

# A HISTORY OF RIVIERA BEACH, FLORIDA



A Publication of the Bicentennial Commission  
of Riviera Beach, Florida

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Cover Photo: Auctioning of the lots in the original town site of Riviera, held in front of the F.E.C. Railroad Station at Lakeview (W. 10th St.) and Commercial, 1913.

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## FOREWORD

A history of Riviera Beach has been needed for many years; little written material is available on the beginnings of our city. In this year of our nation's Bicentennial, interest in our local history is high. I was pleased that the Riviera Beach Public Library could work with the Bicentennial Commission of Riviera Beach in publishing this booklet. It would have been impossible to compile without the help of the Historical Society of Palm Beach County whose library contains the richest store of materials available on the history of the county. Special thanks is due to Maxine Banash, Librarian, John G. Andersen of the Historical Society for aiding and encouraging our often floundering research efforts.

Miss Edith Newcomb kindly spent several afternoons talking with us and loaned clippings and pictures from her personal files; her assistance was invaluable. Virgil R. Strain, former mayor and councilman and resident of the city for 52 years, provided much information and also loaned clippings and pictures. Mrs. Dorothy Halsey Theroux was interviewed and loaned pictures. T. Leonard Griffin, resident of Riviera Beach since 1912, was interviewed on the history of the Bahamian fishing families. Mrs. Cleve Davis was interviewed on the history of the black community

in Riviera Beach. A complete list of those interviewed is included in our bibliography.

Until a more comprehensive history of Riviera Beach comes along, we hope this booklet will serve the community's need to know something about it's past, that it will stir an interest in our local history and that those residents who have information and old pictures of Riviera will contact the Riviera Beach Public Library which welcomes any further information on the history of the city.

Lynn Brink  
Library Director



## THE INDIANS

More than 800 years ago, the area that is now Riviera Beach was laden with variegated vegetation that gave it a pristine beauty and provided a habitat for wild animals, a variety of birds and colorful reptiles. It lay in peaceful repose next to a large freshwater lake which was home to fish that leaped in the unspoiled air, the brilliant Florida sun glinting off their curved bodies.

Deer, bear, wildcats and panthers roamed its savannahs and woods, turtles and alligators slept in its swamps and snakes slithered through its palmetto and jungle-like foliage.

The land was beautiful but life was hard; the early Indians struggled to survive. They chose a sheltered spot on the west side of Lake Worth in what was to become Riviera Beach and over centuries built up two shell mounds and a long, high sand mound.

Karl Squires, in an article entitled "PreColumbian Man in Southern Florida," published in "Tequesta," the journal of the Historical Association of South Florida, writes that a "very large and populous village (of Tequesta Indians) was on the west shore of Lake Worth in the town of Riviera." More recent archeological opinion does not differentiate between the Tequestas, the Ais

and the Jeagas. They are all Glades Culture Indians numbering no more than 1000 throughout all of southeast Florida.

Little is known of these Indians other than that they were a non-agricultural people who lived on fish, shellfish, occasional small game, berries and roots. They are known to have disappeared completely by 1750; possibly destroyed by Spanish slave raids, disease and rum, with remnants absorbed by the Seminoles.

In 1914 a wealthy manufacturer from Iowa named Charles N. Newcomb, a man of avid scientific curiosity who had come to the area 14 years earlier, investigated the mound complex and provided the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C. with details of his findings, including sketches of the mound site.

He described it as 150 feet wide, 10 feet high and more than a half mile long. It consisted of a long, high, fishshaped sand mound used for ceremonial purposes which led to two shell mounds on the shore of Lake Worth. The shell mounds were midden, or kitchen, mounds upon which the Indians lived. The mound complex extended from the lakefront across what is now Broadway between 11th and 12th streets, ending on the west side of Avenue E.

Miss Edith L. Newcomb, Charles Newcomb's

daughter who still lives in Riviera Beach, has objects that were found in the mound, including some pottery shards and a bone implement used for opening oyster shells.

Sometime after the disappearance of the Glades Culture Indians, Seminole Indians also chose Riviera as a site for a village. Records show that in 1841, a military expedition from Fort Lauderdale under the leadership of Captain R.D.A. Wade destroyed Seminole villages on the sites of the towns of Palm Beach and Riviera Beach, and at the head of the Hillsboro River.

#### JUDGE HEYSER AND THE OAK LAWN HOTEL

The homesteading of Riviera Beach is closely tied to the settling of the area surrounding the lake from Jupiter to Hypoluxo--and with the history of the county. Palm Beach County was not created until 1909; when the first settlers arrived beginning in the early 1860's, it was part of Dade County which then stretched from the St. Lucie River to the Keys. During the period of settlement the entire area from Jupiter to Boynton Beach was called "Lake Worth" and comprised scattered homesteads on both sides of the lake. The first settler was a German horticulturist, August O. Lang, who came to this

remote area sometime before 1860 and settled on what later became known as Palm Beach. Lang and his family moved to west of Fort Pierce about the time other settlers began arriving in the area. Some sources state that Lang was a draft dodger who came here to avoid induction into the Confederate Army and who left on being informed that the Civil War was over.

In 1873 the H. D. Pierce family arrived, followed in the spring of 1875 by the George W. Lainhart family. The Pierces settled on Hypoluxo Island, the Lainharts on Palm Beach. Other pioneer families joined them, settling mainly on the east side of the lake.

It was not until the early 1880s that anyone made his home in the area that is now Riviera Beach. Frank L. Dimick, one of the pioneering Dimick family who had come to the area around Lake Worth in the 1870s, bought 80.24 acres for \$93.30 from the U. S. Government in 1881 in what was to become the original town site of Riviera Beach. Dimick, however, did not homestead and the land lay vacant until he sold in 1882 to Allen E. Heyser.

Judge Allen E. Heyser's name is listed on the bronze tablet honoring the pioneers of Palm Beach County, which formerly stood in Pioneer Park and now stands behind the Norton Gallery in



## Oak Lawn House,

Lake Worth, Dade County, Fla.

New House and Newly Furnished.  
Rooms single or in Suites.

NEAR THE INLET,

Best View of Lake and Ocean,

And best Hunting and Fishing grounds  
on Lake Worth,

Fine Lawn shaded by monster Oaks  
and Tropical Growth, both  
Wild and Cultivated,

Try us once and you will come again.

ALLEN E. HEYSER, Proprietor.

1. Judge Allen E. Heyser

2. Advertisement from "The  
Florida Star," Nov. 1888.

West Palm Beach. He was the first to settle in what is now Riviera Beach and was the first lawyer and first county judge in Dade County (now Palm Beach and Dade counties).

Judge Heyser was born June 30, 1857, in Pennsylvania. He came to Lake Worth in 1881 from Madison, Georgia, where he had practiced law for two years. Soon after coming to the Lake Worth area Heyser was appointed to the judgeship of Dade County, a position which he held for 25 years.

According to an interview in 1936 with Mattie A. Heyser, his widow, he had come with the intention of buying a piece of land where the Flagler Museum now stands from Frank L. Dimick.

When Heyser arrived and found that the land

already had been sold, he was "disappointed but not discouraged" and purchased 80.24 acres in what is now Riviera Beach from Mr. Dimick for \$500 in May, 1882.

Heyser, who was a bachelor when he came from Pennsylvania, married Mattie A. Spencer, the daughter of V. O. Spencer, a pioneer and the first postmaster of the area surrounding Lake Worth.

