



## Local leaders celebrate emancipation, embrace county history

By Kyla Woodard  
For Clay Today

CLAY COUNTY – The year 1863 was a time of peace, when freedom was finally given to slaves after years of being weighed down by the harsh realities of bondage.

On Jan. 1, slavery was finally abolished for good in America. According to President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, slaves were supposed to be free.

However, the full effects of the life-changing proclamation wouldn't be seen for another two years. An estimated number of 250,000 slaves still had yet to see the day their liberation would be official. In fact, many were unaware that

they were supposed to be free.

It wasn't until June 19, 1865, that that notion changed.

That day marks what is known as Juneteenth, a celebration commemorating the day enslaved people who were still being held in Texas were read the words that declared them so. All slaves in the country were emancipated following centuries worth of captivity.

Becoming a national holiday back in 2021, Juneteenth is celebrated by many. The memorable day changed the way of life that Blacks had previously known.

Stripped from the plight of servitude, Black people could walk the Earth on their own two feet. Passing on their strength and gifts to the generations that would



PHOTOS BY KYLA WOODARD

Green Cove Springs Mayor Connie Butler, Superintendent David Broskie, former GCS mayor Felecia Hampshire, first appointed Black Clay County principal Ken Francis and Dr. Bernard Fennell attended a Juneteenth church service held at St. Mark Missionary Baptist.

come after them to further fight the long battle for racial equality.

Many of these generations reside in the very community of Clay County. The community is home to many Blacks who have left a lasting impact in the neighborhoods that Clay County residents call home.

They have shown their strength amid adversity, and their achievements are also a testament to the joyous freedom given on that momentous day – 158 years ago.

As a resident of Middleburg, Isaac Brown recalled attending the only Black high school in Clay County – Dunbar High.

Because of segregation, Dunbar remained the only high school available to Black students.

Brown said he and his other classmates trekked eight or nine miles daily to get a simple education.

"We had to do that every day – back and forth, every day. And people were hollering at us, calling us all kinds of names and things of that nature. And we just kept on going," Brown said.

As a football player, it was common for Brown to travel a lot. However, Brown said

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Left, Ken Francis has a collection of artifacts and stories dealing with the county and the Civil Rights Movement, while the members of Black Rodeo USA appeared at Mackey's Munchies.

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Clay County celebrated the Juneteenth holiday last Monday. Many Black leaders reminisced about their education at Dunbar High, as well as how the county evolved from a repressive culture of decades ago to one that embraces the contributions made by many of its residents.

## Juneteenth

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while his white counterparts could travel in large buses meant for their teams, he and his teammates could only carpool.

Brown said that as a team, they made their way to the Clay County School Board to make their voices heard. Brown said the board offered a bus, but only if the team found someone to drive it.

"We told him that we see the bus carrying everybody else to the football game where they can play, but we don't have a bus. So, what do we need to get a bus," Brown said.

Pursuing perseverance and determination in the face of adversity is a stepping stone for possible accomplishments.

That was true for Kenneth Francis. As another Dunbar graduate and community activist, Francis' history lies deep in Green Cove Springs.

In 1968, at the beginning of integration, Francis became the first appointed Black principal in the Clay County school system. Francis said that as a new principal, he

began at R.C. Bannerman and later transitioned to Green Cove Springs Junior High.

As principal of the junior high school, Francis ushered in many new changes into what he called an "oasis of learning." Francis said his efforts to improve higher education resulted in the school becoming a top-performing school in the county.

"I integrated the staff completely. I hired more Black teachers than any other school in the county. I had to let a few go now and then if they didn't live up to those standards because my standards were high," Francis said.

Dunbar High is a critical part of Clay County's history because many Black leaders were educated there. Today, the building is now known as The Augusta Savage Arts and Community Center in Green Cove Springs.

The building was renamed after Augusta Savage, a prominent Black sculpture artist who grew up in the small community. Savage was born in Green Cove Springs in 1892.

Green Cove Springs Mayor Connie Butler said that by renaming the building, the

city recognized Savage's work within the community.

Butler said as a young girl, Savage walked the streets of what is now known as "The Cove" from Middleburg Avenue – now known as Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard – to pick out the clay she would use to craft figurines.

Butler said that the city is aiming to preserve Savage's history and teach future generations about the culture that exists around them.

"[We are] preserving the history of Augusta by having activities that teach that of arts and culture, and to keep that spirit enriched and alive – because of her," Butler said.

Along with past showings of Black achievements, current residents continue to push the mark and shed more light on the county's rich history.

Brandye Mackey, owner of the restaurant Mackey's Munchies, said that by having a prominent Black business in the county she continues to push for inclusive ways to celebrate Black accomplishments.

"Being out here in Clay County, my job,

my love, my passion is to bring people together... [by] the love of food," Mackey said.

Mackey was one of many residents in the community to host a special celebration to honor the new holiday. While hosting a "Black Rodeo" at her restaurant, Mackey invited Black Rodeo USA members to meet guests, sign autographs, and tell the history behind Black cowboys.

Among other celebrations, Middleburg's St. Mark Missionary Baptist church hosted a service to commemorate the holiday and an outdoor gathering filled with food trucks, vendors and a bounce house. Attended by numerous people, the celebration marked the beginning of many more.

The mark that Blacks have made on Clay County is substantial. The achievements made possible from the past to the present because of what those of the past endured. And remembering the past is essential for building the future.

"Because we came from separate beginnings, did not mean that we are secondary in life. We have proven ourselves to be as first-class as anyone else," Francis said.