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An Easy Walk to Explore West Palm Beach Historic Districts

By Linda Cullen

It is a common story of settlements in America that they developed around a hub – the first being ocean or river ports, then rail stations that defined our growth. West Palm Beach is an example of one very defining aspect of our history – Henry Morrison Flagler, who in his push to build his railroad ever southward, built hotels along the east coast, the first being one in St. Augustine.

He then decided to build hotels farther south for northerners to come to Florida, enjoy the sun and weather in style. After the smaller hotels on the island weren't large enough to meet the growing demand for rooms, he envisioned what is now The Breakers Hotel in



Photo courtesy of Linda Cullen

Flamingo Park Historic District

Palm Beach, arguably his crowning glory of twentieth century Florida opulence.

With that hotel, a town developed on the eastern shores of the waterway that separates the mainland from the island of Palm Beach. West Palm Beach was incorporated in 1894. There had been some early, hardy settlers who developed their homesteads in this area. But suddenly the population grew substantially as folks were needed to serve the island: carpenters, grocers, firefighters, medical workers – everything that Palm Beach residents didn't have.

Naturally the city developed around its immediate heart in a small area with Fern Street on the south, 4th Street on the north, Clear Lake on the west and Lake Worth (now called the Intracoastal Waterway) to the east. With continued growth came expansion to the north and south. When Flamingo Park was platted in 1921 and construction followed, this area was considered the suburbs of West Palm Beach. The 1920s saw wonderful small and large houses constructed in



Flamingo Park Historic District

Photo courtesy of Linda Cullen

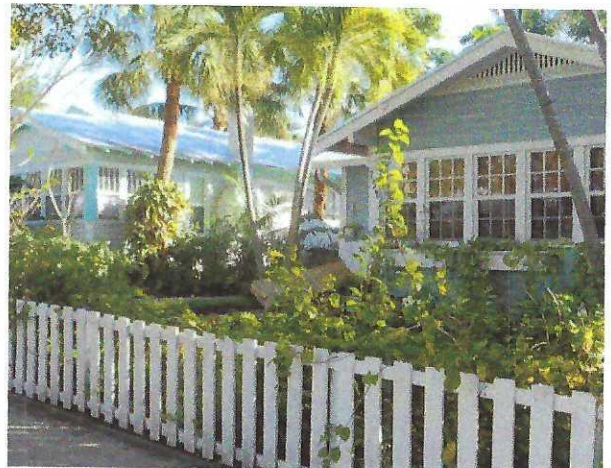
the current styles and using excellent materials. When a 2"x 4" was actually 2 inches by 4 inches and Dade County pine was plentiful (before it was over-harvested and there was no more). This pine was used not only for flooring but in construction, as it was strong and relatively impervious to termites and remains so today.

History maps out for us the next 60-70 years: the Florida Land Boom and then the bust; the stock market crash of 1929, the meager times of the 1930s, World War II and the Korean War, and the quiet recovery time of the mid-century. But during that recovery time, like other urban places all over the country, there was the "flight to the suburbs" that left the urban core rife for exploitation by landlords only wanting to collect their rent on Sundays and never put a penny into their housing stock.

Thank God for the early risk takers – gay and straight – who saw our diamonds in the rough (very rough in many cases) and said "Oh my! Look at what we have here. Quality aesthetic homes that need only sandpaper, paint stripper, time and love to put the jewels back in their crowns!" This renewal work started in the late 1980s. Little by little the word spread because the price of the homes was very low. Unfortunately, in South Florida, one after another new subdivisions were built that were attractive to the Florida retirees who flocked here to enjoy the sun and sand and not have to be faced with anything visually or otherwise uncomfortable. They willingly gravitated to the cookie-cutter Disneyesque see-no-evil western enclaves.

Meanwhile, city employees recognized what they were seeing before their eyes and put those eyes to work. Following the lead of preservationists around the country, they set in place policies that would protect these efforts. They did the painstaking work of creating site files of housing stock, researched history, and led the way for homeowners to buy into the concept of historic districts. It didn't happen overnight; not everyone was on board, but there were good results. They went one step farther and set up a program between the city and county to, once properly documented, create ad valorem tax exemption programs lasting for 10 years for homeowners. The bulk of our historic districts were created between 1993-1995 when this program was established.

Not only did these districts make history they made the news and became sought after. Prices increased, and more and more homes were restored. The districts were so popular that home and garden tours were implemented with visitors paying a pretty penny to gaze lovingly as they saw what was (and still is) some of the best historic neighborhoods in South Florida. It makes us all smile remembering experiencing these places and appreciating the sweat equity that made it all happen. A previous mayor, Joel Daves, in one of his state of the city addresses during this time, stated that the downtown (still then a place no one wanted to go) would never have started to redevelop, if the neighborhoods of Grandview Heights and Flamingo Park had not picked themselves up by their bootstraps. A true tribute!