Sometime after their marriage the Heyzers built a house on their land. In the words of Mattie Heyser, "We just started to build a home and live in it ourselves, but we kept on adding room after room, until we had a hotel three stories high with 20 rooms."

The August 30, 1888, issue of "The Florida Star," published in Titusville, notes that Heyser had moved into "his new hotel" which had been slightly damaged in a hurricane that month.

Oak Lawn House as it was called in the late 80s, or the Oak Lawn Hotel as it was known in the early 90s, was the third hotel on the lake. The name, Oak Lawn, came from the five large oaks on the property. The hotel was located in the original town site of Riviera Beach on the lakefront at what is now 10th Street. One of the large oak trees, now gnarled and split, is still standing on the northwest corner of 10th Street and Avenue C. It is estimated to be over 300 years old.

The Oak Lawn Hotel evidently was a success

during the winter resort seasons, which were then only two months long. The neighborhood took its name from the hotel and thus for the first years of its history, the Riviera Beach area was known as Oak Lawn. The first post office was established under the name Oak Lawn in 1889 and was located in the hotel. The Oak Lawn area included the neighborhood only as far north as Sherman's Point, just south of the present Blue Heron Bridge, and extended farther south than the present borders of Riviera Beach.

"The Tropical Sun," the first newspaper in the Lake Worth area, published at Juno, describes the hotel and surrounding area in an article entitled, "Lake Worth, a General Write Up of All Points of Interest," which appeared in the September 19, 1891 issue:

"The house is situated upon a picturesquely wooded mound--of the kind very common in Florida. This is peculiarly divided into two portions by a wide, deep ditch intersecting it. Since Judge Heyser settled the place eight years ago, many old Spanish relics and curious objects of interest have been unearthed by the residents. It is indeed a most interesting and delightful spot. A well-appointed establishment, a fine garden, a profusion of dairy products, fine fruit trees, well kept premises, clever genial people make it just what it is--a pleasant home-place for rest and ease. It is nearer the Inlet than any other hotel on the lake and is also on the county road leading to Jupiter and northward. The strawberry bed at Oak Lawn measures 33 feet by 48 feet and the yield last winter was 160 quarts.

The popularity of the neighborhood is proven by the fact that during the first six months of the current year (1891) seven homesteads were entered in the vicinity. These live to the west of Oak Lawn, among them are the homesteads of Mr. Burnett and Miss Spencer and others. Much work has been done on these places, pineapples and trees having been set out."

The Handbook of Florida, an early travel guide published in 1891, lists the rates as \$2.00 to \$2.50 a day or \$10.00 to \$12.00 a week for bed and board. It praises the fishing as "probably as good as anywhere on the lake, while fine shooting is to be found within easy walking distance in any direction along the shore, or among the savannahs and woods to the westward."

A study of The Tract Index Dade County Deeds No. 1, which records the land deeds registered with the county in the 1880s and 90s shows--at least in part--when and by whom the land around Oak Lawn and within the present boundaries of Riviera Beach was purchased.

The Rev. Emmanuel Heyser, Judge Heyser's father, came down from Georgia and purchased the southeast corner of lot 2 section 33 from his son in 1883. By 1885 Rev. Heyser had been joined by his wife Mittie and was homesteading. "The Tropical Sun" reports that he was experimenting with new fruits and plants, but that his principal business was strawberry culture.



Between Rev. Heyser's place and the Oak Lawn Hotel were 15 acres purchased in 1890 by James MacFarlane, a Scotsman and resident of Palm Beach.

To the north of the hotel were 100 acres owned by the honorable Josiah Sherman, a winter resident described by the Sun as "an ex-senator and well known capitalist of Atlanta, Georgia." Senator Sherman purchased part of his land as early as 1884 and part in 1891. It was probably not until 1891 that he built a winter home there. The Sun reported that year that he planted more than 100 cocoanut trees and was draining a large portion of his land for the cultivation of upland rice. Preparations for a wharf and new house also were mentioned. Senator Sherman remarried in 1891 in Atlanta and returned to winter with his new bride at Oak Lawn. The area just south of the present Blue Heron Bridge is still known as Sherman's Point.

Several of the early pioneer families of Oak Lawn were black. Willie Melton is mentioned in the Sun as an early settler in the Lake Worth area. In 1888 he purchased about 6½ acres near the Oak Lawn Hotel from E. N. Dimick. A notice in the August 25, 1892, issue of the Sun offers condolences on the unexpected death of his wife and expresses "the sympathy of the entire community" to "one of the most worthy and progressive of our colored settlers."

The Jacob Guildersleeves were another family of early black pioneers. Mrs. Millie Guildersleeve is remembered as a mid-wife for the entire community. (A Katy Guildersleeve is thought to be the first black girl born in the Lake Worth area.) The Guildersleeves owned a vegetable farm west of the Oak Lawn Hotel. Ed and Lizzy Cain, also vegetable farmers, were other early black settlers.

The Thomas M. Taylor family were very early black pioneers, so early that ~~although no deed in their names is recorded in~~ The Tract Index, they were recognized as owning land next to a plot that was purchased in 1884.

In 1892 a group of seven young people from Oak Lawn and Lake Worth visited "the colored church west of Oak Lawn;" the services were conducted by a substitute minister, the Rev. E. L. Smith.

The August 14, 1894 Sun reports that "the colored people of Riviera are organizing a Baptist Church and Sunday school."

The location and membership of these early churches is unknown.

#### OAK LAWN BECOMES RIVIERA

In 1893 Oak Lawn became Riviera. Several accounts have it that a visitor to the Oak Lawn

Hotel, usually said to be a journalist from Atlanta, was so taken with the beauty of the place that he called it the Riviera of America in dispatches to his paper. Probably the correspondent was describing the whole Lake Worth area rather than just Oak Lawn, but Judge Heyser acted immediately to change the post office name to Riviera. The Oak Lawn Hotel, which served as the post office, thus became the Riviera Hotel and the surrounding neighborhood was referred to as Riviera.

The 1896 Business Directory, Guide and History implies that this was a real coup on Judge Heyser's part and a surprise to the other communities on Lake Worth which would have liked to assume the name. The Directory reports that Judge Heyser was "the first to get hold of and appropriate the name for his house" and that "even before the other post offices around the lake had an inkling of what was being done, they received a notice from the (Postal) Department announcing the change."

Besides serving as post office, the Oak Lawn Hotel had a telegraph office by 1893.

