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'Liberty Tree' planting kicks off Franklin County's celebration of America's Semiquincentennial

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

To describe the Wednesday morning event held at the Franklin County Archives as simply a 'tree planting ceremony' would be an injustice to those who planned and hosted it.

The planting of a Liberty Tree, a Princeton Elm, was the centerpiece of Franklin County's kickoff to commemorate America's Semiquincentennial, the 250th anniversary of the July 4, 1776, signing of the Declaration of Independence.

The celebration event incorporated elected officials from Franklin County, its five municipalities, members of the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors and representatives from the county's three garden clubs, each taking a



Franklin County Probate Judge Barry Moore at Wednesday's Liberty Tree planting at the Franklin County Archives

symbolic role in planting the tree.

Franklin County Probate Judge Barry Moore emceed the ceremony, which opened with an invocation by North Highlands Church of Christ

See 'LIBERTY TREE,' Page 4

Belgreen alumnus thriving as book cover model, content creator

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When Andrew Flanagan graduated from Belgreen High School in 2005, he never could have imagined where his career path would lead him.

21 years later, Flanagan's social media accounts collectively have more than three million followers and he's one of the most popular cover models in the romance novel literary genre.

His calendar is full of book signings and events where fans flock not only to meet the authors, but the cover model as well.

Alabama author B.R. Curry has

used Flanagan's photos for several of her romance novels. She and Flanagan will host a book signing in Russellville on Saturday, March 21st, from 6-8 p.m., at the Russellville Public Library. You can preregister for this free event by calling 256-332-1535.

Flanagan will travel to book signings, festivals and conferences later this year in Washington, Ohio, Florida, Georgia and several in Alabama. The March 21st event will be Flanagan's first in his native Franklin County.

He's also scheduled for multiple photo shoots for upcoming projects and he's collaborated with Nine Line,

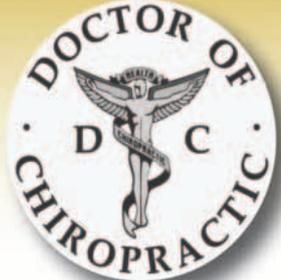
See 'FLANAGAN,' Page 5

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Martha Lynn Sparks Lindsey passed on March 4. A funeral service will be held at Spry Funeral Home Chapel in Russellville, Alabama on Wednesday March 11th, with visitation beginning at 1:00 pm.

Susan Diane Borden, age 62, of Russellville, passed away peacefully on Wednesday, March 4, 2026. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the family.

James Harold Taylor, age 72, of Russellville, passed away on Friday, March 6, 2026, at his home. The funeral service will be held at 2:00 p.m. Thursday, March 12, 2026, at Spry Memorial Chapel. There will be no graveside service; however, burial will follow at Knights of Pythias Cemetery. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the family.

Shelby Jean Baldwin, age 87, passed away March 6, 2026 at Burns Nursing & Rehab in Russellville, Alabama. Deaton Funeral Home was in charge of arrangements.

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Back to the Bible by Larsen Plyler:

Matthew 13:1-23

Crowds flocked to Jesus to hear His teaching. Jesus taught them in parables. Parables have been described as “earthly stories with heavenly meaning.” He used everyday experiences, stories of farming, fishing, and common objects, to explain profound concepts of the kingdom of God.

This parable considers a sower broadcasting his seed. Some seed fell on hard ground and never penetrated the soil. Some fell on rocky ground. Though the seed was able to sink in, it was not able to take solid root. It withered in the heat of the day. Other seed fell to thorny ground. As it grew up, the thorns choked the plant and prevented it from producing fruit. Finally, some seed fell on good soil. This seed produced fruit and in abundance.

The disciples wondered why Jesus taught with parables. He explained that it was so that some would hear, but not understand and some would see, but not perceive. Those who wanted to know Jesus’ teaching would work to understand what the parables meant, while those who remained outside would go away without digging deeper. The parables were the perfect method for Jesus’ teaching revealing or concealing the message based on the condition of the hearer’s heart. He fulfilled the words of Isaiah which pointed to the hardness of the people’s hearts. The ones who would see and hear were blessed. The righteous of old had longed to see and hear Jesus, and they were getting that opportunity.

Lessons to Learn:

Every person is in the parable of the sower, seed, and soil. Jesus’ words always accomplish their purpose (Isa. 55:10-11). Much of the seed seems to be wasted. In reality, the seed is accomplishing its goal of revealing the good and unsuitable soil.

Are we hard soil? Have you heard the gospel of King Jesus and failed to let it penetrate your heart and produce real change? Some people are hardened by tradition, anger, pride, or immorality. Soften your heart so that the message of Christ can penetrate.

Are we rocky soil? Did you make an early enthusiastic commitment to the Lord, but allowed peer pressure, family ridicule, or persecution to dwindle your resolve? Prepare your heart to commit to the Lord for the “long haul” come what may.

Are we thorny soil? Perhaps you want to serve the Lord and do His will, but you allow worldly concerns to choke out your commitment. Money, entertainment, vacation, sports, appearances, sexual appetite, and other things can control us and choke out God’s control of us through His word. So many give first-rate effort to second-rate causes. Examine the priorities of your heart and give it to the Lord so that you can bear fruit.

