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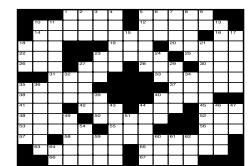
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Photos courtesy St. Johns County Clerk of the Circuit Court and Comptroller
Couples exchange vows during the St. Johns County Clerk's Office annual Valentine's Day group wedding ceremony in 2025 at The Carriage House in St. Augustine.

Valentine Vows

NewsLine staff

The St. Johns County Clerk of the Circuit Court and County Comptroller's Office will host its annual Valentine's Day group wedding and vow renewal ceremony Feb. 13 at 1 p.m. at The Carriage House in St. Augustine.

"Officiating marriages is one of our Office's most joyous duties," said Clerk Brandon J. Patty in a release. "We are excited to celebrate marriages and love with this year's Valentine's Day group wedding and vow renewal at The Carriage House."

The ceremony is limited to the first 50 couples who register online at <https://stjohnsclerk.com/wedding> by Monday, Feb. 9.

The ceremony costs \$30. Couples getting married are also required to purchase a marriage license and adhere to any waiting period.

Valentine Vows cont. on pg. 6

Future Leaders



Photos courtesy Anwita Iyengar
From left, the Florida FBLA District 27 officer team includes Shawn Saint-Vilus, district vice president from Ridgeview High School; Joshua Read, district president and chapter vice president from Creekside High School; Joshua Chun, district treasurer from Ridgeview High School; Maya Kawada, district secretary from Ponte Vedra High School; Julia Provenzano, district historian and chapter president from Creekside High School; Anwita Iyengar, district president-elect and chapter secretary from Creekside High School; and Sahara Jansson, district reporter and chapter junior officer from Creekside High School.

Creekside High School FBLA leads community service initiatives

By Tracy McCormick-Dishman
editor@floridanewsline.com

With 310 active members, Creekside High School's Future Business Leaders of America chapter has become the school's largest co-curricular club and one of its most active in community service.

The organization balances developing business leadership skills with community involvement, according to Anwita Iyengar, 16, the chapter's secretary and district president-elect.

"Our club and the organization really prioritize being involved in the community and just making sure all students have the most opportunities that they can," Iyengar said.

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Photos courtesy Anwita Iyengar
From left, Saniya Aleem, chapter junior officer at Creekside High School; Sahara Jansson, district reporter and chapter junior officer at Creekside High School; and Maya Kawada, district secretary at Ponte Vedra High School, participate in a holiday card-making event from Creekside High School; and Sahara Jansson, district reporter and chapter junior officer from Creekside High School.

to Feeding Northeast Florida in Jacksonville through their Feeding Florida campus drive.

"Because our club is so huge, we are anticipating a lot of participation," Iyengar said.

The chapter also partners with the Alzheimer's Association at the national level. Members collect aluminum cans to take to a nearby recycling center, which

pays the club for the donations. Those funds are then donated to the Alzheimer's Association.

"We're actually able to give back to the association we're working with, while also helping out our community and taking priority in recycling and just being there for the environment," Iyengar said.

Future Leaders cont. on pg. 2

INK! announces 2026 Teacher of the Year finalists luncheon

NewsLine staff

The St. Johns County Education Foundation, better known as Investing in Kids, recognizes the dedicated teaching community each year with two prestigious awards: Teacher of the Year and Rookie Teacher of the Year, according to a recent release.

On Dec. 16, representatives of INK! surprised the five Teacher of the Year finalists in the classroom, sharing the exciting news and including students in the celebration, the release said. This year's finalists for Teacher of the Year, selected from a pool of 50 nominees, are Pauline Harris, Kylie Benetsky, Denise Shedlock, Sabina Atic and Katelin Bonner, according to the release.

The St. Johns County District Teacher of the Year and Rookie Teacher of the Year were to be announced Thursday, Jan. 15, during a ceremony at the World Golf Village Renaissance St. Augustine Resort, the release said.

"Because teachers are nominated by their peers, this recognition speaks volumes



Photos courtesy St. Johns County School District
Pauline Harris



Photos courtesy St. Johns County School District
Kylie Benetsky



Photos courtesy St. Johns County School District
Denise Shedlock



Photos courtesy St. Johns County School District
Sabina Atic



Photos courtesy St. Johns County School District
Katelin Bonner

about each nominee's impact both inside and beyond the classroom," said the release.

Themed "Our Teachers Light a Spark," the awards ceremony also recognizes the nearly 100 educators who were named Teacher or Rookie Teacher of the Year at their schools throughout St. Johns County, the release said. The Teacher of the Year represents St. Johns County at the annual State of Florida Teacher of the Year event. They also participate in a year-long professional development and leadership program with a cohort of Teachers of the Year from around the state, continued the release.

This year's finalists for Teacher of the Year are Pauline Harris, a sixth-grade math teacher at Valley Ridge Academy with 14 years of teaching experience; Kylie Benetsky, a sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade instructional coach at Switzerland Point Middle School with seven years of teaching experience; Denise Shedlock, a ninth-, 10th-, 11th- and 12th-grade science teacher at Creekside High School with 13 years of teaching experience; Sabina Atic, a 10th-, 11th- and 12th-grade biomedical science teacher at Beachside High School with seven years of teaching experience; and Katelin Bonner, a 10th-grade English II teacher at Pedro

Menendez High School with 16 years of teaching experience, the release said.

The St. Johns County Education Foundation promotes success for all St. Johns County public school students and teachers by providing innovative programs, teacher support, classroom resources and scholarships to benefit more than 52,000 students and approximately 3,200 teachers, according to the release.

Editor's note: The winners were announced after this publication went to press. Visit FloridaNewsLine.com for results.

Future Leaders cont. from pg. 1

On a more ongoing basis, chapter officers host financial literacy workshops at the Bartram Trail Library covering topics including budgeting, investing and taxes, specifically geared toward young adults.

"That's a really, really big skill that everyone we believe should go into adulthood with, not just our members," Iyengar said.

In December, the chapter held a holiday card-making campaign where members brought in cards over a two-and-a-half-week period. District officers, including several from Creekside, delivered the cards to local hospitals.

The chapter has also hosted an annual hot wings contest partnered with Hurricane Grilling Wings, where teachers raise funds and compete in the contest.