In 1899 the Dade County seat was moved from Juno back to Miami. Judge Heyser, whose constant attendance was required when court was in session, moved permanently to Miami. The hotel then was managed by several different proprietors and began to deteriorate. Business no doubt was hurt by the construction of such large, elegant hotels as the

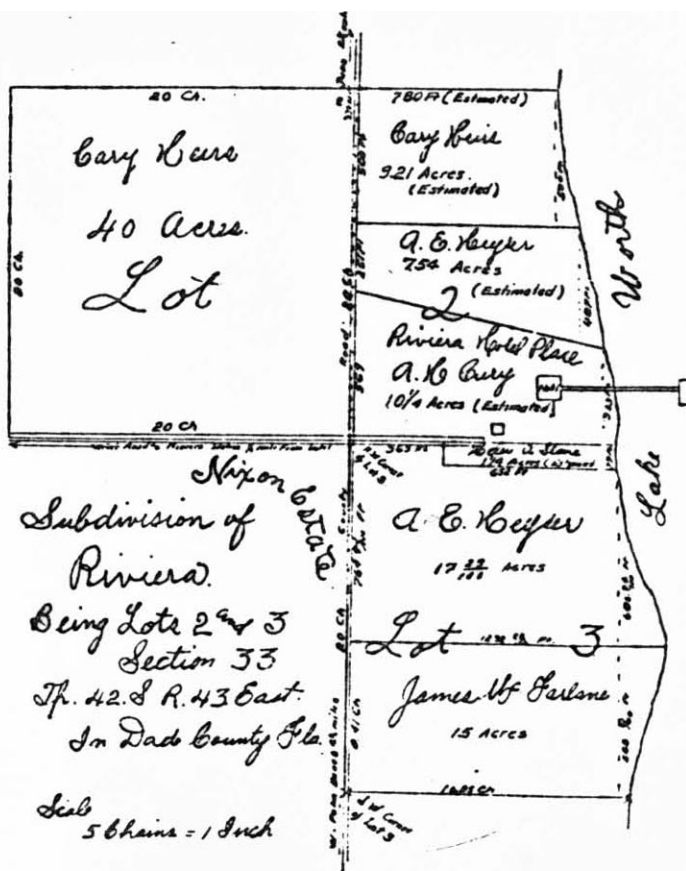
Breakers and the Royal Poinciana in Palm Beach in the late 1890s.

In 1900 Judge Heyser conveyed the Riviera Hotel Place to Ashton H. Cary, a Georgia doctor, in exchange for complete ownership of some property which they had owned jointly. Cary immediately put the hotel property up for sale.

#### CHARLES N. NEWCOMB ENVISIONS RIVIERA AS A RESORT COMMUNITY

Charles N. Newcomb, scientist, inventor and wealthy manufacturer from Davenport, Iowa, spent several winters in Palm Beach in the late 1890s. Newcomb and his family stayed at the Royal Poinciana and made excursions by boat to afternoon teas at the Riviera Hotel, then under the management of a family named Stone. Mrs. Newcomb was especially taken with the view of Lake Worth from the hotel. In 1901 Newcomb bought the hotel, which had by then been closed for several seasons and was somewhat in disrepair, from Dr. Cary. In 1902 or 1903, after the hotel had been remodeled as a private home, the Newcombs began spending the winters there.

The lakefront at that time was swampy. Newcomb invented a dredging device and filled the swampy area with sand. Extensive landscaping was carried out with 26 varieties of fruit trees planted on the rolling lawns. Newcomb called the house "Riviera"



STATE OF FLORIDA,  
COUNTY OF PALM BEACH

I HEREBY CERTIFY, that the above and foregoing is a true and correct copy of a map of  
----- as the same appears of record in Dade Co., Fla. in Book No. B of  
----- of page 33.  
Charles E. Feltone  
County Clerk  
4th March 1910 D.C.

STATE OF FLORIDA  
COUNTY OF PALM BEACH }  
This instrument was filed for record this 2nd day of May A.D. 1910 and duly recorded on the 2nd day of March A.D. 1910 at 1:20 p.m. in Book No. B of page 33.  
RECORDED & INDEXED  
Charles E. Feltone  
County Clerk  
4th March 1910

3. Although this plat was filed in Palm Beach County in 1910, it was recorded with Dade County earlier and reflects landownership in 1900 just before C. N. Newcomb purchased the Riviera Hotel Place.



4. "The Riviera," summer home of C. N. Newcomb, 1904.  
(formerly the Oak Lawn Hotel)



5. "The Riviera," 1906. Observatory and porch added.



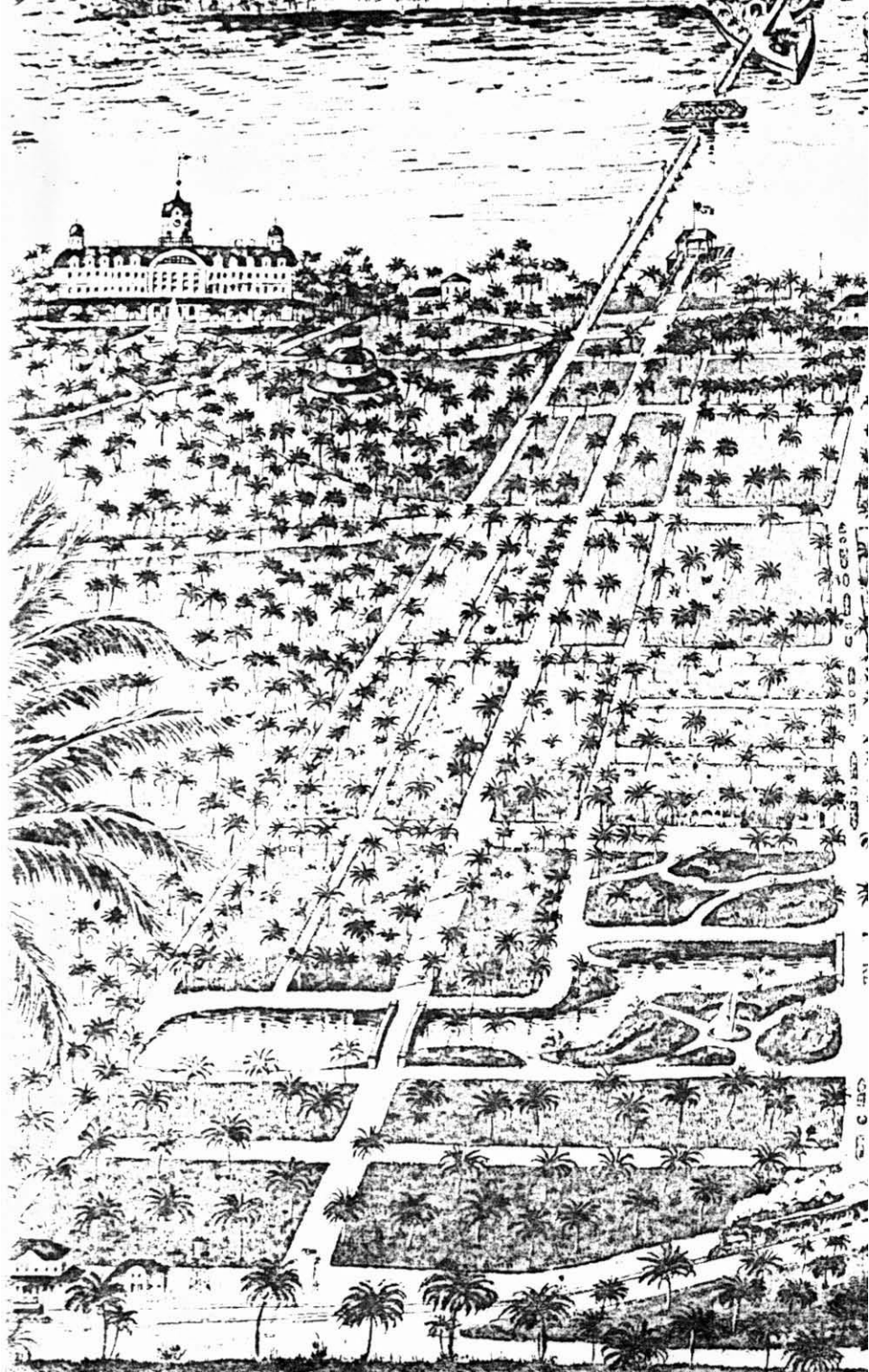
6. View of Lake Worth from the observatory, 1906.

and the name was spelled out on the front lawn in white conch shells.

