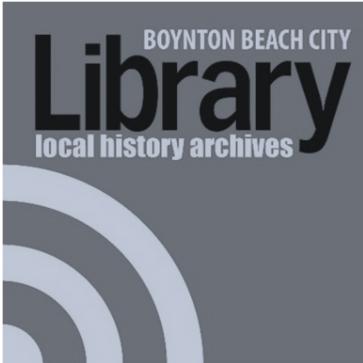


Black History of Boynton Beach, Florida

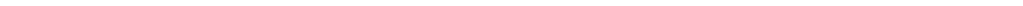


In honor of Black History Month 2021, the **Boynton Beach City Library Local History Archives** offers this short outline of some major events that are often left out of the histories of Boynton Beach. While it's impossible to tell the complete story of any person or place, we hope that this offers some information about significant events that may have been excluded from mainstream histories.

If you are interested in donating material to our collection, or to allow us to scan photographs for the archives, please contact the archivist, Georgen Charnes, at charnesg@bbfl.us.



Let our histories be known.



Visit the online timeline at
<https://www.boynton-beach.org/library/black-history-boynton-beach-timeline>



1890: Early families

Local stories tell that several Black families farmed in the area that would be known as Boynton in the early 1890s, and were among the earliest settlers. Agriculture jobs become plentiful when freezes in northern Florida in 1894 destroyed citrus crops, and citrus cultivation moved south. The East Coast Canal (the intracoastal) was completed from Jacksonville to Miami by 1894 and the Florida East Coast train service established the "Boynton" station (named after Nathan Boynton, who was building a luxury hotel on the coast) to the area in 1895, enabling easier shipping of farm products north. By 1896, Boynton was well established, with a post office, stores, churches, and farms in the area. Agriculture remained the primary industry until at least World War II.

1907: Community expands

The Black community originally settled around Federal Highway, north of Boynton Beach Boulevard, and steadily grew south. The community had a school, church, stores, and homes. In 1907, Black community members petitioned the Dade County School Board (Boynton was in Dade County until 1909) to furnish a teacher for a school for Black children. A separate school for White children had been created in 1896. The St. Paul A.M.E. Church was established in 1900, making it the oldest church in Boynton Beach. The original church building was located at the corner of Boynton Beach Boulevard and Federal Highway. There was no legally mandated segregation.

1924: Segregation established in Boynton Beach

The Town of Boynton established segregation in Boynton Beach in February 1924 with Ordinance 37. The Black community, which lived primarily on Federal Highway above Boynton Beach Boulevard, were forced to move west. Many buildings, including businesses, homes, the school, and church were moved. In November 1924, Ordinance 47 expanded the area available for Black citizens further westward. Boynton was not rare in imposing a segregated area for Black citizens' dwellings and businesses. In 1929, West Palm Beach passed an ordinance delineating a segregated area, although it had existed informally for many years. Lantana's original charter reserved the right to establish a separate section, although it was never enforced. The Town of Lake Worth created the "Osborne Colored Addition" in 1917, a segregated section, and would not have a school for Black children until after World War II. After segregation was imposed, Black citizens of Boynton were not allowed to attend town council meetings.

1924: The Town takes the Black community's land on Federal Highway

After segregation was imposed in 1924, Black citizens James Butler, and Nebraska and Rhodia Lee, refused to sell their land on Federal Highway to the town of Boynton, on which Mayor Knuth had arranged to build a new town hall designed by Addison Mizner. The town sued the families and won, and was required to pay \$2,500 for each property. However, the town of Boynton later sued successfully to have the amount reduced to \$2,000. Moves were made to remove Mayor Knuth from office; a Ku Klux Klan rally in support of him was staged in town. After it became apparent that he had arranged for the new town hall to be built adjacent to his own personal real estate development in exchange for approving the Mizners' plans to move Ocean Boulevard, Knuth was withdrawn from office and the plan for the town hall was abandoned. Later, in 1945, that space was used first for the fire department and water utilities, and then a city hall. In 2020, it is Veteran's Park.

1925: Black Community Flourishes

In 1925, Bahamian born Robert E. Wells platted (registered plots) of the "Robert E. Wells" subdivision along what is now Martin Luther King Boulevard. This became the Black community's downtown during segregation, where there were stores, nightclubs, barbers and beauty salons, and residences. Several businesses were owned by the Wright family, including Capri Restaurant, Tenth Avenue Pool Hall, Community Action Migrant Program, Wright Apartments & Rooms, Bahama Bar & Lounge, and Wright Beer & Wine.

