

Harmon Field at West Side School: A forgotten legacy

Written by William G. Crawford, Jr.,



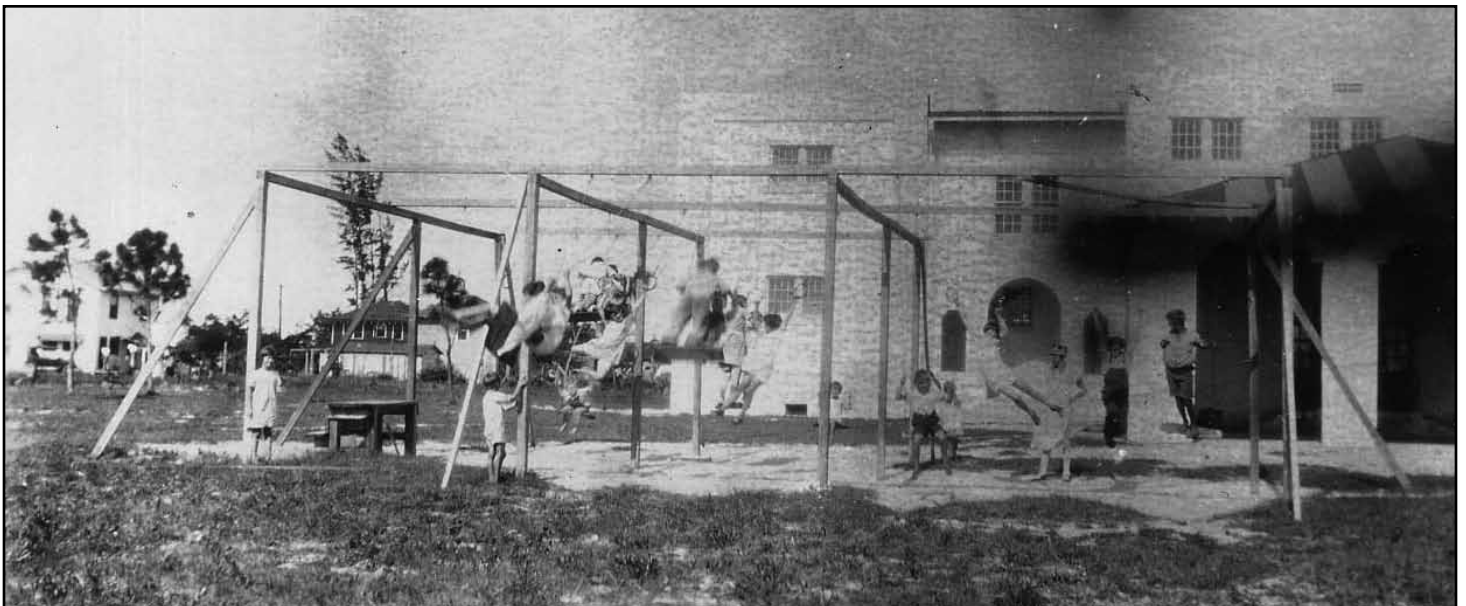
*Harmon Monument (Broward
County historical Commission
collection)*

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At the entrance to the newly refurbished West Side School, where West Las Olas Boulevard ends at Southwest 13th Avenue, stands Fort Lauderdale's first monument, remembering a place called Harmon Field. Embedded in what was once a concrete drinking fountain, a well-worn brass plaque recalls a faint memory of a decades old legacy: "Harmon Field/This Playfield Was Made Ours Through The Assistance Of The Harmon Foundation/1924/ Dedicated Forever To The Plays Of Children, The Development Of Youth And The Recreation Of All/'The Gift Of Land Is The Gift Eternal'."