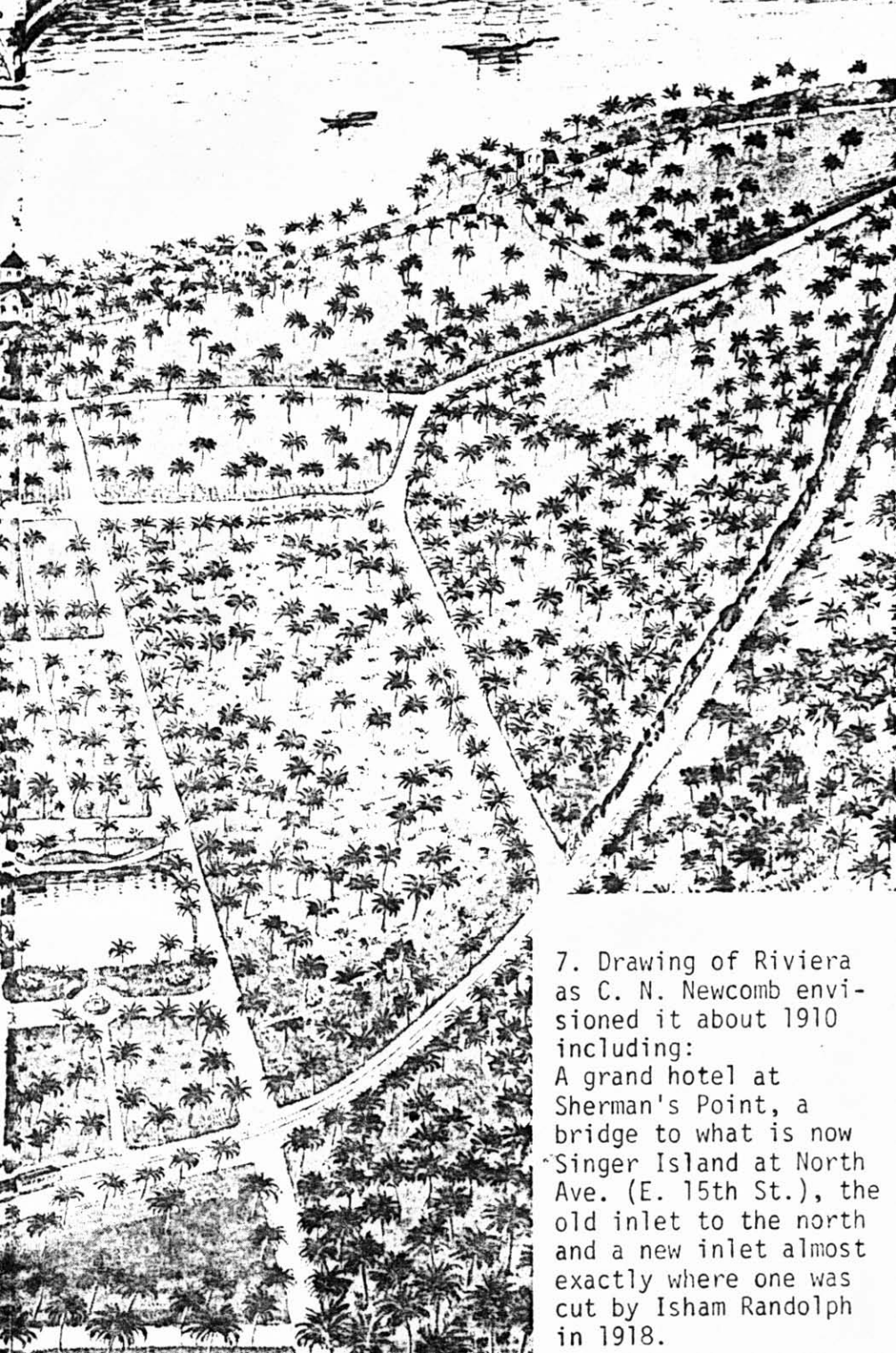
Charles Newcomb knew Henry Flagler and when the railroad magnate's "houseboat," a two story clubhouse on pilings located on the lakeshore on Singer Island, needed repairs one season, Flagler arranged to use "Riviera." The Newcombs spent the winter at the Breakers in Palm Beach while Flagler and his illustrious friends, including the Vanderbilts, the Astors and Andrew Carnegie, enjoyed parties and afternoon teas at "Riviera."

Around 1910 Newcomb purchased about 200 acres of land to the west of his original property. He believed Riviera would make a fine site for a resort community for winter residents from the north. He had the site, which stretched from Lake Worth on the east to just west of the Florida East Coast Railroad tracks and from what is now 14th Street on the north to what is now 10th Street on the south, platted and surveyed. The plat, which was filed in 1913, was the first recorded evidence of an attempt to attract residents in numbers to the Riviera area.

Charles Newcomb's dreams for Riviera were never to be fully realized. As can be seen from the elaborate drawing he commissioned and from the plat, Newcomb envisioned a grand hotel on Lake Worth at Sherman's Point and the conversion of his own home into a club house for the new resort







7. Drawing of Riviera as C. N. Newcomb envisioned it about 1910 including:

A grand hotel at Sherman's Point, a bridge to what is now Singer Island at North Ave. (E. 15th St.), the old inlet to the north and a new inlet almost exactly where one was cut by Isham Randolph in 1918.



8. Dorothy Halsey and her daughter clearing their lot on W. Flagler Ave. (W. 13th St.), 1914.



9. Dorothy Halsey Theroux in front of her mother's home-store-post office, the Riviera Cash Grocery on W. Flagler Ave. (W. 13th St.), 1924.

community. A bridge was shown linking Riviera with Palm Beach where Peanut Island and the Inlet are now. A small park was planned on Lake Worth and a larger one, Osceola Park, surrounding Lake Edith and Lake George was planned for the west side where Riviera Beach Elementary School now stands.

The town site was cleared and streets were laid out, paved with oyster shells and named according to Newcomb's plan. The main north-south street was named Montreal (now North Broadway) because it was part of the major highway which ran from Montreal, Quebec, to Key West.

The house in which Miss Edith L. Newcomb now lives, at 21 13th Street West, originally was built as a model to show the type of bungalow that the resort community would contain.

During 1913 a series of auctions was held to sell the moderately priced lots. The February 27, 1913, issue of "Tropical Sun" quotes C. D. Hinson, an assistant to Mr. Newcomb, as reporting that "land sales at Riviera have been moving along nicely under the able management of auctioneer Willingham, something in excess of \$25,000 having already been taken in."

When Dorothy Halsey, a widow, came to Riviera with her young daughter of the same name in 1913, there were 30 families living in the original town site who had purchased their land in the auctions. That year Charles Newcomb built a house for the

Halsey's at the corner of Commercial and 13th Street. Mrs. Halsey operated the first grocery store in town from this house, the Riviera Cash Grocery. She also had the only gas pump in town and in 1915 she opened a post office. It had taken Mrs. Halsey a year to get the necessary 30 signatures on the petition required by the federal government to establish the post office. She served as postmistress, volunteering the use of her grocery store-home for the post office without pay. This building stood until recently at 444 W. 13th Street. There was no mail delivery and everyone came to the post office to pick up their mail. From 1918 to 1919 the post office was closed and its services were transferred to West Palm Beach, but in December of 1919 Mrs. Halsey reopened it and served as postmistress until 1926.

