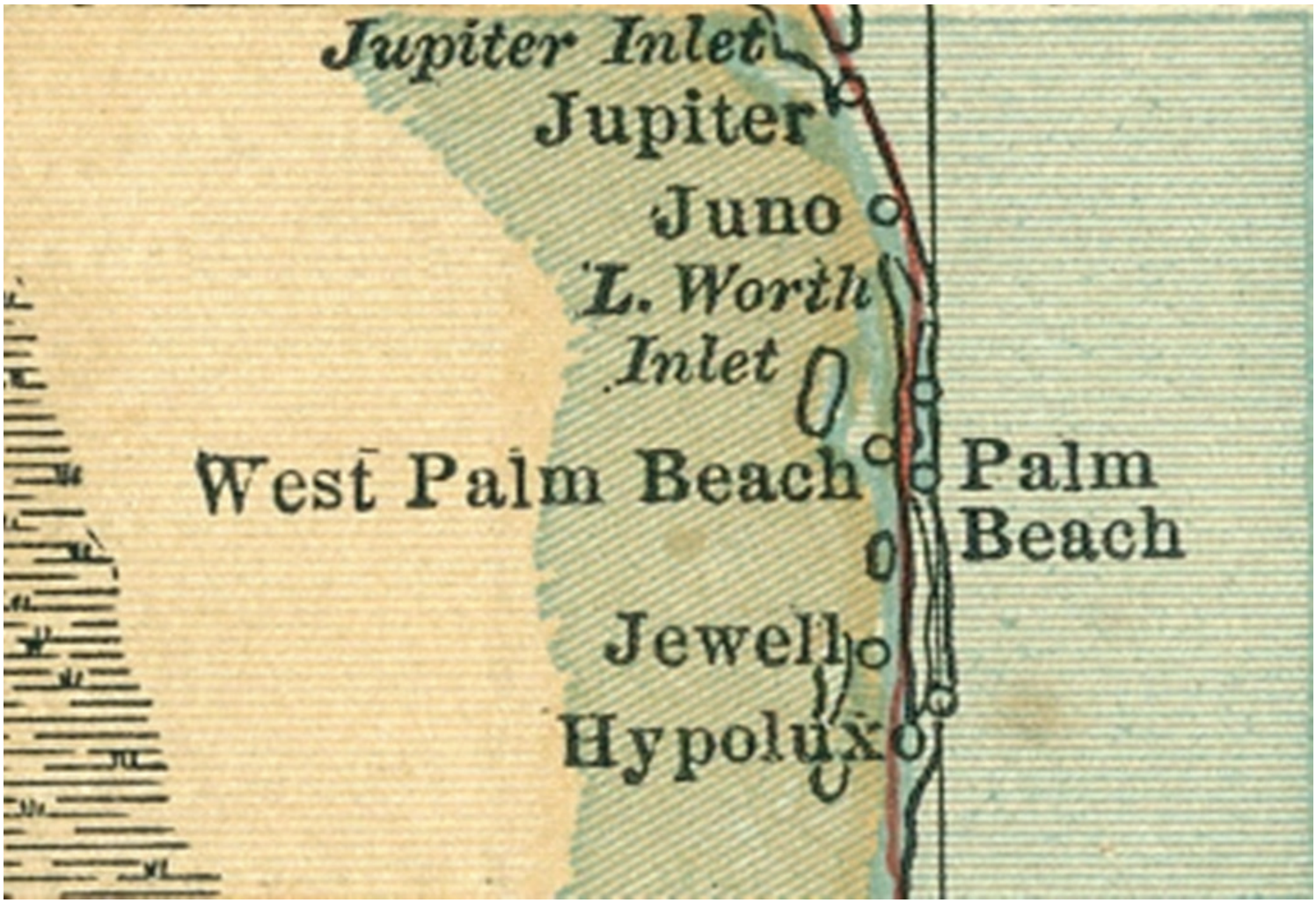
Social Status and Race in the Pioneer Lake Worth Community - A Case Study of Fannie and Samuel James

By Ted Brownstein

Fannie and Samuel James were prominent members of the early pioneer community, landowners, and first citizens of the future City of Lake Worth. They arrived in 1885 and were the first to settle in the area when the population was extremely scattered. Their nearest neighbors were Edwin Bradley and family, two miles south at the future site of Lantana, and bachelor Ben Lanehart, six miles north at the future site of West Palm Beach. The Jameses are widely recognized as African Americans and probable ex-slaves. Professor Dr. Gilbert L. Voss of the University of Miami summarized the Jameses' reputation in *Pioneers in Southeast Florida*:

> *Samuel James and his wife were Negroes and settled north of Hypoluxo…. Highly respected by the other settlers, they played a strong role in the development of the area*.



