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BARTOW, WEST BARTOW, AND THE ANDY MOORE FAMILY: The Joy and Importance of Discovering African-American History

Clifton P. Lewis

In many parts of this great country, citizens take for granted that, with a minimum of effort, they can gain access to their local history. The town or county library’s shelves, they comfortably assume, will contain numerous volumes written over the past century or two that will detail almost every aspect of the community’s past. Heritage is available. The strong foundation that it can provide for dealing with today’s problems can be taken for granted.

Florida stands as a major exception to this general rule of relatively easy access to local history, and for the African-American community conditions rank even worse than for the state as a whole. The few white communities that can boast properly researched and well-written histories should feel particularly fortunate, since virtually no black communities enjoy the same. Until very recently, histories about this state and its various regions, counties, and towns were designed either to ignore or to minimize the accomplishments of African-Americans. Compounding this problem, a population comprised mostly of persons born elsewhere has not supported the kinds of history research and teaching programs that their home states have engaged in for generations past.

This sad state of affairs should not be allowed to persist, and at Bartow, Florida, a group of concerned citizens has acted on a small scale to ensure that it does not. The idea, as it has developed over a period of several years, has been to rebuild a community composed of African-American families upon a foundation rooted firmly in lessons, accomplishments, and role models that the past can provide to those living today. Our history can empower our present. It can inspire, and it can guide with positive results and directions that otherwise could not have been anticipated. It is a story worth sharing.

The History Project’s Origins

During the period 1995-1996, residents of the West Bartow African-American community rose up in arms over the issues of neighborhood blight and high crime. Some residents feared walking the streets, and service personnel hesitated to come into the neighborhood, especially at night. At the time the local people assumed that these circumstances signaled the beginning of a new and disturbing trend. In reality, sagging quality of life indicators had been ignored for some time. Conditions had been allowed to deteriorate there a long time ago.

By November 1996 awareness of neighborhood problems had sparked
West Bartowans to rally together, giving voice to demands that something be done to enhance the community. A group of concerned citizens met to plan a course of action. A decision was made to include city officials in subsequent meetings. Everyone agreed that redevelopment of this neglected community would not be an easy task, but residents appeared ready for the challenge. "Somebody ought to do something" echoed as an often-heard complaint.

Thus was born the Neighborhood Improvement Corporation of Bartow, Inc. Its organizers committed themselves to resolve community concerns. More discussions ensued with Bartow and Polk County officials and with representatives of other government agencies in order to mobilize a maximum effort. Expectations for dramatic improvements ran high. The NIC, as it came to be known, conducted a "needs" assessment to identify specific problem areas. In almost no time, its officers had adopted a mission statement, as well as a strategic plan.

Events then proceeded at a rapid pace. With the assessment report in hand, the group zeroed in on problem indicators. We demanded solutions and found a receptive city administration. The police department stepped up its prevention and enforcement activities, code-enforcement officers accelerated their efforts and increased the number of citations issued for violations, and the demolition of vacant buildings commenced. Our reasoning was that, by getting rid of old vacant buildings which served as breeding places for undesirable activities, the criminal element would be forced to go elsewhere.

Concerned citizens across the town eagerly joined in the NIC’s activities. A first "clean-up day" in March 1997 attracted nearly 300 volunteers representing various churches, civic clubs, businesses, and agencies. It was truly gratifying to see members of the white community working with their black neighbors to help rejuvenate this historically black district. Residents pledged to continue the campaign until all old buildings were demolished and our community looked more like "the other sections of town." We wanted to create a seamless city without differences among neighborhoods. Revitalizing West Bartow took on a very high priority, even if it meant tearing down every vacant building in sight. The rallying cry could well have been "down with the old and up with the new." Such was the level of excitement and commitment to rebuilding!

As often happens when time passes after such a flurry of well-intentioned activity, concerns surfaced about how much change really was necessary—and about how soon needed change should occur. Someone suggested that, before we tear down too much of this old community, we ought to take time to learn more about its history. This seemed to many of us to be a pretty good suggestion. The community appreciated that, at last, something was being done to improve conditions, and its members applauded the NIC’s organizers for taking the initiative. Still, many voiced concerns about the impact of too many changes occurring too rapidly. West Bartow, as far as the long-time residents were concerned, remained unique. While some change was necessary, they believed, after all was said and done they
wanted the neighborhood to retain its special character and identity.

