

WILTON MANORS BACKGROUND

The village of Wilton Manors has built up rapidly during the past two years, and is still growing. Many people think the village has a bright future. But, what of its past? Many of the present residents are newcomers and they may not have thought it had a past. Perhaps it was just another case of arrested development remaining from the days of The Boom which left old cement sidewalks and rusty light standards in the strangest of places.

After pondering this subject your enquiring reporter decided it should be investigated and requested an acquaintance, who is a bit of an antiquarian who loves to thumb over old records, to investigate and here are some facts from his report.

The first deed on record involving present Wilton Manors was executed in XXX 1890. Any present resident can quiet his doubts about this date by a careful reading of his abstract of title. It came about as a step in the romantic story of the reclamation of the mangrove swamps and sand dunes and their transformation into the present day Mecca for tourists and Elysian Fields for year round residents.

In the year 1881 a group of St. Augustine people headed by John Westcott incorporated The Florida Coast Line Canal and Transportation Co., capitalized at \$100,000 for the purpose of "Constructing, maintaining, and operating a canal, or artificial waterway for the passage of boats and vessels, with the necessary locks, for public use in the conveyance of persons and property, to extend from some point near the head of Matanzas River, in St. Johns County, southward to the head of the Halifax River"-a distance of about 12 miles. In 1882 the project was enlarged to extend the canal all the way to Biscayne Bay in Dade County. The canal was to permit passage of vessels drawing three feet of water or less.

In 1885 the Legislature made a grant of land to the canal company to make up deficiencies along ~~XXX~~ its "present and proposed extended line" and in 1889 confirmed the grant of land to the company, at the rate of 3840 acres per mile for the entire distance of 320 miles, St Augustine to Biscayne Bay. The canal was to be 50 feet wide and 5 feet deep, at mean low water.

The Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund of The State of Florida had, meantime been designated as custodian of all the Swamp Lands of the state. Thus it came about that The Trustees in 1890 issued ~~XXXXXXX~~ the first deed to lands in Wilton Manors

(and other lands). The total was something over one million acres.

At this our investigator lost himself in speculation on the question whether this canal project had any influence in the decision of Fort Lauderdale's pioneer, Frank Stranahan to settle on the bank of New River in 1865.

The canal apparently did not play an important part in transportation until years later when it had become The Inland Waterway. It might have been some improvement over the route of "The Barefoot Mailman" who walked the beach regularly (?) from Palm Beach to Miami with mail and packages. "The Commodores Story" by Munroe has this to say about it. "Previous to 1896 sailing by the ocean or walking the beach seemed about the only way until just before the railroad came a County Road was opened by which the trip from Lake Worth to Miami could be made in two days, stopping overnight at Stranahan's Camp at New River. Few travelled this very rough road, however, and before it was improved the rail-

Norman Malcolm
2310 N.E. 5th Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

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1852

EARLY HISTORY

road came through to Miami in 1896), and pioneer days were done" But one must remember that Munroe was a sailor at heart and never did think much of travel by land if there was an alternative water route. The County Road he speaks of thus disparagingly was a rock road before the railroad came. It became the Dixie Highway, and later, on completion of the Federal Highway, the Old Dixie.

It seems strange that enquiries about old times developed so little comment about the coming of the railroad about 1895. That must have produced quite a commotion, at least among the Indians. A railway station was located at the present Mahanna road. It was called Colohatchee. This station was later moved to Oakland Park where it later burned down. Colohatchee is an Indian place-name of local origin, current before the railroad came. It is said that William C. Collier was the first white settler in this north-east section not long after Stranahan settled on New River. He had a rich little area along the south side of the North Fork of Middle River east of the present railroad. He had an orange grove and the Indians developed quite a fondness for his oranges. They called him Colo and hatchee meant river, hence the location was Colohatchee-Collier at the river.

Our informant knew Collier very well and described him as a well educated man, some years older than Stranahan. Collier had perforce to trade with the latter and they became fast friends. Both Stranahan and Frank Oliver were owners of land here in Wilton Manors. In fact, in 1910 Oliver, Moody and Weaver platted the land lying between the railroad and Old Dixie, south of Mahanna Road and called it Colohatchee. This was taken in recently when the Wilton Manors Village was incorporated. The name is still preserved in The Colohatchee Womens Club of Oakland Park and in the Colohatchee Nursery of Mr. Cutler. There was another old settler in the neighborhood by the name of Hatch and Mrs. Crim ascribes the origin of the name to the combination of the two names but for my taste give me the Indian source. Besides there were a lot more Indians than whites in those days who needed a designation for the place where they could get wonderful fruit.

Enquiring for the oldest house now standing in the village we were directed to the one standing at the corner of Old Dixie and Mahanna Road, now owned by C.H. Hutchinson. Here, we were told, a man named Johnson farmed and kept a dairy for many years so we posted off in search of him. Found him tending bridge on New River. Now become "Uncle Billy", he appeared tall, weathered but well preserved and amiable. Said he came here in 1908 from Fort Orange. He worked for the railroad there. It was known as The Jacksonville, St. Augustine, Halifax and Indian River R.R. He was a telegrapher and after coming here and locating his farm he was, off and on, employed by the railroad. It seems telegraphers were still scarce in these parts in those days.

