Contents

Trustees ........................................................................................................ 4

Editor’s Foreword ...................................................................................... 5

A History of Southern Biscayne Bay and its National Park
James A. Kushlan and Kirsten Hines ...................................................... 8

Wrecking Rules: Florida’s First Territorial Scrum
James Tilghman ..................................................................................... 58

El Jardin: the Story behind Miami’s Modern Mediterranean Masterpiece
Iris Guzman Kolaya ............................................................................... 106

Stars and Tropical Splendor: The Movie Palaces of Greater Miami, 1926-1976
Robert Louis Semes ............................................................................. 132

Memberships and Donations ................................................................. 174

About Tequesta ....................................................................................... 175

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Editor’s Foreword

*Tequesta, The Journal of HistoryMiami Museum* has provided countless readers with more than 75 years of scholarship beginning with its first issue in 1941. The journal’s start was auspicious, with the lead article, “Pre-Flagler Influences on the Lower Florida East Coast,” authored by George Merrick, the legendary creator of Coral Gables and the first president of today’s HistoryMiami. Subsequent issues have featured articles by prominent Miamians, historians, journalists, and other contributors who embraced history as an avocation.

A personal note is in order here. Fresh out of graduate school, I was thrilled with the publication of my first article, which was an examination of the court system of early Miami, in the 1976 number of *Tequesta*. Now, as the journal’s editor for nearly a quarter of a century, I continue to marvel over the wide variety of topics that appear in its pages. For anyone interested in expanding his/her knowledge of the rich history of Miami and south Florida, *Tequesta* is the place to begin.

This volume of *Tequesta*, number LXXVIII (78), offers a large dose of maritime history, a centennial perspective on one of the area’s most cherished buildings, and a nostalgic look at Greater Miami’s movie palaces of yesteryear.

James Kushlan, an ornithologist, educator, writer, and conservationist, and Kirsten N. Hines, a scientist, writer, photographer, and environmental educator, have authored widely-lauded books on Biscayne National Park and Key Biscayne, among other publications. Kushlan’s article, “John James Audubon in South Florida,” which appeared in the 2015 edition of *Tequesta*, was an insightful look into the presence and work of Audubon, who was one of the young republic’s most prominent painters, in the region. Kushlan and Hines’ contribution to this issue of *Tequesta*, entitled “A History of Southern Biscayne Bay and its National Park,” offers a clear-eyed examination of the layered, sometimes surprising, story of Biscayne National Park and the beautiful waterway of which it is a part.
James Tilghman, a native Miamian and life-long sailor who has practiced law in his hometown for more than forty years, has been a prolific contributor to *Tequesta* in recent years. With “Wrecking Rules: Florida’s First Territorial Scrum,” Tilghman has again drawn on esoteric source material in the National Archives as well as the Florida State Archives. This fascinating study on the ascension of Key West as the seat of the wrecking or salvaging industry, one of the region’s major livelihoods in the nineteenth century as well as a major pillar of the wealth of the Island City in that era, bears witness to his research skills and his story-telling abilities.

Iris Kolaya, a corporate communications consultant, journalist and free-lance writer, has provided readers with “El Jardin: The Story behind Miami’s Modern Mediterranean Masterpiece,” a detailed story of the stunning home of John Bindley, president of Pittsburgh Steel. Designed by Richard Kiehnel, a brilliant German-American architect, and presently celebrating its centennial, the home stands back from Coconut Grove’s beautiful Main Highway while overlooking the tranquil waters of Biscayne Bay. Since the beginning of the 1960s, it has been at the center of the Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart, a Catholic girls’ school stretching from grades K through 12.

Robert L. Semes, a retired history instructor living in California, has also been a generous contributor to *Tequesta*, with one of his articles examining the Coral Gables of the late 1940s and 1950s through his then youthful eyes. With his “Stars and Tropical Splendor: The Movie Palaces of Greater Miami, 1926-1976,” Bob Semes examines many of the area’s great movie theatres of yesteryear. This article is sure to evoke nostalgia on the part of our readers, for who can forget the elaborate Streamline Moderne décor of the lobby of the Miracle Theatre; the strong Caribbean and nautical overtones of the interior of Lincoln Road’s Carib Theatre; the singular Olympia Theatre with its twinkling stars and rolling clouds; the grandeur of the Miami Theatre, standing proudly above downtown’s Flagler Street, a bustling thoroughfare and host to six movie theaters in the 1950s.
As before, we invite our readers to visit HistoryMiami Museum, which offers a superb research library, the permanent north building exhibition, “Tropical Dreams: A People’s History of South Florida,” that serves as a primer on Greater Miami’s rich history, and a series of rotating exhibitions in the south building, including this year, “A Peculiar Paradise: Florida Photographs By Nathan Benn,” and “Queer Miami: A History of LGBTQ Communities.” The same venue hosts annual events, such as the Miami International Map Fair, the largest of its kind in the world, the Miami Street Photography Festival, and the Presidential Symposium, now in its tenth year at HistoryMiami Museum, with the timely topic “Presidential Power and Immigration Policy: America’s Uncivil War—From Lincoln To Today.”

Many thanks to Rebecca Smith, Managing Editor of Tequesta, for her invaluable assistance in preparing this edition for publication. And a big “thanks” to all of our readers.

Paul S. George, Ph.D.
Editor, Tequesta
A History of Southern Biscayne Bay and its National Park

James A. Kushlan and Kirsten Hines

That a national park exists within sight of the high-rises of Miami and Miami Beach is both unexpected and little known to most southeast Florida residents and visitors, even to many boating the park’s waters. Traffic-bound Miamians might think of Biscayne Bay primarily as an impediment in getting to and from Miami Beach. But this watery stretch is only the northern part of the bay, a portion no more than three miles wide and about ten miles long. Most of Biscayne Bay lies south of Rickenbacker Causeway, forming a waterbody three times as long and three times as wide as the northern part. The northern bay of today is unrecognizable from its late nineteenth century form, littered with dredged-up islands, tide-blocking causeways, and deep channels cut through to the ocean. The story of northern Biscayne Bay is well known because it is the story of Miami and Miami Beach and of greater Miami-Dade County. That of the southern bay is less so, as it is a place farther away, accessible only by water, and offering few artificial attractions. Much of the southern part of the bay lies within Biscayne National Park, as does the mangrove shore, rocky islands, tropical forests, seagrass flats, and the coral reef. Established in 1968, Biscayne National Park is fifty years old; in recognition of that anniversary, this paper captures in brief some of the history of the southern Biscayne area. To complement this concise history, we reference two illustrated books that provide historical images and further context.

Biscayne’s Setting

Occupying Florida’s southeastern corner, Biscayne Bay is a body of water unlike any other in North America, a tropical marine lagoon only about 140 miles from the Tropic of Cancer and warmed by the offshore passage of the Gulf Stream. It bears more resemblance to the nearby Bahamas than to the rest of North America,

sharing with the Bahamas not only its biology, but its history and its nomenclature—such as calling islands “keys” and channels, “cuts.”3 The southern bay’s islands are outcrops of a 125,000-year old ridge of lithified coral and sand, the northernmost of the Florida Keys.4 The bay itself originated about 5000 years ago behind a linear stretch of these rocky keys and coastal barrier islands and the shoal flats between them.5 Freshwater flowed seasonally into the bay from streams heading in the Everglades and at low tide from springs emerging along its coast and from the sea bottom itself. The earliest surveyor considered the northern bay a stream of freshwater. The bay’s mixture of marine waters from the Atlantic and fresh waters from the Everglades created an environment rich in marine life with waters as clear as those of the Bahamas today. The mangrove swamps that line the coast, terrestrial plants on the islands, many of the birds, megafaunal marine life, such as manatee and crocodiles, beds of seagrass, corals of the living reef tract, and the fish and invertebrates that inhabit the reef all come from the West Indies. The flora and fauna mixing with temperate elements uniquely characterize the bay and its waters.

This bay was sufficiently productive to support populations of Native Americans for millennia. And it was this productive bay that was encountered by the first Europeans, used by Bahamian mariners and Cuban fishermen, exploited by turtle and sponge boats, and occupied by pioneer settlers. Throughout most of this long history, the bay was characterized, too, by its isolation. It was not an easy place to enter, leave, or traverse, and was accessible, as it remains today, only by boat. And it was this still enchanting bay and adjacent waters and lands that inspired its protection.

**Biscayne Bay’s Indigenous Peoples**

Proven human history in South Florida predates the existence of Biscayne Bay itself. By about 10,000 years ago, Native Americans inhabited the then extensive uplands. Once the bay and inland wetlands flooded the landscape, from at least 3000 BC people lived in villages on the scarce high ground along the river banks and islands, forming a water-dependent culture. As did
other Southeastern Indians, they created midden mounds, which are known from such locations as Miami River, Key Biscayne, Cutler, Totten Key and Sands Key. Artifacts including incised pottery shards from Sands Key show its use by Glades culture Indians from about 2500 years ago until a few decades after Spanish contact. Clearly, for these thousands of years the bay, the pine and hammock covered uplands, offshore islands, rivers, and freshwater wetlands provided sufficient food and other materials of life to support a persistent hunter-gatherer, non-agricultural society, ending with those people called by the Spanish “Tequesta.”

The Miami River Indians traveled seasonally, finding food in the pinewoods and marshes on the mainland, in the shallows of the bay, and on the bay’s islands. They were in communication with villages along the east coast, the keys, and gulf coast. Their food was primarily marine, including mussels, oysters, conch, fish, turtles, dolphin, seal, manatee, upland game, tropical fruit such as mastic, cocoplum, sea grape and palm, and bread made from plant roots. They did not farm and so had no maize until introduced during the Spanish era. They used bone, conch shells and wood as tools and worked them for ornamentation.

Biscayne Bay’s Indians first encountered the Spanish in the early 1500s, when slavers captured Indians in the keys. Juan Ponce de León made the first official European landing at the bay in 1513, possibly on what is now Key Biscayne, and outbound revisited the area and its Indians, both of which he referred to as Chequeschà. At the time the main village occupied the banks of what would be called the Miami River and at least seasonally what is now Miami Beach and Key Biscayne. Over fifty years later, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés made a second official Spanish incursion into the bay area to engage Miami River’s Indians. Starting in 1567 as part of his strategy to docilize the natives through alliances, he took bay Indians back to Spain and Havana for indoctrination and left a short-lived mission. With its failure, Spain did not try to establish missions as it did with the agricultural Indians farther north in Florida. Spanish authorities in St. Augustine pretty much ignored the bay’s Indians other than arranging to se-
cure shipwrecks and to make sure Indians did not kill survivors. Biscayne Bay was far closer to Havana than to St. Augustine, so South Florida’s Indians over time developed relations with Spanish authorities to the south.

Access to European wrecked ships and pressures from the new paramount chief in St. Augustine evoked a long-term cultural shift in Biscayne Bay Indians. South Florida Indians immediately came to appreciate the boon in high class ornamentation and utilitarian objects wrecks provided. They became skilled wreckers and were used by Spanish salvors as such. While accommodating to Spanish dominance, they also maintained their independence. European-derived disease and cultural disorganization took their toll and the population along the bay declined. Noted only episodically in European accounts, Native Americans continued to occupy the region, especially the Miami River bank and headland.

Who these native peoples were changed over time in ways that are not yet clear, and may never be. Spanish identified Indians by their location, irrespective of who they really were. Ponce’s name Chequeschà for the local Indians evolved into Tequesta and also Tegesta and Tekesta, and they were referred to as Ratones after the charted river outlet Boca Ratones. In the mid-1600s, the Indians of the Miami River were referred to as Vizcayanos (later to become Biscayano on charts, translating in English to Biscayne, giving its name to Key Biscayne and later to Biscayne Bay). A century later, Miami River Indians were called Costas or coastal Indians. Although living in the same place, these were not the same peoples. As Indian populations declined and pressures from the north intensified, Indians of several cultural groups accumulated on the bay. Harassed Indians also moved toward the lower Keys. In the early 1700s, Spanish began removing Florida Indians to Cuba, and in 1716 returning the few survivors to the keys; in 1743, Spanish Jesuits established a mission lasting only a few months on the old Tequesta site on the Miami River to service remnant Indians who were under pressure from other Indians raiding from the north, likely the reason they had accumulated at the former Tequesta site in the first place. The Uchises
took slaves from the much weakened Florida tribes, whom they sold in the British colonies to the north. They attacked the Indians at the Miami River at the time of the Spanish mission. In 1761, Indians abandoned the millennia-old Miami River site, fleeing to Cayo Hueso (Key West) and to Cuba.  

After the Seven Year War in 1763, Spain ceded Florida to England, and it was reported by surveyor Bernard Romans that the Miami River village, which he called Pueblo Ratton, was deserted, and he reported that the remaining Spanish-influenced Indians had left with the Spanish government for Cuba. The English were presented a new colony that included a Biscayne Bay empty of native people other than overgrown village sites.

The United States acquired Florida in 1821 and by 1825 had established a lighthouse on Cape Florida at the north end of southern Biscayne Bay, providing a governmental presence that encouraged the first American settlement. But in January 1836, the Second Seminole War came to the bay; in July, Seminole Indians attacked the Cape Florida lighthouse. The government responded to the attack with its customary vigor. In March 1838, troops led by Lt. Col. James Bankhead established a beachhead on Key Biscayne at the Cape Florida lighthouse. During this period of military activity the bay and nearby land were thoroughly explored by the military. By the end of the Second Seminole War, 1842, the military withdrew from the bay area, and the remaining Seminoles, who were Creeks who had entered Spanish Florida from Georgia in the early 1700s, and had settled into a dispersed life in the interior wetlands. During the Third Seminole War, in 1856, two men gathering coontie were killed by Indians on the mainland, causing Biscayne Bay settlers to flee to Cape Florida. The military returned, reactivated Ft. Dallas on the Miami River, and resumed their excursions into the interior.

By the time the conflict was over in 1858, it is believed that fewer than 100 Seminoles remained in South Florida, mostly in the interior wetlands. Seminoles were traditionally agriculturists and herders. Other than war parties, there is no evidence
of local Seminoles using the bay before trading posts were established. With the resumption of American settlement, the local Miami Seminoles participated in trade economy and became a distinctive, inclusive, and colorful part of the early Biscayne Bay pioneer society.22

Colonial Engagement in Biscayne Bay

The existence of a land north of Cuba and west of the Bahamas was known to the Spanish soon after Christopher Columbus’ voyages. A 1507 map shows a Florida-like peninsula with bays and islands at its bottom.23 Officially, the western history of southern North America begins with the voyage of Juan Ponce de León in 1513, and Biscayne was part of that discovery, as it was with his second documented continental landfall. Ponce applied names to his discoveries of the bay’s islands of Key Biscayne (Santa Marta) and Elliott Key or more likely Elliott plus Key Largo (Pola)26 and to the Indians, which evolved into Tegesta and Tequesta. Chronicler Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas reported that “between the bank and reef of islands and the mainland stands a great sea, like a bay”—the first written European notice of Biscayne Bay, but the Spanish did not name it for centuries.24 The name Tegesta was charted for the bay area and sometimes South Florida as a whole as late as the 1800s.25 The freshwater Ponce discovered in springs emerging from the shore, bay bottom and up the Miami River were used by mariners for centuries.

Spain ruled Florida for 250 years in its first occupancy and 38 years in its second. Other than the attempted settlements by Menéndez and a second launched 178 years later, there were no documented Spanish attempts at settling the Biscayne Bay area or even interacting with it. There is in fact slim evidence remaining of the long Spanish centuries around Biscayne Bay, amounting to items washed up on the shores, found buried in the mangroves, or incorporated into post-contact midden debris.27 As the native American population decreased over the decades, Biscayne Bay was increasingly deserted save for the occasional wreck on nearby reefs followed by Spanish and Indian salvors, and later by seasonal Bahamian mariners.
Sailing along Florida, Ponce encountered and discovered the Gulf Stream, with its swift flowing current that allowed northbound ships to avoid the tradewinds pressing against them out of the east and slowing significantly their return to the Iberian Peninsula. Thus the Gulfstream immediately became the favored route for northward bound ships heading from the West Indies to Spain, a process created by Menéndez. Given their importance to navigation along this route, the Florida Keys and Cape Florida were critical features on subsequent navigation charts to identify the reefs. For two centuries, from 1566 to 1790, Spain’s *Flota de Indias* sailed up the Florida Straits, transporting silver and other American and Asian precious goods to Europe. It worked well in fine weather, but in the autumn sailing in square-rigged ships, going before the current, contending with eddies, and beating into the prevailing northeasterly wind, storms occasionally brought ships, including those of the *Flota*, onto the reefs. Historically the greatest threats were autumn hurricanes, such as those in 1622, 1715, 1733, and 1750, the latter bankrupting Spain. The 1733 hurricane drove the fleet onto the reef and one of the support ships, the *Nuestra Señora del Populo*, wrecked off Biscayne Bay.  

New Providence in the nearby Bahamas had been settled, beginning in the 1660s, and its mariners extended their maritime activities into the nearly adjacent Florida Keys and Biscayne Bay. They sailed there seasonally to fish, turtle, lumber, and salvage wrecks. Spanish fishermen from Havana also worked the keys and likely also ventured Biscayne Bay. English Bahamians continued visiting South Florida unimpeded through both Spanish and British colonial eras. Only after the United States took control was their engagement curtailed. A remnant of this British engagement during a Spanish period is the wreck of the HMS *Fowey*, which grounded in 1748 and then was scuttled in the Legare Anchorage off Elliott Key. By the time of its rediscovery in 1975, the ship’s name had been applied to the reef miles north.

Starting in the 1690s, New Providence was headquarters for mariners functioning alternately as merchants, pirates, or privateers, and in fact controlling Nassau in the 1710s. Although
they clearly traveled the nearby waters, there is no evidence for pirate activity in Biscayne Bay. Likely the bay was not very useful to pirates, being shallow, having restricted access across the shoals, being fenced in by offshore reefs, and lying five miles from the Bahama Channel [Florida Straits]. There remains the issue of a famous pirate story from the bay, that of Black Caesar. Unfortunately for local color, there is no evidence for this pirate’s existence, much less occupancy of Caesar Creek. This tale is best appreciated as a Miami founding legend originating with Bahamians. The story was retold by settling conchs, learned by new-comers, and used by authors Kirk Munroe and Albert Payson Terhune in their fiction. But there is no evidence of a pirate named Black Caesar in the bay.

In 1763, when Spain yielded Florida to Britain, the first land grants were made in the bay area. In order to effectuate these claims the grantees had to have their property surveyed. These surveys were conducted by William Gerard De Brahm and the aforementioned Bernard Romans, who also were surveying the coast for the colonial government and the Board of Trade. Their surveys and reports resulted in the first scientific descriptions and charts of the bay and its islands. De Brahm called the northern bay the Dartmouth Stream and the southern bay the Sandwich Gulf. Key Biscayne (Biscayano) was prominent as was Cape Florida owing to their importance to navigation. The cape was inconsistently placed on charts as the surveyors disagreed on what was an allowable location for a feature to be named a cape. Most of the English names failed to hold—with such exceptions as Hawke [Hawk] Channel and Elliott’s [Elliott] Key. The English land grants were never taken up.

Spain regained Florida after the American revolution in 1783, ruling for nearly four decades. In its second colonial era, Spain, too, thought it wise to populate its possession and began making private land grants. In 1805, Pedro Fornells of St. Augustine received a grant for 175 acres on Key Biscayne. The Fornells established a homesite but never dwelled there long. The other settlers in the area were Bahamians who had lived along the Miami River from the 1790s.
Biscayne Bay’s Pioneer Community

When the United States acquired Florida in 1821, it set out to secure its new coast. By 1825, the Cape Florida lighthouse was built and the town and port of Key West were established, finally opening the bay area as an option for American and Bahamian pioneers. In 1824 and 1825, the United States, as was required by the treaty with Spain, confirmed ownership of Biscayne area land grants. The first American titled owner in the Biscayne Bay area was Mary Ann Davis on Key Biscayne, who had bought the Fornells’ grant. The first Bahamians were the Eagans—James Eagan, Rebecca Eagan, and Polly and Jonathan Lewis—who owned the land along “river Miami.”35 The Eagans were listed as Hagen in the documents, as would be the pronunciation in Bahamian dialect, leading to court challenges later. James Eagan in 1832 served as the primary guide for John James Audubon during his expedition to the Florida Keys and was responsible for many of his important scientific discoveries.36 From 1830 to 1835, the Eagans and Lewises sold their Miami River properties to Key West resident Richard Fitzpatrick, who established a slave-worked cotton plantation and cut down miles of the bay-front hammock and planting in its place tropical fruit, such as guavas and limes.37 To keep his slaves from deserting to the Seminoles, Fitzpatrick abandoned the plantation during the Seminole war, after which his nephew William English re-established a slave-worked plantation in 1844. He also sold lots in his “Village of Miami.” One of English’s buildings, having been repurposed as part of Fort Dallas during the Seminole War and as Julia Tuttle’s homestead, remains, having been moved to Miami’s Lummus Park and the Lummus Park local historic district.

The Cape Florida lighthouse and the Davis grant around it on Key Biscayne became the de facto center point of the bay’s community, and its place of security. Cape Florida Lighthouse keepers were locals. The first, John Dubois, had his home and farm in the Big Hunting Grounds, to become Cutler and much later Palmetto Bay.38 He hunted, grew food, and planted plants sent by Henry Perrine. In 1844, the Dade County seat was moved from Indian Key to Biscayne Bay, elections taking place at the lighthouse. Be-
cause of the importance of the lighthouse to navigation, the bay had come to be called Key Biscayne Bay through the late 1800s.

The bay community’s access to the world was through Key West. When the U. S. closed wrecking and fishing to unregistered Bahamian boats and required salvage be brought to Key West rather than to Nassau for adjudication, Bahamians immigrated to Key West and from there began colonizing islands running north-eastward to Biscayne Bay. Wrecking soon became the dominating commercial enterprise of the region, underpinning the economy of Key West, with some wreckers working as far north as the bay.39

The Indian wars inhibited further settlement of the bay area. The military, stationed at Cape Florida on Key Biscayne and at Fort Dallas on the Miami River, controlled the bay which they explored and documented thoroughly. Key Biscayne’s proprietor Mary Ann Davis, from the safety of St. Augustine, continued planning the island’s development in collaboration with one of the officers leading the war, Colonel William Harney, who bought lots from her that later eroded away.40 The plat of the town was printed in 1839, and the region’s first post office was approved, although it never opened.41 The military importance of the bay was not lost on Washington.42 The Cape Florida lighthouse was rebuilt and relit in 1847, and in 1849 the entire island was set aside as a military reservation, an action that ignored the Davis grant and set up future legal real estate conflicts. The lighthouse, its light being within rifle shot and not being visible far out to sea, had proven less than ideal for its purpose, and in 1855 the tower was elevated so as to be seen further offshore. In the meantime, starting in 1849, the federal government surveyed the entire bay and reef, documenting the region’s geography, studying the reef’s biology, and cementing place names such as the Miami River, Virginia, Soldier, Ragged, Arsenicker, and Elliott’s keys and Black, Convoy, and Turkey points.43

Further settlement continued to be discouraged by the Civil War, during which the Union maintained control of the bay. After darkening of the Cape Florida light as the war began by Confeder-
ate sympathizers, there was not much wartime activity. Blockade running was impractical given the lack of land based transport in southeast Florida. After the war in 1868, immigration picked up again as pioneer settlers enabled by Homestead Acts sought land and opportunities, tradesman arrived, and post-war carpetbaggers came looking for political and economic fortunes. New development settled, not on Key Biscayne as Davis and Harney had planned, but at what would become Coconut Grove, the Miami River, and on southern Biscayne Bay keys, The Cape Florida light was replaced in 1878 by a new facility on Fowey Rocks, implanted on the reef itself and about five miles beyond the Key Biscayne shoreline. In what was to become Coconut Grove, Englishmen Charles and Isabella Peacock built their home in 1882-3, at the same time opened Biscayne’s first hotel; and New Englander Ralph Munroe came permanently in 1886. On the Miami River, Mary and William Brickell began purchasing land on the south bank in 1871; there they established a home, trading post, and eventually accumulated a vast tract of land.

Farther south, settlers on Biscayne Bay keys were mostly Bahamian from Key West, mostly descendants of royalists who left the North American colonies during the Revolution. They were called conchs, and as immigrants retained that name when they moved to the Keys. Even today in the Bahamas a white, multi-generational native Bahamian may be called a “conchy joe.” The earliest claim on Elliott Key was that of Bahamian Joseph R. Albury in 1871. By the 1880s, the southern Biscayne Bay’s keys supported over forty claims, including those of William D. Albury, Henry Filers, Arthur and Edgar Higgs, Henry Pinder, Alfred Acheson and the Sweetings. Pioneers located their houses initially on the sandy ridge just above the rocky shoreline on the ocean side of the islands, with docks extending well offshore above the shallow rocky shelf. Early homes were simple, initially tents and then made from lumber brought from Key West or high quality lumber found on the shore. Freshwater came from springs in the bay and later from cisterns. Shutters inhibited mosquitos and sandflies, as did smoky “smudge pot” fires. Life was not easy in pioneer homesteads.
The Sweeting family story exemplifies conch life on Southern Biscayne’s keys. In 1882, Asa and Lillian Sweeting and their two sons, George and Thomas, homesteaded Seagrape Point on Elliott Key. Their plantation successfully grew pineapples, limes, tomatoes, coconuts, and other produce, their pineapples eventually covering 100 acres. They ran cargo boats, carried their pineapples directly to market, and built the hull of their Mt. Vernon on Elliott Key from local wood. They maintained homes and businesses in Key West. The Great Depression forced them to give up in 1930, ending 50 years of residence on the island during which their family settlement came to include multiple houses, school, store and hurricane house. The Sweeting home site is on the National Register of Historic Places, but only some foundation remnants remain today.

