

The Story of Midway: The Community and the School

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The Community

Important to understanding the history of Midway is to first understand that the community of Midway was established for black people and only black people have ever lived in this community. There is little written history of the Midway community and what does exist is documented oral history, therefore in order to develop a more thorough understanding of the history of the community and of the school within the community, the researcher sought information from the inhabitants of the community whose minds held the keys to opening the doors of the information that could be used to record the history of this community and the school within the community. Interviewed for this history were a series of people, life-long residents, long-term teachers, descendants of early pioneers.

Midway emerged as a community at the beginning of the 20th century. Located half way between Cameron City and what is now known as downtown Sanford, it served as a stopping place for cattle drivers herding the cattle south towards present day Kissimmee. An artesian well served as the “watering hole” for the cattle drivers and also served as an irrigation source for the eight families of farm workers who settled in the area (Elliott, 1990).

Joseph Hillery moved to Midway when he was 2 years old. Mr. Hillery’s family home was the first one built in Midway by a man named Musson. “When we came here in 1910, it was nothing but woods. We were the first family to live here. We came from Monticello, Florida. My parents came here to work the celery farms, we cut celery every day out yonder on Celery Avenue. The white farmers who owned the land lived in Cameron City and they built houses for the blacks to live here in the woods and to work their farms. Only the black people lived in the woods that was called Midway” (Interview 6-26-98). Although Mr. Hillery did not know how Midway got its name, Eva Stephens, a resident of Midway since 1924 recollected the story she was told by her elders about the naming Midway. “A white family by the name of Campbell lived in Cameron City and had a lot of cattle. The Campbell’s would bring their cows to a running well located a block before you got to the current King’s Road on Sipes Avenue to give them water. The well was midway between Cameron City and Sanford” (Interview, 6-24-97). Upon examining the plat map of 1910, Midway is on the map and is located approximately half way between Cameron City and Sanford. Closer examination of the plat maps also indicates the presence of an artesian well in Midway community near the corner of “Water Street” and Sipes Avenue.

Between the late 1920s and the early 1930s, the community experienced a population growth, with the people moving in from areas all over the South. The black people who came to Midway were from different parts of the country; some came from the Carolinas, Georgia, Mississippi, and other parts of Florida, and the United States (field notes of Margaret Barnes, 1936).

Marie Blake Manley was born in Midway on December 25, 1929 and she recalls

My people came from Monticello. My daddy bought our place from Ralph Chapman. They lived out off of Beardall Avenue in one of those big houses. . . . a lot of people from Midway originated from North Florida or Georgia. They came here because of farming. You could work on the farm and make a decent living for your family. Where they came from, only one family member could work and that was the man. The woman would work in the house with white people. Sometimes, she would be the only one working. Sometimes, she didn’t make money. They didn’t give you that much, but you could bring food home to feed your family..when people moved to Sanford, man and woman could work. The children could work . . . it made a difference.(Manley interview 6-26-98)

Migrating to Midway was economically feasible for black families in need of work and desiring to own their own homes. Settling in Midway was not easy living. Hillery, Byrd, Johnson, Manley and Stephens filled the researcher’s ears with stories that told how the Midway families struggled to survive. If these stories prepare a younger generation of Midway for anything, it is to understand how the early settlers survived: through persistence, perseverance, struggle, ingenuity and hard work.

My mother raised me up. My daddy died in 1917. Our family cut celery and did farm work at the farms out on Celery Avenue. Everybody had a garden, chicken, and hogs. You mainly ate out of your gardens. We had tomatoes, okra, and butter beans. We grew everything except grits and rice. There was a gin mill that a white man owned on Celery Avenue. We would take our corn up there to be ground for meal. It was owned by Mr. Bromley of Bromley Farms. They were nice people. When we needed other things, we would walk uptown to Sanford to shop. Sanford Avenue was booming. They had the Piggly Wiggly and old man Gadsen’s store. He was a white fellow. His store was on Celery and Mellonville. (Hillery, interview, 6-26-98)

The downtown shopping area of Sanford was important to the citizens of Midway and the surrounding communities. The city of Sanford was a bustling town that sat on the St. John’s River. James Byrd gave a vivid account of why it was so important.

