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# POLK PROUD HISTORY

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**HISTORIC MACKAY HOUSE**  
**MACKAY GARDENS & LAKESIDE PRESERVE**

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### POLK PROUD HISTORY

is a quarterly publication produced by the Polk County Historical Association. Since 1974, the mission of the publication has been to create a legacy of Polk County's history and heritage through scholarly, informative articles written by local historians, educators and researchers.

To submit an article for publication consideration, please email a word document directly to editor at:  
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Feature article: 2000 words  
Special article: 500-750 words  
Short article: 300 words

Please include bibliography and resources.



### HERITAGE PARTNERS AND WEBSITE UPDATES

The Polk County Historical Association (PCHA) and the Polk County History Center have long been partners in a shared mission to preserve and promote our county's history and heritage. Local history/heritage organizations throughout Polk County are also working hard to preserve and promote history in their communities. Recognizing the value in creating a stronger connection with our local organizations, the PCHA Board recently established a new committee, the Polk County Heritage Partners, which is comprised of people who work with history/heritage organizations throughout the county. Led by co-chairs Jennifer Bush and Harriet Rust, the Heritage Partners will work together to pursue opportunities for cross promotion, share best practices, and generate ideas for special events that will benefit all.

Co-chair Harriet Rust said, "The PCHA represents our entire county, and that includes all the local museums and organizations that share a passion for history and heritage. Their local efforts support the mission of the PCHA, and that makes this a win-win partnership."

Those who have already joined represent Bartow, Davenport, Haines City, Lake Alfred, Lake Wales, Lakeland, Mulberry, Winter Haven, the Florida Citrus Hall of Fame and Publix. If you have a passion for history and want to preserve and promote your community's heritage, you are invited to join the Heritage Partners.

Did you know you have access to an incredible resource of information and photos all at your fingertips? If you haven't visited the Polk County Historical Association's website, here's what you'll find: Past issues of Polk Proud History newsletters, including a keyword search to help you find specific topics. Thousands of photographs on the Florida State Archives. Access to the Polk History Center's online collection of artifacts and photos. Everything you need to know about the PCHA, including a membership form.

And soon you'll find even more great resources as we unveil exciting new resources and information. Be sure to visit <https://www.polkcountyhistory.org> and bookmark the site in your favorites! *Jennifer Bush, Heritage Partners Committee Co-Chair*

### MEET THE AUTHOR



A lifelong resident of Polk County, Connie White is the Historian for Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve. She is curator for the Lake Alfred Historical Museum, and serves on the Board of Directors for the Lake Alfred Historical Society, Lake Alfred Friends of the Library, and Florida State Genealogical Society. She also serves on the Polk County Historical Commission.

Connie also has a very strong passion for genealogy which began over thirty years ago, and she is currently seeking her genealogy certification.

Connie grew up in Haines City, and currently resides in Lake Alfred with her husband, Chris.

Cover photograph: *The Mackay House circa 1918.*

# HISTORIC MACKAY HOUSE

by **Connie White**



*Alexander Mackay*

the main room. The home has been historically preserved and is just as charming today as it was when it was built.

## ALEXANDER MACKAY

Alexander Mackay was born January 8, 1856 in Perthshire, Scotland to George and Margaret Mackay. He was the founder and senior partner of Mackay Irons & Company, a large accounting firm in Dundee, Scotland. His business eventually expanded to include an office in New York City. Mackay made frequent trips to the United States and became a successful entrepreneur here as well. He was a partner and member of the Board of Directors for the Matador Land and Cattle Company in Texas, which owned nearly one million acres of land and one of the largest herds of Hereford cattle in the world. He also served on the Board of Directors of the Shell Oil Company, and owned several copper mines in Arizona.

Mackay married Edith Helen Burns of Nova Scotia, Canada on October 21, 1890 in Halifax. The couple had four children: Robert Ferrier Burns Mackay (b. 1892); Edith Margaret Mackay (b. 1895); Elizabeth Hobden Mackay (b. 1897); and Dorothy Helen Mackay (b. 1900). Mackay's family often traveled with him to the United States, but they always maintained a Scottish-style castle, known as the Glencruitten House, as their primary home in Oban, Scotland.

