

Basement

Florida's Capitol Story

Locate the touchscreen with the "Building Tallahassee" content.

- Tap Explore Census Records, then select Interactive Map of Slavery and Migration in the US 1790-1860. Scroll up to reveal the timeline.
- As you tap through the decades, which region of Florida has the highest population of enslaved people?

A Masonry Capitol: Who built Florida's Brick Capitol?

During recent archival research, Museum staff members discovered an article that revealed the name of one of the enslaved laborers who worked to build the 1845 Capitol. What was his name and in which historic Tallahassee neighborhood did he live?

North and South Halls

Examine the photos of Florida State Senators in the South hall.

Look for The Honorable Carrie Meek, Florida's first Black female Senator. What year did she first serve?

Examine the photos of Florida House Representatives in the North hall.

Look for The Honorable Joe Lang Kershaw, the first Black Representative to serve after Reconstruction. What years did he serve?



Historic Capitol Exploration with Guided Questions

On March 3, 1845, President John Tyler signed the law admitting Florida to the United States as a slave state, along with Iowa, a free state. The first State Capitol was completed that same year and forms the core of this structure. Its walls, including bricks handcrafted by enslaved laborers, can be viewed today.

During the Civil War, this building served as the state's Confederate Capitol. On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing enslaved people in the rebelling Southern states. More than two years later, on May 10, 1865, Union Brigadier General Edward M. McCook arrived in Tallahassee, to take possession of the city from Confederate forces. General McCook established his headquarters at the Hagner House, now known as the Knott House. On May 20, after official control of the region was transferred to Union forces, he declared the Emancipation Proclamation in effect.

Black Floridians began to serve the state in the legislative and executive branches after the war. One hundred eleven (111) Black State Senators and Representatives served in this building from 1868-1899. Florida's first Black cabinet member was Jonathan C. Gibbs as Secretary of State (1868-1873) and then Superintendent of Public Instruction (1873-1874). The Constitutional Convention of 1868, held here, included 17 Black delegates.

In 1876, Governor Stearns ran for reelection with David Montgomery, a Black sheriff and former state legislator from Madison County, as his running mate. When they lost, newly-elected Governor Drew replaced many local Black officials with white officials. The next Constitutional Convention was held in 1885, and just seven Black delegates participated. In 1889, Florida became the first state to pass a poll tax, furthering disenfranchising Black voters and ushering in the Jim Crow laws enforcing segregation and discrimination. Black leaders would not hold state elected offices again until the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

Want to learn more about emancipation history?

Visit these sites just steps away from the Historic Capitol Museum.

The Union Bank Museum: 219 Apalachee Parkway; unionbankmuseum.org

The John G. Riley Center and Museum: 419 East Jefferson Street; rileymuseum.org

The Grove Museum: 902 North Monroe Street; thegrovemuseum.com

First Floor

Executive Branch Hall

Room 114

Florida 1821-1845

Why were states admitted to the Union in pairs?

Room 120

It Happened Here! Events from 1845-1901

Abolitionist and author Harriet Beecher Stowe visited the Capitol in 1875. Where did she live post-Civil War and what important novel did she write?

Room 120

Great Events of May 1865

After General Edward McCook ordered the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation, freed slaves gathered at the Capitol.

Judicial Branch Hall

Supreme Court Chamber

Some Notable Justices of the Supreme Court

Who were the three Black justices that served on Florida's Supreme Court prior to 2000?

Second Floor

House Chamber Hall

Room 210

Poll Tax Pay as You Vote

Florida was the first state to adopt a poll tax in 1889. What was the purpose of the poll tax?

"Lift Every Voice and Sing" was written in 1900 by which two Jacksonville natives?

Room 209

Women's Suffrage in Florida

What was a hope of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune's when she founded the Southeastern Federation of Colored Women's Clubs?

Room 208

Representatives' Terms and Qualifications

What positions did Thomas Gibbs of Duval County hold?

Room 203

Higher Education

Philip Randolph, national labor leader and civil rights activist, graduated from the Cookman Institute in Jacksonville in 1907. Formed by a group of religious organizations, it is recognized as Florida's first what?