



WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

“Wilton Manors 1957 City Hall”

Vintage Images and the Backstory

by Ron Ulm

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MINI-ARCHIVE BACKGROUND NOTES

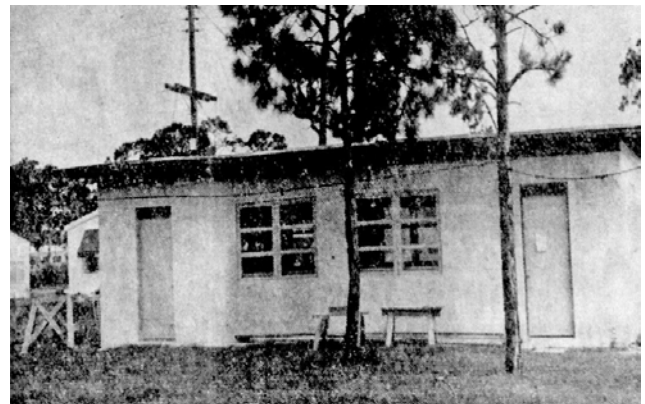
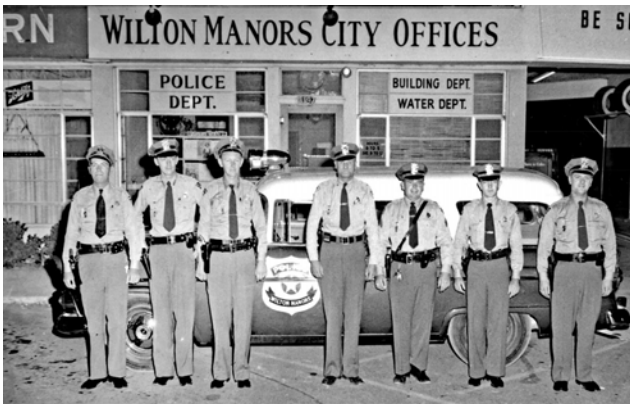
In October of 2024 we were given access to a number of scrapbooks in the collection of the City Clerk of Wilton Manors—for possible digitization. The oldest of these contained a number of never-before-seen 8x10 images of the 1957 “new City Hall” at 524 NE 21st Court (a replacement for tiny original Village Hall on NE 26th Street).

Most had the characteristics of Gene Hyde photographs. They were sent to History Fort Lauderdale to see if they were a part of the Hyde Collection. Curator Ellery Andrews found that they were not, but that very similar images were. She provided digital copies of those to include in our archive.

Recalling controversy about the structure and its location it seemed appropriate to include the backstory and related context, in addition to just the images, in this mini-archive. What follows is first, the backstory--followed by the images. (Note: portions of the backstory are adapted from or updates of content in “*Wilton Manors-From Farming Community to Urban Village*”).

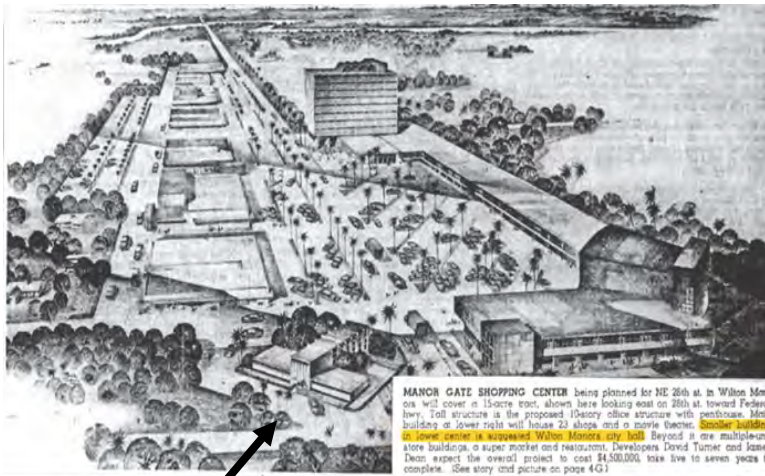
The Backstory of Wilton Manors 1957 “new City Hall”

Planning had started for a new city hall as early as 1950. The police and fire departments, along with the water, building and sanitation departments, were housed at 2197 Wilton Drive in a twenty-by sixty-foot storefront. This and the tiny original Village Hall could no longer support the growth of the city.



