

Ruskin

Little Manatee River Marsh Branch

8 pgs

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**HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY
HISTORIC RESOURCES SURVEY REPORT**

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Ruskin

Situated on the shores of the Little Manatee River and Ruskin Inlet, the first decade of the 20th century witnessed the birth of Ruskin. The town and college were named after John Ruskin, an English writer and critic who called for social reform and espoused the need for higher education for the masses. Born in 1819, John Ruskin died in 1900, eight years before the founding of the rural Florida town.ⁱ

Miller and Dickman are two family names intimately linked to the founding of Hillsborough County's socialist community. Born in 1857, Dr. George McAnelly Miller, a former Chicago prosecuting attorney and professor, became president of Ruskin College in Trenton, Missouri, in 1900. In April 1903, Dr. Miller founded a new Ruskin College in Glen Ellyn, a suburb of Chicago. Both colleges were based upon the ideal that all (White) people should have the opportunity to achieve a higher education. This goal was achieved by allowing poor students to work in industries and farms owned by the college. However, they were joined by their economically better off classmates, because the college required that all students study four hours and work four hours each day. Despite such applaudable goals, internal strife rocked the Trenton, Missouri, college. Additionally, local business leaders despised the college's cooperative stores. Consequently, antagonism grew between the two groups and the college suffered financially. Searching for greener pastures, Miller relocated the college to his old stomping ground of Chicago. Despite having an enrollment of 10,500 students its first year, internal strife and conflict with the surrounding community again drove Dr. Miller to search for a more hospitable environment.ⁱⁱ

Miller, along with his wife, Adeline, and children, traveled to Florida in 1903 looking for an isolated location, separated from an established business community. Not finding anything suiting his desires, the Millers boarded a train and headed for home. During the train ride, the college president met the Williams, turpentine still operators in Hillsborough County's vast wooded wilderness, who enthusiastically lauded the area's compatibility with Miller's needs. Three years later when lightning started a fire that destroyed much of the Glen Ellyn campus, Miller decided to relocate to Hillsborough. Moving with his family in 1906 to a hotel at Shell Point, located on the northern shore of the Little Manatee River directly across from Gulf City, Dr. Miller began trying to establish the school. When Albert Peter Dickman, Miller's brother-in-law, joined him in 1907, the two negotiated with Captain C.H. Davis for 13,000 acres stretching from the north shore of the Little Manatee River to Apollo Beach. Mr. Dickman, however, did not wholeheartedly share in Dr. Miller's socialist dreams, but viewed the prospect with a business eye. Mr. Dickman traded 550 acres of farm land near Greenridge, Missouri, owned by himself and his two brothers, L.L. and N.E. Dickman, as an initial down payment on the Florida real estate. Ironically, Dr. Miller built Ruskin on former turpentine land, an industry fueled by convict laborers who were trapped and exploited in one of Florida's harshest industries.ⁱⁱⁱ

Thus the seeds were sewed for the Ruskin community. Albert Dickman's family, including his wife, two children, and two brothers, arrived from Missouri by train at the

Wimauma depot, the closest train stop, in early 1908. They traveled eight miles west on a wagon track path to the abandoned turpentine camp buildings, setting up temporary homes and a school for the children. The families quickly erected a saw mill to facilitate the construction of their homes and those of prospective buyers. Mrs. Adaline D. Miller founded a post office on August 7, 1908. Within two years the Ruskin Commongood Society platted Ruskin on February 19, 1910, and filed the plat on March 9, 1910, in the Hillsborough County Court House. Setting aside lots for the college, the business district, two parks, and for the founding families, Dr. Miller began marketing the new community. As part of the cooperative ideology set forth by John Ruskin, every person who bought a piece of Ruskin property became members of The Ruskin Commongood Society. While proclaiming socialist ideals and gender equality, the Ruskin members, though, were a product of their time in other respects: only Whites were allowed to own or lease land in the community. After one year of advertising lots for sale, nearly seven thousand acres had been sold. New additions to the north, south, and west of the original plat were cleared and sold to prospective farmers for prices ranging from thirty to sixty-five dollars an acre. Albert Dickman built one of the first Ruskin homes. Finished in 1910, his three-story frame vernacular house had Queen Anne and Colonial Revival elements. Located on the banks of the Little Manatee River, this building is one of the few structures left standing from the founding of Ruskin.^{iv}

