275# Cotton Club (Script by Joanna Grey Talbot)

In the 1950s, Gainesville was a popular stop on the Chitlin’ Circuit, the collective name for all the venues in segregated American cities that welcomed African American performers. This was in great part due to Sarah McKnight, an African American businesswoman who owned and operated Sarah’s Restaurant and The Cotton Club.

The Cotton Club building at 837 Southeast Seventh Avenue began life as a Post Exchange (PX) at Camp Blanding during World War II. After the war, the Army put many of the camp buildings up for sale. William and Eunice Perryman owned a grocery store in the Springhill neighborhood in southeast Gainesville. They bought the PX building and had it trucked in pieces and set up just down the street from their grocery store as the Perry Theater, which catered to African American patrons. At the time, the only other theaters available to black patrons were on the other side of town on West Seminary Street (now known as Northwest Fifth Avenue). Unfortunately, the theater did not generate enough revenue to stay open for more than two years. It closed in 1948.

Sarah McKnight bought the old Perry Theater and opened the Cotton Club in 1950. It showcased performers such as B. B. King, Bo Diddley, James Brown and Brook Benton. A savvy businesswoman, McKnight worked out a deal with Dr. Lamb, the owner of the Club Bali in nearby Ocala, to book the same entertainers, which made it easier to attract big names to both clubs. Patrons at the Cotton Club paid a cover charge and could also buy food and drink, but liquor was not sold as Alachua County was a dry county at the time. University of Florida students soon discovered the club, where audiences and some bands were integrated. It is speculated that this breach of the segregation rules resulted in the club’s license not being renewed by the County. The Cotton Club closed in 1952.

From 1957 to 1959, the building was the Blue Note dance club. Until 1970, it was used as a storage warehouse for the Babcock Furniture Company. Then in 1995, the Mount Olive A.M.E Church on Southeast Eighth Avenue purchased the property with the goal of restoring it to its former glory. Today, it is the Cotton Club Museum and Cultural Center, a repository for local African American history.