



June 2011 Newsletter

Structural Racism and the Destruction of Santos, Florida

By Blue Nelson*

Introduction

About six miles south of Ocala, on highway U.S. 441 in Marion County, there is a brown sign that reads Santos, Florida. To the casual observer this densely vegetated area may appear to be an unmolested patch of virgin forest. However, to a steadily decreasing number of local residents, this was the center of an agrarian and predominately African-American, community. By all standards, Santos was a common town, not unlike many other small towns that seemed to develop along rail lines and dot Florida's landscape around the turn of the 20th century. However, in the early 1930s, Santos was razed and its residents scattered when the proposed Cross Florida Ship Canal was designated to run right through the center of town (Figure 1). Residents were given little or no money for their homes and property and even less time to get out of the way of the waiting bulldozers.

In evaluating the events and circumstances surrounding the destruction of Santos, it is highly likely that structural racism played a key role in the displacement of this community (see, e.g., Gaertner and Dovidio 1986). Such aversive forms of racism often have the effect of choking off economic opportunities from communities. In the extreme form suffered by Santos, large-scale development projects in transportation infrastructure lead to displacement of communities that could otherwise have been ongoing, economic participants in the region. The impacts of distortive ideologies lead instead to the value of those communities being disregarded and to their destruction and displacement (Dovidio and Gaertner 1998; Kleinpenning and Hagendoorn 1993).

Today, a small number of former residents and descendants of Santos have organized to ensure the memory of this nearly forgotten community is kept alive for future generations. Very few former residents are alive to tell their story, and published treatments on the community

amount to a paragraph at best. For this reason, it was essential to obtain informant interviews which could be combined with primary and secondary sources to produce a study of the history of Santos. The existence of Santos occurs during a period historians have referred to as the nadir, or low point, of race relations; and, is contemporaneous with the violent displacement of Rosewood and Ocoee, both only about sixty miles northwest and southeast respectively. Santos