Mackay Gardens & Lakeside Preserve is nestled on the shore of Lake Rochelle in Lake Alfred, Florida. The historic preserve sits on 112 acres of Florida garden and natural habitat, and in the heart of it all is a 7000 square foot Craftsman style home built in 1917 for Scotsman Alexander Mackay. The beautiful home is an outstanding example of Craftsman style architecture with sleeping porches, large porch columns, open interior spaces, and a beautiful staircase in

John M. Critchlow, an oil producer from Titusville, Pennsylvania and a winter resident of Lake Alfred, was a business associate of Alexander Mackay. Critchlow built a beautiful new home in Lake Alfred in late 1913, and invested in about 400 acres of citrus groves in the growing little city, as oranges were fast becoming Florida's most valuable food crop. Following Critchlow's business advice, in August 1915, Mackay purchased 128 acres of land in Lake Alfred on Lake Rochelle, at a cost of \$21,000. The property, which he named La Rochelle, was already planted with young citrus trees and was being temporarily maintained by a local man, James C. Cox, Sr. Mackay continued to purchase more land in and around Lake Alfred, eventually totaling about 1,000 acres, almost all of which he planted with citrus trees.

A full time overseer was needed to care for the newly acquired property and grove. In 1916, Mackay hired John Morley, a botanist from York, England who had previously done extensive landscape work at Mackay's property in Scotland. Travel arrangements were made and Morley, along with his wife and daughter, arrived in Lake Alfred in March of that year. Eventually Morley's two sons, who were fighting in World War I, made their way to Lake Alfred as well. By the time Morley arrived, Mackay had decided to make Lake Alfred a winter home for his family, just as Critchlow had done, and tasked Morley with overseeing the construction of a home.

Mackay pictured a two-story bungalow style house large enough to accommodate his family, but with a separate wing large enough to house the Morley family year round. Mackay's idea began to take shape when he ordered a set of house plans from *The Craftsman* magazine.



*Edith and Alexander Mackay in Scotland*

## THE CRAFTSMAN

*The Craftsman*, based in New York City, was a monthly publication started by furniture maker Gustav Stickley in 1902. Stickley was a pioneer in the Arts and Crafts movement that was taking hold in the United States at the time. Stickley used his magazine to present various forms of art to his readers, and decided to include house plans in the Arts and Crafts style. He wanted to offer plans that supported a simple lifestyle, with open and multi-use interiors, no wasted space, indoor and outdoor living areas, all while using building materials indicative of the local geography. Although Stickley was not an architect himself, he hired architects to work for the magazine, and in January 1904 the first official Craftsman Home plan appeared in print. The goal was to feature at least one house plan in each monthly edition of the magazine, including a detailed description, floor plans, elevation drawings, and interior and exterior illustrations.

Anyone who paid the three dollar annual subscription to the magazine could request one free house plan per year. In addition to the free plans, the architectural department would also produce a house plan on request for a fee. With few exceptions, the house plans continued in each edition of the magazine until June 1915 when the magazine suffered financial difficulties, and then resumed in June 1916. By the time *The Craftsman* finally folded in December 1916, there had been a total of 221 home plans published in the magazine. The original house plans drawn by Stickley's architects are currently stored in the Stickley Museum at Craftsman Farms in Morris Plains, New Jersey, and at the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library at Columbia University in New York City.

When *The Craftsman* magazine ended, most of the staff, including an architect by the name of George Fowler, joined *The Touchstone* magazine, a new and similar publication started by the former editor of *The Craftsman*. *The Touchstone* featured two home plans in each edition, each one designed by Fowler.