But, planning for and achieving a new municipal building was not easy in the 1950s. Location was open to question, and funding was an issue.

The first proposed location, in **1953**, was a site on NE 26th Street and Middle River Drive/14th Ave; on land to be donated by **Middle River Development Company**. That entity was created in **1952** as an unincorporated business (according to a “fictitious name” registration) by **Dave Turner, RV Roberts and James Dean**—apparently to develop a **\$4.5 million** shopping/office center proposed on the south side of 26th Street at the railroad. It was to be called **Manor Gate** [better known today as *Old Florida Seafood, Holy Mackerel or Island City Plaza*]. Also part of the proposal was a new City Hall—which would have been across the street--on the north side of 26th Street (see below).



MANOR GATE SHOPPING CENTER being planned for NE 26th st. in Wilton Manors will cover a 15-acre tract, shown here looking east on 26th at toward Federal Hwy. Toll structure is the proposed 10-story office structure with penthouse. Main building at lower right will house 23 shops and a movie theater. Another building on lower center is supposed Wilton Manors city hall. Beyond is one multi-story store building, a super market and restaurant. Developers David Turner and James Dean expect the overall project to cost \$4,500,000, take five to seven years to complete. (See story and picture on page 4G.)



MOVIE THEATER will be the central enterprise in Manor Gate's principal store building. Expected to cost about \$1,000,000, this two-story structure will embrace 23 stores.



SIX MULTIPLE STORE buildings such as this one will be scattered through Manor Gate. They will line the north side of NE 26th st. for more than 1,300 feet.



NEW CITY HALL at Wilton Manors will look like this. Ground for the structure was broken Friday. It will house police and fire departments, building inspector, city clerk and other offices and provide space for the city council.

It's unclear from deed/title records, plats and newspaper property records the extent to which **Middle River Development Co**, i.e., Turner, Roberts and Dean, actually owned any of the land for either of the above proposals:

- In 1953 the shopping center site, **Manor Gates** was owned/platted by Jimmy and Irene West; with a mortgage from M.R. Summers.
- The proposed city hall site would have been in what later became platted as **Middle River Estates**. In November 1951, **Middle River Estates, Inc** was incorporated--with **A.W. and Gertrude Dixon, President and Secretary**. Shortly after, it purchased all of Lots 4 and 5 of Section 26 from Laure Strader for \$90,000.
- On June 6, 1952 **Middle River Holding Company** was incorporated--with **John U. Lloyd, President and Madonna Heckler, Secretary**. That same day **Middle River Holding Company** purchased all of Lots 4 and 5 of Section 26 from **Middle River Estates, Inc**--but listing **Dave Turner, President and James Dean, Secretary**. (Perhaps Turner and Dean had purchased Middle Rivers Estates, Inc during the six-month interim?) Curiously there is also a \$55,000 mortgage reflecting promissory notes to the Dixons.
- June 10, 1952 **Middle River Holding Company** filed a plat for **Middle River Estates**, encompassing all of Lots 4 and 5 of Section 26; and listing **John U. Lloyd, President and Madonna Heckler, Secretary**. Subsequent deed records we have located are all signed by Lloyd and Heckler, as Middle River Holding.

[In his 1997 Wilton Manors history book, Stuart McIver makes no mention of the 26th Street land donation for a new city hall in the mid-50s. He does note "Dave Turner, ... with Dean and Bob Roberts, ... was developing Middle River Estates ...". Additional research, beyond the scope of this article, would be required to determine

