



WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

HISTORICAL NOTES

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FIXING WILTON DRIVE, AGAIN

Dateline – 1928, 1955, 1966, 1983, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2016

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In 1925, Edward J. “Ned” Willingham laid out Wilton Boulevard, from the Towers at Five Points to the widest bridge in Florida at the South Fork of the Middle River, eliminating seven turns on Dixie Highway on the way to Fort Lauderdale. It was 90 feet wide, with 10 foot swales on either side, in addition to sidewalks. Wilton Boulevard was restricted to expensive houses with commercial lots at Five Points and Dixie Highway.



In 1926, the housing market in Wilton Manors and south Florida crashed.

A month after Willingham’s death in 1928, his son, E. J. Willingham, Jr., amended the plat. He removed most of the individual house lots, making it easier for a developer to buy an entire block, and renamed some of the streets. Wilton Boulevard became Wilton Drive. It was a 20 foot wide dirt

road, lined by forests. By the 1930’s, it was an eerie ghost, a broad boulevard, some light poles, and nothing else. Norman Malcolm in an article on the history of Wilton Manors in the May 7, 1955 *Wilton Sunrise* newspaper says that folks were curious about the broad expanse of Wilton Drive and the lamp posts. The lampposts seem to have been gone by the 1950’s. By 1950, there were 18 businesses on “The Drive.” Speeding on Wilton Drive has been a problem since there were enough residents to notice.

With the Depression and then World War II, not much was going on in town. In 1937, George Richardson bought about 40 acres at the southwest end of Wilton Drive and installed a nine hole golf course. Wilton Drive was more usually traveled by residents hauling produce from nearby farms to market, as well as Model T’s and the large old Franklin belonging to former Mayor Perry Mickel.

Willingham’s deed restrictions required that Wilton Drive be exclusively residential, with expensive houses. When the restrictions expired in 1946, Al Hagen made his move, buying a lot of land at the

south end of Wilton Drive, mostly on the east side. He built what is now Tropics Restaurant in 1947. William's Drugs occupied the south end of the building and The Tropical Club, a popular meeting venue, occupied the north end. Hagen's office and a beauty parlor occupied the middle two bays. Hagen's office served as the first Village Hall. The Laundromat behind the Dairy Queen was built about this time. Clayton Leaver, Hagen's primary builder, had an office on the west side of the street, across from the new City Hall.

Not all was wonderful, however. On September 16, 1948, *The Broward Sun* reported that Governor-elect Fuller Warren, in the presence of Mayor Dave Turner, attacked the Florida Legislature "for refusing to protect residents of the state from the menace of roaming livestock on the highways."

The 1950's saw more development. A Dairy Queen opened in 1953 at the south end of Wilton Drive and, after several modernizations, it is still there. Publix opened a supermarket at Five Points in 1959, the same year the Kalis Funeral Home opened just south of Five Points.

In 1955, Wilton Drive, now a State road, was widened from two lanes to four. By the 1970's and 1980's, the appearance of Wilton Drive had changed, but the flavor of the road, with its deep-rooted, family-run businesses such as Miller's Hardware and Rothe's gasoline station had not changed much at all.

By the early 1980's it was time to fix it. We were going to turn Wilton Drive into a shopping area with the ambience of Las Olas Boulevard, Fort Lauderdale's Rodeo Drive. This was and is a guaranteed laugh line.

As early as 1966 there was discussion about renovating Wilton Drive to be like East Las Olas Blvd. An editorial in the Miami Herald on March 24, 1983 suggested that Wilton Drive may never rival Las Olas for class, but could be turned into a jewel with the many small, family owned businesses.

The catalyst for "Fixing Wilton Drive" in 1983 was the fact that the State had scheduled a repaving, for the first time in 20 years. The initial plan was estimated to be \$1,484,000. The State and County would contribute \$350,000; the City would contribute \$300,000; and the property owners would be assessed \$834,000. Merchants along the Drive were nearly unanimous that their increased rents would put them out of business.

