GUEST EDITOR'S NOTE

THROUGH THE SKEPTIC NIGHT

True stories, well told, offer a corrective to the threat of historical erasure in Florida.

BY ROSALIND BENTLEY

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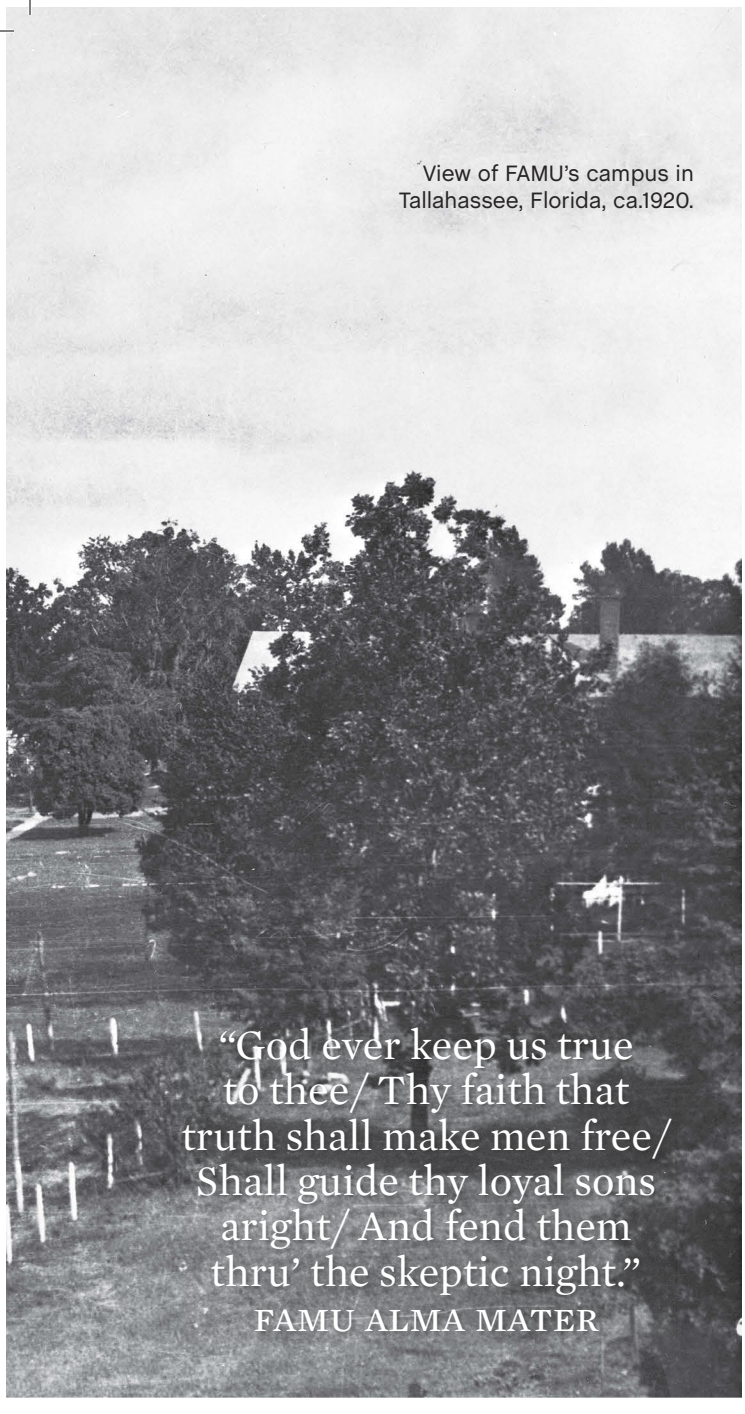
AS I READ AN ASSOCIATED PRESS ARTICLE this spring about a proposed Florida bill that would prohibit elementary school girls from discussing their periods in public school classrooms, I began second-guessing my decision to feature my home state in the summer issue of *Gravy*.

By mid-May, after the legislative session ended, the NAACP issued a travel advisory warning African Americans, people of color, and LGBTQ people, that, due to new state laws, Florida probably isn't a safe vacation spot. This warning follows last year's passage of House Bill 7, also known as the "Stop WOKE Act." It prohibits the teaching of history—from kindergarten through college—in a manner that might make a person "feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress," about their race, or the way their ancestors treated a person of another race or sex. I've read the law. It allows public schools to teach about slavery, Jim Crow, the civil rights movement, "Hispanic contributions" and "women's contributions to the United States." Just not in a way that makes anyone uncomfortable or that suggests harrowing and discriminatory events fundamentally shaped the nation and continue to have lasting fallout. (And there's no mention of Native American or LGBTQ history.)

