

Yesterday & Today



NEWSLETTER OF THE LOWNDES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Walkout at Valdosta High School, 1970

Editor's Note

The words “summer” and “freedom” go together like hot dogs and hamburgers. Perennially at this time of year, school children shriek with delight as they run through sprinklers, retirees roam the interstate in RVs, and others laze on the back porch with a tall glass of sweet tea and a good book. It goes without saying that most Americans now take for granted that they live in a country where they are free to do, say, think, work, marry, worship, and move as they please in a way millions, if not billions, of other human beings still do not.

The establishment of our nation—marked this July 4th with sesquicentennial celebrations sure to be seared into collective memory for all time—was not without its flaws. Slavery was a direct denial of the very truths our founders felt to be so self-evident, a contradiction that went on to cause untold trauma, suffering, and death for well over a century. It has stained our local and national histories in a manner both troubling and redemptive and is a reality whose aftermath we will forever grapple with and try to reach past.

It seems eerily fitting that the federal holiday of Juneteenth falls annually on the cusp of the summer solstice, just two weeks before Independence Day. This dovetailing allows for all Americans to reflect in perpetuity on the shadow of slavery and discrimination as well as the sparkle of liberty and choice. After all, freedom ain't free. It requires the courage to take drastic action (above), forge new paths (page 2), show up for your community (page 3), and never forget the past (pages 5, 6, and 7).

May the bright sun and sultry heat of the season shine a light on the true meaning of America and nudge us to take one small step in the direction of living up to its promise. Happy grilling!

Amy Faeskorn

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Laura Yerby's Escape

by Charles Ellis

It may have been when the pine trees seemed to whisper warnings through the dark that Laura Yerby made the decision to leave Valdosta, Georgia for Liberia, West Africa. Historian Mark Howard notes that postwar Valdosta was marked by “considerable conflict between the races” as formerly enslaved African Americans attempted to build lives amid rising white resistance and violence.¹ In the years following the Civil War, federal troops and Freedmen’s Bureau officials briefly protected Freedpeople, but as Reconstruction weakened, racial terror spread across Lowndes County. Newspapers in South Georgia admitted that the countryside had become “literally strewn with deceased colored gentlemen,” reflecting the danger Black families faced during the era.²

Laura had lived her whole life in Lowndes County, working the red clay fields, tending to her younger sister Ruth, and trying to build a future in a place that refused to let Black people breathe freely. After Union troops withdrew from the region, night riders increased, and violence became a more constant shadow over Black communities. Perhaps Laura had seen enough smoke rising from burned cabins to know that staying meant waiting for terror to find her doorstep.

So when word spread that some families prepared to leave for Liberia—a place where Black families could own land and govern their own lives—she listened.³ She attended a meeting at Mount Zion Church, where Jefferson Bracewell, a skilled and self-educated freedman, spoke about emigration not as a promise, but as a chance for dignity and independence.⁴ Howard describes Bracewell as one of the best educated members of Valdosta’s Black community, a man whose “skills, wealth, and education made him the leader of the group” seeking immigration to Liberia.⁵ Aaron Miller stood beside him, a prosperous farmer who owned hundreds of acres in Georgia but still feared for the safety of his children.⁶



Laura Yerby

Laura felt something settle inside her then, a quiet certainty. That night she packed her mother’s quilt, her father’s Bible, a pouch of seeds, and a small silver locket. By dawn she and Ruth were traveling the wagon road toward Savannah. The journey to the coast marked the beginning of a larger migration movement from Valdosta to Liberia. The earliest emigrants boarded the *Edith Rose*, captained by A. Alexander, which sailed from Hampton, Virginia on November 7, 1871, headed directly to Monrovia, Liberia.⁷ These first emigrants later settled the town of Arthington. A later group made their way to New York, where they transferred to the *Jasper*, the vessel that departed for Liberia on November 21, 1872.⁸

Liberia greeted Laura with thick heat, red earth, and forests so dense they seemed untouched by time. Laura and the other emigrants settled in Arthington, a developing agricultural community established by

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African American emigrants under the support of the American Colonization Society.⁹ Howard describes Arthington as a settlement built along the Saint Paul's River where emigrants quickly cleared land, planted crops, and supplied Monrovia markets with vegetables and coffee.¹⁰ The settlers built rough homes, cleared fields, and planted seeds carried across the Atlantic from Georgia. Slowly, hope began to grow alongside the crops.

