



## **The Story of 403 St. Francis Street**

Compiled for Owners Bob and Mary Bedford

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September 23, 2021

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It was the mid-1920s in the All Saints neighborhood of Tallahassee that had a bustling commercial area nearby. Situated between the railroad and the Capital Building, the neighborhood was a hub for small retail stores, a cotton gin, a brothel, and a bottling plant. In 1925, A H Charleville (Alonzo) and his wife, Exie, moved to 401/403 St. Francis Street, a bungalow-style home built as a duplex. According to city directories, Alonzo was a grocer in the area, living in another home on St. Francis where he housed his store prior to moving to the duplex. He most likely found the duplex appealing as he was able to house his 'mom and pop' grocery store on one side while his family resided on the other.

Historians surmise that these small in-home grocery stores were common, especially in residential areas during this time, and it was convenient to stock the shelves having the railroad right in your backyard as the Charlevilles did on St. Francis. However, the 1920 census listed his wife Exie, as the grocer while he worked as a miller at the Florida Cotton Oil Co. The streets were muddy on St. Francis and stayed that way till they were paved with gravel in 1940.

Mr. Charleville had blue eyes, light hair, was medium height and had a stout build, based on his 1918 military draft card. He was born in Texas on April 23, 1880 and the surname of Charleville/Charleyville is of French origin. As mentioned previously, he was a miller for the Florida Cotton Oil Co. in 1918 and this experience proved to be helpful in his career. Alonzo and Exie seem to close their grocery store at 403 St. Francis around 1930 and they took on their first tenant, Mr. Myrrus Wright, the manager of the Chero-Cola Bottling Co. (the predecessor to the Coco-Cola Co.). Mr. Charleville (Charlesville, Charleyville) graduated to manager of the Tallahassee Cotton Gin Co. located on St. Michaels, just around the corner from St. Francis.

The Tallahassee Cotton Gin received notoriety by the government for their participation in a research study to test the quality of the local cotton. The cotton gin provided samples from every single bale that came in for processing and they were highlighted for 100% cooperation with the government while Mr. Charleville was at the helm.

Charleville's wife, Exie was very involved in the local Garden Club and helped coordinate Tallahassee flower shows. Mrs. Charleville served as Chairman of the Garden Club in 1932 and their mission that year was a beautification project to plant shrubs and flowers from Gaines Street to Railroad Avenue to Monroe Street! I imagine the Charlevilles had one of the most beautiful yards on the block with many flowers blooming because of Exie's passion. The Charlevilles were also very involved in their church, Trinity Methodist and hosted many church gatherings at their home, with one news clipping noting that Exie "served a delicious peach ice cream and caramel cake during social hour."

In the 1930s, the Charlevilles decided to take full advantage of owning a duplex by taking on more than one tenant at a time and began to rent out individual rooms. 'For rent' ads in the local newspaper highlighted several rooms for lease at the same time, \$30 furnished, \$25 unfurnished.

The Suttons also lived at 403 St. Francis, though they were not listed in the city directories. Mrs. Julia Sutton would often host gatherings of the Business & Professional Womens Club Chamber of Commerce. This organization did not seem to have a physical address, but instead floated from home to home, bringing together strong women of the 1930s who were entrepreneurial in spirit and had far

bigger dreams than what social norms allowed. The organization was around for many years and news clippings show it was still in existence in the 1950s. The Suttons must have been dear friends of the Charlevilles; Mrs. Sutton was named the personal representative of Exie Charleville's estate when she passed away in 1977.

