

Bealsville

Howell Branch Creek

5 pgs

The following is an excerpt from:

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY HISTORIC RESOURCES SURVEY REPORT

Submitted to:

**Florida Department of State
Bureau of Historic Preservation**

October 1998

Prepared by:

**Hillsborough County Planning & Growth Management
601 East Kennedy Boulevard, P.O. Box 1110, Tampa, Florida 33601**

* These excerpts have been taken from the Historic Resources Survey Report with permission given by the Hillsborough County Historic Resources Review Board on December 15, 2003. The intention is to help provide targeted historical information on the water bodies in Hillsborough County.

Bealsville

Bealsville's history begins at the close of the Civil War. It is located seven miles south of Plant City, around the intersection of Horton Road and State Road 60. Originally named Howell's Creek on December 24, 1865, the area's inhabitants were freed slaves from Hopewell, Knights, Springhead, and other surrounding communities. Homesteading near the north prong of the Alafia River, Bealsville's earliest settlers included Steve Allen, Isaac Berry, Peter Dexter, Neap Henry, Mills Holloman, Bryant Horton, Mary Reddick, Abe Segenger, Roger Smith, Jerry Stephens, and Robert Story. As with other rural settlements in Hillsborough County, life centered around farming, church, and school.ⁱ

Upon being emancipated after the Civil War, the former slaves gathered at the plantation of Sarah Howell and sent a delegation of five individuals, including Mr. Dexter, Mr. Smith, Mr. Stephens, Ms. Reddick, and Mr. Horton, to survey prospective home sites. Remaining on Mrs. Howell plantation until the land was selected, the eleven founding members of Bealsville moved to their new property in late 1865. Families homesteaded property ranging from 40 to 160 acres through the 1866 Southern Homestead Act. Yet, this did not guarantee that the claimants, and others like them, would become land owners. To retain title, the claimants had to construct homes, clear the land, and procure farming implements. Despite these seemingly overwhelming odds the community succeeded through the assistance of Mrs. Howell who provided desperately needed horses and equipment. They built log homes from trees that they cleared from their future farm land. Andrew Williams, son of Mary Reddick, created roads for the community with a grubbing hoe, a mule, and a plow. Mr. Horton planted the first orange tree and Alfred Beal followed suit planting the first orange seeds, starting a long heritage of orange production in Bealsville.ⁱⁱ

The community founded Antioch Baptist Church in 1868, the first among five churches established in Bealsville. As soon as the church was built, a school was started within its walls, and William Glover procured the school's first teacher. Other Black communities in Hillsborough County (e.g., Citrus Park) created schools within church buildings or churches within school buildings. The Antioch Church, the school, and a cemetery were established on land donated by Alfred Beal. As was common in other nascent Black communities, education was of the utmost importance. In 1873 the community built a one room log cabin school which remained in existence for the next seventy years. Originally the school was named Antioch School. It was renamed Jameson School when moved near the cemetery on Sam Hicks Road.ⁱⁱⁱ

By 1916 Coronet Phosphate Company began making inroads into Bealsville by buying property in and around the community. As the phosphate industry expanded, many Bealsville residents began working for the mining companies. In the process, farming slowly gave way to phosphate and other industries. Many families continued to farm on a part-time basis, while others continued to farm full-time.^{iv}

Sometime after being named Howell's Creek, the community became known as Alafia. In 1923, the community officially became known as Bealsville, in honor of Alfred Beal.

This name distinguished the community from neighboring Alafia, a settlement to the south. When property owners in the area had defaulted on mortgage or tax payments, Mr. Beal bought the property and resold smaller lots back to Bealsville residents. This set a precedence of keeping the Bealsville property in the hands of local families, a pattern which continues today.^v

Paul Diggs, a Federal Writers' Project worker, described Bealsville in the 1930s:

In this neighborhood there is located about forty swell Negro farmers, with tracts of land ranging from five to one hundred acres...The majority of the farm land in this area is cleared for farming; the rest is in timber comprising cypress and pine. The houses are built out of weather-board, pine and cypress. Most of the farm houses are built out of roughly cut lumber from the land that was cleared.^{vi}

Mr. Diggs went on to describe and interview recently arrived Bealsville residents Ed and Ida Gray:

Six miles south of Plant City, located on the Knee-Smith Road, now under construction by the WPA, is the small farm of Ed and Ida Gray....The tract where Ed is farming is rolling and sandy loam soil, with a few orange trees at the western end of the farm. Workers can be seen in the fields in all directions, picking strawberries and planting new crops. In most cases whole families go into the fields.

To enter Ed's farm, you enter the yard from the highway, and sitting in front of the entrance is a tin top log cabin, that is setting high off the ground, and surrounded by high oaks. In front of the house in large pots are flowers. On the west is an inclosed chicken yard, with plenty of chickens in them. The hen house that was once burned, still stands. In the rear of the house is a pump, near the kitchen door. To the east near the house is a large pile of logs used for fire wood. Under the large oak tree in the rear of the cabin is a stand built for a wash stand. Three large tubs and a water bucket sit on it. Thirty feet from the cabin is a shed built out of old lumber used to assort and pack strawberries in....The interior of the home was rustic and was partially ceiled. Long logs ran across the ceiling, and the tin roof could be seen. The rooms were petitioned off with rough cut lumber, with cretonne curtains hanging at the doors. The front room was used for a sitting and a bed room. The furnishings consisted of a double bed, an old trunk, a dresser, and one chair and rocker. The other bed room was very spacious, consisting of three beds, and a dresser. There were curtains at the windows. The kitchen furniture consisted of a three hole burner, a large kitchen cabinet, a large round dining room table, and several chairs. A little room was adjoining the house, next to the kitchen door which was once used as a kitchen, Bessie stated.

