

Yesterday & Today



NEWSLETTER OF THE LOWNDES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Editor's Note

This issue of *Yesterday and Today* marks what I can only assume is a turning point in its storied publication: a Historical Society newsletter written in large part by a Yankee who, up until two and a half years ago, had never even heard of Valdosta, let alone been able to find it on a map.

My family and I moved here from New England in October of 2022. Before then, I had only ever been in the state of Georgia once before, over thirty years ago, and there were some gaping holes in my general knowledge of the South. Growing up in Massachusetts, most of the American history I absorbed revolved around Lexington and Concord and lore related to the Revolutionary War as it was fought in the northern colonies. I knew almost nothing about the role cities like Savannah played in this conflict, or how the Atlantic and Gulf Railroad changed antebellum rural economies, or many other significant facts about the Peach State's past. I'm humbled by my ignorance, and there is much for me still to discover.

The study of history has always been grounding for me, no matter where I've lived or for how long. Making the connection between random observations of one's surroundings and the documented events that contextualize them immediately renders a place more comfortable, familiar, and welcoming. As I've put together this issue, I've experienced that sensation yet again, and I hope my approach—though a significant departure from tradition—gives you a sense of it, too.

The society—and this newsletter—wouldn't exist without its members and their support. If you like what you read, or have suggestions for future story ideas or how to make it better, please reach out to me at amy@faeskorn.com. We Yankees may be stubborn, but we aim to please!

Amy Faeskorn

In this issue

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Happy 200th Birthday Lowndes County!

On December 23, 1825, the Georgia state legislature passed an act creating Lowndes County. Formed by the horizontal bisecting of Irwin County, it stretched 62 miles from north to south and 40 from east to west and was named in memory of prominent South Carolina lawyer and congressman William Jones Lowndes (1782-1822).

The year of its founding was a time of great change on the national level as well. Cotton gin inventor Eli Whitney died that January. On February 12th, the Treaty of Indian Springs was signed, with the Muscogee (Creek) people agreeing to cede all of their land east of the Chattahoochee River to Georgia and Alabama and relocate to a parcel of land along the Arkansas River. John Quincy Adams was inaugurated as the sixth U.S. president in early March, and on October 26, the Erie Canal opened between Lake Erie and the Hudson River.

Midway through the 1820s, the South found itself at the end of the Era of Good Feelings and the dawn of the Jacksonian Era, a period characterized by extension of voting rights to adult white males but the stubborn persistence of slavery. With the War of 1812 in the rearview mirror, Americans had focused on unity and democracy in the years leading up to 1825, yet the burgeoning philosophy of Manifest Destiny would go on to have unintended consequences for the diverse peoples inhabiting the land we all now call home. As with so much of our past, it was a complicated time, full of hope and excitement for a country still finding its footing as well as concern for the freedoms of those left out of the national dialogue.

Two hundred years after then Governor Troup signed the founding of Lowndes County into law, this little corner of South Georgia would likely be unrecognizable to those who founded it. Though it lost some territory to now surrounding counties such as Lanier in 1818, Thomas in 1826, Brooks and Echols in 1815, and Clinch, Berrien, and Colquitt likewise in the mid 1800s, it's grown from a population of 2,455 in 1830 to 118,251 in 2020. It's transitioned from a purely agricultural economy to a region thriving on industries as diverse as manufacturing, higher education, and health care, and each year it continues to welcome thousands of visitors from all over the world.

As the county's bicentennial approaches, watch for special events and commemorative activities scheduled throughout the year at the society's museum, the historic courthouse, and downtown Valdosta. For more information, visit lowndescounty.com or facebook.com/lowndescountyg.

Save the Dates

Membership Meeting

*Celebrating the Lowndes
County Bicentennial*
May 22, 2025, 4 pm
Bird Annex

Membership Meeting

September 18, 2025, 4 pm
Bird Annex

Help Wanted

Museum Administrative

Assistant for 18 hours per week
(compensated).

Museum Docents as needed to
assist with school groups
(volunteer).

Call 229-247-4780 for more
information or to apply.

