

Walsingham House: A Brief Introduction

History of Site before House was Built

- Land held by McMullen family as early as 1868 when William McMullen secured a large tract along present-day Ridge Road. Also held by Charles W. Johnson and family. Like members of the Lowe family and Joshua Boyer, “Captain” Johnson had frequently sailed between Cedar Keys and Key West.
- The O’Quinn family, along with McMullens, held title and occupied land between the late 1870s and 1913.
- Marriages between McMullen, O’Quinn, Lowe, and Walsingham families connect these families and their land holdings in the Largo area. Mary Adona O’Quinn, William McMullen’s granddaughter, married Jesse Walsingham. Jesse’s brother married a member of the Lowe family.

Construction Information

- Jesse Walsingham purchased this land in 1913, and the two-story home was built in 1915.
- This was a notable structure along the frontier where most people were farmers and laborers in citrus fields.

History of Occupants

- A native of Taylor County, Jesse Ancil Walsingham came to the area in 1895 by way of Pasco County, where he perfected his skills as a strawberry farmer.
- During the early 1900s, while settled in the Largo area, Walsingham became a farmer, delivered ice, cultivated citrus, engaged in the “beef business,” constructed a barn and packing house, butchered hogs, and provided meat to residents of the Pinellas Peninsula in Largo and as far south as St. Petersburg.
- He lived in a house along Missouri Road during the early 1900s.
- Jesse served as a representative of the Gulf Fertilizer Company, became an early advocate for separation from Hillsborough County, joined the Largo Board of Trade, led the local association of truck farmers, and became well-known in the community. By 1921, he also operated a hardware company.
- While living in the home—a place where he conducted much of his farming business and held meetings with other civic leaders—he expanded his agricultural holdings to include lands along and within the bounds of the recently-drained Lake Largo.
- As a teenager, son Sumter Walsingham participated in a “Corn Club” competition and harvested nearly fifty bushels on an acre. During World War I, son Carl Walsingham left the home to fight overseas as a member of the 149th Aero Squadron.
- Jesse Walsingham served as a leader of the Pinellas County fair while living in this structure. The fair began as an event coordinated by the Woman’s Club of Largo, an organization that wife Mary Walsingham joined as a charter member.
- The Walsinghams won many awards for their agricultural crops.
- By August 1928, Jesse Walsingham became the first general manager of the Pinellas County Fair, receiving a \$200/month salary.

- The Walsinghams sold this house in 1929. They then lived in the Belleair community along Clearwater-Largo Road.
- The Mayes family owned the residence until 1957, J. V. Childers until 1965, and Luther Walker until 1978. At times during these years, tenants or boarders lived in the structure. The Litz family acquired the house and held the property until 1983.
- By 1949, the Walsinghams had moved once again to Ridge Road. They lived at 12271 Ridge Road, about one block from the 1915 home (located at 12152 Ridge Road).

Moving of the House to Heritage Village

- First discussions about moving the house occurred during the summer of 1983.
- During early deliberations, Pinellas County Historical Commission members referred to the structure as the “Walker House” for the Luther Walker family.
- The house arrived at Heritage Village in June 1984. It sat vacant for many years, until funds for renovations and an air conditioning system were raised. The Pinellas County Medical Association assisted with fundraising efforts.

Walsingham House

Overview

Jesse Ancil, wife Mary Adona Walsingham, and their children lived at the Walsingham House for nearly fifteen years.¹ Constructed along Ridge Road south of Largo in 1915, this residence became a center for the family's agricultural, commercial, and civic enterprises. A native of Taylor County, Jesse Ancil Walsingham moved to the Pinellas Peninsula after becoming a successful farmer in Pasco County. He married Mary Adona O'Quinn, a granddaughter of William McMullen. Jesse's brother, John Randolph Walsingham, also married into a pioneer family when he exchanged vows with Lillie Ruth Meares. While living at this home, Jesse Walsingham took leadership of the Largo Truck Growers' Association, the Pinellas County Fair, and a number of commercial and agricultural enterprises. He operated a Largo hardware store and, along with McMullens and other truck farmers, cultivated crops on the reclaimed lands formerly occupied by Lake Largo. The Walsingham House arrived at Heritage Village in June 1994.

Other Pioneer Footprints on the Land

Long before the construction of the Walsingham house, the land it occupied had become part of the pioneer McMullen family's extensive holdings. In 1868 William McMullen, the oldest of the seven brothers, acquired the southeast quarter of Section Nine, Township Thirty, Range Fifteen East. This tract, with its higher elevation along the ridge, provided an excellent area for grazing, crop cultivation, and other agricultural pursuits. By the 1870s, members of William McMullen's family had subdivided the parcel and sold some pieces to others. One owner of the land was Charles Wharton Johnson who, along with wife Catherine Kurtz Johnson, purchased and sold the land back to the McMullen family. Charles W. Johnson and his family also played an important role in the settlement and development of Largo. Like members of the Lowe family, "Captain" Johnson sailed along the coast between Cedar Keys and Key West. After suffering a shipwreck in the early 1870s along nearby waters, Johnson decided to move his family from Cedar Key to the Largo area. A 28 May 1878 indenture between Charles

¹ Various written and genealogical records refer to Mr. Walsingham as either "Jesse" or "Jessie."