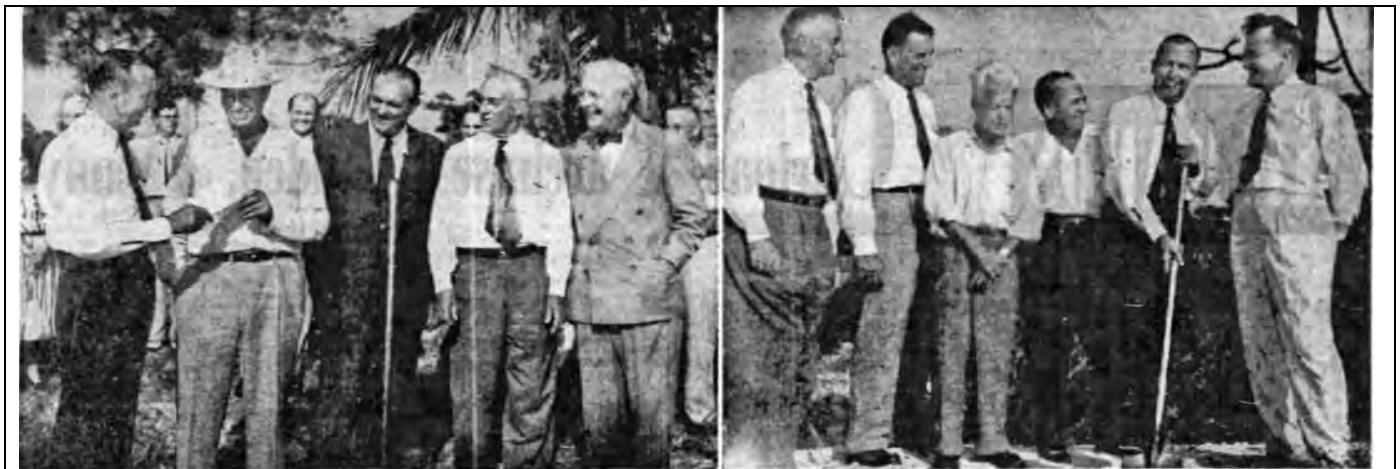
the ultimate land ownership relationships between Lloyd's **Middle River Holding Company**, the Turner/Roberts/Dean **Middle River Development Company** and the original **Middle River Estates, Inc.** There is no record of Middle River Development Company ever being a registered Florida corporation—just as a “fictitious name”/“**Doing Business As**” in Broward County.

[In 2007 historian Benjamin Little edited a 1980s autobiography by James Dean titled “*History of Wilton Manors*”. He discredited much of the content, particularly the recounting of Mr. Dean as having the primary role in the development of Wilton Manors east side. (WMHS no longer publishes this document on our web site because of information that is less-than-factually correct, highly embellished or unverifiable by later research). In his preface, Little describes Dean as “*foremost, a salesman ... talking other people into spending their money*”. More recent research fully supports Mr. Little’s conclusions—suggesting Dean was more “huckster” than sometimes-described “visionary”.]

What can be reasonably gleaned from the Dean biography is that: (1) if any property were owned by Turner/Roberts/Dean in Manor Gates or Middle River Estates it would have been purchased with other people’s money—secured by mortgages or promissory notes; and (2) Dean/Middle River Development Co were primarily commissioned sales agents for lots in Middle River Estates, not traditional owner/developers.]

Notwithstanding the ownership questions raised above, on **October 24, 1953**, Mayor Perry Mickel accepted a deed for the 26th Street site, and joined a groundbreaking ceremony for a new City Hall. The property was described in various news accounts as donated to the City “... by James Dean”, “... by James Dean, representing the donors”, “by James Dean, an officer of Middle River Estates”, “by Dave Turner and James Dean” and “offered by the Middle River Development Co.”.

[As the article below notes, Dean then proceeded across the street to break ground for the Manor Gate Shopping Center—more on that story below.]



GROUNDBREAKING CEREMONIES MARK BROWARD COUNTY PROGRESS

Fort Lauderdale, Oct. 24 — Groundbreaking ceremonies were held Thursday for the new Wilton Manors City Hall at the intersection of NE 26th Street and Middle River Drive. It will incorporate all city offices. Attended by civic leaders of the surrounding communities, the ceremonies were highlighted by the presentation of the ground to the city in a transfer of title from James C. Dean, Rep.

Dwight Rogers spoke after the ceremony. In photo at left Dean presents deed to the land to Perry Mickel, mayor of Wilton Manors. The photo shows, left to right, Dean, Mickel, Mayor Malcolm Carlisle of Fort Lauderdale, Earl Middleton and Rogers.

