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Henry Flagler, his town, and the fire

By Mc Clatchy News Service

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Few Floridians left as indelible a mark on the peninsula as Henry M. Flagler. The rail, oil and real estate baron towered over Palm Beach County and has also been called the father of Miami. In 1912, he completed the Overseas Railroad linking Key West to the mainland, its first train rolling into Key West on Jan. 22.

Although the railroad was torn to pieces by 1935's Storm of the Century and never rebuilt, the project arguably remains Flagler's most audacious achievement. Its centennial is being celebrated this year with lectures, museum exhibits and bike rides.

But in Palm Beach County, where his 55-room mansion (now a museum) and the Breakers are monuments to his vision, a controversy hovers over the tycoon 99 years after his death.

In the black community, many believe that Flagler was behind the burning of a dilapidated oceanfront neighborhood known as the Styx, a haphazard colony that housed many of the black workers who labored on his behalf. It would have been a primitive, illegal version of what later became known as Urban Renewal.

The scorched-earth legend has been passed on through generations like an heirloom, and gained currency not long ago in a sensationalized novel.

There's simply no way it is true, said Debi Murray, chief curator of the Palm Beach Historical Society.

"Would he have problems with his employees? Sure. He was a railroad baron and they were working in the worst conditions you could possibly imagine," Murray said. "But I think it's a huge stretch to believe he torched the Styx."

One in six Palm Beach County residents are black, and to many of those residents, the assertion that Flagler had a role in the destruction of the Styx in 1912 is not far-fetched.

"From what I've seen in the past, it has never been refuted," said Lia Gaines, the director of the city's NAACP chapter. "When we look at the story of blacks in America, it's been ugly for most of that history. But we were able to persist."

Here's what most everyone can agree on: In the early 1900s, the area now known as Palm Beach began to evolve from an untamed frontier town into a winter playground for rich snowbirds, thanks to the extension of Flagler's Florida East Coast Railroad down the Atlantic Seaboard.

A CHEAP OPTION

During the construction of Palm Beach's first two iconic hotels - the Royal Poinciana and the Breakers - the black labor force needed a place to live, so they created a tent settlement at what is now Sunset and Sunrise avenues off North County Road. They called it the Styx because of its (at the time) remote locale, said Jim Ponce, 94-year-old historian at The Breakers. There was no running water, so the raw sewage piled high. But it was a close and cheap option for poor blacks who worked in the resorts.

At its peak, some 2,000 blacks are said to have lived in the Styx, a slum owned not by Flagler but by brothers Edward R. and John R. Bradley. As the years went on, most of their tenants were either single men or heads of households who

stayed in the shantytown during the work week, but whose families lived in better neighborhoods to the west.

Eventually, the white powers-that-be decided the growing eyesore had to go. Newspaper clippings from the early 1900s show an effort by local business and political leaders to have the tent city closed on sanitary grounds. Eviction notices were issued, and by 1912, the entire population was asked to leave. But how exactly it was shut down remains a point of heated debate.

THE CARNIVAL

The legend: Flagler's henchmen burned out anyone who didn't budge. As the story goes, he brought a carnival to town, and provided free tickets to all of his black employees, emptying the compound. When the residents returned, their homes were in embers and they had no choice but to find another place to live.

A century later, that's the accepted account of events for many in Palm Beach County. And with his book *The Styx*, author Jonathon King gave cover to those believing the worst. King's novel, published by Middle River Press in 2009, accepts the premise that the Styx was burned to the ground, although he admits his thesis employed a healthy amount of creative license.

Thing is, fires were common in those days of potbelly stoves and open hearths. A shantytown like the Styx would have been especially vulnerable. At the time, there were numerous fires around the island - including at some of the fancy resorts - that had nothing to do with arson, Murray said.

"I never found a news report, or came across any actual documentation of the fire," King said. "It's a work of fiction. It is folklore, it is a myth. But I think it could have happened, just in stages."

Willie Miller, 36, a fifth-generation Palm Beach County resident, said his great-aunt, Inez Peppers Lovett, lived in the Styx, remembered no fire and said she left of her own accord.

Her characterization of the Styx's demise ran so counter to everything Miller heard outside of his family, he felt compelled to sift through old newspaper

clippings himself, in an effort to determine the truth. All the written accounts he found supported his aunt's benign version of events.

THE ARCHIVES

Just one of many holes Miller found in the theory: If 2,000 people were burned out of their homes, there would have been mass homelessness. But in the newspaper archives, there was no mention of such a phenomenon.

"There's a lot of evidence that refutes it, but none that supports it," Miller said. "It's character assassination of that man and needs to stop.

Murray isn't betting on that happening any time soon.

Both the historical society and Palm Beach-based publications have written extensively over the years in hopes of disposing of the story. But it persists.

"Urban legends are stronger than facts," Murray added. "And this is definitely a very strong urban legend."