A close-up of a 1902 map showing the location of Jewell. Courtesy Ted Brownstein.

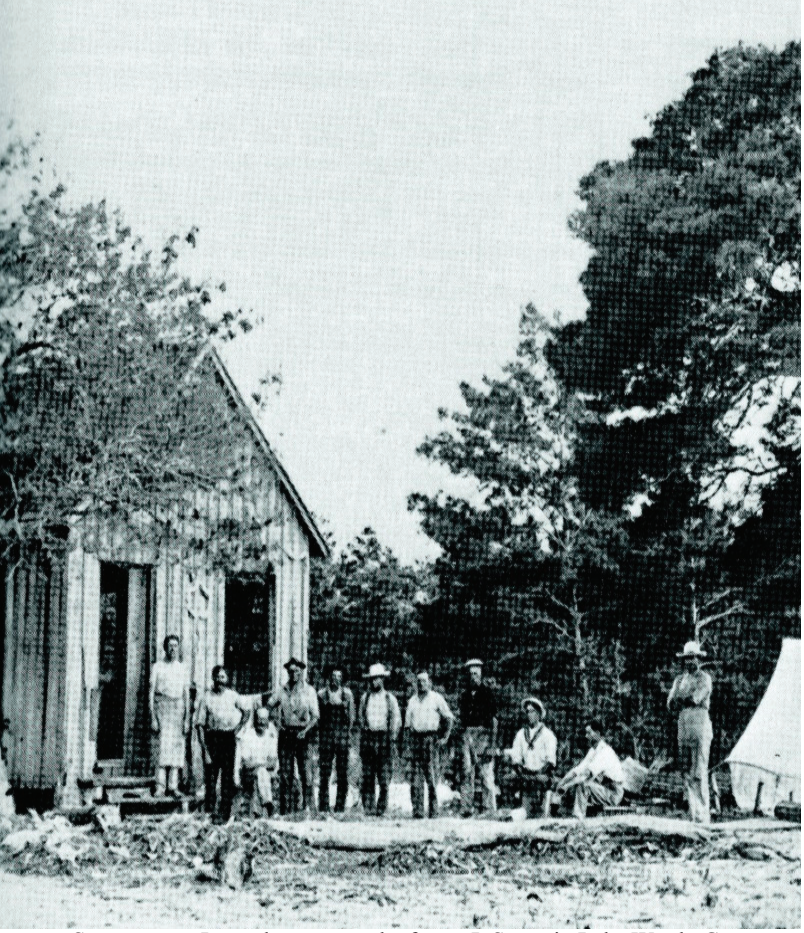
Recent research presented in *Pioneers of Jewell* further develops the theme of racial equality on the Everglades frontier, documenting the Jameses' social standing, friendships and acceptance as equals by their white neighbors. However, the suggestion that the Jameses could have been both "colored" and prominent has been greeted, by some knowledgeable readers, with hesitant reactions ranging from puzzlement to skepticism. In view of the prevailing prejudices in Florida and throughout the United States in the era after the Civil War, such responses are understandable. Racial bigotry was undeniably the norm. White supremacist attitudes were embodied in social custom and given legal expression in such foundational documents as the 1885 Florida Constitution and the 1913 Charter of the Town of Lake Worth. Consequently, some have wondered whether the Jameses were perhaps so light skinned that they passed as white. Alternately, some have doubted that the Jameses could have been as prominent or well-accepted by the white community as has been proposed.

A review of the evidence as to both the Jameses' status in the early pioneer community and their racial identity leads to a more fundamental question: Could the treatment of blacks in South Florida really have been dramatically different from prevailing patterns of discrimination in North and Central Florida?

