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Boardwalk's mystery monument gets its plaque

By [Mark Lane](#)

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More than 80 years after a city commission refused to honor the memory of a controversial mayor, his plaque goes up.

[Edward Armstrong](#) was Daytona Beach's larger-than-life mayor during the Great Depression. The governor of Florida tried to remove him and failed.

This newspaper blasted his methods on its editorial page. But he got the Boardwalk clock tower and Bandshell built and saw the city through hard times.

And on Wednesday morning he got a plaque near the Bandshell attesting to his work. A plaque that went up after more than 80 years of second thoughts and a surprising amount of spirited debate.

Something like this plaque was supposed to have gone up shortly after the mayor died in 1938. But the immediate aftermath of his death were troubled times in the city.

Many of his former allies on the City Commission were miffed because he left no designated successor. This had competing factions jockeying for power and demanding a piece of the sizable Armstrong Ring slush fund.

So it was a resentful commission that voted 4-3 in 1938 to reject a measure honoring him with a plaque. This left a large coquina rock seen resting atop a pedestal with a big blank space. Kind of a baffling sight. One I enjoyed pointing out to visitors and newcomers. The Boardwalk's mystery monument.

Now it's the mystery monument no longer. City workers placed a plaque honoring the mayor on the coquina pedestal. The plaque has Armstrong's picture and begins: "Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers built this monument in 1938 in recognition of five-term Daytona

Beach Mayor Edward H. Armstrong, an old-fashioned political boss who was one of the most colorful and controversial figures in the city's history.”

And controversial he was. And is. So much so that it was only by [a close 4-3 vote](#) that the present City Commission approved the impressive plaque donated by the area chapter of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors at a cost of \$3,266.

“Did you think you'd ever see this,” asked Randy Jaye as a small masked group of about a half-dozen people snapped photos and selfies at the city's newest monument.

Jaye, a local historian and president of the local clock collectors club, spearheaded the drive to put the plaque on the mystery monument for the past two years. A move supported by Daytona Beach Mayor Derrick Henry, who cited the mayor's alliance with the Black community during the dark days of Jim Crow.

Armstrong's alliances with the Black community may have been cynically motivated but proved mutually beneficial. At a time when most Southern communities ruthlessly suppressed Black voting, he was encouraging it. As it happened, Armstrong's chauffeur was the father of Yvonne Scarlett-Golden, Daytona Beach's first Black mayor.

Other Daytona Beach City Commission members adamantly opposed the plaque. “I do not think it is really good to honor somebody who was such a symbol of corruption,” complained Zone 1 City Commissioner Ruth Trager. “A corrupt and greedy man,” she charged.

And she alluded to the time on New Year's Day 1937 when city police directed by Armstrong and National Guard troops directed by the governor were armed and at city hall. A less than sterling milestone in our civic history.

The governor, a longtime political foe, was about to order Armstrong removed from office. Armstrong got wind of this, resigned and appointed his wife as mayor. Undeterred, the governor sent the National Guard in to remove all Armstrong allies. The Armstrongs had police with riot guns occupy city hall to hold off regime change while they went to the courts.

They successfully stood their ground until the governor's term of office ended. The new governor had no stomach for wading into the morass of Daytona Beach municipal politics and called the whole thing off. Armstrong resumed his position as mayor later that year and was re-elected by an astounding 5-1 margin.

Certainly, a rich period in the city's political history. Certainly, a messy political history.

Armstrong may have been corrupt and ruthless, but he had ambitions for Daytona Beach and the savvy to get them in motion. It's easy to wonder what things would have been like here if he hadn't died at the relatively young age of 57.

It's a legacy that deserves public mention even if it took more than 80 years to get around to it.