The club's competitive success matches its community involvement. This year, 182 Creekside students qualified to compete at the state competition in Orlando, where more than 6,000 members from across Florida participated in different competitive events. Five chapter members placed at the national competition.

Iyengar won first place in the International Business Competition at the district level in December. The event



Creekside High School FBLA members attend the Florida FBLA State Leadership Conference in March 2025.

Photos courtesy Anwita Iyengar

required taking a test on international business subjects, then advancing to a performance round where competitors analyze a case study and have 20 minutes to prepare a presentation for judges.

Last year, she placed fifth at state in the Local Chapter Annual Business Report event alongside chapter president Julia Provenzano and former chapter secretary Charlotte Romano. The report is a 16- to 17-page document outlining all chapter events and impacts throughout the year.

"It's really just a testament to the hard work that our chapter has put in throughout the year," Iyengar said.

FBLA offers 72 different competitive events ranging from spreadsheet applications to graphic design to parliamentary procedures and public administration.

"It's really about skills that would in theory help you in a business career, but also are really applicable to any other position moving forward," Iyengar said.

Thirteen chapter members form the officer team, planning and executing the program of work for the year — 42 objectives including events and end goals. Four Creekside students currently serve as district officers out of seven available positions.

Last year, St. Johns County Commissioner Christian Whitehurst signed a proclamation recognizing FBLA Week, which takes place the second week of February.

"With that designation, we've kind of been really motivated to stay involved at the local level with businesses," Iyengar said. "So this year we started the sponsorship program. We're collaborating with local nonprofits like Junior Achievement to put together several of our events, and through those connections we've been able to do guest speaker opportunities that, at the end of the day, really shows the students what the organization's about — it's like building connections within your community all while they're just trying to be a better leader."

Iyengar plans to study political science and hopes to attend Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service after graduation, with aspirations of entering the foreign service.

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BFF

Best Furry Friend of the month

Meet Nora!



Breed:
Domestic Shorthair

Favorite Activity:
Food Quality Inspection.

Favorite Food:
Steak and spinach

Favorite Friends:
Her sister, Bella

How did your BFF get their name:
She's very bright and honorable as her name suggests.

Do you have a cute pet? Send us your pet's picture and the answer to the five questions above before the 10th of the month. Also tell us you saw the BFF contest in Mandarin NewsLine. Your pet could be our BFF of the month and appear in Mandarin NewsLine! Email editor@floridanewsline.com to enter your pet.

Answers
to our
Puzzles

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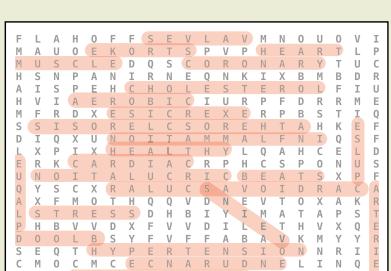
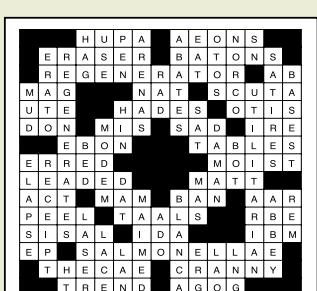


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February

Community Calendar What's Happening in St. Johns

To submit items for the Community Calendar, email editor@floridanewsline.com.

Feb. 3

Northwest St Johns County United for Progress Club

The Northwest St Johns County United for Progress Club will meet Tuesday, Feb. 3. The social is at 6:30 p.m. with a meeting at 7 p.m. Special guest speaker is Steven Pesek who will speak on the role and importance of the Federal Reserve on the American Economy. For further information please email nwsjcp@gmail.com.

Feb. 5

Growing Roses in NE Florida

The St. Johns County Extension Office will host a program titled "Growing Roses in NE Florida" on Thursday, Feb. 5, at 10 a.m. Pre-registration is required. Visit <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/growing-roses-in-florida-tickets-1962696514108> to register.

Feb. 10

Newcomers Club February Luncheon

The Bartram Trail Newcomers Club will hold its February luncheon Tuesday, Feb. 10, at St. Johns Golf and Country Club in St. Augustine. The meal will be an Italian buffet. The luncheon starts at 11 a.m. and costs \$32 if paying by cash or check. For information, visit www.facebook.com/BTNC1.

Feb. 12

Federated Republican Women

St. Johns Federated Republican Women will meet Thursday, Feb. 12, at 6:30 p.m. at Loopers Lounge at the Caddy Shack restaurant, 455 S. Legacy Trail, St. Augustine. The speaker is St. Johns County Sheriff Rob Hardwick. Social begins at 6:30 p.m. with the meeting at 7 p.m. All Republicans (women and men) are welcome. Visit <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1179931829098283> for more information.

Feb. 13

Valentine's Day Group Wedding and Vow Renewal

The St. Johns County Clerk of the Circuit Court and County Comptroller's Office will host its annual Valentine's Day group wedding and vow renewal ceremony Friday, Feb. 13, at 1 p.m. at The Carriage House, 259 San Marco Ave., St. Augustine. To participate, couples must register online at <https://stjohnsclerk.com/wedding> by Monday, Feb. 9. Space is limited to the first 50 couples. The cost is \$30. Couples getting married must purchase a marriage license and adhere to waiting periods. For more information, call 904-819-3600 or visit <https://stjohnsclerk.com/marriage-licenses-ceremonies>.

Feb. 14

Bartram Trail Genealogy Club

The Bartram Trail Genealogy Club will meet the second Saturday of February, Feb. 14, from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. at the Bartram Trail Library. The meeting topic will be "DNA Matches from Ancestry to Family Tree Maker and other programs."

Feb. 14

Singles United "Palentine" Event

Singles United will host a special Palentine Event Saturday, Feb. 14, at The Palencia Club. Designed specifically for Christian singles, the evening includes live music by Sidewalk 65, appetizers and a cash bar. Tickets can be purchased by registering online at www.singlesunited.org.

Feb. 26

Veterans County of St. Johns County

The Veterans Council of St. Johns County meets on the last Thursday of the month, Feb. 26, at 7 p.m. in the Muscovy Room of the County Health & Human Services Building, 200 San Sebastian View. Speakers include Dr. Michael Butler, professor at Flagler College, and Vietnam Historian Brian Stewart, president of Mission 11th Hour. All are invited to attend.