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Martin County 283-5200

ADDITIONAL LOCATIONS: Singer Island • Palm  
Beach Lakes • Twin City Mall • Palm Beach Gardens  
• Jupiter-Tequesta • Port Salerno • Stuart  
• Jensen Beach





10. Fishing boats docked behind the Acme Fish Co.,  
E 20th St.



11. Site of the old Palm Beach Inlet near the  
Hilton Inn, Singer Island. (Arrow marks inlet.)

## RIVIERA: THE FISHING VILLAGE

Fishing has always been an important activity in the Riviera Beach area. Both Lake Worth and the Gulf Stream off Singer Island offered excellent fishing. In the 1880s and 90s this was one of the attractions that drew the first tourists to Oak Lawn. For years commercial fishermen from the Bahamas had been fishing the waters off Singer Island. Sometime before the First World War, a colony of fishermen settled as squatters on the island. At first they stayed only during the fishing season and returned to the Bahamas in the summer. The Bahamian fishermen were called "conchs," as they still are in the Keys, and Riviera was for many years nicknamed "Conch Town."

T. Leonard Griffin left the Bahamas in 1912 to join the fishing colony on Singer Island. He lives today in Riviera Beach, and says that by 1910 there were 12 to 25 men squatting on the island in the winter. They built shacks to live in and later were joined by their families. By 1914 there was a small Pentecostal church and a school on the island; a Mrs. Johnson was the teacher.

Some names of these families were: Moree, Pinder, Knowles, and Griffin. Many of their descendants still live in Riviera Beach.

While some fishermen lived on the island year round, many followed the fishing. Mr. Griffin fished in Connecticut some summers and said many commercial fishermen from New Jersey came to Riviera in the winter.

In the early years the fish had to be taken by boat to the fish houses in West Palm Beach. About 1919 Charles Newcomb gave the Florida East Coast Railroad use of some property on which to construct a loading platform for the shipment of fish. A barrel factory also was established. The fish were iced, placed in wooden barrels and shipped by refrigerated railroad cars to Fulton's Fish Market in New York City. By the 1920s Riviera was one of the largest shipping points for fish on the east coast of Florida. Three fish houses were built in Riviera in the 20s: R. R. Ricou and Sons, Richardson's and the Riviera Fish Company.

Around 1919 the fishing families left Singer Island to join other fishermen on the mainland. This was due either to pressure from the landowners on the island, to the 1919 hurricane or to attractions of subdivisions in Riviera that were being developed for them. By 1922 there were 75 commercial fishing families in Riviera, many of whom were active in getting the town incorporated that year.



## THE DEVELOPMENT AND INCORPORATION OF THE TOWN OF RIVIERA

When the Lake Worth Inlet District was created by the state legislature in 1915 and the site of the present inlet and harbor was established, speculation in real estate became active and several subdivisions were laid out.

Charles Newcomb's plat and sale of lots in the town site in 1913 was, as previously noted, the first attempt to attract a large number of residents to Riviera. Newcomb continued to sell lots in the town site into the mid-twenties.

In 1914 William Taylor filed a plat for a subdivision in section 32, west of the original town site on what is now West 8th Street. This was settled by several black families. In 1916 Acrehome Park, also on the west side, was developed by George C. Currie as a black subdivision. The name "Acrehome" came from the fact that the lots were each one acre.

Also in 1916 G. W. Bingham of West Palm Beach developed Coconut Lodge just north of the original town site (between 20th and 23rd Streets on the east side of Broadway). Inlet Grove between Coconut Lodge and Riviera was developed by Wyse Perry in 1917. Inlet City west of Inlet Grove was also a Perry Realty project developed in 1918.



12. Postmistress Halsey and her mother Mrs. Moore at Andersen's Alligator and Ostrich Farm, 1922. The amusement was owned by Charlie Kennedy and located on Montreal (N. Broadway) between Mound Ave. (E.12th St.) and Grand Blvd. (E.11th St.).



13. Town officials in front of the Newcomb house, left to right: B. D. Kerr, Carl A. Smith, Virgil R. Strain, Mayor Peter Bjerrehus, E. L. Hudnell, Henry Weichmann and A. M. Hunter.

Santry's subdivision at Sherman's Point was platted in 1921 by Frank T. Santry. Coconut Grove, Inlet Grove, Inlet City and Santry's subdivision were settled by Bahamian fishermen, both those moving from Singer Island and West Palm Beach and others directly from the Bahamas.

Monroe Heights in section 29 on the west side was developed by A. O. Greynolds and M. B. Monroe in 1925. It originally was planned as a Danish settlement. Northview in northeast Riviera was developed in 1925 by the Northview Realty Company, whose president was H. C. Fugate.

The activities of these developers attracted buyers, and although many of the lots were bought for speculation, a number of homes were built.

During the summer of 1922, rumors spread that West Palm Beach intended to incorporate Riviera. To prevent the take-over, Riviera residents held a mass meeting at the public schoolhouse in August 1922, to set up incorporation proceedings of their own. On September 29, 1922, 26 qualified voters met at the school and decided by a vote of 17 to 9 to incorporate as the Town of Riviera. L. S. Scott was elected mayor; Charles N. Newcomb, clerk; B. D. Kerr, marshall; and Henry Weichman, A. P. Brodeur, Fred Nelson, Erric Soderberg, and Henry Zill, councilmen. The proceedings were filed in the office of the Clerk of the Palm Beach County

- Circuit Court on October 23, 1922.

On June 1, 1923 the town was re-incorporated under a state charter and a special election was held on July 19, 1923, in which B. D. Kerr defeated L. S. Scott for the office of mayor. B. F. Perry, Jr., was elected clerk; J. B. Stewart, marshall and tax collector; and George W. Moree, G. S. Richardson, S. O. Kahler, Erric Soderberg and Henry Weichman, councilmen. The election was held at Carlson's Store and 70 persons voted.

The Aquarium Building on Broadway between 11th and 12th Streets was used as a town hall until 1925 when a new one was built at what is now Avenue E and 14th Street. The volunteer fire department, started in 1926, was headquartered in the new town hall in 1927. The firemen raised money to buy their own equipment and to convert a truck into a fire engine.

Riviera, like other South Florida cities, had high hopes for development in the mid-twenties.

J. Wadsworth Traven in his History of Beautiful Palm Beach County, written in 1927, predicted:

"Riviera's future is assured for it has a commercial port and harbor of the greatest importance, with splendid railroad facilities and a back country that will astonish the world with its products. With these advantages, industry cannot be denied and factories are bound to come. Homes will follow, then stores and in a few years we vision sky-scrapers for the little giant city--Riviera."

The 1928 hurricane, which destroyed Kelsey City,

Riviera's neighbor to the north, wiped out the Sherman Point Bridge to Singer Island and damaged much property in Riviera. Two hundred eighty-five homes were completely destroyed and 272 were unroofed. Few buildings in town escaped some damage. The town council deputized residents to prevent looting in damaged homes and businesses.

More destructive than the hurricane to Riviera's hopes was the collapse of the land boom in South Florida and the onset of the Great Depression. The promise Traven saw in Riviera was not to be fulfilled for many years.

---

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Paris Singer, 1867-1932

"a strange, silent man, a man of great imagination often in excess of practical common sense."

Obituary in Palm Beach Post 6-25-32.

