



Al Burt Papers

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"The History of Melrose"

Melrose has an unusual history and those of us who live here can learn valuable things from it. By studying the lives of the people who settled Melrose, we can learn how this community got to be what it is today. We can learn something about how we got to be the people we are today.

Melrose is lucky because here we have more than 70 buildings which tell us how the early Melrosians lived, what their concerns were and what their accomplishments were. By looking at their experiences, we can get some measure of what our own possibilities are.

In history and in literature, one of the great themes is the rise and fall of certain societies. One favorite of histories is the rise and the fall of the ancient Roman Empire. In fiction, one of the great rise-and-fall stories was told in a book called *Gone With The Wind* – how the slave and plantation society of the old South flourished and then fell in the Civil War.

Not long after that war, Melrose had its own rise-and-fall. It peaked in the period from 1881 through 1895 – fourteen short but eventful years. Melrose then developed a flourishing community that revolved around the bay. Those were Melrose's golden years. This was an inland waterport served by steamboats. Grand houses were built and there was an active social life and a vigorous economy based on either cotton, citrus, and the hospitality industry – that is, taking care of the winter visitors from the North who contributed so much to the building of Melrose. Great things were predicted for Melrose and then in the winter of 1894-1895 a series of great freezes came. Suddenly those golden years were gone, not gone with the wind, but with the freeze. It is a dramatic and fascinating story.

I am going to tell you a little bit about Melrose, how it reached those golden years those golden years and then how it lost them. It is a story you should know, and it is one important to your own lives.

In 1877, Melrose was accessible only by dirt roads. The nearest railroad passed through Waldo, on its way from Fernandina to Cedar Key. The Second Seminole War, which ended in 1842, was still fresh in many memories. Florida had been a state only 32 years, since 1845, and the first non-Indian settlers began to come in just after that. The Civil War had been over only 12 years. The last of the occupying Federal troops were withdrawn from Florida and Reconstruction was ending. The state population was less than 260,000.

Florida was trying to encourage development, offering free or cheap land to investors. The state became increasingly attractive to tourists. Winter visitors from the North made their way to Florida

In 1877 two big things happened to connect Melrose to those developments.

- 1) Work began on a canal that would connect Melrose by water with the railroad where it came through Waldo; the canal would be cut from Little Lake Santa Fe to Lake Alto, making it possible to visit Melrose by steamboat rather than across dirt roads.
- 2) Probably prompted by prospects offered by that canal, a 30-block area near the bay was platted and surveyed as "Melrose."

These things encouraged both new visitors and new settlers.

In 1877 the McKendrie Lambdin family built a home on the bay which was called "Bayview." It became the center of the new community.

McKendrie Lambdin also brought the first sawmill to Melrose and became agent for the Canal Company. The main dock for the steamboats was located just east of his property.

Cotton fields covered most of where Melrose is today.

In 1881 a wood burning, steam powered dredge completed the mile-long canal. It was thirty feet wide and five feet deep. With that the steamboat traffic began. The first steamboat was the *F.S. Lewis*, named for a prominent cotton plantation owner. It picked up visitors at the rail head in Waldo and delivered them to Melrose Bay. On the return trip it took oranges from local groves. The sternwheeler steamboat, 90 feet long and 18 feet wide, made two round trips daily. The *F. S. Lewis* burned in 1884 and a tugboat was brought in from Jacksonville piggyback on the train called the *Alert*, which continued steamboat service.

In 1881, the year the canal was completed, Florida sold 4 million acres of state lands to developers for 25 cents an acre. Melrose as a waterport attracted more settlers and many winter visitors from the North, some of whom built fine homes around Melrose Bay. With this development, Melrose entered its "golden age." The local economy changed from produce and cotton farms to orange groves, hotels, and hospitality.

Also in 1881, the nearest Episcopal church to Melrose was in Earleton. A few Episcopalians here persuaded the minister at St. Johns Chapel at Earleton, the Rev. Mr. Franklin, to hold services in Melrose, too. The first service was held on the fifth Sunday of July, 1881.

Until 1882, schooling in Melrose had been a matter for private academies, churches, and private, homes. In 1882, Melrose dedicated a new building for a consolidated high school. The present day high school is the third one ever built in Melrose.

At the dedication, a newspaper correspondent for the *Gainesville Weekly Bee* described Melrose this way:

“The little town is in its fifth year and has two hundred inhabitants When the new railroad [the Green Cove Spring & Melrose Railroad] is completed, it will rise and grow both rapidly and solidly. It is beautifully situated on the edge of Lake Santa Fe. Its houses are new and pretty. Its stores are handsome and well-stocked. It claims, with good reason, to be one of the healthiest spots in Florida. The country round is rolling and pretty, well populated and stocked with young orange groves.... It is a rich section and has plenty of material wealth round it to support quite a handsome little city in time. Better than this, it has the pluck, energy, and enterprise to succeed..... Don’t forget to mention Melrose when you come to mention the brightest, cleverest, pluckiest and most hospitable towns in the state.”(The railroad company had 35 miles of track, 3 locomotives, and 34 cars).

In 1883, a tourist guide described Melrose this way:

“There are several stores and industries, two churches.... a \$22,0000 schoolhouse, two public squares The land about Melrose is specially adapted for orange-growing, while the lakes nearby serve as a protection from frosts. There are many fine residences in Melrose, principally owned by northerners who make Florida their winter home.”

