

A LOOK AT KEYSTONE HEIGHTS 1925-1975

In 1918, there was a small village called Brooklyn alongside Road 28 (now SR 100) about one mile north of the present location of Keystone Heights. One might say Brooklyn was the birthplace of Keystone Heights because it was there that John J. Lawrence first thought about the beauty of the Lake Geneva area and decided it should be the place for a new town.

Lawrence was originally from Pittsburgh. He came to the area after helping George E. Sebring develop and build the town of Sebring. He also had lived in Miami.

It was in Sebring that Lawrence met a man who owned a large amount of land around Brooklyn. His name was J. B. Zell. Shortly, Lawrence had purchased several thousand acres of the land.



Brooklyn Hotel 1915



Lawrence Home 1921

In those early days Brooklyn consisted of a large unpainted building called the Brooklyn Hotel; a combination general store and post office; and several small houses scattered about. The Lawrences' temporary home was in one of those houses. The original Lawrence Developing Company also occupied one of the houses.

In 1921 the Lawrences' permanent home was completed. It was the first house built in Keystone Heights and, very appropriately, it overlooked beautiful Lake Geneva. Lawrence's wife, Agnes, was a practicing chiropractor and the house was large enough for her office. The home is still very attractive and is located at the corner of Jasmine Street & Lakeview Drive.

Other families moved to Keystone. However, because construction couldn't keep pace with the influx of families and requests for houses, some families lived in tents until their homes were completed.

In the fall of 1922 C. Ray Lawrence and his family came to Keystone from Conneautville, Penn. A civil engineer, he was hired by the developing company to lay out the streets and lots in the town. He made the first maps of Keystone Heights and this publication's cover is a photo of one of the originals.

In late 1922 the nearest pavement was in Starke. To get to Starke, a person drove through sand ruts, palmetto woods and water holes. Jacksonville was reached by way of Hampton, Lawtey and Baldwin. The trip was somewhat hazardous because of the crossing or resting of hogs and cattle on the road. A trip to Gainesville was a full day's venture.

The first pavement in Keystone Heights was the black top on Lawrence Boulevard. The black top was replaced in 1960 when the street was widened to accommodate more traffic.

Base rock was originally used in lieu of pavement on SR 100 from Keystone to Starke. The road was finished in June 1929.





On Jan. 1, 1924 the Keystone Inn opened. Following a celebration the men organized a Board of Trade. The ladies, not to be outdone, retired to the inn's small lounge and organized a Woman's Club. A small frame building across from the inn was used as a meeting place for the Board of Trade. Constructed by the developing company, the building was used by the town council until 1964 when the present Municipal Building opened.

Keystone Inn was the scene of meetings, community sings and other similar happenings from the time of its opening. The Woman's Club was used for programs and suppers.



Keystone's first Woman's Club building.



Original Town Council Building

An important period in the area's growth was the advent of the Chautauqua. A large, rather rustic building was constructed on the site of the present Woman's Club. Many artists, speakers, musicians, etc reached Keystone Heights by way of the Chautauqua Circuit from the original Chautauqua in New York State. Thus, the name Chautauqua Circle came into being. These people were lodged in the Keystone Inn. Naturally, it was an anticipated event for the girls and younger women of the community because they were always needed to help "wait tables." Following a Chautauqua season there were enough amusing anecdotes circulating to last until the following year.

By 1926 people were coming to the inn from as far north as New England. People from nearby towns held meetings, banquets and other gatherings at the inn. The University of Florida football coach brought his team to the inn the day before a big homecoming game. It was, understandably, another fun time for the girls. The Keystone Inn burned on Sunday evening, Oct. 3, 1954. The inn was owned by William F. LaMorte of New York. It has never been re-opened.



Prior to 1924 there were eight trains traveling daily through Lake Geneva, Keystone Heights, and Brooklyn on the Georgia, Florida and Southern railroad tracks. Four of these trains were passenger and four were freight, and they ran between Palatka and Valdosta, Ga.

In 1907 there were only two houses in the town of Lake Geneva. In 1908 E.A. Kennedy built a hotel there that included a post office and railroad office. Carpenters came by boat across Lake Geneva from Melrose and camped at the building during the week. Trains carrying the lumber and supplies were flagged. Passenger trains brought many families to the lake for enjoyable picnics. Kennedy's son, Seth, and his wife still reside at Lake Geneva.

Prior to the fire a small Clay County branch library was housed in the Woman's Club. After the fire, another library was opened next to the present barber shop. In April 1964 the present library opened. An addition was completed in April 1973.