The Jameses' Status and Social Standing

The historical record leaves little doubt about the Jameses' pivotal role in the early pioneer community on the southwest shore of Lake Worth. US Post Office records name Fannie as founder and postmaster of the Jewell PO in 1889, the site that would later become the City of Lake Worth. At one time or another, the Jameses owned over 700 acres of land, half of which was acquired under the Federal Homestead Act and the remainder purchased from other homesteaders. In turn, they sold property to wealthy Palm Beachers and others including Dorlinda Brelsford, Owen Porter, Edwin Dewey, and Annie Hogg.

In addition to their financial success, the Jameses were known throughout the lake region for their sociability and hospitality. Their farm amply supplied their table where guests were welcome. Pioneer Ed Hosford told of "spending the night with the Jameses who were very nice to me," in a 1954 *Palm*



Surveyors at James house near the future L Street in Lake Worth. Courtesy Lake Worth Historical Museum and Ted Brownstein.

Beach Post article. Newspaperman Guy Metcalf returned from Jewell with similar praise for the Jameses' hospitality as reported in an 1892 article in *The Tropical Sun*.

> *Our Cocoa ex-editor is down on Lake Worth and writes glowing things home about that famed region. Sunday last, the 17th was the anniversary of his birthday, which he celebrated in the most becoming style near the foot of the Lake at Jewell. In making the tour of the Lake he, with his friends, stopped about mid-way at the residence of Samuel James and were induced to stay till dinner, which he declares was the most generous and agreeable spread he had enjoyed for years. The gratifying feature of the meal was that it was almost entirely home-made. The milk, butter, eggs, chickens, fruits, jellies, etc., were all from the home garden and home resources.*

As further evidence of the Jameses' role in the larger community, one need only consider their array of relationships. Samuel formed a partnership to raise vegetables with Josiah Sherman, a major landowner from the north end of the Lake. Surprisingly for an illiterate person, he was named executor of William Stephan's estate, and was a voting member of the Dade County Fleming Club, supporting the election of Frances Fleming for Governor of Florida in 1888. Samuel's friendships included real estate tycoon Owen S. Porter, the lake region's first Justice of the Peace John C. Hoagland, and Edwin R. Bradley (who was, among other things, popular newspaper columnist and superintendent of schools).

Fannie, likewise, was held in high esteem. Not only was she postmistress but later in life she took over Samuel's real estate business, became one of the region's largest pineapple producers, hired white employees, accumulated a fair fortune and loaned funds at interest to such major institutions as the Palm Beach Fair Association. Her death was the subject of intense public interest with several full-length articles appearing in both *The Daily Tropical Sun* and the *Lake Worth Herald*. Typical of the accolades heaped on the Jameses is the following excerpt from Fannie's obituary in *The Daily Tropical Sun*, March 8, 1915.

> *Mrs. James and her husband were pioneer settlers on the east coast of Florida. They at one time owned the greater portion of the land upon which is now located the city of Lake Worth. Mr. and Mrs. James came to this section from the Indian River region, about 25 years ago. They took a homestead on the present site of Lake Worth and were instrumental in building up this section of the county. Mrs. James was well beloved by all who knew her and enjoyed a wide acquaintanceship among residents of the county.*

The lack of any reference to race in Fannie's obituary and likewise in dozens of similar mentions of the Jameses in local papers has raised the question as to whether the Jameses were perhaps so light skinned that their neighbors thought of them as white. Further confusing the issue is the fact that Samuel's death certificate specifies his race as "white."

The most widely known contemporary source referring to the Jameses' color is from an often quoted passage in neighbor Charles Pierce's *Pioneer Life in Southeast Florida*.

> *Another [post office] established at the James place was called Jewel. Mr. and Mrs. James were of rather dark complexion, so the boys nicknamed that office "Black Diamonds."*

Although not entirely explicit, it is hard to imagine that the phrases "dark complexion" and "Black Diamonds" were not intended as racial references. Notably both Samuel and Fannie are said to have been dark.

Complementary bits of information are found in the recently published memoir of Charles' sister, Lillie Pierce Voss in *The Tustenegee*. She described "Mr. and Mrs. Fanny James" as

"light colored ex-slaves" and Mrs. James as "part Indian." It was not uncommon for slaves to claim both African and Native American blood.