The floors were bare and nearly white from scrubbing. The interior of the house was clean and neatly arranged in spite of the crude furnishings.^{vii}

Mr. and Mrs. Gray, and their children, grew strawberries and beans, their two largest crops. Strawberries served as a cash crop for the Grays, selling the berries in Plant City. For personal use the family grew corn, cucumbers, lima peas, okra, sugar cane, potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, and peanuts. The Grays used the peanuts to fatten up their hogs. They raised chickens whose eggs they occasionally traded in Plant City for other items such as flour and meal.^{viii}

Eventually, Bealsville outgrew its log cabin school. In 1932, the residents raise \$1000 from fish fries and musicals, and donated ten acres to Hillsborough County School Board. The county matched the money, building the school in 1932. Two years later, the Bealsville PTA renamed the school after William Glover. Because of the importance of agriculture, the school operated on a strawberry schedule. Bessie Gray stated, "Our little school out here begin their term in April and closes in December. They do that to allow the parents to us[e] their children in the field to pick strawberries. Some work out for others and make money for themselves." In 1962 the school board officially changed Glover School from a strawberry schedule to a winter schedule, consequently ending strawberry production in the area. By the 1960s, most families farmed only part-time, with many people working for the phosphate industry. Despite community protests, the school board shut down Glover Elementary in May 1980, due to low enrollment, high operating costs, and deteriorating condition of the school buildings. Bealsville survived the school closing and residents transformed the campus into a community center.^{ix}

i. "Beasville, Founded 98 Years Ago, Has Fascinating History," *Plant City Courier* December 19, 1963, 3; Canter Brown, Jr., *African Americans on the Tampa Bay Frontier* (Tampa, FL: Tampa Bay History Center, 1997), 42-43; Bruton and Bailey, *Plant City, Its Origin and History*, 63-65; U.S. Department of the Interior, "General Land Office, Automated Records Project, Pre-1908 Homestead and Cash Entry Patents." There is conflicting information from both the primary and secondary sources as to the original name of Bealsville. Both "Beasville, Founded 98 Years Ago..." and Canter Brown's *African Americans on the Tampa Bay Frontier* cite the original name as Howell's Creek, whereas Bruton and Bailey's *Plant City* and HTHCPB's *The Cultural Resources of the Unincorporated Portions of Hillsborough County*, 28, state the name was Alafia.

ii. "Bealsville, Founded 98 Years Ago, Has Fascinating History," *Plant City Courier* December 19, 1963, 3; Brown, *African Americans on the Tampa Bay Frontier*, 42-43; Ethel Glover, "Mary Reddick," (unpublished manuscript, Bealsville Historical file, QGBA, 1987); Kathleen S. Howe, "Stepping into Freedom: An Analysis of the African-American Community in Hillsborough County, Florida during the Reconstruction Era," (MA Thesis, University of South Florida, 1997), 57-62; Chris Jennewein, "Bealville," *East Hillsborough Tribune* August 15, 1974, 10-F.

iii. Glover, "Mary Reddick"; Hugh Gramling, "Song, Prayer, Work: Freedom Offered New Life in New Community," *Plant City Courier* February 5, 1970, 5-B; Jennewein, "Bealville," 10F; Peggy Peterman, "Bealsville Residents Angry at Closing of School that is their Educational Heritage," *St. Petersburg Times* January 11, 1981, 2F.

iv. *Atlas of Hillsborough County, Florida*, 53.

v. Bruton and Bailey, *Plant City, Its Origin and History*, 63; Glover, "Mary Reddick"; HTHCPB, *The Cultural Resources of the Unincorporated Portions of Hillsborough County*, 28.

vi. Library of Congress, The WPA Life Histories Collection, "Ed and Ida Gray--Farmers," March 17, 1939, 1.

vii. Library of Congress, The WPA Life Histories Collection, "Ed and Ida Gray--Farmers," March 17, 1939, 1-2,9.

viii. Library of Congress, The WPA Life Histories Collection, "Ed and Ida Gray--Farmers," March 17, 1939, 3,6-8.

ix. "Bealsville, Founded 98 Years Ago, Has Fascinating History," *Plant City Courier* December 19, 1963, 3; France Griggs, "Bealsville, Residents Fight for Reopening of School," *Tampa Tribune*, December 28, 1980, 1A,6A; Mark Fisher, "Glover School...Residents Against Phase Out of School," *East Hillsborough Tribune* March 18, 1976, 1; Gwen Hays, "Property Given School Board Returned to Bealsville Community," *Florida Sentinel Bulletin*, September 29, 1981; Jennewein, "Bealville," 10-F; Quote from Library of Congress, The WPA Life Histories Collection, "Ed and Ida Gray--Farmers," March 17, 1939, 5.