

A HOME WITH A PEDIGREE WORTHY OF ITS NOBLE HISTORY
Castles in Spain Made Real



1498 Sevilla Avenue, Coral Gables, Florida
Photograph c.1940

[Coral Gables is] Not a thing of the moment, of the year or even of the passing period, but a wonderful monument to the achievement of worthwhile perseverance in the creation of beauty and the bringing true of dreams that will solidly endure and as beautifully and bountifully age as does the everlasting coral upon which this master development is founded.

----George E. Merrick, Founder
City of Coral Gables

A ROYAL BEGINNING

The City of St. Augustine in the northeastern part of the State of Florida, was settled by the Spanish in the 16th century and is the earliest continually occupied city in the United States. Spain would continue to be a pervasive influence in Florida centuries later.

The story of South Florida begins in the early 19th century when His Catholic Majesty, Ferdinand VII of the House of Bourbon ceded to the United States “*all of the territories which belong to him, situated to the eastward of the Mississippi, known by the name of East and West Florida*”. John Quincy Adams, then Secretary of State, negotiated the treaty with Spain (the Adams-Onis treaty) in 1819. The United States formally accepted the land as a territory in July, 1821¹.

¹ Acts of Congress, Volume 7, Federal Statutes, p.810



Silver *real* picturing King Ferdinand VII
Reverse: Ferdinand's Coat of Arms which will be
Closely imitated later with the establishment of
The City of Coral Gables, Florida

St. Augustine is an anomaly, as most of the state of Florida (and most certainly Southeastern Florida) is a state that defies permanent and expanding settlement until the late 19th century when newly installed railroad lines made it possible to transport men and materials through this wild and uncharted territory.

Florida was admitted to the United States in 1845 becoming the 27th state in the Union. During those early years Florida was an agricultural state, with its many farms and plantations growing the fruit and vegetables for the rest of the nation. A state with little infrastructure compared to those industrialized cities in the northeast, Florida had something unique---a year-round climate.

Surrounded by aquamarine waters sportsmen found new species of huge fish that challenged their abilities; the land bore all manner of exotic fruits and trees; the skies were full of pastel-feathered birds and the Everglades teemed with primordial beasts such as the fearsome Florida alligator. As highways opened to motorcars and new hotel accommodations followed suit, Florida realized its singular place as a tourist destination that rivaled the exoticism found anywhere else in the country and perhaps the world.

A CITY BEAUTIFUL—THE CITY OF CORAL GABLES

It was the backwater of Miami--- a pineland that had been tamed to encourage farming where the growing of citrus and other kinds of produce could provide a more than decent living. *But for those inspired*---this land might even become the nucleus of a suburb with such innovative planning principles that it is today still held up as a model in American city planning. That city is the City of Coral Gables.



Seal of the City of Coral Gables, Incorporated in 1926

Notice the resemblance to the emblem of Spain

In the shield's four quadrants, the lion has been replaced with indigenous animals

Anyone who has studied city planning is aware of the nightmarish conditions that characterized industrialized cities in the early 20th century. People lived where the work was. It was only until the arrival of inexpensive transportation with busses, trolleys, rapid-transit lines and railways making it possible to live in the suburbs.

Following the lead of European planners like Ebenezer Howard in England, a new focus on the merits of open space, landscaped gardens and parks, wide thoroughfares and public amenities such as works of art and fountains defined the City Beautiful movement. Early leaders included famed landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted.

A Place in the Pines--- The story of Coral Gables' Developer, George Edgar Merrick (1886-1941)

In 1899 far from Olmsted's Central Park in NYC, a young man began his journey to greatness on a 160-acre farm about three miles from the newly-incorporated City of Miami. George Edgar Merrick was the son of Congregational Minister Solomon G. and Althea Fink Merrick. Following the needs of his congregations in the northeast, the Reverend Merrick tended his flocks in churches in Perry, Maine; Gaines, New York and Duxbury, Massachusetts. It was in Duxbury when the Reverend Merrick used \$1,200 of the family's meager savings to buy, sight unseen, a vegetable farm with only a few rudimentary wooden buildings in which to live and care for the livestock. Named for the limestone, fossil replete substrate that make up the foundations of South Florida, the Reverend Merrick and his wife named their new plantation, "Coral Gables".

The family saga while "civilizing" their home and environs as the family grew, and as all around them progress inexorably continued, is a fascinating tale that reveals the extraordinary talent that made up the Merrick family line. Though enormously successful in their farming prowess--- the future for eldest son George would change from an agrarian base to one of land development opportunities.

After amassing hundreds of acres of land in the areas adjacent to the plantation, Merrick who had studied the work of other planned communities in the United States began his dream of an “Ideal Suburb” allying himself with some of the finest architectural, design, engineering and landscape architects of the period. The market for land in Florida following the horrors of the “War to End All Wars”, grew exponentially with an American economy that exploded with prosperity.

