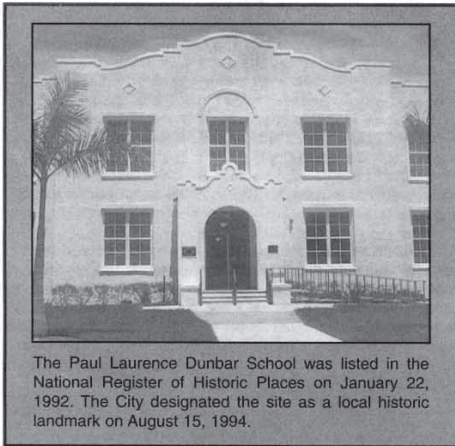




# historic sites of dunbar – appendix **E**

## Historic Sites of Dunbar A Self Guided Tour



The Paul Laurence Dunbar School was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on January 22, 1992. The City designated the site as a local historic landmark on August 15, 1994.

When Fort Myers was active as a fort during the Civil War it was manned by "U.S. colored" (black) troops. Blacks and whites lived in the same neighborhoods when the fort was abandoned and the city established. The earliest known black settler, Nelson Tillis, arrived in Fort Myers on Christmas day in 1867. Tillis and his family at one time lived in a house on McGregor Boulevard, near the Thomas Edison Estate, where it is said his children used to play on the Edison lawn.

Both blacks and whites inhabited an area known as Pine-tucky. The area was geographically located on both sides of Cleveland Avenue between McGregor Boulevard on the west, Grand Avenue on the east, Victoria Avenue on the north and Edison Avenue on the south. By the 1900's newly arriving white settlers didn't like blacks living in the same communities with them.

By the mid-1930's most black families had moved into a segregated area originally referred to as Safety Hill. Some people say it was given that name because the area is the highest elevation in Fort Myers. Others say it was the only place that blacks could feel safe. In the mid-forties, the community began to be referred to as Dunbar, after the name of the high school. The high school was named after the famous black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. Until desegregation, blacks were only allowed to live in the Dunbar section of Fort Myers.

When "Jim Crow" laws segregated the City of Fort Myers, though separate, the Dunbar community thrived. The area had a strong sense of community. After desegregation when blacks were allowed to participate in commerce throughout the City, the economic structure within Dunbar faltered. Another significant factor in the economic decline of Dunbar has been the exodus of young blacks away from Fort Myers.

Through the years, the historic resources of blacks located within the Dunbar community have been lost, mainly due to neglect and code enforcement, without conscious knowledge by its residents. Research finds there has been limited documentation or recording of historic sites within the Dunbar community in past years.

The Florida Master Site File (FMSF), a statewide inventory and clearinghouse of historic sites reflects this condition. To date, there are only 8 sites located within the Dunbar community identified in the FMSF. Only two of the sites selected for inclusion in this brochure were identified in the FMSF. Compounding the inadequacy of documentation and recording of historic sites in the Dunbar community, is the fact that over 90% of the City's demolition permits currently are, and historically have been, for the removal of structures located there.

By publicizing this loss and highlighting the valued assets remaining, it is hoped that public support for preservation of black community assets will increase. It is hoped an enhanced cultural and historical awareness will occur so that past trends do not continue. Preservation of these remaining historic and cultural resources in the black community will allow future generations to gain a sense of heritage and pride by having a documented and physical evidence of their past.

This preservation effort is designed to enhance and complement the work efforts of the Lee County Black History Society, Inc., by providing the foundation for an educational and cultural awareness program to be located at the Black History Museum and archives.

### DUNBAR'S HISTORIC CHURCHES:

In the early 1900's, most of the original black churches and congregations were located in areas which became exclusively white communities with the establishment of segregation laws. Trinity United Methodist Church is the oldest established black congregation in Fort Myers and dates back to May 30, 1889. Their first sanctuary was located at the corner of Anderson Avenue and Lee Street. In 1908 the church was relocated to the corner of Lime Street and Cranford Avenue. The current sanctuary, located at 2979 Lincoln Boulevard, was constructed in 1963, and for purposes of this brochure, is not considered a historic structure, and therefore a photo was not included.



