Photograph of Elizabeth Sundy, her 8 children, and others at the Sundy beach cottage. The young woman in the middle with glasses is Addie, male to her right is Ben, Sadie is the young woman in front of Ben, the male to right of Sadie is John Dewey, and Elizabeth Sundy is the woman on far right. Courtesy Delray Beach Historical Society.

The Tustenegee
The Sundys of Delray Beach

By Dorothy W. Patterson

The Sundy family was a valuable addition to the handful of settler families who had arrived in Delray by 1899. John Shaw and Elizabeth Sundy and their children (eight by 1911) appear to have blended hard work, duty, creativity, and joie de vivre, attributes that came in handy for helping to build a new community.
said that Mr. Flagler tried to talk John Sundy into staying with the railroad. Two of the Sundy daughters, Addie and Sadie, remembered visiting Flagler’s home, Whitehall, with their father.

When the Sundys built their house in Delray, they had three children. Five more were born by 1911. Their father worked as a farmer, politician, and businessman. While their mother taught Latin at the Delray School. The children were Benjamin (Ben) Franklin (1897), Adelaide (Addie) Marsh (1898), John Dewey (1899), Sarah (Sadie) Margaret (1900), Glenn Brooks (1903), Elizabeth Kathryn (1906), Daisy Emmaline (1908), and Edward (Pete) Allen (1911).

A representative of the new Historical Society of Palm Beach County interviewed John Sundy in 1937. Illuminating his personality, his responses consist mainly of praise for other pioneers of Delray Beach. He also praises “our women” who he says “were always very public spirited. They organized the first civic improvement organization, the Women’s Improvement Association. They took the lead at once in civic development, going ahead in their own plans and encouraging the men with theirs.” This appreciation and recognition of the accomplishments of others may have been a reason he was elected the first mayor of the town and was reelected six more times. His sense of humor also may have been part of the reason. Mr. Sundy served as a city judge for several years. His daughter, Daisy, later said to a reporter that his court sessions were well-attended because of his wit.

This evidence of good nature is also reflected in his treatment of his family. Their house was set on two acres. Sundy built a white picket fence and playhouse in an effort to help his wife keep the children at home when they were toddlers. He provided the family with a beach cottage so that summers would be cooler for them. He had a standing order every Saturday for half a beef cow to be sent from Ft. Pierce by train. What the family could not use for Sunday dinner, Sundy cut up and sold to other families in town. The Delray settlers of 1895 to about 1905 had few work animals. The Sundys owned a horse and wagon, when it was rare to have one in town, and a mule or two along with a flock of laying hens.

After settling in Delray, Mr. Sundy began raising pineapples and tomatoes in nearby fields. He purchased a tomato packing house on Railroad Avenue about 1913 and converted it into the Sundy Feed and Fertilizer Store.

The legacy of the Sundy family can be described as community service of an outstanding nature. John Sundy was proud to be a part of setting Delray on a conservative fiscal path, and during his term of office he started and completed improvements such as bonding the town soon after its 1911 incorporation, establishing a municipal water and light plant, building a bridge across the canal (now the Intracoastal Waterway), and all the while maintaining a nominal tax rate. In order to keep taxes low the city waited several years before starting street improvements. They were helped with money

Elizabeth and John came from mainly Scottish families who settled in the Cumberland County, North Carolina, area in the late 18th century. John’s father (also named John) served briefly in the Confederate Army. When John Shaw Sundy was a boy, his parents and three siblings moved to Cheraw, South Carolina, where they are found on the 1870 U.S. Census. The head of household’s occupation is listed as harness-maker. John Shaw Sundy’s mother, Sarah Margaret, was remembered by her family as someone who wrote letters for illiterate people in her community.

John married Elizabeth before he left Cheraw, South Carolina, in September 1895, to take a job in West Palm Beach with the Florida East Coast (FEC) Railway as a construction foreman. Along with the sounds of sledge hammers and workers’ chants, his family followed the track construction toward Delray. In 1899 they settled in Delray and lived in a section house until 1902. That year they moved into their new home at 106 South Swinton Avenue. John Sundy resigned his railroad job a few years later. Decades afterwards, the family reminisced fondly about his employer, Henry Flagler.
and materials to pave the streets by Henry Flagler after he and “his right-hand man, Mr. Parrott” came to Delray on railroad business and got their car stuck for over an hour at the station.

Elizabeth Sundy was one of the 1902 founders of the Ladies Improvement Association, later the Woman’s Club. In addition to teaching at the Delray School, she was also chairman of the Board of Trustees of the school. Mrs. Sundy was one of twelve charter members of the Baptist Church in Delray. In fact, the organizing meeting for the church was held at the Sundy home.

The children of John and Elizabeth Sundy continued their parents’ record of community service: Ben was elected to the Delray Beach City Council and served for twelve years as a Palm Beach County Commissioner (1950-62). He was active in at least ten different civic, social, and church organizations.