Are we good soil? Are you consistently looking for ways to allow God’s word to more fully transform your life? Are you growing to become more like Christ, showing the love of God to others, consistently looking to God’s will, trying to be more obedient, sharing the message of the gospel with others? May we all be that kind of soil so that we can bear fruit for the Lord.

Tune in to 100.7 WGOL Sunday at 8:30am for our Back to the Bible Radio Program.



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'LIBERTY TREE,' from Page 1

Minister Jeff Johnson, the raising of the American flag by the Russellville High School Junior ROTC class, the Pledge of Allegiance led by Grant Atkins and the National Anthem performed by Franklin County Commissioner Joseph Baldwin.

The eight-foot Princeton Elm was given to Franklin County by the Alabama U.S.A. Semiquincentennial Commission, which awarded a Liberty Tree to each of Alabama's 67 counties. County officials were asked to select a site to plant the Liberty Tree and display the accompanying plaque denoting its significance.

The Franklin County Archives, which houses the county's history, was selected as the new home for the young Princeton Elm.

Franklin County Extension Director Katernia Cole-Coffey shared the significance of elm trees in American history.

"Leading up to the American Revolution, a stately elm tree on the Boston Common became a rallying point for the growing resistance to the rule of Britain over the American colonies," Cole-Coffey said.

"In August 1775, loyalists cut down the original Liberty Tree in an attempt to stop the colonists. In response, patriots throughout the 13 colonies began to designate new Liberty Trees.

"Today, we plant this Liberty Tree and dedicate it to past generations that settled here in Franklin County and look forward to new generations making this great county their home," she added.

Franklin County Archives Director Buffie Osborn spoke next, sharing that Franklin County was named after Benjamin Franklin, who at age 70 was the elder statesman of those who signed the Declaration of Independence.

Franklin County's four commissioners each collected soil from their district and dropped it onto the Liberty Tree, representing the people who have lived and worked on the land we call Franklin County.

"It is not merely dirt: it is a repository of history that holds traces of past generations who lived here," Moore said before introducing each commissioner.

Chamber Board members collected water from Franklin County's three major creeks, Bear Creek, Cedar Creek and Little Bear Creek, and poured it onto the tree to symbolize unity, shared roots and the county's flourishing future.

Representatives from the Red Bay Garden Club, Rural Acres Garden Club and Cultura Garden Club added fertilizer to help the tree flourish for future generations of Franklin Countians to enjoy.

Mayors David Grissom (Russellville), Mike Shewbart (Red Bay), Greg Williams (Phil Campbell), Sue Raper (Vina) and Brian Scott (Hodges) were invited to complete the planting by adding shovels of soil onto the tree.

Moore concluded the ceremony by sharing the symbolism of the Liberty Tree planting.

"250 years ago, our founding fathers planted a bold idea. Today, we plant a living symbol of that enduring promise. May this tree grow tall. May its roots grow deep. And may the United States of America continue to grow in liberty, justice and opportunity for all," Moore said.

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'FLANAGAN,' from Page 1

a veteran-owned Georgia company, to market their apparel line.

Flanagan's photos appear on 27 books that have already been released or are pre-ordered. He's sold nearly 100 photos and still has authors contacting him regularly about future projects.

Life has taken him in a direction he never anticipated, and nearly ignored.

After graduation, Flanagan worked as a welder for 14 years before his life would pivot in a very unexpected direction starting in 2019.

Always someone who enjoys making other people laugh, Flanagan began posting on TikTok, a social media platform where users post short videos. TikTok has more than 1.5 billion active users each month across the globe.

As his popularity on TikTok grew, Flanagan realized he was on to something beyond just posting a few funny videos for family and friends.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in 2020, Flanagan's social media following swelled as viewers loved his videos, many of which saw Flanagan sipping coffee from a silly straw straight out of the pot sharing his thoughts on life.

Some of those thoughts are reflective of Flanagan's own life experiences, the highs and the lows, both of which he talks about. His sense of humor shines through in many of his videos, while his inspirational videos have helped other people get through struggles in their lives.

The single father also saw how much his subscribers enjoyed the videos he made with his young son, so he added some of those to his TikTok page.

Flanagan's TikTok account amassed more than 1.7 million followers. With that much exposure to that many people on social media, Flanagan had to learn to deal with scammers coming out of the shadows. On the internet, caution is required at every step. He's dealt with stalkers and has been ambushed at public events, as some fans find it difficult to separate his photo from what's inside the book it adorns.

"I still try and have a private life for my son and me. I love doing this stuff, but sometimes it's a little scary when someone gets obsessive," Flanagan said.

So about a year into his newfound social media fame, Flanagan received a message from an author who was interested in using him as a cover model for an upcoming book. He wrote it off as a scam and never followed up with the author.

"I thought this has to be a scam. After all, who gets randomly recruited to be on a book cover?," Flanagan said. "So I just ignored it.

"About three months later, two more authors (Crystal Daniels and Sandy Alvarez) reached out to me. This time, I said 'what the heck' and I talked to them. They introduced me to a photographer in Athens (Alabama) and I went for my first photo shoot. Those two authors put me on a book cover in 2021 and it just went from there," he added.

Flanagan said goodbye to his welding career as he launched into social media full-time. With modeling, doing photo shoots for book covers and his obligations with Nine Line, Flanagan's life as a social media influencer is busy, but never to the detriment of his relationship with his son.

