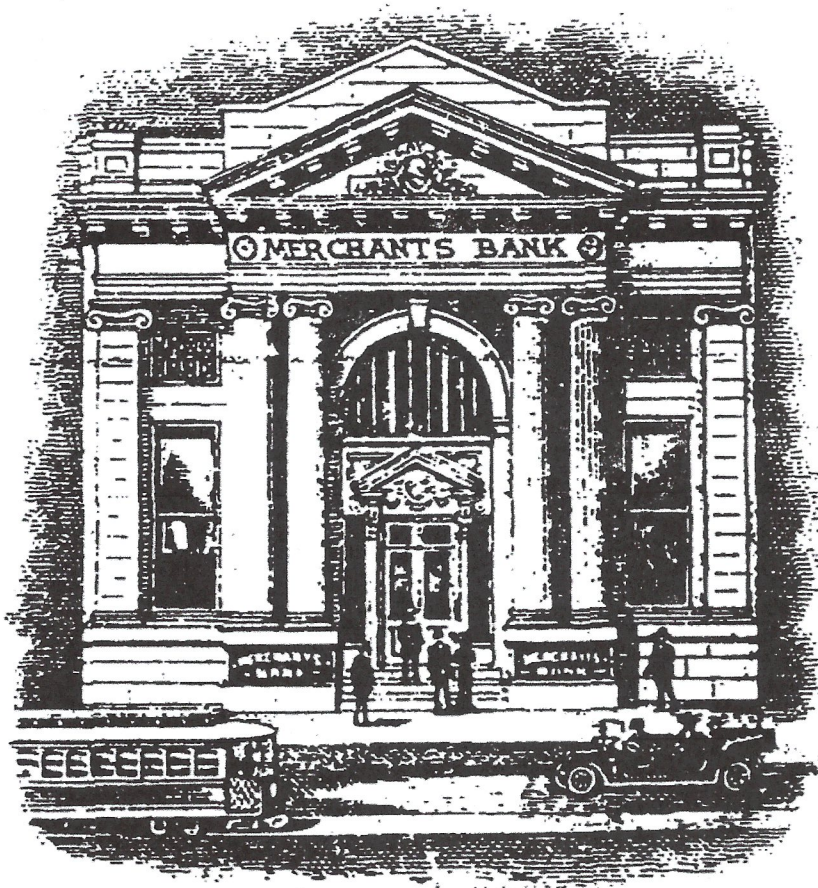


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MAYORS EDWARD AND IRENE ARMSTRONG AND THE BATTLE OF DAYTONA BEACH

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Although Daytona Beach has had many colorful politicians, none was more flamboyant than Edward H. Armstrong. A native of St. Louis, Edward was the son of Ben Armstrong, the founder and editor of the baseball weekly, *The Sporting News*. In 1900, twenty-year-old Edward moved to Daytona to become a salesman for the Ralston Purina Company flour mill of St. Louis. He then worked for a wholesale grocery based in Jacksonville and later opened his own grocery business in Daytona. By 1927, the Armstrong Grocery had several branches in east central Florida.¹ Armstrong then entered politics, and in 1927 he won the first mayoral race of the newly constructed Daytona Beach (on January 1, 1926, Daytona, Seabreeze, and Daytona Beach - the "triple cities" - joined to form the city of Daytona Beach). Armstrong established a formidable political machine, and in all but two years between 1927 and 1937, the mayor and his city commission allies controlled Daytona Beach's government. Only in 1929, after the onset of the Great Depression and the failure of the city's banks just three weeks before the election, did the mayor suffer defeat at the polls. But just two years later he rebounded, capitalizing on the blunders of Mayor Billy Baggett and the hardships endured by residents as the Depression deepened.

An important reason for Armstrong's political success was his support from African Americans, who comprised one-third of the city's population. Black Daytonans had traditionally played a minor role in city elections, but under Armstrong they became a major factor. The mayor worked closely with his "right hand man" in the black community, the enterprising Joe Harris. The owner of a barber shop and billiards parlor on Second Avenue (now Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune Boulevard), Harris was Armstrong's chief political operative in the African-American community. He parceled out jobs to black supporters of the mayor, and, in coordination with community leaders, organized scores of ward heelers who worked the black neighborhoods passing out literature, arranging fish fries, and providing transportation to the polls. Armstrong's opponents lambasted the mayor for his aggressive efforts to maximize the black vote. The *News-Journal*, a bitter foe of Armstrong, routinely denounced the mayor and his "henchman and henchwomen both white and colored" for herding blacks "by the carload" to voter registration and polling sites.²

