The Alpha O. Paynter Mystery

Alpha O. Paynter, restaurateur in Jacksonville Beach and Atlantic Beach, Florida, was locally famous for the quality of her fare for decades. She became wealthy in the restaurant and hotel businesses. She was friends with the movers and shakers on the Jacksonville beaches. She left behind few traces of her life, however. Her life is a bit of a mystery.

She was a divorcée who owned and operated two very successful restaurants on the Jacksonville beaches—the Copper Kettle and the Homestead. Both were more than restaurants—the Copper Kettle also let rooms and the Homestead was a boarding house before it was a restaurant. Mary Perkins of the Perkins Hotel and Bath House fame (see “Ode to Coach Wimpy Sutton”) was a strong, successful business woman who succeeded in a very male-dominated environment; Alpha Paynter was another. Her restaurant career on the beach spanned 1930 to 1961 when she finally retired at age seventy-four. Word of mouth about the quality of the cuisine at both the Copper Kettle and Homestead brought lots of business. For example, Warren S. Childers wrote a note saying he learned of the quality of the Copper Kettle in 1948 from someone he met on the train going to Jacksonville and of the Homestead after he arrived to assume his duties as an engineer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Few women, especially divorcees, were so accomplished in business. In spite of her successes, she is a bit of a mystery.

Surely, a photograph of her exists in private hands but none has surfaced. So I have had to rely upon the descriptions supplied by those who knew her. She had hair, not long that was light colored (graying as she aged). She had pierced ears, uncommon for most Southern women in her day and her heavy earrings caused her ear lobes to enlarge. With age, she filled out and gravity won. She was a great cook and taught her staff well. She was amiable to everyone, not just customers. Loyalty to friends, white or black, was her forte. She hobnobbed with the elite of the beaches. People say she was charming, kind, hardworking, a keen businesswoman, and somewhat regal in her bearing. Victor Pullen, her grandnephew, said he and others used to call her “Duchess.”

Her background remains a bit of a mystery. Sometimes documents, such as census records, do not agree or are non-existent, a problem for an historian since historians rely upon original documents. Her death certificate and her obituary say that she was born in Pelham, Mitchell County, Georgia on October
4, 1887. At her death in December 7, 1962, she lived 1301 Kings Road, Neptune Beach, Florida in a house only two years old.

Neither document mentioned her maiden name which presents a problem in uncovering her early life. The obit names two sisters—Mrs. Norma Rae of San Gabriel, Los Angeles, California and Mrs. Charles Strang of Jacksonville, Florida (her grandnephew says she went by the name Johnnie)—as survivors as well as nieces and nephews. Mrs. Billie A. Welp, the informant for the death certificate and executrix of her estate, did not supply the names of the mother and father.
The obit states that she moved from Georgia to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania at some point. We pick up her trail from her husband's 1918 draft registration document in Philadelphia. It shows her married to John Clifford Paynter, a thirty-nine year old salesman for the Gulf Refining Company. He was blue-eyed, dark haired man born on June 11, 1879 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Cliff, as he was called, was the third child and second son of John B. and Georgette Paynter. John B. was a dentist as was his other son George. So she married into a professional family sometime before her thirty-first birthday. 1918 Draft Registration, Philadelphia, PA

Her friend Evelynne Galvin and her great nephew Victor W. Pullen say she was a nurse. Kathy J. Marvin thought she was a radiologist. Was she a registered nurse and, if so, where was she trained? Philadelphia seems likely. Galvin says that she practiced in New York. If she were not a Registered Nurse, she probably learned practical nursing from practice. She must have been involved in the medical field before she moved to the beach.

Sometime before 1930, she and Cliff Paynter moved to the Jacksonville, Florida area. Possibly, he took a job with Gulf Oil in Jacksonville since he worked for Gulf Oil in Philadelphia. The Beaches News obituary said she lived in Jacksonville before moving to the beach. Her death certificate asserts that she had lived in the Jacksonville area as early as 1923 but she is not in the 1924 or 1925 Jacksonville city directories, so the informant, Billie A. Welp of Switzerland, Florida may have been guessing. The Pullens lived on Riverside Avenue and she may have lived nearby. Perhaps the divorce explains why she moved to the beach. On April 5, 1930, when the US Census was conducted in Jacksonville
Beach, she was listed as a 38 year old divorcée living on 1st Street with two African American employees, Frank Zanders, 15, and his 16 year old sister, Maurice. All three were Georgia natives. Maurice was more than a maid or cook; she and Alpha would be friends for years, as we shall see below. She was, in fact, 43 years old.

