

A History of Central Florida

Episode 42:

Jim Crow Signs

A Podcast by

Kevin Stapleton

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Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences, and Stories

(RICHERS) of Central Florida

University of Central Florida RICHERS of Central Florida

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Episode 42: Jim Crow Signs

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Project Detail

RICHES of Central Florida is an umbrella program housing interdisciplinary public history projects that bring together different departments at UCF with profit and non-profit sectors of the community.

Central Florida has often been associated with large-scale, commercial tourism and housing development. While those aspects of Central Florida are important to the economic growth of the region, much of its history has remained unnoticed and under researched. The Public History program at UCF links many projects under one initiative to promote the collection and preservation of Central Florida history. By facilitating research that records and presents the stories of communities, businesses, and institutions in Central Florida, RICHES seeks to provide the region with a deeper sense of its heritage. At the same time, the initiative connects the UCF students and faculty with the community and creates a foundation on which Central Floridians can build a better sense of their history.

RICHES Podcast Documentaries are short form narrative documentaries that explore Central Florida history and are locally produced. These podcasts can involve the participation or cooperation of local area partners.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of this podcast is unrestricted.

Abstract

Episode 42 of A History of Central Florida podcasts: Jim Crow Signs. RICHES Podcast Documentaries are short form narrative documentaries that explore Central Florida history and are locally produced. These podcasts can involve the participation or cooperation of local area partners.

Episode 42 features a discussion of racial segregation signs used in the Jim Crow South, which are housed at the Orange County Regional History Center in Orlando, Florida. This podcast also includes interviews with Dr. Stephen Caldwell Wright of Seminole State College and Dr. Julian C. Chambliss of Rollins College.

Episode 42: Jim Crow Signs

Narrated by Kevin Stapleton

Interviews with Dr. Stephen Caldwell Wright

0:00:00

Introduction

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Central Florida*

*Presented By
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OF CENTRAL FLORIDA*

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*A History of
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PODCAST
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Stapleton Thank you for downloading this episode of A History of Central Florida podcast. This is the podcast where we explore Central Florida's history through the artifacts found in local museums and historical societies. This series is brought to you by RICHES, the Regional Initiative to Collect the History, Experiences, and Stories of Central Florida, and the Orange County Regional History Center.

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Stapleton I am Kevin Stapleton, and I will be your host for this episode titled, "Jim Crow Signs."

*Episode 42
Jim Crow Signs*

*WHITE
ONLY*

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Stapleton As Central Florida grew in the late 19th century, urban centers like Orlando and Sanford, as well as smaller communities in the region, became racially segregated. Segregation was initially and tacitly supported by most white residents, and soon became the official policy supported by the state government, cities, and local communities in Florida and the rest of the South. In this episode, we will examine the artifacts of racial segregation in Orlando.

*WHITE ENTRANCE
CIVIL RIGHTS*

Stapleton Signs denoting separate places for white and black residents had its origins in the late 19th century, as a way to remind African Americans of their second-class status.

COLORED ENTRANCE

Stapleton The same governments and legislatures – that only decades later granted citizenship and equal rights to blacks after slavery and the [American] Civil War – now gave sanction to the strict separation of the races.

*LINCOLN
WITH MALICE
TOWARD NONE
WITH CHARITY
FOR ALL.*

*“Equal Rights
Before the Law.
The “Jim Crow” Street Car
THE WAY IT WORKS IN [illegible]*

Stapleton These signs were colloquially known as “Jim Crow Signs,” which transmitted their social and cultural meaning as spaces or places of inferior status and accommodation.

0:01:52 **The Jim Crow South**

Stapleton Dr. Stephen Caldwell Wright was born in Sanford, Florida, and came of age during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. He tells us what Jim Crow meant.

COLORED

Wright Uh, Jim Crow was a system of segregation, essentially. Um, separate, uh, economic, political, social systems within a community and throughout the nation, and, uh, it simply meant, um, supposedly, “separate but equal” after a while, but somehow the “equal” got lost [*laughs*].

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0:02:35

Origins of racial segregation

Stapleton Racial segregation came from a series of laws passed at the state and local level at the end of the 19th century. This cumulated with the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* – that established that separate but equal facilities – was constitutional. Dr. Scot French, from the University of Central Florida, tells us about the philosophy behind these segregation laws.

COLORED

MEN

Orange County Courthouse 1950s Restroom Sign

French These signs are really a product of a system of racial control that replaced slavery. In the aftermath of, uh, Reconstruction, there was a lot of conflict, obviously, in the streets and in public places...

COLORED ENTRANCE

French And, uh, the politics of space became very personalized, and of course, this – this problem gets multiplied in the age of railroads when, uh, strangers are confronting one another in passenger cars, and there's a real effort to control this population of free people, and to remind them of their place in society, and that place in the eyes of the powers that be, the – the white redeemers of the southern, uh, government and politics – their place was, uh, underneath the white man, that this was a white man's country. After the *Plessy* decision, the Supreme Court decision which – well, made the – the – the principle of "separate but equal," uh, the law of the land, there was an effort to begin to codify all of these practices in law to...

