
Touring Lincolnton: A Celebration of Historic
Black Business

Professional and Public Writing

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The Land Has Eyes

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This piece came about as a result of research into Lincolnville’s “secret stories” – what aren’t we seeing when we look at the houses? The buildings? The museums? I started and promptly scrapped several approaches to this storytelling method, finding myself struggling to identify an effective point of view. I decided to tell the story of the land beneath Lincolnville simply because it is the one true constant throughout all of history and the lifeline that allows us to survive as a species. My hope is that this secret story of the oft-overlooked land beneath our feet will bring a new perspective to the story of Lincolnville and spark interest in the history of our city that so few people know about.

The land has eyes. Our soil, our grass, the banks of our rivers, cast an ever-present and never-blinking gaze across time and peoples. As centuries have slipped past us in Lincolnville, we have kept a record of all who passed over it – families, children, peaceful settlements, roaming groups, violent wars, houses and businesses, new cars and old buggies.

Before we drank the blood of the Civil War, we held up a grove of orange trees. One by one, in neat rows, tiny seeds were buried in the ground, smoothed over, and fed with water and manure and bright Florida sunlight. Each seed slowly broke open, delicate tendrils reaching out into the soil, spreading like fingers in search of a hand to hold. Pleased by the presence of new life and promise, we stretched out our gentle hand in response, anchoring the seeds so that they could grow and prosper. The trees grew tall and strong, unfolding toward the bright sky, until

they filled with beautiful orange fruit ready for the harvest. And so we provided Florida with its first commercial orange grove.

We were rearranged one piece at a time when America fought the Civil War. Every stomp of a heavy boot pushed some bits of dirt down toward our core and sent others flying away. Each bullet that missed its flesh mark, or perhaps flew straight through it, was buried in our dirt, where it displaced the soil around it bit by bit. Every landmine, every fallen body, every fortress built or dug, changed the landscape in Florida. While the changes may not be noticeable to ignorant human eyes, we can see and feel every miniscule bit of our self that was moved or changed or desecrated while humans fought a terrible war above us. No amount of blood sacrifice, spilled into the dirt under fallen soldiers, could remedy the damage done. And so we endured the Civil War and remained to observe the reconstruction that would follow.

We hold our lakes like water gathered in gently cupped hands. When Henry Flagler, who built his fortune by ripping into us to drink up our oil, decided that he would force us to accommodate his invasive hotels, he ripped our natural rivers and marshes from our grasp and bent them to his whims. Rows of heavy boots once again wore down the dirt in St. Augustine, but this time it was workmen rather than warriors. The existing Maria Sanchez River, with its magnificent natural saltwater marshes, was an important native ecosystem supporting many of our precious creatures. The marshes were a wonderful love story between us and our water – the place where we mingled and combined, two becoming one, to create the swamps that were so important to Florida's ecosystem. Henry Flagler filled them in. And so we were forced to mourn the suffocating loss of our marshes, left only with a lake in remembrance of the graceful river that once was.

We have witnessed the beauty of human resilience. We watched in horror as they enslaved and brutalized each other, forcing entire populations of people into subjugation. We soaked up their blood like sponges long before they fought their Civil War. We continued to act as witness as the enslaved people, now newly freed and fighting for an equal place in the world, were finally able to build a thriving community. Our dirt bowed gladly beneath their tools, making space for their foundations, filling in holes around beams, solidifying beneath driveways, fertilizing yards of soft natural grasses and flowers. Black citizens called their community “Africa.” We whisper our approval to them in the movement of our grasses and reeds, encouraging the breeze to cool their faces as they work to build a prosperous life for themselves. We remember how we have been trampled, subjugated, changed, and forgotten, and we bear witness to their story.

We watched as they made their community beautiful. Shotgun homes, long and slender, were hubs of family life with their streamlined design; generations were born and died, thriving in between, in the homes Africa built. We accepted the roads they build, like many fingers on our earthen hands, so we could reach into the heart of their community like a vital life force. One of our streets, called St. Francis Street, housed a two-story building that provided comfort and care to the families of those who crossed the line between our realm and the next. Baker and Bacon’s funeral home was like a stepping stone to individuals who needed a resting place between their lives among the living and their eternal rest in our arms. We cradled 86 St. Francis Street in our palm like a fragile creature. Our trees rose up around the building, providing protection and shade, as it persevered throughout the years, serving Africa’s family during their moments of grief. Its large, solid frame showed our community that it was a resting place, a safe harbor in a storm of grief and chaos, a place that would always be there to give them solace. The black

shutters at each window made it look like a home, too, and kept the building from feeling too intimidating or sterile. Baker and Bacon traversed our roads and our soil to work each day, where they faithfully prepared the remains of their community members to say witness their last goodbyes. Then, they allowed us to take over. When they came out with their shovels and somber faces, we softened to ease the digging and closed over the caskets in gentle embrace. And so we loved Africa and the house at 86 St. Francis Street.

The land has faithfully supported Africa, now called Lincolnville, for many decades. We held our breath as homes and businesses began to crumble and wept saltwater tears when the city began tearing down construction that held the stories of all the people we watched walk above us as they moved through their daily lives. We screamed in silence, voiceless, when they ripped out the foundations that had become a part of our body, conjoined to our soil and our soul, pumped through with the spiritual life force only we can provide. And what have they done with the gaping wounds they left behind, bleeding and tender? They have built new homes with none of the love, the handiwork, the determination that created Lincolnville, and they sold them to newcomers who showed us no respect, who plucked out our native plants one by one like hairs from a tender head, and replaced it with unnatural blocks of grass. Irrigation systems were put in the ground like an IV into our most essential veins, pulling out our sacred water and feeding it to the lawns that only choke us. And they wonder, now that our rivers are filled in and our natural drainage has been stopped up with grass and artificial fertilizer, why we push the water up to the surface and flood their home – we have no choice. Yes, we have become vengeful, pushing forth floods and opening our gaping sink holes, but we have been provoked for longer than a human mind could possibly understand.