

APPENDIX I:
Jurors' comments, April 2021

Artist's consideration of the term "Black" when it comes to the sponge hookers from the Bahamas and the Keys. The Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean were the Taino, and although their population declined and combined with Africans brought to the islands through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, many do not identify as either African or as Black but rather as Afro-Bahamian.

Teresa Wilkins, Ph.D., Director
The Leepa-Rattner Museum of Art

I also agree with what Teresa noted about inclusion of Afro-Bahamian in the proposal.

Lynn Whitelaw

I have long been an advocate for inclusion of the Black community in the history of Tarpon Springs. My ancestry is from the Island of Bimini, Bahamas. Many of them were sponge hookers in Tarpon Springs. One of my relatives who was born locally worked as a sponge hooker. He is still lives in Tarpon Springs at age 95. Recently he recalled the names of many of the sponge boats of old.

My comment is that the document should describe the contribution of the Bahamians, as does the words following the other settlers in Tarpon Springs.

The Bahamian settlers could be identified as the "blacks" who worked in the sponge industry.

Also, noted in the attachment, I included the word "first" as noted by documentation is Tina's research.

Thanks so much for the opportunity to contribute to this important project.

Rev. Milton Smith

Focus on the early shallow water sponging is a good reference for the early establishment of the African-American community in Tarpon Springs. Many members of the community may also have come from Apalachicola. There is still an early sponging exhibit there with sponge pens (called "kraals") labeled Tarpon Springs.

An article in the Tampa Tribune, Sept 16, 1990 entitled “Local Historian Claims Blacks Were First Spongers” quotes James Dorsett. Dorsett was a prominent businessman and the large park in the Union Academy neighborhood is named for him.

Part of the article reads:

“For the city centennial, they wanted to know about the old spongers,” said Dorsett, 77. “The old spongers were really the black spongers. My grandfather was a sponger.” Just in case anyone doubts his word. Dorsett keeps the yellowed, crumbling ledger of the all black Odd Fellow Lodge No. 3116 in his barbershop to back him up. Among the many members registered is Robert Russell. On the line labeled “occupation, Russell is listed as a sponger. A look through the book reveals the two most common occupations for the blacks at the time were as laborers and spongers.

Article is by Nicholas W. Pilugin.

Dudley Salley, President

Tarpon Springs Area Historical Society

Third generation Tarpon Springs resident

(It is with deep sadness to add that Charles Dudley Salley unexpectedly passed away on July 3, 2021. His role on the panel is being taken over by Nikolette Henderson, a life-long Tarpon Springs resident and history teacher. RIP.)

The City of Tarpon Springs is unique in many ways. The origins and settlement of the city were made by three symbiotic groups: the sponge hookers who came north to Tarpon Springs from the Keys and the Bahamas; the Greeks who came primarily from the Dodecanese and Saronic Gulf Islands with mechanized diving that revolutionized the sponging industry, and the Crackers, who brought farming and cattle [*] to the area. *[Not sure that there was a lot of cattle ranching in Tarpon Springs—definitely in other parts of the Tampa Bay area (I’ve interviewed some). Since Crackers did many things other than cattle ranching, and since that was not their primary work here, you should probably forget the cattle part. Also, not all the non-Greeks were Crackers; many, if not most, were not from Florida but from various states in the deep south, some from the north, some immigrants. Crackers are primarily from Florida and Georgia]*

The black spongers and the immigrant Greeks formed a unique brotherhood that supported each other's efforts to the mutual benefits of both. Many of the black spongers learned Greek to facilitate their working alongside their fellow Greek spongers. Descendants of these groups still inhabit Tarpon Springs to this day. This unique fellowship has not been recognized in public art.

Some of the blacks remained hookers (often working independently on their own boats), but many worked on the mechanized sponge boats for the Greeks, so they were not hookers—in fact a few were divers. Also, a good portion of the blacks (and others) were not working on boats at all, they were working in the packing houses.

Here are some facts for reference. The population figures are from the census:

- *In 1900 (before the Greeks), there were 252 Americans (112 white, 140 black) and 107 Bahamians (21 white, 86 black), one Greek and one Norwegian—so there*

- were 226 blacks and 135 whites working in the sponge industry.** This includes sponge boat crews, processors, and dealers.
- the 1910 census shows about **900 Greeks** (those were just the ones counted) in the sponge business versus 40 Americans and 32 Bahamians (number includes those born in the Bahamas or with one or two Bahamian-born parents), **evenly divided between black and white.** This includes sponge boat crews, processors, and dealers.
 - Many if not most from the Keys (and many of them had Bahamian ancestry) left Tarpon after the Greeks arrived because they couldn't compete.
 - The Greeks also hooked.

Tina Bucuvalas

*Jennings note: *Cattle ranching families in the area were the Mitchells, the Bexleys, and others. Many farms were in fact orange orchards.*

There will be two locations for the art: One at the Sponge Docks to honor their role as spongers and another in the Union Academy neighborhood where most of the black spongers took up residence and worshipped. One artist may do both locations or two artists can each do a location if the themes are complimentary and appropriate for the theme.



Public Marina at the Sponge Docks, Dodecanese Boulevards



The Community Action Program (CAP) building in the Union Academy neighborhood