God's Messenger in Valdosta

by Joscelyn Godwin



Some say that he was the son of freed slaves, born around 1876 in Georgia or Maryland, perhaps under the name of George Baker; but he would have none of that. When he was arrested in Valdosta on February 5, 1914, he answered to no earthly name. This short, sharply-dressed African American declared that he was God's Messenger, defying racial prejudice by appearing as a "colored man," just as He had formerly appeared as a Jew. The world was soon going to end, he said, and those who believed in Him would be saved.

The preacher later known as "Father Divine" had arrived from Savannah, whose local ministers had contrived to punish his presumption with a sentence of sixty days on a chain gang.

Undeterred, he quickly established himself in Valdosta, where the Holiness Church opened its pulpit to his eloquence. The Messenger had a magnetic effect on women, especially in the Black community of the Northwestern quarter. A number of them left their families to join him in a kind of proto-commune, content to observe his prohibitions of alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and sexual intercourse. This was too much for their menfolk, who complained to the authorities that "their wives and mothers were bereft of reason and that if something was not done the whole community would be crazed" (Valdosta Times, Feb. 6, 1914).

The task fell to Police Chief Calvin Dampier, who had once had to shoot a rampaging elephant. Arresting God's Messenger was a more delicate affair. A noisy crowd of women accompanied him to the city jail, where the Messenger was held pending trial. The authorities, perhaps remembering Pontius Pilate's verdict, docketed him as "John Doe, alias God." Lacking any crime to pin on him, the charge would be "lunacy."

Over the next three weeks, the Messenger preached from his cell, attracting still more devotees. Many whites were drawn in sympathy and admiration for the stoical figure, including Rufus (J. R.) Moseley, a former Mercer University professor and propounder of New Thought. Moseley arranged for the lawyer J. B. Copeland to act pro bono, and gave the case still wider publicity. When it came to trial on February 27, the Messenger was adjudged by the jury to be of unsound mind, but not enough to be institutionalized. According to the Valdosta Times, "It was recommended that he be released, but required to leave the city on account of the uproar and confusion which he has caused here."

The Messenger made his way to Brooklyn, New York, where he again attracted a congregation of mainly Black women, and formed a commune in an apartment building. Thus began the rise of Father Divine to wider fame and especially fortune—for one of the pillars of his doctrine was that God wants us all to be rich as well as virtuous. By 1932 he was established in Harlem with an "International Peace Movement" and a hundred branches or "Heavens" in the Northeastern states that gave shelter and comfort to the unfortunate, rather in the manner of the Salvation Army. His later years, until his death in 1965, were spent in a suburb of Philadelphia, in a mansion—almost a château—that is still maintained by his followers. Throughout his career he insisted on the abstinences mentioned, and appears to have set an impeccable example in his personal life, despite his marriage to a young white woman known as "Mother Divine." (continued on next page)

Father Divine is a significant figure for several reasons, all of them latent in his Valdostan adventure. Although he taught that race, color, and gender are of no importance in the eyes of God, his impact on the Black community and his empowerment of its women were undeniable. He was the first African American to found a successful and lasting cult—using the word in a technical, not a derogatory sense. Any excesses of which he could be blamed need to be seen against the continuing injustices of the Jim Crow era. Like the Shakers, another American phenomenon, Father Divine sought to establish a peaceful kingdom of God in a corrupted world. His claim of parity with Jesus echoed that of the Shaker foundress Ann Lee, who was believed to be the female manifestation of God, as Jesus had been the male. Sexual continence was a signal demand of both cults. After all, if the world was soon going to end, there was no need to populate it further.

Father Divine's methods also drew on the New Thought movement of the 1900s. Influenced by the Transcendentalists and the new science of psychology, it put mind before body, and taught techniques of self-discipline, self-reliance, and self-improvement. Like Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science, he held that illness doesn't exist if we don't acknowledge it. His commune suppressed any visible ailments or deformities, including his own inevitable decline. In an extreme version of Calvinist doctrine, he taught that God marks the elect by bestowing earthly goods on them. He set an example by flaunting the wealth that his followers lavished on him. (One critical biography, by John Hoshor, is called *God in a Rolls-Royce*.) In the tradition of the Christian mystics, he taught that disciples should fix their minds unceasingly on Father Divine—i.e., on God—and all would go well with them. Unsurprisingly, those who found these principles ineffective, or the rules intolerable, quit. Thus Father Divine's institution was a model for many cults, communities, and churches of our own day, especially those that promise material benefits in exchange for spiritual devotion. Readers will have their own opinions of all this. My purpose is simply to draw attention to one of the stranger episodes in Valdosta's history.