Feb. 26

St. Johns County Fight Night

The second annual St. Johns County Fight Night will be held at the St. Augustine Amphitheatre. The St. Johns Sheriff's Office and St. Johns County Fire Rescue will compete in the ring for charity. This year's event benefits Diamond of Dreams and Special Olympics Florida.

Ongoing Activities

Open Game Play

Open Game Play at Council on Aging (COA) River House, 179 Marine St. in St. Augustine. Bring your deck of cards

or board game (there are also games available at River House) and socialize over a friendly game of your choosing on Thursdays from 12:15 to 3:15 p.m. Call 904-209-3655 (Monday through Thursday) or email tharris@coasjc.org for more information.

Trout Creek Senior Center activities

Trout Creek Senior Center offers activities for seniors on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings at 6795 Collier Rd. in Orangedale. Cards, crafts and games start each day at 9 a.m., with trivia, nutrition/exercise, Bunco and bingo among the additional activities before lunch at 11:30 a.m. each day. Contact Program Coordinator Jessica Curry at 904-209-3658 or jcurry@stjohnscoa.com for more information.

Playing HOOKie

Playing HOOKie, a group for those who enjoy knitting, crocheting and looming (with all items donated to charity), meets every Wednesday from 10 a.m. to noon at Maple Street Biscuit Company, 1627 Race Track Rd. in St. Johns. Visit the group's Facebook page (Playing HOOKie) or email playinghookecares@gmail.com for more information.

Widow to Widow support group

Widow to Widow, a support group for widows by widows, is held at Council on Aging (COA) River House, 179 Marine St. in St. Augustine, on Wednesdays from 11:45 a.m. to 12:45 p.m. Call 904-209-3655 (Monday through Thursday) or email tharris@coasjc.org for more

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For more information, contact Vinny Terlizzi at 904.742.8777 or vaterlizzi@gmail.com

Trout Creek Academy plans kindergarten recruitment events

NewsLine staff

Trout Creek Academy will host a series of events for incoming kindergarteners and their families during February and March.

The "Shell'abrate and Sign" series for the Class of 2038 includes four events designed to introduce families to the school's Terrapin Team.

Play will be held Wednesday, Feb. 4, from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. on the TCA playground. Families can meet staff, play with other incoming kindergarten families and receive information about TCA.

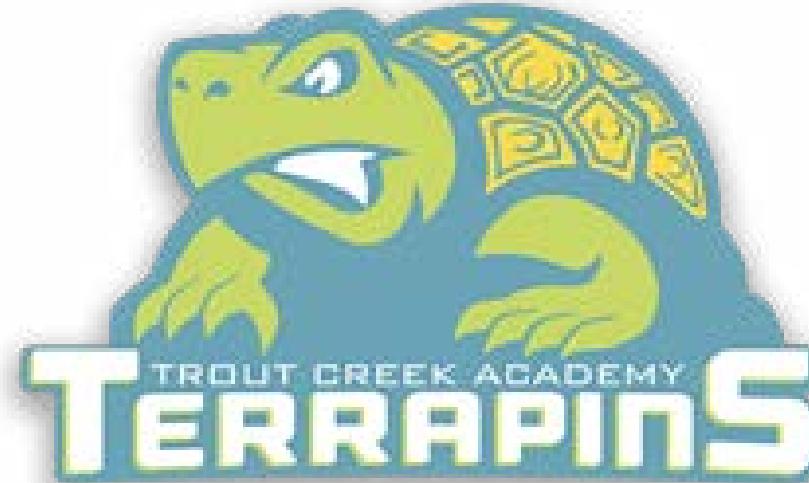
Grow will be held Wednesday, Feb. 25, from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. in the TCA media

center. Families can read with staff member Ms. O'Connell and complete a craft.

Learn will be held Wednesday, March 11, from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. in the TCA cafeteria. Families can explore the campus and speak with staff while incoming kindergarteners complete a readiness screening.

Shell'abrate and Sign will be held Saturday, March 28, from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. in the TCA cafeteria. Families can complete registration for the 2026-27 school year. The first 75 families to enroll will receive a kindergarten welcome package.

Enrollment for the 2026-27 school year opens March 1 at <https://www.stjohns.k12.fl.us/student/enrollment/>.



Gardening

The Good Earth: February's garden decisions

By Connie Doyle, Master Gardener UF | IFAS

For many homeowners, pruning can feel intimidating. The fear of cutting the wrong branch or damaging a beloved plant often leads to hesitation, but February is actually one of the best months to prune in Northeast Florida. With plants still in winter dormancy and spring growth just around the corner, thoughtful pruning now can lead to healthier plants and better blooms later in the season.



Connie Doyle

plant heal more efficiently and reduces the risk of disease. Avoid excessive pruning, as removing too much at once can stress the plant. A good guideline is to remove no more than one-third of a plant's growth during a single pruning session.

Pruning is not about perfection; it's about improving

plant health and encouraging natural growth. Even experienced gardeners make the occasional imperfect cut, and plants are remarkably forgiving. By taking advantage of February's mild temperatures and slower growth cycle, you're giving your landscape a strong start before the heat and humidity of spring and summer arrive.

With a little confidence and a pair of clean pruners, February pruning becomes less about fear and more about opportunity. The thoughtful cuts you make now will be rewarded with fuller plants, stronger growth and a more vibrant garden in the months ahead.

From my garden to yours, keep growing.

In our Ponte Vedra landscapes, many shrubs and perennials benefit from a February haircut. Roses, for example, respond beautifully to pruning this time of year. Removing old canes and opening up the center of the plant improves air circulation and encourages strong new growth. Other warm-season plants such as firebush, beautyberry, lantana and hibiscus can also be cut back now to remove cold damage and shape the plant before new growth begins. You may notice some branches that appear brown or brittle after winter cold snaps; these can be safely removed, as they will not recover.

That said, not everything in the garden should be pruned in February. Spring-flowering shrubs such as azaleas, camellias and gardenias have already set their buds, and pruning them now would mean cutting off this year's blooms. These plants are best pruned immediately after flowering, giving them time to set new buds for the next year. When in doubt, it's helpful to remember a simple rule: if it blooms in spring, wait until after it flowers to prune.

