

The Break Room with Charles Ellis, President of Fort Mose Historical Society, Part 2

February 10, 2026

Narrator:

You're tuned in to another edition of *The Break Room*, a weekly conversation about how the City of St. Augustine works, from those who do the work every day, hosted by the City of St. Augustine's Communications Director, Melissa Wissel. *The Break Room* offers a closer look at the different city departments and provides updates on current and upcoming projects and events. And now, your host, Melissa Wissel.

Melissa Wissel:

Welcome to *The Break Room*. Thanks for tuning in. I'm Melissa Wissel, Communications Director for the City of St. Augustine.

Our last episode, we were speaking with Charles Ellis. He is the president of the Fort Mose Historical Society. He is one of the visionaries behind the Fort Mose Jazz & Blues Festival, and we were cut short because we had such a great conversation about Black History Month.

So I've invited Charles back. We're going to pick up the conversation. Thank you for coming back and joining us again.

Charles Ellis:

Well, thank you for having me.

Melissa Wissel:

I do want to recap a little bit. Being that this is February, Black History Month, how St. Augustine is now home to you—coming here, you made a comment about how your friends were saying, "You're going where?" because a lot happened here. It wasn't always positive. But we have so much Black history here, and you've made your home here. Tell us a little bit about coming here, and then we'll get back into talking about your participation and activity with the Historical Society.

Charles Ellis:

After arriving here in St. Augustine back in 1982, I felt a little uneasy in some ways, knowing the history of St. Augustine because of my friends and my colleagues all knew about the civil rights movement that took place here in St. Augustine back in the '60s.

My managers and my district managers recognized the fact that they felt that I could be a big support for the store that was here in St. Augustine

I was promoted to the store in St. Augustine. So I took that drive up here and found my way coming into St. Augustine with very little light other than the headlights on my vehicle, and not knowing anything about St. Augustine.

It was raining, it was at night, and all of that was going on with me. Then I asked myself, "What did I agree to? What did I sign on to?"

Melissa Wissel:

That was a very—it's a very different visual if you think of coming from Miami.

Charles Ellis:

Exactly, exactly.

Melissa Wissel:

Bright lights, big city, like you said—daylight all the time.

Charles Ellis:

Daylight all the time, exactly. But in retrospect, my wife and I felt that it was a good move.

The schools here were great. They had great schools here.

I think it was a very positive move for me and for my family. They all grew up here and went to school here, graduated from high school here, went on to college, and got their degrees from college.

They all got their own professions and are doing well, and they're not into daddy's pocket, in no way shape or form. [laughs]

So they all are enjoying life, and I'm enjoying life as well. St. Augustine has been great to me, and it's been great to my family.

Melissa Wissel:

So when you got here, you mentioned Wayne Simms got you involved with all kinds of boards. To me, you really are the face of the reenactment piece of Fort Mose, but you've been involved in so many other things.

Charles Ellis:

Oh, absolutely. I've been on more boards than I have fingers at this point. But it's been a learning experience, and it's been an enjoyable journey for me to have been on all these boards and to be a positive face for the JCPenney company as well as my 37 years being with Fort Mose as a face for Fort Mose.

When we first talked about Fort Mose, very few people knew about Fort Mose. I didn't know about Fort Mose when I first got here. I didn't know about Fort Mose until I joined the board. It was never in our history books. It was never part of our history lessons.

So to be a part of Fort Mose and be on the board of the Fort Mose Historical Society, and to be able to impart this history of Fort Mose to the world—and also to the community, and to

the cities and counties and organizations around town—is paramount to me. Today, I'm glad to say that a lot more people know about Fort Mose than they did 5, 10, 15, 20 years ago.

Melissa Wissel:

Sure—and no small part due to your impact on that.

If you're just now tuning in, you're listening to *The Break Room*. We're with Charles Ellis. He's the president of the Fort Mose Historical Society.

Before we get too far along again, I want to make sure we talk about the Fort Mose Jazz & Blues Festival. It really was a vehicle for fundraising for the physical fort, so that when you went out back after you'd seen this great, beautiful museum, there was actually a fort there.

Tell us a little bit about how this festival came to be. If people don't know, I will say this. I did a little research to make sure I could remember. We had Macy Gray, Gladys Knight, KEM, Tower of Power. Those are all names that have been here. That's just a hint of what's been here before. Let's talk about where this festival was born out of, what it means today, and then we'll talk about the lineup coming up here in February.