Having decided to pause and reflect upon the pace and level of change for the neighborhood, the obvious questions appeared to be "What character?" and "What identity?" Real facts were needed to counter the refrain of those who favored rapid action. "Isn't this just a run down community in bad need of revitalization?" they queried. So, while the bulldozers continued their work and other redevelopment plans unfolded, a historical committee undertook research on West Bartow's history.

The historical research process added a new and uncertain dimension to the NIC's activities. In order to insure accuracy and good productivity, the research project had to be well organized and carried out with a high degree of discipline. The work proved very time consuming and physically challenging, but, as we soon learned, the results provided gratification beyond our wildest imaginations. As West Bartow's history unfolded, it became evident that the neighborhood could boast far more positives than negatives.

Soon, the climate of opinion shifted conclusively. It had become clear that we had been focusing so passionately on tearing down that we had ignored all-important facets of our heritage. It should be noted that, fortunately, the structures actually demolished needed to be torn down because of the danger they posed. On the other hand, future efforts obviously had to pay more attention to building up than to tearing down. Beyond that, NIC supporters, in learning some of the area's amazing history, became convinced that it should be researched fully and documented before it was lost to future generations.

While the research posed real challenges, it often afforded joy with new discoveries and insights. Senior residents delighted in talking about West Bartow's olden days. They shared stories both about happy times and about sad times. They related to us tales of many families that no longer lived here. We heard about families that built homes and raised children who, in turn, grew up in the neighborhood and later went on to
the higher accomplishments. Most persons interviewed offered information freely. Where one individual held something back, another soon came along to fill the gap. We were really on a roll! The revitalization effort and the history project were attracting attention from the media. Expressions of good will poured in.

The fuss failed to detract the NIC’s volunteers from pursuing their work. The details intrigued us. We learned about the long-forgotten industry of brick making and of cattle raising that occurred in West Bartow. The fact that black men actually prospected for phosphate, as well as worked in the mines, surprised us. The interviews revealed that fruit packing provided another source of honest employment. Of course, the storytellers bragged about the skills of old-time craftsmen, highlighting the pride that was evident in their creations. Residents enjoyed an active social life, we were told. Social clubs, night clubs, soda fountains, movie houses, lodges, and so on offered many forms of entertainment.

Sometimes the more-shadowy side of life emerged. Some oldtimers discussed seldom-shared details about how the gambling game known as bolita was played and occasionally fixed. It turned out that avoiding detection by the police and retaining the aura of respectability required a high degree of creativity. Although bolita may be dismissed by some today as simply a popular pastime, the game once offered a main source of income to many families during hard times. Its economic impact should not be underestimated.

Certain types of details were revealed only with prompting. The names of prominent persons who served as financial backers to the bolita runners and loan sharks were voiced reluctantly. Respected business people who refused to provide loans to blacks through normal banking procedures readily made personal loans at outrageously inflated interest rates, sometimes as high as 100 percent or "a dollar for a dollar," as the oldtimers said.

In most instances this type of information was provided only upon the promise of strict confidentiality, even though the persons involved had long since died. These secret revelations helped to put a lot of things in context. Likely, many of
the descendants of old-line and prominent families are completely unaware of the types of immoral and probably illegal activities practiced by their ancestors. We were very grateful that the older residents had the courage to talk about those events and about relations between blacks and whites. In this modern era, it is sad to note, discussions about race relations in days gone by still can be very painful. Race relations, even today, almost always are described by blacks in negative terms. We listened to the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The origins of our community institutions were key elements of the research,
and the information we obtained about early churches and schools opened up a whole new world to us. We were reminded that the modern-day First Providence Missionary Baptist church probably got its start around 1856. At that time members of Polk County’s initial group of slave pioneers began worshipping Christ in the open fields near a place called Bear Creek in West
Bartow. Years later, after a church building was erected, school classes for black youngsters were taught there. If this information proves to be accurate, then First Providence is the oldest black church, and perhaps the oldest continuing black institution of any kind, in Polk County and in much of central and south Florida. The actual details have not been verified with certainty. On the other hand, the oral tradition runs very strong and has been handed down through many generations, as has always been the custom among our African ancestors.

