The following is an excerpt from:

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY
HISTORIC RESOURCES SURVEY REPORT

Submitted to:
Florida Department of State
Bureau of Historic Preservation

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Prepared by:
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* These excerpts have been taken from the Historic Resources Survey Report with permission given by the Hillsborough County Historic Resources Review Board on December 15, 2003. The intention is to help provide targeted historical information on the water bodies in Hillsborough County.
Keysville

Located south of the Alafia River and nestled between the communities of Alafia and Welcome, Keysville was a prosperous 19th century community. Some of the earliest settlers in the Keysville area arrived shortly after the Civil War and included the family names Allen, Blue, Caldwell, Keene, Lightsey, McDaniel, Proctor, and Purvis. Obediah and Rebecca Purvis moved from Georgia in 1865 to 160 acres in Hillsborough County along today’s Nicholas Road. Becoming a prosperous farmer, Mr. Purvis grew corn, peas, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, and eventually strawberries. Growing most of these vegetables for the market, Mr. Purvis also raised cattle and crops for his family. He has been credited for establishing one of the first orange groves in Keysville. Obediah was later joined by his brothers Jordan, Tom, and William, all of whom bought property in the Keysville area for approximately $1 an acre.¹

Shortly after the Purvis family arrived in Hillsborough County, Daniel McQueen Blue and his wife Margaret Hill Lane moved from Columbia County (present day Suwannee County) to Keysville in 1872. They built a log cabin on their 120 acres of land and filed for homestead on February 25, 1885. He operated a sawmill, a general store, and became Keysville first postmaster on February 4, 1878. Mr. Blue named Keysville in honor of Gen. David Key who at that time was the United States Postmaster general. In 1878 Mr. Blue employed fifteen workers at his sawmill and sold cedar slats to the Peninsular Pencil Factory in New York City. Additionally, Mr. Blue donated the land upon which a one-room ungraded school was built in 1878.²

During the early part of the 1880s, area farmers grew sugar cane, corn, potatoes, oranges, and cotton and raised hogs and sheep.³ A Keysville resident boasted about the area’s agricultural richness in *The Sunland Tribune*:

It is a well established fact, that the county extending from the mouth of the Alafia river to its source embraces some of the best lands in the county, both for farming and growing of all kinds of semi-tropical fruits and vegetables, and that no section of the county can surpass it in point of health and beauty, finely timbered and watered, and abounding in game of all kinds. It offers many attractions to settlers, and with railroad facilities giving us a quick outlet for our productions, it cannot be excelled by any part of the southern peninsula of Florida.⁴

Yet the person’s bragging did not stop there. The resident went on to state:

Keysville is not making great strides in the way of building up, but situated in the center of a large population and having the best of mail facilities, with many other advantages, could with brain and capital, be made quite a thriving little village. Plenty of good lands in this vicinity subject to homestead purchase or entry from the State. And to all who are desirous of casting their lot with us, we would extend a welcome.⁵

Community pride and contributions promoted settlement. By the 1880s Keysville’s
population ranked second to Tampa with 500 residents. Mr. Blue continued as postmaster, operated his store, and joined forces with A.E. Rhoades to sell real estate. Property in Keysville ranged from five dollars to twenty five dollars an acre. Additionally, Mr. Blue owned the Keysville Mill Company which operated a saw and grist mill as well as cotton gins. Jackson Bird served as the community’s constable, and there was a Justice of the Peace. B.F. Carpenter labored as a wheelwright, S.I. Lightsey worked as a cattle dealer, Henry Wells toiled as a mill-sawyer and engineer, and Williams and Duggan profited as dentists. The community received tri-weekly mail from Tampa and Ft. Meade and semi-weekly mail from Pine Level. Residents attended two churches, one Methodist and one Baptist. Eighty-six Keysville families owned 7540 acres, with 21 possessing 100 acres or more. E. Lightsey operated the largest farm of 500 acres with Mitchell Alderman ranking second with a 420 acre farm. Forty farmers operated the smallest farms of 40-acres. The majority of residents were vegetable and truck farmers, although some did raise cattle or grew oranges. Orange groves ranged in size from one to six acres with Mr. Lightsey possessing the largest grove of six acres. D.W. Proctor was a close second with five acres. Most farmers owned one to four acres of orange groves. After the development of Plant City, Keysville farmers prospered by transporting their oranges, sugar, syrup, oranges, corn, tomatoes, and potatoes to the town’s new shipping facilities.