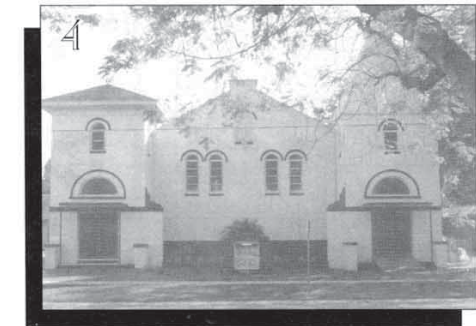
ST. JOHN FIRST MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH  
2044 BROWN STREET

St. John First Missionary Baptist Church was organized as a congregation in 1898. The two-story red brick church located on Brown Street between Price and Douglas Streets, originally served as the Chapel at Buckingham Air Field during World War II. After Buckingham Air Field closed, the building was acquired by the St. John Congregation. The building was moved to its present location in 1951.



FRIENDSHIP BAPTIST CHURCH  
2030 PALM AVENUE

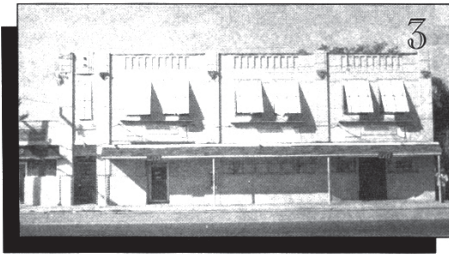
Friendship Baptist Church was organized as a congregation in 1912. In 1930 the church congregation purchased a plot of land located at the corner of Palm Avenue and Kerney Street. On the second Sunday in November 1950, after many years of struggle and sacrifice, the first church service was conducted in the new building.



MT. OLIVE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
2754 ORANGE STREET

Mt. Olive African Methodist Episcopal Church is one of the oldest churches in the Dunbar community with the formation of the congregation dating back as early as 1895. For a number of years church services were held at several different locations, including the Lee County Courthouse, which was where the congregation was originally organized. The church was built at its current location at Orange Street and Palm Avenue ca.1929.





**McCOLLUM HALL  
2717 DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. BOULEVARD**

McCollum Hall was built ca. 1938 by black businessman and entrepreneur Clifford McCollum Sr. and his wife Gertrude as a commercial and recreational building for the Dunbar community. McCollum Hall, located at the northeast corner of Cranford Avenue and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, was considered at one time to be located in the heart of the Dunbar community. Dunbar's community social celebrations were a large part of the significance of McCollum Hall.

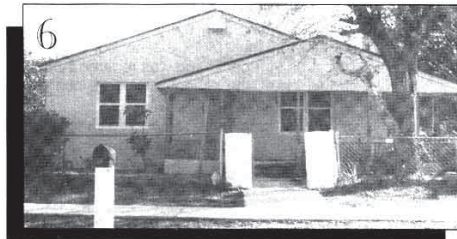
McCollum Hall also served as the USO for black servicemen stationed at Page and Buckingham Air Fields. The second floor housed the renowned "dance hall" and for almost two decades was a popular entertainment location for many famous musicians and entertainers. Many nationally famous blacks including Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, and B.B. King performed at McCollum Hall which was part of the "Chitlin' Circuit", a name commonly used to refer to the places across the country where black entertainers performed during segregation.

The dance hall continued in operation until the late 1970's catering more to the teenagers of the community. In the mid-1980's, the second-floor hall was changed to a rooming house. McCollum Hall was determined to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places in a report prepared May 19, 1994 by Archaeological Consultants, Inc.



**THE BEAUTY BOX - 2775 ORANGE STREET**

This site is the location of one of the first beauty salons in the Dunbar community. It is also one of the oldest black business establishments still in existence. The structure built ca. 1926, was originally a residential structure, and through the years has been changed to a commercial use. The building is currently occupied by a beauty salon called the Beauty Box.



**ETTA POWELL'S HOUSE - 2764 LIME STREET**

The small wood frame house at 2764 Lime Street was the family home of Charlie and Etta Powell. In the 1950's, the family rented rooms to black professional baseball players in town for spring training. During the 1950's there were no hotels in the area which provided lodging to blacks. The Powell home was one of several private residences in the Dunbar community that provided lodging for many black baseball players.