Thanks to the Historical Society for the relevant pages of *The Valdosta Times* and of Jill Watts' *God, Harlem, U.S.A.: the Father Divine Story* (University of California Press, 1992).

Joscelyn Godwin is a native of Oxford, England, and a graduate of Cambridge and Cornell Universities. He and his wife Janet spend the winters in Loyce and Annette Howell Turner's former home in Valdosta, near their son Ariel, daughter-in-law Anne Price (Professor of Sociology at VSU), and their grandchildren. A musicologist by training, Joscelyn taught for 45 years at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. His many writings and translations treat the spiritual aspects of music (Harmonies of Heaven and Earth), the Western esoteric tradition (The Theosophical Enlightenment; Atlantis and the Cycles of Time), and eccentric religious movements (Upstate Cauldron). On learning that Father Divine began his colorful career in Valdosta, Godwin used the resources of the Historical Society to write this account of it, and to place it in a broader context.



“FATHER DIVINE IS A
SIGNIFICANT FIGURE
FOR SEVERAL REASONS,
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ADVENTURE.”



Lowering flag to half-staff for President Carter



Eagle Scout Fabio Maron (left, seated on bench)

On their honor and doing more than their best

Scouting America's structural reorganization hasn't slowed down Troops 491 and 2020 and their collaboration with the museum

When President Jimmy Carter transitioned to hospice care in February of 2023, Scouting America put troops throughout the country on alert that they might be called upon at any time to fly American flags at half-staff in his memory. When Carter passed away at the age of 100 on December 29, 2024, Troop 2020, along with Troop 491 Assistant Scoutmaster Randy Gladwin and his daughter, Randa, were ready; both assembled in front of the museum and did their duty—one of many recently completed in service to the society.

Led by Gladwin and Troop 2020's Scoutmaster Melissa Johnson, local Scouts have recently begun to work again with the society as they've weathered changes to troop formation guidelines, chief among them inclusion of girls. "Our family has been in Valdosta since 2005," says Gladwin, Professor of Modern and Classical Languages at Valdosta State University who has been involved with Scouts his whole life, achieving the rank of Eagle Scout himself as a teenager. "My wife Céline was dear friends with [Past LCHS Executive Director] Donald Davis through her work as an architect, so we always had a connection to this place."

Gladwin, who majored in history as an undergraduate, hadn't been as active in the society until his family donated some antique furniture to the museum in 2022, at which time they got to know current Executive Director

Renate Milner, who outlined the museum's need for repairs on the grounds of the property. "She said that visiting school groups used to tour the museum and the courtyard but weren't able to anymore due to the poor condition of some of the objects back there," he recalls. With Scouts Fabio Maron and Brendan Wood preparing for their Eagle, Troop 491 saw an opportunity to restore both the facilities and the relationship between the two organizations.

Fabio has since fully rebuilt the picnic bench, reinforced the depot, and refurbished the boardwalk, while Brendan built a new wooden platform for the train car. Randa, a member of Troop 2020, is planning to bring the Gypsy the Elephant statue, as well as the display board and fence behind her, back to life. "She may even paint her toenails," Gladwin laughs.

Troop 2020—so named for the year of its founding—was an outgrowth of the change in Scouting America's policy to include female participants. "At the time, my son, Brody, was in Boy Scout Troop 454, and my daughter, Josephine was one of the first girls to sign up for the co-ed Cub Scout Pack," remembers Johnson, who participated in Girl Scouts herself until middle school. "Josephine wanted to join years before with Brody, but it wasn't allowed at that time. When Boy Scouts of America announced the change, and the desire for an all-girls troop

(continued on next page)



Eagle Scout Brendan Wood

to form in our area, I decided to get more involved." Troop 2020 started with four Scouts a week before the COVID lockdowns; that July, Johnson formally took over as Scoutmaster, and as of this year they have nine girls participating.