Addie grew up with Delray Beach and lived to be 93. After her father retired, she managed the family’s feed and fertilizer business for fifty years. She and Sadie never married and always lived in the house their parents had built. Saying, “Don’t think we lived a monotonous life,” the sisters then recounted how they traveled to all the states but two and to foreign countries.

Sadie was a nature-lover who hung over 500 orchid plants on long clotheslines in the back yard. They were both gracious in giving interviews and made their home available for club and Historical Society meetings, tours, and events. Addie was President of the Zonta Club (a club for businesswomen) and the Evening Garden Club.

Glen, a Delray real estate agent during the boom time of the mid-1920s, went to Missouri, but after a few years returned home to open Sundy’s Men’s Wear on Atlantic Avenue. He was elected Mayor of Delray Beach in 1960 and participated in several local organizations.

Some of the children went to other areas of the country. But at least two of them returned. Daisy married Joe Meehan and moved to North Carolina. After Joe retired, they returned and opened Joe Meehan’s Men’s Clothing in Boca Raton’s Royal Palm Plaza. Pete Sundy also moved to North Carolina but came back for a while to help Addie and Sadie in the 1980s when they had become frail due to aging.

In addition to their community service, the Sundys are remembered through the two buildings they left behind, their home and their place of business. Currently, the 111-year-old Sundy family home is one of the oldest surviving houses in Delray Beach. The house has become a Delray Beach icon of the past. It was used as the logo for the City’s Diamond Jubilee (75th anniversary of incorporation) in 1986. Built of wood shipped by rail from Georgia, the house was described by John Johnson of the Palm Beach County Preservation Board as a “solid Vernacular style with decorative gingerbread and stick work in the gables and over-hangs.”

The inventive and resourceful John Sundy built a windmill before city water was available and as a result had running water in the home. Inheriting their father’s knack for handiwork, in the 1920s the Sundy sons constructed a solar water heater that was used as long as family members lived there. As a young man, John Dewey Sundy made two silver vases that are on permanent display in the house.

The original Delray homestead was owned and lived in by family members until 1990 when it was purchased for use as a restaurant and tea-room. Daisy, the last surviving daughter, was invited by the new owners to greet patrons and recount the history of the house. The Sundy property is located in Delray’s largest historic district—the Old School Square Historic Arts District—and is on the National Register of Historic Places. At the present time it is the site of the Sundy House Restaurant.

The family sold the Sundy Feed and Fertilizer Store in 1977. Always a rough, rustic building beside the tracks on Railroad Avenue, it has also been preserved, and in 1991 it was moved to the grounds of the Morikami Museum. It traveled again to Yesteryear Village at the Florida Fair Grounds a few years later, where it is a part of the Agriplex and stands as tangible evidence of Delray Beach’s agricultural heritage.

The record indicates that the Sundys were a happy family. A Delray Beach News reporter who interviewed Elizabeth Sundy about 1950 wrote, “People in town will remember the numerous parties held in the house.” Sadie always had a quip for reporters such as: “No, we had no closets then because we had no clothes.” She said at the conclusion of an interview with Shari Bergom of the Post Times in April of 1978, “There’s been a lot of happy living here.”

Although John and Elizabeth Sundy and their children are no longer living, they have left behind an inspiring family
Officials meet at the old Sundy Feed and Fertilizer Store on Railroad Avenue (between Atlantic and NE 1st Avenues) to watch start of moving the store to Morikami Park. Pictured here are Delray Beach Fire Chief, Kerry Koen, John Tallentire, part owner, and Pat Healy-Golembe Chairman of the Historic Palm Beach County Preservation Board. Tom Marlock (at the door) is preparing the store for the move, March 6, 1991. Photograph by Jack Hutton. Courtesy Delray Beach Historical Society.

The Tustenegee

Photograph of a Seminole dress given to Addie Sundy. As a child, Addie traded salt to the Seminoles for huckleberries. The Seminoles also came to the Sundy Feed Store when Addie managed it from 1925 to 1975. Addie’s niece, Elizabeth Sundy Sears, sent the photograph to the DBHS saying that Addie wore the dress every year in the Fourth of July parade. Courtesy Delray Beach Historical Society.

story and an indelible mark on Delray Beach history.

Bibliography
Information for this article was gathered from the archives of the Delray Beach Historical Society, and the 1870 and 1880 Federal Census.

About the Author
Dorothy W. Patterson has worked at the Delray Beach Historical Society for 21 years. She attended Emory University and graduated from the University of Florida and Florida Atlantic University. Ms. Patterson co-wrote Postcard History~Delray Beach and The La France Hotel. She has written magazine, newspaper and newsletter articles about Delray Beach for the past 25 years. In addition Patterson has created over 40 local history exhibits during her employment as archivist with the DBHS.