"He's always the center of my universe. I'm 100% dad all the time. He goes with me to some of these events and any time I can include him, he's with me," Flanagan said. "He and I did a photo shoot together recently and there's already been some interest from authors in those photos."

Five years after his first photo shoot, Flanagan still finds it hard to believe where his life has taken him and that some folks see him as a celebrity.

"It still seems surreal sometimes. A lot of these authors use me to try and push their sales. I'll post their socials and where to buy their books. When I'm at these events, it's funny to realize people have traveled from far away not just to meet the author, but to meet me," Flanagan said. "It's odd to me because I don't feel like anyone special. When they want an autograph or to take a picture, it makes me happy connecting with people in a positive way."

Once an author purchases one of Flanagan's photos, he doesn't find out about the character he's portraying until the book is released for sale. His photos have been used on the covers of novels with stories ranging from comical to downright steamy. After all, it is the romance genre...

"I enjoy it but it's a little hard to read books with me on the cover. There can be some very spicy content and that's awkward but I appreciate every author that uses me on their books," Flanagan said.

Flanagan has also learned to market himself. In addition to Nine Line, he has an endorsement deal with XERO PICKS, to promote their flavored toothpicks.

With a XERO PICKS toothpick in his mouth most of the time, Flanagan has incorporated his 'Toothpick Dad' moniker into his social media accounts.

So it's no surprise that Flanagan has an extensive merchandise line for sale. From shirts, hats and socks to backpacks, aprons and coffee mugs, Flanagan offers a full line of products that include some of his favorite sayings, including the one most important to him, "You're not broken—you're just broken in."

Flanagan's 2021 video where he first shared that message served as a much-needed reminder that hard times in life don't diminish your value—they add to your strength. It's the video he receives the most feedback about from fans.

"The amount of people who say that video saved their life, well that makes me know I'm doing something right," Flanagan said. "All this has enabled me to do some charity work with the American Heart Association, promoting childhood cancer awareness and other causes.

"And if I can help someone's life in a positive way, that means more to me than these book covers ever will," he added.

After multiple requests, Flanagan set up a Cameo account. Cameo is a site where you can purchase a personalized message to be recorded by an actor, athlete, reality television star, comedian or social media content creator. From Jamie Farr (Klinger on MASH) to Honey Boo Boo, there are thousands of celebrities to choose from, including Flanagan, whose Cameo videos start at \$20.

On TikTok, Flanagan's deep thoughts range from inspirational to reflective to well, downright silly. A few examples:

"Box of chocolates: \$20. Flowers: \$80. Dinner and a movie: \$140. Keeping your \$240 on Valentine's Day because you're single: Priceless."

"The snow and ice advisory is so bad that People of Walmart are suggesting you wear TWO sets of pajamas to come shopping."

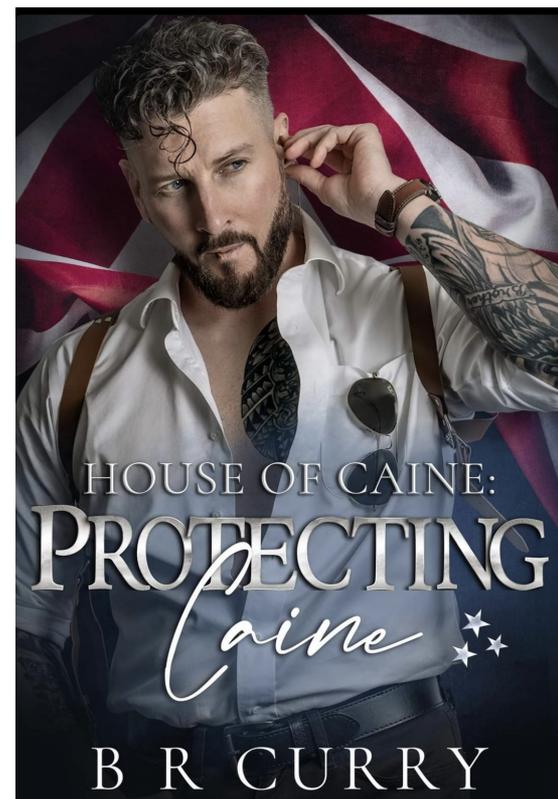
Flanagan and his son moved to the Shoals area several years ago.

His life seems a world away from his grandparents' cattle farm in Gravel Hill where he was raised.

"It took 30 minutes to drive to a grocery," Flanagan said. "I do miss the country life, but I moved this way for my little one to have the best education possible."

You can learn more about Flanagan, his upcoming event schedule, merchandise sales and more by visiting www.theandrewflanagan.com.

His TikTok account is @andrewflanagan13. You'll find him on Instagram with the account name @toothpick_af and on Facebook by searching @andrew.flanagan.92.



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Russellville tops list of Alabama's most peaceful towns

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When it comes to a ranking of Alabama's most peaceful towns, Russellville isn't just among the top ten. It's at the top of the list.

A review of Alabama's most peaceful towns by the Family Destinations Guide finds Russellville to be number one, a place with historic charm where life slows down and Southern hospitality is plentiful.

Family Destinations Guide was founded in 2019. The guide features stories introducing readers to places where 'local life feels richer without demanding a rich person's budget.'

Family Destinations Guide has writers across the country focused on finding affordable places to live, visit and eat, all while being smart with your money.