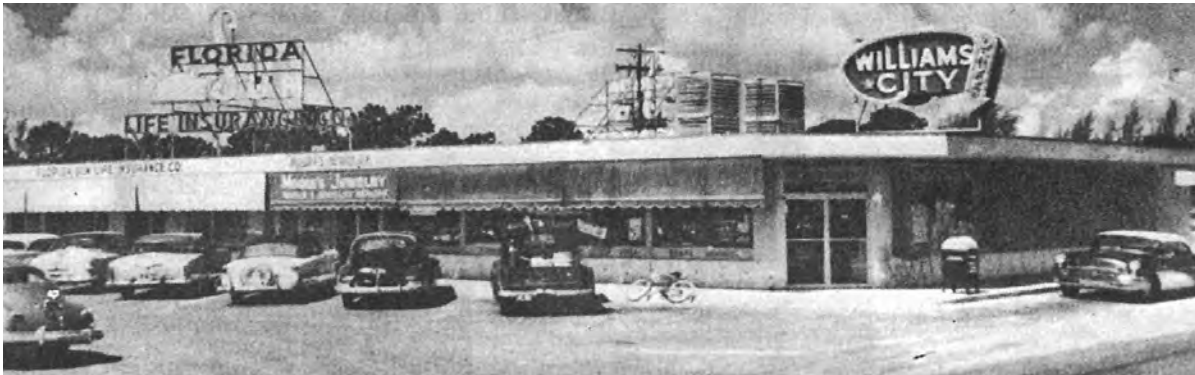
After the city hall ceremony, the Manor Shopping Center was dedicated. (photo at right), directly across the street. Rivaling some of the well-known

developments of Fort Lauderdale, it will include a 10-story office building, a 1,500-seat theater, a bank, supermarket, and various other stores and offices, with parking for 1,500 cars. This area is directly east of the Florida East Coast railroad and only a year ago did not have a road through it. From left to right are Earl Middleton, Dick Gallion, Fred “Doc” Williams, Jimmy West, Dean and architect Charles F. McKirahan.—Robert Norris Photos.

It’s unclear why Mayor Mickel accepted title to the property or participated in a groundbreaking. Earlier that year the City Council had only authorized Mickel to get construction estimates and develop a plan to fund construction with citizen donations and volunteer labor. Based on news accounts at the time of the 26th Street groundbreaking, the Council had neither formally approved that site; nor was there any funding to begin construction there or anywhere else.

The perceived approval of the 26th Street City Hall immediately received strong opposition from the *Wilton Manors Business and Professional Association*. They noted that it was “too far from the center of town” and would “take business away from the [current] business district”. Or, perhaps more simply, that the combination of the expansive Manor Gate Shopping Center **and** a City Hall “on-the-other-side-of-the-tracks” would move the entire city-center to the east—to the detriment, or even demise, of their legacy businesses on Wilton Drive.

But there was little need to worry. The Manor Gate Shopping Center proposal was just another James Dean self-promotion fantasy. Less than three months after the groundbreaking/dedication in the article above, the first block of stores had been constructed and were open for business. Despite the grandiose description and renderings, the result was no different from that of the basic/functional design of the “strip shopping center” buildings on Wilton Drive. Initial tenants were Williams City Drugs (which moved from Wilton Drive), Moore’s Jewelry, and Dean’s Florida Sun Life Insurance. (It would be *ten years* before all the storefronts, as we know them today, were completed—bearing no resemblance to Dean’s vision.)



After the 1953 “groundbreaking” Mayor Mickel and his Building Committee continued their efforts to raise funds for the new city hall through citizen donations/subscriptions. But unlike earlier initiatives for volunteer-funded construction of community facilities, citizen participation was lackluster. Despite transfer of \$10,000 of “seed-money” to the new building fund by the Council, by the end of the year there were only several thousand more dollars in the fund from various sources; and promises from several contractors to donate time, labor and materials.

Between then and **1955**, citizens twice rejected any tax levies that might have helped fund city hall construction. In August of that year the *Ft Lauderdale News* noted: “*Wilton Manors thus retains its envied position as the ‘City with No Taxes’*. It also retains its position as the city with no money and no city hall.”. It wasn’t until November 1956 that residents finally approved a 7-mil ad valorem tax; that would support funding of the new City Hall.

But the site remained a political, if not practical, issue. In **December 1954** *Middle River Development Co* notified the Council that if construction did not begin immediately, “...other disposition of the city hall lot would be made ...”. The Council requested time to address the issue—which was granted.

Perhaps in response, at the **February 1, 1955** Council meeting, **John Pedersen** offered to sell land at the corner of NE 26th Street and 6th Avenue, diagonally across the street from the Village Hall (now the site of the library). It was rejected. The Council then finally officially voted to accept the 26th Street site—including the donors’ requirement that construction begin by April 1. **April 1, 1955** came and went without any construction on the 26th Street site. In August Mayor Mickel announced that the property had been returned to Dean/Turner.

