

This Month in Clay History: Commerce at the Turn of the Century

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A Service of Tara S. Green, Clerk of Court and Comptroller

Have you ever wondered how people made a living here in Clay County a hundred years?

Today, Clay County boasts a wide variety of opportunities for engaging in commerce, as people make a living doing just about anything and everything. In fact, you could probably find a service for almost any need you may have, no matter how large or small. Such a diverse business market only comes with both the passing of time as well as the continuing development of a community. As one would likely suspect, business in Clay at the turn of the 20th Century looked very different to what it does now.

A primary source that can provide us with a unique glimpse into which professions were present in the region can be found at the Clay County Historical Archives - a license docket. License dockets were once used by the collector of revenue and the county judge to keep track of business licenses that were issued to citizens. In it, both the job title and the name of the person who is registering were recorded. At the Archives, we have two hundred pages worth of these records that cover the span of forty-six years between 1887 and 1933.

Beginning in 1887, roughly thirty years after the founding of our county, the available options for employment appear to have been rather limited. One could say that it was a much simpler time, as the docket shows citizens obtaining licenses for only a handful of different professions. By a wide margin, the most prevalent line of work was that of the merchant. As a sort of catch-all term, being a merchant meant that the individual dealt in the trade of any number of a variety of goods, specifically those that had been produced by others. Under this vague definition, a merchant could have done business at a local level, such as running a store, or on a more global scale by importing and exporting goods. Unfortunately, the license docket does not delve into much detail on this regard, but due to the sheer number of individuals who were licensed, a combination of all levels of operation is the most plausible assumption. It is interesting to note, however, that druggists and those who dealt in liquor and tobacco were licensed in their own respective categories.

The hospitality industry was another popular choice for those looking to start up a business. “Hotel Keeper” is a title that shows up quite frequently, with the licenses being issued under prominent Clay County names, such as members of the Fleming family, or under the name of the hotel itself, like the Magnolia and the St. Elmo. The county also had a handful of restaurant choices for the citizens to enjoy.

In general, early Clay County possessed just about everything that a community would need to both function and grow, just on a somewhat smaller scale. There was at least one dentist and one doctor practicing here in the late 1800s, and as the years went by and the population increased, the number of medical professionals did as well. Likely sensing the impending growth in the area, and, more importantly, the chance to make a profit, land and real estate agents were present even in some of the earliest recorded years. Lawyers and insurance agents were quick to follow suit, and there were even a few individuals who exclusively compiled and prepared deeds and mortgages.

Life certainly wasn’t all work, however. Multiple opportunities for entertainment were available to citizens, ranging from billiard saloons to slot machines. Traveling shows also frequented the county, with mobile exhibitions, circuses, and even dog and pony shows making frequent appearances in the records. One particularly notable visitor was the Rhoda Royal Show. This show traveled along the railroads. They made a stop in Clay County in 1901. According to an edition of the *Billboard* paper that was published the same year, the Rhoda Royal Railroad Show consisted of eight railcars, more than one hundred people, fifty-eight animals, and multiple tents. Royal himself was a prominent figure in the circus community. Having held integral positions in the shows of both Barnum & Bailey and the Ringling Brothers, he was widely considered to be one of the best horse trainers in the business.

Around 1902, a noticeable shift occurs in the records. Citizens seemed to be enjoying a bit more diversity when it came to available professions and services. The notes now include jewelers, photographers, and bowling alleys. The timber and naval stores industries also appear to flourish, as there is a somewhat dramatic up-tick in individuals obtaining licenses for sawmills and turpentine manufacturing. This would result in the production of some of Clay County’s more popular exports.

Through a careful reading of these records, one can trace the county's development into the industrious community that we all now know and love. To take a deeper dive into the license dockets or to access more historical records that offer a fascinating glimpse into our county's history, come explore the Clay County Historical Archives Center. Our hours are 8am to 5pm, Monday through Friday (closed holidays). You can find our office inside the Old Jail located at 21 Gratio Place in Green Cove Springs. Citizens are encouraged to reach us at 904-371-0027 to make inquiries or to schedule a visit.



The inside of Dr. Clerke's drugstore in Green Cove Springs, circa 1905.