Exie and Alonzo continue to live at 403 St. Frances until 1936. Mr. Charleville had done well managing the cotton gin and moved the family to 1226 E. Park Avenue, near where we now call the Tallahassee Chain of Parks. The Pichard family has deep roots in Tallahassee, and were the new neighbors to the Charlevilles on Park Avenue. These beautiful parks once served a more ominous purpose than just a place to picnic and hold art festivals. The "old city" was not fortified by a fortress but rather a 200-foot clearing that surrounded what was Tallahassee at the time. The vegetation was burned and large muddy clearings were left to help prevent Native American attacks. Now in the time of Mr. Charleville, the edge of town began to expand past the original city limits. Homeowners along these clearings grew tired of these large muddy and unattractive areas, especially since Indian attacks were a thing of the past.

Neighbors began coming together to cover these muddy areas with grass, and beautiful vegetation, organically growing into what we now know as the Chain of Parks. Remnants of the original 200-foot clearing around the city remain in today's All Saints District as well (Wallace, Roberts & Todd, 1999). The small park in front of 403 St. Francis was once part of this original defense system.

401 and 403 St. Francis Street saw many new faces grace their doors after the Charlevilles move out. In 1940, Mr. John M. Culbreth (Culbert) and his wife Ruth, moved in. John was a mechanic at Allen Sales and Service, located on what was called the "Jacksonville Highway at the City Limits". Many news clippings showcase cars for sale at Allen Sales, including a 1936 Chevrolet pick-up truck, good running condition, price \$125. Mr. Culbreth's wife, Ruth, was quite fragile and was in and out of the hospital often. Tenant backgrounds were diverse, including a salesman from the Tallahassee New Way Laundry and Dry Cleaners, a workman at the Capital Hide and Fur Co., and a barber from the Palace Barber Shop. The barber shop originally opened its doors around 1915 and was THE place to go for men's haircuts, and I can imagine, male conversation. It became an icon in Tallahassee in those early days. In 1951 the local police were on hand to manage an arbitration taking place between all barber shops in town - agreeing to one price for haircuts at \$.85 a cut.

By 1942, the Tallahassee Gin Co. was no longer mentioned in city directories. In the mid-to-late 1930s the gin began to transition into a new industry, as cotton gins were not as prevalent. The old gin was called the Oil Mill Yard, though no records were found confirming its industry. Mr. Charleville is listed as managing the Oil Mill Yard as well.

In 1946, Exie and Alonzo Charleville moved out of their beautiful home on East Park Avenue and back to St. Francis at 407, directly next door to 403. Alonzo was most likely forced into retirement due to many health issues and he suffered through several unsuccessful eye surgeries that basically left him blind.

Unfortunately, Mr. Alonzo took his own life in the backyard of 407 St. Francis in 1947 after, what I could imagine, was a very trying time for him and Exie. He was 67 years old. Mrs. Charleville continued to live at 407 St. Francis for many years. She never re-married and lived to be 96 years old. She is buried alongside her husband in the historic Oakland Cemetery. The Charlevilles did not have any children.

The Culbreths continued to see new tenants come and go in the late 1940s, including Mr. Maynard M. Knight, who was also a mechanic. News clippings show that Mr. Maynards's wife, Evelyn, may have had

a short radio segment on the local CBS station. For 15 minutes, once a week, Evelyn entertained Tallahasseeans with what, I wish I knew.

In 1953, the Culbreths stockpiled enough money to open their very own mechanic business, Amoco Service, and they moved to 811 South Boulevard, just down the street from St. Francis. Joseph Howell, and his wife, Vivian, were the new residents of 403 St. Francis. Joseph began his career at the local Birdsey's Flour and Mill off of South Adams Street. He also worked for the Coca-Cola Bottling Co. for a time. Newspaper advertisements for Birdsey's often highlighted flour, coffee and feed for sale. Flour was \$2.04 for 25 pounds, coffee \$.50 a pound, and horse feed \$3.55 for 100 pounds. Mr. Howell was quite athletic and was offered a contract with the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team. Instead, he opted to stay in Tallahassee for his family life. Mr. Howell was very involved in youth sports in Tallahassee, and managed a few local sporting goods stores, including B&B Sporting Goods.

