



Photo courtesy of Visit Tallahassee

Discovering the heart of Tallahassee

Whether you're a visitor or longtime resident, this capital city may surprise you

By Susan Cerulean

On a bitter January night in 1982, I motored north from Gainesville to begin a new life and a dream job in Tallahassee. I traveled in a yellow Volkswagen Thing, a quasi-military vehicle my dad thought I'd find useful in my new position as staff biologist for Marjorie Carr's Florida Defenders of the Environment.

The Defenders' offices were in the refurbished attic of a historic home on North Gadsden Street, owned by Bud and Kitty Chiles. Today, that house sits close to Stop 5 on a new Florida Stories walking tour of the city, created by the Florida Humanities Council and the Historic Capitol Museum's executive director Tiffany Baker. Recently, I revisited my personal history in Tallahassee, guided by the Florida Stories

app. Though I've lived and worked here all of my adult life, the tour surprised and fascinated me with much I had never learned before about my adopted city's history.

What I have long appreciated about Tallahassee is that it offers a place to live, work and visit that defies the tourist's stereotype of Florida. A vibrant trio of universities and colleges; rich historical roots; and a setting equidistant from the rolling red hills of Georgia and the necklace of coastal islands and marshes to the south have created a city that isn't an attraction: it's the real deal.

The Florida Stories walking tour, one of 17 city walks on the free downloadable app, begins at a place many Tallahasseeans consider the new heart of the town: Cascades Park. An amphitheater, walking trails, an interactive play fountain for children, and an enormous, wide-open sky draw people to picnic, attend festivals, and recreate. It's a marvelous community space.

Just as we do today, the Apalachee and other tribes cherished the area. Listen to these words from writer Julie Hauserman in her essay, "Florida's Last Waterfall – Cascades Park," published in *Between Two Rivers: Stories from the Red Hills to the Gulf*: "Imagine it: a bubbling stream through deep green woods, and then a waterfall, cascading twenty to thirty feet through the wet air into a deep pool, perfect for swimming. It was right downtown. Locals called it the 'Cascade' ... and it flowed near the hillside where the Capitol is now."

In 1823, the governor of Florida assigned two men to search for a state capital between Pensacola and St. Augustine, and they chose this very location. But over time, and for reasons unknown, the city built a coal gasification plant atop the beautiful cascades. Tar and toxic byproducts were dumped into the free-running stream, and eventually, it was converted into the town dump.

For many decades, the Cascades languished as an EPA brownfield, fenced from public use. Although the area will never return to its original, native beauty, it has been restored as a beloved commons, and truly, the heart of the city.

Just north of Cascades Park is the white, three-story Bryant Building, the central office of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, where I was employed in the mid-1980s, again as a biologist.

How many times did I enter and leave that huge white building, never knowing that on that very site, a vibrant African-American community stood, until its people were forcibly relocated by land developers in the 1960s? Smokey Hollow was its name, and on a bit of the land where 600 residents once lived, a small park commemorates and evokes a sense of what has been lost.

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In the 1950s and '60s, Tallahassee civil rights demonstrations added momentum to the national struggle to end segregation and inequality. I didn't live here then, but on the walking tour, I was able to imagine McCrory's dime store at the corner of Pensacola and Monroe streets where courageous young Florida A&M University (FAMU) students and many others staged lunch counter sit-ins and a citywide bus boycott.

You can trace their footsteps at Stop 9, the Civil Rights Heritage Walk.

As you wend your way back to Cascades Park, do not fail to take the elevator to the top floor of the new capitol building. From spacious observation decks, you will find your

best perspective of Tallahassee's location in space and time, and you will appreciate that no city can exist without landscape and fresh water to support it.

On a very clear day, you can look south across the Cody Scarp and the verdant Apalachicola National Forest, all the way to St. Marks Lighthouse. To the west, you'll see the hilltop of Mission San Luis. You'll have to imagine the magnificent Red Hills to the north, and the western boundary of Tallahassee's bioregion, the Aucilla River, to the north and west, but it is worth a try.

If you have time on your visit, dig deeper into some of my favorite venues and events. Attend one of the Tallahassee Bach Parley's periodic concerts at St. John's Episcopal Church. You couldn't be more moved by sight and sounds were you in Paris, I promise. For a more down-home, but equally professional musical experience, catch a bit of a nightly performance, a beer, and a bowl of beans and rice at the Blue Tavern. Do you know of another mellow listening room with its own anthem (written and sometimes performed live by the city's beloved Velma Frye)?

And do not miss Railroad Square, tucked between FAMU and Florida State University, and somehow saved from downtown redevelopment. Walk the loop of this art park, especially on a First Friday, and you'll have a hard time choosing between the Mickee Faust playhouse, climbing gym, vintage shops, a coffeehouse in a caboose (one of several great hangouts), the galleries and studios of many artists, and Proof, Tallahassee's largest brewery.

Off the beaten track: Some gems to discover

If you really want to know Tallahassee and its rich ecology,

history, and culture, venture out to the following sites not included on the tour. All are wonderful places to enjoy with children.

Museum of Florida History. Interpretive exhibits of Florida's past and present culture.

500 S. Bronough St. Free admission and parking. Hours vary.

Mission San Luis. This living history museum is the site of the principal village of the Apalachee; in the late 1600s, it also served as Spain's westernmost religious and administrative capital.

2100 W. Tennessee St.

Open Tuesday through Sunday, 10 a.m.–4 p.m.

Lake Jackson Mounds State Archaeological State Park Nature trail and ancient Indian mounds. From 1000-1450 AD, this site was a large ceremonial center for Native Americans.

3600 Indian Mounds Road.

Open from 8 a.m. to sundown 365 days a year.

Edward Ball Wakulla Springs State Park. One of the world's largest and deepest freshwater springs. Nature trails, swimming, boat tours, and historic hotel.

Ten miles south of Tallahassee.

Open from 8 a.m. to sundown, 365 days a year.

St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge Seven-mile wildlife drive, extensive walking and biking trails, historic lighthouse on Apalachee Bay.

25 miles south of Tallahassee. Fees vary.

Open year-round, sunrise to sunset.

When you go:

Download the Florida Humanities Council's free Florida Stories app on your phone from Apple or Google Play. The app is adding more Florida walking tours continuously. FLStories.org

On the three-hour, 2.5-mile Tallahassee walking tour (or at your own pace and schedule), you will be treated to the fascinating history of the city. The app guides you to 11 stops, each enlivened by 4- to 6-minute narratives.

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