## THE MACKAY HOUSE

The Mackay house at La Rochelle was based on Plan #185 from *The Craftsman*, which had appeared in the April 1914 edition of the magazine. Plan #185 was created by the publication at the request of a subscriber in California, as a revised version of Plan #76, which was first published in October 1909. The revisions doubled the size of the house and included four bedrooms and four bathrooms. Each of the main rooms had windows on two walls, creating a clear path for ventilation, perfect for a warm weather climate.

However, house Plan #185 still did not entirely meet the needs of both the Mackay and Morley families, so further

alterations were needed. Normally the magazine would have been able to accommodate that need, but *The Craftsman* was about one month away from shutting down. The staff was about to transition to *The Touchstone* magazine, including George Fowler, the architect of Plan #185. Mackay contacted Fowler in December 1916 and hired him to make the necessary revisions to Plan #185 at a cost of \$300. He sent Fowler to La Rochelle in early spring of 1917 to meet with Morley, get a perspective of the land, and to offer his opinion of specific changes needed to achieve the desired function of the house.

One of Mackay's requested changes was to relocate the roof garden from the east side of the house to the west side. This would free up the east side to accommodate the wing for the Morley family, including a separate staircase leading from the kitchen to an upstairs parlor in the wing. Fowler's production of the new plan was delayed, however, because a decision had to be made by Morley and Mackay regarding the material to be used for the exterior walls. Fowler offered three options; tapestry brick, ordinary brick, or wood. After much discussion and pricing, Fisklock tapestry brick was ultimately chosen. Fisklock bricks are fire-proof, damp-proof, and double the size of ordinary bricks. A brickmason using this product can complete the job faster, resulting in lower labor costs. The tapestry bricks were manufactured by the Fisklock Company of Birmingham, Alabama and sent to Lake Alfred on the railroad. Fowler's revised house plan was completed in May 1917, by which time he was under the employment of *The Touchstone* magazine. Accordingly, the final blueprints for the Mackay house bear the name "Touchstone."

The final plans included the exterior Fisklock Tapestry bricks, which were also used for the six fireplaces throughout the house. The interior walls were covered in plaster, and the floors were made of Oak. Red Gum wood was used throughout the house on the staircase, trim, mantles, ceiling beams, built-in bookcases, doors and all of the kitchen cabinetry. Traditional elements of a craftsman style house were included through the use of the built-in bookcases, ceiling beams, and wainscoting.



Grace Mackay on the staircase in the Mackay House

Morley chose the exact location of the house at La Rochelle, based on Mackay's request for the best possible view of Lake Rochelle. A Lake Alfred contractor, Hans Wast, was employed to oversee the construction of the house, and local carpenters were hired. Wast's wages were five dollars per day, with a \$500 bonus when the house was completed. Construction was originally not set to begin until after the end of World War I because of difficulties in transferring large amounts of money from Scotland to the United States. However, financial arrangements were made involving Mackay's US funds, and construction of the main section of the house began in May 1917, and took six months to complete. Mackay and the Morley family took up residence in the new house on Thanksgiving Day, and their first meal in the home was a Thanksgiving luncheon. Construction of the additional wing on the east side of the house began in January 1918, using the same types of material as the main section. The work was completed in a few short months, and the Morley family relocated to their own separate wing of the house.

