

## — E.J. Willingham’s Forgotten Castle —

We are often asked “*why is there an image of a castle on the Wilton Manors official City Seal*”; or “*why is a castle a part of the WMHS logo*”. The answer is ...

In 1925, E.J. Willingham commissioned noted architect Francis Abreu to design an Administration Building, Entrance Gateway and Observation Tower for his new upscale subdivision. The structures would be Spanish-revival, a la Addison Mizner. A news article of that year estimated the construction cost of the three buildings to be \$50,000—some \$900,000 in today’s dollars.



They were intended to be permanent—with concrete foundations and reinforced stone or masonry walls. The large Observation Tower on the south side had stairways to the upper floors that were to be used to take prospective purchasers to the top and show them the completed infrastructure of streets, lighting, etc.; as well as let them envision the completed community. It appears that the Administration Building (left) was actually designed to serve as a “model home”—reflecting the type/size/quality of house Willingham expected to be constructed in his subdivision.

Unfortunately, soon after completion of the grand entrance gateway in 1926, the development of “Wilton Manors” suffered a number of setbacks (devastating hurricanes, a railroad embargo, Willingham’s untimely death and the Great Depression). The Administration Building was sold in the early 1930s to George Smith, of our pioneer Smith family; and became his principal residence. Sales of the rest of the lots were at a standstill through end of the Depression. Thus, the entrance gateway towers were essentially abandoned.

Activity resumed in 1943 when contractor M.D. Mace purchased the two city blocks at the SE corner of Wilton Drive and Dixie Highway. By the end of WW2 he had completed his own residence on the south block. He then converted the Observation Tower, with additions, into a unique residence—while still preserving the original design elements. It became the home of Mace’s son until 1951.

In 1953 the Observation Tower went from residence to the house-of-worship for the newly-formed Wilton Manors Baptist Chapel. Their stay was short. By late 1954 the church had moved to a newly-constructed campus adjacent to the Elementary School.

The next notable occupant was the infamous “Bird Woman”, Shari O’Hara—who squatted there with her menagerie of trained exotic birds from 1956 until evicted in 1957.

That same year the large Observation Tower was demolished—to be replaced with an A&W Root Beer Drive-In. (The smaller towers were later demolished in the mid-1960s.)



Five Points-looking south on Wilton Drive, ca 1947