Laura worked with the other women from sunrise until nightfall, learning the rhythms of the new land. Children raced barefoot through the grass while men marveled at the richness of the soil and the long growing seasons. At night, Laura and Ruth sat outside their small house listening to the sounds of the forest, believing for the first time that fear might finally be behind them.

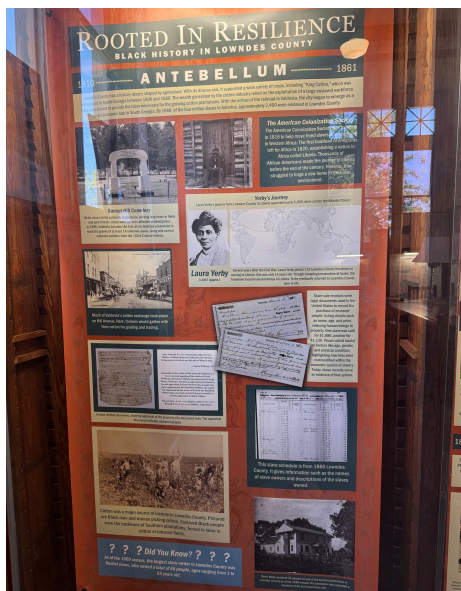
But Liberia carried hardships of its own. Fever swept through Arthington soon after the settlers arrived. Malaria killed many emigrants, including Jefferson Bracewell, members of his family, and later Aaron Miller.¹¹ Howard wrote that fever was so common among new immigrants that few members of the settlement were healthy enough to cultivate the land during the first months after arrival.¹² Laura spent weeks tending the sick. She eventually returned to America and spent the rest of her life in Savannah.

Laura Yerby never married, but she built a life shaped by her own hands, a life no one could take away from her. She would whisper not in sorrow, but in gratitude, that she had made it.

References

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3. Jackson, "Lowndes County Georgia."
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5. Howard, "From Georgia to Liberia."
6. Jackson, "Lowndes County Georgia."
7. Lowndes County GaGenWeb. <http://sites.rootsweb.com/~galownde/liberia.htm>
8. The African Repository, Vol. XLVIII, December 1872, pp. 353–356.
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Charles Ellis earned degrees in English and Humanities. He has taught and currently studies Geosciences, works at the Copeland African American Museum, and digitizes geographic materials at the Lowndes County Historical Museum.



Interested in learning more about Black history in Valdosta?

With help from this year's VSU interns, Museum Assistant Dustin Otey recently completed work on "Rooted in Resilience," the newly updated African-American history exhibit now on display on the main floor. Newly organized with a comprehensive timeline, thorough explanation of objects in the Museum's collection, and inclusion of fascinating yet little known facts, the exhibit brings a fresh, positive perspective to the brutal yet triumphant experience of the Lowndes County Black community.

Stop by and check it out!

Executive Director's Corner

Over the past several months, our region has endured extreme drought, followed by wildfires that destroyed acres of trees and sadly, many homes, reminding us yet again how quickly things can change.

Recently I admired the lily garden of a dear friend. After everything we'd been through with the weather, it stood out. I told him how good it looked, and he said it wasn't his doing—it was the Lord's work, and he was just the one holding the hose.

It was a simple line, but it stuck with me. Most of what grows in life doesn't come from one person doing everything right. It comes from people showing up, doing their part, and staying consistent. That idea extends beyond gardens—to friendships, communities, and even how we think about history. Nothing meaningful holds together without attention. If people stop showing up for each other, relationships fade out. If we stop sharing our stories, they disappear. What keeps things alive isn't grand gestures, but steady care over time: shared work and small moments of connection.

That became even clearer to me watching Jackson Southerland, our volunteer, graduate in May from Valdosta High School. Seeing him step into his next life chapter was exciting, but what stayed with me was something he said—that I'd been a mentor and a steady influence during his time here. I didn't expect that, but it made me think about how little it takes to make an impact on someone's life. A conversation, a bit of guidance, taking the time to listen—things that feel ordinary in the moment can mean a great deal to someone else down the line.

Conversations matter more than we realize. They shape people, build trust, and carry history forward in ways that aren't always apparent right away. I see the same thing here at the Museum. Over the years, members have become more than supporters on paper; they've become friends. The chit-chat before meetings, the shared stories, the help during events, the checking in on each other: that's what keeps this place going. The Museum holds the history, but it's the people that give it life. History works the same way. It doesn't preserve itself. It depends on people choosing to dialogue about it, and that includes the parts that are uncomfortable. There's a tendency to set aside the harder pieces of history in favor of what feels simpler. But if we only learn what's easy to talk about, we're not really telling the full story.

