

# Ocala StarBanner | Ocala.com

NEWS

## Rosewood massacre exhibit returns to Gainesville

Lashonda Stinson Curry Staff writer



Sherry Sherrod DuPree reached into a cardboard box lined with thick cloth and pulled out two mason jars.

Extremely rusted lids covered the glass jars. One was filled with what resembled rotten tomatoes. The other had small beans, almost similar to black-eyed peas. Both were submerged in liquid.

These old jars with old food inside hold an important significance because of the era they come from and where they were found. The jars are from the 1920s and were discovered under a log on wooded property in Rosewood.

In January 1923, a week of racial violence crippled the small, black Levy County town of Rosewood when a mob of whites terrorized, looted and eventually scorched the community. They were searching for a black man accused of attacking a white woman in nearby Sumner. During the Rosewood Massacre, residents escaped by train to Gainesville and other cities, sought refuge in the home of merchant John Wright or hid in the woods. It is recorded that eight people died, including two whites, but historians have argued there were more victims.

The jars are among the artifacts and memorabilia from the “The Beginning that Never Ends: The Rosewood Traveling Exhibition,” on display at the historic Thomas Center for the Arts’ Main Gallery through Feb. 22. Antique quilts, photographs, text panels and even a piece of railroad track from Rosewood are featured in the exhibit, which was originally conceived as a memorial for the 75th anniversary of outbreak of violence in Rosewood. The exhibit, organized by the Rosewood Heritage Foundation, debuted in Gainesville on May 15, 1999, at the Fifth Avenue Arts Festival. The Matheson Museum also housed the exhibit that same year.

This is the first time the exhibition has been displayed in Gainesville since its stay at the Matheson.

In addition to traveling all over the state, the exhibit has been seen in Georgia, Texas, Virginia and Illinois.

“This is not local, not by any means. It’s been around,” said DuPree, a Sante Fe College professor and Rosewood Heritage Foundation board member. She is the curator of the exhibit.

Visitors to the exhibit will be greeted with large glass panels displaying an extremely detailed and comprehensive article about Rosewood from the Seminole Tribune newspaper, written by investigative reporter Charles Flowers.

“It’s an Indian newspaper in Hollywood, Fla., and they did several stories about this,” DuPree explained. “They gave the best history of Rosewood. We used his chronology for the [1997 John Singleton] movie.”

DuPree, a noted researcher and Smithsonian fellow, said Rosewood was founded in 1845.

“Really, it was 20 years prior to that, but we didn’t have excellent documentation for that,” she said. “They came here in the 1820s from North and South Carolina and founded a place called Who’s Town, and eventually it was named Rosewood.”

The exhibit starts with the “hidden history” of the town of Rosewood, then lays out the events leading up to the days of attacks and arson and concludes with how the Florida Legislature passed a \$2.1 million compensation bill in 1994. Based on a report from an academic research team, testimony from survivors and other witnesses, the state admitted its neglect to protect the black citizens during the destruction of Rosewood. As a result, 10 elderly survivors of Rosewood, who had to prove they were in Rosewood during the time of the massacre, each received \$150,000. The law also authorized \$500,000 for property damage reimbursement and established a scholarship fund for the families of Rosewood and their descendants.

Today, Allenetta “Robie” Robinson Mortin is the only living Rosewood survivor. She lives in south Florida. Another survivor, Willie Evans, died in 2007 at age 100.

Pieces of history from Rosewood survivors remain alive with the exhibit. One quilt in the show dates back to the 1900s and remains in good condition. It has a traditional African-American patchwork design made of different prints and patterns. The quilt is from the Hall family, who lived in Rosewood. Wilson Hall, who was a young boy when the Rosewood massacre happened, testified at the 1994 Rosewood hearings in Tallahassee. He died in 1998.

The exhibit also includes photos of Rosewood residents and descendants and a poem by Altamese Wrispus, a Rosewood descendent, that lyrically tells the story of Rosewood.

In 2004, the state declared Rosewood a Florida Heritage Landmark. A historical marker, sponsored by the Florida Department of State and the Real Rosewood Foundation, now stands on State Road 24 in Rosewood in front of the only building that was left standing following the town’s burning. Archer resident Lizzie Jenkins, a retired Alachua County educator, is president of the foundation. Her aunt, Mahulda Gussie Brown Carrier, was a schoolteacher in Rosewood and fled during the riot.

Jenkins said it's important to keep the Rosewood story alive.

"We've experienced a lot. However, we still have the courage to fight on for justice and equality and make certain our children know where they come from and remember their history and the struggle," she said.

Erin Friedberg, visual arts coordinator at the Thomas Center Galleries, said the Thomas Center has a long-standing tradition of coordinating exhibitions in honor of Black History Month. The gallery will host a free, public reception for the exhibit from 5 to 7 p.m. Feb. 19 at the Thomas Center, featuring a presentation by Janie Bradley Blake, director of the Rosewood Heritage Foundation, at 6 p.m.

" 'The Beginning that Never Ends: The Rosewood Traveling Exhibition' depicts a powerful journey through African-American history that had occurred in Rosewood, Fla.," she said. "The Thomas Center Main Gallery is an appropriate location due to the fact that the 1923 massacre occurred so close to Gainesville and it greatly impacted society. The photographs, text, quilts and memorabilia document, educate and remind visitors of the experience and subsequent events."

After the bill passed, DuPree and Annette Goins Shaki, founder and former director of the Rosewood Heritage Foundation, began working on the Rosewood exhibit. Shaki's father, Arnett Turner "A.T." Goins, was a Rosewood survivor. Shaki died in 2001, and her father passed away a year later.

A larger Rosewood exhibit is permanently displayed on the second floor of the library of Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach.

DuPree said the story of Rosewood is known all over the world and the foundation regularly gets e-mails from countries such as Japan, Germany, Italy and Canada from people who have just rented the movie or watched it on TV or in school. Printouts of e-mails from people across the country are displayed in the exhibit on a map of the United States.

"They all say they can't believe something like this happened in the United States," DuPree said.

*Contact Lashonda Stinson Curry at 352-374-5038 or  
lashonda.stinson@starbanner.com.*

**WHEN:** 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesdays and 1 to 4 p.m. Saturdays through Feb. 22, with a reception 5 to 7 p.m. Feb. 19  
**WHERE:** Thomas Center for the Arts' Main Gallery, 302 N.E. Sixth Ave., Gainesville  
**INFORMATION:** 352-393-8532 or [www.gvlculturalaffairs.org](http://www.gvlculturalaffairs.org)

## **'The Beginning that Never Ends: The Rosewood Traveling Exhibition'**