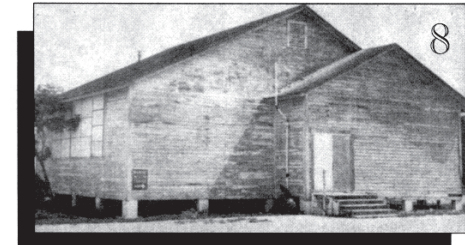
**DUNBAR COMMUNITY SCHOOL - 1857 HIGH STREET**

Dunbar High School was built in 1927 at a cost \$99,000.00 and was partly financed by black citizens in Lee County. The school is located at the corner of High and Blount Streets in the heart of the black community. It was named for the renowned black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. The building's layout was copied from architectural plans prepared for a white school built across town called Edison Park Elementary. It saved the school board money because another set of architectural plans did not have to be commissioned.

Prior to the opening of Dunbar High School, public education for black children in Lee County was limited to the eighth grade. With the opening of Dunbar, black students could now receive four years of high school education. Black students throughout Lee County including Sanibel and Charleston Park were bussed to Dunbar. Because there were no black high schools in Charlotte and Collier Counties black students in these counties were also bussed to Dunbar until 1962.

The school became the hub of activity in the black community. In 1962 a new Dunbar High School was built on Edison Avenue. The original Dunbar High School became Dunbar Junior High from 1962 to 1964. In the fall of 1964 seventh and eighth grades joined the other high school students at the new Dunbar High School located on Edison Avenue.

The school building at High and Blount has been utilized for various educational functions over the years. At the beginning of desegregation in the 1970's the school became a center for seventh grade students and was renamed Dunbar Community School. Later, the school became a center for adult and community education.



**THE 1942 ADDITION TO THE WILLIAMS ACADEMY  
1936 HENDERSON AVENUE - CLEMENTE PARK**

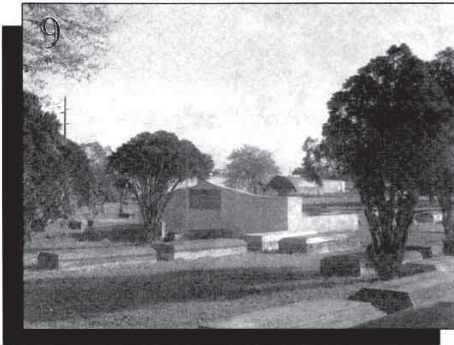
The building known as the 1942 Addition to the Williams Academy is currently located at the county-owned Clemente Park on Henderson Avenue. It is the remnant of a 1942 addition to the original 1913 Williams Academy structure. Williams Academy was the first government-funded school for black students in Fort Myers. The original two-story building was located at the corner of Anderson and Cranford Avenues. Classes went from first to eighth grades. The building was moved to the Dunbar High School site on Blount Street between 1935 and 1937. When Dunbar High School was opened in 1927, the Williams Academy was renamed Williams Primary and used for first and second grade classes.

The architecture of the building reflects the vernacular construction of the era. It remains generally in its original plan. The building represents the value that Lee County placed on black education in 1942 and provides a visual comparison with facilities provided to the white students. It serves to remind the community of past inequities in education, which should not be allowed to recur.

The Williams Primary School portion was dismantled in 1958 and the 1942 addition was relocated easterly on the Dunbar campus site. The 1942 addition remained as a stand-alone building, serving variously as a band/chorus building, day care center, and migrant health clinic. It was covered with aluminum siding in the mid 1980's. From then until its relocation to Clemente Park in 1995, the building was used exclusively for storage by the Lee County School District.

In November 1994, the Lee County School Board slated the building for demolition to make room for a parking lot. The Lee County Black History Society, Inc. (LCBHS) acquired the building from the school district on the condition that LCBHS move the building from its location on the Dunbar Community School property. The LCBHS moved the building to its present location. Clemente Park has served various functions in the Dunbar community through the years. The park in addition to serving as a recreational facility was also a senior retirement facility for black citizens when such facilities were still segregated. The park also housed a counseling center and the first library for the Dunbar community.

