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Howland's invites the community to a 100-year celebration



A blast from the past: Ribbon cutting for new building held April 21, 1976 - Hal Fletcher, left, and Billy Howland, right, hold the ribbon as W.B. and Ruth Howland (center) cut the ribbon to officially open the new W.B Howland Company building in Live Oak. -Photo submitted by Lyn Fletcher



This photo shows both Howland buildings. The building on left opened in 1926 and 50 years later the new building in the background opened in 1976. -Photo submitted by Lyn Fletcher

By Tami Stevenson

Excitement is in the air at Live Oak's W. B. Howland Company as they are counting down the days to their 100th Anniversary Celebration on Saturday, March 28. From 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., the entire community is invited to stop by to help them celebrate this once in a lifetime anniversary, 1926-2026.

The day will kick off with opening ceremonies around 10:30 a.m. featuring proclamations and recognitions from Mayor Frank Davis and others.

They will bury a time capsule around 11:30 a.m. and hold a ribbon cutting ceremony for the newly planted pecan tree.

The pecan tree came from their 1880 store and homestead in Clayland, replacing the original pecan tree that quietly stood watch at their Live Oak location since its inception.

Earlier they created a social media poll asking the community to vote on their favorite flavor from back in the day, one clear winner rose to the top: butter pecan, but four flavors will be offered free of charge on the day of the celebration.

The post sparked a wave of memories, with many recalling childhood trips to Howland's for ice cream since the 1930s continuing till the mid 1980s.

"We have purchased an entire truckload of old fashioned hand dipped ice cream to give away in the parking lot," said owner Lyn Fletcher, grandson of WB Howland. "It's all going to be free and we will have four flavors, vanilla, chocolate, butter pecan and cookies and cream."

On the menu – Free, all you can eat chicken purlieu, smoked BBQ chicken legs, hotdogs, popcorn and, of course, ice cream! They will also give out samples of a

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new stone fired pizza they started next door at Howland's Express by Arise Pizza.

And of course, it wouldn't be a Howland's gathering without their famous Howland's Express sweet tea. Representatives from Coca-Cola will also be there handing out water and Coca-Cola products, all free of charge.

"This is a giant thank you to the community for choosing us for the last 100 years," Fletcher said. "This is not a sale or anything like that, just a sincere show of appreciation to our community."

According to Tyler Gray, Howland's Chief Operating Officer, there will also be raffle drawings and door prizes every 30 minutes, along with free merchandise like Howland's 100th Anniversary t-shirts, hats and other items throughout the day.

Activities for kids will also be part of the fun, animal balloons, face painting and other old-fashioned family fun along with music throughout the event. So mark your calendars for March 28 and bring your family for a fun and memorable event the entire community can enjoy.

Howland's History – From ship to storefront

Being in business for 100 years at the same location, especially during these unstable times, is exemplary, but their story didn't begin there—or even in Florida.

The family's mercantile roots trace back more than four centuries to John Howland, who arrived in America aboard the Mayflower in 1620.

Before reaching the New World, the Howland family had already established themselves in trade. John and his brothers, Henry and Arthur, were part of London's merchant class, carrying on a tradition that—remarkably—has continued for roughly 12 generations making the Howlands what could be the oldest continuously operating merchant in North America.

In North Florida alone, the Howland family established two other locations before the Live Oak store, beginning in 1843 in Madison, then in 1880 they established a store in Clayland (more on that in a previous [SVT article that can be found here](#)).

From generation to generation, the father would start another location for the son and so the legacy continued and continues today. WB and Ruth Howland operated the Live Oak business for a generation. Then Hal Fletcher (son in law) and Billy Howland (son) ran it for a generation, followed by Lyn Fletcher and Bill Howland (grandsons) who have and are operating the business today.

Back to the voyage that began it all

John Howland himself nearly didn't survive the Mayflower journey.

According to the archives from the John Howland society and others, John Howland was listed as a manservant/apprentice to John Carver when they boarded the Mayflower.

Despite orders from the Captain for everyone to stay below deck during a terrible storm, John Howland went up on deck and wound up being swept overboard in the middle of the Atlantic. When the storm subsided they thought he was gone but miraculously, Howland was able to grab hold of a trailing rope where they found him, still alive, hanging on to the rope. He was dragged several fathoms underwater but held on until the crew used a boat hook to haul him back on board.

From Survival to Enterprise

After arriving in Plymouth, the challenges didn't ease. More than half of the Pilgrims died during the first winter, leaving the colony struggling under heavy debt.

In 1626 and 1627, eight leaders—known as the "Undertakers"—stepped forward to assume that debt in exchange for control of the colony's trade. John Howland was among them.

Howland was granted trading rights with the Native Americans along the Kennebec River, where he built a successful fur trade network—sending goods back and forth, to and from his brothers Henry and Arthur in London. They were his supply chain.