Among the pioneer American settlers of the southern bay keys was Israel Lafayette “Parson” Jones, a black man originally from North Carolina, who in 1897 began purchasing land to farm.
the late 1800s, the lives of early pioneers settling around Coconut Grove, primarily northern whites and Bahamian blacks, intertwined cooperatively. But as the decades went on and South Florida society centered in Miami rather than Coconut Grove, it became increasingly segregated, reflecting the rest of the Jim Crow South. Through this period, Parson Jones thrived to become one of the most respected and successful men in Miami. Jones gave his sons, Lancelot and Arthur, the family home and lime plantation on Porgy and Old Rhodes Keys in 1929. By late 1930s as lime prices fell, they gave up farming. Lancelot became a well-known local personality, a fishing guide, boat captain, makeshift environmental educator, and raconteur from his home and dock on Porgy Key across the channel from the Cocolobo Club and later ranger station. The Jones family spent nearly a century on the southern bay’s keys. The family home site is on the National Register of Historic Places, but not much is left beyond steps and foundation of the main house.

From its initial settlement, the Biscayne Bay community was a maritime one. It had to be. There was not a land trail going north from the Miami River until the Seminole War and no cart path until the late 1800s. Actual roads came after the railroad arrived in Miami. Pioneers’ boats supported diverse income streams derived from transporting cargo and passengers, fishing, turtling, sponging, chartering, guiding, and wrecking. Commercial ships ran among Key West, Newport on Key Largo, Cutler, Coconut Grove, Miami-Fort Dallas, Lemon City, Havana, Charleston, and New York.

In the early years of the bay’s American era a profitable wrecker enterprise was headquartered in Key West, which for a time became one of America’s richest towns per capita. Everyone with a boat could register and participate when the opportunity might arise. Relatively few wrecks occurred as far north as Biscayne’s reefs, although they did not go too far to the South, Carysfort Reef being an epicenter of wrecking incidents. But settlers beach-combed for wrecked spoils as they washed up on shore, providing excellent building materials and useful goods.
Post-Civil War, when the bay began to be settled permanently, lighthouses, and steam power had reduced the number of wrecks, thereby decreasing wrecking opportunities for the pioneer community.

Another profitable maritime enterprise was smuggling. The ease of sailing from the Bahamas or Havana to Biscayne Bay had long put these ports in the neighborhood. Intercepting movement of wrecked cargo, undocumented imports, and escaping slaves was a primary function of the Revenue Fleet based in Charleston working the keys. During the war the Navy blockaded the coast against Confederate exports, although as already mentioned lack of land transport to the bay meant that it was not an important blockade running location. By the late 1800s, smuggling focused on running guns to Cuban rebels. The most celebrated of the filibusters, if not a very successful one, was Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, a future progressive, Everglades-draining governor. Smuggling continued to be a core part of southern Biscayne Bay’s history involving not only arms, but alcohol during prohibition, illegal drugs, people smuggling and political and economic refugees.

Most of the first pioneer residents of the Biscayne Bay keys farmed their plots, because this was the easiest way to prove their Homestead claim and because they knew how. Conchs drew on their experience farming rocky limestone islands in the Bahamas to deal with the exceptionally difficult conditions of Biscayne’s similar islands. Plantations initially provided for home consumption and the limited Key West market. Given transportation difficulties, market farming was restricted to West Indian sea cotton and processing mainland coontie plants for starch. Settlers cleared the West Indian forest and burned the downed vegetation, pulverizing the limestone and releasing nutrients, useful at least for the short term. Because the islands lacked topsoil, especially after burning, plants were often rooted in humus-filled holes in the limestone. Invasive Australian pines were planted as wind breaks and other exotic plants were brought in to decorate the plantations.
Southern Biscayne Bay keys’ first market crop was pineapples, which grew well initially and shipped fairly well to a welcoming northern market. By 1910 more than a dozen families were rais-
ing “pines” on Elliott Key. Fruit was transported by boat to Key West for packing and canning or, for those who had their own ocean-going boats like the Sweetings, directly to northern ports. Transport was initially coastwise by sailboat and later by train, although Flagler’s monopolistic rates made private ocean shipping more profitable. Disease and storm surge from the hurricane of 1906 reduced pineapple farming and by 1925 limes imported from Mexico became the bay area’s primary crop. Elliott Key’s groves produced 7,500 barrels annually. "Sours" were farmed on the keys for over 50 years before being outcompeted by the Mexican lime industry aided by railroad discounts. As rapid transportation options increased, additional tropical fruits and vegetables were grown. Over the years production included pineapples, limes, coconuts, sapodilla, tomatoes, yams, papayas, bananas, guavas, mangoes, chickens and hogs. Through the pioneer period, nearly all of the southern bay keys were cleared and farmed. This may be hard to imagine today as one encounters what appears to be pristine tropical forest where the plantations used to be.

On the more northern Biscayne Bay keys, farming was undertaken by large-scale landowners rather than small homesteaders. Taking advantage of deals being offered by the state in the early 1880s, Ezra Osborn and Elnathan Field of New Jersey planted coconuts on the barrier islands. Although unsuccessful, the plantations allowed them to gain title to miles of beachfront from Key Biscayne northward. On Key Biscayne, Mary Ann Davis’ descendants cleared land for pineapples, which were meant to be processed in the overseer Ralph Munroe’s nearby short-lived factory. William J. Matheson went farther on his part of Key Biscayne where he and his son Hugh created a diverse tropical plantation. Matheson began purchasing plots on the key in 1908 from Ezra Osborn’s heirs, eventually accumulating two thirds of the island north of the Davis holdings. Farming began in 1910 with Persian lime trees, which turned out not to prosper in Key Biscayne’s sand; but they then re-tried coconuts, which became one of the major investments on the Matheson plantation. By 1920, 36,000 coconut palms were on the Key. Economic viability was another matter, as the business could not compete with coconut products
derived from the Pacific Islands so other outputs were found such as supplying trees to developers and providing husked coconuts for Miami tourists to mail home.

Beyond farming, fishing of one sort or another dominated the pioneer Biscayne area economy. Biscayne Bay was a nursery for juvenile green turtles, and adults nested on the beaches and assembled offshore in the nesting season. Colonial-era Bahamian and Cuban fishermen worked the waters netting turtles in the 1700s and early 1800s, as did locals through the late 1800s. Easily transportable live turtles were taken to Key West for processing. The heavy harvest eventually depleted sea turtle stocks, after which the Key West canning industry came to depend on imports.

Sponge harvest in the bay supported over a hundred boats by the 1890s. The Key West based industry was a million dollar annual business. The fishery was led by conchs such as the Thompson, Roberts, and Russell families. In the bay and nearby offshore waters, it was a shallow water fishery. Spongers used long poles to hook specific species of sponges from the shallow bay bottom. They then placed them in crawls (derived from the Bahamian pronunciation of corral) until cleaned and transported to Key West for auction. Ralph Monroe failed at sponge farming off Elliott Key, which he attributed to thievery. Owing to a blight and overfishing, this first round of sponging ended in the bay by the early 1930s. It was taken up again in the 1960s by immigrant Cuban fishermen but suspended a few decades later as it was learned that the fast-disappearing sponges were important biological filters in the bay.

The early settlers caught fish and lobsters mostly to feed themselves. Fish such as grunt, hogfish, snapper, grouper and mullet that were able to be brought to Key West in live wells or salted or smoked could be marketed to Havana. Similarly, hunting on the mainland for deer, turkey and other game was mainly for home consumption, but could also produce salable pelts, alligator and crocodile skins, and bird plumes. Eventually, the real business of fishing in the bay became guiding. Once visitors could access the
area a guiding and sport fishing industry thrived. Early fishing guides such as Charlie Thompson became nationally famous. As the late 1800s proceeded, sport fishing became a national pastime, inspired by presidents who themselves came to the area to fish and have themselves photographed doing it.

The maritime-based community of pioneers and their successors of the 1800s changed fundamentally when Henry Flagler brought his railroad to Miami in 1896. Miami expanded at exponential speed as a port of departure for cruising ships, attractor of wealthy seasonal guests and new residents to service them, and as the region’s main city. Most arrived by the railroad, some by a new rough road, others by private yachts or ferries. Some were just passing through on their way to visit Flagler’s hotels in Cuba or Nassau; some others came for the winter; some eventually built houses of increasing grandness. Miami’s development was the turning point for the bay’s early history. Soon after its founding, residents of the southern Biscayne Bay area were no longer isolated, but could shop or meet a train 20 miles away. Key West was no longer their shipping port. The southern bay communities of Cutler, Coconut Grove, and Elliott Key were soon superseded by Miami. Sail gave way to engines, allowing quick transport around the bay. As the economy shifted and agriculture and marine profits faltered, the pioneer families moved on, selling their land to a new generation of settlers, who dreamed of living apart in rustic shacks, of running fish camps, of enticing Miami’s wealthy to visit, or of selling out to them. The final bell for the old homestead families was the 1926 Hurricane followed by the Great Depression, but as they gave up their lands there were buyers with money to buy them.

**Biscayne Bay’s Gilded Era**

Traveling in comfort and style, from 1896 through the 1930s and even into the 1940s, the rich and the powerful came to the southern bay area. As resident and visitor populations grew and Miami expanded after the railroad’s arrival, the natural environment of northern Biscayne Bay was soon obliterated by dredging,
causeways, the creation of artificial islands, upland drainage, and sewage. Miami’s hoteliers then found the southern bay to be a more attractive adjunct for their guests. Pioneer homesteads became camps, lodges, homes, and mansions, allowing the wealthy to enjoy the area’s more pristine boating, fishing, and adventures.

The first of the wealthy owners was Waters Davis, who at the death of his mother, Mary Ann, in 1885, secured rights to the family’s holding at Cape Florida and built a vacation home near the then-abandoned lighthouse. The estate was managed by Ralph Munroe, and the first caretaker was Israel Lafayette Jones. Cape House and the planted estate was used as a vacation retreat. In 1912, James Deering, who would soon build the grandiose Villa Vizcaya on the mainland, bought the Davis tract but did not manage to do much beyond the difficult task of securing the title, stabilizing the lighthouse, and impeding shoreline erosion. In 1948 the Deering heirs sold the property to Jose Manuel Áleman, using assets secured while a Cuban government official. Industrialist William J. Matheson, who built the first of his seasonal homes in Coconut Grove in the early 1900s, built a family entertainment center, Mashta House, on his Key Biscayne plantation.

On the shoals between Key Biscayne channel and Soldier Key, starting in the 1920s, barges and boats rammed onto the bank became the nucleus of a community of “shacks.” Eddie “Crawfish” Walker built his shack in 1933 to sell a lobster-based chowder called chilau, bait, and gambling. This was followed by others, such as the Calvert Club, built in 1938. As more cabins joined the community, located just outside the effect of City of Miami’s laws, the settlement began to gain fame. A 1941 Life Magazine article called it “an extraordinary American community dedicated solely to sunlight, saltwater, and the well-being of the human spirit.” Visitors enjoyed other activities as well, such as at Harry Chuchville’s Bikini Club, cored by a grounded yacht, that offered a clothes optional sundeck and free drinks to bikini-clad women. It was closed down in 1965 for not possessing a liquor license. The Quarterback Club was a barge suspended on pilings, which was featured in the aforementioned article in Life Magazine.
In the 1950s, the most famous house likely was that of Jimmy Ellenburg, Coral Gables restaurant owner, who entertained the rich and powerful in both places. One such guest was Governor Leroy Collins, who likened the house to heaven. Structures came and went with hurricanes, peaking at about 27 in the 1960s. After Hurricane Betsy in 1965, building codes required houses be built at a 10 foot elevation, earning the community its contemporary name, Stiltsville.

In 1904, on tiny Soldier Key five miles south of Cape Florida, Henry Flagler built a day trip club for his Royal Palm Hotel guests. On this tiny piece of land, guests arrived via boat to a fully staffed luncheon. Flagler’s cruise ships met his railroad in Miami to take guests to his properties in Nassau and Havana, leading to the first major channel dredging in the bay, first south of Key Biscayne and then one straight from Flagler’s docks through what was to become Miami Beach. It was called Government Cut since its funding came from the federal government through the U. S. Congress’s River and Harbor committees. He also dredged
the Miami River, placing the spoil wherever, much to the annoyance of the sailing-dependent bay community.

To the south, Boca Chita Key was first homesteaded by Brainard Ball, who sold it to Miami Beach developer Carl Fisher. Fisher and later owner Milton W. Harrison bulkheaded and dredged the now-popular boat basin. In 1937, industrialist and thermostat inventor Mark C. Honeywell built a private resort designed by architect August Geiger to augment his Miami Beach home; it included a 65 foot-tall lighthouse as a landmark, which became the principal icon of southern Biscayne Bay. Boca Chita was the scene of society parties and charity events. Honeywell sold the property in 1942. In the late 1950s the island was owned by G. F. Carlson and then Dan Rivers, who invited the Dinner Key Cruising Club to use the island and eventually to take over its management. Boca Chita’s remaining structures, built of concrete and native limestone and refurbished after Hurricane Andrew, are recognized within a National Historic District.

On nearby Elliott Key, pioneer homesteads were redeveloped. Dr. John Gifford, former and future forestry professor, writer, banker and land developer, bought William D. Albury’s plot near Billy’s Point to create a subdivision. He wrote widely of the virtues of Elliott Key and of why the government should build a road to get there. Charlie Brookfield bought 20 acres from Gifford, building the 8-room Ledbury Lodge of salvaged wood, which despite its rusticity attracted distinguished personages. When Bahamian fishermen showed Brookfield a cannon-strewn wreck site, later determined to be the TMS *Winston*, he enticed a party from the Biscayne Bay Yacht Club to salvage the canons, which were widely distributed including to the Boca Chita harbor entrance. Brookfield wrote about it in the *National Geographic Magazine* in 1941. In the 1960s the lodge site was taken over by the CIA, which trained Cuban exiles there and elsewhere in the remote islands of the southern bay.

The Gilded Era was also one of the many periods of smuggling in the southern bay. During Prohibition, liquor smuggling from
the Bahamas was an enterprise not frowned upon by influential alcohol-using Miami residents. Liquor was transported in boats from warehouses in Bimini and offloaded in international waters to smaller boats whose local captains knew the waters well. Owing to the tight immigration laws of the time, people also were smuggled through the southern bay keys. For a year, 1934-1935, Charlotte and Russ Niedhauk lived in a house on the north end of Elliott Key. Charlotte wrote of her experiences, including life among rum runners, in a book *Charlotte’s Story*. They departed after the 1935 hurricane.

On Adams Key, south of Elliott, in 1916, Miami Beach developer Carl Fisher built the Cocolobo Club for his guests. Exclusive membership included such worthies as C. W. Chase, T. Coleman DuPont, Harvey Firestone, and Garfield Wood. Inventor-adventurer Wood purchased Fisher Island from the Vanderbuilts and acquired Adams Key. In 1954, he sold the Adams Key property to Key Biscayne banker Charles “Bebe” Rebozo and his partners, including Senator George Smathers. Their Coco Lobo Fishing Club continued to entertain the rich and powerful, including then Senator Lyndon Johnson.

Fishing camps were also developed on nearby Key Largo, which unlike the southern bay islands, was connected to the mainland by a road. The first bridge was constructed as part of the Overseas Highway in 1926. After suffering from a fire and hurri-
cane, the bridge was removed in the mid-1940s coincident with the opening of a new highway following the old Flagler railroad line, now U.S. Highway 1. The most persistent of these camps were the Key Largo Angler’s Club and Ocean Reef.

The Key Largo Angler’s Club’s history began in 1912 when W. A. Scott built a stone house as a fishing camp and trading post on the bay side. In the 1930s, L. J. Stranahan sold the property to Henry Doherty of Cities Services Oil Corporation. Following the example of Flagler and Fisher, Doherty established a destination for guests of his Biltmore and Roney Plaza hotels, part of his “Florida Year Round Club.” The rustic but elegant Key Largo Angler’s Club attracted members such as then former President Herbert Hoover.

Another of the early north Key Largo fishing lodges was the Dispatch Creek Fishing Camp, which was purchased in 1945 by Morris and Alice Baker, who had decided to build a small fishing marina. By the mid-1950s, they had increased their holdings to about 1300 acres and began adding home sites, a golf course, and an airport, creating Ocean Reef. The club’s fishing guides became world famous. Other Key Largo developments were planned and even started, but none succeeded.

As the southern bay’s gilded era drew to a close in the 1930s under the clouds of the Depression and World War II, private development pressures on southern Biscayne Bay eased. The wealthy continued to visit their resorts and camps as military matters, such as U-boat surveillance, security, and military training, assumed the region’s priorities.

Islandia and Southern Bay Development

With the end of the War and increased population growth around Miami, new owners took over the southern bay keys and its dredgeable bay bottom, creating a new community of owners of second homes, fishing shacks, camps, philanthropies, and a couple permanent residences. Many also had an eye on development, others thought development should be curtailed.
In 1950, Dade County revealed that it intended to build a causeway connecting Key Biscayne to Key Largo, passing through the Key Biscayne properties that had belonged to the Mathesons and still belonged to Carlos Áleman’s wife and heir Elena Garcia. The causeway would be built by dredging and filling across the flats through Elliott Key to Key Largo. Proposals for a road to Elliott Key went back to the late 1920s, when advocated by owner/developer John Gifford and later by the Upper Keys Improvement Association. Various proposals included plans for causeways from Key Largo, Black Point, Convoy Point, and even down the center of the bay. In 1958, the county commission proposed dredging bay bottom to create a twelve and a half square mile airport. The plan impressed those in favor of development of the southern bay and appalled those who did not.

In 1959, Daniel K. Ludwig, once listed as America’s wealthiest person, announced impending development of 28 square miles of southern Biscayne Bay shoreline. His plans eventually came to be revealed to include a cargo port, 40-foot deep basin, 30-foot deep channel and then an oil refinery. Initially well received by local government, the plans outraged environmentally-concerned citizens. It took years for the plan to die, but its unveiling brought the idea of conserving southern Biscayne Bay to public consciousness.

In 1963, Florida Power and Light announced plans to build oil-fired power plants at Turkey Point along the landward shore of southern Biscayne Bay. The station was to take its cooling water from and return it to the bay. In 1967 and 1968, Florida Power and Light Company completed two oil fueled-plants but the heated discharge water was found to damage bay bottom communities, leading to the company’s digging a cooling canal system eventually covering 20 square miles. Three nuclear plants followed on the site’s 3,300 acres, making the Turkey Point Nuclear Generating Station the largest in Florida and sixth largest in the U. S. Turkey Point’s cooling canals unexpectedly became a prime habitat for the American crocodile. The canals, their berms, and nearby marshes provided year-round habitat and nesting sites, making the canals one of the important factors in the recovery of South Florida’s crocodile population.
Another industrial project was the Aerojet rocket engine testing and manufacturing facility. The Aerojet Canal (C111) was dug from Manatee Bay to transport engines. The canal and levee altered coastal surface hydrology. Flames from a 1965 test were visible in Miami. A 1967 test spewed acid onto Homestead. NASA’s 1969 decision against using Aerojet’s rocket ended the enterprise. The 180-foot deep test silo remains, buried, with an engine still inside.

Personal development continued on Elliott and nearby keys as Miamians, especially from Coconut Grove, built second homes. Virginia and Paul Tannehill built their home from wood recovered from the wreck of the Mandalay. Other developments on Elliott Key were for charitable purposes. A local television personality cofounded the Jim Dooley Fishing Club, the membership of which grew to an astounding 16,000 youths. In the 1950s and 1960s, the camp was free to participants, funded by commercial sponsors of the daily Jim Dooley Show. Also on Elliott Key, in 1956, Andre J. Mathieu founded an alcohol rehabilitation center on 90 acres of cleared land called Camp Recovery.

A few public developments occurred as well. For decades, people with small private boats could access south Biscayne Bay only from Miami or the Keys. Homestead Bayfront Park was created at Convoy Point in 1938, although not re-opened until after World War II. In 1955, across the canal, Homestead Bayfront Park North opened for the black population. Very separate, and not quite equal, north park was accessed only by a long and pitted rock road. It closed in response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In 1953, Dade County opened a park on Elliott Key. The park provided dockage, primitive camping, and access to the interior forests of the key. Elliott Key Park became a well-known and well-appreciated public destination for boaters, one of the few accessible public sites on the southern bay keys.

Owners of land on the southern Biscayne Bay keys were inspired by the thought that a causeway would open their islands to development possibilities. As causeway proposals failed to reach

Elliott Key transportation included this Volkswagen van, June 1968. HistoryMiami, 1976-041-19.
Islandia landowners put a voting machine on a pickup truck, ferried it over to Elliott Key, parked it on the future Spite Highway, and held its first city council election, March 6, 1962. Bill Kuenzel, photographer. HistoryMiami, 2002-374-6.
fruition, development-minded people decided that creation of a municipality would allow them to fund a causeway through municipal bonding. In 1960, the town of Islandia was incorporated by 13 votes of 18 registered landowner-voters drawn from 300 property owners. The city of Islandia cobbled together 33 mostly uninhabited south bay islands. The town officials and voters led the campaign for development and a causeway. The city remained on the books, even after the park service took over the land, so it persisted for decades before being formally abolished in 2012.

The Conservation Movement for Southern Biscayne Bay

The concept that southern Biscayne Bay and the coral reef should be protected was not a new one. At the time of the original proposals for the creation of a park in the Everglades in the 1930s, it was proposed that the southern portion of Biscayne Bay, the islands and the coral reef be incorporated into the planned park. In the 1950s and 1960s a movement arose that in its entirety proposed exactly that. The movement began as opposition to causeway proposals, crystalizing in 1953 with the formation of the Biscayne Bay Conservation Association led by Charles D. Leffler and R. Hardy Matheson. Their arguments became well known: causeways impede tidal flow, increase pollution, destroy bay bottom and fisheries, create navigation hazards and obstructions, enable bay bottom dredging and filling, and assure development of natural landscapes. As early as 1949, author Philip Wylie had publicized such environmental effects in northern Biscayne Bay. Ludwig’s plans for Seadade led members of the Isaac Walton League to create the Safe Progress Association with the singular purpose of raising public awareness of the threat to the southern bay. The movement was led by Lloyd Miller with the journalistic help of Juanita Greene and financial and political support of businessman Herbert Hoover, Jr. Others involved were Joe Browder, Ed Corlett, Dave Davenport, Donald DeSylva, Lai Guthrie, Clarence P. Idyll, Carl Karman, Bill Lazarus, Charles Leffler, Arthur Marshall, R. Hardy Matheson, Joe Penford, Al Pflueger, Sr., James Redford, Polly
Redford, Nathanial Reed, Janet Reno, Belle Scheffel, and Philip Wylie. The public awareness and political campaigns were ambitious and inclusive, eventually enlisting a support list of hundreds of thousands of people and national publicity. Politicians began to come around to the idea that the area should become a federal park, including Florida Governor Claude Kirk, local congressman Dante Fascell, Congressional leaders and President Lyndon Johnson and his Interior secretary Stewart Udall. Fascell and Kirk became the political leaders of the plan, which faced a prolonged uphill battle in Florida and in Congress.

The Isaac Walton League in Washington convinced Secretary Udall to take a look at the issue. Herbert Hoover, Jr., brought down biologist and Assistant Interior Secretary Stanley A. Cain and plane-loads of congressmen to inspect. Udall came to observe the area by blimp. In 1966, a report to the Secretary found that the proposed park with its tropical forest contained a rare combination of “terrestrial, marine and amphibious life, as well as significant recreational value ... clear, sparkling waters, marine life, and the submerged lands of Biscayne Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. Here in shallow water is a veritable wonderland.” With the Interior Department, National Park Service’s influential director George B. Hartzog, Jr., powerful
biscayne, national business leaders, and the local newspapers behind the proposal, Congress created Biscayne National Monument. The bill was signed by President Lyndon Johnson on October 18, 1968, during which he reminisced fondly about the time he spent in Biscayne Bay, at the CocoLobo Club.107

The owners and backers of Islandia, including CocoLobo’s influential Bebe Rebozo, were fierce opponents of the national monument plan. The town officials continued their attempts to get approval for a causeway and to stop the state’s transfer of bay bottom to the federal government. Both county and state officials denied the necessary permissions. In February 1968, when the bill to establish a national monument was being prepared in Congress, Luther Brooks and others floated a bulldozer to Elliott Key and used it to widen the existing car trail into a 125 foot wide path
down the forested backbone of the island. Their expanded “Elliott Key Boulevard” became known as “Spite Highway.” Today, with the trees grown back, it is a peaceful hiking trail.