In 1884 the Melrose Episcopalians started talking about building their own church, and in 1885, with money raised by the ladies society and with donations both locally and from the winter visitors, a building fund was collected. Using Carpenter Gothic plans – some now call it “Cracker Gothic” – furnished by the Bishop, a local carpenter completed construction.

By 1886, a 20 by 40 foot rectangular structure was completed using heart pine lumber cut at a local sawmill, and pier foundations made from bricks believed to have been created at the nearby Campville Brick Works. There were 13 families on the membership rolls. Nine years later, E. L. Judd, the local carpenter, added the wings or transepts on the church for the organ, sacristy, and chancel. He also put a picket fence around the property to keep the roaming pigs out.

In 1890 the Melrose Inn, Melrose’s first hotel, was opened with a gala, a formal ball, and that probably was Melrose at its historical best , the peak of its golden age. Northern visitors invested and built houses. The Ladies Literary and Debating Society was organized and in 1893 built its club house, which is today’s Melrose Woman’s Club, a citrus warehouse was built near the dock, the railroad was completed, there were five stores, two drug stores, a millinery shop, and a lively stable. Bayview even had a tennis court.

The end of all this came with the winter of 1894-1895 and a series of historic freezes. This event very nearly destroyed Melrose and did ruin most of its citrus groves. Most were forced to move to locations farther south.

“Snow fell The first, damaging, heavy freeze ... ruined the fruit on the trees.... Spring-like weather followed.... the fruit rotted and fell to the ground. Again the trees budded and beautiful white blooms came. While the trees were still in bloom, icy winds came again.... The last freeze brought the end of everything Melrose had worked for.... The financial loss caused illness and death.... Deaths were reported as resulting from shock and worry.... The happy years of the first Melrose town came to an end.... People began to leave Melrose almost immediately...the town soon looked deserted.... It seemed everyone, except the original Floridians — the oldtimers — had gone away”¹

The freeze was bad. The temperature reached down to zero.

“All fruit trees ... were cut down... Orange and grapefruit trees were ... piled in rows to dry and be burned.... [Smoke drifted for days over the country, for miles surrounding the town].... The hotel ... which had been so popular, closed its doors”²

Merchants closed their doors, the train stopped running in 1899 and the tracks were removed.

But Melrose somehow survived those hard days without becoming a ghost town. The setting was too favorable, too attractive.

Early in the 20th century, though not on the same scale as before, once again new winter residents began to arrive. Many of the older homes were refurbished, and some new ones built.

But other events began working against Melrose as a haven for winter visitors. Henry Flagler’s railroads ran down the east coast to Miami and then to Key West. The Henry Plant railroads opened up the west coast of Florida, therefore most of the Florida coasts now were more easily accessible than Melrose. With not only railroads but improved automobiles and highways, most of the tourists now went there and Melrose once again was left in relative isolation.

To improve its prospects, Melrose incorporated in 1902 for a few years (until 1910) early in the century, and it formed a Board of Trade in 1910 (the equivalent of a Chamber of Commerce, Melrose’s Business and Community Association today) to encourage development. The Ladies Literary and Debating Society started a library. Its first books came as a gift from the Society the Propagation of Christian Knowledge in England. They were stored in the Trinity Episcopal Church, which loaned them out.

But all that was not enough; the Golden Age did not return.

The steamboats quit running and the economy, rather than turning on cotton or citrus, turned to small farms and turpentine. In 1903, the Melrose population had dwindled to a reported 267.

¹ Kennie L. Howard, *Yesterday in Florida*, (New York: Carlton Press Inc., 1970).

² Ibid.

After World War I ended (1918), Melrose began to see the opportunity for a new identity with the coming of the Florida real estate boom that reached a peak in 1925. North Floridians in places like Jacksonville and Gainesville began to re-discover the lakes and their recreational potential. In the coming years, the lakes area became popular as a place for weekend cabins and summer retreats. Once again the area was attractive to outsiders. One significant newcomer was Carl Swisher of the Swisher Cigar Company in Jacksonville. He bought property on Goose Lake as a hunting and fishing retreat and expanded his holdings to some 25,000 acres. His property eventually became what we now know as the Ordway Preserve.

During the late 1920s, a Boy Scout troop was organized at Trinity Church. To encourage attendance, the boys were told they could come to meetings even if they didn't have any shoes to wear.

The library moved to the Melrose Homemakers Club and then to the Boy Scout hut at Trinity Episcopal. The present library building was an initiative of the Melrose Womans Club. Out of that came the Melrose Library Association, which raised money to build the first true library building, completed in 1984.

But in the late 1920s Florida's real estate boom collapsed, the stock market crashed, and a depression started which did not really end until the beginning of World War II in the late 1930s and 1940s. Some of the banks closed. In one area where a bank failed, Trinity Church lost a bank account of \$47.34, a significant sum then.

In 1935 the Chiappini store was established. In 1938 the Boy Scouts built the Scout hut which still stands behind the church. After World War II the appeal of Melrose's natural environment – principally its lakes – once again gave it something on which to build a future.

After the war (1947), Trinity bought an army chapel from Camp Blanding and had it moved to the church property, where it served as a Parish House until 1985 when it was destroyed by fire and replaced the next year by the present building — the one where we are tonight.

In 1980, a portion of the old Swisher property was turned into the Ordway Preserve, where university scientists and others study the lakes, wildlife, and habitat.

In 1990 the Melrose Historic District, which now numbers more than 70 buildings, most of them built in the late 1800's, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

As the new century began, the best hopes for Melrose prospects seemed to revolve around two things – the lakes, and community interest in making a distinctive history a guiding theme for the future.