1925: Boom, Bust, and Depression

The early 1920s was a "boomtime" in Florida. Wild speculation in real estate developments created a lot of jobs in the construction, agriculture, tourism, and transportation industries, and the population grew, but it also caused the cost of living to soar and jammed the railroad system. Starting in 1925, Florida took a series of hits that ended the boom. In 1925, railroad companies called an embargo on shipping, permitting only foodstuffs, fuel, and other essential commodities, causing a slowing of development, as builders couldn't get supplies. In 1926, the "Miami Hurricane" hit in September, and on September 17, 1928, another storm, the "Okeechobee Hurricane" caused severe damage, destroying several homes and businesses in the Boynton Black community. In early 1929, Mediterranean Fruit Flies were found in Florida in April, and citrus trees and many other crops were destroyed or quarantined to prevent the spread, resulting in severe damage to the agricultural industry and widespread unemployment of agricultural laborers. And between October 24 and October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed setting the stage for the Great Depression, when Black unemployment rates were double or triple of those of Whites.

1926: New school for Black community

Around 1926, a new Rosenwald School was built for the community on the corner of Seacrest Boulevard and NW 12th Avenue. Rosenwald Schools were built primarily for the education of Black children in the south in the early 20th century. The project was the product of a partnership between Julius Rosenwald (CEO of Sears, Roebuck and Company) and the African American leader Booker T. Washington. From the 1910s to the early 1930s, over 5,000 Rosenwald Schools were built in the southern states. According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, by 1928, one-third of the South's rural Black school children and teachers were served by Rosenwald Schools.

1933: Boynton Beach establishes "Sunset Laws"

Racial "sunset law," town Ordinance no. 136, is passed on November 7, 1933, stating that "in order to promote the public peace, welfare, harmony and good order," after December 1, 1933, White people over 18 years of age could not be in the Black section of town, and Blacks could not be in the White section after 9 p.m. in October-May or 10 p.m. in June-September. They also passed an ordinance that anyone under the age of 18 could not be out on the street after those times. "Sundown towns" existed in one form or another all over the U.S. Some sources claim that more than half of towns, or even counties, had some prohibition on where African Americans could be. Jews, Chinese, and Mexicans were also prohibited in some places.

1942: School year for Black students moved to facilitate child labor

During World War II (1941-1945 for America), there was a shortage of labor to pick crops as many men were serving in the military. Farm owners parked outside the school for Black children, offering to pay

schoolchildren who wanted to skip school to pick in the fields. In 1942, in response to a petition from growers, the dates of the school year for Black schools were scheduled to run June 8 to December 18, in order for Black children to be available to work during the harvest months of January to May. Black community leaders, who wanted their children to get an education, lobbied against this practice and it was ended in March 1944. Spencer Pompey was a significant leader in this fight; an oral history with him is available online.

1945: Club Continental "finest building in town"

Club Continental, located at 150 NE 10th Avenue, was a two-story concrete block and stucco building built in 1945. The first floor contained a bar area and the second floor was used for dances and concerts. The club was a hub for Black entertainment from the 1950s to the 1960s and drew entertainment from the "Chitlin Circuit," which was a network of clubs, theaters, and other venues where Black entertainers could perform during the segregation era. In 1948, it was commented in the *Palm Beach Post* that it was the finest building in town, housing a large bar and second-floor ballroom which served as a movie theater. In 1960, a carousel was installed, large enough for 60 people and featuring scenes of Florida and moving fish. The vacant lot immediately to the east was used by the Silas Green all-Negro Minstrel Show (an African American owned and run variety tent show from New Orleans) and other community fairs and holiday celebrations.

1951: Negro Civic League provides voice for Black community

On May 21, 1951, the Boynton Negro Civic League made a presentation to the Boynton Beach City Council, arguing for a larger segregated residential area and more city services and financial support. Noted as the first such appearance by the *Palm Beach Post*, the Negro Civic League was considered to be the Black City Council, since they had no representation in the city.

1951: First Black police officer in Boynton Beach

James Willis Butler (1918-2003) was born in Boynton Beach to Bahamian born parents James A. Butler (1892-1986), a grocery store owner and minister, and Irene Curry Butler (1891-1929) a café owner. Butler was a carpenter, repairman, school bus driver, and in 1951 became Boynton Beach's first Black police officer, a position he held for ten years. An oral history with Mr. Butler is available online.

1954: Poinciana Elementary School & Carver High School

The segregated elementary school in Boynton Beach was renamed "Poinciana School" in June 1954. The only high school available for Black students in the area was in Delray Beach, George Washington Carver High School. Built in 1937 on the site of the Delray Training School, Solomon David Spady was its first principal. Black students were picked up by bus to attend the high school from the entire region, from Lake Worth to Deerfield, because there was no other high school open to Black students. In 1969, after desegregation, it merged with the predominantly White Seacrest High School to form Atlantic High School.