The "Company Car" of Lawrence Developing Company.

In early 1925 Sen. Frank P. Miller of Pennsylvania purchased an interest in the Lawrence Developing Company. Other members of the company were John Lawrence, C.J. Lawrence, Sidney Hart, C.C. Jocelyn and Edwin J. Larson (general manager). Among the salesmen for the company were F.M. Walrath, Floyd Hornbeck and John Bird.

In 1925 a charter for the town was granted by a special act of the legislature and Keystone Heights was incorporated and "christened." "Keystone" was named for the Keystone state of Pennsylvania. "Heights" represented the splendid elevation of the ridge area which reaches 250 feet.

Also in 1925 the first building permits were issued. The first was for the construction of a home for Judge Earl Mecklem, Keystone's first mayor. Another "early" permit was for the building of tourist cottages toward the rear of the present Jackson Building Supply.

Much credit should go to the men who did the actual building of the first homes. Probably the most prominent were M.M. (Mel) Sargent, his brother B.B. Sargent and brother-in-law W.G. Stanley. Mel Sargent served on the county school board for over 25 years. His son, Key Miller Sargent, was the first child born in Keystone Heights. His first name came from the first part of Keystone and middle name after Sen. Miller. Many of the houses built by them are lived in today and it's a token to their integrity and dedication.

William (Will) Baker, who came to Florida by covered wagon from South Carolina in 1881, was a prominent area man. He served in the Florida Legislature for several years. His sons, Tracy and Gordon, and their families still live in the area.



Woman's Club Building



THE KEYSTONE HEIGHTS COMMUNITY CHURCH, KEYSTONE HEIGHTS, FLA.

Community Church

William H. Wagner came to Lake Geneva from Pennsylvania In October 1908. His son, Leon, was the first printer hereabouts, and he turned out excellent work in his little "cabin" print shop.

The first Woman's Club building was a 20' x 30' building on a lot donated by the developing company. Membership increased and in 1926 the club built a new meeting place located at the rear of the original Community Church building. The first building was sold and the new one lasted until it was destroyed by fire in February 1962. Property for a new building was donated by T.J. Williams and Charles Oliver. The present Woman's Club building on Chautauqua Circle was dedicated in October 1968.

In 1923 The Community Church was organized. Worshipers met in a residence on Sylvan Way until a building was erected in 1924. Many years later, the building was razed and a new church building was built on the same original site. A dedication ceremony was held on June 12, 1966.

The beginning of the First Baptist Church of Keystone was on March 29, 1949 when 14 people met in the home of Mr. and Mrs. A.G. Loudon Sr. on Lake Geneva. Church members worshipped in a tent until the first permanent building was completed in November 1949. The church property was donated by Mr. & Mrs. Woodrow Cox of Lake Geneva. The educational building was completed in 1955 and the new sanctuary was completed in 1970.

In 1954 the St. Anne's Episcopal Church was formed and met in a temporary building purchased from Camp Blanding. The present sanctuary was dedicated in August 1958. A fellowship hall/educational wing was added in 1974.

The beginning of the St. Williams Catholic Church was in the Siprelle home (now the Beam's home) on Lakeview Drive. Mass was held at the Woman's Club until that building burned. The present church was dedicated in May 1955.

The Friendship Bible Church (Christian and Missionary Alliance) held its first service on Jan. 7, 1973. In June 1974 the church began holding its services at the Masonic Lodge in Keystone.

After purchasing 2½ acres of land at the corner of Orchid Street and Lakeview Drive, members and friends of the church began constructing a new church building in December 1974. It was dedicated on June 8, 1975.

The Masonic Lodge was the first national organization established in Keystone. However, the Masonic Hall was not built until 1960. J. Edwin Larson and G.E. Wiggins donated the land.

On March 9, 1948 the Keystone Heights Rotary Club joined the family of Rotary International.

There is also an active Rotary Ann Chapter and Eastern Star group.

In 1953 the Keystone Heights Lions Club was chartered and first held their meetings at the Keystone Inn. In 1970 a Lions Club building was erected.

The Keystone-Melrose American Legion Post 202 was organized in 1966 under the leadership of Billy Rose. He also served as the first commander.

The first meetings were held in Clay Electric Co-op's conference room.

The present American Legion building on SR 21 was completed in 1970.