14.

## PARIS SINGER AND HIS ISLAND

The collapse of the South Florida land boom in 1927 also brought to grief the ambitious plans of eccentric millionaire Paris Singer for the development of the sandy strip of land now known as Singer Island.

Paris Singer, the famous developer of Palm Beach and the founder of the Everglades Club, was the 23rd and next to the last child of Isaac Merritt Singer, the sewing machine millionaire. Most of his life was spent in England or Europe, but in 1917 he visited Florida and purchased a home in Palm Beach. With Addison Mizener as his personal architect, he created Palm Beach as we know it today with its Spanish architecture, picturesque streets and



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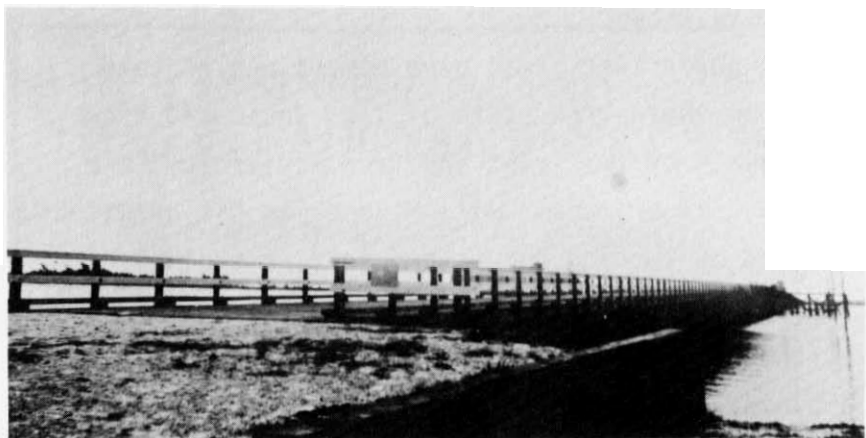


expensive shops.

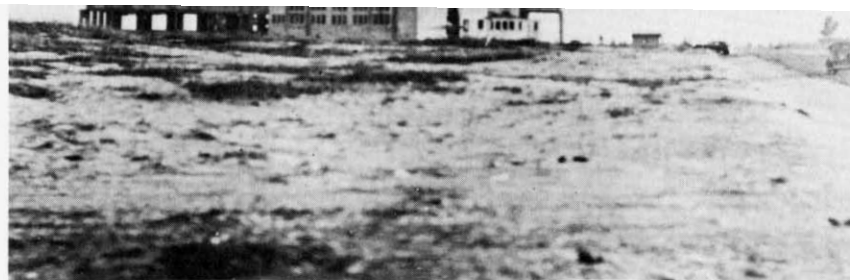
Singer's last great development was to take place on the narrow strip of land separated from Palm Beach by the inlet and from Riviera by Lake Worth. Singer, again with Mizener as his architect, dreamed of turning the island into an exclusive extension of Palm Beach. On the north end of the island he planned to build the Blue Heron Hotel, a typical resort hotel, and on the south end the super-luxurious Paris Singer Hotel. A golf course was to be laid out between the two hotels. All this was to be financed by the promotion and sale of a number of highly priced lots on the island.

Plans had to be changed almost immediately, however, when Singer had trouble clearing the title on the north end property. This and financial problems caused him to build only one hotel, the luxurious Blue Heron on the south end of the island.

Singer had hoped to link the island to Palm Beach either by a series of high-rise bridges or by a tunnel under the inlet. Both Palm Beach and Riviera opposed these plans and the U. S. War Department refused permission. Instead, Palm Beach County in 1925 built a wooden bridge across Lake Worth linking Singer Island to Riviera. Singer himself purchased the bond issue for the bridge. It was called the Sherman Point Bridge.



15. Wooden bridge to Singer Island. Photo was taken in 1935 after the bridge, which had been destroyed in the 1928 hurricane, was finally rebuilt.



16. The Blue Heron Hotel on Singer Island near where the Holiday Inn now stands, 1935.

It was destroyed in the 1928 hurricane and not rebuilt until 1935.

The Blue Heron Hotel originally was scheduled to open in 1925. An indication of Singer's certainty that the hotel would open was his announcement that Christmas dinner would be served there. Carpeting, linens and china were ordered and stored in the finished service wing, but the Blue Heron was never to open.

The collapse of the real estate boom embroiled Singer in bond and mortgage problems. Payments on the high-priced lots stopped coming in. Paris Singer's mother, it was rumored, refused to help him out of his financial straits. Over \$3 million already had been spent on a building that became known as "Singer's Folly," an unfinished seven story shell which dominated the island for years. The structure eventually passed into the hand of the Atlantic, Gulf and Pacific Dredging Company who held the mortgage.

In 1935 a young boy, Ralph Oenbrink, fell to his death down an open shaft while playing with companions in the hotel. The town of Palm Beach sought for years to have the structure razed, but the task was considered hazardous. A guard was kept on duty to prevent another tragedy.

It was not until 1940 that demolition began. About 600 tons of scrap steel was salvaged from



17. Dedication of the city beach on Singer Island, 1940. Left to right foreground: Jay Purim, L. F. Conerly, Ryder Steen, Kenneth Nix, Tom West, J. J. Powers and Virgil R. Strain.



18. Ward's Grocery and the Riviera News at 6903 Dixie Highway (N. Broadway), 1943.

the building. Rumor had it that the steel went to Japan on the eve of World War Two. The final dynamiting of the Blue Heron Hotel occurred sometime in the mid-40s. There are several homes in Riviera Beach built completely with lumber, plumbing and tile salvaged from Singer's Folly.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF RIVIERA BEACH

During the 1930s and early 1940s Riviera remained a rather sleepy small town supported mainly by the commercial fishing industry and tourism. Residents who lived here during those years recall that the residents of West Palm Beach looked upon Riviera as a backward community and referred to it as "Conch Town."

Florida: a Guide to the Southernmost State, compiled by the Federal Writers' Project during the Depression, describes Riviera in the 30s with a population of 811:

"The main street is lined with stores, souvenir stands, jooks, filling stations and a post office. Along the lakefront are fish houses, boat sheds, net racks and wharves. Here live a colony of Conchs, so named for the variety of shell fish they eat...The men are fishermen; the women and children weave native palmetto into baskets, rugs, purses and headbands and fashion fish scales into trinkets, delicate ornaments and artificial flowers for sale to tourists."

During the early 30s many lots belonging to

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owners who couldn't pay special assessments for streets and sidewalks built during the boom were sold at auction by the town; however, no homes were lost because of these tax liens.

After the early 1940s Riviera began to experience marked growth. The population jumped from 1,981 to 4,065, an increase of 104.9%, from 1940 to 1950. In 1940 the town purchased 1,000 feet of beach on Singer Island for \$40,000. This led to the further growth of tourism in Riviera and eventually to the incorporation of the south end of Singer Island (excluding Palm Beach Shores). In 1941 the town changed its name to Riviera Beach. In 1949 the wooden bridge to the island was replaced with a cement and steel bridge.



19. Riviera Gospel Hall at W. 15th St. and Ave. E in the early 40s.

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The 1950s brought increased growth to Riviera Beach; the population grew to 13,036, a whopping 221.2% increase from 1950 to 1960. The development by Frank J. Lewis of an industrial park at Old Dixie Highway and Blue Heron Boulevard attracted light industry. Singer Island began to develop as a resort area of hotels and condominiums drawing many winter residents to the area. In 1959 the town of Riviera Beach officially became the City of Riviera Beach. The city built a new police station, library and recreation halls and put into operation a water treatment system.