Florida, (unlike much of the country which had generations of settlers that brought their own identities from their native countries), was without an identifying theme. Instead, Florida had the romanticism associated with its earliest visitors—the Spanish conquistadors and the fantasy of Juan Ponce de Leon’s Fountain of Youth. It was a natural choice as the climate in South Florida was very similar to that of Spain and would therefore be more than adaptable to the residential designs belonging in Old Spain.

George Merrick a learned man and accomplished poet offered many glimpses into his reasoning. In his own words:

Always it seemed to me that there should be the same class of houses and surroundings which were along the shores of the Mediterranean. Geographically and climatically South Florida is identified with Spain, North Africa and all that lies between them and the South Sea Islands.
--George Merrick, 1925



George Merrick (Second from left) with his team at “Tahiti Beach” before it is cleared for a bandstand, cabanas and of course, swimming in the Atlantic Ocean
Courtesy: Florida Memory

Sending his architects off to Spain and Italy to train their eyes and mind, Merrick’s core complement of architects became greatly proficient in creating a style of architecture that melds the traditions and design vocabulary of the Mediterranean region with a decidedly American sensibility. All of the deeds issued by Merrick and the Coral Gables Corporation included this caveat: “*All buildings shall be constructed of Spanish, Venetian, Moorish, Italian or other similarly harmonious types of architecture.*”

In the hands of Merrick’s architectural giants there were no slavish copies of other buildings, nor were there “formulas” for good design. Instead, it was the ingenuity of each individual architect that took their inspiration from those traditions—but infused it with their own interpretation. The resultant design has been dubbed “Mediterranean Revival” paying homage to the inspirational sources while recognizing the genuinely American filters.

THE RESIDENCE AT 1498 SEVILLA AVENUE (The Peacock-Tyson Residence)

Having assembled his design team and platting the first lots in the earliest subdivisions, George Merrick began the sale of the lots in 1921. The marketing that accompanied the sales continued his symbolic references to all things Mediterranean, and he fashioned such slogans as: “Coral Gables: Miami’s Riviera”; “Coral Gables: The American Tropics,” “Coral Gables: Miami’s Master Suburb” and “Coral Gables: Suburb Beautiful.” Huge billboards in bold primary colors directed travelers to Coral Gables by proclaiming “Follow the Golden Galleon”, depicting a ship at full sail and flags emblazoned “Go West”,



This illustration in full color was posted on billboards on the Roadways leading to Coral Gables

Within a furious matter of months the Merrick team envisioned and executed a plan that would include a glorious new hotel, thousands of trees, shrubs and flowering plants, two golf courses—one with thirty-six holes, a commodious country club, avenues and boulevards replete with open green spaces, and at major intersections coral rock walls fitted with fountain jets for their basins. It was during this explosive and thrilling time that the residence at 1498 Sevilla Avenue was constructed.

The land on which the house was built was originally a part of the Spanish land grant accepted in 1895. By 1912 that land had been transferred from the State of Florida into private hands—the Model Grove Company. Orchards and groves were planted on the rich topsoil that covered the limestone ridge on which Coral Gables was built--- one of the highest elevations in the region. By 1914 Merrick had purchased the land, calling it the “Coral Gables Extension.”

The period between the steady accumulation of land and the actual sales, was time for the real planning to begin. The city's infrastructure was carefully plotted as did acquiring materials, paving of roads, constructing a water tower, creating the signature tinted concrete sidewalks and studying both the success and pratfalls of other communities. The plan for Coral Gables would see platted subdivisions, some with larger lots for more impressive residences and smaller lots that were affordable by the more middle-class and designed as bungalows or cottages.

The Peacock-Tyson Residence at 1498 Sevilla Avenue is located in the Coral Gables Country Club Part I subdivision which was platted In February 1924 with the intent of having grand residences surround what would be the premier hotel in the region--- the Miami-Biltmore Hotel. As such the lots were required to measure at least 150' by 150' as the size would be sufficiently large enough for the construction of an impressive residence/mansion.

In keeping with City Beautiful principles, the strict grid pattern used to maximize the number of sellable lots per block when platted was avoided—opting for fewer lots and consequently less profit. The resulting plan made possible the curvilinear streets and avenues; the construction of plazas and fountains, the opening of vistas and the creation of a canopy by the intertwined majestic mature trees.

The Peacock-Tyson Residence is located at the intersection of Alhambra Circle and Sevilla Avenue. Alhambra Circle is the longest roadway as it winds diagonally across the city to reach the southern end of Coral Gables. At 120 feet, it is the widest thoroughfare in the city with a commodious parkway in its center showcasing a variety of tropical trees.

Completed in 1924, The Peacock-Tyson Residence is a picture-postcard of Mediterranean design as practiced by one of the most accomplished of Merrick's architects, Harold D. Steward.