Over the last fifteen to twenty years, official records of the Census Bureau, the National Archive, the U.S. Postal Service, and other government institutions have been digitized, allowing greater access to historical documentary evidence that was previously difficult or impossible to locate. Supplementing and clarifying the memoirs provided by the Pierces are documentary records that corroborate their accounts.

The 1880 Federal Census

The earliest historical document identifying the Jameses' race is the 1880 Federal Census. They were then living in Leon County (Tallahassee). Both Samuel and Fannie were listed as mulatto, confirming Lillie Voss's description of them as light skinned.

Notably, the census data shows the Jameses living as part of the African-American community. They shared a household in Tallahassee with a young family comprised of Joseph Robinson, his wife Asana, and his brother John. All three are designated as black. The contrast between the Robinsons being listed as black and the Jameses as mulatto is an indication that the Jameses were lighter skinned, but nevertheless distinctly people of color.

William Stanton, a black politician, lived next door. He was elected to the Florida Legislature (1873) and served as postmaster of Tallahassee from 1873 to 1886. The Stantons were what today would be called a middle class family, with their 19-year-old son "at college." Quite likely Fannie and Samuel were influenced by the Stantons, particularly Fannie's decision to open the Jewell Post Office nine years later.

The 1885 Florida Census

By 1885, the Jameses had moved to Cocoa, Florida. Once again the census shows both Samuel and Fannie as mulatto. And once again, they were living next door to a prominent black leader. Butler Reed was minister of the Zion Orthodox Primitive Baptist Church and spokesperson for the African-American caucus of the local Republican Party. Interestingly, Reverend Reed's church was originally formed in Tallahassee and moved to Cocoa around the same time as the Jameses. Although there is no direct evidence that the Jameses attended Reed's church, either in Tallahassee or Cocoa, the coincidence of their joint relocation coupled with Samuel's testimony that he helped build a church for the colored people in Cocoa, suggests that the Reeds and the Jameses were close associates.

Fannie's Family

One of the clearest pieces of evidence regarding Fannie's African-American background comes from identification of her family. Records of the Palm Beach County Probate Court contain a 195-page file on Fannie's will and the administration of her estate. The will names her nephews, Alonzo Anderson and W. T. B. Jones as executors. Her sister, Nancy Webster, and three of her nieces were beneficiaries. Using these names as starting points, census data leads to other relatives. A list of fifteen members of Fannie's family can be compiled, all originating in Oxford, Granville County, North Carolina, an area reported to have had 10,000 slaves working tobacco plantations as well as a sizeable community of free blacks. The 1850 census shows Fannie's mother, Lucy Mangum (Mangurn) as white with three mulatto children at home. Other listed members of Fannie's family were free blacks, mostly categorized as mulatto. Names of slaves were not recorded.