The National Monument protected the extreme southern portion of the bay and the reef beyond. This complemented the first protective actions in the area, in 1963, when the state established John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park offshore of Key Largo. Other pieces were added in later years. The Largo Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary was established in 1975 to expand reef protection beyond state boundaries. On Key Largo, the Crocodile Lake Wildlife Refuge was established in 1980. The state added its own park in 1982, the Dagny Johnson Hammock Botanical Park at a failed development site. In 1990, the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary was established to encompass the keys marine environment. By then much of southern Biscayne Bay, the southern bay keys, coral reefs and offshore waters were governmentally protected areas.
Biscayne National Park

The original boundary of Biscayne National Monument stretched north to Sands Key, leaving out Boca Chita and Ragged Keys; headed east to the 60 foot offshore contour; and west to 700 feet of the bulkhead line. Provision was made for a future shipping channel to cut between the islands to accommodate Ludwig’s seaport. On the south there was a hiatus between the monument and the Coral Reef State Park. Within this boundary, the state transferred submerged lands and the county transferred its park land to the monument, but most land remained in private ownership and not always by willing sellers. Opposition to the monument remained, as lack of information about what a federal monument meant, which was not unexpected as a congressionally approved monument was a unique designation.

Following its establishment, the new monument slowly organized itself. Properties needed to be acquired, existing structures removed or repurposed, rules made and enforced, and visitors accommodated. The monument at first was managed out of Everglades National Park and received its own superintendent, Dale Engquist, in 1971, but had few facilities or staff. Acquisitions were managed by the US Army Corps of Engineers; assessment values had to be set and bids made. Owners proposed new developments to increase the value of their properties. On Adams Key, Bebe Rebozo’s brother-in-law and former caretaker, Howard Bourterse, continued in residence as a park service employee, where he entertained Rebozo and the now president Richard Nixon, sometimes without informing the Park Service. Bourterse’ supervision was thought by the long-time park service director George Hertzog to be the cause for his own removal as director. Whether true or not, the story shows that Biscayne National Monument continued to experience political sensitivities.

Lancelot Jones and his brother’s widow Kathleen sold their 225 acres to the government on the condition that he could continue to live on Porgy Key, which he did. The family home burnt down in 1982, but Lancelot continued to live on the key in a small-
er cabin, until he was evacuated for 1992’s Hurricane Andrew. The second residents granted life tenancy were Virginia and Paul Tannehill. Virginia continued living in her house on the ocean side of Elliott Key. As an indefatigable explorer of the shores, she found among other artifacts a stash of Spanish silver coins dated to the 1600s. She donated many of the artifacts she found to the monument, including a wooden Madonna statue, now on display at the visitor center. Her house, too, was demolished by Hurricane Andrew. With the acquisition of properties, habitats were freed to restore themselves, which over time they did.

The original Congressional act called for visitor centers at Key Largo and Homestead Bayfront Park. It was decided that the former was not needed, and headquarters was established at the site of the previous colored beach. The buildings were mostly repurposed structures, some from other places. These structures were dismantled by Hurricane Andrew; and the replacement visitor center was named for Congressman Dante Fascell, who above all else was responsible for making the monument a reality. Ranger stations were established on the previous county park site on Elliott Key and at the Cocolobo site on Adams Key. The Cocolobo clubhouse was destroyed by fire in 1974 and the rest of the old club by Hurricane Andrew.

Movement to expand the monument’s boundaries began in the early 1970s. The initial boundaries needed rearranging to close the gap to the State Park, add Swan Key (owned by a member of Congress), and eliminate the ship channel easement, all of which was accomplished in 1974. In January 1980, Congress changed the area’s designation from a national monument to a national park. Park boundaries then reached north nearly to Key Biscayne, taking in Stiltsville and Fowey Rocks and to the south to Broad Creek. The original act placed the western boundary where it was possible for development to occur, and the county later re-defined the location of the bulkhead line. But with the 1980 expansion, the park was allowed to work with land owners and local authorities to add the fringing mangrove swamp along the coast to the park. These acquisitions occurred over time, leaving the park with
an undevelopable western buffer of mangrove swamp. Several of the islands within the park boundary did remain privately owned after the expansion, with Soldier Key being purchased in 1993. Through its national park designation, Biscayne National Park was recognized as protecting a significant area having a diversity of historic and natural resources. The park now included most of southern Biscayne Bay.

With the expansion, Boca Chita and Stiltsville became part of the park. August Geiger’s structures, including the iconic fake lighthouse, were restored after Hurricane Andrew put ten feet of water over the island. Bay bottom “campsite” leases of the Stiltsville structures were transferred to the federal government from the state in 1985. Hurricane Andrew destroyed all but seven of the houses and a radio tower. When the leases on the seven that remained expired in 1999 the Park Service announced it would tear them down. But bowing to local public and political pressure, changed its proposal and created the Stiltsville Trust to manage their use in a partnership with their former owners as caretakers. Fowey Lighthouse ownership also was assumed by the park and is considered one of Florida’s most endangered historic structures.
Protecting natural resources was a prime reason for the park’s establishment. Owing to federal legislation and federal-state agreements, recreational and commercial fishing have continued in the park. The southern bay is part of the state’s Biscayne Bay-Card Sound Lobster Sanctuary, where take has been prohibited to protect nursery stock. But most monitored fish stocks in the park have been in long term decline and show unsustainable size class distribution, due mostly to overfishing. Public resistance to increased regulation and additional sanctuary zones has proven to be overpowering to alternative management strategies. Commercial bait shrimping continues in the park using trawls and affecting over 20 per cent of the bay bottom, annually crushing and uprooting sponges and corals and taking substantial bycatch. Protecting the reef tract from damage by grounding, boat anchors, and divers has proven a long-term challenge, acerbated by coral deaths due to disease and increasing sea temperatures.

On land, the park assumed responsibility for managing one of the most important remaining stands of West Indian forested and
shore habitat in Florida, supporting such rare species as Schaus’ Swallowtail, Beach Jacquemontia, and Buccaneer Palm.126

The park protects historic resources, especially nationally listed historic sites that recognize pioneer settlers, the gilded era, and shipwrecks. Remains of hundreds of ships that wrecked on the reef remain in what is now park waters, about 40 such sites having been documented.127 Many of the wreck sites remain unidentified. Acknowledging the Reef’s maritime history, the reefs from Triumph to Pacific were made a National Historic Area, and the park created an underwater Maritime Heritage Trail.

Hurricanes, too, are a part of the historic fabric of southern Biscayne Bay. The storm of 1906 over-washed Elliott Key’s pineapple plantations and wrecked Henry Flagler’s famous paddle-wheeled boat, St. Lucie, drowning at least 21 men near Elliott Key. Hurricanes also hit what is now the park in 1926, 1935, 1950, 1960 and 1962. In 1992, Hurricane Andrew essentially destroyed the park’s infrastructure and leveled non-native vegetation, especially Australian pines.128 In the immediate aftermath of the storm, the park was managed by an emergency team and did not completely reopen for two years. The natural environment that took the brunt of the wind and surge recovered. Natural systems are resilient. The built environment was pulverized. Twenty-five years later, its damage can scarcely been seen as the native habitat revived and park structures were renewed.

Conclusion

Nineteen-ninety-two, Hurricane Andrew, was a historic watershed for southern Biscayne Bay and Biscayne National Park, literally so, as the storm’s water and wind established once again that the bay area belongs to nature. There is meaning in this outcome: southern Biscayne Bay has always been ruled by the forces of nature, not man. Unfortunately, it has also seen that environment altered, animal populations diminished, and some endangered species reduced to a few specimens in the wild. Looking to the casual observer like an untrammeled wilderness, it has been cited as one of the most threat-
ened of the national parks. One of Biscayne National Park’s unique aspects is its location next door to Miami’s sprawling metropolis. It is not unexpected that there would be impacts of this nearness. But the islands once stripped for farming and slated for development are once again covered with West Indian forest and ringed by tropical mangroves. Crocodiles inhabit its lagoons; bonefish, its flats; frigatebirds, its air; pelicans, its mangroves; endangered butterflies, its hammocks; and weekend boaters, its waters. Biscayne Bay remains a unique place in North America where tropics and temperate meet, and a place that has seen five centuries of western culture and millennia of Native American culture before that come, and go.

Endnotes


7 Kushlan and Hines, 14.


9 Hines and Kushlan, 12.


14 Milanich, 230.

15 Carr, 130.

16 Milanich, 230.
17 Carr, 132.


19 Kushlan and Hines, 20.


23 Kushlan and Hines, 15.

24 Fuson, 107.

25 Bernard Romans, *A general map of the southern British colonies in America, comprehending North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, with the neighboring Indian countries, from the modern surveys of Engineer de Brahm, Capt. Collet, Mouzon, & others, and from the large hydrographical survey of the coasts of East and West Florida*. (London: R. Sayer and J. Bennett, 1784). https://www.loc.gov/item/gm71005467/

26 Fuson, 107.


Hines and Kushlan, 14.


Marks, 16.

Marks, 18.


Marks, 18-19.

Blank, 28-32.

40 Blank, 52-54.

41 Kushlan and Hines, 18.

42 Blank, 62.


44 Hines and Kushlan, 18.


48 Niemiec, 24-45.

49 Hines and Kushlan, 20.

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52 Hines and Kushlan, 21.

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54  Hines and Kushlan, 41, 91.
55  Hines and Kushlan, 23.
56  Hines and Kushlan, 19.
58  Wilkinson, ibid.
59  Hines and Kushlan, 22, 26.
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81  Hines and Kushlan, 33.
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83  Hines and Kushlan, 34.
84  Hines and Kushlan, 35-36.
86  Hines and Kushlan, 118.
87  Miller, 25.
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111  Miller, 71-84.


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Wrecking Rules
Florida’s First Territorial Scrum

James Tilghman

When Spain ceded Florida to the United States in 1821, Key West was uninhabited. Four years later, Col. James Gadsden, charged with surveying the route for a road from St. Augustine to Cape Florida, reported that the last stretch was hardly worth the effort. The southern extremity of the peninsula only attracted wreckers and fishermen—“adventurous emigrants” who cared little for roads, thought of “tonnage” (ship’s capacity) as capital and confined their plowing to the deep. Yet when the Civil War broke out thirty-five years later, Key West was the largest and wealthiest city in Florida, and would remain so for another thirty years.¹

Wrecking was the catalyst; by then three to four hundred million dollars in ships and cargo passed through the Florida Straits each year and a vessel a week ended up on the Florida Reef, which arced for some two hundred miles just offshore of the Keys.² Claims for salvaging the wrecks had to be adjudicated and the property saved had to be stored and sold or shipped on, which meant more economic activity in the form of wharves, warehouses, merchants, surveyors, auctions, auctioneers and more ships—and the chandlers, shipwrights and sailmakers needed to tend to them. Much has been written about wrecking and the wreckers, but the political and legal battles fought to establish the ground rules—how, where, and by who wrecked property and salvage claims would be handled in the new territory—were fraught, and have received less attention.³

William Whitehead, an early customs collector and mayor of Key West, would reminisce that the wrecking business had become such a well-oiled machine it was hard to remember what it was like when the island was first settled.⁴ What it was like was a scrum: wrecking interests against merchants, shippers and their insurers; would-be wrecking depots against each other; courts and legislatures pushing and pulling in different directions; and the territorial press trying to move the pile with some “fake news” and “alternate facts.”
A wrecker during Key West's heyday, as envisioned in Harper's New Monthly Magazine, April 1859. Courtesy of Cornell University Library's Making of America Journal Collection.
Would-Be Wrecking Stations

Nassau

Wreckers from Nassau began to salvage wrecks on the Florida Reef long before Florida became a U. S. territory. They came in small, shallow-draft sloops and schooners and anchored where wrecks, good holding ground and water could be found. In their downtime they cut local hardwood, caught sea turtles, and sustained themselves by supplementing the pork and biscuits they brought with fish, game, and the occasional vegetables grown ashore. By 1821, it was estimated that forty to sixty Bahamian wrecking vessels were working the reef, with one “credibly informed” outlier claiming there were 120.

Wrecked property was taken to Nassau where, unless an agreement was reached, salvage awards were determined by arbitration or an admiralty court based on the difficulty of the effort. If necessary, the property was sold at auction to satisfy the award and pay the government fees, with the latter averaging about a third of the proceeds. If the vessel was abandoned the salvage award could be as high as one hundred percent of what was left; otherwise the range was fifty to seventy-five percent, which was high by English maritime standards.

Fishermen from New England began to fish the Keys for the Havana market after the War of 1812, and before long they were salvaging wrecks as well. There was little conflict at first; at times American and Bahamian wreckers even worked the same wreck. When Florida became a U. S. territory, however, the Americans felt the salvage business on the reef was rightfully theirs, and tensions began to mount. There was no legal basis for the belief. Yes, duties had to be paid when foreign goods salvaged on the reef were brought ashore and sold or otherwise “imported,” but no law required them to be brought ashore at all; property wrecked there could be salvaged by anyone and taken anywhere for adjudication, which up to then meant Nassau. Indeed, given their long history on the reef, Bahamian wreckers felt as if they
had, in effect, adversely possessed it—that they had “a right in the wrecking ground ... independent of any change of government.” And they intended to exercise that right until “driven off by armed force.”

Key West and Port Monroe

In 1818, John Whitehead, a Mobile businessman and William’s older brother, was shipwrecked off the Bahamas on his way home from New York. A passing vessel took him to Nassau and another on to Mobile. The last, for reasons unknown, put into Key West on the way, and Whitehead was struck by the island’s strategic location and deep, protected harbor. Back in Mobile he shared his thoughts with John Simonton, a friend, fellow Mobile businessman and part-time resident of Washington with close ties to several members of Congress and the administration. Both concluded that Key West had immense potential, including as a depot for property salvaged on the reef and a naval base astride shipping lanes in need of protection from foreign navies and pirates, who lately had begun operating off the coast of Cuba and Puerto Rico.

Key West was still Spanish at that point, but as ratification of the treaty ceding Florida to the U. S. approached, Simonton and Whitehead went to work. Additional investors were brought in, the island was purchased from its Spanish owner, and Simonton began to tout its advantages both as a wrecking depot and a naval base to friends in Congress and the administration. In January 1822, he petitioned Congress for port of entry status based on the former, pointing out that the wrecking business in Nassau employed some five hundred people and kept the merchants and government there flush. The new territory’s collection districts were being drawn with established ports like St. Augustine, Apalachicola and Pensacola in mind, but provision was made for a small Key West district covering the coast from Charlotte Harbor to Cape Sable and the “islands opposite and nearest thereto,” which in terms of the Keys meant from the Tortugas to Vaca Key.
Port of entry status meant that foreign goods salvaged on the reef could be entered at Key West—a plus, but not the key to the wrecking kingdom it would become; nothing yet required wreckers to bring salvaged property to any particular port or country, much less a port of entry. And port of entry status did not change the fact that, without an admiralty court, salvage claims could only be adjudicated by agreement. So the wrecking dynamics stayed mostly the same, and wreckers continued to take what they salvaged on the reef to Nassau.

Simonton’s effort to bring the Navy to Key West was also successful. After verifying his description of the island, the secretary
of the Navy decided that its location and harbor warranted making it the forward base for the West India Squadron’s planned campaign against the pirates operating out of Cuba and Puerto Rico.16 Commodore David Porter was given command of the squadron and experienced some success early on, but his occupation of Key West turned out to be “arbitrary, unjust and tyrannical”—to the point that its wrecking prospects were “struck with the blight of military despotism.”17

Porter was hard on the prospects of others as well, including those of Joshua Appleby, who came to the Keys from Rhode Island to establish a wrecking station on Knight Key, just off the west end of Vaca Key, in late 1822. A notice to mariners

Titian Ramsay Peale’s Allentown from the Commodore’s house looking north. Drawn in late 1824 or early 1825, it was the first sketch of Key West, officially known as Allentown at the time. Titian Ramsay Peale Sketches Collection (Peale#185), American Philosophical Society.
promised that his “Port Monroe” had “a large and spacious harbor,” “experienced pilots,” “good vessels,” and everything needed “for the immediate relief of the unfortunate stranger” who got on the reef.  

What he failed to mention was the illegal prize-laundering operation. Spanish shipping was the principal target of privateers at the time, but Spanish prizes and prize goods could not be condemned or sold in American ports because Spain and the U.S. were at peace. To avoid the problem one Columbian privateer grounded his prizes near Knight Key, Appleby’s wreckers salvaged the cargo, and it was taken to Charleston or Norfolk to be sold as wrecked rather than prize goods.

When Porter learned of the scheme he seized the prize goods and arrested Appleby. He was released a month later, and Knight Key remained/became a popular rendezvous and jumping-off spot for wreckers to the windward of Key West—to the point that
Knight Key anchorage (circled by author), the western tip of Vaca Key and the view from offshore in Gauld’s *Accurate Chart of the Tortugas and Florida Keys*. Digital image from State Library of Florida, Florida Map Collection.
the acting customs collector in Key West recommended stationing an inspector there. But Appleby’s legal problems persisted, and events soon passed Port Monroe by.

**St. Augustine**

In late March 1822, Congress officially declared East and West Florida to be the Territory of Florida. The president was charged with appointing a territorial governor, a territorial legislative council and a judge to preside in each of two Superior Courts, one in St. Augustine and the other in Pensacola. The Superior Courts were vested with the judicial power of the territory and what amounted to federal district court jurisdiction over all claims arising under the laws and Constitution of the United States.

As a port of entry with an admiralty court, St. Augustine could adjudicate wrecks and clear imported goods. Add a collection district that stretched all the way to the northern Keys and it seems clear that the old capital and only sizable town in East Florida (population 3,000, according to the marshal and mayor)
had been penciled-in as the new territory’s wrecking depot. Indeed, the marshal already thought of himself as the “guardian of ... wrecks and their proceeds.”\textsuperscript{22} St. Augustine’s Achilles heel was geography; it could be a thousand mile roundtrip from the reef, and there might not be enough water over the bar to enter the harbor when you arrived.\textsuperscript{23}

As a result, wreckers shunned St. Augustine as well even though, depending on where the wreck occurred, the roundtrip to Nassau could be almost as far. Frustrated, St. Augustine wanted a customs inspector and a revenue cutter stationed at the southern end of its district, on Old (Lower) Matecumbe Key, in the hope that they might reduce the revenue being lost to Nassau.\textsuperscript{24}

Plan of St. Augustine by the US Army in 1819. It shows just five feet of water over the bar at low tide. Shoaling was a persistent problem. Forty years later, the Coast Survey warned in its first chart of St. Augustine Harbor that vessels drawing more than five feet should not attempt to cross the bar at low water. Digital image from Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, https://www.loc.gov/item 2006628351.
Florida and Federal Wrecking Acts

In 1821, before Congress established a territorial government, a grand jury was convened in St. Augustine to consider East Florida’s most pressing problems. Bahamian wreckers were number two on the list, after replacing Spanish law with American common law. A few months later the first Territorial Legislative Council picked up where the grand jury left off, sending the president and Congress a memorial (petition) listing what the inhabitants of the new territory were in most need of from the federal government. Number three on the list, after a road between Pensacola and St. Augustine and lighthouses for both ports, was help with the Bahamian wreckers:

Your memorialists would beg leave particularly to direct the attention of the Congress of the United States to the necessity of ... some law upon the subject of wrecking at the peninsula of Florida, which is now in the hands of foreigners, and subject to [their] absolute controul [sic].

Wrecking was on the agenda again the next session, and the Territorial Legislative Council concluded that there were really two problems or “evils” that resulted in all but a “trifling” of the goods salvaged on the reef being taken to Nassau. One was the absence of any laws prohibiting “foreign vessels from occupying the wrecking grounds,” and the council took the opportunity to prod Congress on the subject again. The other was the “greater encouragement given to wreckers by the Bahama government,” particularly in terms of the “facility and expedition with which the reward of the wrecker is determined.” The council decided to take on the latter evil.

Congress had given the Territorial Legislative Council the power to create additional inferior courts, and the council used that power to craft an Act Concerning Wreckers and Wrecked Property, which it passed on July 4, 1823. The act’s intent was to provide “prompt and efficient protection” for both wreckers and property owners, which was hard to argue with, but it resulted in a sea change. Before the act was passed, only the Superior
Courts in St. Augustine and Pensacola had the authority to adjudicate wrecks; afterwards, every justice of the peace or notary in the territory could do so, and the governor could appoint as many of those as he wanted. Indeed, an emissary was said to have appeared in Key West in early 1824 with a handful of blank commissions and instructions to start swearing some in.

In terms of mechanics, the new act required the owners or salvors of wrecked property to notify the nearest notary or justice of the peace when it was brought ashore. The notary or justice was then charged with summoning a jury of five persons to inquire into the circumstances of the wreck and salvage, consider both the owners’ and salvors’ evidence, and make a written award setting forth how much of the property or the proceeds of any sale should go to the wreckers and how much to other interested parties, including owners or insurers.

Two of the five jurors were selected by the wreckers, two by the owners of the property and a fifth by the justice or notary, who also picked for the owners if neither they nor a representative, such as the master or supercargo (commercial officer) of the vessel or the underwriters’ agent, was present. Finding five jurors whose lives or livelihoods were not impacted in some way by the wrecking business was virtually impossible in the sparsely settled Keys, so adjudication under the act was wrecker-friendly, with salvage rates that, at 75 to 95 percent of the value of the property saved, were some 25 percent higher than those in Nassau.

Nor was there any real recourse if the salvage award was excessive. A certified copy of the award had to be sent to the Superior Court in St. Augustine, and the justice or notary was supposed to “abide” by any instructions he received. But that never happened; the favored course of action was a quick sale, thought to be authorized by another provision in the act calling for the justice or notary “to cause effect to be given to the award.” And a quick sale coupled with Key West’s isolation meant little in the way of competitive bidding or notice, which in turn meant lower bids and greater losses. The Superior Court was also supposed to
take charge of and advertise whatever property remained for the owner, but that rarely happened either.\textsuperscript{32}

Ancillary charges added insult to injury. Depending on how much property was involved and the circumstances surrounding its salvage, the presiding justice or notary received one to two percent of the value of the property saved and the territory another three; the auctioneer got four or five percent of the value of whatever had to be sold; the clerk of the Superior Court was entitled to two or three percent of the value of the cargo that had to be stored; and the territory to another five to fifteen percent of that depending on when and if the property was claimed.

With the territory’s memorials and legislation in hand, Congress addressed the first evil in May 1824, when it passed its own Act Concerning Wrecks on the Coast of Florida—and then again when the act had to be passed a second time in 1825, because the president forgot to sign it the first time. Rather than bar Bahamians or other foreigners from the reef, as Florida wanted, the federal act required all property salvaged there or anywhere on the coast by anybody to be taken to a U. S. port of entry. Vessels ignoring the mandate were subject to seizure and sale, and informants would receive half of the proceeds.\textsuperscript{33} The act finished off Port Monroe as a wrecking station and ended Nassau’s run as a depot for property salvaged on the reef.\textsuperscript{34}

The next three years were, as one congressman put it, “pretty wild.” It was coming down to St. Augustine versus Key West, and both laws, while general in application, favored Key West. According to the territory’s first delegate to Congress, between August 1824 and March 1825, more than $5,000 was collected under the revenue provisions of the territorial act, which meant $300,000 in wrecked property was brought to Key West on an annualized basis. Simonton provided numbers for an overlapping period—$293,353 in wrecked property sold in Key West from December 1824 to December 1825—and they told the same story.\textsuperscript{35}
Legal Challenges

Resistance to the territorial act was inevitable. In one instance it came from Commodore Porter, who had an interest in the sale of some cotton salvaged by American and British warships and threatened to burn it and the warehouse it was stored in if territorial law was followed. Few, though, could be that bully. The more common tactic, favored by aggrieved merchants, shippers and their insurers, was to sue for restitution in another port where the property, its purchaser or the wrecker could be found. One wrecker even bragged that he was sued on a regular basis in New York. These were “collateral attacks” rather than appeals, so the issue was whether the territorial wrecking act had given Florida’s new “wrecking courts” jurisdiction to proceed in the first place—not whether the result or process was fair.

The most important of these cases arose out of the wreck of the Point a Petre, which was in route from New Orleans to France with a cargo of cotton when it ran aground on Carysfort Reef. The wreck was adjudicated in Key West by a notary and five jurors, the wreckers were awarded 76 percent of the value of the cotton saved, and the cotton was sold to satisfy the award. The cargo’s insurers brought suit in the United States District Court for South Carolina, which sat in Charleston, where 356 of the bales and the purchaser ended up.

The Superior Court of East Florida also considered the act when Jacob Housman, an infamous wrecker with no love-loss for the wrecking establishment in Key West, appeared in St. Augustine with cargo salvaged under disputed circumstances from the Revenge, a French brig that came to grief off of Caesar’s Creek. He opted for adjudication under the territorial wrecking act rather than in Superior Court, and the jury awarded him 95 percent of the property he saved. The French consul challenged the award in Superior Court.