When pruning, it's important to make clean cuts using sharp, well-maintained tools. Cutting just above a leaf node or branch junction helps the

Connie Doyle writes The Good Earth, a gardening column inspired by a life-long passion for plants, nature, and the peaceful rhythm of the garden. With more time in retirement, she has been inspired to take that passion to the next level — learning, growing, and sharing with others in our community by way of earning her Master Gardener Certification. Connie can be reached by email to mail@floridanewsline.com.



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CHARACTER COUNTS: More than grades

By Sara Seifert

As a mom of two children in the St. Johns County School District, I love what CHARACTER COUNTS stands for and the foundations that it instills in students in our county. In fact, I cried when my older son was awarded a CHARACTER COUNTS! Certificate in fourth grade. I had never cried when he made honor roll or got an A on a test, but I was overcome with emotion with his receipt of that certificate because it showed that perhaps he's retaining some of the values our family is teaching him and what teachers at Palencia Elementary School have shown him along the way as well.

The six pillars of CHARACTER COUNTS! are: Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring and Citizenship. Per the program's website, "We have infused the Six Pillars of Character into our school district. CHARACTER COUNTS! is not an add-on program but a means of enhancing the school's ability to concentrate on traditional, academic goals. It's a carefully designed, long-term, community-based strategy to permanently embed character development goals in schools and youth organizations. We have been training teachers and administrators as to how CHARACTER COUNTS! can become a way of life and, in turn, become a part of our entire community."

This program begins teaching the



Photo courtesy Sara Seifert

Runners and walkers take off at a previous CHARACTER COUNTS! 6K/3K Run/Walk in St. Johns County. The 13th annual race will be held Saturday, Feb. 7, at Palencia Elementary School.

importance of the six character pillars to students at an early age so that they can take that knowledge with them throughout the rest of their schooling and beyond. Fundraising is an important part of the program and so the steering committee organizes events throughout the year with one very exciting one coming up in February.

The 13th annual St. Johns County School District CHARACTER COUNTS! 6K/3K Run/Walk will

take place on Saturday, Feb. 7, 2026 at Palencia Elementary School. Walkers and runners will cruise through the beautiful neighborhoods of Kensington and Las Calinas on either a 6K (3.73 miles) or 3K (1.86 miles) distance.

Race proceeds will support the program's initiatives throughout St. Johns County School District. The run/walk race is open to all ages, and the top three winners will be awarded in each of the age categories as well as

the overall male and female finishers with all participants receiving a medal. A cash donation will be awarded to the schools with the most registrants so please consider signing up and supporting Palencia Elementary School. To register to race, please visit the below site and select PES' team or register on race day: <https://runsignup.com/Race/FL/StAugustine/CHARACTERCOUNTSInSt-CountySixPillars6K3KRunWal>

Valentine Vows cont. from pg. 1

Florida residents who have not had counseling must observe a waiting period. Information about license requirements and fees is available by calling 904-819-3600 or visiting <https://stjohnsclerk.com/marriage-licenses-ceremonies>.

According to the release, the group ceremony provides couples with an affordable way to be married in a

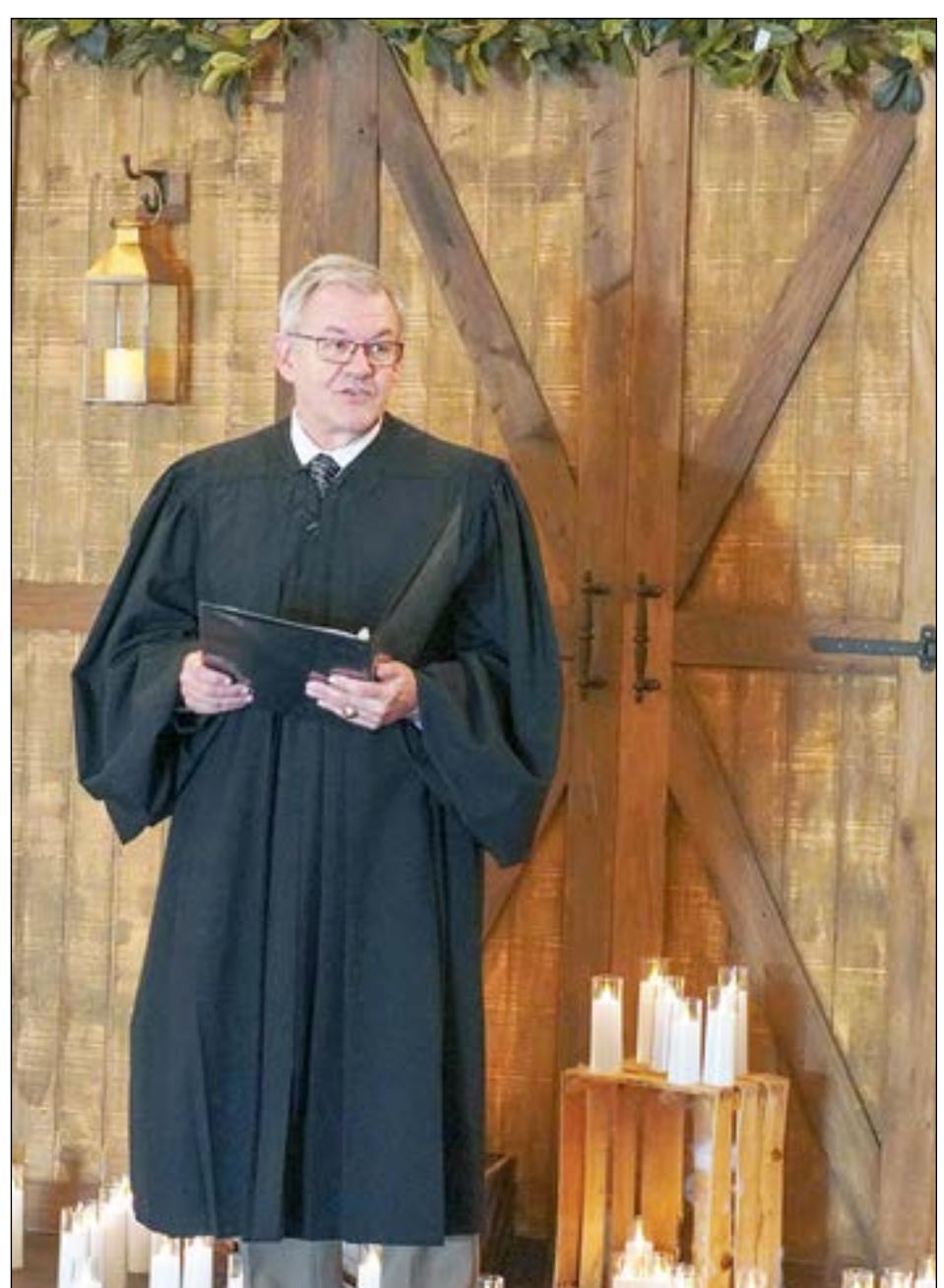
beautiful, historic venue while saving money for other priorities such as a family celebration, a future home or a honeymoon. Professional photography and bridal bouquets are also available at economical rates through third-party vendors.