At the same time, the Millers began Ruskin College on property along Ruskin Inlet in 1910 with Dr. Miller serving as president and Adeline Miller serving as Vice President. The Commongood Society set aside ten percent of all land sales to help fund the school. Continuing with the college's former practices, students worked a portion of each day as part of their education and as a way to pay for tuition and board. Offering three years of preparatory classes, students could then attend the college, taking classes in art, drama, language, literature, music, shorthand, social sciences, and speech. Besides the college dormitories built of lumber taken off the Dickman lands, Adaline Miller, Dr. Miller's wife, designed a three-story house with Swiss chalet and bungalow features in 1912. The home also served as classrooms for students, as a guest house for college visitors, and as the social and cultural nexus for the community. Officially incorporated on April 23, 1913, the school grew during the following years with enrollment peaking at 160 students. However, with the onslaught of World War I students left for the European battlefield or war time work in the cities, and the college shut its door permanently. In 1918 a fire roared through the campus, destroying everything in its wake except one building, Dr. & Mrs. Miller's house. Finally, in August 1919, the venerable Dr. Miller passed away while on a book promotion tour in Ohio.^v

By 1913, the community could boast about a cooperative general store conducting approximately \$25,000 of business a year, a canning factory, a telephone system, an electric plant supplying electricity to both public and private buildings, a weekly paper, and regular boat freight and passenger service to Tampa. In the beginning, boat service constituted people's only real means of transportation to and from the city of Tampa. A posted road existed from Ruskin to Tampa, via Riverview, but a one way trip took approximately eight hours if the roads were dry. After confronting the area's roads, Albert Dickman bought a boat named *The Kilcare* and began service between Ruskin and

Tampa. This allowed prospective buyers to avoid the dirt road from Wimauma, instead traveling by boat from Tampa. The colonists also built 25 miles of roads by 1913, improving transportation between Ruskin and its hinter land. During this initial road building era the foundation of U.S. 301 was laid, but it was known then as “The Wire Road” because of telegraph and telephone lines along side it. At this time U.S. 41 constituted nothing more than a nine foot wide shell road payed for by a \$30,000 local bond issue. Because of the growing importance of truck farming, these roads and others were built to facilitate the transportation of produce to local markets throughout the 1920s. Further aiding the truck growing business, the railroad reached Ruskin when a track connecting Ruskin to the Seaboard Airline Railroad line in Morris Park was built in 1913. Because of the demand for land in and around Ruskin, Dr. Miller, the Dickman brothers, and others bought approximately 11,000 acres of land ten miles east of Ruskin, to sell prospective buyers. They named this colony Morris Park. On the eve of the college’s demise in 1918, Ruskin had a population of 200. The majority of people appeared to have been truck growers. These residents supported a saw mill, a turpentine still, a syrup factory, a black smith, a newspaper, a lawyer, two carpenters, and three general stores. Rachel W. Billings served as postmaster and as the Universalist Reverend. With this foundation, it is not surprising that even with the destruction of the college the colony survived.^{vi}

While speculators were reaping fortunes from Florida’s real estate in 1925, Ruskin’s population remained at 200. Rachel Billings still served as the community’s postmaster and reverend. Furthermore, Ruskin had six hotels, two saw mills, one turpentine still, a public library, the Ruskin Telephone Company, four groceries, one garage, a well driller, two restaurants, a dry goods dealer, a carpenter, and a number of fruit and truck growers. Additionally, because of the road developments auto service was provided to Brandon, Tampa, and Wimauma.^{vii} Despite the physical loss of the college and its founder, much of the socialist and educational ideals lingered on in Ruskin, as witnessed in this 1925 description of the community:

There are many attractive homes on the highway and scattered along the river and inlet are comfortable, homey places, inhabited by a people who spend the greater part of the year, or all of it in Ruskin.