During the 1960s population growth slowed, although the increase of 64 percent was more than double the rate of increase in the county as a whole. By 1970 the population was 21,401, and the estimated population for 1976 varies from 26,000 to 29,000.

The '50s and '60s also saw a marked change in the racial composition of the city. The black population, always an integral part of the community, increased from 23 percent in 1950 to 52.9 percent in 1970. The first black councilman, F. Malcolm Cunningham, was elected in 1962.

Nineteen seventy-six the Bicentennial year is significant for Riviera Beach as well as for the nation since it brings the completion of the new Blue Heron Bridge to Singer Island, the widening

and landscaping of Blue Heron Boulevard, the construction of an attractive boardwalk and the development of the Ocean Mall at the city beach, and the creation of the Bicentennial Park at Avenue C between 14th and 15th Streets.

The Bicentennial Park has been the main project of the Bicentennial Commission of Riviera Beach. It is singularly appropriate that the park should be located within the old town site along the lakefront where Charles Newcomb intended a park to be over 60 years ago. Proceeds from the sale of this history will contribute to the development of the park.



20. Bicentennial Park at Ave. C and 14th St.

# THE CITY COUNCIL OF RIVIERA BEACH

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ROBERT H. DODD, CHAIRMAN PRO TEM

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HENRY A. TAYLOR, COUNCILMAN

CLAUDE T. TOLBERT, JR., COUNCILMAN

DR. RICHARD G. ORMAN, CITY MANAGER

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Mr. & Mrs. John Atkinson  
Harold & Mary Jo Baker & Children  
Mrs. Jack Beaumont  
"Congratulations" Henry & Gertrude Burney  
Irene Carr  
Allan V. Everard, City Attorney  
Mrs. Gerald L. Fitzgerald  
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Mary Miller  
Newcomb Hall Recreation Staff - Ruth Taber &  
George Webb  
Mr. & Mrs. Antonio Ortiz  
Mr. & Mrs. Johnnie Phillips  
George W. Pinckney  
The J. A. Pinder Folks  
Mr. & Mrs. Stephen Jon Postal  
Patrolman David L. Robbins  
Albert Summerlot (West Palm Beach)  
Buzz & Dorothy Taylor  
Odell & Nanette Thomas & Barry, Marc & Valerie  
Dagle & Helen Tooke  
Joyce Fitzgerald Woods

## A HISTORY OF THE EARLY SCHOOLS IN RIVIERA BEACH

The first settlers of the Riviera area, then called Oak Lawn, sent their children to school in Mangonia, a community to the south of Riviera around what is now 47th Street in the Northwood section of West Palm Beach. This "Westside School House" was located on the lakefront and in use before 1891. The September 30, 1891, issue of "The Tropical Sun" reports the beginning of the winter session and that Rev. Emmanuel Heyser of Oak Lawn would serve as teacher.

In June, 1895, a group of "colored citizens in the vicinity of Riviera" petitioned the county school board for a school house. The group offered to donate a quarter acre of land for that purpose. The offer of land was evidently not accepted, but in Sept. 1895, the school board offered to place a teacher at Riviera on the condition that the petitioners find a suitable building for use as a school.

The school board minutes for January 7, 1896, notes that 19 pupils were attending the Riviera School. George S. Rowley was serving as superintendent and in March 1896 was replaced by A. S. Knowles. It has not been determined where this school was located or how long it functioned.

School board minutes do not mention Riviera again until 1911 when arrangements were discussed

for transporting a few pupils from Riviera by wagon to the West Palm Beach school.

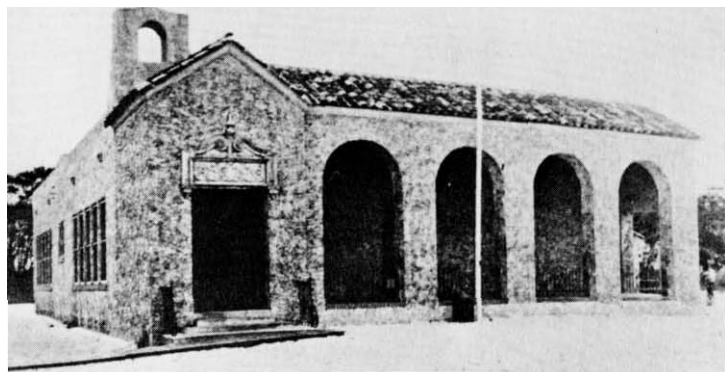
In June 1918 a delegation from "the community near Lake Worth Inlet" requested a school for the 20 children living in the area. They were told a teacher would be supplied if they could secure a building for use as a school house. The school seems to have been established and may have been the one thought to have existed on Singer Island. W. G. Knowles is listed in the school board minutes as the attendance officer for the Inlet school in 1919.

In September, 1921, a delegation from Riviera asked for the establishment of a school in Inlet Grove. A lot for this school was offered by the Perry Realty Company. The Inlet Grove School was finished by October, 1921. It was a one-room wooden school house which stood on the northwest corner of what is now 15th Street and Avenue E. All grades were taught by one teacher.

Again in March, 1924, a delegation from Riviera approached the school board. They reminded the board that several years earlier, C. N. Newcomb had offered to donate five lots on what is now 12th Street and Avenue E for a school site. They stated there were 25 children ready for school in Riviera. The board voted to accept the Mr. Newcombs' offer and in June, 1925, preliminary plans for the Riviera

School were approved. The Riviera School was a one-story stucco building. Mrs. Hazel Nordin was appointed principal in November, 1927. By 1928 Riviera School had five teachers and 170 pupils. Sometime after 1928 a second story was added and the building now serves as part of Riviera Beach Elementary School. After the construction of the Riviera School, the Inlet Grove School was used for the primary grades, for community purposes and for the services of several local churches until it was destroyed in the 1928 hurricane.

From school board minutes it appears that a school was also established about this time in the Aquarium Building on Broadway between 11th and 12th Streets which also served as the first town hall. Riviera children who had been attending elementary school in Kelsey City (Lake Park) were transferred to "the school to be opened in the Town Hall beginning January 4, 1926."



21. The Riviera School, 1924.

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## PORT OF PALM BEACH

The Port of Palm Beach plays an important role in the economy of Riviera Beach and Palm Beach County. The port came into being in 1915 when the state legislature created a special taxing district known as the Lake Worth Inlet District, for the purpose of dredging a channel to the ocean and constructing a harbor and dock facilities. The survey to locate the channel was conducted by Isham Randolph, a civil engineer famed for having reversed the course of the Chicago River. The first Port Commissioners, Dr. H. C. Hood, G. L. Gray, and E. E. Geer were elected by county residents in August 1915. In August 1916, a bond issue for \$200,000 to dredge the inlet was approved. Randolph proposed the location of the present inlet; two small jetties were built and the inlet dredged to a depth of 4 feet at low tide. Nineteen seventeen saw the first small schooners enter port carrying a few tons of freight from the islands. Constant shoaling, however, prevented large ships from using the port.

A second bond issue was passed in 1920 and in 1921 the Andersen Dredging Company's drill boat "Hercules" began deepening the channel. The Waldeck-Deal dredging firm from Miami took over the project in 1923.