Both courts concluded that the judgments rendered in Key West were a nullity—that the territorial wrecking act did not con-
fer admiralty jurisdiction on Florida’s notaries and justices of the peace. The gist of their reasoning was that the Constitution gave the federal government admiralty and maritime jurisdiction, and that Congress made it exclusive by giving “original cognizance” of all such cases to the federal district courts in the Judicial Act of 1789. Congress may well have passed that jurisdiction along to Florida’s Superior Courts, which were acting in part as temporary federal district courts, but the Territorial Legislative Council did not have the power to pass it along again. There was no indication Congress had that in mind when it gave the council the power to establish inferior courts, and it would violate the express prohibition against enacting territorial laws “inconsistent with the Constitution and laws of the United States.”

Although it was not the basis for his decision, the South Carolina district judge also touched on what bothered the merchants, ship owners, and their insurers the most, which was the unfairness created by inadequate notice, inherently biased jurors, conflicts of interest at every turn, excessive salvage awards, and auctions rigged to favor local merchants so that little or nothing was left of the proceeds when the salvage awards were satisfied. The judge saw these flaws as proof that the federal court system—in this case including the Florida Superior Courts—had and needed to have exclusive jurisdiction over admiralty and maritime cases:

[The wrecking courts’ very constitution] is liable to great objections. It is composed of any Notary or Justice, and of a Jury chosen from a society limited in its population, and it may be so identified with the suitors as to render the administration of justice very insecure, and unsatisfactory. ... The evidence in this very case has brought to light circumstances which will warrant the opinion I have expressed. The presiding magistrate was the judge who condemned—the auctioneer who sold—and the purchaser at the sale of some of the property—and however fair and upright his character may be ... he was exposed to temptations by his multifarious occupations in that place, which ought to be avoided.
The courts’ decisions in the *Point a Petre* and *Revenge* cases unsettled wreckers and politicians alike and led Congress to annul the territorial wrecking act in February 1826. But the courts were not through. The District Court’s decision was appealed to the Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of South Carolina, and ultimately to the United States Supreme Court. And there were surprises.

The Court of Appeals reversed the South Carolina District Court and the Supreme Court agreed, concluding that the District Court’s jurisdictional analysis was flawed—that the territorial wrecking act did indeed confer admiralty jurisdiction on Florida’s makeshift wrecking courts. Salvage claims were not creatures of U. S. law; they had been part of maritime law since time immemorial. Thus, when Congress gave Florida’s Superior Courts jurisdiction in “cases arising under the laws and constitution of the United States,” it was not providing those courts any, much less exclusive admiralty jurisdiction. Congress gave Florida the right to confer admiralty jurisdiction on its courts when it provided that its legislative power would extend “to all rightful subjects of legislation.” And the same enabling act gave Florida the power to vest what jurisdiction it created “in such inferior courts and justices of the peace as the legislative council ... may, from time to time, establish.” That Congress chose to allocate admiralty jurisdiction differently between state and federal courts did not make Florida’s approach “inconsistent with the Constitution and laws of the United States.” Florida was a territory, not a state.

To top it off, the Court of Appeals also rejected much of the received wisdom concerning the flaws in the wrecking courts’ composition and procedures:

It is proper to remark here that whatever may be the fact as to the integrity and propriety which regulate the proceedings of the Court at Key West, there is nothing novel or unprecedented in the organization of that Court. The model of it is of great antiquity, and throughout the civilized world, some such summary mode of adjusting salvage, in cases of wreck of the sea, is to be found.
Vindication, such as it was, came too late. The act had long since been declared null and void, and St. Augustine and Key West were two years into a legislative battle over what came next.

**Arbitration Redux**

There was little support for the territorial wrecking act after the lower courts declared it invalid. Shippers, merchants, planters, manufacturers and insurers had complained about it from the outset. The territory’s new delegate to Congress, Joseph M. White, thought it should be abolished. The governor wondered whether the territory had the power to enact it in the first place. The Territorial Legislative Council asked for another chance to create “a proper tribunal ... in the neighborhood of the reef.” Still others thought no Florida ports should have jurisdiction to adjudicate salvage claims, leaving wreckers to take salvaged property to New Orleans or Savannah or Charleston.45

Against this backdrop it is not surprising that, when the Senate asked its judiciary committee to look into disapproving the act, it was gone in five weeks—declared null and void by both houses on February 1, 1826.46 There was far more rant than debate, as the act was denounced as a “palpable violation of the fundamental law of the Territory” and its “extraordinary” provisions were blamed for the “evils” and “abuses” in Key West. All delegate White had to say was that the Florida Legislative Council meant well.47

There was a belief in St. Augustine that invalidating the territorial wrecking act would force wreckers to bring what they salvaged on the reef to St. Augustine, where it could be legally and fairly adjudicated. And according to William Whitehead, when the lower courts first declared the act invalid, wreckers and merchants in Key West did indeed become concerned that sales and salvage awards made there might not hold up: “salvors [were] reluctant to act under [the law] and purchasers were equally averse to investing their money in goods which might be wrested from them in [another] port.”48 But instead of the wreckers heading
north, arbitration made a comeback, and by the time Congress declared the act null and void most wrecks were being adjudicated privately in Key West.

No one in St. Augustine was happy about that, and an anonymous advocate who called himself “Amicus Floridae” accused officials in Key West of resorting to “shameful tricks and connivances,” such as telling shipwrecked captains there was no admiralty court in St. Augustine, to secure the necessary arbitration agreements. On the other hand, there were legitimate reasons to opt for arbitration in Key West, including the delay and risk of further loss inherent in the trip north. Indeed, one officer in the West India Squadron thought arbitration in Key West was the better choice given “the several days of bad navigation” it took to get to St. Augustine and the “small draft of water” over its bar.

Duped or not, enough owners and insurers decided to arbitrate in Key West to keep the wrecking business there humming: salvage awards were comparable; the auctioneer still got his four percent; local merchants had the bidding mostly to themselves; there was no government interference; and no one had to pay the ancillary charges imposed by the wrecking act for the benefit of the territorial government. An “ingenious contrivance,” Amicus Floridae called it, while claiming that Simonton and others in Key West actually preferred it to a superior court. But in St. Augustine’s eyes arbitration Key West-style simply perpetuated the “abuses” of the territorial wrecking act, and Amicus Floridae tried to warn off the wreckers in the town’s paper, the East Florida Herald:

WRECKERS! BEWARE OF KEY WEST!

It is now ascertained that all proceedings at ... Key West under the system of arbitration lately adopted on that island will be ript (sic) up by the Insurance Companies in the sea ports of the United States. No wrecker can there-
fore expect to be secure in the salvage that may be allowed to him by *arbitration* at Key West.\(^{53}\)

It never came to that; Key West wanted a superior court.

**Key West versus St. Augustine**

Perhaps reflecting the close relationships he enjoyed in Washington, Simonton made the case for a new judicial district and a superior court in South Florida in a letter to the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee rather than the typical memorial. Key West, with a population of three to four hundred and growing rapidly, was too important to be left in an “unprotected and lawless state” hundreds of miles from the Superior Courts in St. Augustine and Pensacola (and by then Apalachicola). And the need for a court with admiralty jurisdiction was obvious. Key West’s valuable harbor and commanding location made it the only logical spot for a “court to guard and regulate the immense wrecking business of the Florida reef,” which in the preceding twelve plus months had netted almost $300,000 from the sale of wrecked property and produced $100,000 in duties.\(^{54}\)

Simonton’s familiar, matter-of-fact approach seemed to capture the moment. The Senate Judiciary Committee reported a bill establishing a southern judicial district in Florida, and it passed on April 26, 1826.\(^{55}\) But trouble was awaiting it in the House.

**Too Small, Too Sickly, Too Shady**

The same day the Senate Judiciary Committee’s bill reached the floor, Representative William Drayton of South Carolina, the St. Augustine-born son of a former East Florida justice, countered with a bill from the House Judiciary Committee, which repealed the federal wrecking act and required property salvaged on the coast of Florida to “be carried for adjudication into no other parts of the territory other than the ports of St. Augustine and Pensacola.”\(^{56}\)

Courtesy of St. Augustine, trouble was also brewing in the House Commerce Committee. Simonton’s counterpart there, at least when
it came to promoting St. Augustine as the territory’s wrecking capital, was John Rodman and his alter ego, Amicus Floridae. Rodman, a former New York district attorney who became the customs collector in St. Augustine in 1821, was zealous, resourceful, tenacious, a busybody and, as fate would have it, had defended Simonton’s title to Key West and challenged Housman’s salvage award on behalf of the French government in the *Revenge* case. Rodman was convinced that Key West was a disgraceful port of entry, a ground zero for “every kind of depredation upon fair and regular commerce,” including the smuggling of coffee and sugar from Cuba under the pretense of fishing and of dutiable goods wrecked on the reef under the pretense of taking them elsewhere for adjudication.

Rodman found sympathetic ears in Richard Rush, his boss, the secretary of the treasury and a former prosecutor himself, as well as Churchill Cambreleng, a fellow New Yorker on the House Commerce Committee who shared Rodman’s coastal Carolina roots. Both were charged with protecting the revenue, both were concerned about the goings on in Key West, and both were open to the idea that it should not be a port of entry.

When the Senate voted to establish a southern judicial district in Florida, Rush advised the House Committee on Commerce to consider eliminating Key West as a port of entry, and Cambreleng championed this cause. He procured a resolution calling for statements of revenue and collections from Key West, dubbed the island the “new Barataria” (a reference to Jean Lafitte’s infamous smuggling outpost in a bayou south of New Orleans), and argued in committee and on the floor that the customs house in Key West should be abolished. The approach was inspired: without a customs house there could be no arbitration or adjudication of salvage claims in Key West, and its sins made better talking points than the expediency of an admiralty court there.

Letters were also “insidiously pressed” on members of Congress warning them that Key West was too sickly and its proprietors too unscrupulous to host a superior court or customs house. None of the letters have survived, but a flavor of the “too
sickly” argument can be gleaned from blurbs which appeared (without attribution) in the *East Florida Herald*. The tale told there is of a vessel appearing in St. Augustine in early 1826 to recruit residents to move to Key West, promising that “speedy fortune[s]” would be made in a “land flowing with milk and honey.” Thirty or forty went but found “a land of disease and death” instead. Seventeen returned—tossed on the beach “like so much useless lumber”—and reported that “not more than ten persons remained on the island.”

If all of this wasn’t trouble enough, delegate White declined to take a position on the superior court issue. The duties collected in Key West, which were far more than in the rest of Florida’s ports
combined, were an important source of revenue for the federal
government, and other wrecking charges comprised five percent
of the territory’s budget. But White hoped that ports and courts
in other, more populous and less troublesome parts of the territo-
ry, could generate the same revenue:

A Court at Key West was proposed, provided for in a bill
which passed the Senate. At one time I thought favorably of
it and at another ... that it might be an impolitic measure.
If we had any assurance that the wreckers would carry the
property to any other court in the Territory, for their claim
of salvage, where the property would sell, it would be better
to have no Court. If, however it would be carried to New
Providence and Cuba ... it would be better to have a Court.
... I left it to those who had an interest on both sides. ...

Realpolitik

Key West survived the session with its customs house intact.
A final vote was never taken on Drayton’s bill to make St. Augus-
tine and Pensacola the only wrecking depots, and no bill address-
ing Key West’s port of entry status was ever introduced. On the
other hand, the favorable Senate bill was never taken up by the
House, and there was no superior court in sight. At the end of
the session Daniel Webster, then the chairman of the House Judi-
ciary Committee, took Simonton aside and suggested a stronger
showing of the “propriety and necessity” of a superior court in
Key West. The result was a “manifesto,” Amicus Floridae’s word,
sent to every senator and representative explaining the reality of
wrecking on the reef: the federal wrecking act worked because
Key West was near the reef; wreckers would begin taking prop-
erty salvaged there to New Providence or Havana again if forced to
go to a distant port like St. Augustine; stopping them would take
more resources than the government had or cared to commit;
complaints about the salvage awards and other irregularities in
Key West were exaggerated, but only “proved the [need for] a tri-
bunal clothed with government sanction”; once there was a court,
bidders would come and competitive auctions would ensue.
Amicus Floridae responded in kind: wreckers frequented Key West because they were paid too well and too quickly, not because of its location; the island was too sickly to expect a judge to sit there year-round; and no honest judge would do it without the protection of “a company of armed soldiers.” Rodman, for his part, kept pressure on Rush, reminding him that Key West had a history of “giving encouragement and protection to every species of smuggling”; that it was on-going—“four fifths of the coffee and sugar sent from Key West to Charleston [has] never paid a cent of duty”; and that, if Key West remained a port of entry, ending it would require stationing customs inspectors “every ten paces all-round the island.”

Rodman liked St. Augustine’s chances in the next session:

The iniquitous proceedings which have for some time past been carried on at Key West cannot continue long. Congress will, I humbly conceive ... be sensible of the propriety of abolishing the customs house [there], and should that event take place almost all of the wreckers will come here with the goods saved from shipwreck.

But instead it grew quiet on the port of entry front and the proponents of an admiralty court in Key West regrouped. For the first time memorials came from the wreckers and inhabitants, emphasizing how impractical it would be to carry wrecked goods to St. Augustine. More numbers were submitted to the Senate to underscore how much revenue Key West produced. The Key West collector made it clear that an admiralty court was needed there. The West India Squadron agreed, and its opinions—including that Key West was no sicklier than any other island in the West Indies—were made known to the Senate Judiciary Committee and delegate White. The latter was urged by the Territorial Legislative Council to support a superior court for Key West, and ultimately did. Simonton brought the new chairman of the House Judiciary Committee up to date on the issue and prior submissions. And perhaps most importantly, he took steps to address Key West’s record keeping and remittance issues.
In the end, St. Augustine may have protested and proved too much. Simonton made the point in his manifesto, and the editors at *Niles Register* captured what seemed to be the same, growing sentiment:

Some at St. Augustine have appeared rather hostile to the establishments at Key West—but so many rumors of improper proceedings at that place have reached us that building up some high civil authority seems absolutely necessary to keep things straight.\(^70\)

*The Porter Factor*

Geography eventually prevailed, with Simonton’s deft political touch helping it along. At the same time, it is hard to ignore the impact of Commodore Porter’s second “occupation” of Key West. After the first he had the pirates on the north side of Cuba on the run. Then, however, he contracted yellow fever, became insubordinate, and created an international incident in Puerto Rico. Recalled, court-marshaled, convicted and relieved of duty for six months, Porter resigned his commission to command the Mexican navy.\(^71\)

In December 1826, Porter and four of his Mexican naval vessels were cruising along the coast of Cuba when they were spotted by two Spanish frigates. Porter ran for Key West and settled in, just as the session of Congress that Rodman had high hopes for was getting underway. A Spanish blockading force followed, but Porter’s superior knowledge of the three channels in and out of Key West’s harbor made it difficult to bottle him up. For six months, he came and went virtually at will, raiding Cuba and capturing or destroying enough Spanish vessels to halt trade with the island and outrage Spain. The West India Squadron had moved its base to Pensacola and there was no one there to stop him.\(^72\)

The coming and going and recruiting and at least some of the outfitting and provisioning violated American neutrality laws. The black market sale of prize goods did as well, and made Key West
a “grand depot for smugglers.” All of it created a national uproar, and provided Congress with a demonstration of Key West’s strategic importance—as well as a glimpse of what the island might be like if it became the next Barataria instead of the seat of the southern district of Florida.73

A Southern District of Florida

It took three sessions and more than two years, but on May 23, 1828, Congress passed an act establishing the southern judicial district in the territory of Florida. All of the territory south of a line from Indian River to Charlotte Harbor was included in the new district; the judge would be appointed by the president and sit and reside in Key West to insure his availability; and the Superior Court would have the same jurisdiction as the other Superior Courts in the territory.74 Key West would be the territory’s de facto and de jure wrecking capital.

As intended, adjudication became more owner/insurer friendly. There was no precise formula, but independent judges and existing Anglo-American precedent combined to bring salvage awards down. In his text on salvage, Judge William Marvin provided a sampling of awards made in Key West to illustrate how they were determined. The average award in this group was just over twenty percent of the value of the property saved.75 The larger universe of court and insurance company statistics accumulated from 1844 to 1857, which presumably included a greater percentage of simpler efforts like piloting or towing vessels to safety, reflected an average award of only eight or nine percent of the value of the property saved.76 And this despite the belief that the above average awards were necessary to keep enough wreckers working the reef.77

The act also addressed several chronic problems, including the post-adjudication division and handling of salvaged property and collusive agreements between wreckers and the master or supercargo of wrecked vessels. But by far the most important provision was the Superior Court’s extra-judicial mandate to license the wreckers who worked the reef.78 It was a novel idea from an
unlikely source—a transplanted South Carolina planter, Richard Fitzpatrick, who was Key West’s first (and for a time only) auctioneer and the owner of the wrecking vessel *Eagle*. Despite his stake in the status quo, Fitzpatrick’s planter sensibilities must have told him that taking some of the rough edges off the wrecking business would ultimately help sustain it. And he was right; in the hands of James Webb and William Marvin, the two judges who presided over the superior and then the federal district court in Key West for the next twenty years, the power to refuse or revoke a wrecker’s license was the key to turning the business into the well-oiled machine William Whitehead remembered—“a legitimate business” with “established and equitable rules” instead of a “species of relentless piracy.”

Epilogue

*Indian Key*

While Key West and St. Augustine vied for wrecking supremacy, another wrecking settlement was taking shape on Indian Key, a

William Whitehead’s 1838 sketch of The Business Part of Key West, reproduced in Jefferson Browne’s *Key West: The Old and the New* (St. Augustine, FL: Record Company Printers and Publishers, 1912). Digital image from State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.
ten to twelve acre island off the northern end of Lower Matecumbe Key. Wreckers had long anchored there; fresh water and the most dangerous reefs were close by and the mosquitoes were farther away. In 1824 Joshua Appleby, preparing to move on from Port Monroe, had a store built there to supply the wreckers and trade with the Indians and settlers to the north. The store prospered, the island changed hands several times, wreckers began to settle there, and at one point a hotel of sorts was built with a grog shop, pool table and pin ball alley. Jacob Housman bought a house there in 1830 and the hotel and store the following year. By 1835 he owned most of the island and had turned it into a thriving, would-be wrecking station with its own post office and customs inspector.  

Part of Housman’s success was attributable to the store itself, which did a booming business. By 1833, it had annual sales of $25,000. Part of it was due to his prowess as a wrecker. Housman owned three wrecking vessels by then and made more at it than most, either because he was tough and aggressive or dishonest and unscrupulous or all of the above. And part of it was due to the credit Housman’s store extended to those who rendezvoused or lived on Indian Key, putting many in his debt and obliging them to do his bidding—as lookouts, agents, witnesses, etc.  

In the end, though, wrecked property still had to be taken to Key West, and salvage claims, if not arbitrated or otherwise resolved by agreement, had to be decided there. Housman could not abide the profits made there by “the gentlemen of many avocations,” his derisive term for the merchants in Key West who controlled the warehouses, wharves, yards and often the bidding at auction and wrecking vessels themselves. He desperately wanted Indian Key to become a port of entry with an admiralty court so that he could become a gentleman of even more avocations. It was time, he was sure, to rewrite the wrecking rules and put another wrecking depot in the Keys.
A sketch of the Perrine home and wharf shows how the north end of Indian Key looked in 1840. From Henry E. Perrine’s *A True Story of Some Eventful Years in Grandpa’s Life*, privately printed in Buffalo by E. H. Hutchinson in 1885. Digital image by State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

A ground plan of Indian Key in 1840. From Henry E. Perrine’s *A True Story of Some Eventful Years in Grandpa’s Life* (Buffalo, New York: E. H. Hutchinson, 1885. HistoryMiami).
Dade County’s Dubious Birth

During the first session of the twenty-third Congress, Housman submitted two memorials on behalf of Indian Key’s inhabitants and others interested in the wrecking business on the reef. They asked that the island be made a port of entry, and that the Superior Court in Key West be required to sit there for one term a year. The memorials were referred to the House Committee on Commerce but nothing came of them. They were presented again (along with a third memorial) in the second session but still no action was taken.87 Key West learned of the effort between sessions, and William Whitehead, the collector at the time and the district’s de facto spokesman, wrote to delegate White to protest the lack of notice and point out that Indian Key, with no foreign trade and no admiralty court to adjudicate wrecks, had no use for port of entry status.88

Truth be told, a port of entry with no admiralty court could work in a wrecker’s favor when it came to taking advantage of the owners and insurers of salvaged property. Indeed, it was the dynamic that revived arbitration in Key West years earlier and produced the “ingenious contrivance” that so upset Amicus Floridae. According to Whitehead, however, Housman believed Indian Key needed an admiralty court to become a port of entry—maybe in part because of Whitehead’s letter.89 Consequently, Houseman tried a different approach to obtain one, petitioning the Territorial Legislative Council to split Monroe County in two on the grounds that it was too difficult for those living north and east of Bahia Honda to conduct their legal affairs or act as witnesses or jurors in Key West.90

The petition was well received—some say conceived—by Richard Fitzpatrick, who by then represented Monroe County in the Territorial Legislative Council and was the council’s president. Fitzpatrick had never been a friend of Housman or of Indian Key, and for the most part he stayed out of the coming port of entry fray, but he could have blocked the proposed division instead of backing it.91 Perhaps it was the planter sensibilities again. As the auctioneer in Key West, he saw firsthand how the gentlemen of many avocations took advantage of property owners and insurers,
Indian Key, the surrounding anchorage and view from offshore in Gauld’s *Accurate Chart of the Tortugas and Florida Keys*. Digital image from State Library of Florida, Florida Maps Collection.
and there were certainly those who believed competition from nearby ports of entry would help fix the problem.92

On the other hand, those sentiments were of a piece with Fitzpatrick’s personal agenda. By 1835 he had made some enemies and worn out some welcome in Key West. He had also acquired 3,300 acres along the New and Miami rivers, and operated a plantation on the latter. His vision was to fill southeast Florida with tropical plantations, and having a port close by and a county he could control—Housman might rule Indian Key but Fitzpatrick would represent Dade County in the Legislative Council from 1837-1840—would help.93 Accordingly, in January of 1836, with no notice to those in southern Monroe County, the Legislative Council passed an act making the territory north and east of a line from Bahia Honda to Cape Sable part of a new county called Dade. Indian Key would be the temporary county seat; a new County Court would divide its time between Indian Key and Cape Florida; and the Superior Court in Key West, with its all-important admiralty jurisdiction, would be required to sit for a term at Indian Key each year. Blindsided again, the residents of southern Monroe County complained to Congress, which struck the superior court provision but left Dade County intact.94 The Territorial Legislative Council re-enacted the superior court provision the next session, and Housman resumed his quest for port of entry status—the ultimate prize—with his own county and at least a wisp of an admiralty court.95

**Indian Key versus Key West**

Over the next four years and six sessions Congress received an insistent, almost frantic barrage of memorials, petitions, remonstrations and letters from Housman and those whose interests would be served by Indian Key becoming a port of entry. In the twenty-fourth Congress (December of 1835 to March of 1837) updated memorials for port of entry status, which now asked for a more realistic three superior court terms, were submitted in both sessions and both houses. Whitehead, for his part, submitted a remonstrance from the inhabitants of Monroe County opposing the port of entry.96 Nothing happened.
The issue received more attention in the twenty-fifth Congress (March of 1837 to March of 1839), due in part to the efforts of Thomas Jefferson Smith, a New York/Key West lawyer who became the County Court judge on Indian Key and the island’s port of entry spokesman. During the first two sessions, Smith submitted a new, expanded memorial on behalf of Dade County residents; began to recruit merchants, underwriters and residents in ports and places who might want or be willing to weigh in on Indian Key’s behalf—to the point of providing a pre-printed form; and spent time lobbying in Washington. Florida also had a new territorial delegate, Charles Downing, who raised the issue again by presenting one of Indian Key’s original memorials and a new remonstrance against the port of entry by fifty Key West residents. The House Committee on Commerce finally responded with a bill making Indian Key a port of entry, but it was sent back to committee three weeks later. The legislative awakening was energizing, and the petitions, memorials and supporting documents became even longer and more numerous in the next session: four additional memorials from third parties; a memorial from various masters of wrecking vessels, including from Vaca Key; a Whitehead memorial on behalf of merchants and others in the Key West collection district; a petition by Smith in response; and a Whitehead memorial answering that.

Like Key West before it, Indian Key’s principal argument was superior geography—that its location and harbor made for an ideal port of entry. Most wrecks occurred on reefs to the north, and the harbor, in terms of access, depth and protection was second to none, capable, in the words of its initial memorial, of handling “vessels of the largest class ... with ease.” As a result, wrecks could be reached and salvaged more quickly; more property could be saved; and more duties could be collected. The “proximity” portion of the argument made sense, but there were conflicting opinions and little evidence on whether a longer run to Key West produced significant losses. Indeed, Whitehead suggested that cargo was more likely to disappear on Indian Key than be lost on the way to Key West.