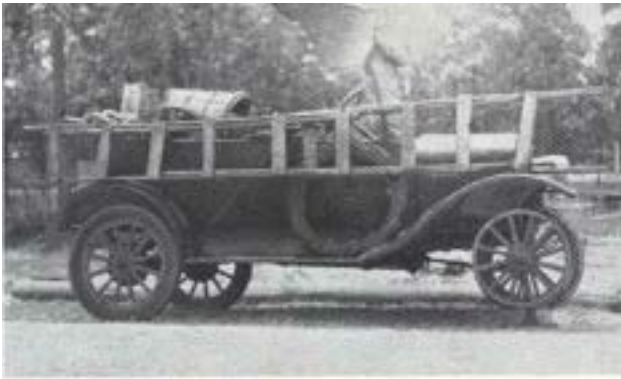
The Garden Club of the Lakes is an inspiration to all "green thumbers" and it was sponsored in 1960.

An area chapter of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) was organized in 1967 under the leadership of Joe Kerrigan.

All of these organizations have added much growth to the healthful atmosphere of the town.



One of the early line crews of Clay Electric Cooperative.



Levi Nagles' telephone truck.



Office and plant personnel of Clay Electric Cooperative (about 1940) — (L-R) Slim Collar, Robert Dodd, Margaret Marks, Helen Demery and A. G. (Pat) Loudon.

Regarding utilities, Keystone Heights has truly come a long way since 1923. In 1923 the water supply was pumped from Keystone Lake with equipment owned by John Lawrence. G.E. Wiggins, moving from Green Cove Springs, bought the water company and operated it until he died March 6, 1969.

In 1940 some of the citizens complained to the State Board of Health regarding the safety of the water supply. It was still drawn from Keystone Lake in the area open to the public. Livestock was also allowed to run loose. When inspected it was found that the water was still safe for drinking, but changes were needed. It was reported that "both cattle and hogs had been along the shore," and "two hogs and a litter of pigs were observed on the shore." The State Board of Health in Jacksonville gave several suggestions for correcting the condition. One suggestion was to go to Lake Brooklyn for the town's water supply. Eventually, it was done. Later, Wiggins drilled deep wells for the present water supply system.

The only telephone in town in 1924 was at the Keystone Inn. The telephone line came from Interlachen. Levi Nagles was the city's telephone "man." He strung lines on trees, fence posts or anything convenient. He drove an old topless Ford overflowed with bales of wire, ladders and every kind of tool needed for frequent repairs. Later, a telephone line was strung from Hampton.

In 1924 electricity for the town was provided by a small Delco plant owned by John Lawrence. Power was turned on during the evening hours and provided a flickering light at the best. The operation was only a one man job but Lawrence still found it difficult to obtain a permanent operator. However, Wiggins took over the responsibility and bought the plant in 1925. In the next few years Wiggins was responsible for the building of 100 miles of power lines stretching to Lake Geneva, Hillcrest, Putnam Hall, Grandin, Florahome, Lake Swan and Lake Rosa.

Wiggins believed electricity was essential, irregardless of where Americans lived. However, to provide electricity to a growing population in Keystone and other areas, money was needed to finance expansion of more power lines and to build a larger power plant. His firm belief that electricity should be available to all families was met when the non-profit Clay Electric Cooperative, Inc. was organized in late 1937.

The co-op's first formal meeting was held in Keystone Inn. Elected president was F.M. Doying of Keystone Heights; vice-president, F.W. Buddington of Middleburg; and secretary-treasurer, James Houser of Keystone Heights.

The cooperative served only a handful of members at first. Now, the co-op serves over 50,000 families in 12 counties.

The co-op and DuPont's (E.I. DuPont DeNemours & Co. Inc.) Highland and Trailridge Plants have provided employment for many of Keystone's residents.

By 1926 Keystone Heights boasted a public beach with a pavillion, picnic grounds and a nine-hole golf course. A putting green was adjacent to the Keystone Inn. The pavillion was the scene of many Saturday night dances. There were many enjoyable picnics on the grounds.

The golf course was in use by 1926. It was strictly a sand course and eventually given up. In 1958-59 a Golf and Country Club was formed. A clubhouse was built and the golf course was made usable again on the site of the original course.

The Bastedo Fire Station, named for the first volunteer fire chief, was dedicated April 5, 1955. Keystone citizens are rightfully proud of their fire station, its two engines and the volunteer firemen. Old timers recall the volunteer fire department of 1925 when it consisted of a two wheeled hose carrier operated solely by man-power. The "power" was, of course, 13 volunteers.