In March 1983, the State Legislature approved \$1 million for Wilton Drive. The word did not make it to Wilton Manors until May, getting the property owners off the hook. The plan called for new storm drains, curbs, and lighting, as well as a median. Merchants complained that the median strip would put them out of business because people would not be able to get to their stores.

By the end of October, a plan was approved, subject to change, that had a grass covered median with lots of openings. Parking spaces were reduced from 83 to 56. The project would take about eight months to complete.

By December 1984, work had started. Chaos. One Wednesday, Siam Cuisine, which normally had 30 customers for lunch, had one. The feared impact of the construction on merchants was real. One merchant sued the city for blocking access to his shop. By August 1985, the project was down to planting trees, 93 palms on the median and 91 sabal palms on grassy areas at street corners were

planned. Multiple lawsuits about blocked access to merchants because of the median were threatened.

On October 5, 1985, there was a full day celebration to open the new Drive. The morning started off with a parade. In the afternoon, there were bands, Giggles Giant Trike Race, and an Oyster Eating Contest. By November, there were more complaints from merchants about access to their stores. There were a reported 160 sabal palms and oak trees planted.

Frank J. "Cotton" Clinton, 70, was selected as Honorary Marshal for the parade. "The only thing I can think of is I'm so damn old and been around here for a long time. That's the only reason I know of why I was selected."

The same day, a new version of the City Seal was dedicated. Diane Cline lead the effort to create a new replica of Frank Starling's City Seal in Lucite. Ruth Bartels lead the fundraising effort. The Towers had been reversed on the Seal for years and this was corrected. It now hangs behind the dais is the Commission Chambers. There is an incorrect version hanging in the Historical Society office.

The State Department of Transportation set out to "fix" Wilton Drive again in 1997. Work on the estimated \$1.1 million project was scheduled to start in October 1998. It provided better access to The Shoppes of Wilton Manors and measures to prevent short cuts through residential streets. The headline was "Wilton Drive trees may get the ax." Most of the trees planted in 1985 were ripped out. DOT regulations say that trees whose trunks were more than three inches thick posed a traffic hazard.

The "rejuvenation" of the Drive was again the object of attention with the establishment of Wilton Manors Main Street, in 2002. It continues to be the object of attention with a proposed takeover of the road by the City.

In 2003, the Florida Department of Transportation wanted to "fix" Five Points for \$680,000. It was deemed to be a "high crash area." City officials and residents emphatically rejected the FDOT plan and we wound up with an additional lane at the end of Wilton Drive at Five Points.

In 2007, some poor bar patron was crossing Wilton Drive, not at a cross walk, and was struck by a car and killed. This triggered "Wilton Drive Traffic Calming." The estimate to narrow Wilton Drive was \$3.5 million. The FDOT suggested transferring Wilton Drive to the City. Annual maintenance costs were estimated at \$75,000-\$85,000.

As happened in 1985, the business owners on the Drive were surprised at the disruption to their businesses from the construction of the new City Hall, which opened in 2010.

In January 2010, the City announced that it had hired Lanier Parking Systems of Florida to enforce parking regulations starting April 1. The objective was to stop employees of Wilton Drive merchants from parking on The Drive. The Presbyterian Church and SunTrust were offered as alternatives. That did not happen.

In July 2010, the Commission approved applying for a \$10 million Federal TIGER II grant to take over Wilton Drive. The Gables, which owns Wilton Park, would chip in \$2.5 million and then spend \$15 million to build a mixed use complex at the corner of Wilton Drive and NE 21st Court, with a

parking garage. The Gables would have a 75 year lease on the land, paid for upfront with the \$2.5 million.

As of 2017, Wilton Drive is again the subject of a “Roadway Improvement Project,” or “Lane Reduction Project,” or “Road Diet Concept.” If one considers the start of this current project to be the founding of Wilton Manors Main Street in 2002, one can not accuse the City of rushing into this.

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