



WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

HISTORICAL NOTES

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WILTON MANORS PANTHEON

The Greats And Their Name-sake Parks & Bridges

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Wilton Manors Historical Society

With enough money, you can get a stadium named for you. In Wilton Manors, to get your name on something, you have to be pretty special. M.E. DePalma joins a very small, very select group of people who, over the last 90 years, have had an inordinate influence shaping the City. To honor and recognize her, the City Commission has created **M.E. DePalma Park** at N.E. 7th Avenue and N.E. 20th Drive.

Municipalities name things for people who have contributed to the improvement of civic life. This is a great honor and creates a “buzz” when it happens. Generations later, sadly we lose sight. Is Hagen a kind of plant? Did the Mickel Beer Company buy naming rights to the ball field on Powerline Road? By honoring M.E. for her efforts to have Wilton Manors certified as a Community Wildlife Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation, the City Commission has also re-honored the entire pantheon of Wilton Manors greats.

Who comprises this pantheon?

Perry Mickel (Mickel Field) was Willingham’s right hand man in the 1920’s. When Wilton Manors and the whole building boom failed and Willingham returned to Georgia, Mickel took over his real estate business. He and his wife Dorothea lived in Willingham’s house. He started a farm and bought land west of Andrews Avenue. He leased the ball field which bears his name to Wilton Manors Sports, Inc for \$1 a year and finally sold it to the City in 1960. He was the first Mayor of the City of Wilton Manors and a key player in its founding. The bridge at the south end of N.E. 15th Avenue into Fort Lauderdale is also named for Perry Mickel.

Alvar “Al” Hagen (Hagen Park and Community Center) bought eight acres in Wilton Manors in 1941. After World War II he bought a lot more property and with his Tropical Homes Company developed much of the south-central part of the city. He built a golf driving range about where City Hall now sits. He developed the first commercial buildings on either side of the south end of Wilton Drive--the laundromat and Williams Pharmacy/ Tropical Club building on the east and general purpose storefronts on the west.

The waterfront property south of Nakomis Avenue-suggested in Willingham's plat, was realized by Al Hagen as "Townhouse Isle." His wife Ginny was one of the founders of the Wilton Manors Woman's Club in 1948, the land for which was donated by Hagen. He was the first President of the Village Council when Wilton Manors was incorporated in 1947. He continued to serve on the Council until 1952 and on the Zoning Board into the 1970's. He played a significant role in organizing the first Wilton Manors Civic Association which set the agenda for how the Village was run in the early days.

Dave (not David) Turner (Oakland Park Boulevard bridge across the Intra-Coastal Waterway) moved to Wilton Manors with his family in 1945.

Turner bought 283 lots from the Willingham estate. With James Dean and others, he also platted the land east of the FEC railroad and south of N.E. 26th Street. Turner was the Village of Wilton Manors' first Mayor from 1947 to 1952. In 1955, he became the first President of the Wilton Manors National Bank. He donated the land for the Village Meeting Hall, which became the Public Library; and the Elementary School, both on N.E. 26th Street. Governor Fuller Warren appointed him in 1949 as the first Board Chairman of the Central & Southern Flood Control District. He was appointed in 1953 by Governor Charley Johns to the State Road Board as the representative for the southeastern district, and was instrumental in getting six bridges built over the Intra-Coastal Waterway in Broward County. It has been suggested that his position on the Board was a major factor in the approval/ completion of the 26th St bridge to Federal Highway.

James C. Dean, Jr. (James C. Dean, Jr. Bridge across the North Fork of the Middle River on N.E. 26th Street at Federal Highway) arrived in Florida in 1936. After World War II, Dean returned to Florida and his old firm and was named Manager of Gulf Life Insurance, Fort Lauderdale Office. He later opened his own insurance company--Florida Sun Life, headquartered in the Manor Gates Shopping Center.

With Dave Turner, Dean played an important role in the development of the area east of the FEC tracks. He was the moving force behind making N.E. 26th Street a major thoroughfare and he raised private funds to build the bridge connecting N.E. 26th Street with Federal Highway. *[Editor's Note: these statements appear to have come from Dean's self-aggrandizing personal biography. Other documents suggest that Dave Turner and the owners of Coral Ridge Properties were equal, or even the major players in the road and bridge construction. RAU 05/2022]* He was very active in many local organizations, serving on the Board of Directors of several. As President of the Village Council, he carried the Articles of Incorporation to make Wilton Manors a "City" in 1953.

Gerald and Dianne Thompson (bridge over the North Fork of the Middle River at NE 6th Ave.) Gerald was elected to the City Council in 1964 and was Mayor from 1968 thru 1974. His wife, Dianne was an important civic and social contributor. She was a major force in accomplishing the oral histories, recorded in the mid-1970's, and President of the Historical Society. The bridge over the North Fork of the Middle River on N.E. 6th Avenue is named for both of them. Note that the sign on the bridge says, "Jerry," which was his nickname. It also says "Diane," a misspelling of "Dianne."

Rachel Richardson Park, at N.E. 21st Court and Andrews Ave, was dedicated in August 1968. Rachel and her husband, George Richardson, Senior, had built the golf course between Andrews Avenue and Wilton Drive along the South Fork of the Middle River. This was the first commercial enterprise to “put Wilton Manors on the map.” The park represents the northwest extent of the golf course.

The Richardson Historic Park and Nature Preserve is a monument to George Richardson Senior and Junior, Rachel Richardson, Senior’s wife, and Helen, Junior’s wife. George Richardson, Junior, contributed to Wilton Manors for over 70 years. He served as City Attorney and on the City Commission.

Donn Eisele Park, Apollo 7 astronaut, was a City Commissioner in the troubled 1980’s. The City honored him with the Donn Eisele Park, at 701 N.W. 29th Street, a one acre jewel on the site of the old Jenada Swimming Pool. There is boat access to the North Fork of the Middle River. It was opened in 2001.

The next time you cross the Gerald and Dianne Thompson bridge, pull in to Hagen Park, pass Rachel Richardson Park, pause to chat with a butterfly, or cheer at Mickel Field, remember that these were ordinary people, trying to do their best to make Wilton Manors a better place, and doing a damn good job.

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