By **September 22, 1955** the City had negotiated with **J.N. McJunkin** for two lots on the north side of NE 21st Court. The purchase price of the two lots, 125 feet long and 95 feet wide, with adjacent parking, was \$2,500. The lots had been appraised at \$8,000 to \$9,000. For some reason this deal did not go through.

After months of negotiations and cajoling by Al Hagen and other city fathers, in **July 1956** **Food Fair Stores** donated a 150- by 250-foot site on the south side of NE 21st Court, adjacent to Hagen Park. The City Council immediately started planning the building.

The proposed city hall building on 26th Street was designed by Charles McKirahan and was to be two stories, with a large auditorium upstairs. Curiously, the NE 21st Court city hall building, designed by William F. Bigoney, Jr., was also to be two stories; with a two-hundred-seat council chamber, municipal court and community auditorium on the second floor. This plan was rejected as too expensive. On **November 28, 1956**, the council unofficially decided on a stripped-down version to fit the now \$100,000 budget.

Finally, in **July 1957**, the city took possession of the "*imposing municipal center*". City administrative offices were in the center of the one-story building, flanked by a two-bay Fire Station at the east end and the Police Station at the west end. The City Council Chamber dais was in a small alcove off the lobby—covered by an accordion door. For meetings, the door would be opened, and folding chairs placed in the lobby to complete the "Chambers." (This arrangement continued until 1964 when a new Fire Station was completed on NE 22nd Street and the original fire station bays converted to an actual City Council Chambers).

The final cost had crept up to \$131,000. There was not enough money left in the budget for new furniture, interior painting, rubber tile flooring, a fire tower, an intercom and numerous other items. Staff moved-in, despite these limitations—it was vastly superior to their current workspace. (It does appear that these were completed by the end of the year.)

The new City Hall officially opened with great fanfare **November 2, 1957** (yes, some *seven years* in the making!):

Clipped from Newspapers.com

Miami Herald, Oct. 31, 1957

In Wilton Manors

New City Hall Will Be Opened

WILTON MANORS — Dedication ceremonies for the new \$130,000 City Hall are to be held Saturday, beginning with a parade, which will start at 1 p.m. Circuit Judge Richard Sauls will deliver the principal address at 2 p.m., with a tour of the building and refreshments following.

State Rep. A. J. Ryan will introduce the speaker.

The parade, being arranged by Marshall Caro, will form at the Wilton Manors National Bank on NE 26th St., move west on 26th and south on Wilton Dr., Council President Vern Burnell announced. Police Chief Tom Brace will lead the procession and three musical units will participate.

The city will be garbed in flags and bunting for the occasion, in the 10th year of its existence. Decorations will reach from the NE 15th Ave. bridge to the bridge on NE Fourth Ave.

The hall has been built without real estate taxes, Burnell pointed out. The city will levy such tax, amounting to seven mills, for the first time this fall.

Located at 524 NE 21st Ct., the hall houses the water, street and building departments and the council chamber, an office for the mayor and city clerk, police and fire departments, bookkeeping department, conference room, repair shops and storage space.

Ultimately the council chamber will be on a second floor to be added. The council room will also function as the municipal courtroom.

The building is air-conditioned, except the jail.

One can argue the citizens got their moneys-worth. With few changes, the building served as Wilton Manors City Hall until 2010—some **fifty-years**. As before, city staff were happy to move to new quarters. Perhaps fittingly, the replacement (our current City Hall) is on the site of the **Food Fair** store—Wilton Manors first modern, national-chain supermarket, and corporate donor the first City Hall site.