Public education came late for African-Americans in Polk County, but there, too, the West Bartow community can claim a pioneering status. Available records suggest that the first public school for blacks in the county opened in the mid-1880s, as the Brittsville Elementary School, it consisted of a two story wooden building. The facility served the West Bartow community until it finally was torn down in the 1940s.

The community’s identity coalesced slowly after the first settlers arrived as slaves in the early 1850s. For much of the remainder of the nineteenth century and up until recent times, West Bartow remained racially segregated. It stood as a self-contained community with its own institutions and social order. In the late 1880s it received the name Brittsville from Bartow’s city fathers. They intended to honor a white developer, William F. Britt, who built the first planned subdivision in this black neighborhood. In spite of the official name, the area’s African-American
population preferred to call their community "Over the Branch." This name doubtlessly was used because one was obliged to cross over the McKinney Creek when commuting between West Bartow and the other part of town. "Over the Branch." What a romantic—almost magnetic sounding name!

As our work as NIC researchers progressed, we amassed a wealth of information about "Over the Branch," but, the more we learned, the more we wanted to learn. We developed a thirst for historical tidbits that was difficult to quench. We soon began delving into the identity of early black pioneers who helped settle Bartow and the Peace River frontier. Who were they? What were they like? Did they contribute much to the overall development of Bartow? Did they pay taxes? Own land?

By that point, our history project had become an integral part of our redevelopment effort. We still intended to rebuild this neighborhood, but our revised strategy was to do so on a solid foundation of history. As the depth of our research grew, we accepted that we were not knowledgeable enough in the area of historical research. After spending fruitless hours in the Polk County Historical and Genealogical Library, we decided to seek help from several local historians. This decision proved to be very wise. We were privileged to receive invaluable and
Steven Johnson Williams, (right) son of Benjamin Jerome Williams, Jr., is shown with his daughter Emadi Lynn.

Photographs courtesy of the author.

Benjamin J. Williams, Jr., (left) with one of his two sons, Benjamin J. Williams, 111, and two grandsons, Kevin and Benjamin IV. A proud, pioneer family with a strong believe in tradition and education, Benjamin, Jr., was the first black classroom teacher in the initial integration of the Broward County school system. Named the 1985 Honorary Citizen of the Year for the city of Ft Lauderdale, he retired in 1994 after a 39 year career in the Broward County school system as a teacher, assistant principal and principal. His son, Benjamin, 111, father of two of the long fine of descendants of Tanner Moore and Andy Moore, has a B.S. in Criminal Justice.
highly professional assistance from a group of fine men and women.

The Early Black Pioneers

The saga that ultimately revealed itself to us could not have proved more interesting or strengthening. We discovered that small groups of white settlers began to arrive in the Bartow area around 1850. One of the first of these families brought along about one dozen black slaves and settled in what is now West Bartow. Others soon trickled in. One well-known historian noted that the first two babies born to permanent settlers in Polk County belonged to two black slaves by the names of Harriet and William Brown.\(^1\)

The Civil War era witnessed a drastic change in Polk County's African-American population. Among whites, loyalties were divided between the North and the South. In 1864 and early 1865, local white Unionist soldiers, together with black troopers from New Orleans and Washington, DC, freed many of the slaves who lived south of Bartow. They were taken as "contrabands" to Fort Myers and Key West.

After the Civil War's end in 1865 and during the decade thereafter, other freedmen and freedwomen left Polk County of fear for their safety or, perhaps, to seek greater opportunities elsewhere. White "regulator" groups lynched two men near Bartow in 1871. At a public
meeting local citizens condemned the violence, declaring that "we view with most indignant feelings the hanging of Nathaniel Red and the shooting of Jim Pernell, and believe it to be the duty of every good and honest citizen to assist the civil authorities in ferreting out and bringing before the courts of the country the perpetrators of such violent and unlawful acts." Still, fear gripped many African-Americans families, whose members sought refuge in Hillsborough County where fellow blacks sat on the county commission.

Of those African-Americans who remained in Polk County during the late 1860s and 1870s, the NIC researchers were able to identify many of their accomplishments. As an example, in 1867 former slave Stepney (or Stephen) Blount Dixon accepted appointment as one of three county voter registrars, thus making him the first black person to serve in a county-wide office in Polk. Mr. Dixon later homesteaded near Tampa, where he lived the rest of his life as a family man and farmer.