The difficult parts matter because they show us what people lived through, what went wrong, and what had to be faced and overcome. That's not about "dwelling"—it's about making sure it doesn't disappear.

Memory, like everything else, needs care to last. Whether it's a garden, a friendship, a museum, or a whole community, things grow and stay strong because we keep showing up. Holding the hose nourishes us all. That's what I see happening here, and it continues to matter.

Deanne Miller

Mark Your Calendar!

New members are always welcome

Upcoming Events

Fall Membership Meeting

September 15, 2026, 4 p.m.



Armistice Day Program

November 11, 2026, 10:45 a.m.



LCHS Holiday Social

December 15, 2026, 4 - 6 p.m.

LCHS is now on YouTube!

Find short videos about Tuskegee Airman and Lowndes County native Carrol S. Woods, Valdosta and the Trench shotgun, full-length recordings of member events, and much more.

Don't forget to like and subscribe!



@LowndesCountyMuseum

Have a Coke—and Some Memorabilia

James “Bama” Walker’s March talk drew members, Coca-Cola enthusiasts, and important figures from the Valdosta bottling plant’s past



From left: Presenter James Walker’s artifacts; Maureen Collins, Walker, Ann Harley Thomas, Phillip Poole; a poster advertising the Shields bottling machine

Coca-Cola memorabilia collector James “Bama” Walker shared both his extensive research and rare artifacts at the March 19 members meeting. In attendance were several people with direct ties to the almost 100 year history of soda bottling in Valdosta, including siblings Maureen Poole Collins and Phillip Poole, whose father, Leslie, was a production manager at Coca-Cola for 46 years, as well as Laurie Gunter, Maureen and Phillip’s cousin. Leslie Poole rescued the original Shields bottling machine when the plant closed in 1984 and relocated to Rome, Georgia; Maureen and Phillip recently donated it to the Museum. Ann Harley Thomas, whose mother, Jean Holmes Green, was the granddaughter of plant founder J.F. Holmes, also shared memories of her family’s role in plant operations over the years and talked about the indelible mark the Coca-Cola Company left on the community.

Celebrating America

As part of the America250 initiative, LCHS welcomed Dr. John G. Crowley, retired history professor from Valdosta State University, as the featured speaker at its May 21 members meeting. Dr. Crowley traced America’s historical journey, highlighting the major events that shaped the nation from the colonial era to the present day.



Dr. John G. Crowley

Giles Memorial Garden Dedication



Garden Club of Valdosta members and two of Mrs. Giles’ daughters at the dedication

Representing the Garden Club of Valdosta, Inc., Rita Hightower presided over the official dedication of the Patricia “Patsy” T. Giles Memorial Garden on May 21. Giles served as president of LCHS from 2007 to 2020. Designed and planted by Crescent Garden and Grounds Chair Heather Miller, the memorial garden honors Giles for her dedicated service to both organizations and to the community.

The improvements were made possible through support from the Jane C. Dawley Fund.

The Society depends on the generosity of its patrons around the world
to carry out our mission.

Thank you to all contributors.
received February 17, 2025 - June 3, 2026

Memorials

H. Freeman Dennis

William M. and Patricia D.
Oliver

Wayne Hall

Jim Hathaway

Lilla Kate Hart

Carl and Kristy Cates
Judith Clark
Dan and Carolyn Coleman
Sandra Connell
Ginger H. Dees
Tracy Eaton and Lewis Giles
Zella Fuller
Ed and Rita Hightower
Ron and Carol Irwin
Lisa Force Lang
Mary Young Manning
Debbie and Allan Nagy
Constance Parramore
Richard Shelton
Stuartlynn and Jim Simpson
John and Kate Swiderski
Deanna Wagoner

Paul (Bud) Bennett Hatcher, Jr.

Ronnie N. Blanton
Vallye Blanton
Geri and Wade Coleman
Cara and Brent Colson
George and Rebeca Daugharty
Todd Hatcher
Loudelle Laws
Thomas VanNortwick
VSU Foundation, Inc.