On the other hand, the harbor’s attributes were overstated. It was far smaller and shallower than Key West’s harbor, and while it
was true that deep draft vessels could cross the reef opposite Indian Key and approach the island, near shore and over the bar at the mouth of the channel to Lower Matecumbe, which served as the harbor, the water shoaled to seven, eight or nine feet. The revenue service and navy captains who were to vouch for better numbers disavowed them, and according to theirs and Whitehead’s numbers, the harbor was too shallow for vessels drawing more than six and a half to seven and a half feet. This was deep enough for wrecking vessels, but not for the ten plus feet most Gulf trading vessels drew or the even greater draft of large commercial vessels. The result would be a logistical nightmare, with cargo off-loaded to float the vessel taken to Indian Key and the vessel and the rest of the cargo taken to Key West.

Much of the support for a port of entry on Indian Key was also based on the belief that the resulting competition would help keep the “gentlemen of many avocations” in Key West honest. Whitehead thought that was unlikely. At the time there were eight merchants competing for the wrecking business in Key West and there was and would only be one on Indian Key—Jacob Housman. And honest competition was not his game, a point Whitehead attempted to make by reviewing his checkered wrecking career and highlighting other, telltale deceptions in Indian Key’s submissions, such as supporting signatures obtained from passing sailors for grog, fake deeds selling lots to straw men to disguise the fact that the island was Housman’s personal fiefdom, and elections that produced more votes than there were people.

The other question was whether the island possessed the critical mass—the people, the land, the facilities—to be a viable port of entry. Indian Key pointed to thousands of arrivals and departures each year; Whitehead said most were small boats stopping by. Houseman claimed thirteen of the fourteen wrecking vessels working the reef “rendezvoused” there; Whitehead said there were twenty, fourteen based at Key West and only four at Indian Key, all owned by Housman. Indian Key claimed 141 residents; Whitehead finally settled on 47. Whitehead said the island was too small, Indian Key said it would build a bridge across the flats to Lower Matecumbe.
As if the spin and alternate facts were not enough, the final exchanges between Smith and Whitehead became combative. There was ridicule, charges of dishonesty and deception, and at one point Whitehead allowed as how Smith’s “character ... did not entitle him to the notice of gentlemen.” According to Whitehead, the Senate thought all of this was so unseemly that the pending petitions and memorials were withheld from consideration for almost a year. They were finally submitted to the Senate Committee on Commerce on January 8, 1840, during the twenty-sixth Congress. Put off or stymied, the committee was discharged from further consideration on July 17, 1840, on its own motion.\footnote{103}

In the meantime, larger forces were at work. When Key West and St. Augustine tangled it was the Latin American Wars of Independence that brought Commodore Porter, his Mexican Navy and a dose of reality to Key West. This time the Second Seminole War provided the coda. It had driven Housman to the brink; his customers had fled, his defense costs had gone unreimbursed, and he had mortgaged Indian Key to survive.\footnote{104} It pushed him over on August 7, 1840, when the Indians attacked and burned the island. Whatever chance remained for a port of entry there, for a change in the wrecking rules, went up in smoke that day as well.

**Endnotes**


9 It was suggested at one point that the wrecks belonged to the federal government because, under certain circumstances, English
maritime law made derelicts the property of the sovereign. The principle did not apply and never took hold. Secretary of the navy to David Porter, 24 July 1823, Territorial Papers, vol. 22, 723; Marvin, Law of Wreck and Salvage, 142-143 n.1.

10 Vignoles, Observations, 126; Pensacola collector to treasury secretary, 26 November 1821, Territorial Papers, vol. 22, 282.

11 Jefferson B. Browne, Key West: the Old and the New (St. Augustine: Record Company Printers and Publishers, 1912), 7, 9, 164, 199 (Appendices A and B); Walter C. Maloney, A Sketch of the History of Key West, Florida (Newark: Advertiser Printing House, 1876) (address), 69-70 (Notes A and B); Maureen Ogle, Key West: History of an Island of Dreams (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 3-7; Dodd, “Wrecking Business,” 177.


13 Ibid.; Browne, Key West, 7; Maloney, Sketch, 6; Whitehead, “Reminiscences,” 63-64; Dodd, “Wrecking Business,” 177.


Samuel Ayres to treasury secretary, 20 February 1824, Ayers to controller of treasury, 10 April 1824, *Territorial Papers*, vol. 22, 852, 920.


Act of March 30, 1822, ch. 13, sec. 6, 3 Stat. 654, 656; Act effective July 4, 1823, 1823 Fla. (Terr.) Laws 128.


Act effective July 4, 1823, 1823 Fla. (Terr.) Laws, 128-132.

32 Act effective July 4, 1823, sec. 6, 1823 Fla. (Terr.) Laws 129-130; Miscellany, *Pensacola Gazette*, December 3, 1825.

33 H. R. Journal, 18th Cong., 1st Sess. 601-602 (1824); Act of March 3, 1825, ch. 107, 4 Stat. 132. By focusing on where salvaged goods had to be taken rather than who salvaged them, Congress eliminated the Legislative Council’s concerns about a short term shortage of wreckers and the lure of Nassau’s wrecker-friendly laws and procedure.

34 The act also prompted Bahamian wreckers to move to Key West, thus commencing the migration that ultimately gave Key West its “Conch” flavor. Browne, *Key West*, 169-70; *Key West*, *Hunt’s*, 58.

35 2 Reg. Deb. 998 (1826); *Pensacola Gazette*, April 9, 1825, p.2, Col. 1-5; Simonton memorial to Congress, 28 May 1826, *Territorial Papers*, vol. 23, 560, 563.


37 “Wreckers! Beware of Key West!,” *Pensacola Gazette*, September 6, 1826, p.1, col.5.


40 Judiciary Act of 1789, ch. 20, sec. 9, 1 Stat. 73, 76-77; Act of March 30, 1822, ch. 13, secs. 5, 6, 3 Stat. 654, 655, 656; Act of March 3, 1823, ch. 28, secs. 5, 7, 3 Stat. 750,751, 752.


1 F. Cas. 658, 663.


S. Journal, 19th Cong., 1st Sess. 63 (1825); Act of February 1, 1826, ch. 5, 4 Stat. 138. And this despite the fact that Congress declined to disapprove the act when it was first passed. Act of March 3, 1823, ch. 28, sec. 5, 3 Stat. 750, 751.

2 Reg. Deb. 998 (1826).


Pensacola Gazette, September 8, 1826, p.1, col. 4-5.

Key West, Niles’ Weekly Register, May 13, 1826, 186; Com. Ridgely to delegate White, 21 November 1827, Territorial Papers, vol. 23, 976.


Rodman to treasury secretary, 9 May 1826, Territorial Papers, vol. 23, 537.

Pensacola Gazette, September 6, 1826, p.1, col. 5.

Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Simonton to Van Buren, 2 February 1826, SEN19A-D8, RG 46, National Archives.
55 S. Journal, 19th Cong., 1st Sess. 164, 270 (1826); S. 93, 19th Cong. (1826).


57 Maloney, *Sketches*, 7; Treasury Department, RG 56, General Records of the Secretary, Correspondence with Collectors, Rodman to then treasury secretary Richard Rush, 13 June 1826, National Archives II.

58 Duval to secretary of state, 29 November 1825, Rodman to secretary of treasury, 10 June 1826, *Territorial Papers*, vol. 23, 363-365, 587-590.


60 Memorial to Congress by Simonton, 28 May 1826, *Territorial Papers*, vol. 23, 560.


62 Fla. (Terr.) Jour. 90-91 (16th Sess. 1838); Whitehead, “Reminiscences,” 40.
Fla. (Terr.) Jour. 90–91 (16th Sess. 1838); Whitehead, “Reminiscences,” 40.

Simonton to Webster, 2 May 1826, Territorial Papers, vol. 23, 528; Memorial by Simonton, 28 May 1826, Territorial Papers, vol. 23, 560-565. Simonton also took the opportunity to call out Rodman, pointing out that the opposition was coming from “one, two, or three emigrant lawyers, who have gone to Florida in quest of better prospects than they could find ... in the States where they resided.”


Ibid.

Memorial to Congress by Inhabitants of Key West, 29 December 1826, Territorial Papers, vol. 23, 699; Senate Committee on Finance, Treasury Department report on duties, 17 January 1828, SEN 20A-D4, RG 46 National Archives; Pinkney to Rush, 23 December 1827, White to Van Buren, 1827, resolutions by Territorial Legislative Council, 28 December 1827, Territorial Papers, vol. 23, 956, 968, 975; Senate Committee on Finance, Simonton to P. P. Barbour (endorsed by delegate White), 5 March 1828, SEN 20A-D4, RG 46, National Archives.

The following year the new treasury secretary would report that the Key West “custom house ... is well organized and may be relied upon for the proper execution of the laws.” Treasury Department, RG 56, General Records of Department, “Letters and Reports to Congress,” Samuel D. Ingham to Levi Woodbury, 31 December 1829, National Archives II.

Key West, Niles’ Weekly Register, July 14, 1827, 323.


73 Treasury Department, RG 56, Secretary-Collector correspondence, Rush to Pinkney, 11 June 1827, National Archives II. For a sampling of the coverage: Com. Porter, *Niles’ Register*, June 9, 1827, 244; Mexican Squadron at Key West, *Niles’ Register*, September 8, 1827, vol. 23; Com. Porter at New Orleans, *Niles’ Register*, September 15, 1827, 40.

74 4 Stat. 291.


78 4 Stat. 291 (“[N]o vessel shall be employed as a wrecker unless under the authority of the judge of said court.”). When Florida became a state and the Superior Court became a federal district court, the statutory mandate became more explicit:

Before licensing any vessel or master [in the business of wrecking], the judge shall be satisfied that the vessel is seaworthy ... and that the master thereof is trustworthy, and innocent of any fraud or misconduct in relation to any property shipwrecked or saved. ...


79 Legislative Proceedings, *Pensacola Gazette*, December 24, 1825; Duval to secretary of state, 29 November 1825, *Territorial Pa-
Wrecking Rules


81 Key West, Hunt’s, 54-55. Well-oiled and legitimate did not mean perfect. Judges Webb and Marvin were respected but not omnipresent. Arbitration was still an alternative—maybe the only one if the judge was out of town—and the awards were often rigged. What happened on the reef—what misrepresentations were made or deals were cut or property was stolen or damage was caused intentionally—was not always apparent in court. And the auctions—the timing, advertising, bidders and bids themselves—were mostly beyond court control. These and other critical points in the process still afforded the opportunity for mischief. One chronicler of the ongoing transgressions was Dr. Benjamin Strobel, a Charleston doctor who practiced—and was the newspaper editor and a town councilman—in Key West between 1829 and 1832. When he returned to Charleston the newspapers there published several of his sketches/articles about Key West. Those about wrecking, from the May 1837 Charleston Courier, are in E. A. Hammond, “Wreckers and Wrecking on the Florida Reef, 1829-1832,” Florida Historical Quarterly 41, no. 3 (January 1963): 239. The ongoing problems with wrecking were also addressed in “Wrecks, Wrecking, Wreckers, and Wreckees on Florida Reef,” Hunt’s Merchants’ Magazine, April 1842, 350-352, and Charles Nordhoff, “Wrecking on the Florida Keys,” Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, April 1859, 57, 584-586. For a modern summary see Viele, Wreckers, 137-142.

Memorial to Congress by Inhabitants of Indian Key, 23 July, 1833, *Territorial Papers*, vol. 24, 863.

Housman was probably more responsible than anyone else “for the ill-repute in which the wrecking business was held.” Dodd, “Housman of Indian Key,” 3. Before his wrecking career was over he would be publicly accused and/or found guilty of robbery, theft, embezzlement, fraud, bribery and colluding with the masters of various wrecked vessels. Communications, Open Letter from F. A. Browne, *East Florida Herald*, November 18, 1825; Hammond, “Wreckers and Wrecking,” 255; Dodd, “Housman of Indian Key,” 7; *Pensacola Gazette*, August 12, 1828, p.3,col.2; Remonstrations to Congress by Inhabitants of Monroe County, 1836, *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, vol. 25, *The Territory of Florida 1824-1828*, ed. Clarence Edwin Carter (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), 250-251. In addition, the customs inspector on Indian Key thought he was “schemy” and “unprincipled,” Charles Howe, “A Letter From Indian Key,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1941): 197-198, the former editor of the *Key West Gazette* was sure that many “notorious transactions had been affected” there, Davis, “Indian Key and Wrecking,” 58 (from a Strobel sketch published in 1833 by the *Charleston Mercury*), and at one point Judge Webb reportedly revoked his license, Nordhoff, “Wrecking on the Florida Keys,” 583, 585.


Memorial by Inhabitants of Indian Key, *Territorial Papers*, vol. 23, 863; Senate Committee on Commerce, Memorial of Inhabitants of Indian Key, 22 January 1834, SEN 26A-G3.5, RG 46, National Archives; H. Journal, 23rd Cong., 1st Sess. 163, 418 (1834); H. Journal, 23rd Cong., 2d Sess. 83, 140 (1834).


Whitehead, “Reminiscences,” 8. The opportunities for foul play afforded by a port of entry without an admiralty court were pointed out by Key West residents in their January 8, 1838, opposition to a port of entry on Indian Key, Committee on Commerce, HR 25A-G3.6, RG 233, National Archives, and were discussed by Dr. Strobel in a sketch published in the May 4, 1837, *Charleston Courier*. “Dr. Benjamin B. Strobel,” Wilkinson, Keys Historeum, http://www.keyshistory.org.

Dodd, “Housman of Indian Key.” 9.


As discussed below, it was a common refrain in the petitions and memorials supporting a port of entry on Indian Key. In addition, an anonymous former resident of Key West had already singled out Indian Key and Cape Florida as likely spots for a remedial port of entry in “Wrecks, Wrecking, Wreckers, and Wreckees on Florida Reef,” *Hunt’s*, April 1842, 349.

Black, “Fitzpatrick’s South Florida, Part I,”, 56-58, 64-65, 68;
“Fitzpatrick’s South Florida, Part II,” 34-35, 38-39, 46, 48-50. Fitzpatrick’s agricultural exploits along the Miami River (though not his name) also began to appear in filings to support Indian Key’s congressional agenda. Petition to Congress of Inhabitants of Monroe County, 1 March 1836, *Territorial Papers*, vol. 25, 246.


95 Act of February 3, 1837, 1837 Fla. (Terr.) Laws 6. The council was empowered to set the time and place of superior court sessions, Act of March 3, 1827, ch. 91, 4 Stat. 241, and the new act would remain in effect unless and until it was annulled again. But the single superior court term it provided was not enough for a wrecking station; a resident judge was needed. Two years later the residents of Dade (Vaca Key) and Monroe counties tried to persuade the Territorial Legislative Council to eliminate Dade County, or at least its courts, arguing, as Judge Webb had the first time around, that there were not enough qualified jurors for two superior courts to function. Fla. (Terr.) Jour. 32, 62, appendix at 4 (1st Sess. 1839); Webb to delegate White, 12 April 1836, *Territorial Papers*, vol. 25, 273; Dodd, “Housman of Indian Key,” 10-12. The effort failed, but the following year the council combined the two counties’ jury pools. Act effective March 2, 1840, 1840 Fla. (Terr.) Laws 39.

96 Committee on Commerce, Petitions of Inhabitants of Indian Key and others, HR 24A-G3.8, RG 233, National Archives; Committee on Commerce, Petitions of Inhabitants of Indian Key and others, SEN 26A-G3.1, RG 46, National Archives; *Territorial Papers*, vol. 25, 249; H. Journal, 24th Cong., 1st Sess. 272 (1836); S. Journal, 24th Cong., 1st Sess. 116 (1836); H. Journal, 24th Cong., 2d Sess. 272, 315 (1837).

98 Third party petitions and memorials ultimately were submitted by New Orleans insurers, merchants and underwriters in Charleston, and residents of Palmyra (New York), Petersburg, (Virginia), New York City and the state of New Jersey—and some were submitted more than once. They can be found in Senate (RG 46) and House (RG 233) Committee on Commerce files. HR 25A-D4.6; SEN 25A-G3.2; SEN 26A-G3.1, National Archives. Two were printed by the Senate. Petition of Merchants of Charleston, 11 December 1838, S. Doc. No. 25-54 (1839); Petition of Underwriters of Charleston, 11 December 1838, S. Doc. 25-55 (1839).

99 Smith’s efforts can be seen in letters referencing his visits, conversations and discussions with congressmen and potential witnesses, which can be found in Senate (RG 46) and House (RG 233) Committee on Commerce files. SEN 25A-G3.2; SEN 26A-G3.1; HR 25A-D4.6, National Archives.


102 Memorial of William Whitehead in behalf of merchants and others, 17 December 1838, S. Doc. No. 25-15 (1839); Petition of Thomas Jefferson Smith in Reply, 10 January 1839, S. Doc. No. 25-71 (1839); Memorial of William Whitehead in Answer to Smith, 24 January, 1839, S. Doc. No. 25-140 (1839); Memorial of a Number of Masters of Wrecking Vessels, 23 February 1839, S. Doc. No. 25-255 (1839). Most of the important supporting documentation can be found attached to these last submissions as exhibits.


On the afternoon of May 10, 1961, a cargo ship, the Joseph R. Parrott, arrived in the Port of Palm Beach with an unusual manifest aboard the vessel, namely, more than two-dozen Religious of the Society of the Sacred Heart. As the ship slowly pulled into port, the weary nuns dressed in traditional black serge habits stood single file along the metal rails. A photograph captured by a Palm Beach Post photographer shows some of the women waving to loved ones and former students gathered on the dock below, while others simply surveyed what must have been a surreal scene. Their relatively short, uneventful trip from Havana to Palm Beach belied an otherwise harrowing journey to freedom. The women, many of whom were elderly, had spent nearly two weeks confined in the cellar of their convent, sleeping on mattresses thrown on the floor, before fleeing Cuba aboard the freighter.

Reverend Mother Raquel Perez, RSCJ, recounted the ordeal to journalists: “There were 25 men and 16 women, all militia people armed with machine guns. They confiscated our convent and school on April 28th as all education in Havana was ordered shut down. Mother Perez served as headmistress of the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Havana, one of two Sacred Heart schools on the island that were closed when Fidel Castro and his forces seized power. “We were put into the cellar for 12 days,” she said. “They did not mistreat us, but held us incommunicado from the outside world. We had no visitors, and few, if any phone calls.” One person who did manage to reach the sisters during their confinement was standing on the dock that afternoon awaiting their arrival. Reverend Mother Agnes Barry, Vicar of the Society’s Washington D.C. Vicariate, kept vigil over the women throughout the ordeal. Described by a reporter as a “spry elderly little nun,” Rev. Mother Barry had proudly “crashed through” the phone lines several times to reach her sisters during the tense period.
As is evident in this photograph from 2008, El Jardin’s beauty is timeless. Image courtesy of photographer Steven Brooke.
The nuns in Cuba were evacuated thanks to the efforts of Sacred Heart alumnae living in South Florida, and officials with the US based West India Fruit and Steamship Company, who together secured the women’s hasty departure. The vessel typically ferried freight cars, and had an official passenger capacity of no more than a dozen persons. But on this extraordinary journey, it transported 37 passengers, including 27 nuns, three lay Cubans fleeing the island, and its crew. As fate would have it, that voyage would be one of the last Havana-Palm Beach runs for the historic cargo ship in the wake of the Cuban embargo. Like tens of thousands of Cuban refugees escaping the island in those chaotic months, the nuns prayed for a quick return home, but that return would not materialize in their lifetimes. The Society eventually reassigned many of the sisters to posts in the Caribbean and Latin America. A few would soon establish a new home in Miami.

The day after their arrival, the Cuban sisters, together with Rev. Mother Barry, met with Bishop Coleman F. Carroll (1905-1977) of the newly formed Diocese of Miami. A black and white photograph taken at St. Patrick Catholic Church in Miami Beach captures the memorable meeting on the afternoon of May 11, 1961. In his efforts to expand the diocese, Bishop Carroll, who would later become Archbishop, had already invited several orders, including the Society of the Sacred Heart, to form schools in the area. It was a move championed by Sacred Heart alumnae in South Florida. A small but determined group of supporters had envisioned a school in Miami, and had already begun scouting potential school sites. Those efforts picked up momentum by the spring of 1961, while simultaneously, the hostile actions in Cuba were escalating. Thus, by the time the Joseph R Parrott pulled into the Port of Palm Beach, the wheels were already in motion to establish a school of the Sacred Heart in South Florida.

On July 13, 1961, Rev. Mother Barry received a one-word telegram from her superiors in France in response to her request to open a new school in Miami: a simple “oui.” That month the search for a suitable school site began in earnest. A number of properties were considered, with no clear favorite, until one fate-
ful day in early August when Rev. Mother Barry, and several others arrived at the wooden gates of El Jardin. Nestled amid the lush foliage and canopy of trees along Main Highway in Coconut Grove, El Jardin looked much the way it had when it was built nearly four decades earlier. Its creators purposely aged the grand home so to give it the appearance of a centuries old estate. Located at 3747 Main Highway, the property was not for sale, but, regardless, the realtor brought Rev. Mother Barry and several others to look around. As she made her way down the stone steps to the back of the estate, with its expansive view across the lawn and to Biscayne Bay beyond, Rev. Mother Barry noticed the verse etched in the entablature above the pool. The words were partially covered by bougainvillea, but once they were pulled back, she read the closing lines of “God’s Garden” by British poet Dorothy Frances Gurney (1858-1932):

The kiss of the sun for pardon,
The song of the birds for mirth,
One is nearer God’s heart in a garden
Than anywhere else on earth.

At that moment, which Rev. Mother Barry later described as “moving,” she decided, God willing, El Jardin would be the Society of the Sacred Heart’s new home in Miami. She did not know Gurney’s verse had long played an important role in the estate’s storied history, and likely inspired its name, which means ‘the garden’ in Spanish.

At the time, El Jardin was owned by Cities Service Company (later known as CITGO Petroleum Company), which used the elegant bayfront property as a retreat for senior company executives during the winter season. When first approached in early August 1961, James P. Farrell, an attorney for Cities Service, flatly refused to sell or rent El Jardin. The persistence of Rev. Mother Barry and mutual friends, however, eventually convinced Farrell, and in turn, Cities Service president W. Alton Jones, to sell the property. In September 1961, the Convent of the Sacred Heart purchased El Jardin and all of its furnishings for $300,000. The first five nuns
moved into the villa on September 8, 1961. The sisters immedi-
ately felt at home, reporting in a letter to their superiors that “every
day we live here we are convinced that El Jardin is a practically
ideal place for us.” Classes were initially held in the homes of
new students while the sisters waited for approval from the City of
Miami for the Convent to establish a school on the property. The
City’s zoning board initially rejected the proposal, but on Novem-
ber 1, 1961, City of Miami Commissioners unanimously approved
the move. Overjoyed by the news, the nuns, with help from new
families and alumnae, immediately began preparing El Jardin to
receive its first students. Classes officially began on the property
in January 1962. It was named Carrollton School of the Sacred
Heart, in honor of Bishop Carroll.

El Jardin’s bedrooms, as well as its large living, dining and
breakfast rooms, were converted into classrooms, while the original
Moorish loggia became a chapel. The nuns, who were semi-clois-
tered in the days prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65),
lived mainly in the servant’s quarters above that carriage house and
on the third floor of the main villa. From its origins to the present
day, the educational model of the Sacred Heart is based on a famil-
iar relationship. Although nuns are now referred to as Sisters, in
that era, they were called “Mother.” Many of the Society’s schools
were located within a historic home or built as a grand and en-
compassing home. From its first days in El Jardin, therefore, the
Society was committed to maintaining and preserving the estate’s
original structure and character, while at the same time adding new
buildings to accommodate growing enrollment. With each gradu-
ating class of young women, new stories emerged about its prior
owners. Like a decades-long game of telephone, romantic and,
at times, whimsical tales, complete with mischievous ghosts, de-
developed about El Jardin’s past. The truth, while not as colorful as
some students imagined, is no less interesting.

John Bindley

El Jardin’s origins can be traced to the steel mills of Pitts-
burough, Pennsylvania. By the end of the nineteenth century, amid
America’s Gilded Age, the city had grown from a river town into an industrial powerhouse. Known as the “hearth of the nation,” Pittsburgh produced the steel and iron needed to build America’s railroads, factories and expanding urban centers. It was an era of rapid economic growth, not only in Pittsburgh, but also across the country, with relatively few individuals controlling the nation’s wealth. Men like Andrew Carnegie, Henry C. Frick, and Henry J. Heinz embodied the city’s success. Among this prominent group of entrepreneurs was John Bindley (1846-1921), who toward the end of his life would make his way to the shores of Biscayne Bay and build El Jardin for his daughter, Adelaide Marie Bindley.

Born in 1846, John Bindley came of age near the end of the Civil War, just as Pittsburgh hit its industrial stride. After studying in local public schools and graduating from the Penn Institute and Iron City College, Bindley began his career as a clerk at John England Hardware Company. By 21, he was England’s partner and, a few years later, with the support of his brother, Edwin Bindley (1842-1906), a prosperous banker, he formed the Bindley Hardware Company. The firm grew into one of the nation’s largest hardware manufacturers. Bindley’s interests spread to manufacturing and finance and, in 1901, he helped organize the Pittsburgh Steel Co., as well as a number of related companies. As his stature grew, Bindley took on increasingly prominent roles within the community. He built a grand Gothic mansion, Atherstone, on Fifth Avenue in Pittsburgh’s Shadyside neighborhood, where he entertained a wide array of friends, including artists and writers. Known as an art connoisseur, Bindley filled his home with “gathered treasures,” including artwork and antiques from his frequent trips overseas. His love of art and architecture would be visible decades later in his creation of El Jardin.