Grandview Heights Historic District

Photo courtesy of Linda Cullen



Photo courtesy of Linda Cullen.

Mango Promenade Historic District

You can see these wonderful neighborhoods firsthand. Steps from the conference hotel (look to the right as you leave the hotel) and you'll see a row of townhomes not far in the distance. Walk through the passageway and you will enter a world that feels wonderfully different from downtown, even though it's very close. Back when plans were afoot to build the Palm Beach County Convention Center and hotel, the original design had the parking lot and the future parking garage smack up against the boundary of the Grandview Heights Neighborhood. The neighborhoods got together and "forced" the county to change their plans which meant creating a meandering necklace of townhomes that face into the neighborhood and helped define and protect it. These were built in 2006 and it was a game changer.

It was fortuitous that I found myself as a homeowner in Flamingo Park in 1985. I can't say I've seen it all, but certainly most of it. I was licensed to sell real estate in 1993 and was thrilled to have clients who really appreciated the architecture and the tree-lined streets. Not to mention that we were also close to downtown, the airport, the intracoastal waterway and transportation (public and otherwise). Goodness, not to mention the Norton Art Museum and the Ann Norton Sculpture Garden. We were inherently walkable before walkability became a newly coveted amenity in Florida. Wonderful shops and restaurants soon followed.

There are three truly significant historic districts in a rectangle starting from the conference hotel via the passageway through the "townhouse buffer." The



Photo courtesy of Linda Cullen.

Mango Promenade Historic District

overall boundary is M Street to the north, Belvedere Road to the south, Parker Avenue to the west and Dixie Highway to the east. The northernmost section of this rectangle is the Grandview Heights Neighborhood (a combination of several platted subdivisions together). This area was being built up before Addison Mizner's architecture was tweaked and copied – from the late 1910s to the early 1920s. Most homes were frame built in the Craftsman style – which is highly popular with buyers. The neighborhood does have a few Art Deco structures and later Mizner copycats. This neighborhood is bordered on the west by Howard Park (and the Armory Art Center located at the southern edge of the park), one of the city's largest and a wonderfully close amenity to the residents. The southern boundary of this neighborhood is Park Place, which is the dividing line between the Grandview Heights Historic District and the Flamingo Park Historic District. Grandview Heights allows bed and breakfast establishments. Listed in the local register as an historic district in 1995, Grandview Heights is also listed in the National Register.

Flamingo Park, along with Grandview Heights, was one of the first neighborhoods that became very organized in terms of creating their own neighborhood association and learning to flex their muscle. There was a time when the city had matching grants (which could include volunteer hours as well as money) and these grants were made to improve the neighborhoods. The historic districts were able to use this tool for many years to purchase and install garbage receptacles on corners, buy their own

poles on which to put street name signs, and to purchase street name paddles as well. When the city stopped providing these grant programs, the neighborhoods began to purchase things themselves. Flamingo Park purchased pink entry signs for the street poles at the perimeter of the district, invested in trimming of trees to arborist standards, and more. They funded these programs by having home tours. Recently a tour netted over \$30,000 for one night. That folks are willing and eager to enjoy (as well as pay more than \$50 for a ticket) may be an indicator of how little historic architecture there is in South Florida; the public comes from far and wide to participate in these tours. The architecture in Flamingo Park is predominantly Mediterranean Revival or Mission Revival and it was listed as a local historic district in 1993. It is also listed in the National Register.

Referring to the map of these three districts, you'll see Sunshine Park at the bottom right of the rectangle. This small district, with a very high percentage of contributing properties (those over 50 years old that have not been altered much), is one of the last to be designated as an historic district. Like Flamingo Park, it has a high concentration of Spanish styles. The houses here tend to be smaller than in the other two districts because the lots are not as deep. It took a lot of time to overcome resistance by some residents. Previous attempts could not get any consensus to create their district. Finally, the time was right and in 2022 it finally happened. They are very proud of this accomplishment, as they should be.

There is another historic district very much worth your attention if you have the time. Mango Promenade is a tiny area south of both Palm Beach Atlantic College and the Norton Museum of Art and generally between Dixie Highway and Olive Avenue. It was first built between 1917-1926 in many architectural styles, and it was developed before Spanish-style homes were popularized. It was one of the first suburbs as development marched south of downtown. It is listed in both the local and



