In the Shadow of the Tree of Strange Fruit

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In the early 1990s, the city of Labelle, in central Florida, a sleepy agricultural community and the seat of rural Hendry County, faced a road-widening project. Its main east/west artery, State Road 80, connecting Palm Beach to Fort Myers, was to be expanded to four lanes, and as is typical of such projects, a number of structures were scheduled for demolition. Two of those structures—wood-frame buildings in a style generally referred to as Florida vernacular—attracted the attention of a group of local citizens. In 1996, the group formed the Labelle Heritage Museum and moved the buildings at private expense to a county-owned site just south of the courthouse.

The stated mission of the museum was to preserve and protect local history. It was also imagined the buildings would help the community retain the memory of a distinctly "Southern" heritage. Florida vernacular is an austere but deceptively elegant style that speaks to the delicate geometry of hammocks and glades and the slow, subtle movements of rivers and wetlands. It was important that the buildings had once belonged to a prominent local judge, Herbert A. Rider; the larger had served as his home, the smaller as his office.

On the surface, the effort appeared to be just another example of small-town historic preservation. A showpiece would be created where tourists might spend an hour or two. And as a container for memory, the museum would allow local residents to present a solid civic image. But inquiry into the Labelle Heritage Museum reveals a much more complex story—one of greed, violence, and shifting identity; one that reveals much about how we give, and deny, meaning to places and buildings.

At the center of Labelle's history is a cruel and violent act—a lynching. It is tempting to conceive of that story as an isolated act of barbarism on a long-ago May afternoon, but the place of memory in the built environment is rarely that clear. And in this case the history is complex and circuitous, bending back and forth through time, weaving together issues of class, race and economics. A new chapter is also now being written, as steps are being considered to again move the buildings that once belonged to Judge Rider.

The Incident

Labelle achieved national prominence during the Florida land boom of the 1920s. Henry Ford made a substantial investment in real estate there. And in 1925, Sears Roebuck announced plans to build a factory south of town to produce prefabricated houses. Labelle's moment of national notoriety, however, came on May 11, 1926, when Henry Patterson, a black construction worker, was lynched there.

Against this story, Judge Rider has sometimes been portrayed as Labelle's version of Harper Lee's fictional Atticus Finch. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Finch struggles to defend a black man convicted of raping a white woman. For his part, Rider attempted—unsuccessfully in the end—to prosecute those accused of lynching Patterson.

Patterson's lynching and Judge Rider's role are common knowledge in Labelle, but they are rarely discussed openly. Likewise, although Rider's house and office were determined to be historically significant and were saved expressly to form the basis of the Labelle Heritage Museum, neither the lynching nor the conditions of the land boom are explicitly represented in the museum's public display areas.[1]

Most of the museum's collection of documents and photographs is stored in boxes and scrapbooks. A determined and careful search of these will reveal a 1983 article from the local *Caloosa Belle* newspaper titled "A Terrible Misunderstanding" that attempts to explain the lynching. Another

Opposite: The Hendry County line at the time of the Florida Land Boom. Historic photo reprinted by permission of Barron Library.
Above: The Captain Hendry House in Labelle as an example of Florida vernacular architecture. Historic photo reprinted by permission of Barron Library.

possible acknowledgement is a single undated Polaroid with a handwritten note, "Doty's garage," in an album of similar photographs (Doty's Garage was where the lynching began).[2] The museum also has a collection of period newspapers, but these are held in its office and are not accessible to the general public.[3]

Those wishing to learn the circumstances of the lynching, and Judge Rider's role, may, however, find a detailed examination of the events in an article by Jerrell Shofner in the *Florida Historical Quarterly*.[4] In particular, the article investigates the conditions that prevented Rider from successfully prosecuting the perpetrators, and it suggests that Rider paid a personal price for his efforts.

A further primary source is the NAACP. Beginning in 1912, it compiled, as much as it was able to, detailed files on every lynching in the United States. Its file on the Patterson case includes newspaper articles and correspondence between NAACP executives, their affiliates, and individuals in Labelle. These documents permit a clearer picture of the events.

The Consequences of Construction

The Florida land boom was a famous speculative bubble based in part on the new mobility of the American middle class, the unchecked ambitions of often unscrupulous real estate developers, and the feeling there was easy money to be made.