W. Johnson and John Daniel McMullen (the fifth child and youngest son of William) transferred title to approximately forty acres of land that fell within the northeast quarter of the original land purchase in exchange for \$52.39 in cash. In addition to the McMullens, members of the O’Quinn family held title to and occupied the land. During the late 1800s, John D. McMullen constructed a small house or cottage on the site and cultivated crops on a portion of the land. Between the late 1870s and 1913, Andrew Martin O’Quinn and John D. McMullen owned the land.²

The O’Quinn family provides an important and direct link between the McMullens and the Walsinghams, one that predates the arrival of these families to the Pinellas Peninsula. According to genealogical records, Mary Ann McMullen—second child and eldest daughter of William and Susannah Elizabeth [Henderson] McMullen—exchanged vows with Andrew Martin O’Quinn on 3 November 1859 in Perry, Florida. While living in and around Taylor County, Florida, Andrew and Mary Ann started a family. Their children included: William Allen (1860-1948, later known as “Uncle Billy”), Andrew Edward, Hiram Randolph (c. 1867-1928), Elizabeth Wineyford, Mary Adona (1877-1956), and David Henderson O’Quinn. Mary Adona O’Quinn—fourth child of Andrew and Mary Ann McMullen O’Quinn and granddaughter of William McMullen—married Jesse Ancil Walsingham. Thus William McMullen’s granddaughter married Jesse Walsingham, and the O’Quinns connected these families through this union.³

William A. “Uncle Billy” O’Quinn vividly described the area where the Walsingham House and Ridge Road were later built. Similar to the McMullen family, the O’Quinns settled along the frontier near present-day Largo shortly after the Civil War. Indeed, three of his closest neighbors were John, Thomas, and James P. McMullen.

² Genealogical research on the William McMullen family and a summary transcription of the May 1878 deed transferring the land between Charles Johnson and the McMullen family appear in the archival files created during this research project. Consult the Walsingham House files, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo. Charles and Catherine Johnson originally homesteaded on the site of the Belleview Biltmore property, and later constructed Largo’s first three-story home on land near East Bay Drive that later served as the site of the Taylor Packing House. One of their granddaughters, Edna Catherine, married Alonzo B. McMullen in that house. See: *Largo, Florida, Then Til . . .* (Largo: Largo Bicentennial Committee, 1979), 15.

³ *Ibid.* According to the 1900 census, Jesse and Mary Walsingham were married for four years as of 1900, making their wedding date either in mid/late 1895 or early 1896. They may have married in Taylor County

According to a 1986 letter from a descendant of O'Quinn, Andrew's father—Allen O'Quinn—also came to the Pinellas Peninsula and may have been buried on his homestead, the former site of Thurston Groves. This family member believed that the original Thurston homestead—once located near the present intersection of Ridge Road, 102nd Avenue North, and the Pinellas Trail—may have served as O'Quinn's first homestead. William's parents (Andrew and Mary Ann) arrived in the area on 12 January 1868. Aside from a handful of organized groves, most of them run by McMullens, few settlers occupied land in this area. "Uncle Billy" remembered a childhood along the central Pinellas ridge that included an abundance of deer, geese, wild turkeys, hogs, bears, and an occasional panther. A hunter for many years, he recalled driving deer from the family's sweet potato and pea fields, and claimed he "could not begin to tell you of [all] the different wild game and little animals that were in this county at that time." He often wore heavy tin leggings made by a blacksmith when trapping small animals such as snakes and alligators. Educated in a simple log school, William remembered gaps in the walls so large that a person "could throw a rabbit through the cracks." Uncle Billy truly matured while tilling the fields and exploring the largely unsettled frontier. At an early age, he learned how to farm and to hitch up the oxen for the long, monthly trip around Old Tampa Bay to the nearest trading post, Tampa Town. When traveling far from home or visiting a distant neighbor, he marked the trees with an axe so that he could remember how to return home. Products from the family's farm made a trip to Lowe's Landing in Anona and often went to distant locations on Captain John T. Lowe's schooner. The family also sent crops on boats launched from John White's Landing at Bay Pines. As a young teenager, Billy ventured on long fishing trips to then-unoccupied land in present-day St. Petersburg, carrying only a frying pan, his fishing pole, and a gun. During this time, he also earned money clearing lands owned by "General" John Constantine Williams north of the area from Central Avenue and Ninth (Dr. Martin Luther King) Street towards Tampa Bay. According to Uncle Billy, Williams paid him \$25 an acre to clear the land and quickly sold it to investors. By 1888, William O'Quinn worked on the grading of rail lines between Largo and St. Petersburg.

before moving to the area, or exchanged vows after arriving. United States Census Office, *Twelfth Census of Population, 1900: Florida* (Washington: Bureau of the Census Microfilm Laboratory, c. 1978).

Soon after the railroad arrived, he married a woman from Alabama, settled in the Lealman area, and opened a laundry. Before passing away in 1948, he lived at 420-25th Avenue North. Spending his later years cast-net fishing, Uncle Billy once told a reporter that he felt sorry for the younger generation (the children of the 1930s and 1940s) because “they got too much education . . . takes more than that to really live.” William O’Quinn, who lived on the Pinellas Peninsula from 1868 until 1948, represents a rare individual who saw the wild frontier, helped clear the land, and worked on the railroad. Yet, Jesse Walsingham’s brother-in-law later lamented the changes he saw and helped to foster by noting that “the peace and the happiness left the country with the horses and oxen—then the paper bag living came along and did away with the farming.”⁴

Early Agricultural and Commercial Activities of the Walsingham Family

Jesse Ancil Walsingham moved to the Pinellas peninsula from Taylor County, Florida, in 1895. Before settling in the Largo area, he lived in neighboring Pasco County for awhile. Born on 24 October 1873 in the community of Lake Bird (approximately ten miles north-northwest of Perry), Jesse had two younger brothers (William A. and John Randolph) and one younger sister (Alice). Genealogical research indicates that Jesse and wife Mary first lived with her brother, Hiram O’Quinn, when they arrived on the Pinellas peninsula. The Walsinghams had five children, all sons: Sumter Loy (1898-1956), Carl Brian (1900-1975), “Baby” Brian (1901-1904), Eldon Ancil (1902-1904), and Roy Blackburn (1905-1980). At some point before the spring of 1895, Walsingham began growing strawberries in Pasco County. On 24 January 1900, Mary gave birth to her second son, Carl, at their home on Hiram O’Quinn’s grove, the same home where Mary herself entered the world on 5 January 1877.