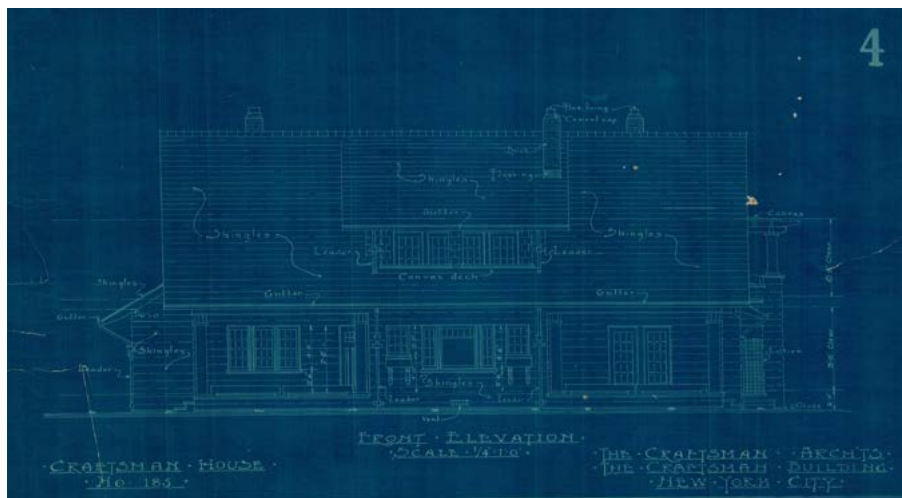
### LAKE ALFRED IMPACT

Alexander and Edith Mackay began spending their winters in Lake Alfred soon after the house was completed. Their son, R.F.B. Mackay, and his wife Grace often joined them with their young daughters, Elizabeth and Rosemary. The Mackay family quickly became very active in the local community. Mr. Mackay played a vital role in the establishment of Lake Alfred's first bank and the building of the city's citrus packing house. Mrs. Mackay and her daughter-in-law, Grace, were both active in the Presbyterian Church and the Lake Alfred Woman's Club.

Alexander Mackay died in 1936, and R.F.B. took over his father's business interests until his own death in 1940.



*The Mackay House as it looks in 2020*



*Plan #185 from The Craftsman, showing the front of the house*

R.F.B.'s wife Grace took over at that point until her death in 1972. The Mackay's citrus groves in Lake Alfred were then managed by R.F.B.'s daughter, Rosemary Mackay-James, until her death in 1994, when her children assumed management of the property. The Mackay descendants continued to winter in Lake Alfred until La Rochelle was sold in 2001.

### LA ROCHELLE BECOMES HISTORIC PRESERVE

The 2001 sale of the Mackay property led to a plan for a large housing development on the full 128 acres of property on Lake Rochelle. The plan also called for the demolition of the historic Mackay home, however, local resident Nancy Daley organized a citizen's initiative to stop the project. Thanks to the great efforts of Daley, current mayor of Lake Alfred, 112 of the 128 acres were saved and purchased by the City of Lake Alfred in 2004 with a Florida Forever Funds grant of \$2.6 million. Those 112 acres are now known as Mackay Gardens & Lakeside Preserve, and include the historic Mackay home. In 2006, the city received \$350,000 from a Florida Historical Preservation grant for restoration of the house, followed by a similar grant in 2016. Another grant from the Florida Recreation Development Assistance Program funded expansion of the preserve to include 3 miles of nature trails, a bike trail, a playground, and a picnic pavilion. Mackay Gardens & Lakeside Preserve is located at 945 Mackay Boulevard in Lake Alfred. The grounds are open daily from dawn until dusk, and admission is free.

### SOURCES

Collection M94-5, Mackay Family Papers 1916-1982, Mackay Estates Limited Collection; State Library and Archives of Florida, Tallahassee, Florida.

*Dundee Evening Telegraph* newspaper, 25 May 1936.

Ray Stubblebine, *Stickley's Craftsman Homes: Plans, Drawings, Photographs* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 2005).

# BLINKY, LAKELAND'S ALLIGATOR MASCOT

LuAnn Mims



One popular story of lore in Lakeland is the tale of an alligator who wanted to live in the city...Blinky, the one-eyed alligator of Lake Mirror.

Dating back to the 1930s, the Lakeland Ledger newspaper noted a one-eyed alligator dubbed "One-Eyed Joe" in and around Lake Mirror. By the 1970s, this gator, or possibly another one-eyed alligator – approximately 11- foot long, 400 pounds, would come to be known as Blinky. He became a legend in the downtown as he frequently walked Main Street and along the Lake Mirror Promenade. He became a tourist attraction with people clamoring to have their photograph taken with him. If he got too far out of his environment, police or citizens would herd him back towards the water.

