



# WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## HISTORICAL NOTES

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### THE WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

#### - A Brief History-

by Paul A. Kuta with Mary Ulm, and Benjamin B. Little

Wilton Manors Historical Society

The Wilton Manors Historical Society held its inaugural meeting in April 1975 in City Hall and honored the first City Pioneers. Its first President, Dianne Richardson Thompson was born in 1929 to a family that had lived in Fort Lauderdale since 1912. She married Gerald F. "Gerry" Thompson in 1950. They moved to Wilton Manors in 1951 and began a long period of volunteer activities in the small, close-knit community of 250 homes. Gerry Thompson served as a City Council Member and then Mayor of Wilton Manors from 1964 to 1974. In 1974, he was elected to the Broward County Commission where he served for 22 years. The Thompson's were named as Wilton Manors Pioneers in 1984. In 1997, the Wilton Manors' Northeast Sixth Avenue Bridge was named for them.

To commemorate the nation's bicentennial, the Society, over a three year period, taped the oral histories of men and women who were seminal in Wilton Manors' development. The Historical Society has converted these tapes of these first hand recollections to compact discs. These are among its most valuable holdings.

During the mid-1970's, the Historical Society compiled an easy-to-read pamphlet of "The Wilton Manors Story" based on newspaper articles and files dating from the 1920s to 1955. The pamphlet noted that Wilton Manors was founded in 1925 by E.J. Willingham as an upscale residential subdivision of Fort Lauderdale. It was not until 1947 that Wilton Manors was incorporated as a non-profit municipal organization and legally separated from the City of Fort Lauderdale.

In 1978, Corrine Brandt became the second President of the Historical Society. Other distinguished officers and directors were: Pat Miller, Lou Leaver, Alice Sargent, Marcia Stafford, Dianne Thompson, Virginia Hagen, Jett Schmelz, Nancy Sawallis, Kathleen Kreitner, and Tinker Connolly.

By the mid-1980's, the Historical Society had become inactive. The Wilton Manors Civic Association, founded in 1946, continued to monitor some historic activities and gather documents and photos until its dissolution in 2006.

In November 2002, the Wilton Manors Historical Society was reconstituted and incorporated as a non-profit organization with Diane Cline as President. At the time, the Society had no office, few archives and little money.

Diane Renollet Cline was well-suited to rejuvenate the Historical Society. She had moved with her family to Wilton Manors in 1977. She was an elected member of the City Council from 1982 to 1986, serving as Council President and as the city's first Vice Mayor after a city charter change. She also was President of the Wilton Manors Civic Association for several years and was the first Chair of the city's Community Affairs Advisory Board from 1994 to 2000. In 1997, as a member of the city's 50th anniversary committee, Diane and her colleagues commissioned noted historian Stuart McIver to write the first book on the history of Wilton Manors.

Serving with Diane as Vice-President of the Society was Cindy Thuma a native of Wilton Manors and an award winning newspaper journalist and the author of a number of books. In 2005, Cindy authored a pictorial history of Wilton Manors, published by Arcadia Press as part of its "Images of America" series. Cindy's research, along with photos and documents used for her book serve as important examples of the Society's inventory of intellectual property.

After Paul Kuta was elected as Historical Society Treasurer in January 2003, he rewrote the Society's Bylaws; prepared a Society brochure with a thumbnail sketch of the city's history and wrote several articles on people and structures important to the city. He negotiated an agreement for the Society to share office space in City Hall with the Wilton Manors Main Street organization; solicited a series of small annual grants from the City for the Society; and facilitated the awarding of historic plaques for residential and business structures in the city.

Benjamin B. Little was elected as Society Secretary in 2006. Ben initiated the digitization process for photos held by the Society. This led to the establishment of the Society's web site, through which additional contacts were made and historical materials contributed. As Membership Chair, Ben expanded the Society's memberships.

The Society added a Research and Technology Committee co-Chaired by Ron and Mary Gayle Ulm in 2007. The couple serves as principal liaison with the Broward County Historical Commission staff. Mary joined the Society Board as a Director in 2008, and in 2012 succeeded Cindy Thuma as the Society's Vice President. Mary has conducted many important interviews with people of historic interest, to include City Pioneers. Ron Ulm has undertaken an enormous amount of research and assembled an impressive collection of primary source material, which he has digitized, annotated, and enhanced.

In 2011, a scholarly, well researched book on the history of Wilton Manors was authored by Society Secretary Benjamin Little with contributions from the Historical Society Board of Directors, and published by The History Press. The prior years of research, compilation of photos and documents, and establishment of important contacts, facilitated the book's publication.

A major focus of the Society is Richardson Historic Park on Wilton Drive. Wilton Manors founder E.J. Willingham had his estate on this site beginning in 1925. In 1938 the George Richardson family built Broward's third golf course on this and adjacent property. In 2002, the City acquired the remaining five acres for use as a public park. The city renovated the Manor House built by George Richardson, Jr. in 1953 for use as an event venue. The Historical Society leases its office from the City here.

Adjacent to the Manor House is the 1920s Carriage House from the Willingham Estate. The Historical Society succeeded in 2008 in having the Park, its Manor House and its Carriage

House declared as the city's first historic landmark. The Society was instrumental in getting a Broward County Cultural Heritage Landmark marker placed in Richardson Park in 2012. The current goal is to renovate the ground floor of the Carriage House, install a small interior caterer's kitchen and exterior covered patio, thus making this historic structure a functional and revenue generating part of our Parks System. .

The Wilton Manors Historical Society has been successful in the past decade because of the hard work by Society volunteers and the enthusiastic support of city authorities, residents and businesses. The Society's books, articles, presence at public events, and other initiatives (such as the city's first Scavenger Hunt in January 2013) showcase the city as being current and vibrant. The Society also maintains a focus on the future, providing both perspective and vision to help the City with initiatives to enhance the quality of life in Wilton Manors. The web site is [WiltonManorsHistoricalSociety.org](http://WiltonManorsHistoricalSociety.org).

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