By the summer of 1901, Walsingham and Martin McMullen delivered ice to people in the Seminole area, while Jesse’s father-in-law, A. M. O’Quinn, finished the construction of his home and planted orange trees on a parcel near Largo that was probably the site later purchased by Walsingham. In addition to delivering ice, McMullen and Walsingham also engaged in the “beef business” during the summer of 1901. In

⁴ Mary Reid B. Rice to Sadie Johnson, 2 February 1986, copy located in Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; *St. Petersburg Times*, undated 1948 clipping; *Largo, Then Til . . .*, 173; *Largo Sentinel*, 3

September 1901, Jesse constructed a new barn and packing house on the Seminole/Largo frontier. By October, Walsingham “quit” that bovine enterprise and focused on the cultivation and shipping of oranges and a large field of eggplants. At the end of this busy year, the Walsingham family moved back to its “beautiful home” on Missouri Avenue, then a narrow dirt road. By February 1902, Jesse Walsingham butchered hogs and provided pork for the St. Petersburg market.⁵

As children, Sumter and Carl Walsingham walked to school from their father’s grove near Ridge Road to the schoolhouse in Largo. “Doctor” G. C. Kingsbury used to arrive at school in his loud Model T Ford. Carl remembers watching his grandfather, Andrew M. O’Quinn, fetch a great price for grapefruit at the market. In a 1975 interview with Sadie Johnson, Carl believed one box brought \$5.75.⁶

Members of the Walsingham family continued their involvement in commercial, civic, and agricultural activities as the movement to create an independent county grew along the Pinellas peninsula. John Randolph Walsingham, Jesse’s youngest brother, came to the area after spending time in Taylor County, Florida, and the Thomasville, Georgia, area. He arrived in either 1897 or 1899. Shortly after his arrival, he married Lillie Ruth Meares—daughter of Anona pioneer William Fletcher Meares—on 29 March 1899. During the early 1900s, John worked as a laborer, cleared land for citrus groves, and worked in a mill. John R. and Lillie Ruth Walsingham later acquired land, started their own grove, and established a home for their four children at the corner of Ridge Road and Taylor Avenue (8th Avenue SW). Meanwhile, Jesse continued his business ventures, raised crops (and children), joined the Largo Board of Trade, and advocated for the creation of a new county along the peninsula. By early 1910, Jesse regularly traveled along the West Coast of Florida as a representative of Gulf Fertilizer Company. During his journeys along the Pinellas frontier, he personally visited with many farmers to discuss the merits of separation from Hillsborough County. As an advocate of division, he also traveled to Tallahassee in 1911 to express his sympathies as a private citizen. In

January 1946.

⁵ *St. Petersburg Times*, 27 July 1901, 21 September 1901, 26 October 1901, 12 October 1901, 28 December 1901, 8 February 1902, 11 March 1961; *Largo Sentinel*, 21 March 1912; *Largo, Then Til . . .*, 167..

⁶ *Largo, Then Til . . .*, 167.

between his many journeys, he tended to his diverse crops in the Largo area, including the three acres he set aside in order to grow strawberries during the early 1910s.⁷

A New County, A New House, and New Agribusiness Opportunities

The creation of Pinellas County in 1912 did not settle all political matters along the peninsula. After obtaining independence from Hillsborough County, community leaders needed to select a county seat. As residents celebrated their independence from Hillsborough and the Tampa power structure, they began arguing with one another over the proper location for the county courthouse and seat of government. While Clearwater ultimately won the struggle, in January 1912—before the dust had settled—Walsingham and other members of the Largo Board of Trade supported St. Petersburg as the best site for the county seat. On 6 January 1912, the *St. Petersburg Times* reprinted a letter signed by Walsingham, John S. Taylor, Marion Wheeler Ulmer, and other Largo Board of Trade members to their colleagues at the St. Petersburg Board. Originally sent on January 3, the letter reminded those in St. Petersburg that citizens “in the northern and eastern part of the county have in various ways shown a disposition to be unfair to St. Petersburg, Largo, and in fact the entire southern part of the county.” The Largo delegation hoped to meet with the St. Petersburg Board of Trade so they could consider strategies to challenge those who planned to place the county seat in Clearwater. Noel A. Mitchell, acting president of the St. Petersburg Board, viewed this “the most important matter now before the citizens and taxpayers” of southern Pinellas. The *Times* gave its support for the Largo-St. Petersburg meeting by adding that these communities needed to “stand together” to prevent “trickery [by] the small end of the county.” Walsingham’s longstanding business connections with St. Petersburg and his frequent travels through Seminole into the southern part of the county probably played a role in his decision to support the “Sunshine City” as the county seat. The boards of trade lost their battle, however, and Clearwater became the de facto county seat.⁸

⁷ John Walsingham’s 26 December 1937 obituary mentions that he arrived in the area as a twenty-one year old man in 1899; however, the 6 August 1959 obituary of his wife, Lillie Ruth [Meares] Walsingham, claims that he came to the Largo area in 1897. *St. Petersburg Times*, 21 January 1910, 26 December 1937, 6 August 1959, 11 March 1961; *Largo Sentinel*, 21 March 1912.