The ceremony will be officiated by Judge Howard O. McGillin Jr.

The Carriage House is located at 259 San Marco Ave. in St. Augustine.



Photos courtesy St. Johns County Clerk of the Circuit Court and Comptroller
Wedding cakes are displayed at the St. Johns County Clerk's Office annual Valentine's Day group wedding ceremony in 2025 at The Carriage House in St. Augustine.



Photos courtesy St. Johns County Clerk of the Circuit Court and Comptroller
Judge Howard O. McGillin Jr. will officiate the St. Johns County Clerk's Office annual Valentine's Day group wedding and vow renewal ceremony Feb. 13 at The Carriage House in St. Augustine.

ST. JOHNS Business Monthly

Deadline to apply for Homestead Exemption quickly approaching

By Eddie Creamer, St. Johns County Property Appraiser

An important deadline for property owners is quickly approaching, and that is the deadline to apply for homestead exemption and other personal exemptions, which is March 2, 2026, for the current tax year. This deadline is typically March 1 of every year, unless it falls on a weekend, which happens this year.

The purpose of homestead exemption is to reduce the property tax burden for Florida homeowners. Homestead exemption decreases the taxable value of a Florida homeowner's permanent residence by at least \$50,000 for those who are eligible for the full benefit. The homestead exemption total changes from year to year since it is now adjusted annually for infla-

tion, but it is always at least \$50,000.

Homesteaded properties are eligible for the Save Our Homes Limitation, which limits a home's assessed value from increasing no more than 3% per year. Another benefit of homestead exemption is the Save Our Homes Portability Transfer, which allows a property owner to transfer from one homesteaded property to another the accumulated difference between the just (market) value and assessed value, up to \$500,000. The portability transfer must occur within three tax years.

To be eligible for homestead exemption, the property must be the homeowner's permanent residence, the homeowner must have owned the property as of Jan. 1 of the current year, and the homeowner must not

be receiving any other residency-based property benefits in the United States. A property owner does not need to reapply every year for homestead exemption unless there has been a change in marital status, property ownership or title.

Besides homestead exemption, additional personal exemptions are available and include senior, widow/widower, military, first responder, veteran, disabled civilian, and more. For details about each exemption, visit www.sjcpa.gov/otherexemptions.

Homeowners can apply for homestead exemption and other personal exemptions at their convenience through our secure, online application by visiting www.sjcpa.gov/exemptions. Also, applications can be submitted in



Eddie Creamer

person by visiting our office at 4030 Lewis Speedway, Suite 203, in St. Augustine on Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

I'm available to answer questions or provide additional information at Eddie@sjcpa.gov or 904-827-5500.

Clerk's Office launches new public records request portal

NewsLine staff

The St. Johns County Clerk of the Circuit Court and County Comptroller's Office has launched a new Public Records Request portal designed to make it easier for residents to submit and track public records requests online, according to a recent release.

"Government transparency and accessibility is a cornerstone of our Office, and this system streamlines the submitting and tracking of all public record requests," said the release.

The new portal provides a centralized, user-friendly platform where individuals can submit public records requests and monitor their progress in real time, the release

said. Upon submission, users receive a unique identifier number along with a security key, allowing them to check the status of their request at any time. Anonymous requesters can also securely access updates without creating an account, according to the release.

Although residents are encouraged to use the new portal for the best and most efficient experience, the Clerk's Office will continue to accept public records requests submitted in person, in writing or via email to ensure accessibility for all members of the community, the release said.

For information, visit stjohnsclerk.com/public-records/, noted the release.

Clerk's Office celebrates year of innovation, impact and service

NewsLine staff

The St. Johns County Clerk of the Circuit Court and County Comptroller's Office celebrated a year of innovation and impactful achievements in 2025, fulfilling more than 1,000 statutory duties in service to residents, according to a recent release.

Over the past year, the office revamped its website and expanded recording services across the county; recorded 2,854 marriage licenses, 19,158 deeds, 13,189 mortgages, 28 plat maps and 81 PUD maps; enrolled 11,700 residents in the free Property Fraud Alert service, which monitors recording activity tied to Official Records; supported court operations for 39,975 cases and processed 4,885 pieces of evidence; answered more than 91,163 phone calls through the Customer Care team; responded to 2,864 requests for public records;

processed 2,227 petitions to the Value Adjustment Board for disputes over property tax value or exemptions; and paid 48,237 county invoices and processed payroll for more than 1,700 county employees, the release said.

One of the most impactful developments heading into 2026 is the expansion of Youth Services initiatives, according to the release. The revamped Teen Court program provides an interactive educational opportunity where students serve as attorneys, jurors, clerks and bailiffs in real cases involving their peers. Scholars in Service: The Clerk Experience provides a new shadowing opportunity for upper-level high school students, college students and recent graduates, the release said.

For information, visit stjohnsclerk.com, noted the release.

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Q&A with St. Johns County Supervisor of Elections Vicky Oakes

Q: When are the 2026 elections scheduled?

A: The 2026 Primary Election will be held on Aug. 18, 2026, and the 2026 General Election will take place on Nov. 3, 2026.

Q: Have there been any changes to polling places for the 2026 elections?

A: Yes. In 2025, Elections Office staff conducted a comprehensive review of polling places and the number of registered voters each location serves to ensure sites are not overwhelmed and voters experience minimal inconvenience. During this review, two areas of the county with significant population growth were identified where existing Election Day polling places had limited capacity. To better serve voters in these areas, precinct boundaries were

adjusted and new polling locations were established.

Q: What precincts were affected?

A: Precinct 209, Village Church, was split in half at Pacetti Road, creating Precinct 214. Voters residing east of Pacetti Road will remain in Precinct 209, voting at Village Church. Voters residing west of Pacetti Road now fall into Precinct 214 and will vote at Trailmark Amenity Center.

