



HistoryMiami Museum Self-guided Virtual Tour

Tropical Dreams: A People's History of South Florida

The Tropical Dreams exhibition explores South Florida history from prehistoric times to the present day. Topics explored include First Arrivals, International Rivalry, Southward Expansion, New People – New Technology, and Gateway of the Americas.

The history of South Florida is the story of humans in a unique environment. It began more than 10,000 years ago with the arrival of prehistoric peoples and continues to the multi-cultural metropolis of today. Throughout the ages, the story has been characterized by arrivals—the migration and immigration of people from many different places and cultures into the region. These varied peoples brought their dreams with them, and remade South Florida over and over again to fulfill those dreams. They also adapted to the region's subtropical environment, interacted with other cultures, and, in the process, changed into something new. This is their story.

Use the following sections to craft your own virtual guided tour. You will find text you can assign as readings, links to videos and other resources for further research and ideas for activities that you can modify and make your own. You may find that you are inspired to explore beyond what is on these pages. Use that inspiration and seek out more opportunities to engage your students in learning about their personal history, their community and what makes Miami, Miami.

First Arrivals and The Miami Circle

The first people to inhabit South Florida were here as early as at least ten thousand years ago. They were descendants of those who had migrated to this continent from northeastern Asia, traveling across a land bridge between Alaska and Siberia in pursuit of herds of mammoths, caribou, horse, bison, and other large animals. Crucial to their survival was the ability to adapt to the environmental conditions surrounding them. As people moved into Florida, they gradually changed their way of living to fit the resources and environs. The lifestyle of the first people of South Florida, including food, clothing, shelter, and even aspects of religious and social activities, was tied directly to the South Florida environment.

Take a [Mini Virtual Tour of the Miami Circle Exhibit](#).



The Tequesta and other Native people of Florida traded local resources for items from places as far away as the Great Lakes and Mexico. This would not have been a one-to-one trade, but more like a network involving different people across the region. Have you ever traded part of your lunch or one of your school supplies for someone else's only to turn around and trade again for something else? This is how the trade network might have worked for the Tequesta and other Native people across the Americas.

Activity

Here is a list of some of the materials recovered by archaeologists at the Miami Circle site. Research one or more to learn about how it was originally gathered, who collected it first and how it might have been used.

Pumice – Mexico
Chert – Tampa and Lake Okeechobee area
Basalt – Macon County, GA
Galena – Southeast Missouri
Copper – Great Lakes region

Look up items found in other parts of North America that likely originated in South Florida. What part of South Florida does it come from? Who likely found it and then traded it away? What was it used for by the people who had it last?

International Rivalries

The geographic location of South Florida, guardian of the trade routes and buffer zone between the English and French to the north and the Spanish to the south, determined its destiny for over 300 years following Ponce de Leon's visit in 1513. It was a period of interaction between the people and nations of four continents. Many people were kidnapped from the western shores of the continent of Africa and enslaved, forced across the ocean and then made to work for the benefit of Europeans who exploited their skills, knowledge and expertise. Many Native people were also enslaved and then forcibly removed to make way for European interests in both North and South America. Many of our lesser-told histories involve alliances between escaped enslaved Africans and Natives who worked together to fight back against European incursions and build their own freedom. Although the international struggle for control of the Florida peninsula did not occur primarily in South Florida, that struggle and its outcome shaped the development of this region.

To learn more about the enslavement of Native Americans, listen to this episode of NPR's [Hidden Brain](#).



Take a [Mini Virtual Tour of The Fort](#).

Use the PBS resources on [Fort Mose from the Africans in America](#) series to learn more about the first legally sanctioned free, Black community in North America.

Activity

What role did forts play in colonial Florida? Research the many forts of Florida to learn more about their function and design. Who lived and worked in those forts? Who built them? What was daily life like at a fort? They each have their own unique history and help tell the larger story of Florida and the Caribbean.

Southward Expansion

The period of International Rivalry ended when the United States gained possession of Florida. In the very southern end of the peninsula came the blossoming of the island town of Key West as the center for the “wrecking industry.” The important trade routes, which passed close to the treacherous coral reefs, caused the development of a regulated system of salvaging cargoes and saving lives. Navigational improvements gradually reduced the number of wrecks. Mainland settlement was encouraged with the passage of the Homestead Acts. To help make good lands available to settlers, the United States adopted a national policy of Indian removal. In Florida that meant broken treaties, reservations, and many years of war as the Seminoles resisted their forced removal from their home in Florida. As seen in past battles with European interests, the Seminole welcomed into the tribe any person of African descent who escaped their enslavement in the United States and agreed to fight alongside them. These Black Seminole became fighters, translators, negotiators and leaders among the Seminole. Their path to freedom often included traveling south on the Underground Railroad on their way to the Bahamas. Their descendants live there still and continue to honor their legacy.

Expanding southward also meant bringing in new people from across North America, the Caribbean and the rest of the world. As people from the northern United States began moving west and south under the Homestead Acts those who chose to settle in South Florida learned very quickly that life would be different here. It was the Bahamian immigrants who began moving to Key West, the West Grove and other parts of South Florida in the late 1800’s who taught settlers from other regions how to farm and build in harmony with the geography and climate of South Florida. And all of these new arrivals learned valuable skills for living off the land from local Seminoles who chose to trade with them.

To learn about the history and culture of the Seminole Tribe of Florida and how they continue to honor their heritage today, check out their [official website](#).



101 West Flagler Street, Miami, FL 33130

To learn about the history and culture of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida and how they continue to honor their heritage, check out their [official website](#).

See how residents of Red Bays Village, Andros Island, Bahamas celebrate their Black Seminole heritage with this [short news report](#).

