



(above): Payne Chapel A.M.E. Church.
 Courtesy Sarasota County Historical Resources.

Payne Chapel A.M.E. Church

1910 Central Avenue Leonard Reid and his wife Eddy are founders of the second African American church built in Sarasota. In 1903, the congregation constructed a small wood frame building on a lot donated by the Florida Mortgage and Investment Company at Central Avenue and present-day Fifth Street. The original building was replaced with a new structure in 1914 to accommodate growth. A hurricane destroyed the original structure in 1926. A much larger facility was built. Membership declined in the 1960s and a new church was constructed closer to Newtown in 1975. The old structure was one of the first revitalization projects in the Rosemary District.

Rosemary Cemetery

851 Central Avenue Rosemary Cemetery is approximately 300 x 300 square feet. It has approximately 740 gravesites, with 380 recorded burials dating back to 1887. The graveyard was platted in 1886 in what was the northwest corner of the town. Rev. Lewis Colson and his wife Irene are the only African Americans buried there with Sarasota's most notable leaders such as its first mayor Colonel John Gillespie. There was tension among white residents who passed through the "colored quarters" to pay respect to their loved ones, according to a Sarasota Times article in 1911.



(below): Rosemary Cemetery.
 Community scholar Walter Gilbert leads tour.
 Courtesy Vickie Oldham Collection.

Overtown's rich history

The first step in your search to find treasures about the earliest African American community in Sarasota is over. A team of experts made the job easier.

Visit historical gems in Overtown, now known as the Rosemary District (It was renamed in 1994).

African American pioneers cleared land and built Sarasota's roads, bridges and infrastructure. They kept the homes of influential leaders running smoothly as cooks, confidantes, and caretakers, domestics, gardeners, laundresses, and blacksmiths. The early settlers were turpentine, celery and citrus workers who established their own self-sustained community and found creative ways to provide for their families and neighbors.

The Overtown heritage trail brochure is funded by the Sarasota County Neighborhood Initiative Grant Program.



(above): African American pioneer Leonard Reid.
 Courtesy Sarasota County Historical Resources.

Overtown Treasures

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Overtown, listed on the National Register of Historic Places was designated in 2001 with 28 buildings that contributed to the neighborhood's historic character.

The community (a section was also known as "Black Bottom") was located within the original plat of the Town of Sarasota in 1885. African American settlement began as soon as lots became available. The first homes were located along what is now Fourth Street between Central Avenue and US 41. The population increased. By 1913, an entire business district developed along what is now Sixth Street. A development in Newtown began in 1914. By the 1920s, the bustling Overtown community began a transition. Residents shifted north after their school and churches moved to Newtown. Some families remained in Overtown.

Gentrification caused by decades of disinvestment, displacement and erasure has changed the community's identity. Once considered by some undesirable, the neighborhood now attracts hipsters and a mixture of eateries. Landmarks were demolished through a Slum Clearance program in 1955.

Some Overtown structures such as the Hood Building, Horne's Grocery store and the Thomas' Restaurant still stand. The Ice House, Boxing Club, Florence and Dorothy's Beauty Salon and a neighborhood bakery are gone...but treasures remain.

Ace Theater

5th Street next to Lolita Tartine at 1421 5th Street

The building with its Mediterranean accents operated for "colored people" by Paramount Pictures, Inc. and their subsidiary E.J. Sparks from 1942. The theater was still open in 1950. Jacob Smith, the husband of Sarasota's first African American principal Dorothye Smith managed the segregated movie house. It was renovated into an art gallery.



(above): Fred Barber at the Ace Theater. Courtesy Jetson Grimes Collection.

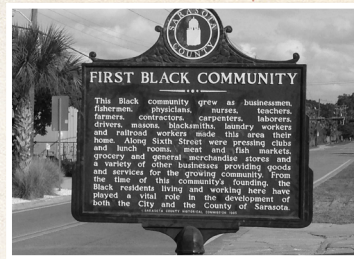


(above): Bethlehem Baptist Church was the first church built by and for African Americans. Courtesy Sarasota County Historical Resources.

Bethlehem Baptist Church

1680 18th Street

Rev. Lewis Colson was the first known African American settler in Sarasota (1884). He was publicly ordained February 15, 1896. Rev. Colson and his wife Irene donated land to build the church and sold the deed for \$1 in 1897. The one story structure was the heartbeat of the Overtown community. On October 28, 1973, a new facility opened closer to Newtown. There is a historic marker on the property.



(above): Overtown Marker. Courtesy Vickie Oldham Collection.

American presence near downtown was designed and installed in 1985. It celebrates the resilience of early settlers who established homesteads, churches, schools, and businesses during Jim Crow segregation. Information collected from deeds, tax records, a 1916 directory and a few oral history interviews tell stories of courage and enterprise. To African American residents, the marker is a memorial.

"First Black Community" Marker Boulevard of the Arts & Central Avenue

A Sarasota County historic marker that documents African American presence near downtown was designed and installed in 1985. It celebrates the resilience of early settlers who established homesteads, churches, schools, and businesses during Jim Crow segregation. Information collected from deeds, tax records, a 1916 directory and a few oral history interviews tell stories of courage and enterprise. To African American residents, the marker is a memorial.



Five Points Historic Marker

(left): Photo by Felix Pinnard is thought to be Rev. Lewis Colson and his wife Irene. Courtesy Sarasota County Historical Resources.

Main Street and Pineapple Avenue (marker at the corner)

Sixty three years after the destruction of the Black Seminole settlement of Angola in 1821, Lewis Colson arrived in Sarasota (1884). Colson drove the first stake into the ground to plat the town of Sarasota as assistant to engineer Richard E. Paulson, employed by the Florida Mortgage and Investment Company.

Colson Hotel 1425 8th Street

Jim Crow laws prevented overnight stays of African American travelers in most hotels. Athletes and entertainers of color who worked in the area reserved space in private homes such as the guesthouse of Jack and Mary Emma Jones, the Wright Bush House and the Colson Hotel. The facility was constructed in 1925 to accommodate African American visitors and was named for Rev. Lewis Colson, but was not owned by him.



(below): Colson Hotel. Courtesy Sarasota County Historical Resources.

Leonard Reid House 1435 7th Street

The Leonard Reid House was built in 1926 at the southwest corner of Boulevard of the Arts and Sixth Street. It faced demolition but was locally designated as historic by the City of Sarasota in 1999 and was relocated to 1435 Seventh Street. After graduating valedictorian at Savannah Normal School (now Savannah State University), Mr. Reid arrived in 1900, was introduced to Sarasota's first mayor Colonel John Hamilton Gillespie, then became the leader's coachman, confidante, caretaker of his estate and the founder of Payne Chapel A.M.E. Church, Overtown's second African American house of worship.



(below): The Reid House faces development pressure. Courtesy Sarasota County Historical Resources.