Some voters were also removed from Precinct 501 (Creekside Christian Student Center) and Precinct 502 (The Clubhouse at Beacon Lake) to create Precinct 512. Voters residing in the newly created Precinct 512 will be voting at the Beachwalk Club.

As a result of these changes, St. Johns County will now have 55 precincts (an increase of two) and 45 Election Day polling places (an increase of two). These updates are intended to reduce wait times, improve efficiency, and better accommodate continued population growth. The proposed changes were presented to the Board of County Commissioners on Nov. 18, 2025, and were adopted unanimously.

The polling place list and precinct maps on our website have been updated to reflect these changes, and affected voters will receive updated voter information cards by mail. For the most current polling place information, please visit www.votesjc.gov.

Q: What should voters be doing now to get ready for the 2026 elections?

A: Voters who are new to Florida or St. Johns County can register to vote online, in person at the Elections Office, or at any St. Johns County public library or DMV office.

All registered voters are strongly encouraged to visit www.votesjc.gov and use the "My Voter Status" tool to confirm their registration information is current.

Voters should also be aware that all vote-by-mail requests on file expired after the 2024 General Election. Anyone wishing to vote by mail in the 2026 elections must submit a new request. Requests can be made online at www.votesjc.gov or by calling the Elections Office at 904-823-2238, Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Fishing

Winter peak and spring spawning

Jimmy Tomazinis
mail@floridanewslne.com



Jimmy Tomazinis

Just like that, we are approaching the peak of our winter fishing season. February might still hold some cold days in store for us, but over the last couple of years we have seen enough warmer days to put the fish in their spring moods. For most freshwater fish that means spawning.

Fish spawning is tied to water temperatures. The magic numbers this time of year are 67-68 degrees. That triggers bass, specks and stripers to begin congregating. Bass will move up shallow and begin to fan beds around heavy cover. Specks will move into lily pads and laydowns. Stripers will gather on bridges before making treks up our area creeks to try to find flowing water.

The congregations, if you can find them, make the fish quite easy to catch.

For specks, I like to position the boat parallel to the shore and cast jigs towards the shoreline. This allows you to cover various depths as you slowly work the jig back to the boat. If you are consistently catching fish at a certain depth and distance from the shoreline you can start to focus on just that depth or switch over to minnows on floats to cover that depth more thoroughly.

Bass don't congregate as tightly as the specks, but you can find multiple pairs of males and females in a short stretch of bank. I like slow trolling shiners along the edges of the creeks to find these areas, making a couple of passes if I get any activity in a particular stretch. Flipping soft plastics up into the cover is another viable option. It can be a very time-consuming endeavor either way.

Stripers will require a trip out to the river to one of the bridges. The Shands, Doctors Lake, Buckman and even the ones downtown can hold large numbers of these river stripers. They are one of the largest fish we can target this time of year, and they love the cold. Some of the best times to look for them are after a cold front when water temperatures take a sudden drop. These temperature drops can make smaller baitfish lethargic and even die, becoming easy prey for the larger fish. I like throwing lipless crankbaits or jigs that simulate a baitfish rising and falling in the water. Most hits come on the fall.

Till next time, tight lines.

Tight lines.

Jimmy Tomazinis is a Jacksonville area native who has fished the St. Johns River his entire life. His passion for fish led him to study coastal biology at the University of North Florida. He has since participated in multiple fishery studies in Northeast Florida, continues to implement fish habitat and water quality improvement projects, fishes as much as he can, and has a monthly podcast called North Florida Fishing and Outdoors where the fishing conversation continues. Jimmy can be reached by email to mail@floridanewslne.com.



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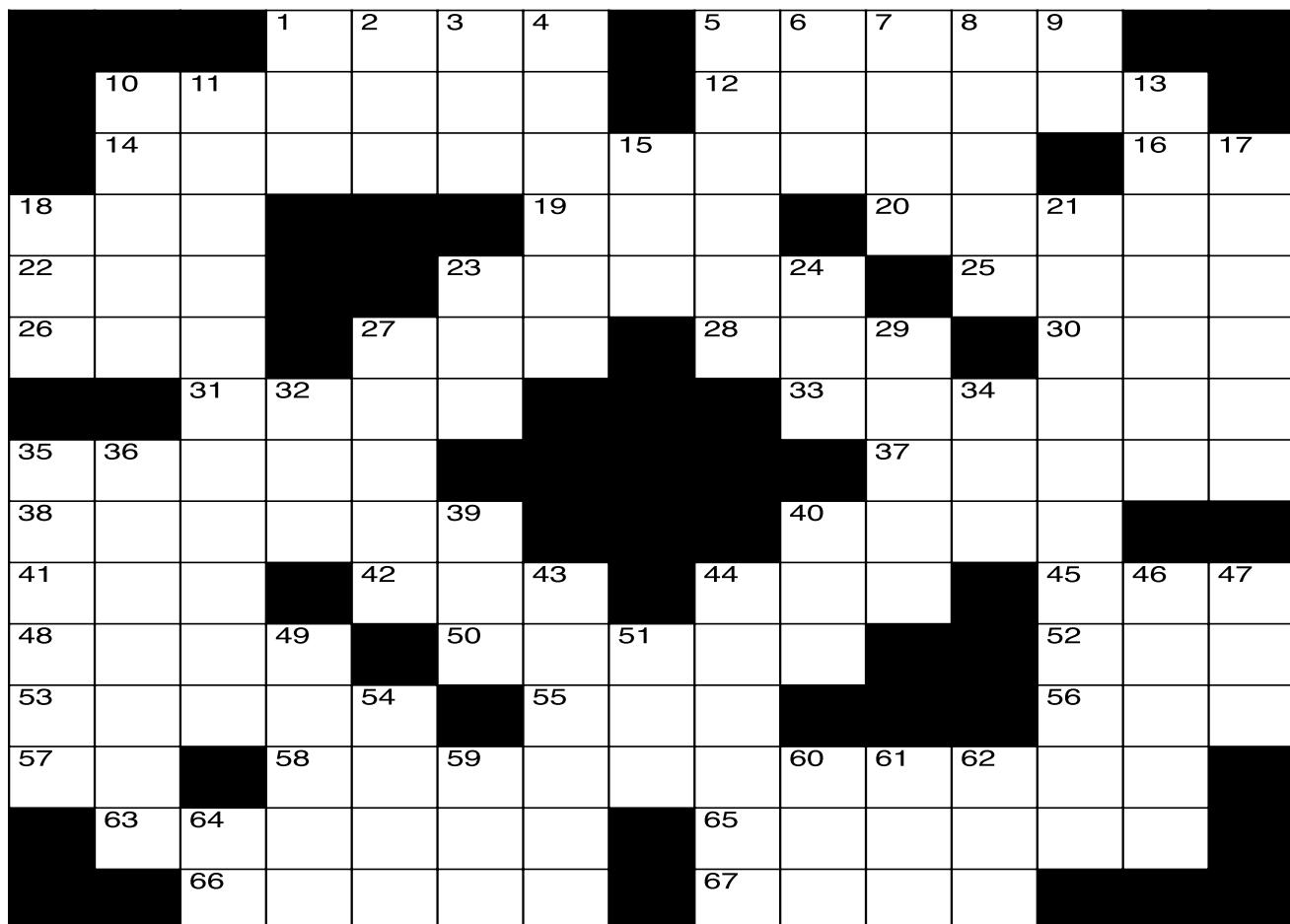
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Puzzles