Harold D. Steward, AIA

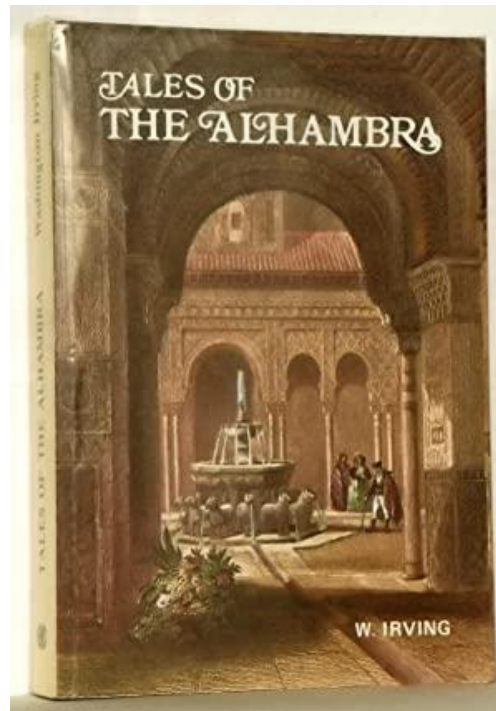
Merrick's design team had another dimension, not often affiliated with the construction industry. Phineas E. Paist from Philadelphia was named Merrick's Supervising Architect and was also named "Supervisor of Color." Architecture is most notably lines on a page creating form and substance, while color choices are often left to others. Remarkably, both Paist and Merrick's Uncle Denman Fink a nationally known illustrator, were first trained as visual artists, both choosing to first conceive their creations within the framework of a painter's palette. Their collaboration is clearly evident in the plazas and entrances built in Coral Gables, as well as the inspiration of Venice and the South Sea Islands realized at the Venetian Pool and at Tahiti Beach.

Harold Steward was key to the triumvirate of Merrick's designers comprised of himself, H.George Fink and Phineas Paist. It can be said that Steward was an equal author of the agreed upon design philosophy and its stylistic vocabulary throughout the city. Upon Steward and his wife moving to Coconut Grove in 1923, he became a partner

in the firm Paist and Steward. Their firm went on to design many of the iconic buildings in Coral Gables including the Coral Gables City Hall (Biltmore Way) and the “Old” Police and Fire Station (Salzedo Street).

The Mediterranean Revival Style--- The Interpretation and Patina of the “Old World”

Washington Irving who penned the stories of Rip Van Winkle and the Headless Horseman, both fiction, also gave the world his impression of his travels, and in particular in 1832 with the publication of “Tales of the Alhambra.”



Book Cover, First Edition

In his “real world” tale, Irving mystified the country with his descriptions of an ancient Roman fortress “The Alhambra” in Granada, Spain, which was remodeled and expanded by the Moors in the 14th Century. His vivid imagination and ability to romanticize captured imaginations and served to inspire the designs of architectural revival styles in the 20th century.

The Peacock-Tyson Residence is a *tour de force* of what has been dubbed “Mediterranean Revival” style. The footprint of the house, immediately alerts the viewers to a plan that is irregular and takes its shape from both the angles and extending and protruding elements of its composition. This movement allows for the addition of balconies; shed roofs over projecting window bays; arcades; towers and prominent chimneys, all of which are featured in the Peacock-Tyson Residence. The materials of the home also hearken to Spanish and Italian prototypes in their concrete walls covered in a rough -textured stucco, and the roof of clay, barrel tile. Wrought iron grilles punctuate ocular windows and embellish balconies. The repetition of round arches as expressed in the front elevation of the porte-cochere trace back to Roman origins.

Half columns as well as those that are freestanding are detailed as if in a sculpture with a spiral column element and square capitals embellished with raised stucco lines. In a strictly Coral Gables fashion, the signature coral rock is used to outline curves and is a reminder of the homes’ provenance.

In Mediterranean countries, the architecture reflects the desire to live in the sunshine and take full advantage of the region’s affable climate. The designs created take that advantage by including courtyards, terraces, open air sleeping porches and loggias that are open to the breezes. The design of the Tyson Residence was considered so important as the embodiment of the Mediterranean Revival style that it was declared a historic landmark by the City of Coral Gables in September, 1984, taking its place a short list of designated homes.

In 1968, prior to its historic designation, then owners Mr. and Mrs. Chris Tyson had designs prepared for a substantial addition. James Dean, a well-known, prolific and well-respected architect in Coral Gables was given the task of seamlessly creating an addition that appeared to be original. Mr. Dean was up to the task, and once again, using prototypes from Mediterranean countries attached a wing to the original house that would provide a second story space with an exterior staircase. The incline of the staircase is roofed with a high-profile clay barrel tile and is punctuated by series of round openings that march up the stairs with the risers. The staircase terminates in a tower with a raking diagonal roof and a series of rooms providing exceptional views of the Biltmore Golf Course

The residence has never been unoccupied, and was the home of a series of distinguished residents. Its most recent owners Christiane and Christopher Tyson were among that selective group. This residence is a survivor in the midst of real estate development and because of the stewardship of the families who lived there features innumerable original details including wooden outriggers below roofs, an exceptional fireplace, Cuban tile floors, ceramic tiles used decorative throughout and featuring historic geometric patterns reminiscent of Spain, original fountains and sculpted elements throughout.

It is, and will continue to be, a stunning contribution to an exceptional city.

Ellen J. Uguccioni
Architectural Historian
Former Director, Coral Gables Historic Preservation Department
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