Russellville is described as a town that 'hasn't gotten caught up in the race to modernize everything in sight,' according to the March 2, 2026, online article written by Benjamin Anderson.

While some describe Russellville's downtown as stagnant, Anderson sees it having a 'unique identity.'

"The structures have personality because they've earned it through years of faithful service...The storefronts maintain their classic appearance, inviting you to actually look inside instead of rushing past.

"Chain stores haven't invaded every available space here. Local businesses preserve the town's unique identity and keep things interesting. Russellville simply exists as itself, which makes it genuinely worth visiting," Anderson writes.

In 2023, Russellville was designated a Main Street Alabama community, the result of a commitment to revitalizing its historic downtown while also promoting economic growth.

The Main Street designation came after tireless efforts from the Downtown Russellville Collective, a nonprofit organization dedicated to revitalizing the city's downtown district while preserving its historical significance.

"Life in Russellville flows like honey, sweet and unhurried," Anderson writes.

"People here actually make eye contact and say hello, which might startle you if you're from somewhere less friendly. This place hasn't been transformed into some artificial tourist trap with manufactured nostalgia," he added.

In addition to Russellville, Tuscumbia is the only other northwest Alabama city named in the top 10.

To see the full list of Alabama's most peaceful towns and details about each, visit www.familydestinationsguide.com.



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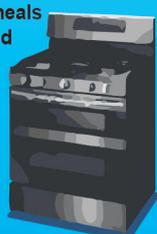
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New ordinance bolsters Town of Phil Campbell's ability to eliminate dangerous buildings/structures

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

As the ongoing saga with the 10-partition dilapidated downtown building continues with no resolution, the Phil Campbell City Council approved a new ordinance to deal with unsafe and rundown buildings in the future.

The council unanimously approved the new 'Unsafe Structures and Dangerous Buildings' ordinance at its February 17th meeting.

The ordinance was drafted by Phil Campbell City Attorney Nathan Johnson after his review of similar ordinances in neighboring towns.

Although Phil Campbell does not have a building inspector, the new ordinance vests the authority to enforce violations with any 'appropriate municipal official,' including any building inspections officer hired in the future, the fire marshal, a police officer and any other town official or employee designated by the mayor.

The new ordinance gives specific definitions for what constitutes an unsafe and/or dangerous building and lays out the procedure for a city official to take in these cases.

After the property owner receives notice of the alleged violation, he or she has the option to repair the building/structure within 45 days, or submit plans for repairs that will bring the building into compliance.

When violations go unresolved, the town has the option to repair the property, with a lien for the cost to be placed against it, or to demolish the building/structure if not feasible to make repairs.

The property owner may contest the notice as well, and the matter will be set for a public hearing.

Phil Campbell Councilwoman Lynn Landers, in her 14th year on the council, said the ordinance is an important step toward addressing dangerous buildings/structures in the community.

"It's going to give us the ability to legally pursue and even enforce fines, if litigation is required in the future. It applies not only to businesses, but dilapidated houses and other structures too," Landers said.

"This is something we've really needed and it will help resolve these issues through a clearly defined process," she added.

The issue of dilapidated/unsafe buildings was significant in last year's mayoral and city council elections, particularly as to the 10-partition building on Broad Street in downtown.

That property, owned by Al Cartee and some family members, has been in a state of disrepair for more than a decade.

There is one business operating in the building, Gigi's, and another partition that was recently sold. Landers said the buyer plans to open a Mexican restaurant in that partition where the cafe was.

While the town did pursue a compliance petition against Cartee in Phil Campbell Municipal Court in 2025, that case remains pending after multiple continuances from days it was set for hearing.

Talks with Cartee about the city purchasing the building continue, but have been complicated due to liens against the property that would have to be satisfied before any transfer of ownership could occur.

Phil Campbell Mayor Greg Williams has said the town needs a building inspector, but there has not been one hired as of March 2026.

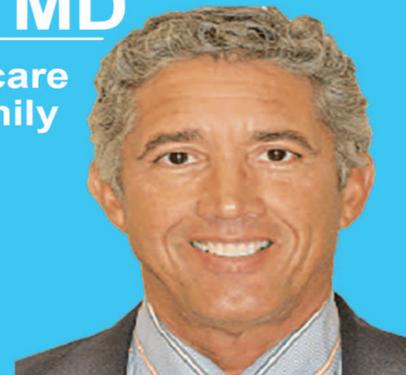
If the town does acquire the property, the fronts of each partition will have to be inspected. If they are unstable, they'll have to be repaired or demolished if repair is not cost feasible.

There are also issues about structural integrity of the back and side walls of each partition. The extent of these is unknown because town officials have not been permitted access inside the partitions to inspect them.

The town's new ordinance allows the appropriate municipal official to inspect any building, wall or structure about which a complaint is filed, so access won't be an issue moving forward.

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'From Russellville to Capitol Hill:' Hill testifies at Congressional hearing

When hundreds of millions of gallons of raw sewage spill into the Potomac River, which supplies most of the drinking water for Washington, D.C., Congress takes notice. And that's exactly what happened in the aftermath of the Potomac Interceptor sewer pipe collapse in mid-January.

That incident was at the heart of a February 24, 2026, hearing held by House Subcommittee on Environment, which operates as part of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce.

