



Uploads to martindigitalhistory.org:

Voices of Pioneers: The Rush Hughes Interviews (1960–1961)

We're pleased to share a new digital collection from the Historical Society of Martin County: *Voices of Pioneers*, a series of transcriptions of oral histories recorded by WSTU broadcaster Rush Hughes in 1960–1961. These transcriptions capture the voices and memories of some of Martin County's earliest residents, offering a vivid look at our community's past.

A Project to Preserve Local Voices

In 1960, the Historical Society of Martin County (HSMC), led by Steve Schmidt, received a \$1,000 donation that allowed the Society to hire Rush Hughes to record a series of interviews with longtime residents. The goal was to document the county's early days through the voices of those who had lived them. In July 1960, Schmidt told the *Stuart News* that nearly 100 "pioneer voices" had already been recorded, with plans to conduct more interviews and to cross-check them for historical accuracy (14 July 1960). The transcriptions we have are short and vary in quality, but they captured priceless recollections—everyday experiences, colorful personalities, and local traditions.

It is unknown if the original tapes still exist or if the transcriptions are edited. The collection offered by HSMC includes 32 transcriptions, and two others were donated separately by the Stuart Heritage Museum. Hopefully, more transcriptions may be found as donations to the project continue.

A Community Effort Spanning Decades

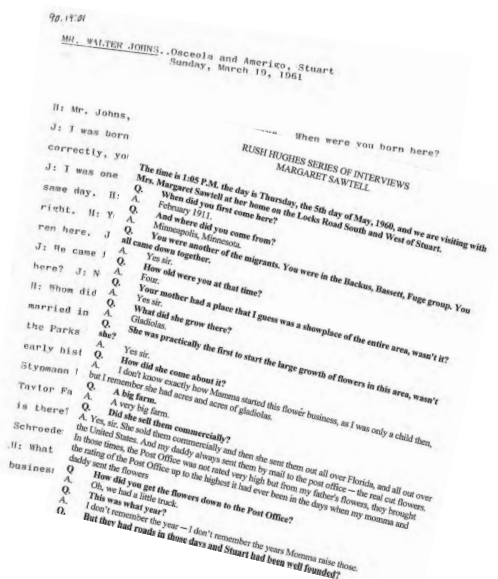
The survival of these interviews is thanks to the dedication of many community members over the decades. Les Combs, founder of WSTU, ensured the original recordings were transcribed and safeguarded for more than thirty years. In 1995, Mary Furino, longtime secretary at the law firm of Thurlow & Smith, retyped many of the fragile pages, helping to make them more legible and accessible. Then, in 2008, local historian Sandra Thurlow revisited several of the original recordings. Listening carefully to copies of the tapes, she reviewed, corrected, and completed the transcriptions—confirming the spelling of names and geographic features and filling in missing passages. Her work greatly improved both the accuracy and the historical integrity of the collection.

Stories from the Past: Ethel Thomas Porter and Fernhill Cemetery

Among the many people interviewed by Rush Hughes was Ethel Thomas Porter (1880–1966). Ethel and her husband Charles Porter (1877–1945) bought the historic Owl House on Colorado Avenue around 1908. Although the couple later divorced, Ethel remained in Stuart for the rest of her life and played an active role in community affairs. Ethel was a well-known community leader who lived in the historic Owl House on Colorado Avenue. A member of the PEO Sisterhood, the DAR, and president of the Stuart Woman's Club, she also donated land at Osceola and Colorado that became Haney Circle.

