Know your Neighborhood:

Manatee County Neighborhood Histories

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In Summer 2020, Manatee County Public Library System's Information Services team created a web resource called Manatee County Neighborhood Histories (MCNH). This web portal focuses on local community history. MCNH gives community members, visitors, and residents the opportunity to learn more about the different neighborhoods in our county from the comfort of their computer or mobile device. It also provides a new means of showcasing the Manatee County Public Library Historical Digital Collections, which contain nearly 40,000 items including photographs, postcards, documents, interviews, speeches, maps, and miscellany.

Creating Our Web Portal

In May 2020, we began creating the MCNH web portal as part of a Results First Internship. Results First is a program in which college students work under the mentorship of Manatee County Government staff to create a project that benefits both the county and the student. Amber Aultman, a local resident and graduate student in Library and Information Science at the University of Maryland, created the web pages for MCNH using information and resources gathered by Information Services librarians from our historical collections.
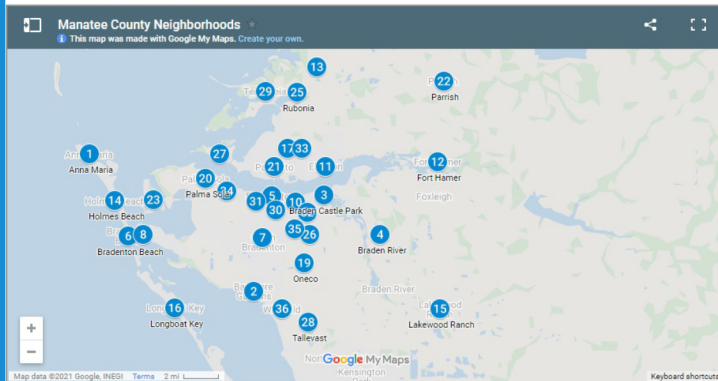
To determine which neighborhoods should be featured on the site, we collaborated with Manatee County's Neighborhood Connections, a division of the Neighborhood Services Department that works hands-on with neighborhoods, homeowner's associations, and community organizations. We selected neighborhoods based on criteria such as historical significance, distinctiveness, geographic and population size, and available resources at the library. After creating a list of about 30 neighborhoods that would be a good fit for the project, we began planning out the layout of the landing page and template for the neighborhood pages.

Some of the neighborhoods selected were Bayshore Gardens—a 1950s planned community comprised of mid-century modern ranch homes, Tallevast—an historically Black neighborhood originally established as a turpentine worker's camp in 1900, and Fort Hamer—an abandoned Seminole War fort which did not experience a residential resurgence until the 1990s.

The MCNH web portal is built on HTML pages hosted through ContentDM's Custom Pages feature. The HTML was written using Microsoft's free website building tool, Visual Studio Editor. The web portal's design was intended to connect it visually with our pre-existing website and Digital Collections. The logo for MCNH was created by graphic designer and librarian Audrey Dombroski. The map on the landing page is plotted with the geographical center of each neighborhood. This was created using the free MyMaps tool from Google. Each neighborhood has a title card linking to their individual page. All images used throughout the web portal are sourced from our own Digital Collections.
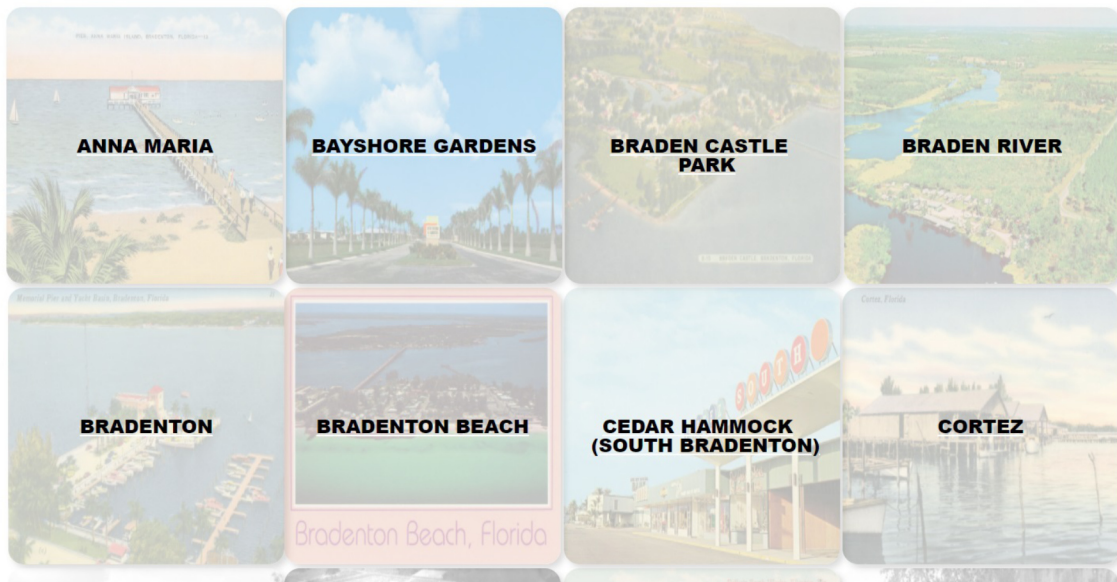
Manatee County Neighborhood Histories Logo/Landing Page