Russellville Water and Sewer Board General Manager Eric Hill was the first of four witnesses to testify at the hearing titled "From Source to Tap: A Hearing to Examine Challenges and Opportunities for Safe, Reliable and Affordable Drinking Water."

The 25-member Congressional subcommittee received testimony from individuals representing the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Resources Defense Council and managers from a large water district and a rural water district.

Hill was the rural water district representative and his testimony, including an opening statement, led off the 2.5-hour Congressional hearing.

Not only did Hill represent the RWSB, he appeared before Congress representing the National Rural Water Association, the NRWA's Board of Directors and the Alabama Rural Water Association.

The EPA, through the Safe Drinking Water Act, regulates contaminants found in public drinking waters and administers the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRF), a vital funding source for rural water systems like Russellville's.

Hill's testimony was dually important not only to stress the importance of funds received through the DWSRF, but also to share the challenges faced by small, rural water systems, which are held to the same environmental regulations as the larger utilities.

"Congress votes to renew funding every year," Hill said. "The State Revolving Funds are a loan to us and when we pay that money back, it stays in the state and the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) reloads those funds, so they never leave Alabama.

"Those funds are used 100% for infrastructure and improvements to water systems in Alabama," Hill added.

The Russellville Water and Sewer Board relies on those funds for projects critical to providing and maintaining safe drinking water, including a massive upgrade to the Highway 243 booster station that pumps more than 50% of the utility's water.

Hill gave a five-minute opening statement and answered questions from subcommittee members, including an explanation of the dangers of per- and polyfluoralkyl substances, or PFAS, man-made pollutants that can contaminate water systems.

"When PFAS are dumped into the water and you bring that water into your plant and discharge it, you are the polluter," Hill said. "We want circular exemption, meaning we don't have liability for those pollutants."

A pending House resolution, HR1267, would change that by releasing certain water systems from PFAS liability, shifting the financial liability to the source responsible for the PFAS pollutant.

Hill's testimony was critical not only regarding continued federal funding, but also to stress the importance of HR1267.

"I realized there was a lot of weight on my shoulders (at the February 24th hearing), so I tried not to disappoint. But at the end of the day I just had to be me. We are a small utility in Northwest Alabama and I didn't stray from that in my testimony," Hill said.



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Red Bay dominates en route to Franklin County Tournament title

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

Just a quick glance at the box scores and it would seem that the Red Bay High School varsity baseball team's path to the 2026 Franklin County Tournament championship on Friday, March 6, was an effortless one.

The Tigers, who hosted this year's tournament, dispatched all three of their opponents—two of them by 16 or more runs—on their way to a second title in three years and didn't allow a single run in the process, outscoring Vina, Tharptown and Phil Campbell 43-0.

"This was goal number one," Red Bay head coach Donovan Hand said of his team taking the county tourney crown. "We have certain goals that we set in the offseason and the county championship is number one.

"It was good to have all the county schools at our place....and to win the county championship, honestly, in dominating fashion, it was pretty sweet," he added. "It's good for our team, good for our kids, good for our program."

Red Bay opened the tournament with a 19-0 victory over Vina that ended in three and a half innings. A 10-run bottom of the first, highlighted by three RBI doubles from Jeremiah Thorne, Ayden Pruitt, and Carson McGee, put the Tigers on very firm footing early. RBHS then followed it up with a nine-

See, 'RED BAY,' Page 14

FFP 2025-26 All-Franklin County Girls' Basketball Team

First Team

- Leela Baker, Sr., PCHS
- Ella Copeland, Jr., RHS
- Makenna Fisher, Sr., BHS
- Layla Hester, Jr., VHS
- Laila Hill, Sr., RHS
- Randi Terry, Soph., BHS

Second Team

- Layla Baker, Soph., PCHS
- Carly Cason, Soph., THS
- Kamryn Kuykendall, Fr., RBHS
- Jemma Moore, Jr., BHS
- Braxtynn Quinn, Sr., VHS
- Angeleah Smith, Soph., RHS

Honorable Mention

- DaRilee Colburn, Sr., RBHS
- Addie Gilbert, 8th, PCHS
- Raeleigh Harrell, Fr., THS
- Katlyn Lindley, Fr., RBHS
- Cecilia Rowbottom, 8th, VHS

Franklin County Coach of the Year: Abby Ward, Tharptown

(Players on the All-Franklin County Team were nominated by their head coaches and selected by the FFP sports editor. The Coach of the Year award was voted on by the coaches with the coach receiving the most votes selected.)

See, 'GIRLS ALL-COUNTY,' Page 12

FFP 2025-26 All-Franklin County Boys' Basketball Team

First Team

- Jake Dill, Jr., BHS
- Austin Elliott, Jr., PCHS
- Evin Lawson, Fr., THS
- Khalil Luster, Soph., RBHS
- Jaxon Vinson, Sr., RBHS
- Sir Williams, Soph., RHS

Second Team

- Colton Davis, Jr., VHS
- Bryant Harris, Sr., RBHS
- Braycen Johnson, Sr., BHS
- Parker Odom, Sr., RHS
- Zach Riley, Soph., THS
- Madden Welch, Jr., PCHS

Honorable Mention

- Malaki Groce, Sr., RHS
- Jonathan Mendoza, Sr., BHS
- Matthew Patterson, Sr., VHS
- Brody Raper, Sr., VHS
- Hagen Raper, Sr., PCHS

Franklin County Coach of the Year: John Torisky, Red Bay

(Players on the All-Franklin County Team were nominated by their head coaches and selected by the FFP sports editor. The Coach of the Year award was voted on by the coaches with the coach receiving the most votes selected.)

