

# Back to Angola Festival Rushes into Bradenton

Celebrating the historic connections of Red Bays, Bahamas to the Village of Manatee in Bradenton, Florida.

Karen Willey, Freelance Writer

The 2nd Annual Back to Angola Festival July 19-21 was celebrated with joy, laughter and good food as villagers from Red Bays, Bahamas returned to the land they fled 200 years ago. At that time, people who had struggled for freedom in Florida were threatened with renewed enslavement when Florida became a U.S. territory. Some freedom seekers escaped Manatee and found haven in the Bahamas. Excavations recently revealed traces of Angola, an early 19th century Maroon community on the Manatee River, which was destroyed during a violent raid in 1821. This discovery led to the site becoming the latest “stop” on the National Underground Railroad. Angola is an important chapter in Florida’s history of peoples of African heritage.

On July 20, 2019 about 200 people from Manatee and Sarasota converged on the grounds of the Curry Museums in Bradenton, Florida owned by Reflections of Manatee, Inc. to remember and reunite with the descendants of the community on their ancestral land. The descendants of Angola were invited here by Oak Tree Community Outreach, Inc. headed by Ms. Daphney Towns of Bradenton, formerly of the Bahamas.

The event began with a welcome from Mr. Henry Higgins, Pastor of Creative Christian Arts Ministries International in Nassau, Bahamas and Mr. Patrick Roff, Bradenton City Councilman.

**OAKTREE COMMUNITY  
OUTREACH, INC.**  
Presents



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July 19, 2019 - July 21, 2019

Location:  
Reflections of Manatee, Inc Visitor Center  
1305 4th Ave East  
Bradenton, Florida



The highlight of the welcoming was the Junkanoo rushing by the New Generation Junkanoo group out of Miami.

The festival was conceived and led by Daphney Towns, Oak Tree Community Outreach, Inc. Daphney's bright spirit and strong voice followed the program from welcome, to dance, to history and included the many expressions of voice, art, and culture of the Bahamians.

Photo: Daphney Towns, Oak Tree Community Outreach, Inc.ere with Trudy Williams, Reflections of Manatee

"No matter where the journey takes you, or the trails you face, keep your hearts on Angola." The theme song for the community, "Keep Your Heart on Angola" was written and performed <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGssWdBPue8> for last year's inaugural festival by Clifford "Big Bruh" Riley. Clifford skillfully kept the sound flowing this year as well.



Whistles, drums and flamboyant, fancy feathered costumes had the entire crowd in motion.

Pictured Vicki Oldham and Vincanna Godet dance to the New Generation Junkanoo rushing. Both hail from Sarasota, but Ms. Godet originally came from the Bahamas.





Festival team L-R: PeggyAnn Colebrook, Wilton Russell, Clifford Riley, Sharona Woodside Barr, Indiana Colebrook, Daphney Towns, Dr. Rosalyn Howard, Henry Higgins.

History was retold by a panel of scholars who most recently have researched the evidence of free Black communities in Florida, delightfully moderated by Vickie Oldham, Looking for Angola Project Founding Director.

#### Historians:

- Dr. Canter Brown Jr. - Historian. Professor. Author. Brown has written many books about Florida and southern U. S. history, including Florida's Peace River Frontier.
- Dr. Rosalyn Howard - Retired Professor of Anthropology, University of Central Florida. Researched the Descendants of Angola and found them in Red Bays, Andros, Bahamas! The 2009 book *Black Seminoles of the Bahamas* documents her groundbreaking work.
- Dr. Edward Gonzalez-Tennant, Lecturer of Anthropology, University of Central Florida. Author of *The Rosewood Massacre: An Archaeology and History of Intersectional Violence*.

#### Archaeologists:

- Dr. Uzi Baram - Professor of Anthropology, New College and Founding Director of New College Archaeology Lab. Head of archaeological team that documented the evidence that placed Angola here on the banks of the Manatee River.

- Sherry Svekis - Reflections of Manatee, Time Sifters Archaeological Society. Arranged donation of ground penetrating technology that enabled the archaeological investigations. Wrote the Underground Railroad Network to Freedom nomination.