1958: Black community demands access to beach; is promised swimming pool

Black citizens were not allowed to use the beach owned by the City of Boynton Beach during segregation. In July of 1958, Boynton Beach Mayor L.S. Chadwell closed the public beach in response to rumors that a group of Black people might try to swim there. The Negro Civic League approached the city council of Boynton Beach about gaining access to beachfront on July 13th, 1958. They were told there were no funds to buy more beach property, so the City promised them a swimming pool. Wilson's

Recreation Center (named after community leader Theodore Wilson) was opened 3 January 1960 and the pool there on 14 November 1961. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, "wade-ins" took place all over Florida, as a way for Black citizens to protest the segregation of beaches.

1958: Desegregation of Palm Beach County Schools begins

Black and White children attended separate schools until desegregation. Facilities and materials for Black schools were inferior. In 1954, a landmark Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* found that racially segregated educational facilities were "inherently unequal," but supplied no timetable for school desegregation. A series of lawsuits ensued in many places, including Palm Beach County. In 1958, William M. Holland Sr., the county's first Black attorney, sued for his child to attend a White school. A court decision in 1961 resulted in four Black students transferring to White high schools, including 15 year old Yvonne Lee Odom, who became the first Black student at Seacrest High School in Delray Beach in 1961. Holland's son was finally admitted to Palm Beach Junior High in 1963 and he dropped his suit in 1973 when the schools were declared integrated. However, efforts have continued to assess and respond to integration of our public schools.

1962: Civil Rights Era

A group of Black teenagers from Fort Lauderdale took every seat in the Royal Castle Restaurant (502 N. Federal Highway, Boynton Beach) for 45 minutes. They were served, then departed without incident. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 superseded all state and local laws concerning segregation.

1972: Black community demands City action

Protests from the Black communities for City action on the crumbling infrastructure in their communities, and against police misconduct erupt during a City Council meeting in 1972. Prompts for change continued through the 1970s and 1980s.

1981: First Black City Council Member

Over the decades, Black citizens have had an increasing number of leadership positions. Dr. Samuel Lamar Wright, Sr. (b. 1953) served as the first Black city council member in 1981-1984. Prior to his election, he was also a representative of the Concerned Citizens Voter's League of Boynton Beach. He went on to become a professor, dean, and community liaison consultant at University of South Florida and founder of the Tampa Bay Black Heritage Festival.

1988: Increasing representation in city leadership

Ezell Hester Jr. (1931-1989) became first Black Vice Mayor of Boynton Beach in April 1988, and Acting Mayor in July 1988 when mayor Nick Cassandra stepped down. Hester worked 31 years as an educator, including 13 years teaching mathematics at Congress Middle School; in 1992, a new community center was named in his honor. Other important leaders who were "firsts" include:

- Lillian Artis (1934-2006), first elected Black woman city commissioner in 1990;
- Floyd Jordan, the first Black fire chief in 1994;
- Gladys Cannon, the first Black woman police sergeant in 2004;
- Michael G. Gregory, the first Black Police Chief in 2018;
- Perry Patterson, first Black firefighter;
- Latosha Clemons, first Black woman firefighter, and later first Black woman lieutenant and deputy chief; and

- Lores ""Larry"" Gamble Sr., first Black police lieutenant.

2013: Black Lives Matter

Many Boynton Beach and Palm Beach County citizens have participated in protest events after incidents of racially motivated violence. From 2013, many of these events were associated with the "Black Lives Matter" movement. In 2020, after the shocking video of the killing of George Floyd, these protests were larger and were supported internationally.

2015: Robert E. Wells Day

Robert E. Wells traveled from the Bahamas to the future Boynton Beach to farm pineapples. He was instrumental in getting both his church and the school for Black children established. While he attended early town meetings, including the meeting to incorporate the town in 1920, after segregation in 1924, he and other Black citizens were banned from attending town meetings. He was the first president of the Boynton Negro Civic League. In 2015, Mayor Jerry Taylor proclaimed February 7th as Robert E. Wells Day in his honor.

The Boynton Beach City Library Local History Archives has been helping to document the history of the area for many years by collecting, preserving, and making collections of historical materials available. As part of our ongoing mission, we have made several oral histories, photographs, and other materials available online. If you are interested in helping us document our community and would like to donate or allow us to scan your photographs, please feel free to contact Georgen Charnes, the archivist.



Boynton Beach City Library Local History Archives
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