The town is quaint because the planted things have been allowed in many instances to have their own way in growing. Fields look like fairy dells, with the ferns and tropical growth and in some of the gardens are fountains and stone seats. One can see the productivity of the soil by looking at the gardens where everything has been gardened by Nature.

Some of the fields have been cultivated and tomatoes, cabbages, onions and other crops are being raised. There is a nursery established for ornamentals on a favorable site, and in all probability it will become a pretentious place. Thousands of palms are ready for the demand of the markets and streets are being graded in certain portions of the town that lie off the highway....The social life of the town is commendable. The

women have organized four or five clubs, ranging from the Woman's Twentieth Century Club of the League of Women Voters. A new school is being erected, as well as a church. Every attention is given to the education and social life of the residents. As the town was originally the site of a college, the atmosphere of a college community has never been lost, and the appreciation of the people for the finer things of life is shown in the existence of the Literary Club started many years ago.

Ruskin is inviting. It attracts the man who wants to live quietly and at the same time in close proximity to much activity and life.^{viii}

In 1930 Ruskin's population reached 709, consisting of 395 males and 314 females. Despite the deed restrictions against African Americans owning or leasing property, 140 Blacks resided in Ruskin. The rest of the population was White, of whom 514 were native and 52 were foreign born. Three companies operated in Ruskin in 1935 despite the Depression and a drop to 600 residents: Florida Power & Light Company; Ruskin Telephone, Electric Light and Power Company, Inc.; and Ruskin Trailer Company. Prominent local families had a controlling interest in the Ruskin Telephone, Electric Light and Power Company where Mrs. A.D. Miller served as president, Paul Dickman (discussed below) as treasurer, and Mrs. Frances Powell as secretary.^{ix} According to a 1930s description of Ruskin, because of its agricultural roots, the town weathered the depression:

The soil of Ruskin farms is especially adapted to growing tomatoes. There is a large area of muck land under-laid with marl in this region. The marl base allows irrigation of crops without loss of fertilizer, as the marl prevents the fertilizer from washing too deep into the soil. Irrigation is no problem for Ruskin is favored with numerous artesian wells.

Due to the rapid growth of tomato culture and a cooperative arrangement among Ruskin farmers, the town has taken a new lease on life and again is a thriving community. It has a canning plant which employs 65 workers, a community hall and a modern schoolhouse.^x

As part of an attempt to attract visitors to Ruskin and to celebrate the area's agricultural richness, the community instituted the annual springtime Ruskin Tomato Festival in 1935 where vegetables were displayed and the community's most popular woman was voted as queen. This event continued through to the 1950s. By 1960 it was changed to Ruskin Days, focusing more upon the Ruskin community and less upon the Ruskin produce.^{xi} It appears that the festival and the agricultural business were a success. In 1945 Ruskin's population tripled to 1975, consisting of 1692 Whites and 283 Blacks. With many Ruskin residents working in Tampa during World War II, Tampanians began hearing of the benefits of the rural community. Shortly after the war, Ruskin slowly became more and more suburban as people not related to the agricultural business moved into the community.^{xii}

Much of the area's post Ruskin College success is attributed to one person, Paul

Dickman. As the land boom peaked and crashed in the late 1920s, Paul Dickman, son of Albert Dickman, returned to the agricultural community. He would eventually place Ruskin on the map as “America’s Salad Bowl.” Like many of Ruskin’s youth, Paul Dickman attended Ruskin College. Just a few credits shy of graduating with a degree in engineering, he was drafted into the Army during World War I. Due to his college experience, the Army placed Paul Dickman into artillery officers’ training school. However, the war ended and Paul Dickman returned home. While working with his father in the family owned sawmill business, Paul Dickman finished his college degree. Paul Dickman, however, moved on to bigger prospects in the 1924, selling real estate in Tampa. When the bottom fell out of the market, he lost everything but the 2300 acres he owned in Ruskin. Returning to his former home, he set out to farm his property in 1928, beginning with an acre and a half planted in tomatoes and pepper.^{xiii}