COLORED ENTRANCE

French Designate certain spaces as for colored and certain spaces as for white...

WHITE ENTRANCE

CIVIL RIGHTS

French and the idea behind this was that it would keep black people and white people from brushing up against each other in ways that would lead to – to conflict.

0:04:24

Origins of "Jim Crow"

"Equal Rights

Before the Law.

The "Jim Crow" Street Car

Stapleton The word "Jim Crow" originally came from African-American activists in the middle of the 19th century. African Americans used the term to describe the ways

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in which they were treated differently from whites in public accommodations and services. From then on, the name stuck.

JIM CROW.

[illegible]

Stapleton Jim Crow was a blackface character, performed by white stage actors, during that time which portrayed blacks without human dignity or humanity through racist stereotypes. For African Americans, the system of racial segregation was part of that same dehumanizing legacy.

DIRECTORY

1ST FLOOR

COUNTY WELFARE DEPT

WHITE WAITING ROOM 8

COLORED 6

COUNTY CLINIC 8

DISTRICT WELFARE BOARD

INTAKE OFFICE

Stapleton Even though according to the law and court decisions, separate was to be equal, it never was. "Separate" was only a way to reinforce difference.

0:05:08

Segregation in practice

Stapleton Dr. Wright tells us how he experienced segregation growing up in Central Florida.

Wright Usually, there was a black section, um, if I remember correctly, uh, usually a smaller area, and usually more crowded than the larger so-called "white section," and the black sections, uh – what were then called the "colored sections," were not nearly as well-kept, and – and – and – and the like. That would be true in terms of the bathrooms, as well. For instance, I remember...

COLORED

Wright Um, in many instances, um, men and women shared the same bathroom, while in the other section, you'd have women and then men, uh, facilities.

Uh, taking the bus was, um, notable, because it was understood that when you got on the bus you went to the back, and that was understood. There were no signs. The signs were the faces. The driver would, you know – knew that you were going to go to the back, and would give you a funny look if you sat too close up front, and that kind of thing. Not all of them, but some of them would.

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If you went downtown, and you were standing at the counter, then you knew that everybody else was going to be waited on, served before you. So you could be standing there, but if a person who was white walked up, then they would reach around you and just continually serve all of them, until they had gone. Then, they would serve you.

Stapleton Although racial segregation translated to second-class citizenship for African Americans, it did not mean that residents of Central Florida stood idly by.

0:07:07

African-American communities and business districts

7UP

BOO-BOO'S BAR

TOWN& COUNTRY

Stone's[?]

Stapleton African Americans founded their own businesses, churches, civic associations, and even towns. Local communities usually had a segregated downtown district, where African American businesses and residents lived. In Sanford, there was Georgetown; in Winter Park, there was Hannibal Square; and Parramore, on the west side of Downtown Orlando.

African Americans even established entire incorporated towns, which elected black officials, such as Goldsboro, west of Sanford, and Eatonville, north of Orlando. Goldsboro eventually was absorbed into the City of Sanford in 1911, but Eatonville is one of the few black municipalities founded during this period that still exists. Dr. Julian [C.] Chambliss, from Rollins College, tells us about these black business districts that emerged out of racially segregated cities.

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Chambliss Well, segregation's sort of unplanned, perhaps on some level, uh, benefit for an African-American community is to coalesce, uh, the [inaudible] community within the boundaries established by white society. As a result, what you see is a whole infrastructure created around servicing the black community – servicing – so black professionals, doctors, lawyers, teachers, um, black businesses that are serving black residents. All those are situated around the core of the black community. So if you look at a place like, for instance, Hannibal Square in Winter Park, Florida...

[illegible]

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HOTEL

[illegible]

Chambliss You have everything that African Americans could possibly need within the confines of their segregated community, and this, of course, bolsters the economic standing of those, uh, business owners and those professionals. They are, in fact, servicing a captured audience, but that doesn't mean that they're not doing good service to the community.

Stapleton By the 1950s, many public places did not admit blacks at all, and separate entrances and facilities were common in courthouses and other public buildings for access by African Americans.

0:09:09

Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka and desegregation

Stapleton Another Supreme Court decision in 1954, *Brown v. the Board of Education [of Topeka]*, finally overturned the *Plessy* decision, and the Federal Government finally declared that "separate" was not only unequal, but also unconstitutional.

Tallahassee Democrat

Court Bans Segregation

In Public School Cases

Court Ruling

Is Unanimous

Cases Directly Involve

Only Five States But 17

Others May Be Affected

[illegible]

Paroled Man's

Captures Ends

Reign of Terror

[illegible] *Retrieved*

As Mayor [illegible]

[illegible]

Court Questions

Suit Challenging

Second Primary

[illegible]

Secrecy Clamp

Put On Talks

McCarthy Calls Order "Cover Up"

[illegible]

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*French Cancel
Air Evacuation
In Indochina
All Out Attack
Will Be Resumed
On Rebel Troops
[illegible]*

*Frank Costello
Gets Five Year
Prison Term
[illegible]*

*New US Bomber
Test Seen Near
[illegible]*

*Sober, Careful
Thought Urged
By Tom Bailey
[illegible]*

Stapleton Although by the 1950s, many Americans were recognizing that racial segregation was wrong, it was a long process for state and local communities to dismantle Jim Crow's segregation. Dr. French explains.