⁸ *Tampa Daily Times*, 6 January 1912.

In 1913, Jesse and Mary Walsingham purchased the property along Ridge Road where they would build their home. Two years later, in 1915, they moved into their new home that sat at the present location of 12152 Ridge Road. This two-story house, a notable structure along the sparsely settled frontier, combined ornamental, rusticated concrete blocks on the lower level with wood-framed second floor. Such ornamental concrete construction—though unique among the structures presently located in Heritage Village—followed a pattern popular in American suburban homes during the early 1900s. Though the main building suffered little damage during the 1921 hurricane, original outbuildings, including a windmill, did not survive that storm.⁹

During this period, Walsingham maintained his involvement in business, civic, and fraternal activities. At a January 1914 meeting of the Largo Board of Trade, Walsingham—by then also a member of the board of governors for the County Board of Trade—reported on a recent visit with representatives from the Atlantic Coast Line Railway in Tarpon Springs. Boosters and leaders of Largo—fondly known as “Citrus City”—often came to the monthly meetings of the Minnehaha Club. This informal group included seasonal visitors as well as local residents who gathered to socialize and enjoy picnics.¹⁰ On 30 March 1917, the Minnehaha Club met at the Walsingham’s home. According to the *Largo Sentinel*:

The gathering . . . was in every way a very pleasant affair. The tables were set out in the beautiful oak grove surrounding the house, so that when the forty-two sat down to partake of the many and toothsome viands, they could feast the eye while feeding the body and improving the more noble occupation of getting acquainted with their neighbors. After dinner this was most emphatically the case, when all gathered on the commodious porch and visited.¹¹

Those in attendance at the Minnehaha gathering included Hiram O’Quinn, Dr. Wiley of Baltimore (company chemist for Gulf Fertilizer), and L. R. Woods of Tampa (from Gulf Fertilizer’s Tampa office). Walsingham and brother-in-law D. H. O’Quinn also became

⁹ Consult Stephanie Ferrell’s research note for more information on the architectural composition of this structure. A copy is available in the Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

¹⁰ *Largo Sentinel*, 21 January 1914.

¹¹ *Largo Sentinel*, 12 April 1917.

managers in the recently formed Largo lodge of the Woodmen of the World (WOW). This non-profit fraternal benefit society began in 1890 as an organization that provided members with insurance services and supported community projects. With ceremonies officiated by C. H. Dame, WOW state organizer, members celebrated the installation of Walsingham, O'Quinn, and others under the leadership of M. J. McMullen, counsel commander.¹²

As Largo transformed from a farm settlement into a city, Jesse Walsingham maintained his close connections to the land and agricultural interests. Throughout the mid- and late 1910s, columns in the *Largo Sentinel* newspaper celebrated Walsingham's harvests and crop transactions. For example, in April 1915 Chicagoans received one of their earliest springtime shipments of beans from the Walsingham. A telegraph report from Walsingham's consignee in Chicago noted that his beans sold for the handsome sum of \$4.65 per crate. The *Sentinel* praised Walsingham as "among the very best farmers in all Pinellas County" in June 1917 when he brought a dozen Irish potatoes to the newspaper's office that weighed nearly ten pounds altogether. During that season, he told the paper that he hoped to cultivate 225 bushels of potatoes, 300 pounds of navy beans, as well as corn and other provisions. By the summer of 1917, Walsingham and members of the Geiselman family obtained nearly ten acres of land along Lake Largo (near present-day Starkey Road and East Bay Drive). They immediately erected a fence around the land, cleared part of the site, and planted peppers on half of the tract. A believer in crop diversification, Walsingham soon took a leadership role among farmers in the region.¹³

Walsingham and other central Pinellas truck farmers, those who grew crops for market, decided to strengthen their organizational resolve by the summer of 1917. Similar to those who participated in the Grange and Farmers' Alliance movements of the late nineteenth century, local farmers hoped to realize the advantages of cooperative shipping, marketing, and selling of their crops. On September 1, local farmers established the Largo Truck Growers' Association during "a very enthusiastic and profitable meeting" at

¹² *Largo Sentinel*, 21 January 1914, 5 April 1917; *Largo, Then Til . . .*, 56. For more information on the Woodmen of the World, visit: <<http://www.woodmen.com>>.

the Largo Town Hall. Jesse Walsingham served as the group's president. Those in attendance heard J. W. Booth of the Tampa & Gulf Coast Railroad Company (T&GC) discuss marketing strategies for farmers. Unlike many Gilded Age agrarian cooperatives that viewed rate-setting railroad employees as the enemy, Largo truck growers regularly met with agents from T&GC, the Seaboard Air Line, and the Atlantic Coast Line (ACL) who supported the farmers' cause. Indeed, as early as April 1915, representatives from the Seaboard Air Line had investigated the handling of local vegetable and melon crops at the insistence of buyers interested in the market. By August 1917, local railway agents had strongly urged the creation of a farmers' association as a way of increasing agribusiness and they worked closely with Walsingham and M. J. McMullen as planning for the organization began. At a November meeting, railway representatives not only participated in the meeting, they also joined as members of the association. In the days before the land boom exploded with full force along the Pinellas Peninsula, shipments of agricultural products provided an important source of revenue for the railroads. For example, members of the Truck Growers' Association predicted that they would harvest enough cabbage and lettuce alone to fill fifty railcars during the 1917-1918 season.¹⁴