On June 24, 1925, William and Kathleen Harmon of New York City donated a two-acre parcel of land called Harmon Field to the City of Fort Lauderdale for a children's playground behind West Side School. Born in 1862 in Lebanon, Ohio, William Elmer Harmon amassed a large fortune in the real estate business before retiring to a life devoted to charitable works. In 1921, he formed the Harmon Foundation and began helping small communities throughout America build children's playgrounds. In 1924, Harmon's foundation announced that it would grant 50 towns each \$2,000 to secure a playground. Seven hundred and twenty-five cities from every state in the Union except Nevada submitted grant applications. The Foundation awarded 54 grants. The City of Fort Lauderdale was one of the lucky few, and the only award recipient in the State of Florida.¹

As early as spring 1924, Russell G. Snow, mayor of Fort Lauderdale, began lobbying the foundation for one of the coveted playground grants. In November, the foundation reported to Snow that it had whittled down the proposals to 86 "Grade A" applicants. On December 29, 1924, Snow wrote Ivy Stranahan to help organize a committee



Playground, 1927. (Image courtesy of Helen Herriott Landers)

to welcome a representative of the Harmon Foundation who was expected to arrive “in the near future.” Along with Stranahan, Snow invited Annie Beck, Mrs. R. D. Bailey, R. E. Dye, and James S. Rickard, Broward County schools’ superintendent. On February 5, 1925, the Harmon Foundation telegraphed Snow to advise that Fort Lauderdale had indeed won the fierce competition for a Harmon grant. On April 20, 1925, the Broward School District sold a two-acre plot for the playground to William Harmon.²

On June 4, 1925, the City of Fort Lauderdale deposited \$300 in the locally-held Harmon Foundation Park Fund. On June 24, William Harmon sold the same two acres to the City of Fort Lauderdale to be used only for park purposes. In July, the foundation wrote Snow again: “We have made a note to send you on the first of August the bronze plate for use in marking Harmon Field.” Later moved to a new location on the West Side School site, today the bronze memorial is prominently displayed in front of West Side School, the new home of the Broward County Historical Commission. County records document the project as the first city-county operation of a playground in Broward County and Fort Lauderdale’s first monument.³

A few years after the park’s completion, the Foundation awarded the city a prize of \$150 for improving and maintaining the grounds, the only

city in Florida to receive the honor. The City Commission even named Southwest 13th Avenue “Harmon Avenue” in honor of his generous gift to the community.⁴

In 1926, the Harmon Foundation began a decade-long practice of annually recognizing outstanding African Americans in the fields of literature, music, fine arts, business, science, and education by awarding cash prizes and medals. The Foundation’s work helped encourage the flowering of black culture throughout America during the 1920s and ‘30s, a period known today as the Harlem Renaissance. Among the first of the prize recipients were thirty-three-year-old Palmer C. Hayden, a house cleaner, winner of the gold medal for painting; noted lawyer, author, poet and composer James Weldon Johnson for his interpretative work on the Negro spiritual; writer and poet Countee Cullen, for his collection of poems, “Colors”; and Charles Clinton Spaulding, who steered North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, the nation’s first black-owned life insurance company, into national prominence. In 1933, for his painting, “Woman Holding a Jug,” exhibited in the Harmon Foundation Exhibition of Negro Artists, James Amos Porter, age 28, was awarded the Arthur Schomburg Portrait Prize. Today, Porter’s daughter, Coni Porter Uzelac, president of the Dorothy Porter Wesley Research Center, lives in Broward County.⁵

When William Harmon died on Sunday, July 15, 1928, it was revealed that Harmon had been the longtime anonymous New York City benefactor “Jedidiah Tingle.” “Tingle” made hundreds of gifts to writers, poets, and needy children as well as to the Children’s Aid Society, one of the oldest charities for children in the New York area. Three days after his death, it was learned that “Tingle” had made a gift of \$500 to be distributed as prizes in the form of savings accounts to children “of good character” attending one of the camps held each summer by the Society. By 1933, the Harmon Foundation had helped cities and towns throughout America acquire 118 playgrounds, made 5,000 loans to college students, and given national recognition to scores of African American artists, writers, and educators.⁶