The life of freedman Prince Johnson offers another illustration. In 1880 he became the first African-American actually to run for office in Polk County. At that time he sought the position of constable. Although he lost the election, we recognize Johnson for his bravery and commitment. Prince homesteaded an eighty-acre farm on the eastern side of Bartow and went on to become one of the most widely known and successful farmers in the county.

Ned Green stands out as another key player of the early years. Although he and his wife Emily did not arrive in Polk County until the mid-1880s, Green, too, proved to be a remarkable person. Soon after appearing on the scene, Ned homesteaded 120 acres of land "Over the Branch." Within a few short years, in 1886, he purchased a separate one-acre plot and donated it for the use of the Providence Colored Baptist Church. This church today is known as the First Providence Missionary Baptist Church, as mentioned previously.

**Andy Moore**

Numerous other personal stories that deserve to be mentioned came to light as a product of the NIC research project, but with limited exceptions their experiences must await another time for telling. I would make mention, though, of one pioneer whose life carries special meaning to this writer. His name was Andy Moore.

The Polk County portion of Andy Moore’s life began in 1862, when he and a number of other slaves were transported from Virginia by planter William Joel Watkins, who was anxious to protect his property from the advance of Union forces. This came at about the same time Polk County was created out of Hillsborough. The written record first reveals Andy at that glorious moment when the slaves were freed in 1865. The daughter of Andy’s owner later recorded in her memoir that her father appeared to question Andy’s ability to survive as a free man, while her words indirectly pointed out her father’s callousness. "Among our Negroes was Andy the fiddler," she wrote. "Andy had five children, and I remember when word came that Lincoln had freed the slaves my father dolefully shook his head as he said, 'Poor Andy, with five children to feed.'"
Andy Moore’s owner was said to be a good man. It was noted that he was well educated, wealthy, and a highly successful farmer. Some said he related well to blacks and whites alike. But, this intelligent man who doubted Andy’s chances of survival would be proved wrong by the events of subsequent years, although the slaveowner may never have known his error. He left Polk County soon after the war and would not be around to witness the miracles God worked in Andy’s life.

We learned a good bit about the path that Andy took. Approximately one year after gaining freedom, Andy Moore and Tanner Reid, the woman who was the mother of his five children, were married on September 2, 1866. Previously, state law had prohibited them from officially ratifying the enduring commitment they had made between themselves years before. The next year Andy registered to vote, an act that involved some personal danger in a sometimes lawless frontier county filled with Confederate veterans.

Already, Andy had found himself a taxpayer and the farmer of his own land. He had cleared a tract of land in "Over the Branch" and, several years afterward, submitted a homestead application to the Tallahassee land office. Finally, on October 26, 1876, after having farmed the land successfully for over five years, Moore received a clear title to his eighty-acre farm. Research indicates that Andy was the first African-American to file a homestead application (December 1869) and the first to hold legal title to land in the county.

As the years passed the community took greater notice of Andy. During the early 1880s, for instance, a reporter published an article on local agriculture. It read, in part, "One of the best places within a mile of Bartow is that owned by a negro named Andy Moore.” The reporter commented further, "He has some 30 bearing [citrus] trees, makes some 400 or 500 bushels of corn, raises his own meat, and is independent generally."

As Andy merited increased respect for his talents and hard work, he pushed his children to improve their own chances for a brighter future. He believed especially in the benefits of education. Consider the fact that Polk County in the 1870s and early 1880s provided virtually no support for the education of blacks. Not surprisingly then, of the 453 children listed on the 1880 United States census as attending school in the county, only five were black. One child belonged to Prince Johnson. The other four belonged to Andy Moore.

Soon, the Moore children began to tally accomplishments of their own. In 1882 son Patrick stood as one of four black men to vote along with eighteen white men to incorporate the town of Bartow. Their action made the county seat Polk’s first incorporated city. It should go without saying that those four black men—Patrick Moore, along with Squire Newman, Prince Johnson, and Tony Tucker—rank high in our minds on the roll call of Bartow’s founding fathers.

The years, by then, were taking their toll on Andy and Tanner Moore. God’s mercy was manifested in 1891 with Tanner’s death. Her grave supports the oldest marked tombstone among the nearly 2,000 sites in the black Evergreen Cemetery in West Bartow. The same year, Andy apparently accepted the reality of his own mortality. He
commenced deeding portions of his considerable land holdings to his children. Andy Moore eventually passed away in 1900. His remains were placed by family members in a common grave with his beloved wife Tanner.