Blinky served as the town's unofficial mascot due to his somewhat friendly demeanor. He allowed humans to pet his head, and rub his back, much like you would a puppy. Children and adults would flock to feed him anything from popcorn, to marshmallows, to table scraps even though it was against the law to feed alligators. Some people even dared to let Blinky give them a kiss. One such photograph appeared in the local newspaper and led to his downfall.

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission states on its website, "By feeding alligators, people create problems for others who want to use the water for recreation." In 1978, this commission put the City of Lakeland on notice to do something to separate Blinky from the public for their

own protection. Many of the City Commissioners were fans of this alligator and sought alternative ways to retain their favorite 'gator in his beloved lake. Chain-link fencing, and enlarging concrete embankments brought a hefty \$1-million-dollar price tag.

Though the town rallied for retaining this beloved king of the lake, the final solution was to habitat Blinky to an alligator friendly preserve at Homosassa Springs to live out his days in peace. In 1979, he was taken to the preserve where he had other ideas. As a long time lone gator and somewhat of a celebrity, he soon found a challenge at the reserve with a 1000-pound crocodile named Jake. Being a friendly gator, Binky would look for companionship with Jake daily which often aggravated the croc into a fight. He pushed his luck one time too often with this much larger reptile, leading to the final altercation and the demise of Lakeland's beloved Blinky. See you later, alligator!



Blinky's legend lives on with the public art piece call Mecha-gator located in one of Blinky's favorite sunning spots on the edge of Lake Mirror. This homage recalls this too-friendly reptilian city mascot who won the hearts of the people.



*Blinky's kiss, circa 1978, Lakeland Ledger*

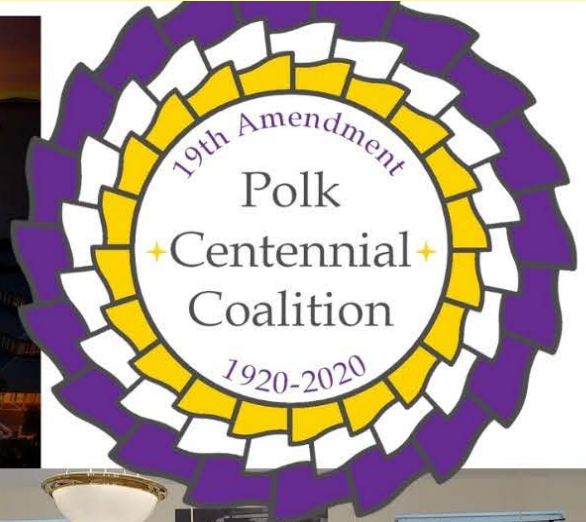


*Mascot Blinky at bat to welcome players, family and fans to Lakeland for the Dixie Youth World Series, 1960*

# POLK COUNTY'S LEADING LADIES

*A Year Long Series Recognizing Historic Female Contributors To Our County*

19th Amendment Celebrations Across the County in 2020





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## Voices and Votes: Democracy in America

A new traveling exhibit from the Smithsonian Institute  
now on display through December 11, 2020  
at the Polk County History Center

An exploration of historic events from the revolution and suffrage to civil rights and casting ballots. A kiosk features unique stories from Polk Countians.

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The Polk County Historical Association supports local history. Dues and contributions help fund historical research, educational programs for all ages, and publications. Members receive a subscription to the Polk Proud History Quarterly. Join or renew today. Send payment to PCHA, P.O. Box 2749, Bartow, FL 33831.

### ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP LEVELS:

Benefactor - \$500 or more  
Pioneer - \$100 or more  
Family - \$50  
Individual - \$30  
Youth/College - \$10

### MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL DUE NOW!

The membership year runs from June 1 through May 31. Direct membership questions to Lois Sherrouse-Murphy, PCHA Secretary, at (863) 534-4386 or by e-mail to:

[LoisSherrouse-Murphy@Polk-County.net](mailto:LoisSherrouse-Murphy@Polk-County.net)

PCHA is a 501 ( c ) ( 3 ) organization. Please consider a charitable bequest in your estate planning.