

[William F. Hawley]

[??? ?]

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William F. Hawley,

Arlington, Florida.

(Jacksonville History)

Personal Interview

(Concluded)

Rose Shepherd, Writer. [??]

WILLIAM F. HAWLEY

- [1?] - QUAINT CHARACTERS FAMILIAR TO JACKSONVILLE IN THE [?]

“There were several quaint characters familiar to Jacksonville citizens in the [1880's?].” said Mr. Hawley. “One of these was [Nagged Sal?], a middle-aged colored woman who [traipsed?] over the streets and up alleys, gathering whatever there was visible of food, cast-off clothing, bottles, or anything she could make use of. She carried a large wicker basket on her right arm which was soon filled with odds and ends. Then [Nagged Sal?] lifted her worn skirts, wadded the hem at her waist in the back, thus making a [copins?] catch-all of the [front?] portion. She was a funny sight as she waddled homeward, with her filled basket and her back bent with the weight of stuff she had gathered up in her skirt. Incidentally, she originated what was probably the first short skirt on our city streets.

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“Another was Uncle Gabriel who walked up and down [May?]-st., blowing blasts on a long tin trumpet, after which he would proclaim: ‘stealin’ man when’t lie — lyin’ man won’t steal. Trumpet says so.’ Gabriel was an ex-slave of the Mart’s, a little off in the upper story, but he had entree to the kitchens of local citizens, via the back door, and never went hungry. He was harmless, but peculiar. People were kind to him, and even the children were not afraid to talk to him, as 2 was a familiar sight. When he thought it was near meal time, he just went through somebody’s yard to the back door, opened it and helped himself to any food in sight.

“There were many of the [Kingsley]? slaves in Duval County, always distinguished by their fine manners and good behavior. [Jerhamiah Kingsly]? was a slave-dealer, built his own vessels, and became rich in the traffic of negroes. On one of his trips to Africa he dealt with an African ‘King’ or sort of head man of the tribe, who had a very beautiful daughter. [Kingsley]? married her, and she was of great assistance to him, as he would [unload?] these gibbering Africans at his [Fort]? George plantation, and Ma’am Anna’, as she was called, would take them in hand, train them to work, and to talk English. He had two very handsome daughters, with dark olive skins, and black wavy hair, but showing traces of their negro blood in their hands and dark eyes with large whites. He had his [daughters educated?] at the best colleges in the east, and when they become of marriageable age, he inserted an advertisement in the New York Times offering a dowry of \$10,000 each to settled and satisfactory young men who were willing to marry them, with knowledge of their ancestry. John [Mammis]? from New York married Martha, and the other married a man by the name of Baxter. The [Mammises]? lived on the south side, but the other couple located in the north somewhere, although they stayed for a while near Jacksonville, the section from Maxwell to [Commodore’s]? Point on the St. Johns River was for many years known as Baxter’s Bluff, the section where their home was.

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“Mr. [Sammis?] was engaged in the sawmill business, and my duties in handling shipments often took me to his home. Mrs. [Sammis?] was highly educated, well mannered, and friendly, but while she looked after the comfort of any visitors in cordial fashion, she never sat at the table with Mr. [Sammis?] and his business associates. He cleared a lot of land on the south side, owning a large number of slaves. He protested against [?], and one day made a Republican speech on the corner of [Bay?] and [Pine?]-sts. Quite crowd gathered around, some became threatening, so he cut short his speech, made a run for the river where a boat awaited him with one of his slaves with oars in hand, jumped in, and was rowed to [Fulton?], where he caught a schooner and left for the North, just one lap ahead of a highly incensed committee who were bent on vengeance.

“In preparation for his journey north, he had deeded his property to a woman named Mosely. In the early 1870's during the reconstruction period, he came back, got his land back in his own name, and resumed business at the old stand.

“Kingsley died before I came to Jacksonville. I used to like to talk to Mrs. [Sammis?], she was so intelligent, and am sorry now I did not make notes of the interviews, as the history would be worth while. There are two rows of stately [palmettoes?] forming a wide avenue from the water to the front of the old plantation home of her [father?] on St. George Island which she told me of helping to set out. The [Mammises?] had two sons who were educated at Meidelberg University in Germany.

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“The boys left Jacksonville and made their home in Washington, D. C., where one of them for thirty years or more had a splendid job in the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

“I have been told that Mrs. [Sammis?] attended the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1776 and registered at a different hotel every night on account of her color. She was a fine-looking woman, stately, and with charming manners.

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“One of the Kingsley negroes used to work about the J. & [K.?] W. R. R. station and one day showed me his [?] papers, ([emancipation?] documents).