For months now, I've kept a log of such stories



View of FAMU's campus in Tallahassee, Florida, ca.1920.

under the header, "For Florida issue." Not that I wanted this volume to center these events, but I did not want to ignore them, either. As the list neared twenty, I stopped counting.

It's been a little more than a year now since I became deputy editor of SFA. But over its history, *Gravy* has never had a Florida theme. As a sixth-generation Floridian, I felt this omission exemplified the flawed notion held by many that the Sunshine State isn't part of the South. As though we're an outlier; a place with contiguous geography to the rest of the region but somehow in our own category, like...Texas. In it, but not entirely of it. Since SFA's theme this year is "Where is the South?" now seemed the right time to say, "It's from Pensacola to Key West!"

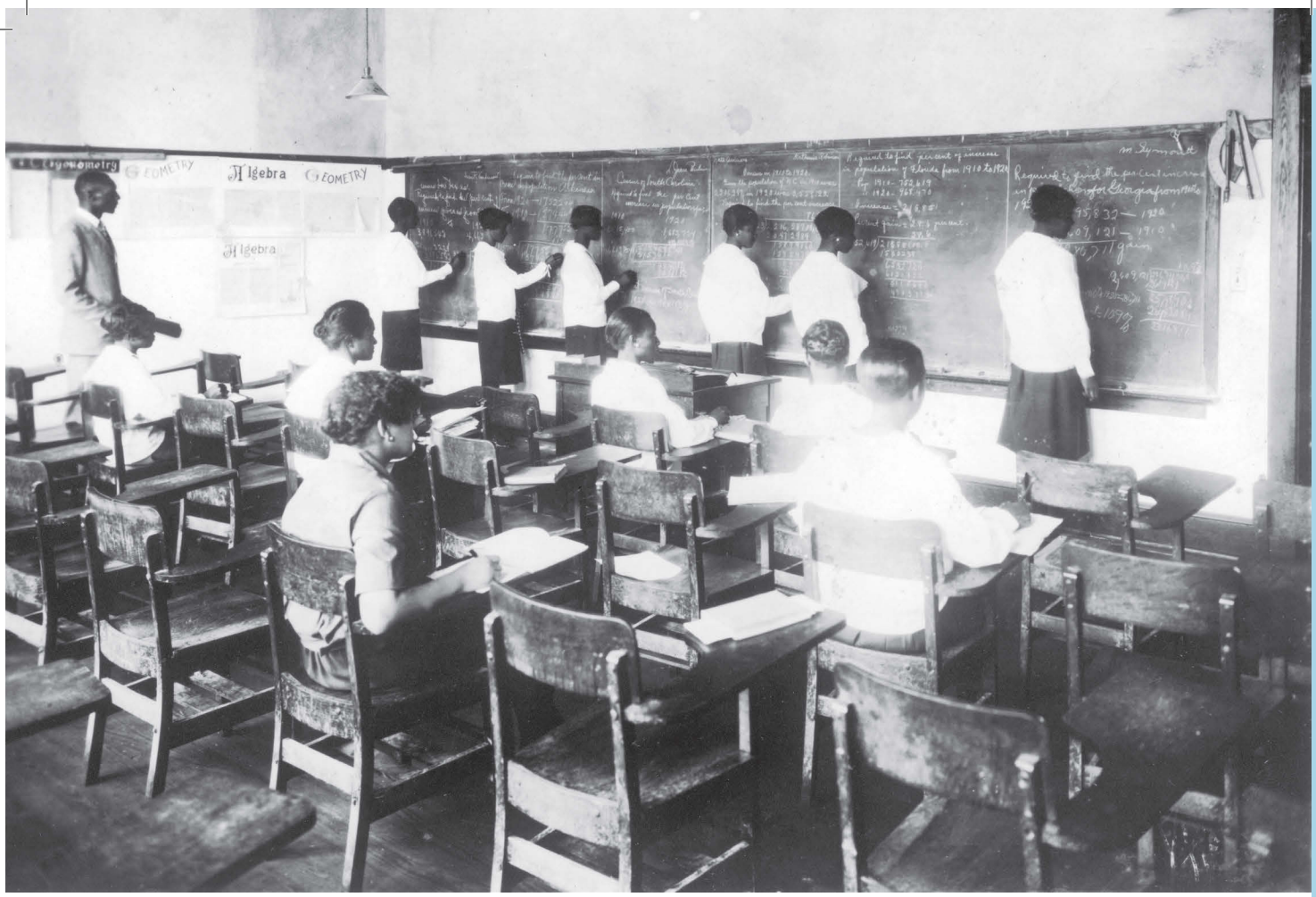
But then cities started canceling Pride parades because organizers say this new climate feels "unsafe," and Toni Morrison's classic *The Bluest Eye* was removed from all high school libraries in at least one county. And here I wanted to talk about swamp cabbage, oranges, and Cuban sandwiches and their place in the Southern culinary cannon.