Clay County

Issued by the Collector of Revenue, Duplicates of which have been filed with the County Judge, for the period beginning on the first day

| NUMBER OF LICENSES. | TO WHOM GRANTED. | FOR WHAT PURPOSE. |
|---------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 39 | A. C. Cummings | Restaurant |
| 40 | A. H. Vogelbach | Druggist |
| 41 | Mrs C. G. Harvan | Hotel |
| 42 | S. O. Stephens | Merchant |
| 43 | Dr William Griffith | Druggist |
| 44 | T. J. Dillaberry | Merchants |
| 45 | Lewis Wilson | Merchant |
| 46 | A. C. Coleman & W. F. Ingold | Hotel Keeper |
| 47 | Mo. F. Geiger | Merchant |
| 48 | C. A. Boden | Agent |
| 49 | J. H. Lunderq. | Merchant |
| 50 | Hotel St. Elmo | Hotel |
| 51 | G. M. Hall & Son | Travelling Exhibition |
| 52 | T. J. Edgerton Jr | Hotel |
| 53 | W. Q. Glisson | Merchant |
| 54 | Harris & Applegate | Hotel |
| 55 | Nauford & Low | Insurance Agents |
| 56 | F. A. Fleming | Hotel |
| 57 | J. C. Low | Land Agent |
| 58 | C. A. Holt | Hotel |
| 59 | J. L. Kirkpatrick | Billiard and Pool Table |
| 60 | J. F. Greer | Insurance Agent |
| 61 | Thomas & Jones | Merchant |
| 62 | Willie Dukes | Merchant |
| 63 | Mrs W. A. Lee | Merchant |
| 64 | Fisher & Wallis | Lawyers |
| 65 | C. Fabair Law | Lawyers |

A page from the license docket from 1891. Note the many familiar names from Clay County history (Dillaberry, Wilson, Geiger, Glisson, Applegate, Fleming).

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| NUMBER OF LICENSE. | TO WHOM GRANTED. | FOR WHAT PURPOSE. |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| 77 | J. Mc Saffin | Sewing Machine Agent |
| 78 | Agnes T Taylor | Insurance agent and company |
| 79 | W. W. Griffith | Preparing feeds & manures for Profit |
| 81 | J. F. Green | Insurance Agent |
| 80 | J. E. Low | " |
| 82 | Dr. H. R. Johnson | Physician |
| 83 | Miles Dorton | Dog & Pony Show |
| 84 | J. W. Applegate | Boarding House Keeper 12 Rooms |
| 85 | O. D. Sessory | Hotel Keeper 73 Rooms |
| 86 | Lewis Butler | Merchant |
| 87 | Ellis Ganger | Life Insurance agent |
| 88 | L. Kirkpatrick | Stet Machine |
| 89 | Barley & Leroy | Merchant |
| 90 | W. L. Sharpe | " |
| 91 | T. M. Edwards | Physician |
| 92 | C. Mc Nable | Dentist |
| 93 | John Sparks | Dog & Pony Show |
| 94 | Long & Redington | Distillers and Whisky Sp. Tur & Rasin |
| 95 | J. K. Stickland | Merchant |
| 96 | Walkell Turpentine Co | Distillers & mfgs. of Sp. Tur. & Rasin |
| 97 | Walkell Turpentine Co | Merchants |
| 98 | H. A. Fleming | Hotel Keeper |
| 99 | Frank E. Brewster | " |
| 100 | Brown & Watson | mfgs. of Sp. Tur. & Rasin |
| 101 | Hellman Sutherland Co | General Merchant |
| 102 | R. L. Lewis | " |
| 103 | Green Cove Springs Ice Delivery | Ice Dealer |
| 104 | W. Mc Wilson | Livery Stable |
| 105 | Lyonan Keel | Manufacturing Sp. Tur & Rasin |
| 106 | Edward & Johnson | Druggist |
| 107 | Bank of Green Cove Springs | Bankers |
| 108 | E. L. Powers Jr | Furniture Dealer |
| 109 | C. H. Williams | Druggist |

A page from the license docket from 1904



The St. Elmo Hotel, circa 1900; one of the registered hotel licenses found in Archives records.