At that point in time, most of the food came in from Jacksonville, Florida by river boats down on the lake front. Even the citizens of Orlando had to come to Sanford. In

fact, the merchants of Orlando had to come to Sanford to the warehouses. There were masses of warehouses down on the lake front. They sold wholesale supplies of groceries to the merchants and citizens. I remember going to some of the warehouses as a kid. Our parents would take us down there. Some would go by mule and wagon or walk. They would buy rice, oil, sausages, and the five gallon containers of goods. It was called the 'Three month foods' because of the three months when there was no work (interview 4-16-97)

Every community needs easy or convenient access to major businesses and shopping areas. Midway had (and continues to have) two main highways: State Road 46 and Sipes Avenue. Other roads were not existent.

We didn't have any roads as you see them today. We had little pig trails. In fact, you could catch a pig trail through the back alleys into the swamps and go all the way to Sanford on foot. You couldn't drive an automobile on those little pig trails. All this was swamp land. When it rained or stormed, the citizens of Midway had to wade in water. There were no street lights, drainage, or sewage systems for years (Byrd interview 4-16-97).

The streets in this community, now approximately 25-30 square miles in size, have typically, as in many small towns, been named after individuals who positively impacted the community. A major street in Midway is Sipes Avenue, located between 20th Street and the railroad line which connected Midway to Sanford to the north and Lake Okechobee to the south. Sipes Avenue was named for J.W. Sipes, a white celery farmer who owned a large celery farm in the area and recruited blacks to come and work his farm. Mr. Sipes employed many of the black laborers to pick, pack and ship his celery (Stephens, interview 6-24-97).

In the interview with Mrs. Manley, she indicated how important it was for the community to help each other.

My daddy had hogs. When we killed hogs, he would give everybody in the neighborhood meat. He had his own smokehouse. My mommy and the women would grind the sausage meat. They would put just enough fat and seasoning in them so that it wouldn't be too fat. I can do it now myself. I have never forgot how to do that. . . . Although I was younger, my daddy never trusted my brothers to light the smokehouse every day. We used corn cobs for fuel. He [my daddy] utilized everything. I did what my daddy said that is why he trusted me with that job (interview 6-26-98).

The late 1920s and early 1930s that the interviewees grew up in was not an easy time for any American, especially black Americans. This was evident in Mozell Johnson's story of growing up in Midway.

When I was a little girl in the early 20s, Midway had nothing but dirt roads. There was a store in Canaan that a white woman used to run. Our family used to go there when it was time to shop and come back with bags of food. Midway also had a jook joint that people would go to for fun and dancing [Jook is the word for a Negro pleasure house]...Every morning before going to school we had to pick peas. Daddy used to walk to the St. John's every day to catch catfish and shads for our meals. There was a chicken farm on Celery Avenue where we would buy pounds of chicken feet for a nickel. We would eat chicken feet and rice, peas and okra. I had two dresses and one pair of shoes. I always wore a clean dress to school. I washed my dresses every day. I wore my shoes to school and church (interview 4-11-97).

By 1925, there were three churches that had been built by the black people who lived in the Midway-Canaan community. The lands for these churches were either donated by or bought from white property owners in order to attract black workers to Florida to pick citrus, build roads, and clean and cook for the white property owners (Elliot, 1990). These churches are very active to this day: Progress Missionary Baptist in Midway, New Bethel A.M.E. and Saint Mathews Missionary Baptist in Canaan. New Zion Primitive Baptist Church was built by Reverend Allen in 1927, the Morning Glory Missionary Church, the New Zion Missionary Baptist Church, the Mount Olive A.M.E. (frequently called the Boyd's family church) and the Reddick Memorial Church, a holiness church started by Johnny and Clara Reddick in their home, were also opened by 1927. (Interviews with Stephens 6-24-97; Johnson 4-11-97).

The establishment of so many churches in a small community provides evidence of the importance of spirituality of the black members of the community. Although not all the churches survived the changing times, their influence on the values and social mores of the citizens of Midway helped build a positive foundation that ensured the community's survival.