See, 'BOYS ALL-COUNTY,' Page 13

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'GIRLS ALL-COUNTY,' from Page 11

This year's All-Franklin County First Team is made up of six players from four schools. Belgreen and Russellville each had two selections while Phil Campbell and Vina had one selection each.

Belgreen's First Team selections were guards Randi Terry and Makenna Fisher, who helped lead the Lady Bulldogs to the Franklin County Tournament title for a third straight year and reach the Class 2A Northwest Regional championship game. Both players finished the season averaging over 10 points per game and both shot a high percentage from beyond the arch.

Terry, the Franklin County Tournament MVP this season, also averaged 2.6 steals per game and 2 assists per game. Fisher, who scored her 1,000th career point during the campaign, made 3.6 steals per game, 2.7 assists, and added 3.2 rebounds per game.

This is Fisher's second *FFP* All-County Team selection (Second Team in 2024-25) and Terry's first.

Russellville's two First Team picks are junior guard Ella Copeland and senior center Laila Hill.

Copeland led all scorers in the county this season with over 800 points, good for an average of 25 points per game. She reached the 2,000 career points milestone during the Lady Golden Tigers' regular season finale. During the regular season Copeland had nearly 100 total assists, averaging 3.2 assists per game; she recorded 59 steals; and she finished with six double-doubles and four 30-plus point games.

Hill, the lone senior on the Lady Golden Tigers' team, was a force inside and on the boards for Russellville. Almost averaging a double-double for the season, Hill scored 10.1 points per game and averaged nine rebounds per game. She also added 1.5 steals per game and finished with 11 double-doubles.

This is the second career *FFP* All-County Team selection for both RHS players.

Rounding out the tapped First Team players are Phil Campbell senior Leela Baker and Vina junior Layla Hester.

Phil Campbell's Baker had another great season, her final for the Lady Bobcats. Baker, who scored her 1,000th career point early in the season, averaged the second most points per game in Franklin County this season at 15.6 and did her job on the boards, as well, averaging eight rebounds per game. Baker helped lead her team to the Franklin County Tournament championship game this year and to a spot in the sub-regional round of the Class 3A playoffs.

This is Baker's second *FFP* All-Franklin County First Team selection.

Vina's Hester is also making a return to the First Team ranks with her performance this year leading the Lady Red Devils. Hester averaged 15.5 points per game over 24 games—10th best average in Class 1A according to MaxPreps—made 98 assists, and recorded a whopping 95 steals. She also added 126 rebounds, good for a 5.25 per game average.

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'BOYS ALL-COUNTY,' from Page 11

The *Franklin Free Press* announced it's 2025-26 All-Franklin County Boys' Basketball Team on Friday morning. Of the First Team selections, there were two from Red Bay and one from Belgreen, Phil Campbell, Russellville, and Tharptown.

Red Bay's two First Team selections are sophomore Khalil Luster and senior Jaxon Vinson, who helped lead the Tigers to an eighth consecutive Franklin County Tournament title and an AHSAA Northwest Regional championship.

Luster, a reigning All-State forward, is the top scorer in the county, averaging 22 points per game—in fact, he averages a double-double with 11 rebounds per game, as well. During the course of the season, Luster has scored 25 points or more in nine games this campaign. And for a big man, he shoots well from beyond the arch with 44 made three-pointers.

The Tigers' senior leader, Vinson, was a major presence on the floor for RBHS, too. The senior averaged 13 points per game and gave his team 5.5 rebounds on average, as well. Vinson logged a lot of minutes and his performance increased down the all-important stretch.

This is Luster's second All-County First Team selection and Vinson's second time appearing on the All-County Team (he was Second Team in 2024-25).

Belgreen's Jake Dill is up next. Dill stepped up for the Bulldogs after the injury of BHS star Braycen Johnson and helped lead his team to another area championship appearance and a berth in the AHSAA sub-regional. Averaging 15.1 points per game, Dill also averaged 4.2 rebounds and 2.1 assists per game. He was the *FFP* Athlete of the Week the week of November 24-29. An Honorable Mention last season, this is Dill's second selection to the All-Franklin County Team.

Phil Campbell's Austin Elliott is another First Team pick, once again; he was also a First Team All-County player last season. This year the junior was the second leading scorer in the county, averaging 19.1 points per game. He passed the 1,000 career points milestone early on in the season and kept progressing from there. In addition to his double figures scoring average, Elliott added six rebounds per game, 2.5 steals, and two assists.

Russellville's Sir Williams is one of two newcomers to the All-Franklin County Team. The sophomore had big shoes to fill after the graduation of a scorer like EJ King, but Williams met the challenge with a 17 points-per-game average this campaign, as well as 6.3 rebounds per game. Williams finished as the third-leading scorer in the county.

Rounding out the First Team is Tharptown's Evin Lawson. The freshman is the other first-time All-County selection. Lawson ended the year averaging 15.1 points per game and, with a shooting percentage of 40, was a constant threat from anywhere on the court. He also did his work off the ball averaging three steals and four rebounds per game.