Young Sumter Walsingham proudly followed in his father's footsteps. A student at the Largo Agricultural School, Sumter became a "Corn Club" boy. For his Corn Club project, Sumter tried to get a high yield of corn on an acre of land. At the end of his project, he reported to L. R. Highfill, the county agricultural agent, that he had produced nearly fifty bushels of corn on his acre. On the date of his report, a Largo market sold shelled corn for approximately \$2.15 per bushel. With an initial outlay of approximately \$30.00, Sumter would have netted a profit of over \$70.00 after expenses for his acre, an amazing return on his investment.¹⁵

Agricultural endeavors transformed original land and water patterns in the Largo area. While the effects of urban and suburban sprawl became obvious to Pinellas County residents after the land boom of the 1920s, the earlier transition as widespread crop

¹³ *Largo Sentinel*, 15 April 1915, 7 June 1917, 26 July 1917, 8 November 1917. Brother-in-law Hiram O'Quinn also received attention from the *Largo Sentinel* when he brought over samples from his bumper crop of sweet potatoes.

¹⁴ *Largo Sentinel*, 15 April 1915, 23 August 1917, 30 August 1917, 20 September 1917, 8 November 1917.

¹⁵ *Largo Sentinel*, 6 September 1917.

cultivation replaced a handful of isolated pioneer settlements also left an indelible mark on the landscape. The drainage of Lake Largo offers a notable example of how farmers—not real estate developers hoping to build homes—redefined the terrain. While the *Largo Sentinel* predicted a record crop during the 1917-1918 season, it also celebrated “the drainage of Lake Largo and other bodies of water between Largo and St. Petersburg [that] has opened thousands of acres of rich muck land to cultivation, adding to the zest of agricultural endeavor.” The 28 March 1918 issue of the *Sentinel* carried the following headline story: “Old Lake Largo[,] Once Filled With Water[,] Begins to Look Like a Big Plantation.” In the former lake bed, Walsingham and other farmers grew rice, cabbage, Irish potatoes, navy beans, corn, and other crops.¹⁶ At a time not far removed from Governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward’s plan to drain the Everglades, the paper celebrated the draining of Lake Largo as a progressive measure:

While it was a pleasing picture before the drainage work . . . to look out over the large body of water forming the lake, it is now a much more pleasing picture when one looks out over the many acres of rich muck and hammock land now in cultivation . . . illustrating the possibilities of what these lands will produce when they are fully reclaimed . . . This large tract of reclaimed land shows what drainage is worth to that section of the county, which has always been considered practically worthless, and many of the old settlers are now being convinced of the possibilities in store for these lands . . .¹⁷

Truck farmers required a better transportation infrastructure to get crops to market before they spoiled. Thus, by 1915 the board of county commissioners approved a contract with Leon Campbell to use approximately 5,000 yards of oyster shell as pavement for Missouri Avenue (the portion now known as Seminole Boulevard), to make this dirt trail passable. At about the same time, workers graded and resurfaced “the road between Largo and Clearwater” (probably Clearwater-Largo Road) while widening it to forty feet.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Largo Sentinel*, 30 August 1917, 28 March 1918.

¹⁷ *Largo Sentinel*, 28 March 1918.

¹⁸ *Largo Sentinel*, 15 April 1915.

At a time when future profits in agriculture seemed certain for the truck growers in the Largo area, distant battles cast an uncertain shadow on world events. By 1917 calls for enlistees and preparations for America's possible entry into the Great War occupied the headlines. While Sumter Walsingham and other Largo High School students enjoyed games, music, dances, and a picnic lunch of sandwiches, pickles, cake, and candy during a visit to Indian Rocks in April 1917, soon many members of their generation would leave home to prepare for war. Sumter's younger brother, Carl, was among those who answered the call.¹⁹

During the summer of 1917, seventeen year-old Carl Walsingham departed for Tybee Island in Georgia to enlist in the military. On 23 August 1917, he entered service at Fort Screven, located on the island near the mouth of the Savannah River. Similar to Fort DeSoto in Pinellas County, Fort Screven (previously known as Camp Graham) provided protection of coasts and harbors around the Savannah area during the Spanish American War; facilities at Fort Screven remained in operation during both World Wars as well. While training at Ft. Screven, Carl noted in a letter that he "was well pleased with things as he found them" there, except for waking from bed at five o'clock every morning, an act that "went against the grain." After completing his training, Carl reported to Wilbur Wright Aviation Field in Dayton, Ohio, where he trained with the 327th Aero Squadron through 29 January 1918. On his way to Dayton, he visited with fellow Largo residents (William) Stansel Belcher and John Thomas Gordon for a day in New York City. After suffering a brief bout with the measles in January 1918, on the 30th of the month Carl transferred to the 149th Aero Squadron for the duration of his service. The 7 February 1918 *Largo Sentinel* noted that Carl had written a letter to his parents to tell them of his squadron's impending departure for New York City and that he would soon join those in the hostilities "over there." Carl did indeed serve overseas from 26 February 1918 through 7 March 1919, and formally left military service on 20 March 1919. In later life, Carl Walsingham became the first post commander of the Heisler-Johnson Post 119 of the American Legion in Largo, an institution that received its charter from the national

¹⁹ *Largo Sentinel*, 26 April 1917.

headquarters of the American Legion in March 1940 and was named in honor of two World War I veterans from Largo who had perished in France.²⁰