African-Americans appreciated the personal attention they received from Armstrong, even though he upheld Daytona's rigid code of racial segregation. During the city's "military election" of 1933, when election officials stymied black efforts to vote, Armstrong convinced Florida Governor and Daytona Beach native Dave Sholtz to activate the National Guard to protect black voters. Years later a black Armstrong supporter reminisced: "To show you how regular he was, the night the militia was called out to keep us free from harm to vote, Armstrong had three white policemen burning fires and guarding my house." In other ways too, Armstrong ingratiated himself to black Daytonans. City Commissioner Yvonne Scarlett-Golden, whose father chauffeured the mayor, credits Armstrong with building the playground and swimming pool that she enjoyed as a child and recalls instances when the mayor paid the funeral expenses of indigent family members.³

The strength of Armstrong's political machine in the black community propelled him to victory in 1931 and 1933 mayoral contests. While capturing only a minority of the white vote in those elections, the mayor realized huge majorities among African-American voters. In his landslide victory of 1935, Armstrong received uncharacteristically strong support from whites as well, tallying over 53 percent of their vote in addition to over 91 percent of the African-American vote. Most Daytonans credited the mayor with

restoring prosperity and improving services, and indeed, Armstrong attracted substantial New Deal monies from the federal government that provided jobs for hundreds of city workers. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) funded construction of a boardwalk, bandshell, public docks, and an airport, while the Public Works Administration (PWA) contributed \$300,000 for a city waterworks. In addition, the Armstrong administration could take credit for improved recreational facilities and an expanded bus system.⁴

Despite his accomplishments and popularity, controversy continued to swirl around the mayor. His acts of partisanship, political arm twisting, and corruption were legendary. When the city sponsored a beautification contest in 1929 that awarded palm trees to city dwellers who significantly improved their properties, Armstrong allegedly ordered that palms only be delivered to winners who pledged to vote for him in the upcoming election. Retired News-journal reporter Robert Hunter recalled that "all city employees were required to make a contribution every payday to the Armstrong administration." A published story claimed that such "contributions" to the mayor's slush fund accounted for 10 percent of all city employee's wages, and that just before his death, Armstrong transferred \$20,000 from this fund to his account in a New York Bank.⁵

Armstrong's difficulties reached crisis proportions in late 1936: The city's \$200,000 budget deficit for 1935 triggered an investigation by a special state's attorney, since the city charter called for the removal by the governor of officials responsible for exceeding the budget. Believing that Governor Sholtz was about to remove them from office, Armstrong and commissioners R.W. Carswell and George T. Robinson resigned on December 10, 1936, but not before they hand-picked their successors. The wives of Armstrong and Robinson immediately replaced their husbands, while the city finance department's bookkeeper, Lyle C. Ramsey, filled Carswell's seat. Hoping that their resignations would thwart the governor's plan to oust them, Armstrong and his allies planned to safely return to office after the governor-elect, Fred Cone, took office on January 5.⁶

But the Armstrong machine had miscalculated. On December 30, Governor Sholtz ordered Mayor Irene Armstrong, three city commissioners, the city clerk, and the city manager removed from office, holding them responsible for the budget deficit and for exercising poor judgment in administering city affairs. The governor insisted that he removed Irene Armstrong because "she had continued the policies of her husband." He then ordered two hundred National Guardsmen to Daytona Beach to install Harry Wilcox as the new mayor, and Albartus C. Hankins, Henry Pollitz, and Harry Drake as the new commissioners.⁷

Although Wilcox, a former city commissioner, had supported Edward Armstrong in the past, on January 1, 1937, he demanded entry into city hall. Irene Armstrong, insisting that she was still mayor, refused to unlock the door. Meanwhile, on orders from her husband, approximately one hundred policemen and other heavily armed city employees entered the building to defend Mayor Armstrong. With four detachments of guardsmen closing in on the armed Armstrong partisans holed up in city hall, and with a crowd of more than two thousand milling around outside the building, conflict seemed imminent. Mayhem was averted, however, when Circuit Court Judge Herbert B. Frederick issued a temporary restraining order preventing Wilcox and the other newly appointed officers from entering city hall. On January 4, the Florida Supreme Court refused to remove the injunction, the guardsmen retreated, and the crowds went home. Soon afterward, the Florida Supreme Court ruled against Governor Sholtz's order to remove Daytona Beach's elected officials, claiming that law under which the governor acted contained a defective title. This ruling and the inauguration of Governor Cone paved the way to Edward Armstrong's reinstatement as mayor on March 4. The Armstrongs and their supporters had won what the *News-Journal* labeled "The Battle of Daytona Beach."⁸

Edward Armstrong emerged from the crisis stronger than ever politically, winning a fifth term in 1937 by an astounding five to one margin. However, the mayor could savor his victory only briefly. On the

morning of January 2, 1938, just one day before his scheduled inauguration for a fifth term, he died from a diseased liver. An estimated seven thousand Daytonans attended the mayor's funeral on January 5, 1938. In the hours preceding the funeral service, his body lay in state while hundreds of mourners, "white and colored alike", slowly filed by to pay their final respects.⁹

