crossed and converged several times on the way.