Weathering the depression and prospering during World War II, by 1950 Paul Dickman farmed approximately 1200 acres a year, growing more than 20 types of crops, such as corn, tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers, eggplants, peppers, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, squash, and watermelons. Mr. Dickman also grew 80 acres of citrus and raised cattle on 3600 acres. On his farm, the produce was grown, harvested, trimmed, washed, pre-cooled, and packaged in cellophane before being shipped to grocery stores throughout the South and the East in yellow colored refrigerated trucks. Furthermore, Mr. Dickman grew vegetables nine months a year. During the summer months he grew crops that replenished the soil with nutrients, allowing northern shoppers to have “fresh” vegetables year round. Not allowing anything to go unused, much of the waste byproduct of his produce was sold as cattle feed. Because of his engineering background, Mr. Dickman designed farm equipment, such as a tomato harrower. Embodying some of the early Ruskin ideals of his youth, in 1941 Mr. Dickman was a founding member of Ruskin Vegetable cooperative, a packing cooperative of Ruskin farmers, and the Ruskin Vegetable Distributors, a sales organization. Because of his success and innovations, Mr. Dickman became a spokesperson for Florida farmers, attending agricultural meetings throughout the country and advising the government on farm issues. Not forgetting his real estate roots, Mr. Dickman began developing land holdings in Ruskin for northern immigrants. In 1956 he sold 6000 acres for ten million dollars. Had it not been for the efforts of Mr. Dickman, Ruskin would be a very different place today.^{xiv}

The seeds of change began to sprout during the 1970s. In 1960, Ruskin was still very rural and had a population of 1894. Agriculture dominated Ruskin throughout the 1970s, but its influence began to wane. The greater Ruskin area’s population reached 17,000 by 1975, many of whom were not farmers, but suburbanites. By 1982, Ruskin produced approximately 3000 acres of tomatoes a year, and one of the world’s largest tomato packing houses operated in nearby Apollo Beach. However, flower farms, phosphate, real estate, and tropical fish farms also became important economic engines for Ruskin that began encroaching upon farmland. Despite this invasion, farmers grew approximately \$15 million worth of produce yearly in the late 1980s. Poor crop yields in the mid to late-1980s drove some farmers to the wall. Many borrowed money, sometimes as much as \$500,000, against their land to plant their crops. Consequently, many farmers were forced out of business, and others chose to leave farming forever.

Due to the impact of the North Atlantic Trade Agreement in the 1990s which allowed Mexican tomatoes to flood the U.S. market and with ever increasing water restrictions, tomato acreage continued to decline. Less than half the number of acres planted with tomatoes in the early 1990s were planted in 1997. While farm produce has declined, it still is important to the local area, and Ruskin today is prosperous and continues to grow.^{xv}

i. Lori Robinson and Bill De Young, "Socialism in the Sunshine: The Roots of Ruskin, Florida," *Tampa Bay History* 4(1)(1982), 5; Katherine Baker Siepmann, ed., *Benét's Reader's Encyclopedia*, Third Edition (NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 853.

ii. Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida*, Volume II, 568; "Interurban Railroad Development Planned by the Ruskin Colonists," *Tampa Tribune* February 2, 1913, 18; Robinson and De Young, "Socialism in the Sunshine," 5-6.

iii. Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida*, Volume II, 16; "Interurban Railroad Development Planned by the Ruskin Colonists," 18; "The Early History of Ruskin: Notes Based Upon the Williams Family and Other Area Residents Etc., Notes Based Upon Mr. Paul Dickman and Other Area Residents," (no author, USF Special Collections, no date), 1; Robinson and De Young, "Socialism in the Sunshine," 7.

iv. Bailey, "A Study of Hillsborough County's History, Legend, and Folk Lore, with Implications for the Curriculum," 264; Bradbury and Hallock, *A Chronology of Florida Post Offices*, 73; "Interurban Railroad Development Planned by the Ruskin Colonists," 18; M.C. Bob Leonard, comp., "Ruskin Topics: Notes on Hillsborough's Utopian Community," March 10, 1977 (unpublished manuscript, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library), 8,22; Carol Neef, "Best of Past Retained in Updating Ruskin House," *Tampa Tribune* November 29, 1970, 1-H; Plat Book 5, Page 75, Sheet 1 and 2, Clerk of the Circuit Court of Hillsborough County, Tampa, Fl; *Ruskin Colony Lands* map, March 9, 1910 (A.P. Dickman House file, Hillsborough County's Planning and Growth Management Department); "The Early History of Ruskin," 1-4.