In 1925, the construction of a highway through Labelle was considered fundamental to local participation in the boom. Labelle and the newly formed Hendry County needed highway access to enable the car-driving tourist to become a real estate investor, but it was assumed that construction-related jobs would benefit the local economy and that those jobs would go to local white boys and men. Instead, crews of black men were brought in as laborers.

This is how Sheriff Dan L. McLaughlin rationalized the killing of Patterson, in a statement published in the *Tampa Tribune*, May 17, 1926 (and reprinted in the *New York Evening Post*, May 31, 1926):

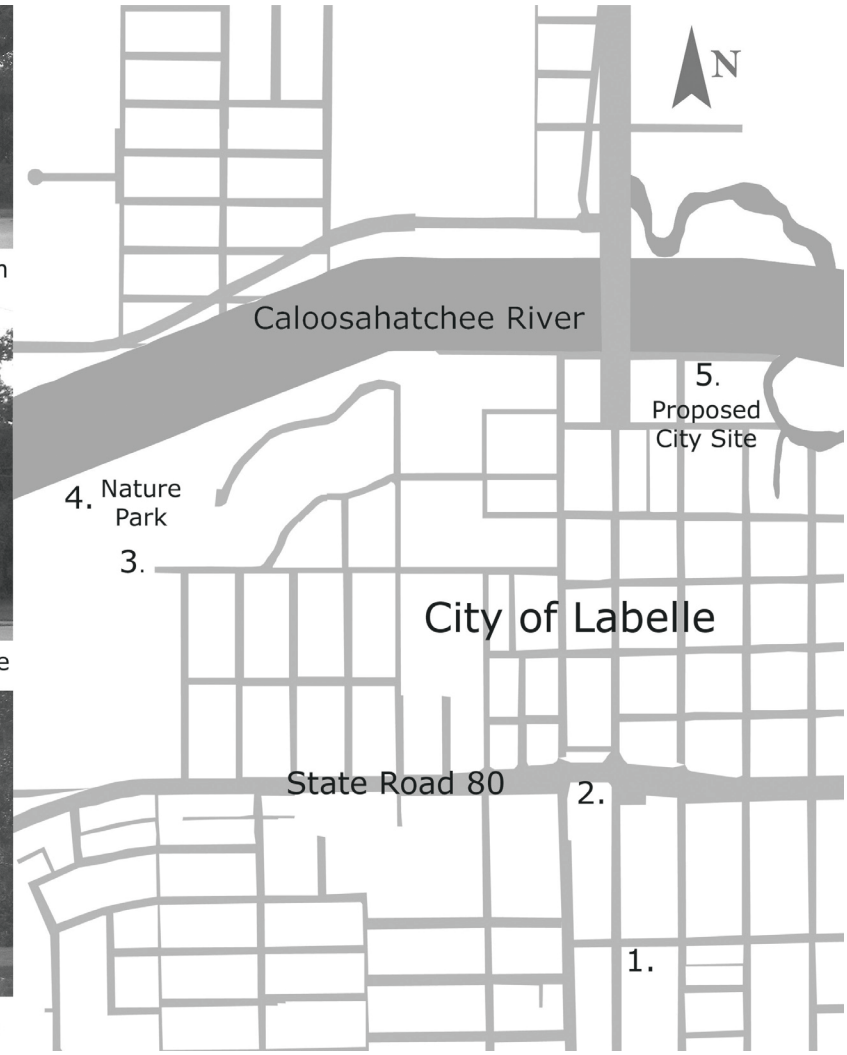
> *These boys have a lot of right on their side and it is time their side of the case was presented…. It started when we were having a campaign down here for a bond issue to build good roads. People who were pushing the bond issue promised work to all the boys if they would vote for it…. The next thing the contractor imported a lot of Negroes and the voters who supported the bond issue could not get work on the roads. They felt they were tricked, and naturally, they resented the presence of the Negroes here. This is the story behind the trouble.*[5]

The killing of Henry Patterson was driven, in part, by frustrations of working-class whites over a perceived

1. Labelle Heritage Museum

2. Hendry County Courthouse

3. Captain Hendry House



loss of jobs and the money to be made from the Florida land boom.