Walsingham and the Pinellas County Fair

Jesse Ancil Walsingham's agricultural acumen and leadership among central Pinellas truck farmers served him well during his many years associated with the Pinellas County Fair. Although the *Clearwater Sun* credited Walsingham as "County Fair Founder" in his obituary, in reality the women of Largo provided the impetus for launching the fair. Marcia H. Tritt and other members of the Woman's Club of Largo proposed holding a fair in 1916, at a time when many men in the community seemed indifferent to the idea. Mary Walsingham, as a charter member of the Woman's Club, supported the fair. According to one account, when many men (with Walsingham and Dr. Bob McMullen being notable exceptions) failed to support a proposal by the Woman's Club at a mass meeting, Tritt supposedly told those in attendance: "We called this meeting to ask for your help. If you can't, we'll do it ourselves. We're going to put on a fair." As Dr. Bob McMullen met with various constituencies to drum up support, the women planned the event. The Woman's Club held two very successful fairs. In the 1917 fair, Walsingham won prizes for boxed oranges and boxed grapefruits. By September 1917, an editorial by W. L. Straub in the *St. Petersburg Times* (also reprinted in the *Largo Leader*) celebrated the commercial and agricultural potential of a county fair for "Peerless Pinellas" and encouraged readers to support the Pinellas County Fair Association's plans for an annual gathering in Largo. At a 26 October 1917 meeting in Largo, the Pinellas County Fair Association assembled for the first time. Elected members included four representatives from the Largo Woman's Club and twenty-one men. Walsingham took charge of the fair's horticulture department, while M. W. Ulmer obtained office space for the association on Railroad Avenue, near the ACL Railway. By the end of November, the Fair Association had purchased 11.26 acres of land for a

²⁰ *Largo Sentinel*, 6 September 1917, 17 January 1918, 7 February 1918; "Walsingham, Carl B.," "Gordon, John Thomas," and "Belcher, William Stansel," Available from *World War I Service Cards online at the Florida State Archives*, <<http://www.floridamemory.com/Collections/WWI/index.cfm>> (1 October 2003); *Largo, Then Til . . .*, 204. Similar to many young men who patriotically entered military service during the Great War, it appears that Carl Walsingham may have misrepresented his age on his enlistment papers.

permanent fairgrounds site from Charles W. Johnson for \$1127. Johnson, of course, had once owned the land where the Walsingham House was built.²¹

In January 1918, the awards given at the first annual Pinellas County Fair covered the front page of the *Largo Sentinel*. As vice president of the Fair Association, Jesse Walsingham could claim his share of credit for “record-breaking attendance from all parts of the county” during the four day event. He also garnered attention as superintendent of the horticulture department that celebrated a bumper crop of entries, including some of his own that won prizes. While he received a loving cup for his efforts, the *Sentinel* also praised his wife, Mary, and Dr. Bob Mullen’s wife as “true and loyal helpers in fair work and without them their husbands would not have come off with the excellent prizes that came their way.”²²

Walsingham continued his involvement with the Pinellas County Fair. On 1 August 1928, he became the fair’s first general manager as county commissioners replaced the Fair Association as the primary supporter of the event. This move came at a time when the day-to-day necessities of planning and organizing the fair required more effort than an ad hoc committee could offer. Walsingham received a monthly salary of \$200 for his duties as fair manager and reported directly to the county commission. Soon after taking on these new responsibilities, Walsingham pledged that the next fair would be “bigger and better than ever” and encouraged representatives for all cities and areas of the county to participate. To back his promise, Walsingham apparently contacted

Though he was seventeen years, eight months of age when he enlisted at Fort Screven, his World War I card indicates his age as eighteen years, eight months.

²¹ *Largo, Then Til . . .*, 124-126; *Largo Sentinel*, 1 February 1917, 23 August 1917, 20 September 1917, 8 November 1917, 11 January 1951; *Clearwater Sun*, 10 March 1961; *St. Petersburg Times*, 8 November 1958. The role of Marcia H. Tritt and other members of the Largo Woman’s Club cannot be underestimated. Even as the Fair Association held meetings in November 1917, many members feared that Tarpon Springs or other distant communities might refuse to participate. Aside from John Cheyney, few members of the Tarpon business community had pledged monetary support through the purchase of shares in the Fair Association. In the late summer of 1917, many in northern Pinellas viewed the fair as a city-sponsored activity in Largo, rather than as an event of countywide significance. Tritt and Sarah Colton Smith visited Tarpon Springs in early November and encouraged many members of the business community to show their support. They also secured the promise that Tarponites would participate in the fair through exhibits by spongers and Greek merchants. One may speculate that not all members of the community were encouraged to attend: A 1951 retrospective story about the fair’s early years mentions that when African American handwork was brought to the first fair, neither the Clearwater nor the Largo groups wanted to be associated with their display. After bouncing back and forth many times, the black artisans received a small corner for their “really creditable exposition.”

²² *Largo Sentinel*, 31 January 1918.