Mr. Maynard Knight and his wife, Evelyn, continue to reside as tenants at 403 St. Francis until 1954. The Newsome family moved into the duplex alongside the Knights. The Newsomes have three children, two girls and a boy. Mr. Julius Newsome is listed as a bus driver for Greyhound Bus Station in the city directory but news clippings paint a different picture. He is noted to actually supervise the Greyhound Bus Station with his son, James Cecil acting as operations supervisor in 1970. The Newsomes were very involved in the community, donating \$300 to a local political campaign, and his wife and daughters were often mentioned in the local newspaper hosting luncheons and wedding receptions for the Immanuel Baptist Church. Ann, their eldest daughter, married in a beautiful wedding that was highlighted more than once in the local newspaper. Mary Frances was the Newsome's youngest child and she is where my story ends.

While cleaning out 403 St. Francis in 2007 after their recent purchase of the home, the current owners, Bob and Mary Bedford, discovered what seemed to be a little girl's hideaway tucked away in the attic. She had left behind part of a metal dollhouse and a book, "Good Times Together," by Grace Storm. Mary Frances wrote her name in cursive on the inside cover of the book; she had beautiful penmanship and was probably close to 7-10 years old in 1954 when her family moved to St. Francis. This secret attic space was probably her escape from the hustle and bustle of a busy family. I believe she dreamed of a different life for herself inside this attic. You see, news clippings often highlight Mary Frances in the background of many large wedding affairs as a young lady hostess, including one clipping noting she manned the fruit punch bowl for the affair. Mary Frances' sister and friends had beautiful weddings that were highlighted in the local newspaper, down to the type of lace on one bride's wedding dress and the type of flowers used for the celebration.

Mary Frances did not seem to have much interest in following the same path as her friends and older sister, Ann. Mary Frances graduated with an Arts Degree from North Florida Junior College in 1964. She was the only female in her graduating class. And when it was time to announce her wedding to Mr. Baumgartner in the local newspaper, there was no beautiful wedding photo or lengthy description of the celebration; it was a small mention stating that Mary Frances had married Mr. Baumgartner, who was employed by the U.S Air Force while she worked for the Okaloosa County Schools, and they planned to honeymoon on Jekyll Island, Georgia. Mary Frances and her husband resided in Fort Walton Beach.

This beautiful home at 403 Saint Francis Street has survived the test of time. It has shared its walls with so many wonderful people, including strong women who dreamed of a different life outside of the social norms. This house is so special and I pray it continues to stand proud at the corner of St. Francis for many years to come. There are many more great stories to be told inside 403 St. Francis and my hope is it will continue to be loved and its stories shared for generations to come.

### **The Gaines Street Corridor**

The Gaines Street Corridor is an overlooked but special part of Tallahassee. Near Gaines Street is Cascades Park. This area once boasted a waterfall known as the Cascade and was one of the reasons this area was selected to be the capital of Florida. Tallahassee's first settlers reportedly camped in or close to the Gaines Street Corridor in 1824. In the September 24, 1825 Pensacola Gazette, it was described as "a beautiful cascade, which was formed by the rivulet above described falling over a ledge of rocks into a deep glen, which forms almost a circle of about 70 yards in diameter and disappears at the bottom of the same ledge of rocks, very near the cascade." (Wallace, Roberts & Todd, 1999).

Initially, in 1825 a City Reserve was established adjacent to the Cascade to protect the water supply. However, the city soon began leasing this land out for a tanning yard, planing mill and an ice company. The city also began using this area for city services, including the Gas and Electric Company, County Jail, City Waterworks and city sewage system. By the 1870s, the railroad was dumping ties into the Cascade to stabilize the rail bed. This ultimately backed up the stream and by the 1880s, the Cascade had disappeared, creating a pond. While the pond was initially used as a community swimming hole, as mosquitoes became an increasing problem, the city began filling the pond with trash beginning in the 1920s. By 1953, the pond was completely filled (Wallace, Roberts & Todd, 1999).