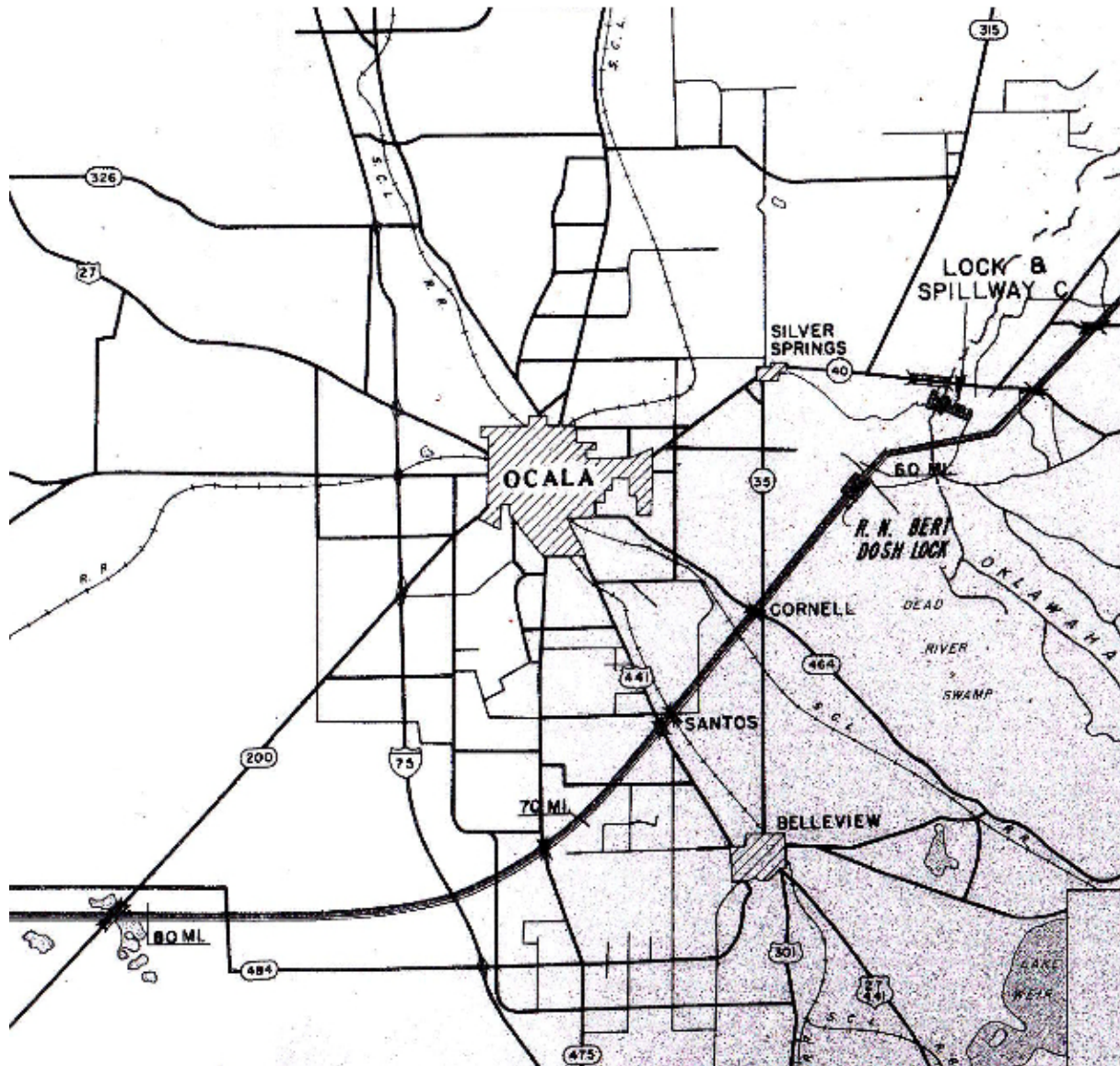


Figure 1. Map of the location of Santos, Florida and the Cross Florida Ship Canal.

has the potential to provide valuable insights into the development of an African-American collective identity for such a community. This account can in turn be compared and contrasted

with the histories of the more violent displacement of other Florida African-American communities during the same period. Fundamentally, this is an opportunity to document the history of a town whose memory fades with the passing of each former resident.

Community Histories

The story of Santos begins just outside Memphis, Tennessee following the Civil War. Following a decade of struggles in the battle scarred region, a band of European-American farmers led by John Cole sought to make their fortunes with a new start and a new home. With the potential of riches in their eyes, the group set off for Brazil to establish coffee plantations. Once in Brazil the co-operative purchased enslaved laborers and hired an overseer. However, after a short time the women in these farming families became disenchanted with their new home and successfully urged the men to move back to the United States. According to Payton Liddell, a grandson of John Cole, the family had grown fond of two enslaved workers, Benedict and Eria, and decided to take them back home for fear that the two would not fair well without the farmers (Pottorff nd).

Upon arriving in New York, Eria and Benedict were given their freedom and accompanied the farmers south to establish new homes. Once back home in Tennessee, the farmers found that not much had changed and decided to try their luck on the Florida frontier. It is possible the band of farmers heard rumors of an alleged cross-state canal and preemptively settled in the assumed path. According to Liddell, the settlers were hoping to cash in once the canal was constructed. In any case, Cole and his associates decided to settle on a few hundred acres just south of Ocala. They called their new home Santos after the previous home of the formerly enslaved companions.

The center of town formed around the Florida Central and Peninsular Rail Road (called the Seaboard Air Line Railway sometime after 1900). Here J.M. Liddell and his wife, the daughter of John Cole, started their family and established the town's first general store and train depot. On the 17th of October 1883, Santos received a post office with J.M. Liddell serving as postmaster. By this act, the little community officially became a town (Bradbury and Hallock 1962).

Within a year, a Marion county newspaper, *The Daily Item*, recognized the farming community of Santos in its "Spring Trade" edition as an ample contributor in Marion county

agricultural production (Harris 1885). By 1886, the town of Santos boasted a population of forty-seven. The town contained several businesses, including three general stores and the S. R. Pyles & Company's steam saw and planing mill (Polk 1912). In addition, the town had a public school and African-American Methodist and Baptist churches (Polk 1912).

The main industry of the town, however, remained agriculture with the primary commodities being cotton, lumber, citrus, and vegetables (Polk 1912). In the early years of the town the former Tennessee farmers, including John Cole, tried to cultivate coffee on their land, but were unsuccessful (Pottorff nd). In turn, they decided to develop orange groves. However, during the devastating series of freezes from late 1894 to early 1895 this staple crop of the community was decimated. The town was discouraged but not devastated and continued its agrarian ways until its demise.