Clearwater and St. Petersburg radio stations with a plan to broadcast from the 1929 fair for an hour or more each day. A manager at the Clearwater radio station agreed to connect a “necessary electrical apparatus” between his station, the telephone wires, and a microphone at the fairgrounds. The 1929 fair proved to be a resounding success, as standing-room only crowds and nearly 3,000 automobiles crowded Largo during the week of the fair. Pain tempered Walsingham’s jubilation, however: Shortly after taking on his managerial duties, Walsingham and his family mourned the loss of Hiram O’Quinn, brother-in-law and longtime citrus grower, who passed away on 14 August 1928 at his nearby home on Ridge Road, probably near the Thurston Groves.²³

Jesse Walsingham maintained other enterprises while working for the Fair Association and as fair manager. He operated the J.A. Walsingham Hardware Company in Largo, and—according to 1920 census records—son Carl worked as a hardware salesman after returning from World War I. Older brother Sumter worked as a farm laborer during this period. The family suffered a financial setback on the morning of 21 February 1921, when a fire of unknown origin “completely gutted” the one-story brick building that housed the Walsingham Hardware Company. Responding to the fire at about 3:30 a.m., the Largo volunteer fire brigade could not quench the flames; a call to the Clearwater firefighters brought them in five minutes’ time, too late to save Walsingham’s store but soon enough to prevent the spread of the fire to other buildings. With only \$5,000 in insurance on the structure and contents, Walsingham probably suffered a loss of nearly \$11,000 from the blaze. Undeterred by this setback, the Walsinghams continued to explore new business and agricultural opportunities.²⁴

The Walsingham family also had an important connection with the nearby Baskin-Dansville community. This African-American settlement appeared in the early twentieth century around the present-day intersection of 119th Street and Ulmerton Road, an area north-northwest of Walsingham’s property. Black farm workers originally came to the region, often following the railroad lines, in search of opportunities in the booming

²³ *Largo Sentinel*, 2 August 1917, 26 July 1928, 16 August 1928, 13 December 1928, 24 January 1929. According to *Largo, Then Til . . .* (p. 127), Walsingham received an annual compensation of \$1800 for his duties to professionalize the County Fair. By 1917, Andrew M. O’Quinn—Hiram’s father and Jesse’s father-in-law—had moved to a home near Dade City. The Walsinghams frequently visited the elder O’Quinn during the 1910s. He passed away in 1922 and, like most members of the Walsingham family, is buried at Lone Pilgrim Cemetery.

citrus industry. Brothers Dan and Lloyd Henry moved to the Baskin region from Dawson, Georgia, in the early 1920s. After working on the railroad, Dan lived on a grove alongside the Seaboard Air Line tracks (now the Pinellas Trail) in a log cabin provided by his employer, Jesse Ancil Walsingham. Dan Henry worked for Walsingham until Jesse passed away in 1961. Research of property records and titles by Sue Goldman indicated that Dan and Lloyd Henry acquired much of the land for the Dansville settlement by purchasing small parcels during the Great Depression and paying back taxes on the lands.²⁵

The Later Years and the Moving of the House

By the fall of 1929, the Walsinghams decided to sell their home on Ridge Road. Perhaps the two-story structure seemed too large for their needs. The 1930 census places the Walsinghams in the Belleair community at a home along Clearwater Road. Between 1930 and 1957, the Mayes family lived at the residence, followed by the J. V. Childers family from 1957 through 1965, and the Luther Walker family until 1978. At different times, these families used the homes themselves but also rented out sections to boarders. The stairs to the rear of the building may have provided an entrance for the tenants who stayed at the house.

Jesse continued his public service through the 1930s, and engaged in citrus grove development and real estate activities in his later years. He managed the Pinellas County Fair through the 1934-1935 year. By the time he left this position, many residents called this annual event the “Pinellas Free Fair,” a connotation given because of the efforts by Walsingham and Frank A. Bradbury, former secretary of the Fair Association, to remove the admission fees beginning in 1924. Appointed commissioner of the Pinellas County home on 1 August 1933, he claimed that during his twenty-three months managing this shelter he saved over \$3,000 in operating expenses, a sizeable sum during the lean years of the Great Depression. In March 1936 and again in March 1938, he entered the race for the District Three seat on the Pinellas County Commission. During this period, Jesse’s wife gained a reputation as a lady who drove in the slow lane. Nearly every morning,

²⁴ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 21 February 1921.

Mary Walsingham climbed into her 1936 Ford, with its V-8 engine, and drove approximately three miles from home into town. According to son Carl, she often arrived at the post office around seven o'clock and complained that the stores did not open early enough. Despite its powerful engine, she rarely drove her vehicle more than twenty miles per hour!²⁶

Tragedy struck the Walsingham family on 25 December 1937. John Randolph Walsingham, Jesse's brother, suffered fatal injuries that Christmas morning while riding on the back of a truck driven by his son, James Lucian Walsingham. As the truck traveled near the Largo town hall, John lost his balance while sitting with the lumber in the truck's rear. Unknown to Lucian, his father had fallen from the truck and struck the pavement headfirst. A pedestrian summoned Lucian to stop, and though John was quickly taken to Morton Plant Hospital in Clearwater, he died later that afternoon due to multiple skull fractures. Members of the McMullen, Wilcox, and Meares families served as pallbearers at his funeral. John's wife, Lillie Ruth, died at a Largo rest home on 4 August 1959.²⁷

By 1949, Jesse and Mary Walsingham moved back to a home along Ridge Road. This structure, at 12271 Ridge Road, sat approximately one block north of their 1915 home (12152 Ridge Road). On 7 November 1958, Mary Walsingham passed away at the age of eighty-one. Jesse, at eighty-eight years of age, died on the evening of 9 March 1961 while at the Sun Coast Osteopathic Hospital. Longtime members of Lone Pilgrim Primitive Baptist Church, Jesse and Mary were buried at the Lone Pilgrim Cemetery, close to many other family members.²⁸

The first discussions about moving the Walsingham House to Heritage Village took place during the summer of 1983. During a September 21 board meeting of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, Director Kendrick Ford mentioned that Jim and Delores Litz—then owners of the Walsingham House—offered to donate the structure and moving costs so the building could relocate to the park. Dorothy Edmunds, a

²⁵ Sue Searcy Goldman, "Baskin-Dansville: An African-American Community in Transition," unpublished manuscript, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

²⁶ *Largo Sentinel*, 11 January 1934; *St. Petersburg Times*, 15 March 1936, 13 March 1938; *Largo, Then Til . . .*, 167.