Wealthier whites had a different view, however. They were principally troubled by the loss of real estate sales as a result of the negative publicity surrounding an unpunished lynching. This worry became obvious in a statement by the Florida Chamber of Commerce that appeared, for example, in a July 1, 1926, article in the *New York News*, entitled "Four Lynchings Rouse Florida's Business Alarm."

Based on such concern, public support emerged to investigate and prosecute those responsible for the Patterson lynching. However, the funding for this effort did not come from the Florida Chamber of Commerce or the governor's office. Rather, Judge Rider and other local officials turned to members of the African-American community.

In a letter dated July 15, 1926, John Weber, of the Labelle Chamber of Commerce, described the situation as follows to James Weldon Johnson, Secretary of the NAACP in New York: "It is true that the State Chamber of Commerce is backing us, in a moral way, but we cannot look to it for financial assistance nor can we look to the Governor for certain assistance that we need."[6]

Opposite: The Hendry County Courthouse shortly after its construction. Historic photo reprinted by permission of Barron Library.
Above: Location of historic sites in present-day Labelle. Photos and map by author.

The NAACP was actively seeking a test case in its fight against lynchings. Because local government and business interests endorsed the investigation, the Patterson case offered the potential for a successful prosecution, and so it was willing to lend its support. But Johnson and other members of the African-American community had no illusions about the white community's financial self-interest. In a letter dated September 18, 1926, Johnson wrote to Bishop John Hurst, of Edward Waters College, in Jacksonville, Florida:

> *I note what you say about the two men with whom you were talking being interested in land developments in Hendry County and that they are interested in having the criminals punished because the offense committed by them has paralyzed the land business in that county. I do not believe this motive on their part is in no way disadvantageous. It is quite likely that they will go further toward having justice done in this matter because they are financially interested than they would if they were merely actuated by abstract ideals of justice.*[7]

The case against the accused lynchers went before a grand jury in December 1926. During the subsequent investigation and trial, some witnesses were threatened, others fled, and supporting evidence was lost. In the end, a verdict of "death at the hands of persons unknown" was returned.

The New Land Boom

For those seeking to advance their fortunes in Hendry County and across the state, the verdict hardly mattered. The lynching had occurred in May; by the summer of 1926 the speculative bubble in Florida real estate had already begun to burst.

Northern newspapers, previously favorable to Florida development, began to print negative articles. An unseasonably cold winter in 1925-26 deflated the myth of Florida as a semi-tropical Eden, and the deadly hurricane of 1926, which caused massive property damage, settled the matter. By 1927 Florida entered a period of statewide economic collapse, exacerbated by canker damage to the orange crop of 1927 and another devastating hurricane in 1928. Nationally, the stock market crash followed, in 1929, and ushered in the years of the Great Depression.

It was not until after World War II that prosperity slowly returned to the state. But by this time Labelle and Hendry County had reverted to an agricultural economy based on citrus and cattle.

Recently, however, Labelle has experienced a new surge of change and expansion. The 1990s highway widening and a general boom in construction across southwest Florida have brought speculative real-estate activities back to the area in a way unseen since the 1920s.

Labelle's past as a cattle town is fast disappearing as it is transformed into another suburban bedroom community. Yet even as old ways are disappearing, those profiting from its makeover are capitalizing on its image as a traditional Florida town. In their marketing efforts, real-estate developers routinely use the preserved Rider buildings and nearby Hendry County Courthouse as evidence of "Southern charm" and "old Florida architecture."[8]

There are problems with the presentation of local history through the museum's preserved Florida vernacular5 buildings, however. One is that the county never formally granted the Labelle Heritage Museum title to the land on which the Rider buildings sit. Many boosters also feel the location lacks visibility and adequate parking, and a number of alternate sites have been suggested that would allow the museum to grow into a more financially viable civic institution. The most prominent lies on the grounds of the Captain Hendry House, adjacent to the Labelle Nature Park.

Captain Francis Asbury Hendry, a Confederate Army veteran, was also known as Florida's cattle king. An early developer in the area, he built a two-story wood-frame structure at the edge of town in 1914, just prior to his death, in 1917. In 1996 the house was purchased by the City of Labelle and placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The current proposal is for the heritage museum to be combined with the Hendry House as a re-creation of a Florida homestead. This type of museum collection, often called an immersion experience, is increasingly popular. But some have noted that it is similar to the dioramas and exhibitions used to promote tourism and investment in Florida at nineteenth- and twentieth-century World's Fairs. Thus, it echoes the dubious relationship in the state between historical presentation and real-estate promotion.[9]

The site raises other questions as well. Captain Hendry had taken up permanent residence in Fort Myers when he built the house that now bears his name. Indeed, he built it as a secondary residence and used it only for brief periods at the end of his life.