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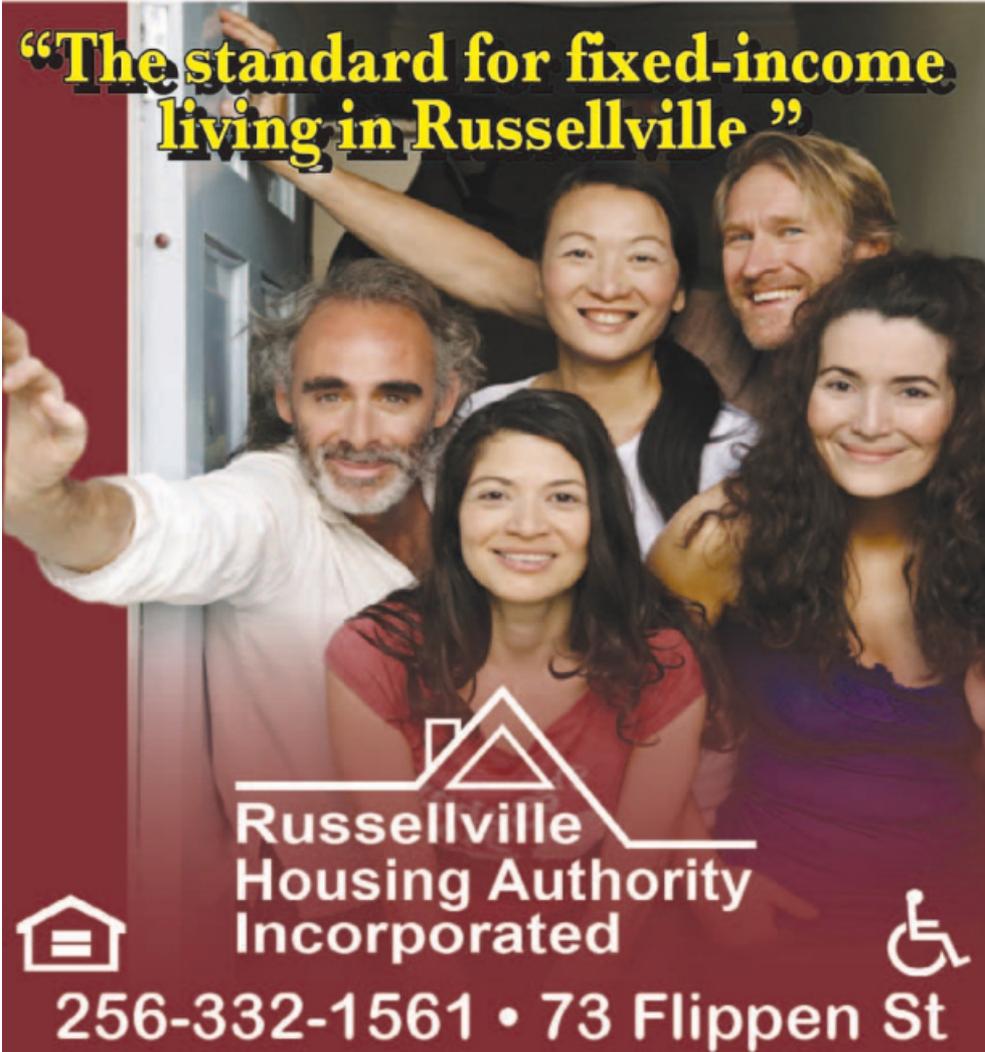


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'RED BAY,' from Page 11

run third that saw Thorne and Pruitt hit two more RBI doubles.

Thorne and Pruitt led in RBIs with three and four, respectively; meanwhile, Thorne and teammate Landyn Lewey finished with a game-high three hits each.

RBHS starting pitcher Landon Petree, who tossed three perfect innings, finished with nine strikeouts and received the win. Braxton Massey came in in relief in the top of the fourth, allowing one hit while striking out one.

Red Bay's next victim was Tharptown in the tournament semifinal round.

The Tigers, while not as explosively as in the game against Vina, still jumped out to an early lead and went on to win 16-0. Red Bay's scoring was more methodical in this one: the Tigers plated two runs in the top of the first, five in the second, four in the third, and rounded things out with a five-run fourth.

McGee, who hit a three-run home run in the second inning (which was followed in the next at-bat by a solo homer from Riley Carpenter), finished the game with a team-best four RBIs. Lewey, batting leadoff, also had a game with four hits, three RBIs, and two runs scored. Ten different Tigers ended the contest with a hit as they piled on 16 against the Wildcats.

On the mound it was Lewey who earned the win after allowing just one hit through three innings. He finished with seven strikeouts and didn't allow a walk. In relief, Khalil Luster made an appearance and threw the final two innings. Luster also allowed just one hit and recorded two strikeouts.

The 2026 Franklin County Tournament championship game Friday night was a rematch of the 2025 finale. Last year Phil Campbell snuck past Red Bay 4-3 to take the crown; this season the Tigers avenged that defeat with an 8-0 win over their county rivals.

Red Bay opened the scoring in the top of the second inning on an RBI double from catcher Sawyer Humphries to make it 1-0. The Tigers then added to their advantage with a three-run third inning. Lewey hit a two-run bomb that also scored Petree and later Jaxson Swann was able to score on a wild pitch to make it a 4-0 ballgame.