Answers on page 3
Provided by MetroCreative



CLUES ACROSS

- Native American group of N. California
- Type of fuel
- Actor Damon
- Geological times (Brit. sp.)
- What thespians do
- Tool to remove
- One's mother
- Rods
- One who renews
- They precede C
- Chatter incessantly
- King Cole, musician
- Insect parts
- One from Utah
- The world of the dead
- Singer Redding
- NBA legend Nelson
- Indicates wrongly
- Unhappy
- Anger
- Dark brown
- Some are in kitchens
- Made a mistake
- Damp
- Type of fuel
- Actor Damon
- What thespians do
- Tool to remove
- One's mother
- Rods
- One who renews
- They precede C
- Chatter incessantly
- King Cole, musician
- Insect parts
- One from Utah
- The world of the dead
- Singer Redding
- NBA legend Nelson
- Indicates wrongly
- Unhappy
- Anger
- Dark brown
- Some are in kitchens
- Made a mistake
- Damp

CLUES DOWN

- Witch
- A place to sleep
- Utilize
- Pass or go by
- Where rockers go to work
- Indicates a purchase
- Digital tape recording of sound
- More (Spanish)
- Disfigured
- White (Spanish)
- Church building
- Georgia rockers
- Type of surgery
- Cool!
- Much about nothing
- Make by braiding
- Local area network
- Unit of work or energy
- Member of indigenous people of Thailand
- Liquefied natural gas
- Distance to top
- Utilize
- Pass or go by
- Where rockers go to work
- Indicates a purchase
- Digital tape recording of sound
- More (Spanish)
- Disfigured
- White (Spanish)
- Church building
- Georgia rockers
- Type of surgery
- Cool!
- Much about nothing
- Make by braiding
- Local area network
- Unit of work or energy
- Member of indigenous people of Thailand
- Liquefied natural gas
- Distance to top

WORD SEARCH



WORDS

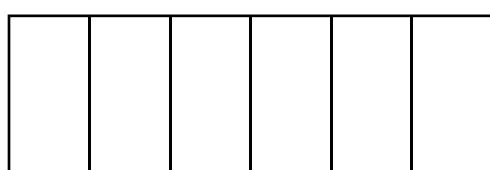
AEROBIC
 ARRHYTHMIA
 ARTERIES
 ATHEROSCLEROSIS
 BEATS
 BLOOD
 CARDIAC
 CARDIOVASCULAR
 CHOLESTEROL
 CIRCULATION
 CORONARY
 ENDURANCE
 EXERCISE
 HEALTHY
 HEART
 HYPERTENSION
 INFLAMMATION
 MUSCLE
 PLAQUE
 PULSE
 STRESS
 STROKE
 VALVES
 VEINS

Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and backwards.

WORD SCRAMBLE

Rearrange the letters to spell something pertaining to Valentine's Day.

ISSKSE



Answer: Kisses

Did You Know?

Early brides carried bouquets made of herbs, designed to help ward off evil spirits on their special days.



GUESS WHO?

I am an actor born in Iowa on February 7, 1978. I have a twin brother with cerebral palsy, and as a child I wanted to give him my heart in a transplant. As a young actor, I gained recognition for my role on a TV show set in the 1970s. It led to many leading roles and a pranks show.

Answer: Ashton Kutcher

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St. Johns CARES Giving Tree Initiative a success

NewsLine staff

Due to the generosity of the St. Johns County community and the support of the host sites and volunteers, the 19th Annual St. Johns CARES Giving Tree Initiative for 2025 was a success, according to a recent release. Wish tags were displayed at 39 host sites that included

library and bank branches, day care and fitness centers, neighborhoods and other businesses, the release said.

Over the years the generosity of the community during the Giving Tree Drive has been appreciated by the receiving organizations and has made a significant impact on their clients,

according to the release. More than \$72,000 of items and gift cards were distributed to nonprofit organization partners serving the elderly, veterans, homeless, abused, children and animals in St. Johns County, the release said. The donations helped provide partners' clients with wonderful holidays and for many, extras to help with needs in 2026,

the release said.

St. Johns CARES' mission is Uniting the Community Through Helping Others in Need, noted the release.

For information, call 904-507-7740 or visit www.stjohnscares.org.

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Bartram Trail Newcomers Club plans February luncheon



Photo courtesy Bartram Trail Newcomers Club

Members of the Bartram Trail Newcomers Club celebrate the season during their December holiday luncheon held at the historic San Jose Country Club.

By Dawn Garrity

The February luncheon for Bartram Trail Newcomers Club will be held on Tuesday, Feb. 10, at St. Johns Golf and Country Club in St. Augustine. The meal will be an Italian buffet including chicken, pasta with different toppings, bread and butter and dessert. Luncheon starts at 11 a.m. and will include both entertainment and the meal at a cost of

\$32 if paying by cash or check.