To learn about the history of the salvage industry in Key West watch [Key West Wreckers](#) from local PBS station WLRN.

Take a [Mini Virtual Tour about settlers in South Florida](#).

Places like Key West, Coconut Grove and South Florida in general have been home to people from all over what are now the United States and the world. These are communities of migrants and immigrants in what is today a nation of migrants and immigrants.

Activity

Look up some of the residents of South Florida. Where did they come from? What push and pull factors led to them leaving their home Country or State or moving within Florida? How did they contribute to making Florida or Miami the places they are today? Use this list of names as a starting point:

E.W.F. Stirrup
Julia Tuttle
Chekaika
Holata Micco (a.k.a. Billy Bowlegs)
Paulina Pedroso
Isabella and Charles Peacock
Betty Mae Jumper
Ralph Munroe
Mariah Brown
Flora MacFarland
Mary and William Brickell
Israel Lafayette Jones

New People/New Technology

The harnessing of steam power in the 19th century provided some Americans with the tools to shape the environment to fulfill their needs, plans, and desires. But, many Americans of color did not benefit from this expansion and were actually exploited in the endeavor. Black Americans enslaved in the South constructed several southern railroad lines and immigrants from China were exploited for their labor in the West. Native Americans lost their homes, lands



and freedoms as the construction of new lines pushed European American settlements further into the continent.

The beginning of this era in South Florida was marked by the 1896 arrival in Miami of Flagler's FEC railway. Residents of the neighborhood known today as Overtown were the ones responsible for the construction of the railway and supporting infrastructure, such as roads, hotels and other buildings. Flagler also took advantage of the convict leasing system available in Florida to use the labor of incarcerated men in construction. Soon additional lands for agriculture, tourism and settlement were being created by drainage and landfills. The impact on the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes was a mirror to that of what occurred throughout the rest of the country – lands were taken and the natural balance of the environment was broken.

To learn more about railroads in the late 19th century, try the [Library of Congress](#).

Learn about the workers who built the railroad in Miami by reading *Black Miami in the 20th Century* by Dr. Marvin Dunn

Read about Mr. A.M. Cohen, one of the residents of Overtown who built the railroad and voted to incorporate Miami in 1896 through [this Miami Story written by his granddaughter](#) Ms. Aundrella Bunyan Hamed.

Thousands came to the area during the real estate boom of the 1920s and the face of South Florida changed drastically as cities, tourist resorts, subdivisions and skyscrapers materialized. Although the 1926 bust shattered the dreams of many South Floridians, population growth and development continued through the Depression era. The military brought thousands to the area during World War II, when South Florida's mild climate and vacant tourist facilities were used as a major training center for soldiers. Many of these returning soldiers were Black men, returning from the fight for freedom in Europe and the Pacific to an imposed status as second-class citizens. Many of these men and other local Black residents became an integral part of the Civil Rights movement in Miami through sit-ins, wade-ins, marches and demonstrations.

Take a [Mini Virtual Tour of The Trolley](#).

Get to know some of the key figures in the local Civil Rights movement as featured in the [Civil Rights Forum](#) produced by HistoryMiami Museum.

With the birth of Miami came new people, new technologies, new ideas and new possibilities. It was a time of incredible growth and prosperity but also destruction and loss. Consider that for the city to expand and create new homes for residents it meant destroying the fragile



Everglades and that the people who built the railroads, skyscrapers, resorts and other infrastructure projects were often not allowed to enjoy them.

Activity

As a class, create a timeline of events in Miami, starting with incorporation in 1896 and ending with the year your students were born. Students can be assigned to work on specific decades or themes (events in military history, architectural developments, music in Miami, etc.) to break up the assignment into more manageable chunks.

Have students select a specific event in their assigned timeline to research in greater detail. Ask them to consider how that event may have impacted different people or groups of people in different ways. As an example, how did completion of the Tamiami Trail in 1928 impact business owners living and working in coastal areas? How did it impact the Seminole and Miccosukee people living along the route in the Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp? How did the construction impact the natural environment then and what are the lasting effects today?

Gateways of the Americas

South Florida, like much of the industrialized world, has experienced more changes during the past 50 years than during the previous five centuries. Southeast Florida has become complex and diverse, with many ethnic groups and cultures calling it home. Geography and cultural diversity have made it the gateway between the United States and the Caribbean and Latin America.

The general trend of people moving from rural to urban areas combined with job availability and technological advancements in transportation, construction, and other industries caused South Florida to experience a new surge of population growth following World War II. The annual number of tourists in South Florida also increased tremendously as people came to visit year round rather than just during the winter months. Thousands of refugees, beginning with Haitians and Cubans in the late 1950's and early 1960s and continuing to today, have come to South Florida seeking a new life. South Florida has become a metropolitan community with increasing international significance in the Americas.

Learn more about the many cultures of South Florida through the [South Florida Folklife Center](#).

Activity

Watch some of the interviews with former Artists-in-Residence at HistoryMiami Museum through the South Florida Folklife Center. Think about someone in your life who has taught you about your culture or shared something special from their own. Maybe it is a family member who taught you how to make a special dish, a friend who shared a holiday tradition or a



neighbor who tells you stories about where they are from. Conduct an interview with that person to learn more and then share what you have learned.

Some steps to get you started:

1. Identify your subject, the person you want to interview.
2. Develop 5-7 questions to ask your subject that will help you learn more about their history, culture, traditions and who they are.
3. During the interview, take notes and pictures or film the interview. Make sure your subject does not mind being on camera. They can also share their own photos or videos, finished projects or something they are currently working on.
4. If your subject is interested, ask them to teach you a skill or tradition and document the experience.
5. Share your interview and anything you create as part of the experience.