The Tigers plated three more runs in the fifth thanks to a two-run single by Pruitt and a later wild pitch that brought Pruitt around to score; RBHS rounded things out with its eighth run of the game in the sixth inning after another PCHS wild pitch allowed Swann to score his second run of the game.

Five Phil Campbell pitchers made an appearance in the championship defeat, but it was Sage Morgan, who threw three innings and allowed four of Red Bay's eight runs, that was stuck with the loss.

On the bump for Red Bay was Carson McGee, who threw a complete game and earned the win. McGee allowed just two hits and two walks while striking out 16 of the 26 batters he faced.

Red Bay's Franklin County Tournament championship triumph—and the way in which the team achieved it—could be an early indicator of the season the Tigers are destined to have. RBHS is off to a 5-1 start, outscoring its opponents 71-12 in its first six games.

Hand attributes this team's early season success to the players' belief and "next man up" mentality.

"Right now I'm seeing the last two years of hard work and players trusting in our system and our coaches," Hand said.

"We graduated five starters last year, guys that contributed a lot to our program and two of which are playing college baseball this year," he added. "Now it's kind of like 'next man up'; there's five guys that haven't played a lot of varsity baseball, but they haven't missed a beat because they've believed and they've worked and they've seen how the guys before them worked. Riley Carpenter, Landon Petree, Jaxson Swann, Ty Hester, and Sawyer Humphries, who's a ninth-grader behind the plate and caught all three games Friday night. These guys believe and they're working their butts off and have showed that they deserve what they've got so far."

Winning the Franklin County Tournament feels good, of course, Hand said, but the county title is just one step on what the Tigers hope is a long, long journey this season.

"We're off to a good start to the season, but obviously there's still a long way to go," Hand told the *Franklin Free Press*. "I think we're going to be, one, a little bit better than I expected us to be; and, two, better than I think a lot of people were going to give us credit for. So we're excited but there's still work to do."

"The county championship was (goal) number one, the area championship is after that, and then hopefully we can win one round at a time in the playoffs. Those are our goals. We try not to look too far ahead, but this is step one for this year's team," the coach added. "Step one is accomplished, now it's on to step two."

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Tharptown's Fretwell tosses perfect game in 11-0 win over Phillips

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

In the Tharptown High School varsity baseball team's shutout win at Phillips on Tuesday, March 3, Wildcat sophomore Christopher Fretwell accomplished a feat few baseball players are able to pull off.

Through the full five innings played, Fretwell tossed a perfect game, achieved by pitchers who do not allow a baserunner—no hits, no walks, and no errors allowed—for the entire game.

"It was great to watch him compete (Tuesday) night," Tharptown head coach Lucas Craft said. "He competed his tail off on every single pitch. For that to be his second time pitching in a varsity game, it was definitely one he will never forget."

Tharptown jumped up on Phillips early and gave Fretwell, who batted leadoff for the Wildcats and finished with a walk and a run scored, a 2-0 cushion as he hit the mound for the first time in the bottom of the first. Fretwell start on the bump was a propitious one as he struck out the first three batters he faced in the home half.

Offensively, the Wildcats continuously added to their advantage each inning. THS plated one run in second, added three more runs in the third and fourth innings to make it 9-0, and then tacked on two more runs in the fifth to give them an 11-0 lead. The 10-run margin at the end of five innings was enough to end the game early.

Fretwell ultimately struck out 11 of the 15 Phillips batters he faced. Of the 65 pitches he threw, 45 of them were strikes.

A couple of times in the game it looked like Fretwell might allow a walk, but the sophomore showed his mettle and always battled back to get the out. One example: With one away in the bottom of the fifth inning, Fretwell threw three straight balls to start the at-bat, but three pitches later he was recording his 10th strikeout.

In his only other start early in this campaign, Fretwell recorded the win in Tharptown's 6-4 victory over Colbert County. In that contest he threw five innings, allowing four runs off seven hits while striking out eight batters. Fretwell holds a 2.80 ERA after two starts and has 22 strikeouts to three walks.

While Fretwell dealt on the mound, his teammates were putting in the necessary work in the field behind him.

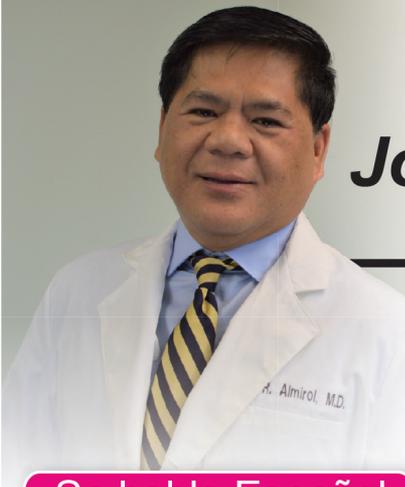
"Our team played great defense," Craft said. "Melvin Gutierrez caught for us and did a fantastic job. Infield and outfield played great and the made routine plays that we talk about everyday in practice."

The Wildcats also took care of business with their bats. Tharptown finished with five hits against Phillips, but also showed great plate discipline by drawing nine walks in the game. Four different players finished with RBIs and catcher Melvin Gutierrez came around to score three runs for the Wildcats.

The result improved Tharptown's overall record at the time to 3-3



Tharptown sophomore Christopher Fretwell, right, after his perfect game vs. Phillips. (Photo courtesy Tharptown High School)



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