

spaces

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The expansive porch of the "new" 1,200-square-foot Sams House almost touches the old cabin.

Piece of pioneer pride

Feb. 9 event showcases Sams House, church

**Story by Maria Sonnenberg
Photos by Dave Potter
For FLORIDA TODAY**

They sure don't make houses — and people — like in the old days. Florida's pioneers were an extremely hardy bunch and the homes they built, while not fancy, were sturdy and could face whatever weather and age would hurl their way.

Sams House at Pine Island, Brevard's oldest standing structure, reflects the indomitable spirit of its

creator. John Sams grew up living the privileged life of a Sea Island, S.C., plantation owner's son. He added to the family's fortunes by marrying the richest girl in Beaufort, but all their wealth was gone with the winds when the Civil War destroyed their old way of life.

"The family lost everything," says Katrina Morrell, education coordinator at Sams House.

They were down, but not out, for the Sams family decided to take advantage of the 1860 Homestead Act

and migrated to Eau Gallie, where in 1875 Sams built a 600-square-foot cabin to house four adults and six children. Sams had hoped to grow citrus in Eau Gallie, but the oranges never bore fruit.

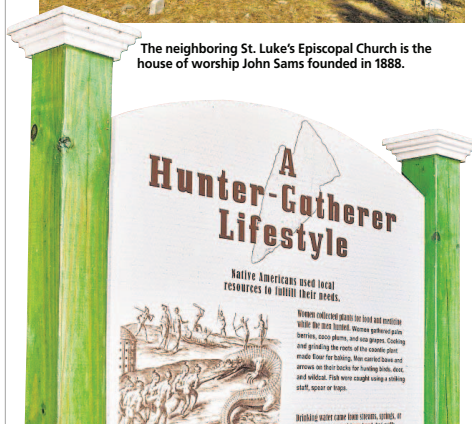
"They lived on sprouted beans for sustenance," says Morrell.

Three years later, Sams moved his family further north to Merritt Island, and the cabin came along by boat, neatly disassembled into parts that were to be

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The neighboring St. Luke's Episcopal Church is the house of worship John Sams founded in 1888.



The original Sams House cabin was 600 square feet.

Pioneers

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later put together by the shores of the Indian River.

"Times were very rough and there was no lumber mill nearby, so it was easier for them to take it apart and move it," says Morrell. "You can still see the Roman numerals they used to mark the different pieces, just like we mark our hurricane shutters."

The little heart of pine house is by no means pretty and was never luxurious, but it remains a concrete testament to pioneers' determination. Not only did the tiny structure provide physical protection for the family, but it also nurtured the souls and minds of the community, since it did extra duty as church and classroom for the area.

"It shows the grit of these early settlers," says Morrell.

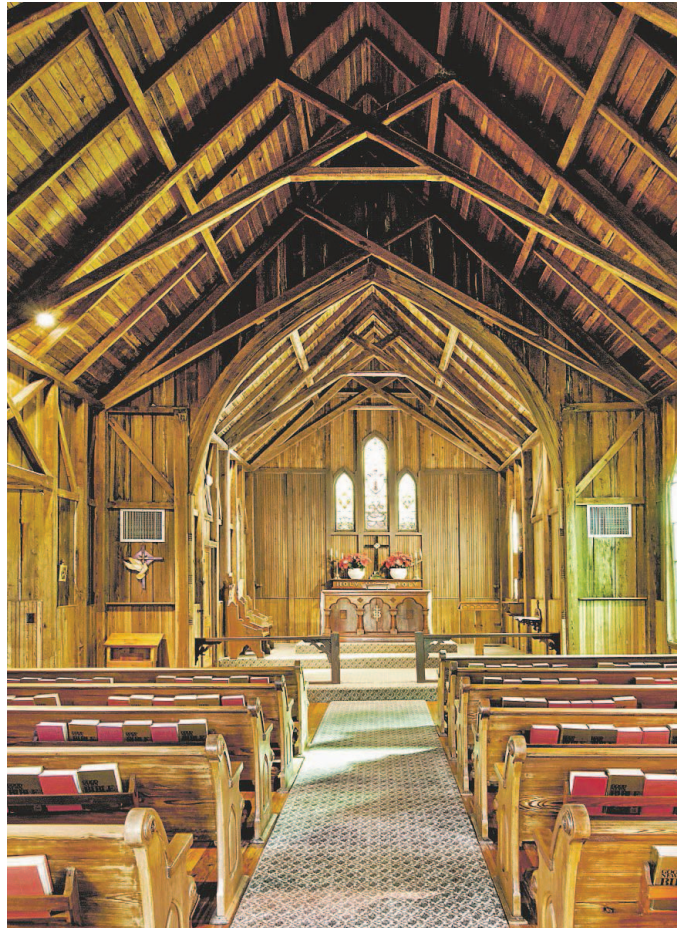
Still somewhat of a best kept secret because of its out-of-the-way location, the cabin John Sams built will be the centerpiece of Pioneer Day celebrations hosted by the county's Environmentally Endangered Lands Program together with neighboring St. Luke's Episcopal Church, the house of worship Sams founded.

