

Beaches Museum & History Park

By Peggy McGuinness



The Beaches Museum & History Park has been an evolving entity in Jacksonville Beach since 1979 when the land between Fourth Street North and Sixth Street North, bordered by Pablo Avenue and Beach Boulevard, became the Pablo Beach History Park. The Beaches Area Historical Society, which had been formed in 1978, was approached by the City of Jacksonville Beach (COJB) to operate the space given to them by Florida East Coast Railway (FEC). The land was formerly a right-of-way for the railroad, with tracks running down what is now Beach Boulevard into Jacksonville.

The Historical Society knew the parcel given to COJB was accepted with the understanding it would always be a park and responded by creating one with a "history theme," according to the Museum's Executive Director, Chris Hoffman. Over the years, the park, the structures perched on the land, and even the surrounding streets, have undergone a remarkable transformation.

Today, the Museum is a multi-faceted non-profit organization that will celebrate its 40th anniversary this year serving the communities of Mayport, Atlantic Beach, Neptune Beach, Jacksonville Beach, Ponte Vedra Beach and Palm Valley. The main building at 381 Beach Blvd between Third Street North and Fourth Street North accommodates exhibits, archives, offices and the Museum store. Across from Fourth Street North going west is the Museum's History Park, a collection of mostly historic buildings that are part of the complex.

Chris says she has heard the Museum described in the past as "a hidden gem in plain sight," but that perception has changed since the mid-2000s. Today the Museum attracts between 10,000 and 15,000 visitors annually, has a board of directors and is staffed by four full-time employees and over a hundred dedicated volunteers. Visitors are offered "an interactive, informative, and intriguing look at the area's heritage" according to the website, "through exhibits and first-hand accounts designed to bring the rich history of the Beaches communities to life."

The Museum encourages area residents to become members to help with "preserving, understanding and celebrating the history of the Beaches." Membership benefits include access to historic buildings and rotating exhibits which showcase "the colorful heritage of our Beaches communities." Members also enjoy free admission to the reading room and many programs and events. Non-members are typically asked to donate \$5 for events, although general admission is free due to the generosity of Atlantic Beach residents Maxwell and Edna Dickinson. Detailed information about the Museum and levels of individual and corporate memberships may be viewed at www.beachmuseum.org.

The Museum History Park is a unique collection of mostly historical buildings that sit together on a narrow strip of parkland that begin on Fourth Street North and extend to Sixth Street North. The first building to

be moved onto the site was the Mayport FEC Depot building. Constructed in 1900 and once the terminus point for the FEC spur line to Mayport, it was moved to its current location in 1981.

A separate structure holds a 25-ton 1911 steam train donated to the Historical Society by the City of St. Augustine and moved to its current location in 1982. The FEC Foreman House #93 is a "colonial yellow" wood frame structure built by the FEC in 1900 as a residence for their section foreman. Once located a block west of its present location, this house was moved to its current spot in 1979.

The 1903 post office on the property was the first stand-alone post office in what was then called Pablo Beach. By 1917 the structure had been moved to Second Street South and become part of a home before it was moved in 1986 to the park.

The two most recent additions are the St. Paul's By-the-Sea/Beaches Chapel, one of the oldest historical structures at the beach, and the Oesterreicher-McCormick Cabin, one of the area's oldest examples of Florida Cracker architecture. Both the chapel and the cabin were built in 1887 in Jacksonville Beach when it was called Pablo Beach. The chapel, which may be rented for weddings, became part of the park in 2012 and the cabin arrived in 2016. With the arrival of the chapel, a beautification effort was sparked and since then Fifth Street North was closed to connect the chapel with the other buildings.

A white picket fence and sidewalks connecting the structures have also been installed. Through an Eagle Scout project, signage for each of them has been added to enable self-guided tours of the historical buildings, with docent-guided tours available during museum hours. There's also a Heritage Garden on the property, where, in season, there's always something growing or flowering.

The Museum is a veritable hotbed of activity at any given time. Lectures, concerts, tours, events, "Train Days" and fund-raising events are planned throughout the year, including the annual "Beaches Legends" event which honors well-known members of the community who have made "significant contributions to the on-going history of the Beaches." This year will be the 5th such gala, which includes both live and silent auctions. Proceeds from this event go to "preservation, operations and education," Chris tells me.

Ten months of effort went into re-defining and documenting The Museum's mission, vision, core values and strategic plan in 2017, and the organization is still in the process of "re-branding," says Chris. Their mission, according to the website, is "to preserve and share the distinct history and culture of the Beaches area" and their broader "Vision 2025" is summed up as follows: "We are the bridge from past to present, inspiring a sense of place and are embraced by the community as its connection to history, culture and one another."