Wilton Manors 1957 “new City Hall” Photo Gallery

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Courtesy - History Ft. Lauderdale
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1957 new City Hall nearing completion-front



new City Hall completed-front
[handwritten date 1959, but probably 1957]



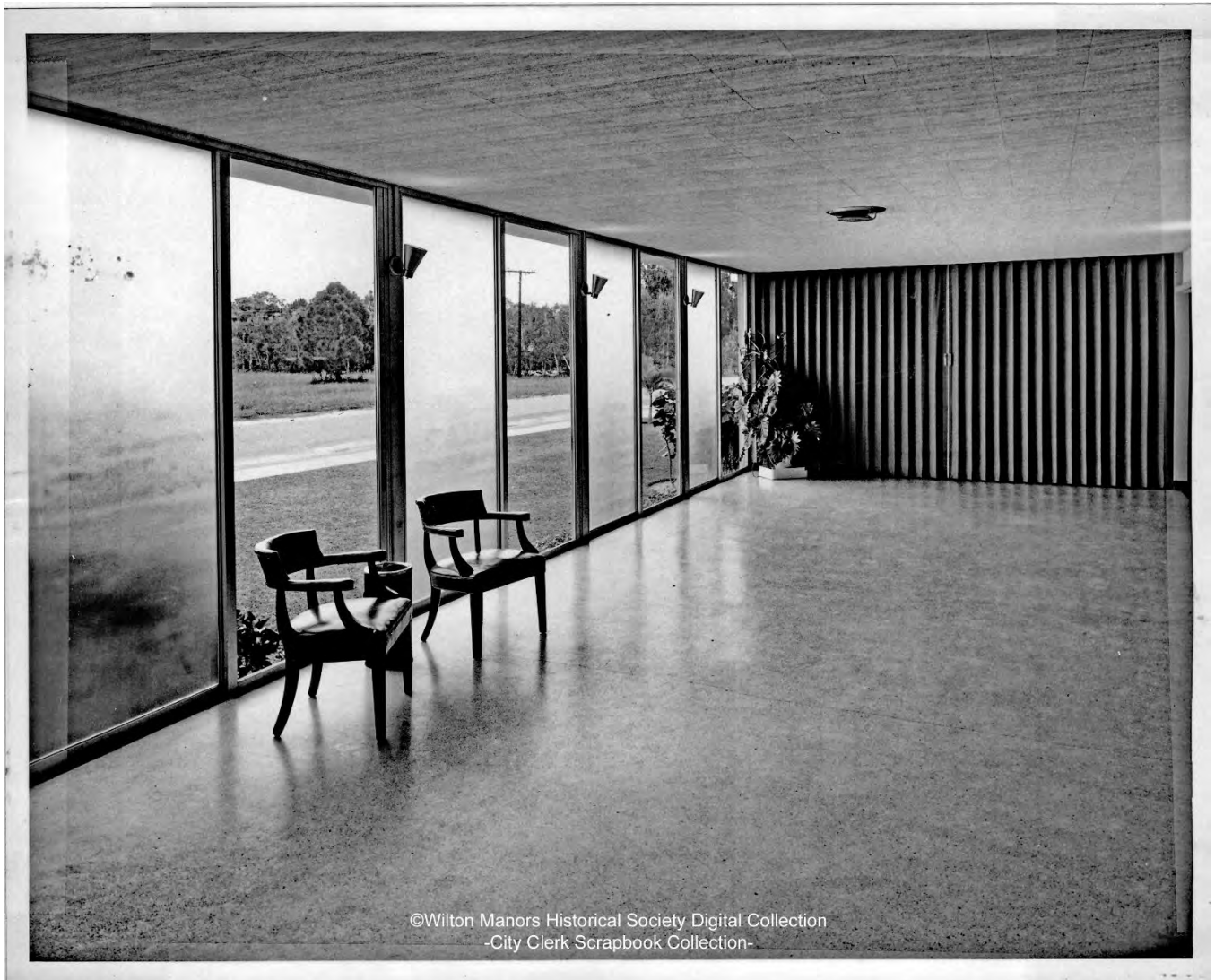
Courtesy - History Ft. Lauderdale
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1957 new City Hall nearing completion, interior service desk and Council alcove door



©Wilton Manors Historical Society
-City Clerk Scrapbook Collection-

1957ca new City Hall completed, interior service desk



©Wilton Manors Historical Society Digital Collection
-City Clerk Scrapbook Collection-

1957ca new City Hall completed, lobby and view of NE 21st Court
(with Commission Chambers alcove closed)

