#258 Matheson House (Script by Peggy Macdonald)

The 1867 Matheson House is the third oldest surviving home in the Gainesville area. The two oldest houses are the Haile Homestead at Kanapaha Plantation, completed in 1856, and the Bailey House, which was built between 1848 and 1854. While the Bailey and Haile houses were plantation houses, the Matheson House was a townhouse completed after the Civil War.

The Matheson House is the oldest house in downtown Gainesville and is the oldest continuously occupied house in Gainesville. The Matheson family occupied the house for 130 years. Sarah Matheson bequeathed the house first to the Alachua County Historical Society, of which she was an early president, and later to the Matheson History Museum, which she co-founded along with Dr. Mark Barrow, Helen Ellerbe and others.

Sarah Matheson was the first female elder at First Presbyterian Church in downtown Gainesville. She was married to Chris Matheson, who was Gainesville’s longest-serving mayor with 8 one-year terms. Chris was the son of James Douglas Matheson and Augusta Florida Steele Matheson, the first occupants of the Matheson House. James Douglas Matheson moved to Gainesville in 1867 and opened a dry goods store. He served as a founding elder of First Presbyterian Church, a member of the City Council and as City Treasurer. He relocated from Camden, South Carolina after serving as a Confederate officer under Robert E. Lee. He was at Appomattox when Lee surrendered.

The Matheson House used to be surrounded by ten acres of orange groves until a series of freezes in the 1890s wiped out most commercial citrus in North Central Florida. Built of heart pine, the house is raised from the ground on brick piers. Six free-standing square columns extend from the roof to the ground, an architectural style that is seen at the Haile and Bailey houses and is common in Camden, South Carolina, the Matheson and Haile families’ former hometown. The Matheson House has a gambrel roof with decorative woodwork at the eaves and small balustrade, three dormer windows and cypress shingles cut in curved and sawtooth patterns. These elements were added during a 1907 renovation.

James and Augusta Matheson had only four children, a small number compared to Serena and Thomas Evans Haile’s 15 children. Of the Mathesons’ four children, only one, Chris, survived into adulthood. Chris and Sarah Matheson had no children. After Chris died in 1952, Sarah preserved the house and all its contents, including furniture, artwork, photographs, maps and letters from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including artifacts from Augusta Matheson’s namesake, Augustus Steele, an early Florida pioneer who established Hillsborough County and Cedar Key. Augustus Steele and members of the Matheson family are buried at Gainesville’s historic Evergreen Cemetery. Tours of the Matheson House can be arranged by contacting the Matheson History Museum.