v. Articles of Incorporation, Book 8, pages 62-66, Clerk of the Circuit Court of Hillsborough County, Tampa, Fl; Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida*, Volume I, 314; Karen De Young, "Ruskin: The Years Wear Thin a Dream," *St. Petersburg Times* May 9, 1974, 3-D; Richard Dodge, "History Fills Miller Home," *Tampa Times* April 4, 1975, 1-D; "The Early History of Ruskin," 5; HTHCPB, *The Cultural Resources of the Unincorporated Portions of Hillsborough County*, 49; Gloria Jahoda, *River on the Golden Ibis* (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 352; Aleta Jonie Maschek, *A Piece of History* (n.p.: The Shopper Observer News, circa 1995), 5; Carol Neef, "Ruskin Landmark is Dedicated," *East Hillsborough Tribune* February 26, 1976; Robinson and De Young, "Socialism in the Sunshine," 10.

vi. *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1918*, 500; "The Early History of Ruskin," 3-4; "Interurban Railroad Development Planned by the Ruskin Colonists," 18,23; Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County, Florida*, 123; Robinson and De Young, "Socialism in the Sunshine," 11,13-14.

vii. *Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1925*, 789.

viii. *Rinaldi's Official Guide of South Florida* (Tampa, Fl: Rinaldi Printing Company, 1925), 281.

ix. Florida State Chamber of Commerce and Florida Emergency Relief Administration, comp., *Industrial Directory of Florida, 1935-36*, 151; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Population Bulletin, Second Series, Florida Composition and Characteristics of the Population*, 51. Three people are unaccounted for in the 1930 Census. If one adds up the total number of people of color (140) with the total number of Whites (566), the total population comes to 706, not 709. It is unknown if

these three people were White or Black, foreign or native.

x. Federal Writers' Project, *Seeing Tampa*, 121-122.

xi. Federal Writers' Project, *Florida*, 403; Walt Robshaw, "Ruskin Days Mark 50th Anniversary," *Tampa Times* March 1, 1960; Cindy Rupert, "Ruskin Wants to Lure Tourists with an Eye for Nature," *Tampa Tribune* November 15, 1997, 1-Brandon/South Bay; "Two-Day Program to Mark Ruskin 50th Anniversary," *Tampa Tribune* March 24, 1960, 2-B.

xii. Robinson and De Young, "Socialism in the Sunshine," 17; *The Seventh Census of the State of Florida, 1945*, 32.

xiii. Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida*, Volume I, 397; Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida*, Volume II, 16; "The Early History of Ruskin," 4; Lucy O'Brien, "Paul Dickman Builds Industry from West Coast's Fertility," *Tampa Tribune* May 8, 1949, 4-A.

xiv. Al Burt, "The Father of Ruskin' Remembers the Past," *The Miami Herald* December 28, 1975, 4-E; Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida*, Volume I, 397; Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida*, Volume II, 16-17; "Farm Magazine Honors Dickman," *Tampa Tribune* October 15, 1950, 17-B; Grismer, *Tampa*, 305; O'Brien, "Paul Dickman Builds Industry From West Coast's Fertility," 4-A.

xv. Burt, "The Father of Ruskin' Remembers the Past," 4-E; *Hillsborough County Florida Public Schools*, 3; Jahoda, *River on the Golden Ibis*, 351, 354; Lindsay Peters, "Land-Rich Seek Out Niche," *Tampa Tribune* July 5, 1993, 2-North Tampa; Robinson and De Young, "Socialism in the Sunshine," 17; Rupert, "Ruskin wants to Lure Tourists with an Eye for Nature," 1-Brandon/South Bay; Jennifer L. Stevenson, "Ruskin: a Utopia Out of Time," *St. Petersburg Times* September 4, 1989.