The demolition of the cascade and subsequent filling in of the pond caused major flooding areas in and around the Gaines Street Corridor. Franklin Boulevard and parts of Monroe Street were frequently underwater in a heavy rainstorm and this area was plagued with flooding problems for decades.

With the coming of the railroad to the area in 1837, industrial uses sprang up to take advantage of proximity to that important resource. By the 1860s, the area adjacent to the rail line was home to a myriad of industrial uses, including steam saws, mills, lumber yards and a brick yard. In the 1890s, the railroad became part of the new Seaboard Air Line Railway (Wallace, Roberts & Todd, 1999). The raw cotton would arrive on the Seaboard Air Line and was taken by mule- or cattle-drawn carriages up to the Tallahassee Cotton Gin for processing.

The All Saints District, or also known as the Walker Subdivision, was once the estate of George K. Walker (ca. 1886) near the depot along Gaines Street. Once converted into a neighborhood, the Walker Subdivision consisted of some 51 small lots, as well as properties on St. Francis, St. Michaels and All Saints Streets, an area that eventually became known as the All Saints Neighborhood (May, 2014). Mr. Walker's grave can be found at the historic cemetery at St. Johns Episcopal Church in downtown Tallahassee. Mr. AH Charleville was one of the first homeowners in the Walker subdivision.

Platted in the 1880s, the Stearns-Mosely Neighborhood was a vibrant African American community that had been situated on the site of an 1860s brick yard (Wallace, Roberts & Todd, 1999). Despite the growing industrialization of the area, several residential neighborhoods developed and flourished in the

Gaines Street Corridor during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The All Saints Neighborhood was a flourishing neighborhood with a mix of white and black residents. St. Francis Street was a predominantly white area, while homes closer to the depot had more black residents. Due to its proximity to the depots, the neighborhood was scattered with industrial uses (Wallace, Roberts & Todd, 1999), and even housed a notorious brothel not far from the Coca-Cola Bottling Co. that was recently demolished in 2021.

Sanborn Insurance Company Maps reveal that as late as 1926, the area was still predominantly residential. The main industrial buildings (excluding those along Railroad Avenue) were the Middle Florida Ice Company (now demolished) and its Cold Storage Facility (still standing), and the Wahnish Cigar Factory (still standing). The site of the present Coca-Cola building appeared in 1926. The Middle Florida Ice Factory and Bottling Works opened in All Saints sometime prior to 1895 on a site immediately adjacent to the railroad tracks on St. Michaels. Between 1910 and 1920 Middle Florida Ice constructed a Cold Storage facility immediately north of its factory. It began bottling Coca Cola in 1904. While the Cold Storage facility remains, the factory has been demolished (Wallace, Roberts & Todd, 1999).

Another notable landmark is the Wahnish Cigar Factory on St. Francis Street. A. Wahnish built his two-story factory at the corner of All Saints and Macomb streets in 1907. In full operation, it would house as many as 107 workers. By 1911, the building was home to Wahnish's son's Tampa Stogie Manufacturing Company. In later years, it would house the Hill City Manufacturing and Machine Company, a bakery, a mattress factory, and many more. It later housed the McGowan Electric Company and more recently, a bar, the Cowhaus (Wallace, Roberts & Todd, 1999).

The Old Clock Tower, now demolished, was a landmark of the area. It was located at 815 South Macomb Street and was constructed in 1911 by the eccentric architect, Calvin B. Phillips. Those who lived in the area relied on the old clock tower for the time. Phillips lived in the adjoining home and is buried in the exotic onion-domed mausoleum he designed in the Oakland Cemetery. The Florida Heritage Foundation, Tallahassee's first historic preservation organization, unsuccessfully attempted to save the Old Clock Tower from demolition in the early 1970s (Wallace, Roberts & Todd, 1999).

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