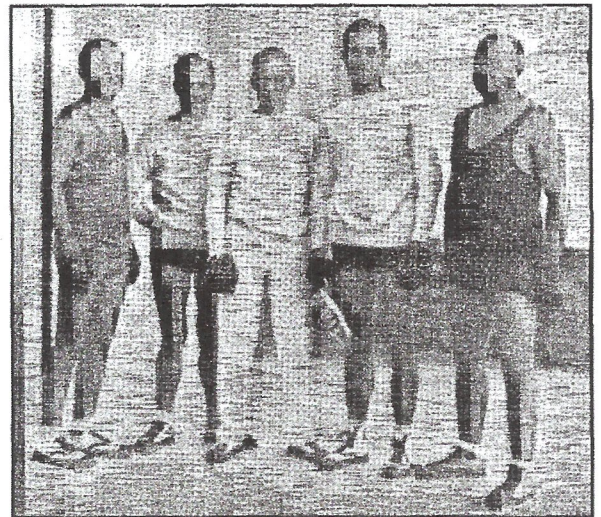
Mounted on a pedestal near the boardwalk's bandshell lies a large coquina rock, erected as a tribute to Mayor Armstrong. Although a space on the mounting was prepared for an inscription, strangely, none was made. Meant to symbolize the mayor's accomplishments, especially his successful efforts to bring much-needed jobs to the city during the Depression, the incomplete monument instead attests to the controversy that surrounded Armstrong long after his death. While many viewed the mayor as an adept, strong leader, others vilified him as a corrupt, heavy-handed tyrant. The citizens of Daytona Beach could never quite agree on what the coquina rock inscription should say.¹⁰



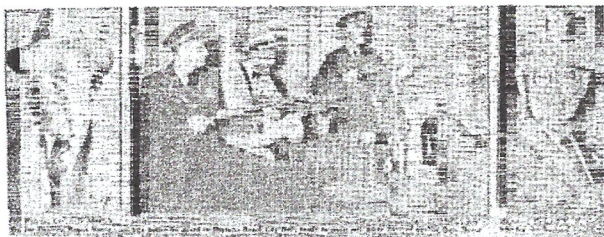
Irene Armstrong



Mayor Armstrong with Ed King opening golf course



Ed Armstrong's handball group



Fighting Woman Mayor Feels People Will Think She's Mean
 Few Worried About Outcome of Struggle to Stop
 In Daytona Beach City Hall Than Do in
 Brakes in the North Believe About Her

Newspaper clipping dated January 2, 1937

Endnotes:

1. *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, December 7, 1927; *Daytona Beach Sunday News-Journal*. "extra" addition, January 2, 1938.
2. George Engram interviewed by author, June 7, 1988 (tape recording in author's possession); Yvonne Scarlett-Golden interview by author, July 8, 1997 (tape recording in author's possession); Rogers P. Fair interview by author, June 1, 1988 (tape recording in author's possession); and Jimmy Huger interview by author, June 2, 1988 (tape recording in author's possession); *Daytona Beach News-Journal*. September 24 and 26, 1929, November 8, 1931.
3. Interview with former meat inspector of Daytona Beach, conducted by Wilhelmina Jackson in Ralph J. Bunche, *The Political Status of the Negro in the Age of FDR*, edited by Dewey W. Grantham (Chicago and London, 1973), 482; Yvonne Scarlett-Golden interview by author, July 8, 1997 (tape recording in author's possession); City Commission Minutes, November 22, 1928, June 19, 1929.
4. *Daytona Beach Sunday News-Journal*, "extra" edition, January 2, 1938.
5. *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, December 3, 1929; Albert Schellenberg to E.H. Armstrong, October 23, 1929 (copy of letter in author's possession); Robert Hunter interview by author, July 15, 1997 (tape recording in author's possession); "Who's Got the Ten Thousand Bucks?" *Daytona Beach Sun Record* (editorial), October 9, 1938 (copy in the Armstrong file, Halifax Historical Society Museum, Daytona Beach).
6. *Daytona Beach Evening News*, January 1, 1937; *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, "extra" edition, December 10, 1936; *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, December 11, 1936.
7. *Daytona Beach Evening News*, January 1, 1937; *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, January 2, 1937.
8. *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, January 2, 1937; *Daytona Beach Evening News*, January 4, 1937; *Daytona Beach Sunday News-Journal*, "extra" edition, January 2, 1938; City Commission Minutes, March 4, 1937.
9. *Daytona Beach Sunday News-Journal*, December 5, 1937; *Daytona Beach Evening News*, December 7, 1937; *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, January 4, 1938; *Daytona Beach Evening News*, January 5, 1938; *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, January 6, 1938.
10. *Daytona Beach News-Journal*. March 10, 1959 (copy of coquina rock photograph with caption in Armstrong file, Halifax Historical Society Museum).