Ambulance and emergency calls are also handled at the station.

Today's excellent Keystone Heights police force can scarcely be compared with the one man deputy night watchman of the 1920's.



The Blue Lantern boat carried people for a ride on Lake Geneva.



The first golf course with sand greens.



Education has always been a priority in Keystone Heights even though there were few students. In 1924 a one room, frame structure was built just south of the lumber yard on SR100. It housed the elementary grades while the high school continued to hold classes in the Brooklyn Hotel. The first high school graduating class consisted of two girls.

In 1926 a much needed school house was erected on Academy Way for the elementary and high school students. As years passed many temporary buildings were added.

In 1944 the high school portion, grades 9-12, were deleted because there were few students. The three graduates of 1944 were Detha Baldree Hickey, Martha Glisson Thomas, and Mildred Frith Thigpen.

Grades one through eight continued to be held in Keystone. Grades 9-12 were added in the 1962-63 school year.

The school's gymnasium was built in 1966 and was dedicated to A.E. Anthony, Keystone's representative on the Clay County School Board.

The school's football field is named in memory of Gary Cooper, a graduate of the high school. He lost his life while serving his country in South Vietnam in 1968.

In September 1974 the present junior-senior high school building opened.



Hazel McKay can be seen strolling by former Post Office.



Keystone Heights, Fla

The Keystone State Bank was the first bank in town and it was originally located at the site of today's Mallards dime store. It opened in 1952 and was moved to the present building in 1955. The building was enlarged in 1961 and 1973.

As a result of the fast growth in the area, the Guaranty Federal Savings & Loan Association constructed its building on Lawrence Boulevard. Guaranty Federal opened for business on July 2, 1973.

The Post Office has been at three locations since its move from Brooklyn (before 1926). It was first combined with a grocery store (approximately where Scales' Food Store is today). In 1962 the present Post Office building on Lawrence Boulevard was constructed.

In 1948 Keystone had grown to a size that a medical doctor, Dr. William Musser, opened a full-time practice. Dr. Don Christoffer was the town's second physician and he came shortly after Dr. Musser left in 1953. A very popular man, Dr. Christoffer died in an airplane crash in 1968.

Keystone now boasts two medical doctors, an optometrist, and a dentist.

THE COMING YEARS

In the next 50 years Keystone Heights will, in all likelihood, find itself a booming, fast moving community.

In the immediate future, a sewage system, paved roads and apartment complexes seem eminent. One building project in the retirement community of the Park of the Palms will increase Keystone's population by more than 300 and create 80-100 new jobs. The project includes a new church with a seating capacity of 500, a three story apartment building containing 208 units and a 50 bed nursing home.

Along with the sewage systems, residents will likely see re-zoning of lake front property to allow multi-family dwellings.

Population for the lake region by the year 2000 could total 30,000 people.

Because many families are expected to move into the area within the next few years, there will be a need for more educational and recreational facilities.

Hubert White, principal of Keystone High, expects a seven to eight percent increase of students per year in the next five years.

Although Keystone gained a new high school in 1974, there are already plans for expansion. An additional 10 acres of land northwest of the school may be purchased soon.

A new gymnasium, band complex, industrial arts building and a new football stadium are among the dreams of local educators and parents.

Transportation for the community's commuters will change as Keystone's growing pains continue.

Local commuters, whether they be headed for Jacksonville or another city, will drive to the "new" airport and head for work in an aircraft.

Would you believe that people will no longer carry cash or check books? Just a plastic card.

The banking industry is entering into a new era and people will be in the "checkless society." It involves a nationwide money transfer system. And, Keystone's very own Keystone State Bank is switching much of its work to a computer this year.

Watson Hardenbergh, Jr., President of the Keystone State Bank, feels the sleepy city of Keystone Heights is a thing of the past. He envisions it a metropolitan area, starting with a super highway leading from Gainesville to Jacksonville, with Keystone in the middle.

Utilities will also take a bounding leap into the future. According to E.T. Martin, general manager of Clay Electric Cooperative, nuclear power is the only corridor open for Florida's immediate power needs. Solar energy is also a power source and will surely be included in the design of future homes.

Keystone can probably expect the rise of professional centers, major shopping centers, office complexes and a community center.

It seems eminent that Keystone will experience great growing pains in the next few years. There have been a great amount of changes in the past 50 years but it seems likely that even more changes will take place in the next 50 years.

For sure, however, the "retirement community" of Keystone Heights is something of the past 50 years and is certainly no longer true today.