Troop 2020's involvement with the museum began in November of 2022 during the society's ceremony honoring their new American flag. The following spring—again helped by Céline Gladwin's contacts—they toured the Wisenbaker-Wells-Roberts House as part of their work toward earning the Citizen of the Community merit badge. "[Valdosta Heritage Foundation President] Vickie Everitte helped connect us to the site," remembers Johnson. "And we were able to meet the mayor there during Historic Preservation Month."

Johnson hopes Randa's Eagle project will be the first of many for Troop 2020, which has found the community to be welcoming and encouraging. "We've had three different names and a lot of changes since the girls were first invited. The response overall has been great," says Johnson. Founding member Aida Miller initially didn't want to go for Eagle, but she was inspired to do

so by her peers, achieving her goal one day shy of her 18th birthday; she's now an Assistant Scoutmaster heading to the University of Oregon in the fall.

Both Gladwin and Johnson see the society's renewed connection with Scouts to be a great way to strengthen ties among community organizations as well as get young people more involved in civic life.

For Eagle we lean towards hands-on projects that rehabilitate local institutions, trails, and the like, so working with the museum is a natural progression for us," says Gladwin. For Johnson, witnessing the character growth her girls experience through service learning has been one of the most rewarding aspects of leading the troop. "These girls have matured so much since they joined. They've gone from not being able to speak in front of a group to giving presentations with confidence," she says. "Our Scouts gain such valuable life skills from the program, and I hope we'll continue learning about our local history even more in the years to come."



Historic Preservation Month, May 2023

Looking backward and moving forward

Newly appointed President Dr. Michael Black combines his love of the past with a plan for the society's future

Growing up in his native Valdosta in a family that valued learning and education—and one that traces its roots to the Huguenots—Michael Black found his passion for genealogy at a young age.

“My son Matthew says I only look up dead people,” he laughs. “But it’s more than that, of course. To truly understand history you have to know how a society functioned at a given time. A shortage of salt, a flu pandemic—all those events are the kind of clues that have always fascinated me.”

After attending Valdosta State University for his undergraduate and graduate studies, Black went on to earn his Doctor of Education in Higher Education at Florida State University, the only time he’s lived away from his beloved hometown. “I love it here, and I was glad to come back,” he says. “With both of my parents having worked in higher education, it was a landscape I knew well, and it’s where I felt I could best contribute.”

Currently the Director of Institutional Effectiveness in the Office of Academic Affairs at VSU, Black has worked for over 20 years in several positions related to finance, planning, accreditation, and administration. He’s also done many deep dives into the institutional history of VSU and his own family background, authoring a total of seven books about both topics in the process. Last August, he began offering his services as a consultant in higher education accreditation and assessment as well as genealogical research.

A longtime member of the society, Black first became involved over 15 years ago. “I’d been to the museum, but I didn’t know it was as large of an organization as it was,” he remembers. “Dr. William Gabard was instrumental in helping me see how I could contribute.” In 2006, to commemorate VSU’s centennial, Black published *A Mosaic of People and Events in the History of Valdosta State University’s Business Operations, 1906 to 2006*; he was the recipient of the society’s Keeper of History Award the following year. “It’s really important to me to promote and preserve our local history,” he says.



Keeper of History Award, 2007

Black joined as a the society trustee in 2023 and was later invited by then President Ron Irwin to consider a leadership role serving on the Executive Committee. Now three months into his role as the society’s 22nd president, he’s looking forward to increasing awareness of the society and bringing its resources into the digital age. “There are many people who say they have driven by our building without knowing what it was,” he says. “I’m going to do my best to make it more accessible to the public and our youth.” Project goals for this year include revamping the society’s branding and website, applying for grants to fund new exhibits, and further digitizing archives to make online searches about South Georgia history. (continued on next page)

**“TO TRULY UNDERSTAND HISTORY YOU
HAVE TO KNOW HOW A SOCIETY
FUNCTIONED AT A GIVEN TIME.”**

As he takes the helm of an organization that has given him so much, Black is grateful for the groundwork laid by Irwin and other past leaders. "Ron left me great records and procedures," he notes. "It's such a well-established society, and I really want to see us increase membership and visibility in the community." With its 60th anniversary just two years away, Black hopes to see it thrive and expand over the course of his term. "Some of our more established members encouraged me to be involved in the civic life of Valdosta when I was younger. They're the ones who blazed that trail, and it's up to us to encourage the next generation to join in what we're doing," he says.