He built his house, a commodious two-story structure around 1912-15 with the aid of his uncle who was a carpenter. Floors are 3 inch Dade pine. The roof is asphalt slate surfaced and over that galvanized corrugated iron. The house has withstood many a storm but stands unaltered today with the original roof. Mr. Hutchinson says it never has leaked. We are inclined to believe that Uncle Billy's uncle was really a carpenter. In early days the comparatively high land between the forks of the Middle River was covered with a fine stand of pine. Portable sawmills logged off the largest trees. Present pines range up to 2 feet in diameter and when one of our

neighbors removed a large one to make room for his house we obtained a 6 inch section of the trunk for a bird-feeding platform and counting the rings found it to have been about 225 years old.

Uncle Billy bought part of his farm from Oliver and sold out to E.J. Willingham in 1924, and there begins the story of Wilton Manors proper.

The names Wilton Manors and Willingham have been synonymous for so many years that we thought a little information about Willingham would be interesting to present residents. He came here from Brighton, a small town near Macon, Ga. about 1922. Resided first at Pompano where he bought and developed a plot of land just south of Hillsborough Inlet including that on which was built by Jelks. The Wahoo Inn - now occupied by Dr. Carlson's ~~AMA~~ School for Spastics.

Byron

Willingham next appears as the developer of Lauderdale Beach in 1923. Having that well under way he acquired the ground and plotted Wilton Manors, Unit No. 1 in 1925. His judgment in the selection of his property was well confirmed in 1947 since none of these locations suffered from flood waters.

It may be mere coincidence but it is a fair inference that Willingham, owner of lands on both sides of the Waterway, had some influence in the construction of Ocean Boulevard to the beach and installation of a bridge at the waterway. We are informed by County Engineer Davis, who is an authority about such improvements after 1912 that the present bridge was placed in position in 1926. It was moved up from Las Olas Boulevard, having been erected there in 1917.

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The plat of Unit No. 1 showed but did not include the land lying along the north side of the South Fork although it apparently was owned by ~~W.M.~~ Willingham. He resided in the present Richardson house, having remodeled a smaller one on the site into the present commodious residence. It interesting to speculate on the dense clump of beautiful royal palms in full maturity now standing between the house and the river. Who planted them? And why were they left to mature in the nursery instead of being set out to grace Wilton Drive? Probably they are orphans of the storm of 20. ~~present~~

90'

Wilton Manors was an ambitious project for a high grade subdivision. Wilton Drive, 100 feet wide, was improved with paving, sidewalks and light standards to be the axis of the residential district. Emphasis was placed upon the north-east corner at the intersection of the Drive with Old Dixie. Block 60, ~~W.M.~~ adjacent, was reserved for business to be improved to the F.E.C.R.R. with two story buildings only. Sidewalk on Old Dixie 10 ft wide.

1925

→ The entrance to the residence district was made impressive with the two crenulated towers.

But they were not just false fronts of stucco on lathas were so many similar structures which decayed and fell apart in succeeding years to become, as many such did, ghastly reminders of disappointed hopes and lost investments. These towers were built for keeps and still stand today as well as when erected, without crack or settlement. They had concrete foundations and belt courses at each story with steel reinforcement as the built under today's building code. They were, and still are, beautiful with decorative insets of coquina rock, and, after the fashion of the famous ~~ARCHITECT~~ architect, Addison Mizner, were given a splash of colors for exterior surface relief.

Between the towers a cable was swung to display a Welcome to Wilton Manors banner. The south tower had stairways to the upper floors and we are told that prospective purchasers were taken to the roof and shown the world at their feet. This tower and the block on which it stands were acquired some years ago by Merle D. Mace. After completion of his own handsome residence the tower

From present 1929 plat came back for construction

with a ~~addition~~ was converted into an unique and convenient residence while still preserving the original design.

It is said the name Wilton was selected to perpetuate a branch of the Willingham ancestry in England of which he was very proud. In order to be a credit to that name The Manors was restricted to Caucasians and the improvements were to be of non-combustible material. Residences on Wilton Drive were to cost not less than \$8,500, on Dixie Highway \$7000 and all others in proportion. Indian names were given to all streets except present 26th St. which was called Prospect Road. The restrictions were to run for 20 years or until 1946. Lots were sold at high prices. Wilton Drive lots near the towers sold for 7000, on Iroquois, now 23rd St. for \$3000.

The first new home ~~erected~~ in the new sub-division was erected by M. Hiasen at or near Chutkan and Ludowici, now owned and occupied by Mr Sandler. E. J. Willingham Jr. erected the house nearest to the towers and it was the real estate office of the project. About 8 residences were erected, 4 being on Iroquois, now all but one being of a adapted Mediterranean design.

Matters were progressing happily toward fulfillment of Willingham's plans to make Wilton Manors a credit to the family name, a place of distinction as a select locality and to augment his considerable capital. Then, suddenly came disaster! The Hurricane of _____, 1926. All activity ceased, here and everywhere in Florida. That wind blew away all plans and hopes, including, it is said, some \$3 million of Mr. Willingham's investment. But misfortunes seldom come singly. He returned to Byron where his wife died in January 1928 and he followed her two months later.

The Willingham ~~Mc~~ Estate carried on for nearly 20 years, administered by the son. Seldom has extended inquiry been made among so many people about a man engaged as Willingham was without some unkind criticism but your investigator encountered nothing but praise for the Founder of Wilton Manors. Mr. Hiasen characterized him as "One of God's noblemen".

Mayor Turner who knew Willingham well said the latter always carried his check book along and paid on the spot. When the collapse came nobody suffered by Willingham's default since there were none.

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*Written in 1948
Norman Rescaldon
2710 NE 5th Ave*