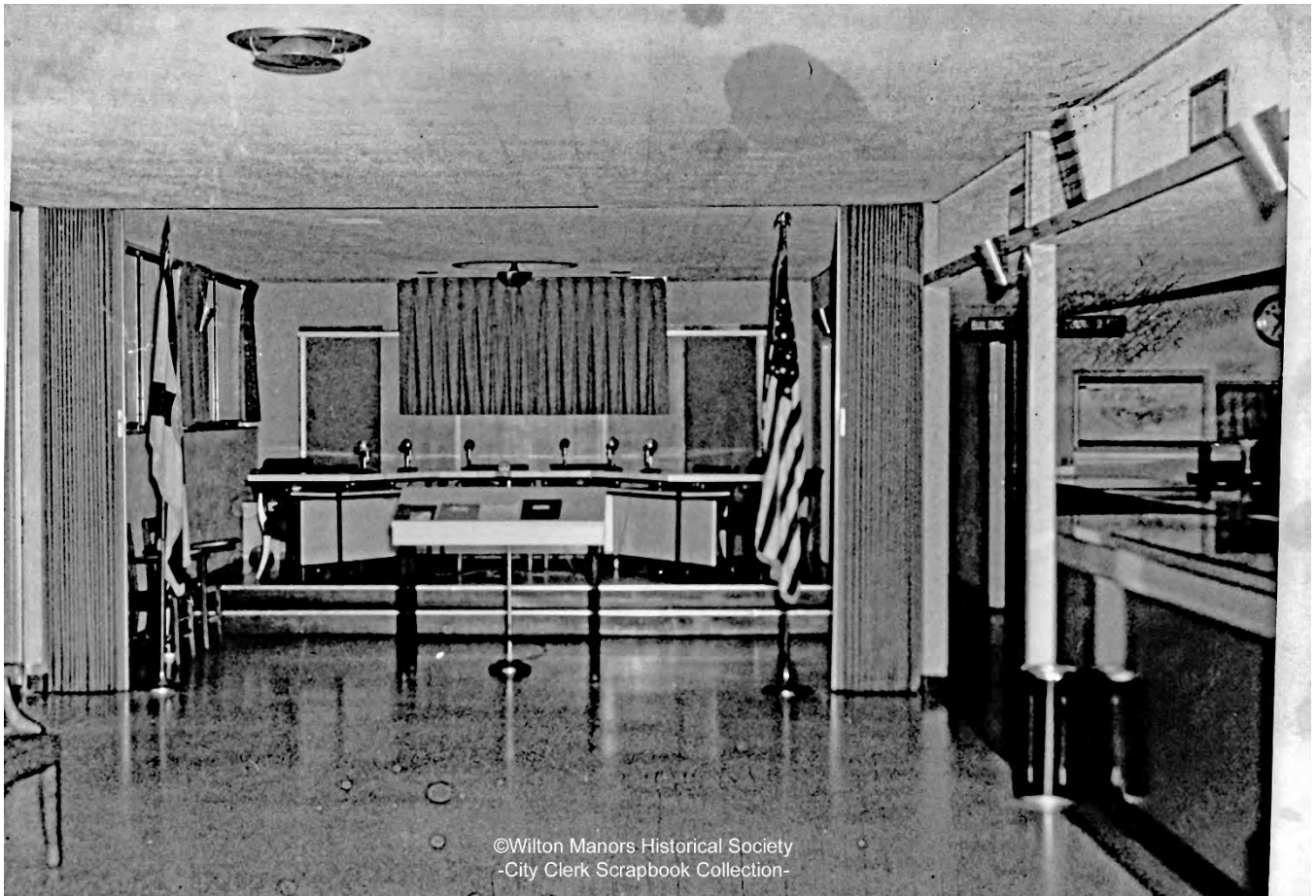


Courtesy - History Ft. Lauderdale
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1957 new City Hall nearing completion, City Council Chambers alcove



1957ca new City Hall completed, lobby set up as City Council Chambers



©Wilton Manors Historical Society
-City Clerk Scrapbook Collection-

new City Hall completed, furnished City Council Chambers and lobby service desk
[undated, probably not Hyde]



Standing: Mrs. Ned Noonan-Auditor, Frank Starling-Mayor, Wm. Miller-City Attorney, Tom
Brace-Police Chief, Wally Wakefield-Water Dept
Seated: Wm Joslin, Earl Middleton-V.P., Marcia Stafford-City Clerk, V.W Burnell-President, Fred
Stevens, Harold Price

1957 new City Hall completed, first City Council meeting
(Council members and officials/department heads)



1957 new City Hall nearing completion, rear service area