The inlet was deepened to 16 feet and the

turning basin enlarged. A bulkhead, slip and terminal facilities with railroad and highway connections was established.

In December, 1925, the Lake Chelan, the first oceangoing cargo ship, entered port and established regular service.

The arrival of "The Mary Weems," the first passenger ship to enter port on January 3, 1927, occasioned a celebration in Riviera; yachts, speedboats and airplanes escorted her into the harbor and hundreds of residents gathered on the pier to cheer Capt. William D. Brooks, Pilot James Deal, Mason L. Weems Williams, president of the steamship company, and the arriving passengers and crew. The Mary Weems established passenger service from the port to New York. The same winter the S. S. New Northland began passenger service to Nassau and Havana.

At the height of the land boom in 1926, General George Goethals builder of the Panama Canal, was hired as consultant for the further development of the port. A 3.5 million dollars bond issue was sold and work had just started under General Goethals when the boom collapsed; when the bank holding port funds failed, the \$3.5 million was lost and General Goethals plans for development of the port were brought to a standstill.

The end of the boom reduced the port to a pleasure boat harbor with only the Merchant and



22. An oceangoing freighter and a pleasure yacht berthed in the Port of Palm Beach, 1928.

Miners Transportation Company still operating its weekly freight service along the coast.

The 1928 hurricane dealt the port another blow. The September 19, 1928, issue of the Palm Beach Post describes the scene left by the hurricane:

"The inlet terminal docks were strewn with wreckage, but though half the planking of the docks was gone the pier stood firm. The Merchants and Miners office was partially intact, but the sheet iron sheds were a mass of wreckage. Although no official check was made it was not estimated that the slip was damaged materially. The tug Moorehaven lay sunk within the slip. Another freak of the storm was noted where two new cars just arrived from the northern points stood unhurt amidst warehouse wreckage."

The Merchants and Miners loaned the port

\$60,000 to rebuild the warehouse and complete slip #1.

In 1935 the federal government took over maintenance of the jetties and channel, and dredged the inlet to a depth of 20 feet.

World War Two, which caused some ports to boom, curtailed use of the Port of Palm Beach, which was not geographically situated to handle war goods and could not accommodate the new, larger ships.

In 1946 the West India Fruit and Steamship Company, owned and operated by Dan Taylor, began car ferry service to Havana. The Old Grand Haven, a Great Lakes freighter rebuilt to carry railroad cars and four other West India ferries, increased port tonnage records. Termination of trade with Cuba in the early 60s sharply reduced port revenue.

In 1948 the channel was again deepened to permit oil tankers to enter harbor. The port was dredged to its present depth of 35 feet in 1967. It now serves as a terminal for the export of general cargo, molasses, and furfural, and the import of bunker oil, cement, newsprint and general cargo. Over 1,200 ships arrive and depart each year serving ports in Florida, the Bahamas, the Caribbean, South America, Europe and Japan. More than 1.2 million tons of cargo are transported each year.

The Port Authority is soon to begin work on a \$1.5 million development project in Layton's Park

on the site where the Oak Lawn Hotel once stood.

## PEANUT ISLAND

In 1918 spoil from the dredging of the new inlet was deposited on one of the shoals in the old inlet and a sand island created. It was briefly called Hood's Island in honor of Dr. H. C. Hood, the first chairman of the Port Commission.

Picnickers arriving by boat took an immediate liking to it and had to be discouraged with "no trespassing" signs so that spoil could continue to be dumped without endangering lives.

In the early 20s the island was known both as Inlet Island and Parker's Island. H. P. Parker, who is said to have worked at the Port, lived there at that time.

There are two versions of how the name "Peanut Island" originated. One is that a county commissioner, Gus Jordahn, referred to the island during a commission meeting "as not worth peanuts." The other version is that the W. H. Brown Pulp Company intended to start a peanut farm near Belle, Glade and to build a processing factory on the ~~island which would then be known as "Peanut Island."~~

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Mr. C. Leonard Griffin  
Miss Edith Newcomb  
Mr. V. R. Strain  
Mrs. Dorothy Theroux

#### INFORMATION FROM:

Mr. Joel M. Baskin  
Mr. Harry Carroll  
Mrs. June Gamash  
Mr. Uriah Knowles  
Mr. Arnold Pinder  
Mr. & Mrs. Maxwell Pinder  
Mrs. Eliza Taylor  
Mr. Howard Webb



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RIVIERA BEACH VOTERS' LEAGUE  
BY Gertrude Burney

The Riviera Beach Voters' League, a branch of the Palm Beach County Voters' League, was organized in 1952 by Mr. Arthur Brown. In 1950 a housing development known as the Veterans' project was built. The water supply was from a supporting well. Each residence was guaranteed a \$2.50 per month water bill by city council ordinance. By 1952 the water bills had increased as much as \$35 per month. These irregularities disturbed citizens who decided that something must be done. Mass meetings were called at the Pleasant Heights Baptist Church by Mr. Brown. From these meetings the Riviera Beach Voters' League came into being as a result of the merger of three groups. The following officers were elected: President, Arthur Brown; Vice President, Henry McKenny; Secretary, Gertrude Burney; Assistant Secretary, Emma Hudson; Treasurer, Ethel Harvey. An Executive Board was added: Chairman, C. C. Harvey; Co-chairman, Clifford Carey; Secretary, Rosa Mack; Assistant Secretary, Elizabeth Daniels.

Mr. Brown told us that the purpose of the Voters' League was to organize politically and qualify electors who are interested in men and measures and the general welfare of the citizens

of the community. "You must let your voice be heard at the polls with your votes," he said. We co-ordinated the community and each block had a captain. Persons were deputized to work at the polls.

The Inlet City Progressive League had been organized in 1944. Since its members had grown older and were unable to attend meetings, Mrs. Alice Mathis, spokesman and secretary, asked that the Inlet City Progressive League join with the Riviera Beach Voters' League. It was felt that with their experience and our physical strength we would be able to do a better job together. We merged in unity.

We were then instrumental in getting the city commission to hire blacks in various departments of the city because we attended council meetings and made recommendations to the council. The whole city became concerned.

In 1961 we ran our first black candidate for councilman, but we were not successful until 1962 when we were victorious in electing attorney F. Malcolm Cunningham to the council. When he was elected, the city had separate facilities; this was changed immediately. We have continued to make progress in all city functions. We have elected Bobbie Brooks the first black mayor of Riviera Beach, and three black councilmen, James Jones,

Henry Taylor and Claude Tolbert.

We are proud of the leaders who have led and served us in the Riviera Beach Voters' League.

#### SOME PRESIDENTS AND VICE-PRESIDENTS:

Mr. C. A. Applewhite  
Mr. Bobbie Brooks  
Mr. Arthur Brown  
Mr. F. Malcolm Cunningham  
Mr. T. B. Engram  
Mr. Charles N. Gainey  
At present Mr. George McClain  
Mr. Frank L. Sampson

#### SECRETARIES:

Present: Mrs. Gertrude Burney  
Howard Campbell  
Dessie Christian  
Elizabeth Daniels  
Ethel Engram  
Leola H. Graham  
Merry Herring  
Emma Hudson  
Rosa Mack  
Alice Mathis  
Violet Renalds  
Lillie P. Stanley

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Mrs. Gertrude Burney  
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We had many loyal supporters which are too numerous to mention. All of our accomplishments have been made with the help of God and all of the citizens of our community.

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HAPPY BIRTHDAY U.S.A.

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