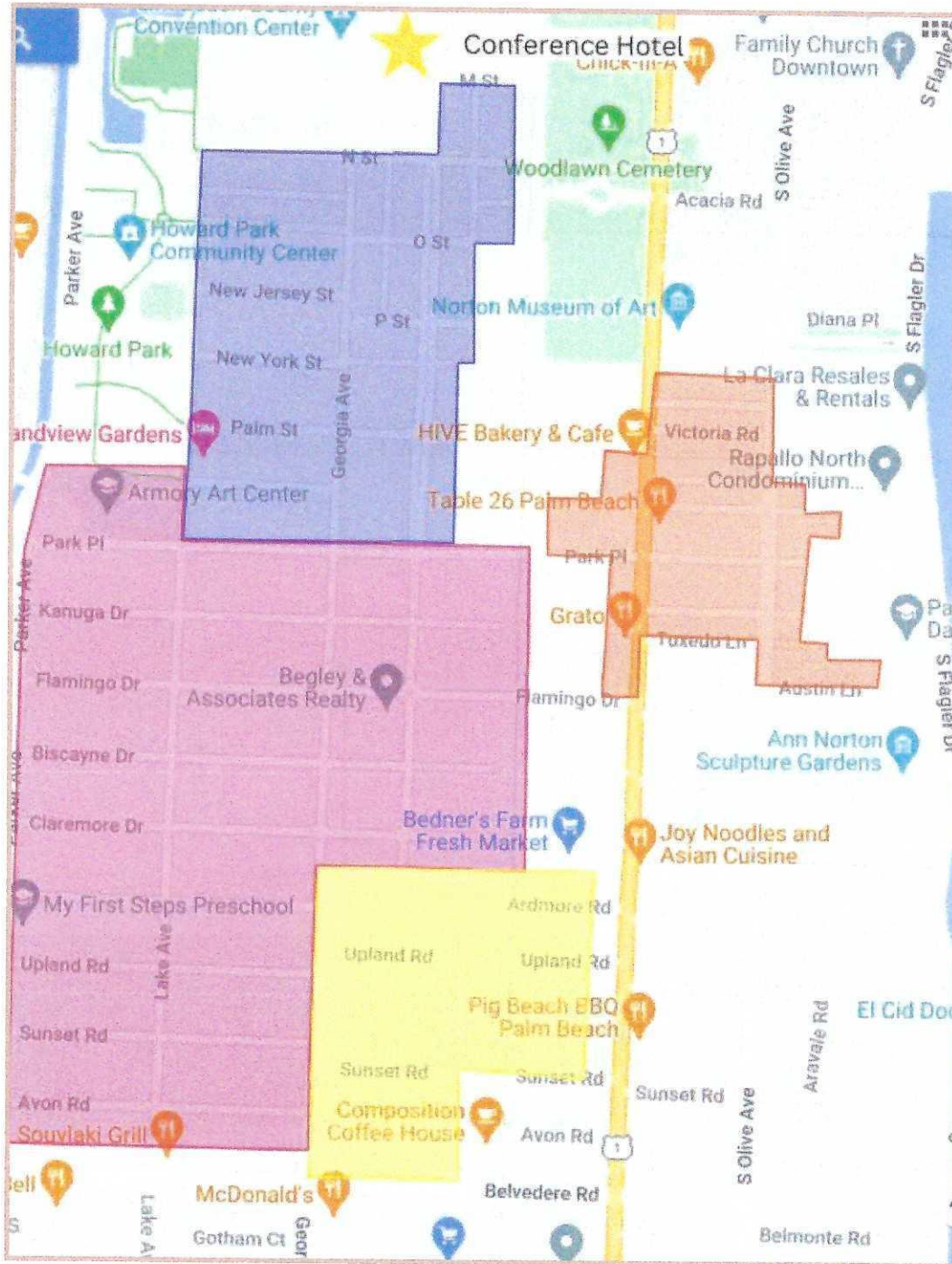
Photo courtesy of Linda Cullen

Sunshine Park Historic District

National Register and, quoting from the National Register nomination, "The Mango Promenade District developed as one of the earliest upper middle-class automobile suburbs... The neighborhood reflects the early influences of automobiles through its original garage outbuildings which architecturally complement the main houses." The district has two unique pedestrian-only walkways (Mango Promenade and Orange Court) that are not found in any other districts. Mango Promenade was listed in the local register in 1995 and is also listed in the National Register.

As noted, most historic districts were designated thirty years ago. There was much press, interest, and involvement during that process. But thirty years is a long time. A lot of the early proponents are no longer around, newcomers don't know the history, and there is a current development threat. Builders look to purchase lots that are double-sized or more with non-contributing homes that can be torn down, and the land subdivided to build more than one house, resulting in significant financial rewards. Recently houses have been demolished "by mistake" or left unattended so long that the argument is that they cannot be saved, no matter how impressive their architecture. There is a nascent grass-roots effort now to educate and inform residents of these historic districts so that the residents are aware of development proposals and can work to minimize their impact on the districts. We can't wait to see you exploring our historic districts! ■

West Palm Beach Historic Districts within a Short Walk of Conference Hotel



Historic Districts

- Flamingo Park Historic District
- Granview Heights Historic District
- Sunshine Park Historic District
- Mango Promenade Historic District