

1992

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Recommended Citation

Tokley, James E. (1992) "An History of Blacks in Tampa/Hillsborough County from 1526 to the Present," *Sunland Tribune*: Vol. 18 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol18/iss1/16>

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AN HISTORY OF BLACKS IN TAMPA/ HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY FROM 1526 TO THE PRESENT

By JAMES E. TOKLEY

& Who shall tell our history when we are
dead
and gone
of the beauty and the mystery & the pain of
Freedom
Song
Shall I tell you, sitting 'round me/ of our
long and sacred past
Will you tell it to your children - tell it true,
so it
will last?

It was said by all the wisemen/and the Truth
is still complete:
If you do not learn from Hist'ry/Then from
Hist'ry you'll
repeat &
If you do not know you hist'ry that began
across the waves
You have doomed yourself, my children, &
your children shall
be slaves.

This Truth I come to tell you - all about that
which has been
As a poet, this I tell you/of the long &
winding sin/
Of a time when days were filled with
pain/confusion walked
the land/& all who were Black were
considered slaves every
woman, child & man.

I speak, young ones, of a wonderland
that rose from a painted sea
A golden Caribbean Paradise - like the land
of Adam and Eve; I bring you memories/

of a land so green & abundantly given by
God
that our Spanish cousins - once removed –
fell in love with this mystical sod
& They christened the land El Florida
(which means
the flowery plains)
Then proceeded to search for the Fountain
of Youth –
at a place that they also would name

T'was Espiritu Santo - a place by the Bay
The land of the Timucuan
and the home of the brave Caloosa tribe
who made the Spaniards run!
T-'was the year of 1526
on the voyage of Narvaez
that an African hero called Esteban
established
himself in the West/as
the first Black man to land in Tampa
and walk its winding shores
This Estevanico - which means "Little
Stevie"
was born a North African Moor.
As a matter of fact, it was Esteban –
as the story is often told –
who was sent by Narvaez to find The Seven
Cities of Gold!

Some seventy years before John Smith
built Jamestown for the King,
young Esteban and Narvaez claimed Tampa
Bay for
Spain

I sing of a time when Florida was the
Promise of

Liberty

When the Seminole Joined the African slave
in the hopes they
could both be free.

On the Apalachee-cola back in 1695, they
built a fort
& called it Musa - like a king of days gone
by.

But the fort was destroyed by battleships
and many Africans died/The Seminoles,
who were
their friends, died also at their side.

Yet, the fight was far from over & the
Seminole Wars raged on
Inspired by men like Osceola and men like
Gopher John.

Osceola was Chief of the Seminoles and he
was also
Black.

His Seminole wife was Pee-to-Kiss, but
Cher-to-Cher
he liked.

For, Cher-to-Cher was his African bride
whom the
slavers stole away –
which started the Second Seminole War that
made
America pay!

& Then, there was ol' Gopher John
as dark as a Tampa night
whose warrior spirit & cunning ways
prolonged the
Freedom fight
until there was a treaty signed & the
Seminoles moved West.

Black Seminoles were the first to leave
But the struggle would not rest.
Blacks fought in Florida - the Civil War –
in the 48th Infan-try
Then took Rough Riders up San Juan Hill
just to hel the Cubans get free.
O' the Buffalo Soldier was their name –
when they camped in Tampa Town

The 9th and 10th Horse Cavalry even took
Geronimo
down

& Even though the Tampa Press accused'em
of acting White
They walked the streets of Downtown
Tampa & weren't
afraid to fight.

Then Ybor City opened its doors and
Cubans gathered
'round
& we marveled at Black Cubans/as they
wore their freedom
crowns
But we could not speak their language &
they did not
know our names
So, our African reunion was a day that never
came.

But the days of the 1900's/just before the
First World War,
were the days of pain and murder:
Blacks folks dying by the score!
& the papers printed front page news while
Tampans read
their fill/
of the "Nigger In The Woodbox", or "That
Bad Black Negro
Killed"!

"At Fleeing Coon He Fired" ("Coon" is what
they called us
then.)

"The Unspoiled Nigger" was another
headline (For, we were
Niggers ... never men.)
in that same old Dally, another headline
states:

"Negro Death Rate Doubles Birth Rate" - it
announced in
gleeful hate.

While Black soldiers risked their lives in
World Wars I & II,
We were living, leaving and dying as we
paid our

Tampa dues
But even then we kept the faith, though
surely most would
disbelieve
Yet, Black folks came to Tampa, by the
thousands –
thick as bees...
came from Georgia, S. Car'lina, from New
Orleans,
Alabam
Came from up in Archie, Florida, even
Bealsville lent
a hand
& together with Italians, Germans, Jews and
Spaniards, too,
We built Henry Plant a railroad & a fine
hotel, to boot!
For, the building that most people know as
good ol'
U. of T.
was once the grandest hotel that the world
had ever seen.

Now, after we had built this town & laid its
red brick streets
We built our tabernacles where the children
of God could meet
& when our souls had rested and the White
Man's work was
through
We gathered all our dreams & put up
Central Avenue

There was Saunders' Central Blue Room,
Palm Dinette &
Green's Cafe;
'Was the Lincoln Movie Theatre, Central
Theatre on the way.
Jackson, Fordham & Rodriguez - three
Black men who
practiced Law
Drs. Richards, Williams & Silas who were
always there
on call
We had Richard's Photo, the Pepper Pot,
Central Newstand

& beauty shops
The Shoe Shine Parlor, Johnny Gray's, the
ol' Stink Moon
where the big boys played
There was the old Kid Mason Hardware
Store, Palace Drugs
and many more!
We had the Florida Sentinel ('fore the
Bulletin came)
& Central Life Insurance (To this day, it's
called the
same.)
There was the Clara Frye infirmary where
only Blacks
could go
a union of Longshoremen whose Black
membership would
grow.
There were High Schools - Blake &
Middleton,
Debutants and big parades - like the Tilt of
the
Maroon and Gold when FAM and Cookman
played.

There were names like Armwood, Wilson,
Dorsett,
Davis and Stewart, too
Rodriguez and Hammond answered the call
But Lowry made it through!
Rev. Lowry was the first Black man to win
by local vote
Then Hargrett, Perry & Padgett/each
increased Black voters
hopes.
Jim Hargrett won a capital seat/Rubin
Padgett –
a County beat
& Perry Harvey prospers in
his post as City Council-man.
Yet, there are others who soon will be/a part
of
our prosperity
whose dreams & hopes have yet survived
the thin that eat Black dreams alive

Like Urban Renewal –a “dream-come-true”
- that murdered
Central Avenue
& Integration - which was used as a tool
to steal from Black Tampa its public high
schools.
Yes,

even the drugs and crime we see
that ruin our communities

...these, too, will pass, though many may
die
But we'll remain & continue to try
Until one day when most of us/will pack our
bags
for the Exodus....

These things I sing as History/But the truths
I speak
are Destiny.
For, I am a poet of the Line of Kings
& I speak of Black Tampa & all that it has
been.
May your young ears listen & your spirits
hear
What my heart has told you
In Truth and Fear.

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