Bindley’s success in the steel industry and, indeed, the phenomenal growth of Pittsburgh’s economy, came at a steep price. By the 19th century, Pittsburgh was dubbed the “City of Smoke,” as polluted air from coal mining enveloped the city. Industrial wastes and sewage emptied into the same heavily trafficked rivers, from which the city drew its water supply. The unsanitary living con-
ditions caused by the industrial pollution and sewage contributed to deadly outbreaks of cholera and typhoid fever. At its worst, between the 1872 and 1908, Pittsburgh had the highest typhoid fever mortality rate of any city in the nation. Tuberculosis, then known as consumption, also plagued the city. Against this backdrop, John Bindley would bury his young wife, whom he married in 1875, and four of their six children. His wife, Emeline Houston Bindley (1853-1886) died of tuberculosis at the age of 33, shortly after the death of two of their infant children. In subsequent years, two more of Bindley’s children died young from other illnesses. Ultimately, only two of his six children, Edward Houston Bindley (1878-1929) and Adelaide Marie Bindley (1883-1959), survived well into adulthood. John Bindley never remarried.

To escape the soot-filled city and the bitter cold, many of Pittsburgh’s wealthiest residents traveled abroad during the winter season. Bindley regularly traveled to Spain and France, often with his daughter Adelaide, widowed sister Mary McMillin, and niece Elmina McMillin. In December 1916, however, in the midst of World War I, Bindley decided to spend his first winter in South Florida. The family leased the Shadows, developer Carl Fisher’s first Miami home on Brickell Avenue (then known as the Coconut Grove Road), at a cost of $5,000 for the season. Their visit did not get off to a promising start when the home was burglarized and thieves stole several pieces of Adelaide’s jewelry. Undeterred, and apparently uninterested in the development underway in Miami Beach by Fisher and others, Bindley set his sights just south and west to the community of Coconut Grove. During their first season in South Florida, John Bindley, Adelaide, Mary, and Elmina began socializing with local luminaries wintering in the Grove, and joined the small parish of St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church.

**Origin of the land**

... from an almost impenetrable jungle, was wrought the great, rolling, highly developed acres of “El Jardin” which is a veritable Garden of Eden.
In the spring of 1917, Bindley purchased 13-acres in Coconut Grove in Adelaide’s name. It was among the last large tracts of land along Main Highway (then known as County Road) on a stretch that would become known as “Millionaire’s Row.” Mangrove edges, pine rockland and tropical hammocks covered the Bindley property, which sat between Arthur Curtis James’s Four Way Lodge and the home of L. D. Huntington. Four acres of land lay west of Main Highway, and the remaining nine acres fronted the bay. On the smaller parcel west of the road, Bindley built Cherokee Lodge, a Tudor-style home for his sister Mary and niece Elmina. Named for Cherokee roses that once grew on the property, the home had a distinct “thatched roof” and was where Bindley and Adelaide stayed while construction began at El Jardin in early 1918.31

Said to be a favored hunting ground of Native Americans, the Bindley property was first homesteaded as part of New England mariner Edmund “Ned” Beasley’s 1868 claim under the federal Homestead Act of 1862. The act enabled generations of Americans to acquire 160-acre quarter sections of property if they lived on the land for five years and made improvement. Beasley and his wife, Anna, lived in a small log cabin near the site of the present-day Barnacle Historic State Park, while Beasley’s homestead included much of present-day downtown Coconut Grove, from 27th Avenue southwest to the Moorings.34

In 1877, Beasley’s widow, Anna, sold the entire 160-acre tract for $100 to John Frow, who was the first to subdivide property in the Grove. In 1882, J. W. Ewan acquired the Grove’s second homestead. Known as the “Duke of Dade,” Ewan originally came to South Florida to manage the property of the Biscayne Bay Company, and later served as a Florida legislator. Ewan claimed the land south of Beasley’s property along the Atlantic Coastal Ridge, along with several parcels farther west. He also purchased much of the Frow property and created the Ewarton Heights subdivision, platted in 1894, which includes the El Jardin property. Ewan was an early promoter of Biscayne Bay, encouraging northerners to “secure a place of sunshine for life’s winters.”36
Tracts labeled “D” and “E” on the map delineate the property that the El Jardin estate would eventually encompass. The adjoining lots changed ownership several times before John Bindley purchased both in 1917, approximately 13 acres in total, in the name of his daughter Adelaide M. Bindley. According to property records, ownership of the 4-acre northern plot (labeled “D”) was transferred from L. T. Allen to Adelaide on February 28, 1917, and the 6-acre southern plot (labeled “E”) was transferred from Carrie Stafford Wyrick to Adelaide on March 2, 1917. While the El Jardin
property has remained intact, the Cherokee Lodge property was subdivided in the 1960s. The original home remains on the site, as well as the carriage lodge, both of which are now private homes.

**Creation of El Jardin**

In 1917, Bindley hired German architect Richard Kiehnel of the prominent Pittsburgh firm Kiehnel and Elliott to first build Cherokee Lodge and, later, El Jardin. Bindley would have likely been familiar with Kiehnel’s work in Pittsburgh, and appreciated the architect’s Old World aesthetic. Born and raised in Germany, Kiehnel studied at the University of Breslau in Germany and the École Nationale des Beaux Arts in Paris. He worked in Chicago in the 1890s with the firm of Egan & Prindeville, which specialized in churches.

In 1906, Kiehnel and architect John B. Elliot opened the firm of Kiehnel & Elliot in Pittsburgh, with Kiehnel as the designing partner. Following the Bindley commission, Kiehnel opened a Miami branch office of the firm and became known as a leading practitioner of the Mediterranean Revival and Streamline Moderne styles.

In his design of El Jardin, Kiehnel created an elegant villa set amid lush tropical vegetation. Together with the skill of prominent local builder John Barclay Orr, known for his work on James Deering’s Villa Vizcaya, Kiehnel combined Spanish, Italian, and Moorish influences to create a distinct style suited for the tropics.

Writing about El Jardin in the September 1928 issue of *Tropical Home and Garden*, Kiehnel referred to the estate as the “progenitor of the Modern Mediterranean Style Home.” He noted that El Jardin and Villa Vizcaya enjoyed “the distinction of having given impetus to the construction in Southern Florida of homes in the style which we now know as Mediterranean” since, at the time they were constructed, the two estates “were the only examples of the architecture of Southern Italy and Spain, which were to be
Portion of map showing Coconut Grove’s Millionaire’s Road. El Jardin is the third labeled property on the right, labeled “Adelaide Bindley Davidson.” Cherokee Lodge is slightly north, on the other side of Main Highway. From Along Greater Miami’s Sun-Sea-Ara, by Frank Stearns. Miami: Stearns, 1932. HistoryMiami, 2011-328-3.

found here. The beautiful residences now adorning Miami Beach and the number of Mediterranean homes now found in Coral Gables, at the time were scarcely thought of.”40 The villa’s intricate cast stone decoration and wrought-iron grillwork became a trademark of Orr’s projects. Working together with Kiehnel, he built Mediterranean-style homes across South Florida. Realizing the impact of Miami’s “new style of architecture,” Orr said in 1924, “Local architects should get the full support of the building public in their endeavor to create a type of architecture that would be suitable to this section of Florida.”41

With work nearly finished, The Miami Daily Metropolis featured El Jardin on its front-page edition for December 13, 1919. The article noted El Jardin, “set in the midst of picturesque woods with gardens to lend more formal beauty,” was “consid-
erected by many second in magnificence only to the James Deering place." After two years of construction, likely slowed as the result of World War I, El Jardin was completed in 1920, at a reported cost of $1 million. The property originally included the main villa, gatehouse, an orchid-filled greenhouse, garage, boathouse, and numerous gardens.

From the rustic gatehouse, guests made their way down a winding path lined with stone lanterns, toward the home. An ornate latticework greenhouse originally sat east-west along the property’s northern edge, with a sunken garden in front. Before reaching the main villa, guests would pass a carriage house with staff quarters above, before the drive curved around to the home’s heavy front doors, reproductions from the famous Palace De Santa Cruz, of Toledo, Spain. Kiehnel designed the interior space around a tiled central courtyard, which featured a Venetian fountain in the middle. A specially constructed screen enclosed the patio and allowed for open galleries and arcades on the first and second levels. The entire first floor of the home, including the grand Spanish-Renaissance living room opposite the entrance, the dining room inspired by and modeled on the work of English architect Robert Adam (1728-92), and library featuring a 15th century fireplace from Ferrara, Italy, were designed for “elaborate entertaining.” Early photos of the home depict rooms lavishly decorated with items collected from Bindley’s travels, as well as pieces designed by The Hayden Company of New York, which was known for its authentic antiques and reproductions of furniture.

In addition to the property in Coconut Grove, Bindley purchased 120 acres along Red Road between Coral Way and Bird Road, “from which he drew supplies of fruits, vegetables and dairy products for the great home on the bay front.” The property, which was also held in Adelaide’s name, included a dairy, poultry house, cottage, and acres of fruit trees and vegetables.

Bindley hosted many social events at El Jardin throughout 1921, including several fundraisers for the expansion of St Stephen’s Church. The largest affair was held on February 7, 1921.

El Jardin was the site of a garden party to benefit St. Stephen’s building fund. It was the first time Bindley opened El Jardin to the public, and “by so doing he is permitting local people and visitors an opportunity to view one of the loveliest places in this part of the country.”

A member of the Biscayne Bay Yacht Club, Bindley enjoyed fishing on his 60-foot yacht, *Surpass*, moored in the yacht basin of El Jardin and served by its adjacent boathouse. Meanwhile, Adelaide regularly hosted benefit teas, garden parties, and swim parties at the estate throughout the winter season of 1921. Writing of one afternoon gathering by the pool, the *Miami Herald’s* social pages reported “it was a charming party with a wonderful setting, the blue waters of Biscayne Bay in the distance and the sheltering pines and hedge of orange about the pool which reflected the tints of sky and sea and the soft pink walls of El Jardin shutting out the world beyond.”

The Bindleys enjoyed barely two seasons at El Jardin before fate intervened. On December of 1921, John Bindley passed away.
at El Jardin following a brief illness. He was 75 years old. Funeral services were held on the lawn of the estate and led by Rev. Benjamin Soper of St Stephen’s. Adelaide, who had married George Davidson, an Episcopal minister, the previous summer and moved to Los Angeles, accompanied her father’s body via private railcar to Pittsburgh. Bindley was buried at his family plot at the Allegheny cemetery. Among his professional accomplishments, Bindley was remembered as a lover and connoisseur of art, a patron of science, and a philanthropist.51

There is no record of Adelaide Bindley Davidson returning to El Jardin following her father’s death, even though she held the property for several more years. Mary McMillin and Elmina continued to winter at both Cherokee Lodge and El Jardin, and entertain occasionally. One of the events they hosted was a “Tour of the Orient” benefiting the Coconut Grove Housekeepers’ Club during the winter of 1923. A photo from the affair depicts the “Grecian tableaux vivant” arranged around the estate’s large pool.52

Roaring Twenties

Following Mary’s death in 1924, Adelaide’s brother Edward Bindley, his wife and their three sons, spent one final winter at El Jardin before Adelaide sold the estate to Albert J. Richey, a local real estate investor, in January 1925.53 Around that same time, Elmina McMillin sold Cherokee Lodge.54 A native of Pittsburgh, Richey moved to South Florida in the early 1920s to capitalize on the area’s real estate boom. At the time of the sale, the Miami Herald reported, Richey “... has succumbed to the lure of Miami and has come here to become an active part in the development of this city.” The real estate firm of Richey & Barnhart bought El Jardin in January 1925, and initially placed it for sale. A few months later, however, in the spring of 1925, the firm took it off the market.55 Richey and his wife, Dorothy, moved into El Jardin with their four young children (the first and only family to reside on the property year-round). As part of the purchase of the El Jardin property, Richey and his partner acquired the 120-acre Bindley farm on Red Road. The firm immediately drew up plans to trans-
The president of Pittsburgh Steel, John Bindley (1846-1921) was one of the industrial titans of the Gilded Age and early twentieth century America.
form the farm into a master subdivision named Schenley Park. Located immediately across from George Merrick’s newly created community, Coral Gables, the Schenley Park neighborhood was platted in 1925, although its development followed World War II.

During their time at El Jardin, the fun-loving Richey family hosted many large social gatherings on the property, including garden parties, soirees by the pool, as well as musical and theatrical performances. A silent movie, *Chickie*, was filmed on the property in 1925. In the days of Prohibition, the Richeys benefited from a few “gunny sackfuls” (burlap sacks) of whisky brought to shore by rumrunners at night. Their life at El Jardin included 11 servants and several gardeners. Social pages of the day chronicled the family’s many festivities right up until they were forced to leave in early 1930. Following the bust of Miami’s real estate market in the late twenties, Richey lost his fortune and was unable to pay El Jardin’s mortgage, held by Adelaide Bindley Davidson. In 1930, she recovered the estate following a foreclosure suit. With the exception of the El Jardin Nursery, which superintendent Michael Fascell operated out of the large gazebo on the property from 1929 to 1934, the estate remained vacant for several years.

**Corporate Retreat**

In 1933, amid the Great Depression, Davidson sold El Jardin and all its furnishings for $45,000 to Cities Service Company. There is no record that Cities Service’s founder and president, Henry Latham Doherty (1879-1939), ever lived at the home, although he may have used it to host social functions. In addition to his success as public utilities magnate, Doherty invested in real estate in New York and Florida. In South Florida his vast holdings included the Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables, Roney Plaza in Miami Beach, and Whitehall in Palm Beach. He typically spent the winter at the Giralda Tower suite at the Biltmore Hotel.

Before his death in 1939, Doherty passed El Jardin to his successor, W. Alton Jones, another pioneer in the development of natural gas and petroleum. Through the late 1930s and early
1940s, Jones, his wife, Nettie, and two teenage daughters, Elizabeth and Patricia, wintered at the estate. The girls attended the nearby Miss Harris’ School, and regularly held pool parties and picnics on the lawn of El Jardin. In the mid-1940s the Jones family built a home in Miami Beach, where they lived during the winter season, and the El Jardin estate became a retreat for company executives.

In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, senior Cities Service executives and their families vacationed at El Jardin. As the *Miami Herald* reported, guests came to “... luxuriate in the incomparable surrounding, to give parties, and fish abroad the smart cruiser moored at the sea wall.” Cities Service employees wrote a song sung to the tune of “Hail, O Hail Cornell,” which expressed their love for the estate:

Out upon the Old Main Highway  
Just beyond the Grove  
Stands the spot we love so dearly,  
Like a treasure trove.  
How we hate to leave El Jardin,  
Makes us very vexed!

Still we wish the best of weather  
To the group that’s next.  

The group that arrived next, Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart, has resided in El Jardin for nearly six decades. From those tumultuous early days in 1961 to the present, the school has preserved the home John Bindley envisioned and the architectural masterpiece Richard Kiehnel created. While many of the estates that once lined Coconut Grove’s Millionaire’s Row have disappeared and their properties have been sub-divided, El Jardin’s rich architectural legacy remains intact, each school day enriching young lives. Built as a home for one young woman, El Jardin became home to generations of young women and by extension the staff, faculty, family and friends who continue to be enlightened by the experience of this “treasure trove.”
Endnotes

1 The Society of the Sacred Heart is an international Roman Catholic women’s congregation founded by Madeleine Sophie Barat (1779-1865) in the wake of the French Revolution. The Society’s mission is to “reveal to the world a God who loves us,” and “educate children to be a source of transformation in their world.” Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Sacred Heart education spread around the world. In 1818, Rose Philippine Duchesne (1969-1852) brought the Society to the Americas, establishing the first free school west of the Mississippi in St. Charles, Missouri. Members use the suffix “RSCJ” which represents Religieuses du Sacré-Cœur de Jésus. https://rscj.org/sacred-heart-schools.


3 The Cuban Minister of Education ordered all schools, including religious, private and public, to be closed by April 28, 1961. Following the expulsion of all vowed religious from the island, all of the remaining Sacred Heart nuns left aboard the freighter led by Superior Vicar Isabel Pons. “Castroites Held Nuns in Cellar,” Fort Lauderdale News, May 11, 1961.

4 Until Castro’s government closed religious institutions and expelled vowed religious from Cuba, the Society of the Sacred Heart operated two schools on the island: the Colegios del Sagrado Corazon (College of the Sacred Heart) in Marianao, Havana and Santiago de Cuba.

5 At the time, Reverend Mother Agnes Barry served as Superior Vicar of the Society of the Sacred Heart. Based in Washington, D.C., she oversaw all of the Society’s work on the East Coast of the United States and the Caribbean. Born in Rochester, New York, she entered the Society of the Sacred Heart in 1912, and over the course of six decades served as a teacher, headmistress and supervisor. In 1923, she helped found the Sacred Heart School in Washington, D.C., and later helped establish schools in Miami, and Princeton, New Jer-
sey. She died in 1979 at the age of 86. Carrollton’s Barry Building is
named in her honor.

6 Account based on the journal of Reverend Mother Agnes Barry, en-
try dated May 1961.

7 “27 Nuns Fleeing Red Cuba Land Here As Castro Radio Rips Catho-
lic Church,” The Palm Beach Post, May 11, 1961. Accounts vary as to
the exact number of religious aboard the Joseph R. Parrott.

8 Originally owned by Henry Flagler’s Florida East Coast Car Ferry
Co., the Joseph R Parrott ferried railroad cars from Key West to Ha-
vana in the early twentieth century. By 1961 it was one of six railcar
and automobile ferries owned and operated by The West India Fruit
and Steamship Company. Daniel E. Taylor served as the company’s
president and helped facilitate the nuns’ departure in May 1961, as
well as the evacuation of other Cuban refugees. The next month, as
trade between the US and Cuba ceased under the embargo, the com-
pany put its fleet of ferries up for sale. “West India Lists Ferries For

9 The Diocese of Miami was created on August 13, 1958. Bishop Cole-
man F. Carroll was installed on October 7, 1958. Between 1958 and
1963, Bishop Carroll spearheaded a period of significant growth
within the new diocese, which then encompassed 16 counties in
(Strasbourgh, France: Editions du Signe), 10.

10 Mayita Ledo, “Early History of Convent of the Sacred Heart, Carroll-

11 Account based on video recorded interview with Ellen Theresa
“Tish” Coakley O’Neil (1927-2006), conducted at Carrollton in

12 “Our History,” Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart, Septem-
ber 19, 2018, https://www.carrollton.org/page/about/our-mis-
sion-and-history
The Society’s search for a suitable school site initially proved challenging. Among the top contenders was Whitehall, the ten-acre estate of former Miami County Commissioner Charles Crandon at 3600 Red Road (the property was later subdivided and developed into a community of townhomes known as the Forest), in addition to a local elementary school. Crandon (1886-1979) was a Dade County Commissioner from 1929 to 1949. He built Whitehall in 1938 and lived there until his death at age 92. “Crandon estate sells for $1.68 million,” *Miami Herald*, January 1, 1981.

Account based on interview with Ann Taylor, RSCJ, former headmistress of Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart, conducted on August 9, 2018.


According to a letter dated August 9, 1961, from Rev. Mother Agnes Barry recounting the foundation of the Miami community, Bishop Coleman Carroll and Michael O’Neil (spouse of aforementioned Ellen Theresa “Tish” Coakley O’Neil) approached James P. Farrell (1903-1988), longtime attorney for Cities Service, regarding the sale of El Jardin. Farrell initially refused to rent or sell the property, but later called back and agreed to sell El Jardin to the Society for $300,000 pending the approval of Cities Service President W. Alton “Pete” Jones, who was traveling at the time in Hong Kong. Based on the interview with “Tish” O’Neil, her husband Michael knew Jones socially from the La Gorce Country Club, and immediately “circled the wagons” asking mutual friends to convince Jones to sell the property to the Society of the Sacred Heart. According to Ms. O’Neil, “he [Jones] called Mike and said good God, who do you know?” Jones soon approved the sale.


Account based on interview with Ann Taylor, RSCJ, former headmistress of Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart, conducted on August 9, 2018.

20 Among the companies Bindley helped establish were the Neely Nut & Bolt Co., Pittsburgh Steel Products, Co., and the Monessen Coal & Coke Co. He also served as president of Duchesne National Bank. “Death of John Bindley,” *American Exporter*, 1922, Volume 90, 80.


22 Atherstone was located at 5300 Fifth Avenue in Pittsburgh. The 4-story Gothic castle featured crenellated turrets and 80 windows with leaded panes. It was torn down in 1938 after being vacant for nearly a decade. Patricia Lowry, “Minding Our Manors: How great estates of Pittsburgh got their names,” *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, December 5, 1999, http://old.post-gazette.com/magazine/19991205names2.asp


26 Decades earlier, following the death of John Bindley’s wife Emeline Houston Bindley, his widowed sister Mary McMillin (1840-1924) and her maiden daughter Elmina McMillin (1870-1942) moved into
Atherstone and helped care for the children and manage the household. The women remained Bindley’s lifelong companions.


28 “Thieves Get Over $1,000 In Jewelry at Bindley Home,” Miami Herald, December 30, 1916. The event may help explain why several safes were later installed in El Jardin, including a large one on the first floor and a smaller one, presumably for jewelry, in Adelaide’s second floor bedroom.

29 “Coconut Grove First Settled 40 Years Ago,” Miami Herald, January 1, 1925.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.


33 Ibid.


35 Arva Moore Parks, Miami: The Magic City (Miami: Community Media, 2008), 68.


38 Albert M. Tannler. Pittsburgh Architecture in the Twentieth Centu-
Landmark structures in South Florida designed by Kiehnel include Coral Gables Congregational Church (1925), Coral Gables Elementary School (1926), and along Main Highway in Coconut Grove: La Brisa, the winter home of Eleanor and John Bonner Semple of Linden Avenue in Pittsburgh (1926), the Coconut Grove Playhouse (1927), Bryan Memorial Methodist Church (now Bet-Ovadia Chabad of the Grove) (1928) and Second Church of Christ Scientist (1940).


“Coconut Grove First Settled 40 Years Ago,” *Miami Herald*; January 1, 1925.


Historic Designation Report, prepared by Claire Kondolf, RSCJ, August 30, 1974, https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/AssetDetail?assetID=c079cd3e-f3e5-49d4-8c96-725d29c1b9d9


“Schenley Park Fine Example of Subdivision,” *Miami Metropolis*, July 26, 1925.


50 “Smart Parties at Coconut Grove for Miss Ethel Jackson and Dr. Hutson.” *Miami Herald*, Feb. 2, 1921.

51 “Pioneer Steel Magnate Dead,” *Miami Herald*, December 17, 1921.


54 *Miami Herald*, May 22, 1925.


56 *Miami Herald*, January 3, 1925.


58 Grace Wing Bohne, “Elite Carrollton’s Stately Corridors are Haunted by Memory of Things Past,” *Miami Herald*, April 18, 1968.


60 Michael Fascell began managing El Jardin’s extensive gardens for John Bindley and stayed on when the Richey family moved into the home. Printed advertisements for the “El Jardin Nursery” managed by Fascell from the estate’s greenhouse, first appeared in the *Miami Metropolis* on March 29, 1929. Fascell, the uncle of future United States Congressmen Dante B. Fascell, advertised “tropical plants, professional landscaping, artistic pools and rockery construction
services.” Fascell’s nursery remained at El Jardin through 1934 when, following the purchase of the estate, by Cities Service, he re-named his business “Coral Way Gardens” and moved it to Coral Way and 17th Avenue in Miami. He also developed the “Fascell Mango,” reported to be a “cross between the Haden and Brooks” mangoes. “New Mango,” *Fort Myers News-Press*, July 1, 1939.

61 “Henry Doherty, 60, Big Miami Investor is Dead of Pneumonia,” *Miami Herald*, December 27, 1939.


63 Ibid.
As vaudeville reigned supreme even in the new city of Miami, motion picture exhibition began as it did throughout the country in the early years of the twentieth century with the “nickelodeon,” a word derived by combining the term “nickel” which was the price of admission, with “odeon” which was the ancient name of Greek theatres. Moving pictures were a curious novelty, on a par with the juggling acts, standup comedians, barbershop quartets or somersaulting bars of the vaudeville shows. The “movies,” as they later came to be called, offered a whole new dimension to the lives of Miami residents and tourists alike.

Miami’s nickelodeons appeared in 1906 when the first movie theatre, called Kelly’s Theatre, opened on today’s East Flagler Street between Miami and First Avenues. As these movie houses proliferated they were usually very simple and plain, usually smoke-filled and oftentimes incredibly dingy. Before the advent of “talking” pictures, each theatre had either a piano player who accompanied the film or a small orchestra in the more substantial movie houses. The skilled musicians made certain that the musical selections fit the mood of the film, thereby enriching the movie experience. This often called for improvisation and soon led to music composed especially for films. As time passed, the quality of the film-going and movie theatre experience improved because of the public’s demands.