In 1944, the Harmon Foundation organized an exhibition of portraits of prominent black Americans like Marion Anderson, George Washington Carver, and Jane Bolin, the nation’s first appointed black female judge. Comprised of portraits painted by both black and white painters, the exhibit premiered at the Smithsonian Institution and later toured the country. In 1967, the Foundation donated forty-one of the fifty portraits to the National Portrait Gallery, which displayed them in an exhibition thirty years later. By the mid-1960s, the Harmon Foundation had become

prominent in the exhibition and sale of native African art throughout the United States. In 1966, the Foundation published the work of dozens of these native African artists in various media and later donated over 2,500 slides and photographs documenting the works of these artists to the National Archives.⁷

Over the years, the venerable West Side School morphed into a Broward County Schools administration building, later abandoned. Today, the School is the new home of the Broward County Historical Commission and a community center. It's also a neighbor of the Village at Sailboat Bend townhouse community, which stretches south to the banks of the New River, adjacent to Waverly Place, one of the county's oldest neighborhoods. The school's 'next-door' neighbor, however, is a fitting tribute to the Harmon legacy. It's the home of the Sailboat Bend Artists Lofts, a partnership between Broward County and ArtsSpace, a Minneapolis nonprofit organized to help provide low cost housing to artists—just the sort of thing William and Kathleen Harmon might have supported more than 80 years ago when the Harmon Foundation partnered with the City of Fort Lauderdale and Broward County Schools to provide a playground for children.

- 1 "To Increase Playgrounds," *New York Times*, October 23, 1921; "Plans Loans To Send Boys to College," *New York Times*, November 18, 1921. The Playground, May 1922, p. 19. "725 Playfields Wanted," *New York Times*, July 2, 1924. "Harmoun [sic] Foundation Selects Lauderdale for Playground Gift," *Fort Lauderdale Evening Sentinel*, February 7, 1925.
- 2 There is an undated signed agreement between Harmon and the City of Fort Lauderdale in the Julia Snow Jones collection of papers at the Broward County Historical Commission (hereinafter, "Snow collection"). Edith Fremdling (Harmon Foundation) to Russell Snow dated May 9, 1924, Snow collection. Mary Beattie Bradley (Harmon Foundation) to Snow, November 28, 1924, Snow collection; Snow to Mrs. Frank Stranahan, December 29, 1924, Stranahan papers, Fort Lauderdale Historical Society (hereinafter referred to as the "Stranahan papers"). Harmon Foundation (telegram)

- to Snow, February 5, 1925, Snow collection. Warranty deed executed by Special Tax School District Number Three in favor of William E. Harmon dated April 20, 1925 and recorded in Deed Book 80 at Page 488 of the Public Records of Broward County, Florida.
- 3 Snow to Mrs. Frank Stranahan, June 4, 1925, Stranahan papers. Warranty deed executed by William E. Harmon in favor of the City of Fort Lauderdale, Florida dated June 24, 1925 and recorded in Deed Book 158 at Page 20 of the Public Records of Broward County, Florida. "Monuments and Markers – City of Fort Lauderdale," *New River News*, October 31, 1966, p. 1.
- 4 "One Florida Playground Is Given Harmon [sic] Award," *Florida Times-Union* [undated, but believed by the author to be June 6?, 1928]
- 5 "Negro Artist Wins Prize for Painting," *New York Times*, December 8, 1925. For the award to Porter, see, "Art in Review," *New York Times*, February 21, 1933. For general background on the Harmon Foundation and African American artists during the Harlem Renaissance, see, Gary Reynolds and Beryl J. Wright, *Against the Odds: African-American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* (Newark: Newark Museum, 1989).
- 6 "W. E. Harmon's Death Reveals His Secret of Being Jedidiah Tingle, Philanthropist," *New York Times*, July 19, 1928. "Realty Developer, W. E. Harmon, Dies," *New York Times*, July 16, 1928; "Foundation Shares Harmon Fortune," *New York Times*, July 20, 1928. "W. E. Harmon Estate Put at \$4,159,147," *New York Times*, May 30, 1931. "Black Prizes," *Time*, March 6, 1933.
- 7 Evelyn S. Brown, *Africa's Contemporary Art and Artists* (New York: Harmon Foundation, 1966). See, also "Contemporary African Art from the Harmon Foundation," www.archives.gov/research/african-art/ for information on Harmon Foundation support of contemporary African artists.