Black has been married to his wife, Krystle Kennedy Black—whose Salzburger ancestors settled in Dasher in the early 1800s—since 2010, and enjoys traveling overseas with her and Matthew, 10. They visited Malta, France, and Italy in 2023 and are planning a trip to London later this spring. Serving the society is a labor of love he's squeezing in between work, family, and other side projects, and he looks forward to what comes next. "It's a great place," he says. "Getting the word out to the community about what we do and what we offer can only help us grow."



With wife Krystle and son Matthew in Rome, 2023

Go digital!

Send a message to
research.lchs@gmail.com to receive
meeting announcements and the
newsletter electronically.

Executive Director's Corner

Spring is in full swing at the Lowndes County Historical Society, and we are busy preparing for an exciting season ahead! This year is especially significant as we commemorate 200 years of Lowndes County with a special exhibit that explores the people, places, and events that have shaped our community over the past two centuries. We look forward to sharing this history with you and celebrating the rich heritage of our county.

I want to take a moment to thank all our members who have renewed their memberships for another year. Your continued support makes everything we do possible. If you haven't yet renewed, we encourage you to do so today. Memberships provide the foundation for our work—helping us maintain the museum, develop exhibits, and offer educational programs for both residents and visitors.

In addition to memberships, donations are crucial to our mission. Whether large or small, every contribution helps us preserve and share Lowndes County's history for future generations. As we mark this milestone anniversary, we invite you to consider donating to support the museum's ongoing efforts.

We appreciate your support and look forward to seeing you at the museum this spring!

Dee Dee Miller

Come see what's new at the museum!
Open Tuesday through Thursday 11 am to 4 pm

A chance to learn, grow, and organize—and maybe squeeze in a coffee run

The society welcomes VSU history major Jaylin Debro as its first summer intern since COVID



Jaylin Debro with Dr. Jay Rickman

Before the COVID lockdown—which, though hard to believe, began five years ago this month—the society consistently collaborated with Dr. Jay Rickman, Head of the History, Philosophy, and Religious Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies at Valdosta State University, in placing current VSU students at the society to help them include an internship as part of their history major.

“Over the years we’ve had students working at various historic sites in the region, such as the Grady County History Museum, the Charlton County Historical Society, and the Okefenokee Heritage Center,” explains Rickman. “But the location of the society has always been helpful for those who aren’t able to relocate for an entire semester to complete an internship.”

In 2023, Rickman tried to place VSU junior Jaylin Debro at the museum, but Jaylin was unable to fit the internship into her schedule. This year, however, the timing is finally right.

In late April, Jaylin will begin working with Director Renate Milner on several projects, including restoration of a religious history museum display heavily damaged by recent flooding and integration of the Black History Month section currently housed in the basement into the main display areas on the main floor of the museum. She’ll make her own hours, completing the required total of 150 by the end of the summer.

As a student at Valdosta High School, Jaylin found a passion for history, but was unsure how she could make it a career. “I’ve always loved analyzing topics that interest me, and I love doing independent research,” she says. “When I first started in the major, I thought my only option was to go into teaching, but this internship will give me the opportunity to see what other kinds of work I can do after I graduate.”

Rickman—whose wife, Pamela Rickman, teaches middle grades social studies at St. John’s Catholic School and recently brought her students to the society for a scavenger hunt—echoes Jaylin’s sentiment, noting that VSU recently hired Dr. Sarah FitzGerald to teach classes in public history, a pathway that allows for history majors to explore avenues in museum curation, archival library science, and historic site administration. “I’m a hands-on learner,” says Jaylin, “And I love the freedom to research using my own methods and approach. Digging deep to have things make sense is something I find really satisfying.” (continued on next page)

“THIS INTERNSHIP WILL GIVE ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO SEE WHAT OTHER KINDS OF WORK I CAN DO AFTER I GRADUATE.” - JAYLIN DEBRO

The society and VSU are grateful for this mutually beneficial arrangement, both for the exposure Jaylin will gain from working under Milner's guidance and for the contribution Jaylin will no doubt make to the ongoing efforts of the society to organize and better display its collection. Jaylin is looking forward to having some freedom to be creative in her approach to the internship, while Rickman sees how these kind of relationships help keep the society going strong. "My wife and I have been in Valdosta for 35 years. When we first moved here, we had to watch one of our neighbors throw out old papers he'd kept from when he served as an intelligence officer in the Marines in the 1920s," Rickman recalls. "I hated seeing that stuff destroyed. I'm so glad we have a process in place for people to preserve artifacts that carry such enormous value for the community."