John had 10 children who all reproduced. In those days a child was highly likely to continue in their fathers trade.

The merchant trade has continued and expanded in the Howland family when Edward Church Howland came to Florida in 1843, as mentioned above.

John Howland's descendants include three presidents — Franklin Roosevelt, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush — as well as former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, along with poets Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and two million others.

John Howland's colorful exploits along the Kennebec River and beyond can be found at the [John Howland Society](#) website, the [Plymouth Archive Project](#) and other numerous historical websites referencing the Mayflower and its descendants.

A story still being written



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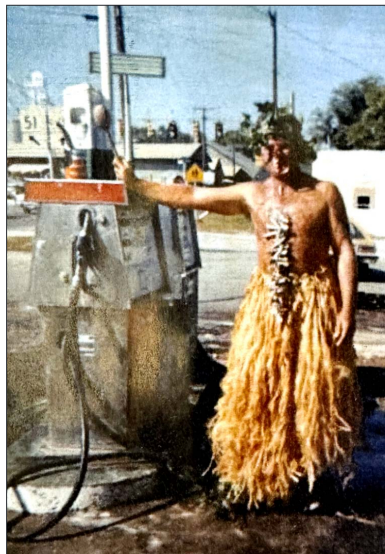
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As the March 28 celebration approaches, the Howland story stands as more than a 100-year milestone in Live Oak—it is the continuation of a merchant legacy that began centuries ago, crossed an ocean, and took root through generations of hard work and community trust. From a ship in 1620 to a storefront in North Florida, that same spirit endures, and this anniversary celebration is not just about looking back—but gathering together to honor a legacy still being written.



This is the first W.B. Howland store that began in 1926, in Live Oak. The photo was taken in 1974. The store was known for its tender meats and hand-dipped ice cream back then. Today, Howlands has grown into a full building supply, truss manufacturing operation, hardware store, gas station and convenience store. - Photo: Submitted by Lyn Fletcher



Carl Wilson pumped gas and loved to make people laugh by dressing up in crazy costumes. -Photo: Submitted by Lyn Fletcher



This 1912 photo was published in the Suwannee Valley Times on January 21. The article can still be found [here](#). It is the 1880 homestead and store at Clayland in Suwannee County. Standing L-R, WB's mother Mary Ann Lamb Howland, WB Howland, Aunt Narcissa Lamb. Seated L-R, friend Jessie Goff, Walla Howland and Louise Howland Hines, mother of the famed Andy Hampton Hines war hero. - Photo Submitted by Lyn Fletcher



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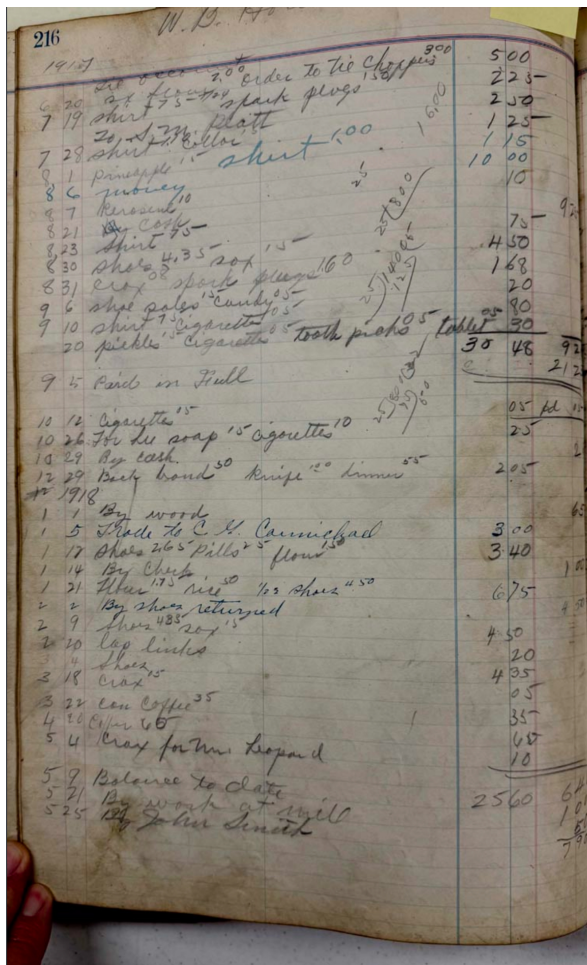
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A page from the Clayland ledger dated 1917. W.B. Howland would take these goods to the community by wagon and sell them when he was a teenager. -Photo submitted by Lyn Fletcher



The new pecan tree was recently set into the exact spot the former tree was in by Huntsman Tree Service. The Mickey Boatwright family gifted the tree from the original 1880 store location in Clayland. -Photo submitted by Lyn Fletcher

To learn more about the rich history beginning in Florida in 1843, read the previous [SVT article that can be found here](#)

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