In developing the all black community of Midway, the white property owners also included a school for the black farm laborers' children. The interviewees stressed their belief that the school and churches laid the foundation for the Midway community. The belief was evident in how they chose to share their memories. Mr. Hillery described his school as a little one room school house set in the woods--this would have been around 1914. Although no other documentation can be found to substantiate Mr. Hillery's recollections, county records indicate that in this area, land owners were taxed for a school. "The school was a little one-room house just setting off in the woods. It didn't have a name and all grades and all ages were taught in that one room. Miss Fannie Reid was our teacher. Professor Monroe was the first principal" (Interview 6-26-98).

In 1924 Celery Academy was built to accommodate the growing population of Negro children living in the Midway community. This was a non-public school, supported by the community (black and white) and the churches. Mrs. Mozell Johnson and Mrs. Eva Stephens both shared vivid memories of the academy. Eva Stephens describes Celery Academy as a round, red,

two story building, located two blocks from her current residence. Because of its color, it was called "The Red School" by the local residents although its legal name was Celery Academy, named after the celery district in which it was located (interview 6-24-97).

The Academy was important to the Midway community. According to Mozell Johnson, to the children of Midway, attending school was as serious as attending church or going to work.

There was one day at Celery Academy that I will always remember. Miss Reid taught us a new formula for working a math problem. One day she tested us to see if we knew it. Everybody in the class got the problem wrong. She told us we couldn't go home until we worked the problem. When the sun began to set, we knew that we were in trouble. We thought about what would happen when we got home. Our chores weren't done, and we had to get home early. We had to get up early and pick peas before coming to school. All of us were scared because the worst thing was for your parents to think that you were playing off in school. The class began to work the problem as a team and we finally came up with the correct formula. That day never repeated itself (interview 4-11-97).

The sound of Johnson and Stephens' voices, couple with the momentum in which they spoke about life in Midway, encouraged the researcher to believe that these women began developing a purpose very early in life. Learning to become self-sufficient began early for most children in the Midway community.

I learned to sew when I was six year old. When I graduated from Celery Academy, I made my own suit. It was pea green and white. That was my class colors. I continued my schooling and went on to attend Crooms Academy for high school. My parents made arrangements for me to stay in Sanford with Miss Jo Anna Moore, the principal of Goldsboro School (The Little Red School)¹, during the week. I would come home on the weekend...we didn't have transportation. Miss Moore had a niece, Francina Martin, who was a school teacher. She had a car and would pick me up. Transportation was scarce. There were few cars in Midway. Some of my relatives had a car, they would also take me to Miss Moore's house in Goldsboro (Stephens' interview 6-24-97).

The practice of "boarding a child out" for educational purposes was not uncommon among rural Southern Negroes. Some of the researcher's relatives living in the all black community of Goldsboro had the same experience of Ms. Stephens. The reason was for the child to get as much classroom "schooling" as possible. The term "schooled" or "schooling" is often used by African-Americans to describe when, where, how, or what an individual or group of people learn or should learn.

In establishing an all black community such as Midway in close proximity to their farms, white farmers were assured of experienced laborers who could plant and harvest their crops in timely intervals. This system provided economic prosperity to the farmers and a sense of security for the African-American laborers.

The security for the laborers stemmed from the opportunity to work, buy land, own a home, and build a church. The community was complete according to the interviewees when a "school" was started for the children. When the number of children in Midway grew, the Negroes banded together, went to the Seminole County School district and asked them to build a public school for their children in Midway (interviews with Hillery 6-26-98; Johnson 4-11-97; Stephens 6-24-97). Thus, Midway School was established.

The School

During the 1930s, the separate but equal doctrine was a reality throughout America. It was a system that combined two worlds within one world. It was a system that regaled a second class citizenship to black people. In the South, this doctrine was also known as "Jim Crow," and it was here that it reigned supreme. It was a racial caste system that constantly reminded blacks that they were not worthy of the freedoms that are spelled out in the Constitution of the United States of America. And, one of the most "dampen" sanctions of the "separate but equal doctrine" was the denial of a "quality" education for black children.