During her 1960 interview, Ethel shared a memorable story about the first burial in Fernhill Cemetery, a story that combines humor, reverence, and community spirit:

...Uncle Broster Kitching was an Englishman. He was our Post Master and he was a rather tall, stout man with a long white



The Owl House, 1939

beard and all the little children called him Santa Claus. He was very lovable character and very kind and considerate. He had been here for a number of years and he said he had never heard of a town progressing that did not have a cemetery. He had some land that you couldn't even grow sandspurs on and he gave the land - the original tract - for a cemetery and it looked like, at least, we were a town. Now, he walked off the lines and when he walked it off he stuck down white oleander branches. Well, the oleanders grew and grew and Uncle Broster was getting very discouraged. One day a New Jersey fisherman we called "Square Head" was out in the river and drunk and fell overboard and drowned. And so he was due to certainly come up on the third day - so all the village was apprehensive to see if we are going to get him. He did. He didn't disappoint us - he came up. The men built a coffin - oh we had wooden coffins for years after I came here - I mean homemade wood coffins - and the some of the women lined it with felicia - a white cloth. Well, it was when the Royal Poinciana was in bloom. And some of the women, out of cardboard tops, made wreaths and crosses. Oh they were beautiful. Everybody made something. Now the boat that they were going to take the body in was lined with coconut fronds and around the edge of the boat they placed red hibiscus. Because you know, it does not wilt. Then the rest of us got in line from George Parks dock, and we went up the river. And I will tell you it looked like a regatta. We got to Poppleton's Creek and we went in there because that would take us to a bridge - the same bridge but it was wooden - to the cemetery. With ropes they [towed] the body up and got it on the ground. Then from boat, from boat, from boat all of us crawled and pulled and jumped until we got on the bridge and then we followed in great dignity - the body. Uncle Broster read out of the Episcopal Prayer Book the service and then we came home. But you see there was so much sand and it was so soft - that always - the graves even for years afterward, had to be boxed with planks and of course, they were lowered with ropes. Well, we came home but I could not help but think - because I always laugh at the wrong time - I could not help but think that if that man could look down, he'd have hysterics because if he had been buried up in his own home town he would have been in the Potter's Field. But, this of course, was a grand occasion. Now that was the first body that was there and that is how we got it.

Remembering "Square Head"

According to journalist Joe Crankshaw, who revisited the story in his 1991 *Stuart News* column "Town Cemeteries Once Sign of Status," the identity of the drowned fisherman remains uncertain. Cemetery records, however, show that a man named J. Flynn was exhumed and sent north in 1908—perhaps the same "Square Head" remembered in Porter's story.

Preserving the Past, One Voice at a Time

Thanks to the combined efforts of the Historical Society of Martin County, WSTU, and generations of dedicated local historians, these voices from the mid-20th century continue to speak to us today. The Voices of Pioneers collection reminds us how much of our shared history lives in the memories and stories of ordinary people—and how valuable those stories remain.

[Explore the full transcriptions and learn more at Martin Digital History](#)

Recent uploads to martindigitalhistory.org:

Remembering the Early Settlers' of the Treasure Coast

In 1926, a group of Treasure Coast "pioneers" gathered for the first time at the Beachland Casino in Vero Beach. Their goal was to bring together families who had settled in Martin, St. Lucie, and Indian River Counties before 1905 and to preserve the region's early history.

The group, originally called the Old Times Association of the Lower Indian River, held annual meetings at various locations, each followed by a lively barbecue and potluck meal. In 1963, they adopted a new name, the Early Settlers' Association of the Lower Indian River, and continued to meet regularly until around 1990.

It's unclear whether the organization still exists or if they collected photographs, memoirs, or other materials—items that would make wonderful additions to Martin Digital History.

Our collection currently includes photos from the 1953 gathering in Jensen Beach, the 1974 event in Stuart, and a few others. If you have additional information or materials related to the Association, please let us know!



*Early Settlers' Association of the Lower Indian River
annual meeting at the Jensen Beach Community Center,*

A Mystery on the Tracks

Among Sandra Thurlow's recent donations were a pair of intriguing photo negatives—images of a car adapted to travel along the railroad bridge. The unusual sight immediately caught our attention and sent us down a fascinating research rabbit hole.

The photos, clearly taken from the old bridge across the St. Lucie River, show Stuart Marine Service in the background. The station wagon bears no license plate, has wheels designed for railroad tracks, and sports a siren on the roof.