²⁷ *St. Petersburg Times*, 26 December 1937, 5 August 1959, 6 August 1959.

²⁸ *Largo Sentinel*, 10 November 1949; *St. Petersburg Times*, 8 November 1958, 11 March 1961; *Clearwater Sun*, 10 March 1961. Nota bene: Many genealogical records incorrectly give Mary A. Walsingham's date of death as 16 November 1956, the same date given for her son, Sumter.

commission member and former president of the Pinellas County Historical Society, wondered if the structure might be suitable for use as a children's museum. Later discussions also mentioned the possibility of using this large structure as a caretaker's home, a site for extra storage, and a doctor's office. Ford told commissioners that they needed to make a decision within the next three weeks. He then began researching the property records associated with the structure.

Anchor Construction Company, the firm working with the Litz family, called Ford in early November 1983 to get the commission's final decision. During their deliberations at the November 16 meeting, commissioners expressed concern about how Proposition One—an initiative to modify the county's taxation structure—might affect the historical museum. At a time when Ford worried about losing staff and actively sought to acquire either a store or a school for the park, the possibility of moving the Walsingham House generated a great amount of discussion. The construction company had already contacted Roesch Housemovers and agreed to cover the \$12,000 bid to move the house from its location north of Walsingham on Old Ridge Road. But the structure would require substantial wiring, plumbing, and other maintenance after its arrival. Space was not a problem: plenty of room existed on the north ten acres of the park site (a line running parallel from Heritage Mercantile, past the Lowe House and Barn, and beyond Union Academy). Upon learning that the house faced imminent demolition if not relocated, the commission approved the proposed move. In tight budgetary times, the ultimate fate of the building remained uncertain. They moved and “stockpiled” the structure, with Commissioner Don Williams even mentioning the possibility of demolishing it in the future if the park needed surplus lumber.²⁹

Fortunately, Proposition One failed and the park's budget remained relatively intact. By 16 May 1984, Ford reported to the Pinellas County Historical Commission that the “Walker House” would move to Heritage Village in mid-June. During many of the early discussions about the structure, Ford and commissioners referred to it as the “Walker House” because Luther Walker had lived there from 1965 until 1978. Much of the house remained similar to its original form, except for a modernized kitchen and

²⁹ Records of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo, 21 September 1983, 16 November 1983.

bathrooms. After the electric company temporarily disconnected low-lying power lines, Roesch Housemovers transported the house along Walsingham Road to Heritage Village in the early morning hours of 15 June 1984.³⁰

Park administrators met with representatives of the Pinellas County Medical Association about establishing interpretive exhibits on the lower floor of the Walsingham House. Ford mentioned on the association's fundraising efforts to the Historical Commission. In his 17 November 1988 report to the Historical Commission, Ford noted that the doctors had started to raise money to purchase an air conditioning system for the Walsingham House. By early 1990, the Medical Association had raised approximately \$3,500 for an air conditioner. After a full restoration of the structure was completed, the home opened to visitors on 22 October 1994 during the annual Country Jubilee festivities. The house resembled a 1928 pioneer physician's office and residence fully equipped with lab, pharmacy and waiting room.³¹

A Final Walsingham Story

Soon after the house arrived at Heritage Village by way of Walsingham Road, a controversy over the possible renaming of part of Walsingham Road made the headlines. During the early years of Pinellas County's history, Jesse Ancil Walsingham had lobbied for an east-west route that connected the citrus country between Seminole and Largo with the beaches of Indian Rocks. Walsingham Road, running from Seminole Boulevard west to Gulf Boulevard in Indian Rocks Beach, was named in his honor, as was a nearby Walsingham Station that once existed along the railroad line. With the use of Ulmerton Road as a major cross-county artery, the highway department constructed an extension of Ulmerton that curved from the Ridgecrest area south-southwest into Walsingham Road near Vonn Road (131st Street). Once this segment opened, most travelers heading east along Walsingham from Indian Rocks and Anona followed the Ulmerton "curve" rather than continuing east along Walsingham.³²

³⁰ Ibid., 16 May 1984, 20 June 1984.

³¹ Ibid., 18 May 1988, 17 November 1988, 21 February 1990.

³² As suburbs appeared along Starkey Road north of Bryan Dairy Road, a short, disconnected stretch of Walsingham Road appeared on the eastern side of Lake Seminole, directly across the lake from the original road. The Pinellas County School Board commemorated the family's contributions in the Largo area

Largo's city planners worried that the divided highway's transition from Walsingham Road to Ulmerton Road might confuse travelers. They believed that changes in traffic patterns made it necessary to rename the portion of Walsingham Road from its intersection with Ulmerton west towards Gulf Boulevard as Ulmerton. Ophelia Gates Walsingham, Carl's wife (and Jesse's daughter-in-law), led the opposition to this plan. A longtime schoolteacher and resident of Largo since 1925, she appealed to city commissioners to preserve the road's name as a way of respecting Jesse's contributions to the Largo community. Commissioners in attendance unanimously rejected the renaming proposal at their 19 March 1991 meeting, and the road kept its Walsingham moniker.³³

during the early 1970s when it opened Walsingham Elementary School, located at the corner of Starkey and this eastern extension of Walsingham.

³³ *Tampa Tribune*, 24 March 1991; *St. Petersburg Times*, 20 March 1991, 21 March 1991.