In order to tell the story of Midway school, the researcher approached the women of Midway for the stories. Many women in the African-American community were teachers because their womanhood is a "natural order" for them to become teachers, historians, protectors, and care-givers, regardless of their formal education or economic status. And, the women were the collective mind of the community—they knew the stories and were anxious to share them for the "future" of the children of Midway.

Altamese Smith Bentley was the daughter of a prominent missionary Baptist Minister, received her bachelor's degree in biological science with a minor in English from Shaw University, Raleigh, North Carolina. Bentley is an 87 year old retired educator, author, and local historian of the African-American community in Sanford, Florida. She has a regal presence and speaks with the commanding ability to teach and impart knowledge of her subject. While listening to her recall her experiences as an educator at Midway School, the researcher knew that she was having a unique opportunity to see how teachers evolve and become sages in the field of education when they have the courage to learn and grow with their students.

The rural farming community of Midway was not a stranger to Bentley. Her father's pastoral duties allowed her to fellowship with people in churches that were located throughout Central Florida, including Midway. She also attended the Midway School during the summer months...

In order to supplement our schooling, the boys and girls from the black communities of Georgetown and Goldsboro would attend summer sessions at Midway. The Midway student would do likewise when we were in session. That was how we got eight months of schooling because the county only gave four months across the board...After Christmas the children of Midway were out of school like we were, but they came back in May because of the seasonal work. (Bentley interview 7-15-97)

When Mrs. Bentley graduated from college, she taught tenth grade biology in Polk County, Florida. At the end of late spring 1935, she returned home to Seminole County with her father. According to Bentley, "I was in need of a job. The school year at Midway was still in session due to the seasonal work of the community. I applied there for a teaching position." (Interview 7-15-97). At the time when Bentley sought employment at Midway School, Fannie B. Reid was the principal, and T. W. Lawton was the superintendent.

Her need for a job was met when she was hired at Midway School and much to her dismay, assigned to teach first grade. For Bentley this was more than a job. It was a challenge, and for her, a beginning. As we are faced with concerns in our lives, there are times when the need to talk about it is necessary. This is when it is important to have a special person to turn to. In Bentley's case, she sought wisdom from her father.

I don't know whether it was a conversation or whether he challenged me with my complaint in going from tenth grade biology to first grade. He reminded me that I was not teaching a subject, I was teaching children... The example he used was how interesting children were in their quest for knowledge and what curiosity I could arouse in them...I found that there were a few things that I learned on the secondary level that was not usable in the elementary school. When I was in training, we hammered on the principles of learning. Yes, the Laws of Learning. I found that there was more in my being willing to re-learn, than it was a failure on the part of the children to absorb. That was where my problem was, I had to get from the level where I had left college. I had been out of school for just two years (Interview 7-15-97).

The major challenge Mrs. Bentley had was trying to find ways to reach the little children and developing methods that were more appropriate for the small children than what she used with the older children. Once she discovered how to reach the children she was able to bond with her students, and together they developed a classroom environment that was conducive for learning.

She developed a science corner in their classroom.

It wasn't difficult because you were to build around their experiences. They had many little things at home that they could contribute. They had pets but couldn't bring them into the classroom because of lack of space and heat. They wouldn't be safe or survive overnight...But the specimens that I could bring in, I did. That was really the beginning of my security when working with grade school children. . . . I really started with day to day experiences that they knew. They had seen the ground prepared for planting. They knew what a seed bed was; they could use terms like pulling plants, dropping, and setting plants. These were household words. One of the first projects we had was a little window garden. . . . We couldn't use a variety in these so we used the bean plant. We used the seed. They learned from the seed you get the baby plant (Interview 7-15-97).

In the 1930s, when Bentley taught at Midway School, special educational services were non-existent. According to Bentley, teachers did their own "in house therapy". If a student had a speech defect, drills were used to illustrate the correct pronunciation and to help them choose and correct their spoken language. The incorrect use of English was common among the African-American population, but most of the parents and children were not aware that they made grammatical errors or mispronounced words. If children needed extra help, they frequently went to Mrs. Bentley's home for tutoring after hours and at night. It was also not unusual for Mrs. Bentley to go to the child's home to provide extra help.

