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## Mark Woods: A drive down what remains of the Old Brick Road



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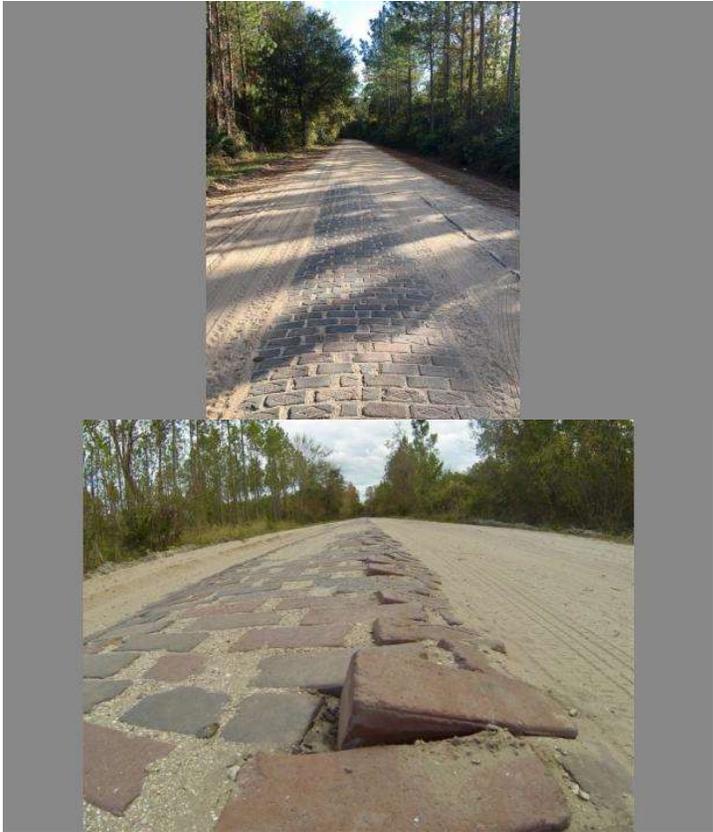
Mark Woods



### The old brick road

A section of the Old Brick Road in St. Johns County (and now Flagler County) was finished in 1916. One hundred years later the 10.6-mile stretch of road between County Road 204 and Espanola might be the longest remaining portion of the original Dixie Highway, a group of paved roads running from Michigan to Miami Beach.





The Graves Brick Company of Birmingham, Ala., made most of the red bricks for the Old Brick Road that was completed in St. Johns County in 1916.

HASTINGS | The drive from downtown Jacksonville to the Old Brick Road took about an hour. That hour, though, felt a bit like 100 years of time travel, with modern-day driving tools — GPS and Siri — leading the way not just to a 10.6-mile stretch of road in St. Johns and Flagler counties, but back to 1916. While Siri never noted this element of the journey, I couldn't help but notice how the route she suggested took me and my 2011 Chevy on a reverse timeline of automotive travel in America.

From I-95 to U.S. 1 to County Road 204 to the original Dixie Highway.

From a piece of the interstate system that Life Magazine described in a special 1976 bicentennial issue as “the most grandiose and indelible signature that Americans have ever scratched across the face of their land” to a remaining piece of a road system that, a century after its much-hyped creation, has been largely been swallowed up, erased and forgotten.

From a road that is more than 100 feet wide in some places to one that is 9 feet wide.

From superhighway to blue highway to red brick.

My goal was to follow the red brick road. Although when I made the left turn off CR 204 as directed by Siri — the reference to the “Old Brick Road” by an automated female voice creating an incongruent juxtaposition of then and now — I didn't see a single brick in the road.

I've been meaning to hop in my car and find the Old Brick Road ever since I was working on a story about Jacksonville's wacky 1915 mayoral election (the winning candidate's platform included reopening the brothels).

While going through microfilm of the Florida Times-Union and Jacksonville Journal, I kept coming across stories, editorials and cartoons about roads that were being built. Or not built.

One front-page headline proclaimed that Duval County had the worst roads in America.