African Americans' Experiences in Santos

It is necessary to point out that little is known about Benedict and Eria, presumably Santos' first black residents. However, it is certain they continued to work for the Cole family and helped raise the grandchildren of John Cole. In fact, a provision in the last will and testament of John Cole stated that the couple, who at this point had adopted the last name Cole, be provided with ten acres of land, eight acres of orange groves, and \$250 to build a house (Schneider 2000). Payton Liddell recalled in an interview during the 1960s that Eria and Benedict spoke mostly in Portuguese and used hand gestures much of the time to indicate what they were trying to say (Pottorff nd). It is unknown whether they ever had children of their own.

Despite the widespread racism and violence against African Americans prevalent throughout the United States, and particularly Florida, at the time (the massacres at Ocoee and Rosewood are contemporaneous to Santos), race relations within Santos appear to have been "pretty good" between the residents of the community (Olinger 1996). One common denominator among whites and blacks was baseball. To this day those old enough to remember recall the baseball games that took place in the rural community with a smile. Situated near the railroad tracks and a rock crusher facility was the Santos baseball diamond. During the early 20th century this baseball field played host to the Southeastern Circuit of the Negro League. In between scheduled games, Negro League teams would often stop at towns along the railways and play exhibition games for people who would otherwise never have the opportunity to go to a

regular season game. Baseball games were huge events that drew citizens from the surrounding areas, including whites. Many people, both white and black, recall the games with fondness, and in a time when integration was unthought-of in the South, people were able to find “fellowship in baseball” (personal communication, Wayne Little, March 9, 2009).

Route 13-B and the Demise of Santos

January 21, 1927, was the beginning of the end for this little farming community. On this date President Calvin Coolidge signed the River and Harbor Act which permitted preliminary surveys to be conducted to find a route for a cross Florida ship canal (Stockbridge and Perry 1938). Twenty-eight possible canal routes would be explored. Among these, an option labeled as Route 13-B was selected. By November of that year, for unknown reasons, the Post Office in Santos was moved or closed (Bradbury and Hallock 1962). By January 1931, the Belleview School District received a bond to purchase land to build a consolidated “Negro” school, which merged the schools of Santos, Mt. Royal, Belleview, and Ocklawaha (Lovell 1975; Ivey 1977). The school would relocate in nearby Belleview and be known as Belleview-Santos High School.

In the throes of the Great Depression, residents in the path of the canal were instructed to move. According to Wayne Little some residents received money for their land, and others did not. In an interview with *The Floridian*, Santos resident Leroy Jack Damon recalled, “My dad had ten acres, and there were three homes on the place. They gave him five hundred dollars” (Olinger 1996). It is uncertain what, or who, determined fair market value of the land or if different values were paid to African Americans than to white landowners. Further, Mr. Little declares that the people of Santos were led to believe the canal was necessary in order to ensure national security. Additionally, he maintains that the people of Santos offered no resistance because they felt it was their patriotic duty to aid their country. Mickey Thomason, Central Region Manager with Office of Greenways and Trails, concurs with Little, and has spoken with other African-American land owners along portions of the canal right-of-way that have indicated that they, in fact, donated several acres of their land in the name of national security (personal communication, March 9, 2009). The idea to construct a cross-state canal for military purposes went back as far as Andrew Jackson who, as Florida’s military governor “urged upon the government at Washington the construction of a canal across Florida for military purposes” (Stockbridge and Perry 1938: 192). It is uncertain what sales pitch, if any, was provided to

landowners in order to purchase their land and remove the occupants with as little resistance as possible.

On September 3, 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt allocated \$5 million from the Emergency Relief Fund in order to begin work on the canal. Seventeen days later initial excavations began when the President “pressed a gold nugget covered” telegraph key from the comfort of his home study in Hyde Park (Ott and Chazal 1966). Work began nine miles south of Ocala. In Santos, on U.S. 441, four bridge stanchions were built to support a bridge that would route traffic high over the ship canal. By summer 1936, financial support for the canal project was exhausted and work came to a stop. Over the next three and a half decades, interest in the canal project would renew. However, the project was always contentious and met heavy resistance on several fronts, most notably the threat of salt water intrusion into Florida’s drinking water supply. In January 1971, President Nixon halted construction on the canal and in 1990 the “Water Resources Act de-authorized the canal” (Davis and Arsenault 2005).

After the official demise of the canal project the question arose of what to do with the land in the right-of-way. The descendant community feared that developers would buy up the land and their history would be lost forever. Some residents tried to buy back their old parcels of land but at the fair market value of that time they simply could not afford to do so. In order to avert controversy the state designated the right-of-way for the canal as a recreational area, rather than sell the land to private entities. Then in 1996, the Santos descendant community formed a committee known as the Santos Historical Recreational Committee and asked the state to allocate them a few acres of Santos to convert to parks and recreational areas. The government finally capitulated and allowed the community, in conjunction with the Office of Greenways and Trails, to develop five acres for recreational use with the stipulation that no permanent structures could be constructed on the property. The historical committee, supported by the Office of Greenways and Trails, continued to push for a more permanent recreational area with facilities and structures. Eventually, the state capitulated and granted \$300,000 to build permanent facilities, a park, and a baseball field.