#### Underground Railroad:

- Sheri Jackson - Underground Railroad, Southeast Regional Manager National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom

#### Interpretation and Outreach:

- Vickie Oldham - Looking for Angola Project Founding Director. Formed the team, wrote the grants, provided the inspiration, and authored a video on the search.



Panel of researchers L-R: Dr. Uzi Baram, Vickie Oldham, Dr. Canter Brown, Sheri Jackson NPS, Dr. Rosalyn Howard, Dr. Edward Gonzalez-Tennant, Sherry Svekis

Fresh water was life for anybody trying to survive on the Manatee River before the modern day. Manatee Mineral Springs is long known to have supported that life from the time of early Native Americans to Spanish explorers to British traders to early settlers. Now it is known to have been the temporary home of freedom seekers (escaped slaves) and the site of their settlement, known as Angola.

Another key to survival is a source of good food. The Manatee River and surrounding area provided that in plenty. The descendants who now live in Red Bays, Andros, Bahamas brought the bounty of their island to the festival and served it up for any who wished to partake. Chefs included Sharona Woodside Barr and Indiana Colebrook. Crowd favorites included conch in several forms: cracked, frittered, fried, and in a scrumptious lime-cured salad. Also served was fried gray snapper (mangrove snapper to Florida friends), several sides, and plenty of sweets including coconut cake, coconut tart and guava duff. Yum, yum, yum!



Bahamian arts were demonstrated and available for sale, including wood carvings in Mahogany by Wilton Russell, and the traditional basketry of the Red Bays. Pictured above basketmaker Peggy Ann Colebrook and researcher Dr. Rosalyn Howard.



Above L-R Henry Higgins, Clifford Riley, Wilton Russell  
Seamstress Gwendolyn Mortimer with a child modeling a shirt she created at the festival.

No festival is complete without kids activities and fun booths for visitors.

- Manatee County Public Library was sharing their new “Florida Stories” smart phone app: Bradenton, Old Manatee. <https://youtu.be/C6k7pZaDKVE>
- DeSoto National Memorial shared the rich history down the Manatee River and their Junior Ranger program, complete with badges for the kids.
- Bob Pitt, Master Boatbuilder, brought wood, and tools and let the kids drill to their hearts content.

- Around the Bend Nature Tours set up a simulated archaeological dig. Kids take home a journal of the artifacts that they found. Included in the dig were Kaolin pipe-stem replicas that dated this site. [https://www.nps.gov/archeology/afori/howfig\\_mar4.htm](https://www.nps.gov/archeology/afori/howfig_mar4.htm)



Around the Bend Nature Tours simulated dig and Bob Pitt replica tools are a hit with the kids!

The latest news regarding Angola is that the Manatee Mineral Springs Park is officially part of the National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom for its historical ties to escaped slaves. The Reflections of Manatee, Inc. visitor center located at 1305 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue East in Bradenton is the welcome center for the Underground Railroad exhibit.

Read more here: <https://www.bradenton.com/news/local/article228129794.html#storylink=cpy>

Some other Bahamian History in Old Manatee provided by Reflections of Manatee, Inc:

Captain John Curry of Key West purchased 30 acres of land in Old Manatee from Dr. Franklin Branch in the 1850's. In order to build homes for his extended family, Capt. John brought Bahamian carpenters and their vernacular building style from Key West. This building design would later become known as the "Conch" style. This style evolved from the work of Bahamian shipbuilders-turned-carpenters. Based on shipbuilding techniques, the homes use balloon frame construction, rather than heavy cross-braced timbers of more traditional homebuilders. The homes have front and back wrap-around porches and are raised off the ground on piers to allow air circulation underneath the house, the original "air conditioning". Two of these houses remain today 170 years later, are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and are maintained as museums by Reflections of Manatee, Inc.



The 1850's Curry homes build by Bahamian carpenters, restored by Reflections of Manatee, Inc.

The Back to Angola Festival 2019 put on by Oak Tree Community Outreach, Inc. lasted 3 days. The full day described above was embedded between Friday and Sunday welcome and closing ceremonies complete with blessings, song and dance. A Florida summer thunderstorm ended the day with a bang on Saturday, but not before the Junkanoo rushing – which was started ahead of schedule by the New Generation group to avoid a lightning strike! The finale was a blessing on Sunday afternoon July 21.