Fannie's Death Certificate

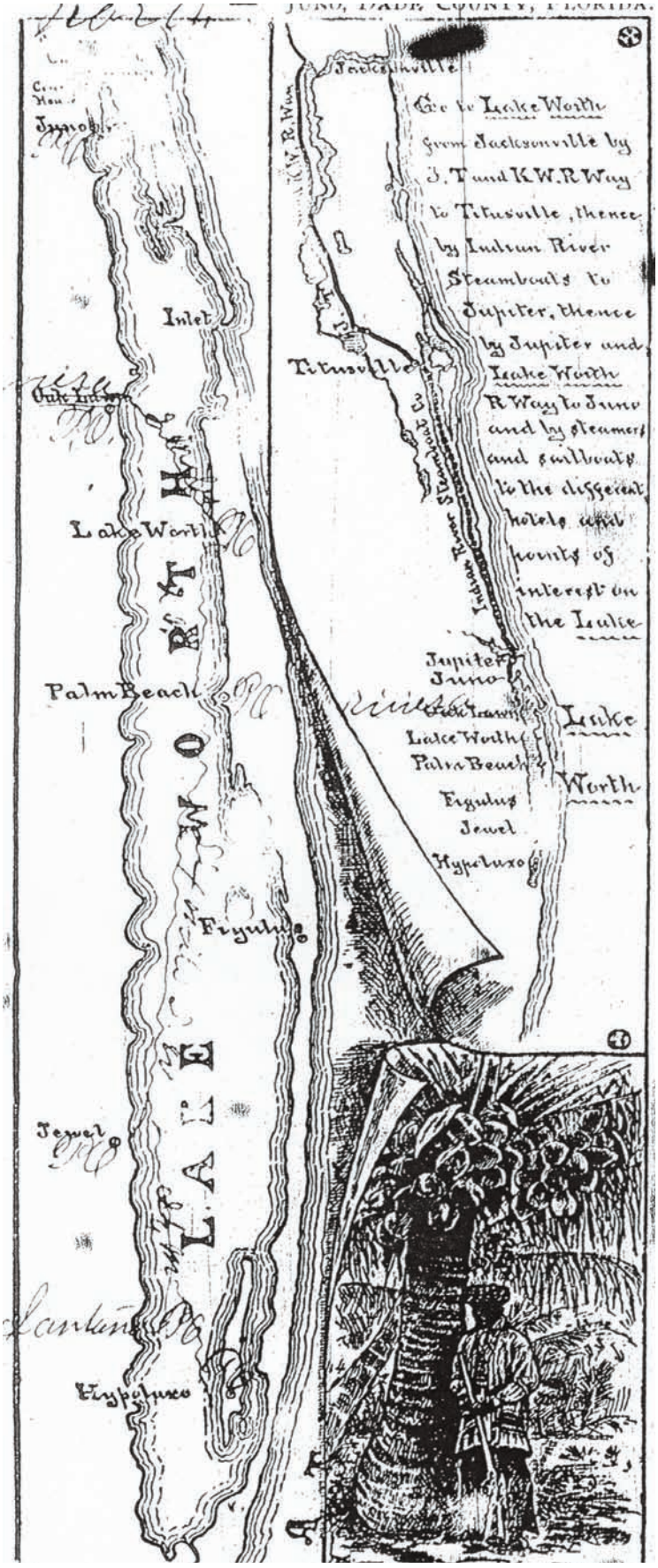
Fannie died on March 6, 1915, of wounds suffered in an automobile accident. Her death certificate indicates that she was of "mixed" race. Such a description makes perfect sense if Fannie had European, African, and Native American blood in her veins.

Race Relations in South Florida During the Homestead Era

Throughout their lives in Florida, the Jameses did not shy away from identifying themselves with the African-American community. Everywhere they went they associated themselves with people of color and remained close to out-of-state relatives. At least one nephew is known to have visited Aunt Fannie in South Florida.

The pattern of having black neighbors that existed in Tallahassee and Cocoa continued after the Jameses moved to

A monument dedicated to Samuel and Fannie James. It is located outside the Lake Worth Post Office on the northeast corner of Lucerne Avenue and North J Street. Courtesy Richard A. Marconi.



A map of the Lake Worth area with Post offices. From the back of the Oak Lawn Hotel Letterhead. Courtesy Historical Society of Palm Beach County.

the Lake Worth area. Even during their early years on the Lake, when the population was scattered and the number of blacks few, the Jameses managed to find and cultivate black friends. Amanda Malvina Moore is an interesting example. She was a young black woman from Pike County, Alabama. There is no indication of how Amanda and Fannie met, but apparently the two were friends. The Jameses subdivided their homestead property and sold parcels ranging from five to 20 acres to various farmers and investors. But the land they sold to Amanda was unique, a 50' by 300' residential lot adjacent to and directly south of the Jameses' home on the lake front.

The Jameses were extraordinarily friendly people who maintained relationships with blacks as well as whites. Contrary to segregation practices that were taking root in other parts of Florida, their race and self-identification as members of the black community does not seem to have hindered their standing in the larger white community.

Confirmation of the community's liberal views on race can be seen in the editorial policy of the local newspaper. Guy Metcalf was editor of *The Tropical Sun* and a personal friend of the Jameses. Metcalf also on occasion spoke at the "Colored Baptist Church" in Cocoa, seemingly Reverend Reed's church. When reporting on a dispute between segregationists and integrationists in the G.A.R., an organization of Union Civil War veterans, the *Sun* clearly leaned in favor of the integrationists. At no time was the *Sun* reticent in advocating racial equality. Such a position would have been economically detrimental to the paper if it had been contrary to prevailing views of its readership.

