263# The Historic Thomas Center (Script by Joanna Grey Talbot)

Did you know that the Thomas Center was almost demolished, or that it was once home to Santa Fe Community College? This elegant building was the dream of Major William Reuben Thomas, a businessman and Gainesville mayor. In 1906, he purchased an unfinished home from Charles W. Chase and transformed it into the 15,000-square-foot Sunkist Villa, which was completed in 1910. Over the next two decades, Major Thomas became the owner/operator of multiple businesses, including the White House Hotel.

In the mid-1920s, Thomas decided that Gainesville needed a resort hotel to help attract tourists. With the assistance of architect William A. Edwards, Thomas decided to build the Hotel Thomas, which was attached to the Sunkist Villa. Construction began in 1926 and the hotel opened on January 10, 1928. Governor John Martin and other dignitaries attended the opening ceremony. The Hotel Thomas operated for 40 years, hosting famous visitors such as Helen Keller and Robert Frost. Its landscaped grounds, garden parties, dances, and restaurant attracted many locals and visitors. Designed in the Renaissance Revival style, the building has a stucco exterior with a red clay tile roof, della Robbia swags and festoons over doorways, turtle fountain in the courtyard, and beautiful Spanish Court.

Major Thomas died on September 10, 1943, and left behind his wife, Kathryn, and five children. William Jr. was manager of the White House Hotel. Tragically, he died in an automobile accident in 1944. Major Thomas’s eldest son, Phillip, moved his family into the former Sunkist Villa and lived there until the hotel’s closing in 1968. John, the fourth son, became a medical doctor and practiced in Gainesville for 30 years. He died in 1948, one month after his mother. That same year, the railroad was rerouted to Sixth Street, making it difficult for guests to arrive by train at the Hotel Thomas. In 1963, Gainesville became “wet” and the hotel opened one of the most popular cocktail lounges, the Cornish Arms.

With the construction of Interstate 75 and the rise of beach vacations, the family decided to sell the hotel. It was closed in 1968 and purchased by Myrl J. Hanes, R. A. Hanes, and John M. Steadham. It was leased to Santa Fe College and then fell into disrepair. Thankfully, it was saved by Historic Gainesville, Inc., and currently serves as City of Gainesville offices and a cultural event space. A self-guided tour features several rooms that appear much as they did during the Hotel Thomas’s glory days.