On each neighborhood page are links to related Manatee Libraries digital and physical collections. While pulling the data for the physical collections was as simple as creating a link to a keyword-search in our Polaris catalog, aggregating the Digital Collections was more complicated. To pull these resources via a keyword search link, we created neighborhood specific subject tags which then were manually added to any relevant images. Several Information Services librarians assisted with tagging images by searching the collection by street, landmark, geographic feature, alternative names, etc. Aggregating this information is such a large task that it continues to be an important role in maintaining the project. Our long-time digitization volunteer, Terry Hirsch, has continued to help tag records from home since we began working on MCNH.

In addition to providing historical resources from the library and a historical narrative about the neighborhood, we wanted to create a hub of resources for residents of the neighborhood. This information includes an education section listing the public schools serving the area, a list of nearby parks, preserves, beaches, and links to points of interest such as local museums and attractions as well as local landmarks and historical markers. Additionally, we include links to local media, community organizations, and other Manatee County resources. It was important to include information that would show both local history and a neighborhood's current characteristics.

Bayshore Gardens Neighborhood Page

Postcard Collections Results for Bayshore Gardens

Building and Growing

The MCNH web portal was first introduced to the public in August 2020 at a Manatee County Board of County Commissioners meeting. It was also featured in the Manatee County Neighborhood Connections Magazine and in Anna Maria Island's The Islander newspaper.

Since that time, Information Services has received many inquiries from community members eager to learn more about their neighborhood, its history, and any potential additions to the project. As of Fall 2021, we have 36 neighborhoods showcased on the web portal and are in the process of adding more. As the coordinator of this project, I continue to answer questions about the project, add and edit content, work with patrons seeking more information about their neighborhood, look for marketing opportunities, respond to requests for inclusion in the project, and develop partnerships with community resources that could be highlighted in the web portal.

This project is also helping to grow our library's collection and network. Local residents have sought information and the Historical Preservation Board has requested to collaborate and showcase their efforts via MCNH.

Importance During Covid-19

In normal times, Manatee Libraries offers the vast resources of our Elizabeth Eaton Florida History Reading Room & Collection as well as research assistance and programming to patrons interested in local history. As we faced uncertainty in our ability to provide in-person reference and research assistance due to Covid-19, creating online information hubs became pivotal in our service provision. Although we reopened in July 2020, being able to provide digital resources for patrons who did not feel comfortable visiting the library in person remained paramount.

MCNH played a key role in ensuring that library patrons knew about the historical resources available to them outside the walls of the library. We have a significant physical collection of local history books, papers, and print media, and our online Historical Digital Collections is equally notable. Creating the new Manatee County Neighborhood Histories web portal helped us point a new audience toward that collection and grow our audience of local history enthusiasts.