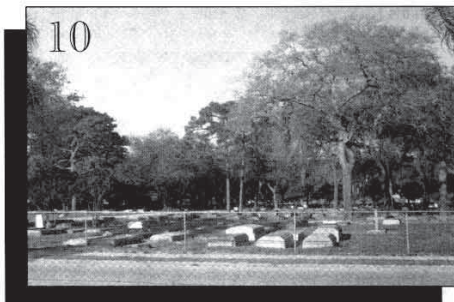




**WOODLAWN AND OAKRIDGE SECTIONS OF THE CITY OF FORT MYERS CEMETERY - HENDERSON AVENUE**

For many years, there were two distinct sections of Fort Myers' Cemetery used exclusively for black burials. The Woodlawn Section is located on the east side of Henderson Avenue, just north of "C" Street. City records indicate Woodlawn was established in 1915. Oakridge is directly across the street from Woodlawn on the west side of Henderson Avenue and was established in 1943. Both cemetery sections are approximately 5 acres in size.

The black cemetery sections lack any distinct entry feature or marker and are located at a significant distance from the once exclusive white cemetery to the north. The black cemetery sections were situated in the middle of the block with a dirt path for access. The cemetery's random location, lack of identification and limited access was typical of black cemeteries in segregated communities.

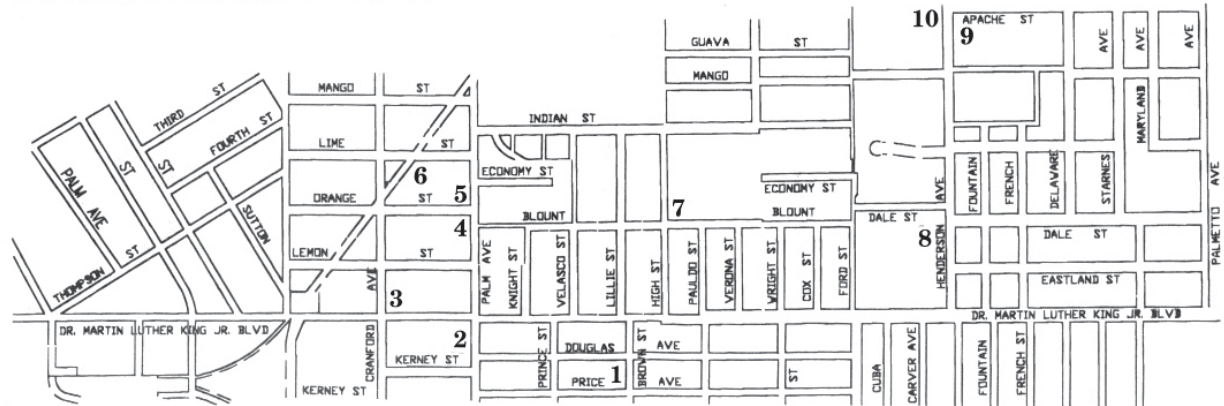


Many prominent black residents and community leaders are buried in the Woodlawn and Oakridge Sections of Fort Myers Cemetery. The family plot of Dr. Ella Piper, a local philanthropist and podiatrist is located the Woodlawn Section and is noted in photograph # 9.



- 1) St. John First Missionary Baptist Church - 2044 Brown Street
- 2) Friendship Baptist Church - 2080 Palm Avenue
- 3) McCollum Hall - 2717 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.
- 4) Mt. Olive African Methodist Episcopal Church - 2754 Orange Street
- 5) The Beauty Box - 2776 Orange Street
- 6) Etta Powell's House - 2784 Lime Street
- 7) Dunbar Community School - 1887 High Street
- 8) 1942 Addition to Williams Academy (Clements Park) - 1986 Henderson Avenue
- 9) Woodlawn Section of the City of Fort Myers Cemetery - Henderson Avenue
- 10) Oakridge Section of the City of Fort Myers Cemetery - Henderson Avenue

## Historic Sites of the Dunbar Community



This brochure was a joint project between the City of Fort Myers' Planning Department and the Lee County Black History Society, Inc. Special thanks to Janice Cass, Chairperson, Board of Directors, LCBHS

This project has been financed in part with historic preservation grant assistance provided by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, administered through the Bureau of Historic Preservation, Division of Historical Resources, Florida Department of State, assisted by the Historic Preservation Advisory Council. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Department of the Interior or the Department of State, nor does the mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Department of the Interior or the Florida Department of State. This program receives Federal financial assistance for identification and protection of historic properties. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended, the U.S. Department of Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability, or age in its federally assisted programs.