The December holiday luncheon was held at San Jose Country Club. The St. Johns Quintet bellringers featured an outstanding program that was enjoyed by everyone in attendance. The January luncheon was held at St. Johns Golf and Country Club on Jan. 13 and featured a plated lunch. Bingo was played and



Photo courtesy Bartram Trail Newcomers Club

The St. Johns Quintet bellringers perform for the Bartram Trail Newcomers Club during the December luncheon.

prizes were awarded.

BTNC is an organization that provides an opportunity for women to learn about the community and find fellowship through monthly meetings and social and special interest activities. Membership is open to everyone.

In addition to monthly meetings,

BTNC has a wide variety of special interest groups including Bridge, Continental Rummy, Pennies Canasta, Mexican Chicken Train, Bunco, Mah Jong, Golf, Book Club, Nature Walk, Lunch Divas Girls Night Out and Special Events.

For information, visit www.facebook.com/BTNC.1.

Newcomers luncheon features Mardi Gras theme

By Michele Oliver

Newcomers of North St. Johns invites members to join the fun at our February luncheon on Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2026 at Cooper's Hawk Winery & Restaurant, 4850 Big Island Drive, Jacksonville, Florida. The event features a delicious

lunch and Mardi Gras inspired theme and talented musicians from Bold City Music.

Doors will open at 10:30 a.m. Cost for the luncheon and program is \$38 for members and \$45 for guests. The event

is being partially monetarily subsidized by the Club for NNSJ members as a special benefit.

All reservations must be received by Feb. 9, 2026. For further information about the luncheon and membership, please go to the NNSJ website at <https://newcomersofnorthstjohns.org>.

Luncheon includes an entrée choice of Dana's Parmesan-Crusted Chicken topped with Tomato Basil Relish and served Lemon Buttered Mashed Potatoes and Garlic Green Beans; Soy Ginger Atlantic Salmon served with Wasabi Mashed Potatoes and Asian Slaw; or Chef's Choice Vegetarian Entrée. All

entrées come with a Classic Mixed Salad with assorted dressings and accompanied by Warm Rolls and Butter. Dessert is a Salted Caramel Crème Brûlée. Beverage choices include Water, Tea and Coffee. A cash bar is also available.

As always, raffles for gift baskets and a fun 50/50 drawing spice up our NNSJ luncheons. And, perhaps you will win one of our beautiful centerpieces!

NNSJ offers a variety of activities for St. Johns County residents to get acquainted and have fun including smaller lunch groups, wine socials, a walking club, golf, Mah Jongg, card groups, day trips and cultural events.



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Newcomers of North St. Johns members attend a previous event. The club will host its February luncheon Tuesday, Feb. 17, at Cooper's Hawk Winery & Restaurant in Jacksonville.

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PLANT SALE

Travel

Viterbo: Where the Papal Conclave was born

By Debi Lander
mail@floridanewline.com

I recently took an hour-and-a-half train trip north from Rome to the medieval city of Viterbo. This predominantly stone-built region once stood at the very center of the Catholic world. Viterbo is not just another beautiful hill town. Known as The City of Popes, it is the place where the modern papal conclave was forged, born from frustration, faith, and a roof quite literally torn away.

Last year, when the world once again watched white smoke curl into the Roman sky with the election of Pope Leo, Viterbo's story felt newly alive. The ancient process that guided the Church through that transition began here more than seven centuries ago.

A city of popes and power

During the 13th century, Rome was often unstable, unhealthy, and racked by political conflict and violence. Viterbo, loyal to the papacy and protected by strong medieval walls, became a favored refuge for popes. Several lived and governed here, transforming the city into a temporary seat of Christendom.

The Palazzo dei Papi, with its commanding loggia and austere Gothic lines, still dominates Viterbo's skyline. Standing in its shadow, I could easily



Debi Lander

imagine the urgency and tension that once filled its chambers, for this is where one of the most significant events in Church history unfolded.

The election that changed everything

Viterbo's pivotal role began in 1261, when Pope Alexander IV died within the city walls. The cardinals gathered there to elect his successor, establishing Viterbo as a trusted stage for papal decision-making.

But it was after the death of Pope Clement IV in 1268 that Viterbo would truly change history.

The cardinals met again in the palace, but months turned into years. Yes, nearly three years passed, 1,003 days exactly, the longest papal election in history. The people of Viterbo, exhausted by the stalemate and fearing divine displeasure, finally took action. In those days it was customary for the city to host the cardinals, but after such a long time, supplies were running low. The citizens locked the cardinals inside the palace, restricted their meals, and eventually removed the roof, exposing them to sun, rain, and winter winds. (They slept in tents and the room still bears the post holes.)



Photo by Debi Lander
The Papal Loggia at the Palazzo dei Papi in Viterbo, where cardinals were locked inside during the longest papal election in history, lasting 1,003 days from 1268 to 1271.

In 1271, the cardinals finally elected Teobaldo Visconti, who became Pope Gregory X. Deeply affected by the ordeal, Gregory later issued formal rules for future elections: the cardinals would henceforth meet cum clave, in strict seclusion until a pope was chosen.

The conclave was born.

From medieval crisis to modern ritual

When the cardinals assembled last year to elect Pope Leo, they followed procedures that trace directly back to Gregory X's decree, procedures shaped by that long winter in Viterbo.

The locked doors of the Sistine Chapel, the oath of secrecy, the daily ballots, the white smoke rising above St. Peter's, all of it carries the imprint of this small hill town.

Walking through living history

Today, visitors to Viterbo step into a remarkably preserved medieval world. The stark interior of San Lorenzo Cathedral stands beside the Papal Palace. The

former conclave hall houses relics and a rare parchment bearing the original balloting tags of the cardinals. The old quarter unfolds in narrow stone lanes and arches that seem little changed since the Middle Ages.

Viterbo is not a museum city. It breathes. It lives. And its stones remember.

Viterbo taught the Church that even sacred decisions require structure and that faith sometimes needs the firm nudge. The rules born there continue to guide the world's largest Christian institution, including the election of Pope Leo in our own time.

Debi Lander is an award-winning travel writer and photographer who blends her passion for history, culture, food, and personal discovery into captivating stories. Through her website Bylandersea.com and her long-running travel column for Florida Newsline, she explores destinations from small U.S. towns to iconic global landmarks. She hopes her storytelling and practical insights inspire readers to experience

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Wednesday, February 11

Murray Bros Caddyshack
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Wednesday, February 18

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Wednesday, February 25

Pusser's Bar & Grille
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Wednesday, March 4

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