“Another funny character was Cy [Purman?], who was a snake charmer. If anyone heard of a big rattlesnake in the neighborhood, they would send for Cy. He would capture it and go up and down the streets giving exhibitions in snake handling. Finally, a [circus?] hired him, and he was sent to Atlantic City, New Jersey, where he opened a kind of side show as a ‘snake charmer’. The city authorities gathered him up with his box of snake and sent him off to jail for operating without a permit. Trouble started among the other city guests who were afraid of snakes and not particularly interested in a colored snake charmer, so the police remitted his fine and he picked up his pets and walked out. The snakes would sometimes bite him, but he always carried a little bottle of black mixture, a secret formula he claimed to have received from the Indians, and would put a few drops on his tongue, seemingly suffering no harm from the reptiles' bites. He would never divulge to anyone what this mixture was composed of.

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“There were a good many florists in Jacksonville, one of who — named [Robinson?] — made a specialty of cultivating violets. When President Grover Cleveland brought his bride here on their wedding tour in the late 1880's, they stayed at the St. James Hotel, and Mr. Robinson who was a great admirer of the lovely Mrs. Cleveland, threw a large bouquet of perfect purple violets in her lap, as their carriage passed along in front of his place of business. She smiled in gracious acknowledgement and later wrote him a note of thanks, which he prized very highly. Mr. Robinson, quite elderly, is still living somewhere in Jacksonville.

“Another familiar character was a little white woman known as ‘smiling Kate.’ I never knew her name nor heard her referred to in any other manner. She smiled in a friendly way at everyone as she passed along, whether she was acquainted with them or not. My first contact with her was one hot day [crossing?] on the two-board walk along St. James Park

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to [minree?]-st. She was sitting flat down on the board, and as I came along, she took off her shoe, and looked up as she pulled out a two-and-a-half-inch sliver that had run through the thin sole of her slipper, and holding it up, she said, with a gracious smile: "Now, I ask you, isn't that an awful thing for a lady to have in her shoe?" She was small, always dressed very neatly, and the smile was never-failing.

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"I believe I forgot to say that during the yellow fever epidemic of 1888, when the town was quarantined, the Clyde Line steamboats stopped running. They resumed operations, however, on December 15th, and that night there was a celcoming reception, the Wilson Battery came out and shot off several salvos, there was a parade, and a good time generally.

"There was usually a good band of some sort available. One of the best, known as the Welcome Cornet Band — the leader was a blind man who was led always by a little colored boy. Then there was Lucy's band, and there were two or three very well trained local companied of colored minstrels. They gave entertainments at the Park Opera House, on the corner where the Western Union building now stands at the corner of Laura and Duval-sts. In 1901, after the Park Theatre burned, there was a temporary structure erected, and later on the Duval Opera House at Monroe and Main-sts., very well equipped for that period, and everything was held there in the way of receptions, entertainments, recitals, etc.

"Sailboats and excursions on the river were popular, and there were often boat races which occasioned great excitement. When I came here, the levee was lined with steamboats, both passengers and freighters, and if you came along towards the wharf with a suitcase, indicating you were going to board a steamer, the little negroes would almost knock you over in the scramble for one to carry your bag aboard for a quarter.

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“John Clark and his family were northern people, and when the War between the States occurred, they put their grocery stock on a steamer and went away, but returned after peace was declared, opened the store, and did business as usual.

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“I am very proud of Jacksonville. It has weathered fires, fevers, storms and other disasters, and progressed right along.

“In 1891 there was a big fire which started in the China store of [?], Stockton and [Knight?] at the foot of Main and Bay-sts. This was a new, five-story structure, and the fire started in a collection of shavings and packing material at the elevator shaft. The flames were leaping from the roof top before the alarm spread. The fire went on the east side of [?] Main to Forsyth, jumped the street, took the [Freedman's?] Bank Building, and then went out Main, sweeping both sides clean of buildings to Church-st., before it was checked.

“Where the [Windle?] Hotel is located, named for Windle Smith, his father, Mr. C. B. Smith had a grocery store. Next was a vacant lot with a deep cave where a limited amount of dynamite was always stored. This afternoon, however, some had been returned, so that a larger quantity than usual was in the [case?]. The main stock was stored outside the city limits in regular powder magazines. The [W.?] B. Douglass printing place adjoined the vacant lot, and as Mr. Douglass and I were struggling to get his desk through a window, the dynamite went off, the Smith Building crashed to the ground, and we ran for our lives. Beyond the vacant lot was the old Savoy Theatre, which was also destroyed in the fire.

“The grocery stores were in long buildings filled with all sorts of supplies in use at that [time?], in addition to groceries; the fronts were open, and at night closed by fastening the shutters. Shelves held the small packages, with barrels behind the long counters for sugar, meal, flour, etc.

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“In 1887, Robert Jones opened a first class grocery store, very attractive in its white paint, with closed shelves, show cases, and a high grade stock. He sold for cash, which was also a novelty, as the old stores did a big credit business. The store was on West Bay-st., just off of Laura. He did a fine business until the yellow fever epidemic next year, when he was compelled to close his store, which was never re-opened.

“One thing I will say in favor of yellow fever. I suffered attacks of typhoid fever for twenty-five years, which were long-drawn out and very debilitating, but I would rather have yellow fever which lasts only a few days, than one siege of typhoid. By the way, after I had the yellow fever, my health improved, and I seemed immune to all diseases. Not so bad, eh?”