Why Route 13-B? Possible Impacts of Structural Racism

Of the twenty-eight proposed canal routes, 13-B was designated above the rest. This route began at Port Inglis and rambled towards the east directly through the middle of Santos.

Many canal advocates opposed this route as they thought it was not the most practical of the twenty-eight alternative routes. One article indicated that if a canal route were necessary “the present practical cross-State waterway now successfully operating between St. Lucie Inlet at Stuart and the Gulf at Punta Rasa, be considered” (Coe 1941). Instead, one year later, route 13-B was re-approved. Of all the acreage necessary to construct the canal only one town would be destroyed.

Despite the fact that an extant cross-peninsular canal was operational to the south, advocates pushed for a new project. No doubt the canal project and route were dictated by Florida politicians and towns that lobbied to bring the project to their community in hopes of prospering from the commerce a major transportation artery would bring. Unfortunately for the community of Santos, policy makers chose to direct the canal right-of-way through their town rather than to the south and through what was, at the time, land utilized by the turpentine industry. In fact, in evaluating Army Corps of Engineer maps of the proposed route a concerted effort had to be made to direct the canal right-of-way through Santos (see Figure 1). Taking logistical and topographic concerns into consideration, it made more sense to continue the route south of the town and connecting with the Oklawaha River just south of Sharpes Ferry (USACOE, 1933). This adjustment would have spared the town and at supposedly little to no extra cost.

In the decades that preceded the destruction of Santos, African Americans in Florida experienced a mass exodus northward in the wake of agricultural hardships due to boll weevil infestations, and most notably unbridled violence leveled against black communities. Judicial intervention was almost non-existent in Florida and African Americans could not expect protection from anyone outside their own communities. The decision to route the canal through Santos was a direct result of contemporary racist views and the destruction of the town was as absolute as that of Rosewood.

By the mid-1930s the entire town of Santos had been razed and much of its population displaced. With the economic base of the community shut down and land parcels splintered many people decided to move. Although work was set to begin near their community, few African Americans, if any, were offered work on the canal project. Discouraged, and in the middle of the Great Depression, community members diffused across Florida and the United States in search of new opportunities.

Santos Today

Today, near the old center of town sits a basketball court, bathroom facilities, a playground, several pavilions, and, of course, a baseball field. The committee was also instrumental in having a sign placed on U.S. 441, memorializing the spot of the once agrarian community. In addition, nineteen small brown signs were placed throughout Santos indicating where various known establishments once stood. The town itself has been overrun with forest.



Figure 2. The Original Little Chapel is the only structure of Santos still standing today.

Other than the small brown signs there is no indication that a town once stood near the railroad tracks. In the median of U.S. 441, behind the Marion County Sheriff sub-station, looms the four bridge stanchions. Almost entirely obscured from view, the largest stanchion stands imposing like a grand tombstone that indicates the great loss. The only structure left standing in all of Santos is the Little Chapel United Methodist church on Southeast 80th Street (Figure 2).

Today, the community of Santos celebrates the memory of the town annually by holding a barbeque and softball tournament. Former residents and families, as well as anyone else who would like to attend, are treated to good food and Santos hospitality. A symbolic softball game is played in the afternoon and, keeping with tradition, the game is integrated. The Santos Historical Recreational Committee invites the Marion County Sheriff's deputies to participate in the game to ensure that the spirit of Santos baseball is honored.

Concluding Observations

Santos was not unlike many small towns of its era -- a simple agrarian community established on a dream of prosperity and hard work. Santos did not stand out in any way and no significant events occurred there. Race relations among the town's residents appear to have been affable and there was no violent riot that killed masses of innocent people. However, the destruction of Santos is no less racially motivated and its residents no doubt found little solace in a "peaceful" displacement. The passive-aggressive destruction of Santos cannot be compared to the violent devastation of communities such as Ocoee and Rosewood; however, the narrative of Santos seamlessly weaves itself among these horrors to create a tapestry of African-American life in the Jim Crow south. Although the structures have long since been demolished the spirit of Santos remains today through the descendants that keep its memory alive.

Note

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