Railroads had a tremendous impact upon Keysville. The Warnell Lumber and Veneer Company built a narrow-gauge wooden logging railway through Keysville in the early 1890s. This opened up much of the area’s timber to their saw mill located in Plant City. By 1893 the Florida Central and Peninsular Railroad constructed a branch line between Plant City and Welcome, passing through Keysville. The Seaboard Airline Railroad took control of the Florida Central and Peninsular in 1900, extending the branch line to Bartow in 1905. Along with freight and lumber, the Peavine Express and the Bartow Short provided passenger service for Keysville residents. While the railroads transported felled trees to the sawmills, the trains themselves helped fuel the deforestation of the area. Because the locomotives burned wood, the trains consumed much of the locally cut timber.

When Mr. Blue died in 1906, Keysville suffered a tremendous setback. His saw mill allowed many farmers to supplement their income when their crops did not fair well, and his store provided many essential items to area residents. Yet these important businesses passed away with Mr. Blue. Keysville would experience ups and downs well into the second half of the twentieth century, never reacquiring its former glory. In 1890, Keysville population dropped to 245, remaining stable with a population of 259 in 1900. With the opening of the Coronet Phosphate Company by 1908, many of Keysville’s residents went to work as miners. Possibly due to the expanded economic opportunities, Keysville population reached 409 in 1910. By 1918 these people supported three general stores, two churches – one Baptist and one Methodist – and a saw mill in 1918. J.L. Rivers owned the saw mill and one general store. Miles Carpenter served as the community’s postmaster and operated another general store. Mr. Carpenter became postmaster when Mr. Blue passed away. Clem Armstrong, a Plant City resident, moved his sawmill to Keysville in 1923. The company continued to operate throughout the
1930s, switching to crate manufacturing in 1928. By 1935 the company produced approximately 110,000 bean and strawberry crates annually, but the mill did not survive the depression. viii

The Broadwells represent one of the Keysville success stories. Leo Broadwell moved from South Carolina to Keysville in the early 1920s to work as a dragline operator in the phosphate industry. Shortly after they married in 1925, Leo and Bessie Broadwell opened a general store and filling station. They ran the business until 1978. In 1929, business was so good that the Broadwell’s expanded the store to sell feed, grain, nails, clothes, and lard jars. At one time residents could also get their cars fixed by the Broadwells in a building next door to the general store. In the 1930s Mr. Broadwell closed the auto shop because he tired of washing his greasy hands every time a customer wanted bacon. Agriculture continued to be an important industry in Keysville. According to Mr. Broadwell, during the 1920s and 1930s, nearly every resident grew strawberries. Thus it is easy to understand why the sawmill switched to making strawberry crates. Prosperity in the late 1920s caused Keysville’s population to reach 682 in 1930.ix

Keysville experienced another decline in the 1950s when the Coronet Phosphate Company stopped mining phosphate in nearby Hopewell. Coupled with this, the school superintendent closed down Hillsborough’s “Strawberry Schools.” Therefore, hardly anyone could grow strawberries in Keysville because their labor supply, school age children, now had to attend school when the crop needed to be picked. In response, local residents worked again in the phosphate industry, but it was no longer a short commute to work. People also sought jobs in Tampa, Orlando, and St. Petersburg. While not under heavy development pressure, many of Keysville’s roads were paved during the 1940s and 1950s. The community’s post office was closed on February 16, 1956, with rural delivery from Lithia. However, Mr. Broadwell, who became postmaster in 1953, continued offering limited mail service in the Broadwells’ general store. Mr. Broadwell passed away in 1978. Consequently, Mrs. Broadwell ended the mail service contract and sold the general store. In the same year Keysville’s population totaled approximately 2500 residents, many of whom worked in the phosphate industry.x

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iii. “Keysville Items,” The Sunland Tribune July 15, 1880, 4; “Keysville Items,” The Sunland Tribune

v. “The Alafia Section,” The Sunland Tribune March 26, 1881, 2