Located in a subtropical environment, Miami had the opportunity to entertain evening film viewers under the moon and stars. Several “open-air” theatres were introduced in the downtown Miami area, providing pleasant and comfortable spaces as long as the weather was good. To sit under the stars on a balmy night in Miami was certainly a delightful experience. However, Miami was often plagued by thunderstorms and rain, cold and mosquitoes,
which often limited the fun of movie going. Matinees in the open-air theatres were not possible because of the sunlight. The best known of the open-air genre was the Airdome Theatre. In 1914, it was located on the south side of Flagler Street, then called Twelfth Street, near the site of Kelly’s Theatre.

Because of weather conditions and other obstacles, the Airdome had an elaborate system of weather curtains, which could be rolled back in good weather to expose the starry skies and moon. The curtains could also be rolled up if a storm came up and the audience would be spared from getting soaked. The theatre patrons who sat under a crack in the curtains would have to move in case of rain or be subject to a steady drip on them, according to Elroy Cormack, who, as an usher and ticket-taker at the Airdome, around 1920, had to run and roll up the curtains if a storm appeared.¹

By 1915, price for admission to the theatres went up from a nickel to a dime for adults in the afternoon and fifteen cents at night. For that price, one could see Mary Pickford, the movie sweetheart of that era, star with Charlie Chaplin in *Diamond in the Sky*. At the Hippodrome Theatre, Theda Bara, referred to as the “dark archangel of destiny,” could be seen starring in the “stirring, starling, satanic,” *The Galley Slave*. Continuous performances were scheduled from 2 p.m. until 11 p.m. Those early days of Miami movie going were pleasant and happy times for theatre patrons, including families with children. People flocked to the movies night after night for plain old-fashioned fun. But, these early theatres and vaudeville houses were soon to be supplanted by larger, more glorious venues.²

**The Advent of the “Movie Palace” in Miami: The Olympia Theatre**

With the accelerated growth of the motion picture industry in Hollywood, California, and burgeoning patronage, the number of theatres featuring lavish exteriors and interiors grew and replaced the old converted store nickelodeons. Developing from an entertainment medium that attracted hundreds of patrons, the
movies eventually drew thousands, even in small cities like Miami. One after another of the new “movie palaces” of the early 1920s claimed to be more elegant, more grand, bigger and more palatial. Movie going became an experience to be savored, not only for the films but also for the glorious environments that the newly constructed movie palaces offered their patrons. Gone were the days of store-front nickelodeons with hot and stuffy non-air conditioned auditoriums with a piano player or a small orchestra. Gone also was the frightful concern over rapidly-spreading fires in the theatre. New theatres would incorporate such safety features as emergency exits. Smoking in the auditorium was generally banned as well.

With the new safety rules and the need for larger auditoriums, it made more sense economically to construct new buildings instead of renovating existing structures such as opera houses, concert halls or churches. And the new theatres tended to be larger and with a greater accent on “ambiance” than their predecessors.

Theatergoers loved leaving behind their worries and sometimes harsh environments by involving themselves in the stories that the

Airdome Theatre, June 1921. In a quirky manner, the theatre spelled its name both “Airdome” and “Airdrome.” Claude Matlack Collection, HistoryMiami, 92-12.

new modern marvel of motion pictures presented them. Quickly, movie entrepreneurs seized on the idea of extending the fantasy world from the screen stories to the whole experience of movie going. New theatres were built almost overnight, not only to hold larger audiences but also on a scale and grandeur that was in many instances “over the top.” Because so many of these palatial new theatres had such opulence and extraordinary architectural beauty, a new term was coined: “movie palaces.” The average patron was no longer just a movie-goer, they were treated as royalty. The movie palaces were an overwhelming success between 1914 and 1922 with 4,000 opening in the United States, with more to come.3

In 1924, Paramount Enterprises, Inc. commissioned the building of a theatre in South Florida to rival any of the movie palaces in the North. By December 1924, the blueprints were completed, and Miami was chosen as the location for the new theatre. In May 1925, construction began on Miami’s first movie palace, to be called the Olympia Theatre. It was located on the southwest corner of Flagler Street and Southeast Second Avenue, on the site of the old Airdome Theatre. The new theatre was situated in a ten story building, the Olympia Building, which cost one and one-half million dollars to build. Both the exterior and the interior were designed by prominent theatre architect John Eberson.4

The building’s exterior is a fine example of the use of the Mediterranean style on a high-rise commercial structure. The top floor of the building’s exterior is decorated by suggestive Venetian palazzo motifs, which are then continued in the theatre’s interior.

The large auditorium with a mezzanine and balcony and boxes is meant to suggest “an urban square with side walls representing enclosing palazzo facades. Despite the presence of large crystal chandeliers, the 246 twinkling ceiling lights and the artificial cloud machine manage to create for members of the audience the illusion that they are seated outdoors in a Venetian square observing a glorious spectacle presented in front of them.”5 The theatre was the quintessential “atmospheric” creation that was a hallmark of Eberson’s work.
The original seating configuration provided 2,170 seats. Nicholas Patricios, in *Building Marvelous Miami*, described the interior in the following manner: “The original proscenium had a richly decorated elliptical arch that supported a projecting balcony, on carved corbels, with a balustered parapet rail. Still flanking the stage area on both sides is a wall façade that resembles a bay from an ornate Venetian Gothic palace. The auditorium walls, the ceilings of the mezzanine, and loge balconies are embellished with paintings and ornate, painted plaster ornaments.” The Olympia was one of the finest theatres in the South, and the first building in Miami to be air-conditioned. The theatre had its grand opening on February 11, 1926, with the silent film, *Grand Duchess and the Waiter*, starring Adolphe Menjou and Florence Vidor. The musical accompaniment for the film was provided by a striking new Wurlitzer theatre organ.
Over the years, movie-going was an experience to be “relished and appreciated,” especially if it was at the Olympia. Geraldine H. Williams has described visits to the Olympia in the halcyon days of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.
The best part of going to the movies was not so much what was showing but entering a palace so grand and so elegant, you knew you were privileged just being there. Seeing a movie was a small part of a much larger experience.

Ms. Williams takes the reader back to the time when the “friendly stars twinkled and wisps of clouds drifted.” It was here that theatergoers saw the first showings in Miami of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*, along with other classic films. Williams introduces us to the “dazzling Olympia lobby with its pink marbled foyer, guarded on either side with heavy brass stanchions holding deep red velvet ropes that led to the box office.” As a child, Williams’ father usually purchased the tickets and they would walk “through heavy bronze doors into the cool luxury of the lobby.”

Immediately, the golden glow from electric light wall sconces and the carved mahogany tables and chairs lining the walls told you the hot tropical world outside the doors was to be left behind, because now you were in a very special place. There was no pushing and shoving, no popcorn dropped on the plush oriental patterned carpets, and no loud voices cursing and hollering for children. There were only hushed tones as if one was in church or a wealthy person’s palace.

The uniformed attendants stood guard at each of the entranceways to the seating areas, and with their flashlights, they led you down the aisle to a row that had seats still empty. This was the best time to gaze at the night sky on the ceiling with the tiny, glittering lights arranged in astrological patterns just like the real sky. Soft cobwebbed clouds seem to drift by while you listened to the trickle of water coming from the fountains on either side of the front of the theatre’s gardens.

Some citrus trees and flowering bushes created an unbelievable tropical paradise in front of you, encasing the
orchestra pit in beauty only seen by the average movie-go-
er in travel books or on the movie screen.

The real magic began while you were gazing up at the
carved sculpture on the balcony, seeing statues and cupids
adding to the glamour of the architect’s genius in creating
a genuine feeling of being transported to a foreign land.
The lights dimmed in the house, and slowly a full orches-
tra arose right in front of you, led by a slick-haired con-
ductor in a tuxedo.

It was time to begin. Usually, there was an animal act on
stage, or jugglers. Sometimes a beautiful adagio act with
a couple in eveningwear would recreate a Ginger Rogers/
Fred Astaire dance.

We would watch with awe and applaud with gusto. This
was entertainment! Then the conductor and the orches-
tra would take a final bow, and as they descended and the
spotlight went out, the heavy blue velvet curtain would
slowly part to reveal the movie screen.  

As changes occurred in the production of films, so did the offer-
ings of the Olympia Theatre. By 1929, talking pictures, introduced
only two years earlier, and vaudeville acts grew in popularity and
the theatre began to host many acts, including the Marx Brothers
and Gypsy Rose Lee. When the Olympia was host to only silent
films, they were accompanied by the “mighty Wurlitzer” pipe or-
gan, which had been constructed in 1925 prior to the theatre’s
completion. The organ had cost $75,000 to build and consists of
1,085 pipes made of wood, brass, lead and zinc. In the vaudeville
days, it was the practice to paint the organ’s solid mahogany con-
sole a different garish color every time it was scratched or marred.
When organ finally underwent restoration in 1971, the Theatre Or-
gan Society of South Florida counted twelve coats of paint before
stripping the console. “Tap-dancers once tap-tap-tapped across
the keyboard, carving deep grooves as souvenirs of those carefree
vaudeville days,” according to the restoration workers. The organ
had last been played in 1949 when it ceased to be used prior to the shows or in intermissions. By 1971, the once grand organ was “broken and forgotten.” Thankfully, the organ was restored in 1977, and continues to be a project of the Theatre Organ Society of South Florida.

The in-house orchestra in the 1950s was conducted by Les Rhode. By that time, the Olympia was hosting numerous concerts, especially the widely publicized and sensational stage show performances by Elvis Presley in August 1956. Elvis followed such performers on stage as Ethel Smith, Sophie Tucker, Joe E. Brown, Martha Raye, Rudy Vallee, Jackie Gleason, Tex Ritter, Kay Armand, Etta James, Della Reese and B. B. King in the 1940s and early 1950s.

There can be little doubt that the preeminent events of the Olympia Theatre’s stage history were the aforementioned stage appearances by Elvis Presley. In early August 1956, the Olympia featured one of the fastest rising figures in music and the beginning of a legendary performer. Twenty-one year old Presley packed the theatre for seven shows over two days. Those who were in attendance held memories that have lasted a lifetime. By the time Elvis appeared on the Olympia’s stage, his popularity with teenagers and young adults, especially girls and women, was exploding. A series of national television appearances in the spring and early summer of 1956 only boosted his popularity and his record sales. Not long after his Olympia appearance and a countrywide tour, Elvis was filming his first movie, *Love Me Tender*.

Miami was the first stop on Elvis’ tour of seven Florida cities. Once it was announced that he would be in Miami on August 3 and 4, a frenzy of excitement broke out among his fans. Even before his arrival, excited fans gathered at the Olympia’s entrance around midnight of the day before his first concert and a line of excited fans stretched around the block by noon on the day of the show. Elvis checked into the nearby Robert Clay Hotel where he believed he would be safer than in Miami Beach.
Elvis went on stage for his first show on Friday, August 3, wearing a “lavender jacket, black pants and white shoes.” The crowd went wild. Presley was protected by a group of Miami policemen, but one enthusiastic fan was able to grab and tear off a section of Elvis’ lavender jacket. Another fan was able to rip off a piece of Elvis’ black pants. Between shows the singer cut up his pants and threw fragments of them over the fire escape from the stage to screaming fans. Presley left Miami after his 9 p.m. show, one of the last of four on Saturday, August 4, and headed to Tampa for the next part of his tour. It was reported that 15,000 fans saw Elvis perform in Miami.
By the late 1960s, the theatre was in financial trouble as a result of declining audiences as downtown Miami was on the cusp of a long period of decline. In 1970, with the theatre’s fortunes continuing to plummet, Maurice Gusman, a highly successful businessman and philanthropist, purchased the theater and saved it from demolition. Gusman then hired famed architect Morris Lapidus to renovate the main auditorium. The seating capacity was reduced to 1,700. In 1972, the renovated Olympia Theatre became the home of the Greater Miami Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1975, Gusman donated the theatre property to the City of Miami on the condition that it would be operated by the city’s Parking Authority. Renovations to the theatre continued from 1975 to 1977. It was now known as the Gusman Cultural Center and in its new incarnation became a pop concert venue. In the 1980s, the theatre box office was reconstructed to its original shape and design. In 1984, the theatre received historical designation by the National Register of Historic Places. A non-profit group, the Friends of Gusman, was organized to help create funding for improving the aging building. In 1989, renovations again began to convert the theatre to a performing arts center.

The theatre reopened in 1994 and was named the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts. Stars as diverse as Luciano Pavarotti and Johnny Cash headlined the shows. In 2000, restoration work began on the theatre’s original artwork and plans were unveiled to repair the building’s structure and exterior frame. A grand reopening was held in October 2002, under another new name: Olympia Theatre at the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts. More renovations were made in 2009 on the stage, acoustics, HVAC systems, seating and to the replica of the original Olympia marquee. Capacity was again reduced, this time to 1,500 seats. The reconstructed box office was moved to the front of the theatre. In 2010, the Olympia Center, Inc., was formed to manage and operate the venue. In 2014, the name was changed again, back to its original name, Olympia Theatre. In late 2017 there were rumors of a demolition of most of the original Olympia Theatre Building and the construction of new residential apartments over the theatre. There was sufficient outcry over this plan to cause it to be dropped, and preservation efforts continue with the prospect that Miami-Dade
College, a conservator and operator of several singularly historic buildings in the City of Miami, may take control of it.\(^\text{16}\)

**The Capitol Theatre**

Four months after the opening of the Olympia Theatre, 1,500 Miamians crowded into another new theatre, the Capitol Theatre at 300 North Miami Avenue, patterned after its namesake, the Capitol Theatre in New York City. The audience occupied every seat, including the orchestra section, which was reserved for invited guests. Capitol theatregoers saw a foyer highlighted by elaborate mosaics, a stunning chandelier and a color scheme in predominantly orange, ivory, gold and green, which gave the interior, as one commentator noted, “the beauty of a gorgeous tropical sunset.”\(^\text{17}\) The grand opening film was *Breakfast in Hollywood*, starring Beulah Bondi, Bonita Granville and Billie Burke.\(^\text{18}\)

The theatre was less lavish and more restrained in interior design than the neighboring Olympia, but it was still splendid in its
décor and appointments, according to contemporary reports. It was the first “first-run” movie house built by the infant Wolfson-Meyer Theatre Company (later shortened to Wometco Theatres) and had been under construction for a year. Mitchell Wolfson and his brother-in-law Sidney Meyer faced many crises in obtaining material and workmen owing to the shortage of both during the real estate boom of that era, for the theatre’s construction. They had to import a contractor from Chicago, but finally the theatre was finished at a cost of $300,000. The Capitol, like the Olympia, was air-conditioned, and the Wometco group kept the temperature at seventy degrees in the theatre, which was cool but welcomed by the audience who had come out of the hot sun or steamy summer night. The Capitol offered a new kind of ventilation system consisting of huge fans sending out “currents of refreshing air” that had been forced through a spray of ice water which kept the temperature at the designated level. Wolfson said that the Capitol was one of the first theatres in Miami to install sound equipment. As soon as Twentieth Century-Fox and Universal had talking films, Wometco screened them at the Capitol.
Like the Olympia, the Capitol Theatre had a pipe organ, which was played to accompany silent films and then later to play before and after the “talking” feature film programs. At the theatre’s opening, the Capitol Theatre Orchestra played classical jazz music under the baton of Mario Armellini, who had been musical director at the Roney Plaza Hotel on Miami Beach as well as the Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach. Along with the orchestra, William Gilroy, former organist at the Capitol Theatre in New York, and
Lee Broyde, who came from Yonkers, played the $60,000 “mighty Wurlitzer” organ. Stanleigh Malotte (1901-1973) was a renowned American theatre organist who often played at the Capitol’s organ console after having worked at the Olympia as their principal theatre organist.\textsuperscript{22}

Unfortunately, the Capitol Theatre’s life span was short. By 1954, the Capitol was transformed into the television studios of WTVJ, Channel 4, the Miami station owned by Wometco. Major building reconstruction changed the entire interior of the theatre to accommodate a cluster of studios, offices and equipment facilities. Some of the original décor of the exterior of the theatre was spared. It was demolished, however, in 2000 to make way for a new federal district courthouse.

The Coconut Grove Theatre

The Coconut Grove Theatre building is a significant example of the Florida Land Boom that has survived to this day despite many twists and turns. The original design of this theatre was produced by the architectural firm of Kiehnel and Elliott of Pittsburgh, as a Spanish Rococo movie palace built in the Mediterranean style, then quite fashionable. (Kiehnel was also the architect for the Scottish Rite Temple of Miami, Miami High School, and Coral Gables Congregational Church.) Despite the glories of the Olympia Theatre in downtown Miami, the Coconut Grove Theatre was intended to be Miami’s most elaborate cinema with the largest seating capacity of any theatre in Miami. On January 15, 1926, ground was broken for the theatre at the corner of Main Highway and Charles Avenue in the Coconut Grove neighborhood of Miami. The theatre was a project of the Irving J. Thomas Company, which had been involved in the real estate business in Coconut Grove as early as 1912.\textsuperscript{23}

Approximately one year later, in early 1926, the Thomas Company turned over the theatre property to Paramount Enterprises, Inc., the film studio and theatre builders headquartered in Hollywood, California. It was thought that Paramount would better
serve the citizens of Miami as managers of the theatre which was to become the eleventh Paramount theatre to open in southeastern Florida. The publicity release on the theatre boasted that it would be equipped with the latest model of an orchestral pipe organ. The building would have a climate controlled air-conditioning system for use year-round as a “pressure system of ventilation” producing cool air during the hottest days of summer. The building was designed for mixed use, including seven storefronts on the ground floor and offices on the second. The third floor contained apartments.

The theatre building demonstrates the Mediterranean style in its dramatic entrance portal, which is accentuated by the use of a cast ornament that continues to the third floor. The spiral or twisted columns and classically-inspired entablature running above the entrance doorway are also reminiscent of the style. The loggias on each side of the original theatre interior expressed key concepts of the style as they allowed an open yet sheltered area that provided the illusion of being “outdoors.” This area was framed by arches with panels containing ornamental wrought iron grilles. The ornamentation of the theatre’s side walls was simpler. Ornamental compartments for the organ pipes flanked either side of the theatre’s proscenium.

On Saturday, January 1, 1927, the theatre’s opening night, screen actor Adolf Menjou starred in D. W. Griffith’s production of Sorrow of Satan. Accompanying the film was a twelve piece orchestra under the baton of Arnold Johnson and Celia Santon, who played the Wurlitzer Concert Grand Organ. The Reverend J. D. Kuykendall of Plymouth Congregational Church in Coconut Grove gave an unusual dedicatory address, which compared the growth of the motion picture industry with that of Coconut Grove. The new theatre was packed.24

The Coconut Grove Theatre’s opening could not have come at a less propitious time for South Florida, which just four months earlier had endured the savage destruction of the hurricane of 1926, which leveled a substantial portion of Dade and Broward
County real estate while worsening an already serious economic downturn. In this fraught economic climate, the theatre closed. On October 3, 1930, however, it reopened, again as the Coconut Grove Theatre with the film *Queen High*, a musical comedy starring Ginger Rogers, Charles Ruggles and Frank Morgan. Special organ music was performed each evening. The theatre continued to experience ups and downs, and during the Second World War it served as a schoolhouse to train aerial navigators for the armed forces. Following the war, the Coconut Grove Theatre again reopened as a movie theatre and remained in operation until the mid 1950s.

In 1955, George Engle, a wealthy Houston oilman, purchased the theatre for $200,000 with the intent of establishing a legitimate performing arts venue. The theatre was in a state of disrepair, so Engle hired renowned Coconut Grove architect Alfred Browning Parker to refurbish the house and decorate it for a more contemporary era. Renovations at this time almost obliterated the original Mediterranean-styled interior. The theatre was renamed the Coconut Grove Playhouse, reopening on January 3, 1956, with the U. S. premiere of Samuel Beckett’s play, *Waiting for Godot*. A series of changes of ownership occurred in 1966, 1970, 1971, and 1977. The State of Florida acquired the playhouse in 1980 and in 2004 transferred ownership to the Coconut Grove Playhouse LLC Inc.

The Playhouse has been closed since 2006, when it was abruptly shuttered because of financial and administrative problems. In January 2014, Miami-Dade County received permission from the State of Florida to take over the building. Several options were on the table as to how to proceed with renovating and reopening the theatre as a stage performance venue or venues, but bickering and differences of opinion on the renovation continued to constrain any concrete action. In December 2017, Miami-Dade commissioners put an end to plans to modernize and completely transform the historic theatre building which included demolition of the historic auditorium and replacing it with a much smaller new theatre. The future of the historic building is uncertain at this time.
The Miami Theatre

The Miami Theatre was built at 145 East Flagler Street, on the north side of the street between Southeast First and Southeast Second Avenues, just up and across from the Olympia Theatre. It was designed to be the flagship of Wometco’s Miami area theatres and was dubbed the “Showplace of the Americas” on its opening. It was the culmination of a vision shared by Mitchell Wolfson and Sidney Meyer, founders of Wometco, the largest theatre chain in Florida. The opening of the theatre was on April 18, 1947, a glamorous occasion with written greetings from the leaders of twenty Central and South American countries delivered by the Costa Rican Consul General in Miami, hosted by Perrine Palmer, the mayor of Miami, with masters of ceremonies on stage and in the lobby. The stage Master of Ceremonies was Joey Adams. The lobby Master of Ceremonies was Don Lanning. A “parade vanguard” consisting of the
Greater Miami Boys’ Drum and Bugle Corps added to the color and sound of the occasion. A group of Costa Rican Popularity Queens capped the entourage, a fitting connection to the Technicolor grand opening feature film *Carnival in Costa Rica*, starring Dick Haymes, Vera-Ellen, Cesar Romero, Celeste Holm and J. Carrol Naish.

The staff and services of the Miami Theatre were outstanding for its time. Under Managing Director J. M. “Sonny” Shepherd, the theatre boasted “push-back seats,” a new type of seat where a patron just simply slid back obviating the need to rise to let another patron pass, “true air conditioning” wherein each section of the theatre was “zone controlled” so that no part would ever become too warm or too cold. The air was dust and smoke clean through the use of pure air forced into air ducts by automatic variable pitch louvers on supply blowers. In addition, “walkie-talkie” earphones were introduced, providing hearing-impaired patrons with the ability to sit in any part of the theatre and hear perfectly well. The entire theatre was wired for that purpose. The Miami Theatre also boasted of having the largest screen in Miami. The entire entertainment package was enhanced by a combination of the theatre’s unique association with Huyler’s, a nationally famous purveyor of fine food and delicacies with headquarters in New York. The theatre/restaurant was accessible from either Flagler Street or the cinema’s mezzanine. In a nod to the future, and as a part of the community service program of Wometco Theatres, the Miami Theatre offered Spanish-speaking attendants to serve the entire community “of the Americas.”

In the late 1940s, during the height of Wometco’s theatre empire, renowned theatre architect S. Charles Lee had established himself as the principal movie theatre designer in California and the Southwestern part of the United States. Lee was known for his dramatic and ornate interiors and grand entrances, foyers and lobbies, as well as his breath-taking auditorium designs. He was hired by Wometco to design a theatre for downtown Miami that would embody the “Streamline Moderne” style, so popular before and during that time in Miami and Miami Beach. Moderne is an architectural style that incorporates the Art Deco style of the 1920s and 1930s. It was noted for its “roots in crisp and clean aerodynamic
designs, common architectural characteristics including smooth, curving shapes and long horizontal lines mixed with nautical elements such as portholes.” Some of the finest examples of this style could be found in Miami Beach hotels of the 1930s.

Using Miami’s famous tropical splendor as his point of reference, Lee set out to design a theatre more innovative and unique than any of his previous projects. The three-story Miami Theatre building featured an auditorium that seated approximately 1,850 people. An elevator took patrons to the second floor section of the next door Huyler’s restaurant, where one could have lunch or dinner and be charged for their food and movie tickets in a single bill. The restaurant’s third floor, reached by elevator or stairs, was used for private parties or luncheons. The theatre also had a soda bar on the main and mezzanine floors, and a snack bar was available in the interior lobby.
Lee blended the past with the present in his theatre decoration. When a patron entered the Miami Theatre, they were “submerged” into an aquarium-like lobby. Noted contemporary designer Frederick T. Rank served as the interior decorator and local mural artist F. M. Bergere provided a large mural that embellished the “showplace of the Americas” theme with the continents of the Americas and the Americas’ peoples and national flags found within these land masses. Movie patrons experienced a lobby with recessed lighting, elongated cascading ceiling treatments and wavy walls decorated in shell and sea life motif reliefs. The quasi-Baroque and Rococo-style ceilings and walls were painted in colors of coral, gold, white and silver gray. Flowing curvilinear staircases and ornamented railings and archways proceeded to each floor of the theatre.32

The two-tier balcony auditorium was “a simple linear composition with the structure’s shape leading towards the prosценium. Bands of indirect lighting framed the proscenium, and a lavish curtain hung in swags that scaled the stage’s great arch to a reasonable screening size.”33 The walls of the theatre auditorium were also decorated with large sculptures in relief resembling Greek gods. While the theatre is considered one of Lee’s finest and largest, it was the last of his major motion picture movie theatres designed in the grand tradition of 1920s and 1930s movie houses. The Miami Theatre celebrated its quasi-underwater lobby motif and movie-going experience for approximately thirty years. In 1978, Wometco closed the theatre and sold it to architect Oscar Sklar and his associates, who reconstructed the building into a mini-shopping mall in the early 1980s. The glamorous and atmospherically pleasing theatre of the late 1940s is no more, but the decline of large movie houses with single screens in the 1970s and 1980s doomed even the finest architecturally-distinguished theatres. It was an unfortunate loss for Miami.34

The Colony Theatre
1040 Lincoln Road Mall, Miami Beach

The first of two theatres to open in Miami Beach during the Great Depression, the Colony Theatre, built by the Paramount
Theatres chain, was a delightful but restrained Art Deco gem, much of whose décor still is visible to the theatre patron, especially on the exterior and in the lobby area. With a capacity for nearly 900 theatre-goers, the Colony opened on January 25, 1935, with Clive of India, starring Ronald Colman and Loretta Young. From the 1930s to the 1960s, the theatre featured first-run films and was a distinguished landmark on famous Lincoln Road. In 1936, the Colony played host to the world premier of The Trail of the Lonesome Pines, the first dramatic feature film in color. In October 1948, Arch of Triumph, starring Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer, had its world premiere at the Colony.