Race appears to have been much less of a contentious issue in South Florida than it was in other parts of the state. Pioneer life on the Everglades frontier was so hard in the early days that the few scattered inhabitants were eager to welcome any new settler who was willing to work. Unlike the northern part of the state, which had been steeped in prejudicial attitudes by the institution of slavery and the bloodshed of the Civil War, most South Florida settlers came from the north, sympathized with the Union cause during the War, and carried racial attitudes more in line with the spirit of the Emancipation Proclamation and equal rights promoted by the Thirteenth through Fifteenth amendments to the U. S. Constitution. Several settlers are known to have been Union veterans including Edwin Bradley. This divergence of backgrounds helps explain why the racial climate on the lake was decidedly different from the white supremacist attitudes prevalent in the Panhandle and Central Florida.

Lemuel Livingston, an African American writer from Key West, reported that blacks living in coastal South Florida and in the Keys retained many of the benefits of Reconstruction into the 1880s and 1890s, including the right to vote.

> *There are no attempts at bulldozing and intimidation during campaigns and at elections here. No negroes*

are murdered here in cold blood, and there are no gross miscarriages of justice against them as is so frequently seen throughout the South, to her everlasting shame and disgrace.… A (race equality) vigilance committee here would meet with the warmest kind of reception and a klu klux clan would be unceremoniously run into the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic Ocean.

As the turn of the century approached, new immigrants arrived by the tens of thousands from both the North and South including a large pool of black labor. Racial attitudes in the Lake region quickly changed to mirror the segregationist trends prevalent in the rest of the country. Covenants mandating separate neighborhoods for blacks and whites became the norm, not only in the former Confederacy, but in northern cities as well.

By 1910, when Fannie James sold her homestead to the developer of the Town of Lake Worth, Palm Beach Farms Company, she was not allowed to live in the community she helped found but was forced to move outside the city limits. Lake Worth was white-only from its incorporation in 1913 until the annexation of the Osborne Colored Addition in 1926. A series of walls, the city dump, and railroad tracks created a ghetto for citizens of color. Blacks were restricted to living in the Quarters, as the neighborhood was popularly known, with its own segregated school, boarding house, and grocery. Memory of the Jameses and the earlier era of tolerance were gradually forgotten.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s saw an end to legal segregation. Schools were integrated. African Americans moved out of the Quarters and took up residence throughout the City. Over time, the City of Lake Worth became a haven of diversity with large Hispanic, Haitian, and Guatemalan populations. The City made efforts to welcome its diverse residents, old and new, and to distance itself from its segregationist past. The former ghetto wall was adorned with a Mural of Unity. A memorial to the struggle for equal rights was built in a new downtown Cultural Plaza, honoring Dr. Martin Luther King and other heroes of the Civil Rights Movement. In conjunction with this effort, memory of the Jameses, as people of color, was resurrected with the placement of a monument to them in front of the local post office. The inscription justifiably acknowledges that the Jameses were both prominent and African American. It reads:

The Black Diamonds
This monument stands as a memorial to
Fannie and Samuel James who settled on the
shores of Lake Worth in 1883 [sic].
Fannie, believed to be an ex-slave, was the
area's first postmaster.
Their land later became the heart of the city.
The Jameses should always be remembered
as the City of Lake Worth's first settlers.

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Ted Brownstein is a highly regarded researcher and popular writer with a broad background in diverse fields. He holds a master's degree from the University of Wisconsin in Biblical Studies and had a successful career as an economic analyst. Ted has dug deeply into subjects as varied as interfaith religious studies, the life insurance industry, the stock market, ancient Near Eastern history, Mayan archaeology, and Florida history. His previously published works include The Interfaith Prayer Book*, a compilation of prayers from six world faiths (2001) and* Sunshine Republic*, a futuristic novel set in Lake Worth, Florida (2010).*

Brownstein is active in his community, serving on the Lake Worth Martin Luther King Committee and the Lake Worth Centennial Committee, is co-founder of the Lake Worth Interfaith Network, organizer of the Earth Day Peace Jam and past president of the Kiwanis Club. Born in New York City in 1951, Brownstein has been married since 1970, and has two married daughters and three grandchildren. He has been a resident of Lake Worth, Florida, since 1987.