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## HOME/LIFE



# New museum for American Beach fulfills dreams of 'The Beach Lady'

By **Charlie Patton** Fri, Sep 19, 2014 @ 11:39 am | updated Sat, Sep 20, 2014 @ 4:52 pm

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Bob.Self@jacksonville.com  
The American Beach Community Center on Amelia Island houses the new American Beach Museum.

**AMERICAN BEACH** | From 1935, when A.L. Lewis, an African-American insurance executive who lived in Jacksonville, purchased 216 acres of beachfront property in Nassau County, through the early 1960s, American Beach was a mecca for African-Americans.

It was the rare beach resort at which African-Americans were welcome. People came from across the South for the sun, surf, sand, the

balmy ocean breezes and the world-class entertainment by acts such as Duke Ellington.

American Beach's decline can be traced to events in 1964: In September 1964, Hurricane Dora damaged or destroyed many of the buildings there. In July 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, which eventually opened previously segregated beaches to African-Americans.

One person who fought that decline was Lewis' great-granddaughter, MaVynee Betsch, known to locals as "The Beach Lady." After a career in opera, Betsch returned to American Beach in 1977 and spent the last 28 years of her life fighting to preserve both the natural beauty of American Beach and the memory of what it had meant to black America for three decades.

One of the things she wanted to do was to create a museum that would celebrate American Beach's past. When she died of cancer in 2005 at the age of 70, that goal was still unfulfilled. But she made her friend Carol Alexander, then the executive director of Jacksonville's Ritz Theatre and Museum, promise to carry the idea forward.

"It was totally her vision and her dream to build a museum," said Alexander, who calls herself "a spiritual daughter of the Beach Lady."

Now, thanks to the work of Alexander and others, such as Bill and Ann Jennings, that dream has been fulfilled. The American Beach Museum opened Sept. 6 in the American Beach Community Center on Amelia Island's Julia Street.

The museum celebrates American Beach's glory days and notes its proximity to Franklintown, a town built by former slaves after the end of the Civil War. It also celebrates MaVynee Betsch.

One of the more striking exhibits is a case containing the Beach Lady's famous hair, which she arranged to look like the course of the Niger River and carried draped over an arm. She always told people it was seven feet long and took five hours to wash and five days to dry. Complying with her wishes, Alexander cut the hair and preserved it after Betsch's death. It turns out Betsch underestimated its length: It's actually 7½ feet long, Ann Jennings said.

Perhaps the most compelling exhibit in the museum is a 13-minute film clip which shows

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## ENTERTAINMENT NEWS

**Matt About Jax: Upscale Barbecue at MOJO no. 4**

8:00pm

**First Coast Happenings**

4:40pm

**Amber Waves: A look at Goozlepipe &**

Betsch talking about why American Beach matters and conducting visitors on a bus tour through the 12 streets of American Beach, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2002.

Bill Jennings said he hopes the opening of the 800-square-foot museum is “the first part” of a “rebirth of American Beach.” In time, he said, the museum may be able to move into a larger space, the building that was once the celebrated honky tonk Evans Rendezvous.

Opening the museum during a reception that was attended by Betsch’s sister, Johnetta Cole, director of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African Art, and her brother, jazz drummer John Betsch, “really felt exceptional,” Alexander said. “I held a responsibility to the Beach Lady to make this happen.”

Hired in 1998 to supervise the renovation of the old Ritz movie theater into what became the Ritz Theatre and Museum, Alexander served as the Ritz’s executive director from its opening in September 1999 until May 2012.

A widow, she has remarried, to Howard Dodson, director of Howard University’s library system, who lives in Washington. But she retains her ties to Jacksonville. She still has house here and is a member of the Jacksonville Aviation Authority’s Art Commission.

“Jacksonville can’t get rid of me,” Alexander said. “I love it.”

Charlie Patton: (904) 359-4413

**Guttyworks, Steve Flores' new beer and food wonderland**

5:30pm

**A kid in a candy store**

4:44pm

**New photos show toll of age, prison on pop legend Phil Spector**

6:12am

**Colin Farrell, Vince Vaughn set for 'True Detective' season 2**

5:23pm

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