The 1930 federal census lists her as manager, Copper Kettle on 1st Street but we don’t know where on 1st Street. It probably was a rooming house as well as a restaurant since overnight visitors needed a place to stay. Permanent residents were few. Jacksonville Beach only had 409 people in the city limits, most lived south of Pablo Avenue. Neptune Beach, clustered around Atlantic Boulevard, would secede the next year but was part of Jacksonville Beach in 1930. The population outside the city limits, but including its suburbs, raised the total to 882 people. To the south in northern St Johns County, there were a few hundred people in Palm Valley and Ponte Vedra Beach. Atlantic Beach to the north of Jacksonville Beach contained just 164 people and a nice hotel. The Mayport area was populated by 1,003 of whom 511 lived in the village. She served not only the people of these little burgs but, more importantly, tourists who came between April and September, many of whom were from Jacksonville.

Since the Copper Kettle was her first restaurant (and inn), we start there.

Copper Kettle

She and the Copper Kettle would be together from 1930-1951 although she moved the business twice from its original address. The 1935 telephone directory lists a Copper Kettle Inn on Ocean Front at 14th Avenue North with the telephone number 9128.
Postcard of the Copper Kettle in 1932
Then, in the 1940s, she moved it to the Atlantic Beach oceanfront where it intersected with Atlantic Boulevard. She had a home at 27 Beach Avenue adjoining the Copper Kettle property.
By 1947, she concentrated on her two restaurants--the Homestead Restaurant in Jacksonville Beach and the Copper Kettle Restaurant and Inn in Atlantic Beach at the foot of Atlantic Boulevard where it meets the ocean. Her food was so appealing and well-prepared that she attracted customers from the beach and Jacksonville. Her grandnephew says that they would sometimes serve a thousand people on a weekend and that his father would help by manning the cash register.

She also earned income from renting hotel rooms. Before chain hotels became ubiquitous, motels and hotels (except in cities) were small by today's standards, “mom and pop” businesses as it were. Air conditioning was rare. This was true of rooming houses for tourists. Because of the uneven quality, the American Automobile Association published descriptions and ratings for its members. Lacking that, it was advisable for a traveler to inspect the room before renting. The Copper Kettle was reputed to be one of the best places to stay.
Looking north from Atlantic Boulevard
By 1945, she was living in a two-story house at 27 Beach Avenue, Atlantic Beach. Beach Avenue formed the western boundary of the Copper Kettle restaurant and inn. The Florida State Census recorded her as being 54 years old (born 1891). Living with her were two African American housekeepers, Jill Daniels (40) and Maurice Zanders Roundtree (31). Is this the house that a married lover built and gave it to her in his will when he died?

Even though she had been involved with a Copper Kettle restaurant and inn at least since 1930, she sold the property in June, 1951. P. Coleman, Joe Adeeb, and M. J. Olivier of Jacksonville paid $80,000. The property had 200 feet of oceanfront and was 375 feet deep, that is, it was 75,000 square feet or about 1.7 acres. The restaurant seated 220 patrons; the hotel had 15 guest rooms. Adeeb, the principal buyer and the operator, renamed it as Joe Adeeb’s Sea Turtle. He planned to spend $20,000 in renovations to expand the capacity of the dining room to 240, improve the bedrooms, and install air conditioning.
Courtesy of the Beaches Museum
The property was so successful that it was expanded in 1973 as the 1974 photograph above shows.\textsuperscript{12}

Photo by Don Mabry  
Sea Turtle Inn and Restaurant, 2003
Keith Roberts, son of Dr. Earl H. Roberts, the first physician at the beach, reports that Eugene Bostick built the original two-story log cabin for her in 1934 on the southwestern side of Hogan Road (present-day Beach Boulevard). Bostick was the father of Lois Bostick Roberts. Today the address is 1712 Beach Boulevard. This log cabin was her home as well as a boarding house before she converted it to the Homestead Restaurant in 1947. People flocked to it to enjoy her Southern cuisine. It was rustic inside with the logs showing and stuffed animal heads dotting the walls. The restaurant exuded a warm down home feel.
Rear View of the Homestead House, ca. 1937. Alphonso Roundtree in the kiddie car. Photo courtesy of the Beaches Museum