But, Andy's death did not mark the end of the Moore family story. I mentioned earlier that his life carried special meaning to this author. That fact can be traced to 1882, when Moore's beautiful daughter Elizabeth married a newly arrived and handsome fellow from Virginia by the name of Thomas Waldon. The couple followed her father's example by homesteading 160 acres of land just south of Bartow in the small village of Homeland. There, they started to raise a family.

Andy Moore’s death in 1900 prompted the Waldons to relocate to the Moore family homestead in West Bartow. Earlier, Elizabeth’s father had deeded to her thirteen and one-half acres of the property. They farmed the land until 1905 when thirty-eight-year-old Elizabeth died, seemingly at childbirth. Thomas thereafter married Emma, daughter of Prince Johnson’s. He continued to work the Moore family farm and added to his estate, as well. In 1918 Thomas purchased twenty acres in "Over the Branch" with one of his sons, Fred (Cap) Waldon. Cap went on to become a well-known grocer and landlord. With the passage of time, Thomas deeded off portions of his land.

The Moore/Waldon line persisted at West Bartow, even as some family members sought their fortunes elsewhere. When Thomas passed away in 1923, he left behind seven children. Each of them grew to be a solid citizen. Today the legacy of Andy Moore and wife Tanner lives on. The city of Bartow, the county of Polk, the state of Florida, and, indeed, America itself are richly blessed. To paraphrase a comment recorded at the time of Thomas Waldon’s arrival at Homeland in 1882, "The population of this country has been greatly enhanced by the generations of Andy Moore." More on that in just a moment.

After Thoughts

As direct result of the NIC’s history project and the historical facts that were uncovered, West Bartow has taken on a new significance to its current generation of residents. The neighborhood never again will be treated simply as an irrelevant, blighted area. We now know for certain that it is one of Polk County’s oldest settlements. As such, "Over the Branch" merely is showing its age.

Yes, we still intend to rebuild this gracious, old, and neglected community, but it will be done with an eye toward its history, preservation, protection, and promotion—not to tear down and destroy.

Such can be the contribution of the wealth of history to a community; yet, sometimes the impact on human beings can come even more profoundly. "The Joy and Importance of the Discovery of African American History" serves as a very appropriate subtitle for this narrative. In a very personal sense, my family has been uplifted by the discovery of its West Bartow roots and especially by learning of Andy Moore and his wife Tanner Reid. Readers may be interested to know that, prior to
undertaking this history project, my mother-in-law, Asonia Waldon-Washington, had not heard of Andy Moore and Tanner Reid Moore. She had no idea who they were. Words alone cannot describe the depth of emotion that swept through our household the moment she discovered that those two pioneers, over whose grave she had walked and which she had ignored throughout her life, were her great-grandparents.

Odd as it may seem, not one of Andy’s descendants, beginning with my mother-in-law’s generation, knew anything about Andy Moore and Tanner Reid Moore or of any of the other black pioneers of West Bartow. This history project, which began as an afterthought, has produced some blockbuster revelations—at least for my family. Rest assured that future Waldon family reunions will never be the same. The generations that have followed Andy Moore will continue to honor his memory.

For many African-Americans today, the lack of knowledge about family heritage presents a real and harmful void. The Neighborhood Improvement Corporation of Bartow, Inc., strongly encourages groups in other communities to conduct similar research. We believe that they will find the results truly gratifying.

ENDNOTES

The officers of the Neighborhood Improvement Corporation of Bartow, Inc., extend their sincere appreciation to the Polk County Historical Association, the Polk County Historical and Genealogical Library, the Florida Humanities Council, NIC volunteers and supporters, Odell Robinson, Lloyd Harris, Hal Hubener, Dr. James M. Denham, and everyone else who assisted us in any way, and especially to our scholar and mentor, Dr. Canter Brown, Jr., of the Tampa Bay History Center, whose guidance and assistance were absolutely invaluable.

1 Except as noted, source materials for information contained in this article may be found in the research files of the Neighborhood Improvement Corporation of Bartow, Inc., Bartow, Florida.


3 Tallahassee Weekly Floridian, May 9, 1871.

4 Canter Brown, Jr., African Americans on the Tampa Bay Frontier (Tampa: Tampa Bay History Center, 1997), 56-59.