Meanwhile, the undeveloped land that forms the Labelle Nature Park was created when the Army Corps of Engineers dredged the Caloo-

sahatchee River. It does contain numerous and varied examples of natural vegetation and wildlife. But the claim that it represents Florida as it appeared when the Caloosa Indians occupied the site is undercut by the fact the site did not exist when the Caloosas camped on the banks of the river nearby.

Considering these objections, the City of Labelle has offered another alternative, a site contiguous to an existing public park and library that would preserve access to valuable riverfront property. Some developers and community leaders also see it is consistent with efforts to redevelop Labelle's downtown in a historic, pedestrian-friendly manner.

Yet, while this proposal would undoubtedly create a significant and attractive public space, how it would further the museum's mission to preserve, protect, and present local history is unclear.

The Paradox of Place

The unresolved question of an appropriate location for the museum reveals a paradox. Although the exact site of Henry Patterson's lynching is probably lost to time and memory, the most specific newspaper and eyewitness accounts place it two blocks south of the courthouse. In a disjunction of time, it would probably now be possible to watch the events of the lynching unfold from the present location of Rider's back porch.

At present, the museum also sits close to the Hendry County courthouse. Traditionally, the courthouse was the preeminent public space and symbol of justice in rural America. But in Florida during the land boom of the 1920s it also played a vital role as the place where real estate and property transactions were processed and recorded. Indeed, one of the reasons Hendry County was created, in 1923, was so that the citizens of eastern Lee County could participate fully in land development.

But in the South there is another meaning to many courthouses. In the thousands of documented lynchings, the victim was often dragged from a jail cell, tortured, and killed nearby; the courthouse thus became the backdrop to scenes of public mutilation and death.

In addition, then, to the association between Rider and these tragic events, the current placement of these two wood-frame buildings begs the question: what is the power of this place?

Certainly, a small heritage museum must be subject to fiscal reality, and it should present exhibitions that attract and encourage patronage. It cannot fixate on the horrors of a lynching as a means to draw visitors. On the other hand, it should not ignore parts of the past it finds too difficult to address. But most important, perhaps, its location should not be a secondary consideration; its place should be one that engenders thoughtful investigation.

The creation of the Labelle Heritage Museum and the conservation of the courthouse and the Rider buildings were, and are, grounded in a desire to remember. In some ways, for some people, the preservation of architecture is a desire to see ghosts—to imagine the people who once inhabited the rooms, to glimpse traces of the dead. These shadows exist in the spaces between theory and practice, between meaning and mortar.

Labelle was once a small town on the banks of a river, shaded by massive oak trees. In Florida, this past is now being lost to an onslaught of highways, strip malls, and tract housing. In such circumstances, it is easy to argue for preservation and protection of old buildings. But how do we hear the voices within, however distant and far away they seem?

Notes

1. The museum did recently acknowledge the lynching in its fall 2005 newsletter by excerpting part of a 1984 *Gulfshore Life* magazine article.
2. James R. Doty was the local state representative. The best available information indicates that Patterson was running for his house or garage as a possible sanctuary. The violence, the killing, began there, but Patterson's life had clearly been in danger for hours prior.
3. A lack of funding has prevented the museum from hiring professional curatorial staff to manage and exhibit its collections. Other artifacts related to the Patterson lynching may exist within its collections, but their significance is neither recognized nor documented.
4. Jerrell H. Shofner, "Judge Herbert Rider and the Lynching at Labelle" *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 59, Issue 3 (January 1981), pp. 299–300.
5. The Papers of the NAACP, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Series C, Box 351, Reel 8, Part 7.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Of course, it is no small irony that buildings whose actual historical significance lies in a period of rampant real-estate speculation are now being used, during a new real-estate boom, to sell the illusion of a pastoral, idyllic Florida.
9. Joel M. Hoffman, "From Augustine to Tangerine: Florida at the U.S. World's Fairs," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, Vol. 23 (Miami Beach: The Wolfsonian-FIU, 1998), pp. 48–86.