Within the Homestead property were Paynter’s Road and Paynter’s Farms where some of her relatives and employees lived in 1940. The federal census of that year showed the divorced Alpha Paynter living there with Robert Hendrickson, listed as her partner and farm manager; at 52, this Michigan-born man was a few years older than she. Also living in the house was a farm hand, 23 year old Richard Peck from Jacksonville.
Almost all of her life at the beach she had other people living with or near her as employees, lodgers, or hotel guests depending upon when and where she was in her business enterprises. She employed mostly African Americans, whom she liked. She was particularly close to the Roundtree family in 1940, living close to her on Paynter’s Ferry Road was a household of nine African American restaurant workers and one farm hand. Next to them was the African American family headed by English Roundtree (25 years old), a hotel waiter, his wife Maurice (26), a restaurant waitress, and their son Alphonso (6). Living with the Roundtree family were two male lodgers who were restaurant workers. Paynter would house African American workers on the second floor of the log cabin and encouraged them to finish school, according to Bill Gufford, a long time resident of the beaches, who sold her seafood for her restaurants. Some of these people went into the professions.

Johnnie Strang, one of her sisters, also lived on Paynter’s Road with her second husband, Charles T. Strang, a 55 year old New Yorker or Canadian carpenter, and her two children by a previous marriage—Linwood V. Adams (21) and Waver Adams (19), both restaurant cashiers and born in Georgia.
The next family on the census was Charles L. (31) and Christine (24) Hopkins. Charles managed the fountain in a retail drugstore.

She and the Roundtrees were close, closer than common for an employer to employees, especially African American employees. They were almost like family. She and her niece, Waver Adams, were the official witnesses for the marriage of English Roundtree, an embalmer, and Maurice Zanders on December 26, 1933. Both were nineteen years old and had to have parental permission to marry. English managed a local bar. Their son Alphonso grew up on the Homestead property.
Notary Public State of Florida at large.

STATE OF FLORIDA

COUNTY OF DUVAL

Before me, T.Y. Cook, Jr., a Notary Public in and for the State at Large, personally appeared

who being duly sworn, say...that...he...the...above named...

married, who is 19 years of age; and that...he...does hereby consent to the marriage of the said...

Sworn to and subscribed before me, this 13th day of December, 1933.

Notary Public, State at Large
Official Title

C. J. No.

MARRIAGE LICENSE

CENTRAL BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS

State of Florida, Duval County

To Any Minister of the Gospel, or Any Officer Legally Authorized to solemnize the Rite of Matrimony:

Whereas, Application having been made to the County Judge of Duval County, of the State of Florida, for a license for marriage, and it appearing to the satisfaction of said County Judge that no legal impediments exist to the marriage now sought to be solemnized:

These are, therefore, to authorize you to unite in the Holy Estate of Matrimony

and that you make return of the same, duly certified under your hand, to the County Judge, aforesaid.

Witness, my name as County Judge, and the seal of said Court, at the Courthouse in Jacksonville, Florida, this 26th day of December, A.D. 1933.

(SEAL)

CERTIFICATE OF MARRIAGE

I certify, that the within named...English Roundtree

and...Maurice Gandy

were by me, the undersigned,
duly united in the Holy Estate of Matrimony, by the authority of the within License. Done this 26th day of December, A.D. 1933 at Jacksonville, Florida.

Witness: Alpha Caynter

Signature and Title of Minister or Legally Authorized Officer.

Witness: Warren Adams

Notary Public, State of Florida at Large

Returned this 26 day of December, A.D. 1933, and recorded in Marriage Book X, and page 10.

Notary Public, State of Florida at large
English and/or Maurice would work for Paynter for years. They had a special, almost familial, relationship. When she sold the Homestead Restaurant in 1961, the contract guaranteed that the tenant house (occupied by the Roundtree family) and the house she planned for herself would have access across the restaurant property as well as access to water from the restaurant’s artesian well for as long as she lived. As it turned out, she died in December 7, 1962 in her Neptune Beach home.