"He was the inspiring voice for the building of the church in 1888," said church spokesman Tom McFarland.

Sams, along with most of his family and many members of Brevard's first families, found final rest at St. Luke's cemetery. There is no gloom to the cemetery, perhaps because its residents are so at peace in the idyllic setting.

In addition to the original house and the church, the Feb. 9 event showcases another 1888 building, the second home Sams built adjoining the cabin, after his fortunes rose and he became the first Superintendent of Brevard County Schools. The two homes form the management and education center for Brevard's Environmentally Endangered Lands Program Pine Island Conservation Area.

The porch of the "new" 1,200-square-foot Florida vernacular house almost touches the old cabin. Sams' second home is very simple by today's standards, with two rooms on the first floor and three bedrooms upstairs. The house didn't even have kitchen or bath until an addition to the porch was made many years later. However, the house and its predecessor, together with the quaint nearby church and the 947 splendid and pristine acres that surround them, are true Cliff Notes of Florida's past. An afternoon



St. Luke's Episcopal Church is the house of worship John Sams founded.



John Sams' homes will be the centerpiece of Pioneer Day celebrations by the Environmentally Endangered Lands Program.

spent there is a fascinating, condensed history lesson.

Some of the old citrus, mango and guava trees Sams planted so many decades ago are still bearing fruit. A 4,000-year-old Native American burial mound is on the property, where mastodon bones from 20,000 years ago were also discovered. Visitors often glimpse wading birds, bald eagles, manatees, alligators and bobcats.

"It's not just a historical home," said Morrell. "This place has this really cool vibe. You just feel the history."

PIONEER DAY ACTIVITIES

Sams House at Pine Island and St. Luke's Episcopal Church will host Pioneer Day on Feb. 9.

Activities at Sams House run from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and include tours of the 1875 cabin and 1888 house, living history demonstrations by the Confederate Sons Association, pioneer-related games, arts and crafts fair and exhibits by the Florida Gourd Society, Florida Honey Queen Association, University of Florida Brevard County Extension Office and the Florida Public Archaeology Network.

Singer/songwriter Chris Kahl will perform from noon to 2 p.m.

St. Luke's will serve a luncheon of homemade stews and soups from noon to 1:30 p.m. A \$5 donation is suggested for the meal. Other activities at the church include a Boy Scout Dutch oven cooking demonstration and an exhibit by the Florida Historical Society. At 1:30 p.m., the church will feature "The Florida Suite," a documentary by Brevard native Jeff Thompson, director of the county's library system. A presentation on John Sams is scheduled for 3 p.m., followed by a tour of the historic chapel at 4 p.m.

The church will also host a traditional Florida fish fry with seatings at 5 and 6 p.m. The meal includes locally caught mullet, hush puppies, baked beans, coleslaw, corn on the cob and tea or lemonade, all for a \$7 donation. Because seating is limited, advance reservations are recommended. Call 321-452-5260.

The Brevard Theatrical Ensemble will present Mosquitoes, Alligators and Determination, a program about the men and women who shaped Florida, at 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. at the church. Donation for tickets is \$5.

Call 321-452-5260 to reserve meal and play tickets. For more details on Pioneer Day events, call 321-449-4720.

Sams House at Pine Island is at 6195 N. Tropical Trail, Merritt Island. St. Luke's Episcopal Church is at 5555 N. Tropical Trail. Ample parking is available at both locations.



The grounds of Sams House is in an out-of-the-way location on Merritt Island.



Pine Island highlights pioneer history.