Midway School was also a very resourceful place.

We had the re-use of various items. The paper bags we brought from the grocery store were cut and used for spelling lists...We knew how to work the trash containers behind the Celery City Printing Company on Magnolia between First and Second Street to get supplies for our school...I collected the Ladies Home Journal magazines because they featured mostly children around the world and we would use those children as cut outs for paper dolls...that's how we learned about children who lived in other countries and their cultures.(Interview 7-15-97)

The harsh, ugly realities of segregation reached into all phases of the black child's life. All doors were closed to them including the one that led into the public library. The teachers at Midway had no reference books or extra literature books because the libraries were not accessible to the black members of the community. There were books, however, available at the McCrory's dime store, which sold the "little classics." The teachers would buy those books and read them to the children. "It was enriching for us; it was enriching for the students; it was enriching for the reality of segregation. We had to do it. Segregation was ugly" (Interview 7-15-97)

As demoralizing as it was, the separate but equal doctrine was a way of life for blacks. It took inner strength and will power to rise above the insecurities that the system bred. Mrs. Ollie Johnson, the second interviewee, was determined to do just that. Mrs. Johnson graduated from Crooms Academy in 1933 and attended Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College for two years and began teaching at Midway in 1936. While teaching at Midway, she continued at FAMC until she completed her bachelor's degree and also worked on her master's degree.

I started teaching at Midway when it was a red, two story building. Miss Fannie Reid was the principal. School was closed in the summer. Students worked in celery and were home in winter. Sanford was known as the Celery Capital of the South and agriculture was their parents livelihood...The school was called the 'bird house' because the birds would build nests throughout the school. The conditions were terrible. There were outdoor toilets, no screens on the windows—the flies were awful during the heat of spring and early summer...There was no lunch

room. Some children brought lunch to school; some didn't. Teachers would bring raisins for the children to eat. Parents would bring teachers dinner. Despite the hardships of the times there was a strong community spirit in Midway. When the school burned down, I taught school in the church. . . . I think it was New Bethel -- its been a long time, it's hard to remember sometimes. The parents requested them to build a new school after it burned down. Parents and students sold candy to get materials that the school needed. Plays were also helpful as fund raisers (Interview 7-11-97).

It was a well known fact that segregation was characterized by two sets of everything: one for coloreds and one for whites; however when Mrs. Johnson described the conditions of the schools, with as many as 50 students in a classroom and a pay scale of \$50.00 a month for a teacher with a bachelor's degree, while white teachers had smaller classes, 25 in a room, and earned \$75.00 a month, the inequities were blatantly obvious.

Mrs. Eliza Pringle was a 78 year old retired educator, community volunteer, and political activist. She gave a vivid account of her experience as a teacher at Midway and also how she evolved culturally.

I taught at Midway elementary School for twenty years under the principalships of Miss Fannie Reid and Mr. Willie L. Hamilton. I began work as a first grade teacher at Midway School in 1945. I was elated that I was a teacher. I attended Bethune Cookman College for two years and received my B.S. degree from Florida A & M College in 1949...When school was not in session, I would work in New York City for the owner of the Lowe's Theater. I attended plays, wore fashionable clothes and lipstick when the other teachers didn't...The population of Midway was about 500 children. The new school that was built after the old one burned down was one building and housed students from first through eighth grade. Teachers had to be creative in order to accommodate for the lack of needed teaching materials and building space. I shared a classroom with another teacher. We still had outdoor toilets, well water, and unpaved roads. All age groups started first grade. There was no school lunch and the major fund raiser was to pay for food. The fish market on Sanford Avenue was always upset with Miss Reid because she would order fish for the children's lunch but couldn't pay for it. We did not have books most of the time. I would put gel on my hands and rub it over pages of the books to make copies for my students to read. I taught reading with rhythm and I used markers. I taught them that the alphabet had eight vowels and the rest were consonants(Interview 6-23-97).