The Colony featured major road show attractions in the early 1960s, such as Lawrence of Arabia, which this writer saw there
in 1962. In the early to mid-1960s, it became known as a classic film revival house offering double features, often of Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy musicals. In 1965, the Colony featured *The Sound of Music*, another road show attraction with reserved seating. This classic film played continuously there for well over a year.

To help stave off a decline of Lincoln Road as a tourist and high-end shopping street, in 1960 vehicle traffic was eliminated from the area and the former street became known as the Lincoln Road Mall, a pedestrian walkway with fountains and elaborate containers and landscapes of tropical plants replacing the roadway. Alterations also were made to the façade of the Colony Theatre by its owner, Florida State Theatres, which unfortunately altered the original entrance and box office by sealing them off and relocating them to a totally undistinguished theatre entrance on a diagonal corner of the theatre building at Lenox Avenue and the Lincoln Road Mall.

In 1976, the Colony was renovated to provide a venue for performing arts presentations and an occasional film. However, by the beginning of the 1980s, the Lincoln Road Mall area had declined in popularity with locals and tourists alike and the area lost its former glamour and glitz. By the late 1980s, Miami Beach entrepreneurs and the “city fathers” decided something had to be done to restore the excitement and tourist draw of the Lincoln Road Mall. One of the important draws would be the Colony Theatre. The City of Miami Beach purchased the theatre building. It had been out of the first-run film business for almost two decades, largely serving as a revival house, but instead of classic movie musicals it had morphed into Russian films of the 1930s and 1940s. Even at the Mall’s lowest point, many knew the Colony was an important survivor from the illustrious past, and a plethora of ideas for its revival were proposed: a disco, an art film house, a return to vaudeville, a dance space and a legitimate theatre. By the mid-1980s, restoration was underway, with its re-opening coming in October 1986 with a film festival sponsored by the Film Society of Miami, and subsequent stage shows. By this time, the ceiling had
been renovated, a soft gray color was placed on the side walls, the original aluminum Deco ceiling mini-chandeliers were returned to their former place, sound baffling, stage lights, new seats and more were installed. The new expanded stage was a great addition and a beacon for future performing artists.35

More restoration and changes were to come. In 2003, the theatre was closed for nine months to enable another new stage area to be built in the auditorium. In addition, the movie projection system was upgraded. In 2006, the theatre was extensively renovated and restored to its original Art Deco splendor at a cost of over six and one-half million dollars. Many of the original Art Deco décor features are again clearly visible, especially the outstanding grillwork on either side of the proscenium, although the side walls do not seem to reflect the original design, now decorated only with drapery swags. The ill-considered corner entrance of 1960 was eliminated, and the original front entrance on Lincoln Road Mall was carefully restored along with the original Art Deco box office, which somehow survived. Today the Colony Theatre is one of South Florida’s most popular entertainment locations, hosting a wide variety of concerts, dance performances, opera, comedy acts and film festivals. It is presently the home of Miami New Drama.36

The Lincoln Theatre
555 Lincoln Road, Miami Beach

Until the early 1950s, Mitchell Wolfson championed the Lincoln Theatre on Lincoln Road as the “flagship” of the Wometco theatre chain. He was proud of this movie house because it had been the home of many world premieres as late as 1961 with the premiere of Back Street, starring Susan Hayward and John Gavin. Despite its prominence in the theatre scene of Miami Beach for many years, there is little information extant, especially about the interior of the theatre designed in 1935 by prominent American theatre architect Thomas W. Lamb in association with local architect Robert E. Collins, who also designed the nearby Cameo Theatre. The Lincoln opened January 15, 1936, with the
film *King of Burlesque*, starring Warner Baxter and Alice Faye, in the midst of the Great Depression with a scaled-down Art Deco architecture whose most prominent design features appear on the exterior of the building. The exterior Art Deco design offers sleek, curved shapes and intricate and stylized floral reliefs on a coral-pink façade. The theatre’s exterior was the subject of many photographs and remains faithful to the original design despite several renovations of the interior of the building.

The Lincoln Theatre contributed its share to the nation’s cause in World War II by turning over more than a thousand pounds of satin finish aluminum from the theatre’s marquee to the military as “scrap metal.” A new marquee using baked enamel was installed in place of the former aluminum in the early 1940s.

This once grand movie house, which saw the long road show runs of *Cleopatra* in 1963 and *My Fair Lady* in 1964, left the Wometco chain in the 1950s to become a part of the Brandt circuit of theatres. By the 1980s the theatre had seen its day and was wearing thin on ailing Lincoln Road. In 1986, the Lincoln was showing re-run double features. It was a less than glorious end to a once-inspiring film venue. After sitting vacant in the late 1980s, the New World Symphony bought the theatre building in 1990 and shortly thereafter began a multimillion dollar renovation of its interior, which essentially gutted the original Lamb-Collins designed auditorium. Today, despite the interior of the building having been again gutted, the exterior of the former theatre building, which now houses a large retail store, has been restored to much of its original grandeur, including an elaborate marquee and Art Deco façade.

**The Beach Theatre**

420 Lincoln Road Mall, Miami Beach

After the restrained Art Deco architecture and décor of the Colony and Lincoln theatres of the Depression era, the 1940s bloomed with a flowering, literally, of architectural design and décor, which ushered in a different movie theatre ambiance. Opened
in the new Mercantile National Bank Building in 1941, the Beach Theatre won praise as a “fantastic Streamline Art Moderne movie palace,” which cost more than $300,000 to build. The theatre was clearly grand and unique in its architecture and décor. It was designed by the firm of Weed and Reeder (Robert Law Weed and Edwin T. Reeder), with associate architects Periera and Periera, who acted as design consultants. Robert Law Weed, the principal architect, also designed most of the interior, which represented an “eclectic mix of tropical themes and Streamline Moderne.” The expansive theatre contained 1,800 seats, including seating in the orchestra and balcony. In addition to its extraordinary interior, the Beach possessed an impressively beautiful exterior with brass doors leading into the lobby.40

During the 1940s, the Beach Theatre was Paramount Theatres’ major Miami Beach film venue. In the 1950s, archive reports indicate the Beach booked mainly Warner Brothers films, including A Star is Born, (1954) the world premiere of Miami-themed Lucky Me (1954), The Pajama Game, (1957) The Spirit of St. Louis (1957) and Damn Yankees (1958). Hello Dolly ran as a road show engagement at the Beach beginning in December 1969. By
the early 1970s, however, the theatre was closed coinciding with the decline of the Lincoln Road Mall and nearby areas. The final listing in the Miami area telephone book for the Beach Theatre was in July 1971. The theatre stood dormant until it became home to a nightclub in the late 1980s. After the nightclub closed amid the lingering doldrums of Lincoln Road, the onetime lobby space of the theatre was partitioned and converted into a savings and loan association office and retail space. In 1987, this writer peered into at a portion of the remains of the auditorium from the rear of the building and saw nothing but debris and an interior in shambles. The stage house and auditorium stood visible from a side street. In September 2007, it was proposed that the former theatre space would be converted into an upscale restaurant, but this never occurred. In 2015, it was reported that the theatre was totally gutted.

The Carib Theatre
230 Lincoln Road Mall, Miami Beach

The quintessential movie palace of the 1950s in greater Miami was the luxurious Carib Theatre on Lincoln Road just west of Collins Avenue in Miami Beach. This exotic showplace opened on December 22, 1950, as Wometco Theatres’ flagship house in South Florida. This extravagant creation was designed by architect Michael DeAngelis, based in Rochester, New York, who designed many movie theatres in New York state and Pennsylvania, along with Roy F. France as his associate.41

Mickey Wolfson, Jr., Miami historian and collector, along with co-author, Michele Oka-Doner, have vividly recorded their memories of the Carib Theatre in their beautifully illustrated book, Miami Beach: Blueprint of an Eden, complete with photographs, architectural renderings and decorative sketches of the theatre. They describe how Wometco Theatres was on a mission to build a theatre with an exterior and an interior that would showcase the climatic conditions of South Florida, but also reflect both the cultural and natural richness of South Florida’s sub-tropical location. Wometco was successful.
A riot of color and exotic design met the moviegoer as they looked up at the imposing façade from the sidewalk! A remarkable thirty by thirty-five foot mural greeted the awestruck observer, providing a pictorial relief map of the Caribbean region showing portions of Mexico and South America, the Bahamas, the Greater and Lesser Antilles on the south and southern Florida. A
large compass near the top of the mural was designed as a directional star. This façade of porcelain enameled steel was brilliantly illuminated at night by flood lights placed upon the Plexiglas theatre marquee. The name of the theatre, in three dimensional lettering, was written in animated neon lighting on a dark coral colored background. The decorative styling of the marquee provided the observer with a sense of the movement and excitement of the ocean. The entrance thus presented a unique combination of technology, art and architecture.

After the patron entered the decorative lobby, they were greeted with representations of the flora and fauna of Central America. Birds fashioned from Plexiglas, fountains, small waterfalls, pools and paintings were used to reinforce the Caribbean-style décor. Live parrots were perched in the lobby. Fish designs seemed to be everywhere, gracing the front doors and embellishing the stage with a unique and sensuous appeal.

Upon entering the theatre lobby, the patron was met with a patio-foyer that measured forty feet from the stone flooring to the ceiling. The inner lobby was open to the sky, and during the day sunlight poured in. Mirrors on one wall reflected the colors of the stone and waterfalls of the opposite wall.

The auditorium seated 2,077 people on the main floor and balcony. The latest in comfort and technology was readily apparent. The seats in the orchestra section downstairs were Kroehler “push-backs,” high in the back and fully cushioned with latex rubber. The smoking loge upstairs employed a newly developed rocking chair manufactured by the Heywood-Wakefield chair company. The mezzanine level was reached by way of broad concrete stairs, which provided the illusion of a “floating stairway.” Another unique feature was the installation of a full escalator to the upper level. It was the only escalator in a south Florida theatre.

The primary feature of the fantasy-style auditorium was the grand drape, or contour curtain, which was of a tangerine color with a hammered satin finish accompanied by borders of emerald
green satin. An extra set of curtains were deep bottle green plush. The last set of curtains opening side to side covered the movie screen in a translucent turquoise rayon ripple style, decorated with a hand-dyed mural of Caribbean Sea marine life. Two rather Baroque octopuses, indirectly lit, stood like sentries on the stage on each side of the proscenium arch. The unusual arch with its wavy outline was framed by plexiglas cartouches and ornamental plaster. The predominant color was a sea green, which provided an extraordinary tableau of floating ocean and undersea life.42

In 1962, the Carib hosted the world premiere of *Sweet Bird of Youth*, starring Paul Newman and Geraldine Page. However, this theatre’s rather short history as a movie palace ended sadly in 1977 when it was closed by Wometco Theatres and gutted in 1979. As with other theatres on Lincoln Road, the mall’s decline was a major factor in its demise. Tourists and locals alike found other areas of “the Beach” to frequent, shop and enjoy. The building stood as a shopping arcade for a short time, but for many years it was boarded up on the exterior front, until it was demolished in December 2015.43 On July 18, 2017, a Ross Dress for Less retail store opened on the former site of the Carib Theatre. As a concession to the history of the place, the shop developers surprisingly incorporated a map of the Caribbean with the word Carib in its original style written on a giant glass pane, which is part of the new façade, a small token to the once unique theatre exterior.44

**The Miracle Theatre**

*280 Miracle Mile, Coral Gables*

More restrained in design and décor, but more elegant than the Carib Theatre, the Miracle Theatre, which predated the opening of the Carib by two years, was dubbed “Showplace of the Riviera” by Wometco Theatres. It was the next to last of the glorious movie palaces of Greater Miami. As a movie venue it was much longer lasting than the others. The theatre was designed by William H. Lee of Philadelphia, a renowned American twentieth-century movie theatre architect and designer. Lee used a
revised Art Deco design for his interior of the Miracle, what was called “Streamline Moderne.” He was assisted and to some extent influenced in the Miracle Theatre project by the work of Miami architect Robert E. Collins, mentioned earlier. While several theatres that opened in the later 1950s or early 1960s attempted to be decorative, especially in their interiors, such as the Loew’s Riviera in Coral Gables, they were no match for their grander precursors.

The Miracle’s grand opening was on Pearl Harbor Day, December 7, 1948. The opening movie was Columbia Pictures’ The Return of October, a color film directed by Joseph H. Lewis and starring nineteen year-old Terry Moore, Glenn Ford and James Gleason. It was a warm-hearted comedy about a wholesome young woman, played by Terry Moore, whose deceased Uncle Willie, played by James Gleason, is reincarnated as a thoroughbred horse.45

The theatre’s dedication address was given by University of Miami president Dr. Bowman F. Ashe, with a statement of welcome by Coral Gables mayor W. Keith Phillips. Also present were the bands of the University of Miami and the Ponce de Leon High School. The souvenir brochure refers to the Miracle Theatre’s inaugural performance as heralding “the birth of two new stars—one a charming personality, the other an institution dedicated to the community’s service.” Indeed, Terry Moore, was present for the inaugural program. The second “star” was “the bright new star in the Wometco banner, which represents the Miracle Theatre itself. From its inception we have been proud of what is intended this showplace shall be. Our continuing effort—through courtesy, service, and entertainment—shall be to make you as proud of the Miracle as we.”46

Franklin “Frank” Maury was the first Managing Director of the Miracle, and he would serve for several decades in that role becoming well known to the people of Coral Gables and beyond for his kind, respectful manner not only to theatre patrons but also to his staff.47 At the Miracle, the matinee ushers wore smart, but more causal uniforms and the evening ushers wore formal
uniforms. The manager and assistant manager were always in “black tie” during the 1950s and 1960s, the years in which this writer served as a matinee usher. The experience of “going to the show” was an all-compelling one, from the décor to the staff’s evening formal wear. It was a special experience.

The Miracle sported “new luxury type “push-back seats” with “deep foam rubber cushioning,” an “improved air-conditioning” system, which purified the air in several ways by removing excessive moisture; trapping dust particles in a filter; and by eliminating smoke, and odors “in activated charcoal filters.” The new theatre also boasted the latest and newest of RCA sound equipment. Among other newly designed features in the Miracle were “an auditorium placed diagonally on a rectangular plot to provide natural convergence of the side walls towards the screen for improve-
ment of both the sound and sight lines, an automatic fire-fighting system in the projection suite” and “individual rest rooms in the ladies lounge, each having complete toilet and make-up facilities.”48 The auditorium walls and ceiling were painted a verdant green, and the theatre seats were upholstered in tropical coral.

The Miracle Theatre inaugurated special admission prices for high school and college students. There was an elaborate confection counter with a wide variety of candies, popcorn and grilled hot dogs, in addition to complimentary coffee and tea served hot or cold. The adjacent lounge, complete with an abstract garden area behind the confection counter, offered comfortable seating for patrons waiting on the next feature to begin. Standing on the back side of the confection counter was a large, eye-catching aquarium containing beautiful tropical fish. The foyer and lounge area of the theatre were covered in decorative carpeting while the inner and outer lobby areas were in picturesque design terrazzo. “The terrazzo floor of the entrance extends out to the curb curve of the marquee. Entrance doors are plate glass, and the entrance way and box office embody copious quantities of mirrors and clear glass. The terrazzo-floored lobby within the doors is finished with similar materials, plus transparent etched and painted plastic, with occasional panels of natural wood and stands of living plants.”49 Piped music by Muzak flowed through the lobby area to entertain those gathered there. The sound system could also be converted by the flip of a switch into a public address system carrying announcements to waiting patrons.

The elegance and refinement of the Miracle Theatre extended to the opening of each day’s show, both at the matinee and in the evening. A large “grand drape” curtain hung in front of the small stage, ascending in a gathered “waterfall” fashion to expose a second curtain called a “traveler,” which parted sideways from the middle as the film trademark appeared on it for a few seconds as the feature film began.50

The Miracle continued to screen first-run films by Twentieth-Century Fox, United Artists, Columbia, and Universal stu-
dios. It also featured well-attended Saturday morning children’s shows complete with cartoons, serial and a feature film designed to interest the younger set. This extraordinary theatre, with its very professional staff continued operating until 1978, when it was divided into two theatres on the auditorium ground floor, ending its reign as a single-screen movie house. In 1983, Wometco twinned the Miracle’s balcony as well, adding two additional small cinemas. By April 1995, when the last films were shown by Wometco at the Miracle, the “drawn and quartered” theatre had faded greatly, becoming worn and tattered. Luckily, the City of Coral Gables purchased the theatre for 2.8 million dollars in November 1994. As soon as the last films were shown the following year, the Actor’s Playhouse organization of Kendall, Florida, under the enterprising Lawrence E. and Barbara S. Stein, signed an extended lease with the City of Coral Gables and spent seven million dollars restoring the theatre to its original grandeur. The renovation work was undertaken by Fullerton Diaz AIA, renovation architects headed by John Fullerton. On November 17, 1995, the Actor’s Playhouse at the Miracle Theatre opened with its first stage performance. Again, the Miracle was a beacon for sophisticated and beautiful entertainment on the Miracle Mile of Coral Gables. This new tradition continues.

Conclusion

Gone are the days of the wonderful “movie palaces” of Greater Miami, but remnants of some of them still exist and the people of South Florida can be grateful for them whether they be the Olympia Theatre in downtown Miami, the Colony Theatre on Miami Beach and the Miracle Theatre in Coral Gables. Although no longer predominantly film exhibition venues, these theatres are “splendid survivors” of a long-ago time when attending the movies was one of the most delightful cultural and entertainment activities of South Floridians. The people of present day Greater Miami are fortunate that some of these grand “palaces” are still standing to provide performing arts and occasional film festivals thereby enriching the lives of the larger community with stars and tropical splendor.
Writer’s Note: The “movie palaces” reviewed in this article were selected based on architectural, decorative décor and cultural enrichment of the greater Miami community. The selection is entirely based on the writer’s research and opinion as a professional historian.

Endnotes


2 Ibid.


4 John Eberson was born in what is now the Ukraine in 1875, immigrating to the United States in 1901. Soon after, he began designing opera houses. By 1910, he was designing movie theatres and in 1926 had moved to New York, where he attained national and even international fame for his “atmospheric” theatres in Italian Renaissance, Spanish Revival, Moorish Revival and other exotic styles. Only a few of his theatres have survived. Eberson died in 1954 after designing an estimated 500 buildings.


6 Ibid.

7 Geraldine H. Williams, “Gusman Now, Olympia Then,” South Florida History Magazine, vol. 28, no. 3 (summer 2000), 20.

8 Ibid.

“Bugs with Taste for Music Dine on Gusman Wurlitzer,” *Miami Herald*, October 15, 1980. What the Theatre Organ Society found in 1971 was a Wurlitzer almost devoured by rats, termites and roaches. These creatures had chewed on the organ since 1949. The keyboard was never touched, the leathers were corroded and the organ seemed doomed to the junk heap until the Organ Society came to the rescue. The Society made great progress in the organ’s restoration, and today it is in fine shape.

My grandfather, who came with his family to Miami in 1923, often took this writer, as a boy, to the Olympia to enjoy a stage show and a movie. I remember seeing Kay Armand, Tex Ritter and Ethel Smith among other “stars” on the Olympia stage. I was last there for one of these great shows in 1953 and saw *The Master of Ballantrae* on the screen, an adventure film starring Errol Flynn.


Ibid.

“Olympia Theatre (Miami)” [online] https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympia_Theater_(Miami)


18 The theatre marquee has *Breakfast in Hollywood* in an opening night photograph, but theatre owner Mitchell Wolfson, in an interview years later, stated that the opening night film feature was Laura La Plante in “The Midnight Sun.” “From One Boom-Time Theatre to a Miami Entertainment Empire: A Reminiscence with Mitchell Wolfson,” *Update* (April 1976), 6-7.

19 Ibid., 6.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.


23 “Report to the City of Miami Preservation Officer to the Historic and Environmental Preservation Board on the Potential Designation of the Coconut Grove Playhouse as a Historic Site,” c. 2004.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 The writer, as a child and accompanied by his parents, remembers seeing the film *Cheaper by the Dozen*, starring Clifton Webb, Jeanne Crain and Myrna Loy at the Grove Theatre in 1950.

27 “Report to the City of Miami Preservation Officer,” regarding the Coconut Grove Playhouse, c. 2004

28 Joey Adams was an American comedian whose career included night clubs, vaudeville shows, radio and television and who in his spare time wrote twenty-three books.

29 Don Lanning, who died early in life in 1960, was a performer and
producer, husband of Miami’s singer Roberta Sherwood (d. 1999) dubbed in her time “the Cinderella of Song.” Lanning owned the famous Miami Silver Slipper nightclub in the 1930s and 1940s, where Roberta became the star attraction and later a successful recording artist beginning in the 1950s.

30 Souvenir program, Wometco’s “New Miami Theatre,” April 18, 1947.


32 Apparently some of the railings on the stairways from their original installation in the theatre still remain in the shell of the old theater.

33 Ibid.

34 The theatre site soon became a central spot for the growing tourism, domestic and international trade and commercialism that was increasing in downtown Miami to the detriment of historic buildings and long-established businesses. The new mini-mall housed the offices of Capital Bank, while the former kitchen-basement space for Huyler’s Restaurant was renovated and transformed into Floridita Bar and Restaurant, specializing in Cuban cuisine. An amazing stroke of insight and respect for the past occurred in 2011 after the current property’s owner purchased the building for three million dollars in 1998. The new owner, Marlon Avneri, after finding vintage photographs of the exterior of the theatre, engaged SK-LARchitecture, a southeast Florida based firm, with the request to restore the building’s façade to its original Moderne look. With the city’s approval and a large investment in time and design, the glass windows were replaced and the theatre’s monumental cartouche was reestablished, although not in quite the grand fashion of the original one. The letters that spelled out “MIAMI” vertically in the original cartouche were replaced by the number “777,” which was the name of the international mall that then occupied the former theatre’s space.


In 2011, the Symphony, seemingly having outgrown the space of the gutted and renovated theatre, moved to a new and larger Frank Gehry-designed New World Center in Miami Beach. In January 2012, the H&M Company, a women’s retailer, signed as the first tenant in yet another renovated space which had virtually obliterated the remains of the original auditorium. In the same year, the American Institute of Architect’s Florida Chapter placed the Lincoln Theatre building on its “100 Years, 100 Places” list. See [online] “Cinema Treasures: the Lincoln Theatre” http://cinematreasures.org/theatres/3087.

Robert Law Weed was a Miami architect who designed many singular buildings in the city and beyond, including the Grand Concourse Apartments (1926) in Miami Shores, Miami Shores Elementary School (1929), the Shrine Building, Miami (1930), an Art Deco commercial building of both uniqueness and elegance, and was one of the architects for the Italian Village (1925-1927) in Coral Gables. See [online] “Robert Law Weed,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Law_Weed.


Roy France (1888-1972), a Minnesota native, studied architecture in the Chicago area and was a hotel architect in Chicago until he and his wife visited Florida in 1931. Soon after they settled permanently in Miami Beach. There he designed dozens of major Art Deco and postwar oceanfront hotels. Many of his hotels remain between 24th

42 Michele Oka and Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. *op cit.*, 230.


45 Terry Moore is 90 years of age

46 Souvenir Program, the Miracle Theatre, Coral Gables, December 7, 1948.

47 This writer knew Frank Maury well, having worked at the Miracle as a matinee usher in the summer of 1959 and again for a brief time in the summer of 1962.

48 “Rare Features in Miracle Theatre,” *Showman’s Trade Review* (August 20, 1948), E-7.

49 Ibid.

50 One of this writer’s most delightful duties as a matinee usher at the Miracle was to “start the show.” On the wall separated by a carpeted aisle from the back glass and wood wall of the auditorium was a small cabinet door which opened to a shallow wall control panel with a large button and a smaller regular electric-type light switch. The projectionist would notify the usher to “start the show” and the usher would press the large button which raised the beautiful scalloped “grand drape.” As soon as this curtain had been raised, the usher would flick the switch just after the film’s trademark hit the “traveler” curtain and this curtain would then part exposing the curved screen. When CinemaScope was introduced in 1953, a new larger screen was installed in place of the original traditional size screen.
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