Memorials

as of March 12, 2025

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

Thank you to all contributors.

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**THANK YOU
FOR YOUR SUPPORT!**

Who put the “Clyatt” in Clyattville?

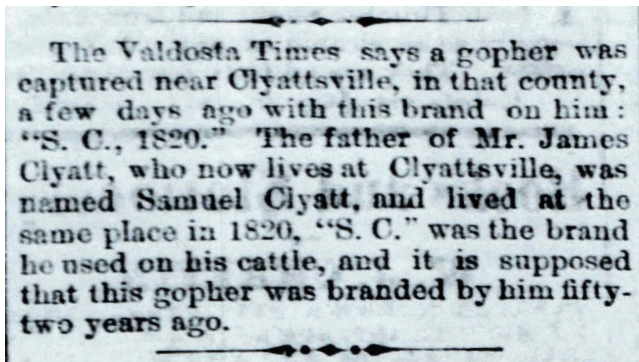
by Harry S. Evans

The early settlers of the Clyattville area included the Brays, Hunters, Lanes, Arnolds, Covingtons, Quillians, and, of course, the Clyatts.

From 1837 to 1848, the community, known then as Forest Grove, was located to the northwest of the current location on the Withlacoochee River southwest of Troupville. It was centered around the Forest Grove Primitive Baptist Church. The only current use of the Forest Grove name is the local cemetery, which still serves as the primary cemetery for Clyattville.

In 1848, the Forest Grove post office was transferred a short distance away to the store of James M. Clyatt. Clyatt's store had been established for about a decade at that point along a stagecoach route between Troupville and Bellville, Florida. It was located near the intersection of Ousley Road and Old Clyattville Road, about 1.4 miles northwest of the current location of Clyattville.

The Clyatt store was previously owned by James Clyatt's father, Samuel Mills Clyatt, who had owned a plantation which covered most of the area around Clyattville. There is anecdotal evidence that Samuel Clyatt had been in the area since at least 1820. In the 1870s The Valdosta Times reported that a gopher tortoise was found in Clyattville with a brand reading “S.C. 1820.” From this it was surmised that Samuel Clyatt branded the tortoise with his initials and the year 1820.



Weekly Columbus Enquirer, Tue., Oct. 8, 1872, p. 3

Interested in helping fund projects at the museum?

Call 229-247-4780 to find out how.



Gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*)

Historians Wayne and Judy Dasher set the year that the first settlers arrived in what would become Lowndes County as 1821, four years before the establishment of the county. Sam Clyatt was not included in the Dasher's list of the first four settlers. He, nor anyone else, was listed as residents in the 1820 census. So, we don't know if the gopher tortoise was telling the truth or not.

Since the future county was still Indian Country in 1820, the census taker, understandably, may not have made a very thorough search for new residents. What we do know is that by 1826, the elder Clyatt was prominent enough to be named as one of the first officers, County Surveyor, of the newly formed Lowndes.

There once was a grist mill, a cotton gin built by C. A. Baucom, a drugstore, and the Methodist Church. Early Clyattville was mainly agricultural, and its community thrived on farming. The first store in modern Clyattville was owned by the Bray family, who were prominent in Valdosta history. In the early 1950s, Owens-Illinois built a paper mill and a bag plant there. Although it's gone through many changes over the years, this facility instantly made Clyattville an industrialized area.

Despite this iconic presence, Clyattville continues to be an unincorporated community of about 550 people, and is now notably known for Wild Adventures theme park which attracts visitors from throughout the country.



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 /LowndesCountyHistoricalMuseum

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NEWSLETTER OF THE LOWNDES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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