Courtesy of Walter L. Bennett
She expanded the size of the Homestead and converted it into a restaurant in 1947 because she understood that travelers would welcome a family restaurant on the soon to be completed Beach Boulevard. She was right. Beach Boulevard opened in December, 1949; the restaurant flourished.

One key to her success was her willingness to accommodate customers. She was willing to stay open late for private parties. Canadian pleasure boats docked at the Intracoastal Waterway so the occupants could eat at the Homestead Restaurant. They arrived year after year and Paynter was always ready for them.16

She sold the Homestead Restaurant in late 1961 to Preben Johansen for $45,000 with a mortgage at 6% interest. Preben deeded it to his wife Edna. The property was 300 feet by 300 feet. There were conditions. For as long as she lived, the tenant house (occupied by the Roundtrees) and the house she

Courtesy of Walter L. Bennett
planned to build on her unsold property would have access to the restaurant’s artesian well and the right to drive across the restaurant’s land. This was for as long as she lived.

She died at age 75 on December 7, 1962 in her home at 1301 Kings Road, Neptune Beach, Florida. She was cremated on December 10th by the Southern Crematorium in Jacksonville. She was survived by two sisters and some nieces and nephews and their children. Mrs. Billie Ann Welp of Switzerland, Florida supplied the information on the death certificate and served as the executrix of the estate.

Alpha O. Paynter was an important person in the history of the Jacksonville Beaches; she was a leading entrepreneur, one of the best in those coastal communities. As it was, she did not need a husband to front for her. She never remarried even though it was not easy for a woman to be the proprietor of two excellent restaurants. Had she been male, she would have been in a civic club with other business people and, more than likely, her picture would have been in the newspapers. She was shrewd enough to make and keep friendships among the male power elite.

Afterword

Ordinarily, that would have been the end of her except for her memory and some documents. It wasn’t.

At some point after her cremation, the legend was started that the Homestead Restaurant building had a ghost and that it is she. The unusual architecture of the building (a two-story log cabin) with chinked log walls on the inside fostered the ghost legend. There is enough of the old building remaining to foster the imagination of someone who wants to find mysterious events, to
feed confirmation bias. People tend to see what they want to see.

Some people want to believe that she hung herself in the Homestead Restaurant and she is buried on the grounds of the building. Neither is true. The question remains as to whether a ghost (or ghosts) haunt the building and, if so, if Alpha O. Paynter is one of them. Don and Debbie Nicols, owners of TacoLu Baja Mexicana restaurant, have photos of the ghost, a woman with long blond hair. Is that sufficient evidence to say the ghost is Ms. Paynter? How does anyone know what she looked like at any point in her life without one or more photos? Keith Roberts says she had blond hair but it was medium length. Is the ghost Ms. Paynter and at which age of her life? 38? 55? 75? Until at least one photo is uncovered, the mystery remains.

Of course the ghost story or stories entice people to the building. After all, they say that she is a friendly ghost so all that might happen is a safe thrill. Dorothy K. Fletcher in The Lost Restaurants of Jacksonville recounts some of the ghost stories. The haunting of the Homestead Restaurant and its successor restaurants is included in a number of books written about the supernatural.

Paynter was a powerful woman in life and death.

NOTES

Paynter has been a difficult subject to research even though she lived a long life and was successful in businesses in the Jacksonville Beaches. Not being able to identify her maiden name made it impossible to discover her life from
birth until she married Cliff Paynter. She left no children. If she left personal
and/or business papers, they haven’t been found.

Walter L. Bennett was an incredible help in this project; he was willing to
supply me with the photographs I needed. The Beaches Museum and History
Park has almost nothing on her; Taryn Rodríguez-Boette, archivist, helped with
photos and the obituary. To get sense of who this exceptional woman was, I was
fortunate that so many people were willing to help. Thanks to Kathy Johansen
Marvin, Patricia M. Wainer, Keith Roberts, Victor W. Pullen, Park Adams,
Claudette Adams, Dianne Parfitt, Raymond Harris and Jim Overton, Property
Appraisers, Duval County, Florida, and Evelynne Galvin, friend of Alpha Paynter.
Forgive me if I neglected to mention anyone.