Charles Ellis:

Yes, I have to give a real shout-out to the St. Augustine Amphitheatre—Gabe Pelissier and his team. A very, very professional team. When they put on an event, it's almost seamless. They have been a very big asset to the Fort Mose Historical Society, bringing them on board in 2022, which was their first event. You mentioned Mavis Staples and also Trombone Shorty. Trombone Shorty was one of the artists that were there. Kingfish Ingram was also there. The Count Basie Orchestra was one of the first lineups that we had back in 2022. The Jazz & Blues event—this is the fifth year. Bringing in great artists, and when you think about the artists they're bringing here and the following they have, we have people traveling as far as Virginia, Washington, D.C., and New York who follow these artists all over.

In the last four years, they've generated over 20-some thousand visitors who came to the fort to help us tell the story of Fort Mose. And when you multiply that by their friends they reach out to, we're looking at 40, 50, 60,000 people who get the word out about Fort Mose. Gabe and his team have been a very strong partnership with the Jazz & Blues series. People always say, "We don't want you guys to move anywhere else—we want to keep it right here at the fort," because under the trees, under the big aok trees, with the uplighting, it's been a success ever since it's been here.

Melissa Wissel:

It's a beautiful venue. I know when I went the first couple of years and was hearing about the fundraising for the fort, I thought, "Well, if you put a fort, how are you going to have this

concert and still have this fort here?"

I have to confess, I have not been over to see it, but I would imagine it just adds to the majesty of the grounds there. The trees are incredible, the music is incredible, the event itself is fantastic.

The city does sponsor—we help with the shuttles. Shuttling is so important; we can talk about that as well. But I'm so pleased with what has happened.

I also want to give you a chance to talk about Fort Mose a little bit. I'm going to circle back again to the concert with some details, but tell us about the Flight to Freedom event that you all put on. Is it only one time a year?

Charles Ellis:

It's one time a year, right. Flight to Freedom comes up in the month of February, which is Black History Month. Initially, it was the first week in February, but we moved it to the last week of February to give the Jazz & Blues event the first two weeks.

That gives us an opportunity to promote Flight to Freedom with all those 6,000 to 7,000 people coming through and telling them about Fort Mose and also the reenactment.

It was a great move to move it to the last week of February. The reenactment takes place over a three-day weekend—Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. The first two days are more designed for school kids and school tours. It's designed for school trips because it's fourth- and fifth-grade required history.

That's one of the things that really resonates with me—getting our young people to know African American history and also what freedom is all about. That is the key to this signature event.

Flight to Freedom is three days, and it's about a 25-minute reenactment. If you have not been out to see it, by all means, please come out and see it.

The reenactors we have are great and very passionate people. We have the Yamasee reenactor, the boatman, the priest, the enslaved person, the bounty hunter—which everybody hates, but he's part of the reenactment.

The whole reenactment team does a great job.

Melissa Wissel:

A powerful story.

Charles Ellis:

Exactly. If you haven't been out to see it, please come out and see it.

Again, I really want to thank the Amphitheatre for the job that they're doing because they continue to bring in visitors that normally we wouldn't get if we didn't have that particular event coming on board during those days each year in February during Black History Month.

Melissa Wissel:

Your role here in the city—as a leader and as someone who represents great success and you have stories to tell. That's why we wanted to have you come on to share with us during Black History Month.

Is there anything that stands out to you over the years you've been here—something that was a defining moment for you in St. Augustine? Something like “oh, I've arrived”, or was put here to do?

Charles Ellis:

Yes. I think that being here as a store manager and being able to listen and talk to a lot of people—because as a store manager, you get a chance to see a lot of different walks of life, not just locals, but folks from out of town as well.

You have to wear a lot of hats every day. You listen to the good, the bad, and the ugly. I enjoy that because I enjoy making sure that people are satisfied and happy and having a good experience—whether it be with JCPenney or with Fort Mose.

I take that same attitude from my job as a JCPenney manager and move it right into Fort Mose and also as a realtor. Dealing with people is what I enjoy most, and seeing them satisfied and happy with what they're receiving.

Melissa Wissel:

And telling the story of Fort Mose.

Charles Ellis:

And telling the story of Fort Mose, right.

Melissa Wissel:

So critical. Well, thank you so much for coming and talking with us, Charles. I wish you all the best with the music festival, and I will get out there to see the fort.

Just continue on with the great work that you do. I so enjoy seeing you out there, and all of the reenactors at Fort Mose do a great job.

Charles Ellis:

Thank you for having me. Thank you, ma'am.

Melissa Wissel:

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Narrator:

You've been listening to *The Break Room*, a weekly program addressing projects and programs offered by the City of St. Augustine. Join us each week as the city's Communications Director, Melissa Wissel, has in-depth conversations with the people who make our town work to meet the needs of our community.

See you at this time next week for another edition of *The Break Room*.