

Clay's early days were fraught with fire

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, fires took a heavy toll on human efforts to build and maintain community life in Clay County. Raw pine — barely cured — was the construction material of choice for early developers. It was abundant, available, cheap and local labor was skilled or easily trained in its use. It also burned fast and hot — like blue blazes. Before the ink was dry on the 1879 Orange Park incorporation papers for Washington Benedict's Florida Winter Home Co., the town's hotel burned to the ground.

It seems that northern tourists mistakenly built warming blazes in the downstairs parlor fireplaces with sap-filled lighter knots intended for starting only. They burned so hot that chimneys and walls framed with raw pine boards ignited near dawn while guests still slept. Residents turned out in force to fight the conflagration but could only watch and offer hospitality to the nightcapped and gowned visitors collected on the grounds.

Immediately before and after 1900, Orange Park experienced a deep economic depression when freezes destroyed the orange industry and the tourist business went sour.

As if that was not enough, they were frequently roused from restless sleep to watch helplessly while another abandoned winter mansion from the golden and glorious 1880s was consumed by fire before their eyes.

In the 1930s, the town's freshly organized volunteer fire department raced behind a used fire truck to the waterfront home of Town Commissioner J.B. Carnes. In the curve of the point where the St. Johns River meets Doctors Lake, they

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prepared to pump river water to extinguish the blaze. It was not to be. When the pressurized water hit the engine's rotted hose, it exploded in a brief geyser. Firefighters and onlookers watched another building burn but — this time — they were all sopping wet.

In the 1940s, when the same truck — with new hoses — set up to fight a fire at the Moosehaven hospital, disaster struck again. The torque of the pump ripped it from its moorings and launched it into the river. Moosehaven bought a new engine for the town because its insurance rates were soaring.

Green Cove Springs had more than its share of fires during this time, too. In fact, the fires tended to be real infernos because the buildings were so much larger and the structures were so close together that containment was difficult.

In 1900, the town's famed Clarendon Hotel erupted in flames. The gingerbread-trimmed frame building went up like a torch. Firefighters mainly wrestled with crowd control and assisted in removing a few contents.

The Magnolia Springs Hotel, south of town at Governors Creek, was the grand-dame of St. Johns River Resort hotels.



— Clay County Photo Archives

In the early 1900s, the two-story black schoolhouse in Green Cove Springs was severely damaged by fire.

Although by 1923 it served as the campus of Florida Military academy, it remained a splendid example of Victorian-era Southern hospitality. The four-story structure was reduced to ashes in a matter of hours.

In 1928, J.B. Rivers' block of brick buildings in downtown burned. Ground-floor tenants, Petsold's Drugstore and the Palace Theatre, were a total loss but Herculean efforts by the town's volunteer fire department saved the pool hall. Bystanders uncertain of the outcome had moved the tables

into the street.

Today, building materials are fire-resistant, and fire departments are better equipped, but fire still takes a toll. At least every confrontation is not just a stand-and-watch situation.

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