Not all the news was negative. When one motorist and his family arrived in Jacksonville in a fancy new Cadillac, stopping here because of the automobile service available, that made front-page news. (The driver, presumably trying to illustrate the benefits of such a trip, said that his wife, who had been ill, had gained weight during the trip.)

Several stories were about the start of construction of roads stretching from Miami to Michigan: the Dixie Highway.

It wasn't so much a single highway — at the time the federal government didn't build highways — as it was a collection of roads, built county by county, state by state, auto club by auto club.

The Dixie Highway was the latest project for Carl G. Fisher, an Indiana businessman and South Florida developer. Long before Jaguars owner Shad Khan made his fortune by putting bumpers on cars, Fischer made his by supplying headlights. After creating the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (still referred to as the Old Brickyard, even though all but a few of the bricks are long gone), Fischer conceived and helped develop the Lincoln Highway, which stretched from coast-to-coast when completed in 1913.

Fischer's next goal was to link the Midwest to the South. When a north-south highway meeting was held in Chattanooga, Tenn., about 5,000 people attended, many lobbying to have the road pass through their area. They eventually settled on a dual route, with eastern and western sections, and more than 5,000 miles in 10 states — Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, South Carolina and Florida.

'Good Roads, Progress, and Prosperity'

Perhaps no state was altered more dramatically by the Dixie Highway than Florida. In 1909, the state had 17,579 miles of public roads. Other than a few city streets — Jacksonville had paved seven miles in 1893 — most of these miles of road were dirt and sand, maybe finished with pine straw or improved with oyster shells.

Millions of bricks changed that. Combined with the mass-produced automobile, the bricks changed Florida. A trip to Florida no longer was something reserved for the wealthy. Americans began loading up their vehicles — with extra gasoline, spare tires and lots of canned food — and heading south, embracing the label they were given: Tin Can Tourists.

The St. Johns County portion of the road was completed on March 4, 1916, two years after voters overwhelmingly approved a referendum built around the slogan: "Good Roads, Progress, and Prosperity." The St. Augustine Record reported that the workers who built the road with bricks from Graves Brick Company in Birmingham, Ala., celebrated with a barbecue that included 160 pounds of pork and 40 loaves of bread.

One brick was left unlaid, saved for a formal ceremony later that year.

For a decade, this stretch of the road was part of the primary route for motorists heading down Florida's east coast. On an average day, hundreds of cars passed over the bricks. Many stopped in the town of Espanola. Some stayed at a nearby place called the "Live and Let Live Tourist Camp."

All of that changed when a new Dixie Highway — now U.S. 1 — was built in 1926.

The original Dixie Highway became the Old Dixie Highway and, along with many of the towns along it, began to fade into the past. From Michigan to Miami, thousands of miles of brick roads have been

torn up, many paved with asphalt. Some of the bricks ended up in public buildings, such as a school gymnasium in Bunnell. Many ended up in private homes, fireplaces and patios.

But a few remnants of the Old Dixie Highway remain intact. In St. Johns County, at the northern end of one of the longest existing stretches, an ordinary street sign says: "Old Brick Road."

#### **'When I was a kid, it was beautiful'**

On the large corner lot next to CR 204 and the Old Brick Road, a "Make America Great Again" sign was planted in front of a mobile home, an older man working in back.

When I stopped and asked him if I was in the right place, he assured me that this was indeed the Old Brick Road, even if I didn't see any bricks.

"You could see all of them yesterday," he said.

He explained that between log trucks driving on the bricks and thieves stealing them, the road takes a beating. It had gotten so bumpy that, to smooth it out, loads of sand had been dumped on it the previous day, temporarily burying many of the bricks. But, he said, there were still plenty of them there.

He introduced me to the woman who owns the property on what is known as Kersey Corner, saying she might have some memories of what the road used to look like.

Gianetta Kersey Johns, 57, has spent much of her life here. Her father, Theodore William "Shot" Kersey, the first park manager at Faver-Dykes State Park, was born there in 1926. She moved back 37 years ago.

"It was still all red brick," she said, pointing toward the road. "When I was a kid, it was beautiful."