A search through the *Stuart News* archives yielded no clues, so we turned to the ever-helpful members of the Facebook group *Martin County Memories*. Several people quickly provided the missing context—the long and turbulent Florida East Coast Railway strike of 1963.

The strike began in January 1963, when 1,640 workers walked off the job to demand fair wages and benefits. Expected to last only a few weeks, it instead dragged on for over a decade, not concluding until late 1974. In its early years, the conflict was marred by violence, including train derailments and dynamite attacks on FEC freight lines. Passenger service was suspended for much of this period until the Florida Railroad and Public Utilities Commission intervened, ordering its restoration. Service resumed briefly in August 1965—though the FEC warned passengers they rode at their own risk—and was ultimately discontinued again in July 1968.

It's possible that the rail-ready vehicle in Sandra's photo was simply used for routine track inspections, not necessarily tied to the strike. Still, the image opens a window into a dramatic chapter of Florida's transportation history—and reminds us how one small discovery can uncover an entire story.



Recent uploads to martindigitalhistory.org:

A Float from the Space Age

Occasionally, a photograph arrives that prompts deeper investigation, such as this image of a parade float featuring a domed structure and a sign reading, "We Help Guard Our Freedom."

Apparently, it's the 4th of July float put together by the Port Salerno Firemen's Auxiliary. An article in the *Stuart News* (7 July 1960) details the group's process to create the float (it's included on the record if you'd like to read it). The domed object was intended to represent Pioneer IV, the American space probe launched in March 1959 and the first U.S. spacecraft to travel beyond Earth's orbit.

Firemen's Auxiliaries are volunteer organizations that offer fundraising, emergency support, and administrative help for fire departments. In the twentieth century, they were chiefly the wives of the firemen, and were often called "Ladies Auxiliaries." Today's auxiliaries are usually open to anyone who wants to be supportive.

The float won the award for "Most Original."





Stuart Heritage Museum Speaker at the Flagler Series

House of Refuge Restoration Update,
presented by Jess Robinson & Catherine Larsen

Tuesday, November 11th at 7PM

The Flagler of Stuart, 201 SW Flagler Street, Stuart

The House of Refuge is the only one remaining of ten built in 1876 by the U.S. Treasury Department. These houses provided havens for sailors and shipwreck victims.

Elliott Museum Event

The Highwaymen : From the Street Corner to the Smithsonian

Opening November 23rd, exhibit starts Nov 24th

Elliott Museum, 825 NE Ocean Boulevard, Stuart

Spanning nearly 70 years, a group of 25 African American men and 1 remarkable woman—later known as The Highwaymen—made an indelible mark not only on Florida, but on the art world. This exhibit features over 60 original paintings from the private collection of Roger Lightle, Highwaymen Art Specialists, Inc.; sponsored by The Kiplinger Family Foundation and Rachelle “Rocky” Grady.



Martin County Celebrates its Centennial in 2025! Check out the website for events and information!

martincounty100.com

Interested in Martin County history? Visit and subscribe to Sandra Thurlow's

Sandy History Lady Blog



What is Martin Digital History?

The mission of Martin Digital History (MDH) is to encourage the appreciation of Martin County's unique history by collaborating with participating community members and local organizations to collect, present, and interpret relevant digital content. This **participatory archive**, orchestrated by the Martin County Library System, is the result of the planning teamwork of several far-sighted community members and organizations, including Sandra Thurlow, Black Heritage Initiative, Stuart Heritage, the Historical Society of Martin County, the Library Foundation of Martin County, and many others. It is open for public participation.

- This newsletter will attempt to keep all informed about the project, including new participants and accessions, plans, events, etc. [Click here to subscribe to this newsletter.](#)
- More information: martindigitalhistory.org
- Support the project: <https://www.martindigitalhistory.org/participate>
- Feedback, comments, questions? Contact the archivist: Georgen Charnes, gcharnes@martin.fl.us



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