Such errors as might exist are mine.

Further Readings

Dorothy K. Fletcher, *The Lost Restaurants of Jacksonville*, a delightful little
book, includes the Homestead Restaurant and its successors, Le Chateau, and
the Sea Turtle.

For a number of years now, I have been researching and writing about the history of the
Beaches. My books are *I've Been Working on the Railroad (HTA Press, 2012)*, World's Finest
Beach: A Brief History of the Jacksonville Beaches (Charleston and London: The
History Press, 2010), and *World's Finest Beach* (HTA Press, 2006). The articles are "Le
Coach Wimpy Sutton" June, 2013, "Pablo Beach 1910," HTA Press, June, 2013,
"Yankee Engineer in Florida: Frederick William Bruce," The Southern Genealogist's
"Uncovering African American Micro History" HTA Press, 2010, "Yankee Engineer in
Mayport Florida Beats Jacksonville," HTA Press, 2009, "Baseball on the Beach: Sea Birds,

A list of my other writings can be found at [djmabry.org/vita/](http://djmabry.org/vita/).
She and John Clifford Paynter (Cliff J. Paynter on the official record) divorced in Florida in 1930 and the US Census of that years classified her as divorced. As far as I can tell, she never remarried, so classifying her as a widow was a mistake. When she sold the Homestead Restaurant, she was called a widow. As a divorcee, she was what used to be called a “grass widow” but my guess is that being seen as a divorcee was more socially acceptable and a good business tactic.

Letter from Warren S. Childers to The Historical Unit of the Beaches, August 21, 2001. The letter is framed an on a wall of the TacoLu Baja Mexican restaurant in the Homestead building.

John Clifford Painter of 1509 15th Street, Philadelphia, PA registered for the draft in 1918 and was 39. His wife was Alpha Paynter. He was a salesman for Gulf Refining Company located in the Widener Building. The registration document described him as having blue eyes and dark hair.

Draft registration, Philadelphia Local Board, #50. In 1900, he was single and living with his parents. Source: 1900 US Census. 29th ward of Philadelphia.


Sometimes pronounced Morris.

"United States Census, 1930," index and images, FamilySearch (https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/SR8V-TMM : accessed 15 Oct 2013), Alpha O Paynter, Jacksonville Beach, Duval, Florida, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) 0080, sheet , family 102, NARA microfilm publication. If Alpha was 38, then she was born in 1892, not 1887 or 1895!

Her obituary, published in The Beach News, December 14, 1962, said the Copper Kettle was first on North 1st Street, then at the ocean front of 14th Avenue North in Jacksonville Beach, and finally at the foot of Atlantic Boulevard in Atlantic Beach.

The state census is not clear. The 1945 Florida State Census has the 54 year old Alpha Paynter living at 27 Beach Avenue, Atlantic Beach on one page. 1945 State Census ["Florida, State Census, 1945," index and images, FamilySearch (https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/MNN3-57G : accessed 15 Oct 2013), Alphew Paynter, 1945.] had an Alphew Paynter living in Atlantic Beach. She was born in Georgia in an estimated 1891. The 1945 Florida State Census for Jacksonville Beach, Precinct 31 has an Alpha Painter, 59 year old widow born in Indiana.

[according to Dave Manuel’s Inflation Calculator, that would be $720,720.72 today. http://www.davemanuel.com/inflation-calculator.php]

Florida Times-Union, June 14, 1951. p.15.


Patricia McCormick Wainer in a note to the author, January 21, 2014, wrote of the chinked logs interior and Florida wildlife displays.

Her older sister Norma married a man named Rae. They lived in California where Norma died on October 1, 1973 at age 89. Death Records. http://www.death-record.com/I/172516883/Norma-Rae. Mrs. Norma Rae of San Gabriel, Los Angeles County, California, was born on December 6, 1883 in Georgia and died October 1973 at age 90 in San Gabriel, Los Angeles County, California, according to the Social Security Death Index.

Victor W. Pullen, grandnephew, telephone conversation with Donald J. Mabry, January 18, 2014.

In St. Johns County on the border of Duval County close to the St. John’s River.