French It was really not any secret. Everybody knew this. In many ways...

COLORED ENTRANCE

French The – that the – these signs were a part of a fiction of “separate but equal,” but for African Americans, of course, it was never equal. And, in fact, this was the basis for the great challenges to, uh...

WHITE ENTRANCE

CIVIL RIGHTS

French Segregated society. the great legal challenges was the “equal” was not equal under this system, and, uh, you began to see in the 20th century a chipping away at this edifice of – of Jim Crow law...

*Segregation
IS
UnAmerican [sic]*

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French Based on the fact that the facilities provided to African Americans were profoundly unequal or absent altogether. After *Brown v. Board of Education*, many civil rights advocates – activists white and black – decided to test the law, to – to take the idea that public spaces should be open, uh, as there were increasingly being made open. The courts began to open up public spaces, particularly in places like interstate travel, and so the waiting rooms at bus stations or railroad stations became desegregated, technically. However, in practice, states and localities continued to enforce segregation. They left those signs on the walls, and they continued to insist that persons of color sit in different waiting rooms – in waiting rooms designated for them.

0:11:12 Desegregating schools

Stapleton In Central Florida, racially segregated schools were the norm until the 1960s, when Durrance Elementary was integrated under pressure from the Federal Government. And soon, other Orange County schools agreed to desegregate.

[illegible]

Stapleton Because of demonstrations by civil rights activists, community leaders, and students, local officials closed some public facilities, rather than allow them to be racially integrated. This public activism and protest against Jim Crow segregation...

FT. LAUDERDALE
NAACP
YOUTH COUNCIL

FT. LAUDERDALE
BRANCH
NAACP

NAACP
FORT LAUDERDALE
NAACP
KEY WEST
BRANCH

PASS THE
CIVIL RIGHTS
BILL!

NAACP
MIAMI
BRANCH

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Stapleton Was similar to events throughout the state and the rest of the South. It was through this activism, and because of the passing...

*THE
Civil Rights
Act of 1964*

Stapleton Of the 1964 Civil Rights Act by the U.S. Congress that outlawed these forms of racial segregation and relegated the Jim Crow signs to the dust bin of history.

0:11:59

African-American communities post-segregation

Stapleton Although the system of Jim Crow disappeared, its absence, while welcomed by all segments of society, left a vacuum in the once-thriving black downtowns, as Dr. Chambliss explains.

*CAMPUS
THEATER*

Chambliss In order to make sure African Americans had full sorta status as—as Americans, um, they had to break down the segregation system. As a consequence, the restrictions in terms of movement, and space, and regulations associated with zoning housing, uh, gave way, and with that, African Americans had the choice of where they wanted to live and how they wanted to live. This had a direct negative impact—impact on the strong cohesion that was created by that outward force constraining African Americans into their, uh, communities. So you see a spread—a spreading out, but you also, I think, see a kind of breaking down. The strong cohesion created by the outside force threatening the black community goes away. African Americans are able—'cause, especially middle-class and upper-class African Americans, are able to move to places that are better, and this leaves the working-class African Americans...

*7UP
BOO-BOO'S BAR
TOWN& COUNTRY
Stone's[?]*

Chambliss Um, in that former space, but without the sort of economic and social connections that they had during segregation.

Stapleton As Dr. Chambliss mentioned, the legacy of Jim Crow is bittersweet. It is a legacy that residents of these communities confront today. Dr. Wright recalls for us his struggle with this legacy, and the conversation he had with his mentor and friend, the late Gwendolyn [Elizabeth] Brooks, the famous African-American poet.

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Wright It's interesting that, um, when I think of, um, integration, uh, and the whole business of...

CARVER

DOUBLE
FEATURE

ROBERT TAYLOR

THE BRIBE

LOUIS JORDAN BEWARE

[illegible]
NEWS

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Wright Uh, segregation supposedly going away, one of the – one of the great losses is, in fact, the – the black community – the black business community. Um, members of the black community are – are now affiliated with, uh, non-black institutions, and – and that's the way it is. Reminds me of what Gwendolyn Brooks said to me when I said to her one day, "All of the black principals have moved out of the community," and she said, "Oh." Looked at me and she said, "I'm glad you stayed. I'm glad you stayed. They need to see you."

[illegible]

Wright "The children need to see you," and that's I think the great loss with – with the, um – with that. But when, um, integration advanced, as far as I'm concerned, uh...

COLORED ENTRANCE

Wright The black community suffered irreparably. It will never recover. Uh...

0:14:58

Conclusion

Stapleton We hope that you have enjoyed this episode of A History of Central Florida podcast. For more information on the objects featured in this episode...

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History Center
65 E Central Blvd.
Orlando, FL 32801*

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Stapleton Please visit the Orange County Regional History Center at 65 East Central Boulevard, Orlando, Florida, 32801.

*Episode 43
Surf Boards*

Stapleton Make sure to join us for our next episode entitled "Surf Boards."

0:15:21

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