She said her late father had all kinds of stories about what used to be along the Old Brick Road, about the old towns and turpentine mills.

"I'm sorry I don't remember more," she said. "I wish I had paid more attention to Daddy when we were coon hunting."

She said that the road isn't what it once was. And if you're looking for roadside attractions, you're in the wrong place. But if you're looking for a bit of really old Florida, sprinkled with some hunt camps, there's plenty of that.

"For nine miles we're the only house," she said. "There's no electricity from here until you get to the other end and hit the pavement."

She asked what kind of car I was driving.

A Chevy Cruze, I said.

"You just have to take it real easy," she said. "I wouldn't go down it with a Corvette or motorcycle. It's kind of bumpy and dirty. And they hunt. ... But it's a nice ride, it really is."

#### **'Travel at Own Risk'**

Shortly after starting down the road, heading south toward Espanola, a cloud of dust approached. I pulled over to the side and let the log truck pass.

This is a dance that vehicles have been doing ever since the road was built.

Even in 1916, the year after the millionth Model T rolled off the assembly line, when two of Henry Ford's cars came upon each other, one had to pull off to the side.

The dust settled and as I continued on, the bricks started to appear, at first little more than what feels like a stripe running down the middle of the road. But eventually there were stretches with thousands of red bricks forming a crowned road leading into the distance, through the landscape of palmetto and slash pine.

Most of the 10.6 miles of the Old Brick Road are in Flagler County. If you drive north to south, after about 2 miles, you arrive at a county line that dates back to 1917, when part of St. Johns County became a new county.

The “Entering Flagler County” sign has been used for target practice, circles drawn on it, hundreds of dents and holes dotting it. Beneath it another sign says, “Travel at Own Risk.”

Just down the road there is a third sign, also full of pockmarks and holes, enough of its letters wiped out that trying to read it feels a bit like playing “Wheel of Fortune.” But these days you cannot buy a vowel or anything else on this stretch of road.

(If you can’t solve the puzzle, when you hit the pavement at the south end of the Old Brick Road, you can turn around and see a matching sign, no dents or holes, that gives the answer to northbound motorists: “Removing Bricks is Illegal. Violators Will Be Prosecuted to the Fullest Extent of the Law. Flagler County BOCC.”)

I continued down the road, stopping at a particularly beautiful spot to get out and look at the bricks. Other than a slight breeze and the buzz of mosquitoes, it was quiet. Standing there, the late afternoon sunlight cutting through the trees and splashing across the lettering – “GRAVES, B’HAM, ALA.” — it was easy to feel like this place was closer to 1916 than to 2016.

### **‘The red brick road back in time’**

In 2005, an effort led by the Flagler County Historical Society paid off when the Old Brick Road was added to the U.S. Register of Historic Places. The 286-page report done by Environmental Services, Inc., of Jacksonville is full of all kinds of wonderful historical details. But it opens with a poem titled “Road One — Florida,” written by Ellie Ball at the turn of this century.

“I walk the red brick road back in time ...” the poem begins.

Diane Marquis, a retired elementary school teacher in Bunnell, was the president of the historical society when the brick road received its historical designation. It was important, she says, because so much local history has been lost through the years, torn down or paved over with concrete.

In the last decade, developers have unveiled plans for the future of the land around the Old Brick Road in Flagler County — thousands of homes, schools, parks, pools, retail and office space, a restoration of this piece of the Old Dixie Highway.

“I would say, ‘Let the brick road be the center of the development,’” Marquis said.

It remains to be seen whether those ideas will become reality. And whether this would be a step forward — a modern-day version of “Good Roads, Progress, and Prosperity” — depends partly on whom you talk to. For now, though, when you bounce along one of the longest remaining stretches of the Old Dixie Highway, perhaps wishing you had a vehicle with the ground clearance of a Model T, it feels like you’ve gone back to another place and time.

I took my time driving the road, partly out of necessity. When I reached the reached the pavement at the southern end near Espanola, Siri started talking again, taking me back to Jacksonville, back along the timeline.

From red brick to blue highway to interstate.