Laura Ann Milby Hoff

William M. and Patricia D. Oliver

Joan Walton Lawson

Dan and Carolyn Coleman
Stuartlynn and Jim Simpson

T. Michael Luke

Peggy and Michael Beauvais
Ronnie Blanton and Associates
Andy and Jill Harrison
Rebecca Anne Odom
Lyndle Thomas
Deanna Wagoner

Fr. Fred Joseph Nijem

William M. and Patricia D. Oliver

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Donations

Richard L. Lee
Tara Street



James and Rachel Hastings on their
wedding day in February 1945

Diamond Couple (+1)

Wedded 76 years and 47 days, James and Rachel Hastings set a marriage longevity record for Lowndes County

When James and Rachel Hastings first met in the parking lot of Naylor High School, they had no idea they'd eventually make local history. One day in Rachel's senior year, she made eye contact with James, who was driving the school bus that pulled up in front of her, and it was love at first sight. The couple married on February 4, 1945 and went on to raise their family in Valdosta, becoming parents to two children, grandparents to four, and great-grandparents to another four. They moved to Naylor, Rachel's hometown, in 2003, and lived there well into their upper 90s until Rachel's passing in 2021 and James' in 2023.

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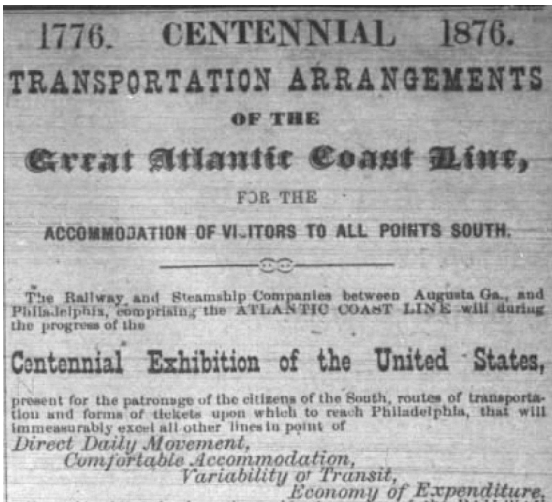
They were excellent parents,” recalls son Van. “They were good Christians and worked hard for everything they got.” A few years ago, former Society Executive Director Donald Davis confirmed that the Hastings were indeed the only couple in the county on record to have been married for as long as they were.

Van still marvels at their love and commitment to one another. “Most marriages today don’t last nearly that long,” he says. “They still inspire me, and I hope their story inspires others, too.”

South Georgia in 1876

Straddling the developments of the Gilded Age, Lowndes County found itself challenged by a rapidly evolving economy at the dawn of the Centennial

In honor of the America250 celebration, each issue of this year’s Yesterday & Today will look back on a period in Lowndes County’s past that aligns numerically with the sesquicentennial.



Great Atlantic Coast Line’s advertisement in the July 8, 1876 edition of *The Valdosta Times*

Lowndes County in the 1870s was a region in transition. On the one hand, the horrors of slavery and the Civil War were in the rear view mirror; enslaved people were now free and beginning to participate in local life, though against a backdrop of hostility and discrimination. On the other, with plantation-based agriculture decimated by the Reconstruction, industry was moving from a purely agrarian model to one heavily influenced by the growth of the merchant sector—and the building of the railway connecting Macon to Valdosta by Georgia Southern and Florida Railroad, begun in 1875 and completed by 1889. Farmers turned to sharecropping or crop-liens to shore up capital, growing primarily Sea Island cotton; those with the foresight to buy or maintain pine groves would soon benefit from the turpentine boom in the decades to come.

The July 8, 1876 edition of *The Valdosta Times* provides a glimpse into life at the nation’s Centennial: an editorial accusing Republican presidential nominee Rutherford B. Hayes of being a continuation of “Grantism,” a summary of the outcome of the Clinch County Democratic Convention in Homerville, and applications for dismissory letters. Perhaps most revealing are the advertisements: one promising smooth, comfortable passage via rail and steamship to the Centennial Exposition, held in Philadelphia that year from May to November, and another announcing the grand opening of Lewis Robb’s barbershop next to Captain J.W. Wells’ bar on Patterson Street, where Robb promises to “always have something interesting to tell you and if not, I will take his sweet toned violin and give you something that is sweet and pleasant to the ear.”



Barber Lewis Robb’s heartfelt plea to potential customers

The next installment in this series will focus on life in Lowndes County in 1926. Know something about that time that you’d like to contribute? Email the editor at amy@faeskorn.com.

For more information about America250, visit america250.org.



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Vol. LV No. 2 / June 2026

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