Claretha Hudson was a first grade student of Eliza Pringle in 1949. Her recollections were of sharing books because there never were enough books. Most of the books they did have were hand me downs from the white schools and frequently had missing pages, broken spines, missing covers. "When I graduated from

Midway and attended Crooms, our school bus would take us past Seminole High School and we were amazed at what we saw from the bus window. The white children had armfuls of books!" (Interview 6-19-99)

The public school year was short. Planting, tending, and harvesting crops emptied classrooms. Farm work was the only source of employment for the majority of black people who lived in the south. When harvesting ended, thousands of black families would migrate to the North for seasonal work. When these families returned home, sometimes it would be standing room only in the classrooms.

In 1950 I had a fifth grade class. November 1st was the date the students whose parents were migrant workers would return from New York. On the first day of my class. I had forty-three students. By Christmas time the children would be able to write. I encouraged them by having them write Dear Santa letters or in spring Dear Mother or Dear Father letters. I was always encouraging for black people when a child learned to read and write...We taught mathematics, reading, and writing. Field trips were also an important component of the curriculum. We would take our students to the celery fields to learn how celery was cut. We would also go to the wash house to see how the celery was cleaned and packed before it was put on the train to be shipped throughout the United States...After 1965, changes began to occur. I was very active in the teacher's union. We needed the changes that were taking place in our schools. In 1967 the teachers went on strike and walked out of the classroom. In 1967, the first white teacher, Jackie Grace, was assigned to Midway School. Things were changing. (Pringle interview 6-19-99).

Mr. and Mrs. Herman Refoe were teachers at Midway from 1948-1964. Herman Refoe taught 7th and 8th grade science and Shellye Refoe taught 7th and 8th grade mathematics and social science. Her perceptions of the students were that they would argue their point and be respectful. They were also cautious of accepting new students into the school. Mrs. Refoe kept a photo album that was filled with old photos of her students during classroom activities and field trips. She started a Camera Club for the children and they would take pictures of the community to help instill community pride. She and her husband took students on field trips

from the Big Tree to downtown Sanford to the Sanford Atlantic Bank on First Street, train rides, and to Silver Springs in Ocala, Florida [there was a section of the springs reserved for the 'coloreds']. Every year our children would attend the State Fair in Tampa, Florida, and would be encouraged to exhibit their sewing and furniture. It was one of the most important events for the children. It was fun, educational, and competitive. Students who took home economics, industrial arts, and agriculture classes worked very hard to win a "blue ribbon" and exhibits (Interview 6-27-97).

Mr. Refoe not only taught science, but he started a furniture building club and help the boys learn how to build and finish furniture. Times were changing in Midway, more mechanical farming was decreasing the need for field workers and migrant workers and the children of Midway needed different skills if they were going to survive in the changing times.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) court decision had rippling effects across the country. The 1950s brought change to American schools and change in Midway. But the story of how Midway was impacted by the desegregation of schools in another chapter in the history of this community. Midway still exists as a black community in the midst of a bustling, growing Central Florida area. Much of Seminole County, where Midway is situated has become a bedroom community to the growing area or Orange/Osceola Counties, the home of the largest tourist industry in the United States. Unemployment is not a problem anywhere within this broad area of Central Florida; however underemployment and limited opportunity still manifest themselves within the Midway community. The community is struggling for an identity. The early efforts of the original settlers and the teachers who worked hard to build a school cannot go unnoticed. The future of Midway lies within the rich history of the community. Much of that history still remains in the minds and hearts of the people within the community and needs to be preserved to be shared with the youth of the community. This paper and the dissertation from which it is derived are just the beginning of an attempt to record the history of Midway. One of the interviewees, Mrs. Refoe, has passed on; however, she left the researcher her legacy of what schooling was like in Midway—that photo album which is the best documentation of school activities that has been uncovered through this research.

End Notes

¹ Goldsboro is located eight miles west of Midway. Goldsboro was the second town incorporated by black citizens in Seminole County (Robinson & Andrews, 1995). A school known as Goldsboro School originally stood at the corner of Lake and 13th Street. It was affectionately called “The Little Red School House.” In 1920 another educational facility was built on the Goldsboro site, which was replaced with the current facility in 1956. (Wawrzaszek, 1985)

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