

# Black History Month

## A Florida Focus

### A CIVICS IN REAL LIFE SERIES: CIVICS CONNECTION SPOTLIGHT

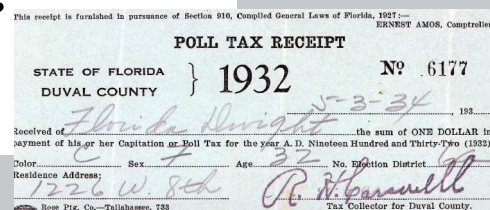
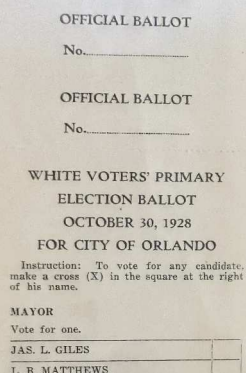
#### Spotlight #14: Voter Suppression

Florida looked very different after the [Civil War](#) than it does today. In 1865, Florida was the least populated state east of the Mississippi, and about half of the population was black. In order to rejoin the Union after the war, Florida had to draft a [new constitution](#) that included the conditions, rights, and protections of the 13th, 14th, and 15th [Amendments](#). Immediately following, a large number of Black males registered to vote. [Nineteen Blacks](#) were elected to the Florida Legislature, and [Josiah Walls](#) became the first Black Congressman elected from Florida.

However, once [Reconstruction](#) ended, Florida began to implement legal means of discrimination and voter [suppression](#) aimed specifically at Blacks. In 1885, Florida ratified [another constitution](#) that segregated public schools, banned interracial marriage, and legalized many voter suppression methods. What made this constitutionally possible, given the addition of the [Reconstruction amendments](#) to the U.S. Constitution? The exact language of the [15th Amendment](#) states: The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. This amendment does not specifically give Blacks the right to vote but instead prohibits states from denying the right based on race. This language provided Florida and other Southern states a pathway to developing barriers that suppressed Black voters without violating the 15th Amendment. In 1889, Florida became the first state to legislate the “multiple ballot box” or “eight-box” law. This law required voters to cast votes on eight separate ballots and then place those ballots in eight corresponding ballot boxes. This law required voters to cast votes on eight separate ballots and then place those ballots in eight corresponding ballot boxes. As most Black voters were [illiterate](#), they could not read to know which ballot went in which box. White poll workers would claim they must “preserve the [secret ballot](#)” and, therefore, often denied Black voters assistance. In addition, whites in Florida used intimidation and violence to suppress votes as seen in the [Ocoee Massacre](#), [Rosewood Massacre](#), and the murder of [Harry and Harriette Moore](#). This violence perpetrated against Black voters was typically met with little legal ramifications. If charges were brought against perpetrators of these crimes, the individuals were often acquitted by all white juries. Florida also used [white primaries](#), [grandfather clauses](#), and [literacy tests](#) to suppress Black voters, but its most significant suppression method was use of the poll tax. Florida became the first state to implement a poll tax in 1889. It was an annual \$2 tax required for voting. As both blacks and whites had to pay the tax, it did not appear to discriminate. However, elected officials knew that the black population was very poor in Florida, making the poll tax a significant barrier to overcome for those voters. Candidates for office often paid the tax on behalf of poor white voters so they could cast their vote. Despite their widespread use throughout the South, it was Florida’s senior U.S. senator, [Spessard Holland](#), that led the charge to eliminate poll taxes when he introduced the [24th Amendment](#) to the US Constitution on the floor of the U.S. Senate in 1962. Two years later, in 1964, it was ratified.

### CONNECTION QUESTIONS

- How does the U.S. Constitution and its amendments safeguard individual rights?
- Why are free and fair elections important in a constitutional republic?
- How can governmental action impact voter participation?



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