Though I now live in Georgia, Florida's Panhandle is my cradle. I center it in essays about how my ancestors endured in the Sunshine State from enslavement until now. I mourn the loss of Apalachicola oysters. I prefer Tupelo honey to orange blossom. Fried mullet is king. All of which makes this moment so difficult. Those are foods we all can enjoy, regardless of race or identity, yet it's important to sit and reckon with the histories that brought each of us to the table.

As a third-generation graduate of Florida A&M University (FAMU), the only HBCU in the state's university system, I know this moment isn't a historical anomaly. Exactly one hundred years ago in October, students at my alma mater staged a walkout and burned down several campus buildings to protest a push by state officials to make FAMU a vocational training school for "Negroes," rather than a full-fledged liberal arts college to enrich Black minds. According to *The New Negro on Campus: Black College Rebellions of the 1920s*, by Raymond Wolters, given its location "in the Florida panhandle—where many whites feared that liberal training would ruin good field hands—the college inevitably came in for criticism." One of the buildings students torched: the Mechanical Arts Building.

Though the "Stop WOKE Act" currently is enforced in K–12 public schools, last fall a federal court injunction stopped its implementation on university campuses—for now. The judge who issued the order called the law "positively dystopian." There's another passage in the act prohibiting instruction that suggests a person bears any responsibility for what their ancestors did to another race or sex. I'm trying to fathom what it might mean for my alma mater if a higher court reverses the current ruling—a Black college barred from talking about systemic racism.

I visited FAMU's campus recently, just to see how things had changed since my last trip home in 2022. My mom came along. She, too, is a FAMU alumna who later worked on campus for nearly



A mathematics class at FAMU in Tallahassee, Florida, ca. 1920.

forty years as an administrator in the Office of Continuing Education. One of our school slogans is "On the highest of seven hills." Tallahassee, the seat of Leon County, is situated near the southernmost point of the Red Hills region, which links the Panhandle coast to south Georgia. Leon County was one of six counties along the Georgia border, called Middle Florida, that was fertile cotton territory in the 1800s. At one point, enslaved Black people outnumbered white folks at least three to one. In 1887, the school was founded—literally—on the other side of the railroad tracks of the Tallahassee Railroad Company depot, through which thousands of cotton bales were shipped. That's how we landed on the highest hill. Later, those same tracks delivered students to the foot of campus.

Mom and I went to the pinnacle, the site of a new performing arts amphitheater named for Will Packer, a major Hollywood producer and FAMU alum. We looked down the slope where the women's dormitories once stood. Farther down, the university administration building still stands. When I was an undergrad, my friends teased me by saying I was born in the financial aid office. It's true that I was on student aid. But before it was the Foote-Hilyer Administration Center, the sprawling brick edifice was the only area hospital during segregation where Black mothers could give birth. I'm not sure what floor housed the maternity ward, but that's where I was born, just a few months before passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

About a mile away from the amphitheater, above the live oak tree line, we could see some of the city's tallest structures: the Turlington Building, home to the state department of education, and the Capitol tower, an unfortunate 1977 addition to the more elegant, classical 1845 statehouse. Scholars say the enslaved built the nineteenth-century classical revival legislative hall. In all the times I visited the historic grounds on school field trips, never once was that fact shared.

Now that I know, it's up to me—and others who love this state as much as I do—to tell this hard history with honesty and pride. It belongs to all Floridians. I can't control how other people feel, but I can give them the truth to think about.

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