

B7 Tom Peterson

REACHING FOR UTOPIA: THE ORIGINS
OF THE LIBERTY SQUARE HOUSING PROJECT

"This project will be one of the greatest blessings that Miami ever had. It will not only eliminate the possibility of fatal epidemics here, but fix it so we can get a servant freed from disease."

John Gramling, October 17, 1934

To contend that the origins of the Liberty Square public housing project signal the origins of contemporary federal urban policy in America is to exaggerate slightly. But only slightly.

On June 16, 1936 - almost precisely fifty years ago - the Secretary of the Department of the Interior, Harold Ickes, affixed his initials to the memorandum approving the name "Liberty Square" for one of the three first public housing projects ever constructed by the federal government. The dedication of the nearly completed project three months later, and less than a year after the dedications of the Montgomery and Cleveland projects which were begun simultaneously with Liberty Square, marked the culmination of nearly three years of an often tumultuous struggle between those for and against the creation of a new public entity- public housing.

This summer we mark the fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Liberty Square and of public housing in America. The tumult and the struggle persist.

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The first administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt was barely nine months old, and the legislation of the first Hundred Days just enacted, when in December of 1933 Miami attorney John Gramling and six other professionals formed the Southern Housing Corporation for the purpose of developing a "negro colony" on 120 acres of land on Miami's northern outskirts. Their purpose was to take advantage of just-enacted New Deal legislation creating the US Reconstruction Finance Corporation providing low-interest loans for slum clearance and construction of housing for low-income groups.

The dedication of Liberty Square three years later would be almost entirely attributable to the persistence and commitment of one man in Miami, John Gramling, and to the courage of another man in Washington, an Undersecretary for Housing in the Public Works Administration by the name of Angelo Clas. That the men were in all respects dissimilar, with Gramling a former Judge and member of the downtown establishment born of the

Southern aristocracy and Clas a middle western architect who would exit the New Deal as abruptly as he had entered after a career in government that lasted barely four years, enhances the drama. That Gramling's motives were without doubt less than totally altruistic, and more than a little paternalistic, in no way lessens it.

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The application of the Southern Housing Corporation to the Public Works Administration stated the problem:

The only site on which a negro might live in the city of Miami is in what now is known as negrotown in the heart of Miami. That area consists of 343 acres of land and according to the United States census of 1930, there were 25,116 colored persons living in that area. This population is living in one story negro shacks and there are from three to fifteen shacks on a city lot of 50'x 150'. The sanitary conditions are a menace to the whole city. The living conditions are inconceivable and are a shame and disgrace to the responsible citizens of Miami. This area is principally owned by white people who have erected these small shacks and get exhorbitant rent from them so that they pay for themselves every two or three years... Many houses have no toilets connected with the house, no bathrooms, nor bathing facilities...

The principal concern, stated emphatically and repeatedly in correspondence from Miami to Washington as well as in the press, was the threat of servants transmitting disease to the homes in which they were employed. John Gramling, in one of his innumerable letters to the PWA wrote of the incidence of tuberculosis in the negro quarters, adding "From this cesspool os disease the white people of Greater Miami draw their servants" and the newspaper Miami Friday Night, on January 20, 1934, spoke in no uncertain terms:

The people who hire negroes in their homes should come forth with their protest. A protest against allowing the maid that cares for their children, the cook that prepares their food, and the wash woman that does their clothes, from bringing into their homes the disease germs that flourish in the present negro district.

Two days later a Miami Herald editorial, apparently in step with the Southern Housing application submitted to Washington two weeks earlier, echoed the health concern:

Lovers of Miami have long decried the condition

in which the colored people here are compelled to live. Attention has been led, frequently, to conditions that are not only a source of embarrassment but are actually a health menace to the entire population... With the help of the PWA it might be possible that conditions in colored town could be materially improved...

This concern regarding sanitary conditions, apparently rooted in the possibility of the infection of whites, permeates the early history of Liberty Square.

Two years later, in the summer of 1936 with construction of the project well under way, the concern recurs in the context of kitchen facilities. "The tenants of the project", wrote Clarence Coe who headed the Advisory Committee established to oversee construction and tenant selection, "if within the proper income group, will in many cases desire to do washing for people outside of the project. It is the belief of the Committee that the stationary tubs in the kitchen of each apartment would not be sufficient or satisfactory to carry out such work in any volume".

Later that same year, now in the context of tenant selection, Coe wrote that "Many of the employers of domestic help have personally made request that quarters in the project be reserved for their help". Health certificates, said Coe, would be required as part of the tenant application process.

Another requirement in the admission process in retrospect may well have been more of a burden to the incoming tenants. "Fumigation and extermination for household goods of incoming tenants", wrote the Director of Housing for the PWA in a letter to Miami chemical companies requesting bids, would be a requirement. Two companies suggested cyanide. A third, alluding to the dangers of cyanide, suggested a more expensive alternative. On the basis of cost, the Director chose cyanide.

Concerns relating to infectious diseases may also have doomed the swimming pool which was included in the blueprints for Liberty Square but which was never constructed. Dr. Marvin Smith, a physician on the Advisory Board, suggested in early 1936 that a swimming pool represented a risk of the transmission of syphilis and that such a facility should not be included at Liberty Square. Although Angelo Clas at the PWA in Washington expressed incredulity and countered with the opinion of a government expert ("Dr. Von Derlehr was very much surprised at Dr. Smith's statement... He further said that he had never yet heard of syphilitic infection from a swimming pool."), the local view prevailed and there is no swimming pool.

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As the new year 1934 began, John Gramling's ducks appeared to be in a row. In addition to the support of the press, his application for a low interest loan included letters of support from the Miami Chamber of Commerce, the Publisher of the Miami Herald, the "business and professional colored men of the City of Miami", the Juvenile Court Judge, Walter Beckham ("My work as Judge of the Juvenile Court leads me to believe that better housing conditions for this group of people would serve to greatly reduce delinquency and dependency among negroes and would tend to make and create better citizens."), as well as the Sheriff.

On January 18 Gramling confidently wrote to the Division of Housing that "The only ones that are opposed to the project are a very few white people who own a large number of shacks in colored town".

In early March, however, Gramling was suddenly told by the representative of the Division of Housing with whom he had been corresponding that all allocated funds had been committed and that the Southern Housing Corporation application would be held on file until further notice. This temporary setback coincided with a decision by the Public Works Administration to shift its approach to low-income housing from the private sector oriented limited-dividend approach that had attracted the Southern Housing application to a direct federal role.

Although the description may or may not have applied to the Gramling group's initiative, Harold Ickes would write of the original limited-dividend initiative: "More than 500 applications were received, but only a few merited serious attention. Many were frank attempts to sell the government vacant land in high tax areas, while others were of a purely speculative nature. It quickly became obvious that our much vaunted private initiative, as so often happens when the goal is a social good instead of a private profit, was unable or unwilling to undertake the job".

John Gramling's weekly letters to Washington now became daily. His reaction was to show additional community support for the project. Imploring the PWA to "state from whom we should have petitions" he proceeded to submit one from the City of Miami Commission and another from the State Housing Board in Tallahassee. For three weeks in April his correspondence went unanswered and the Liberty Square project appeared dead before it had begun.

By June, however, it is apparent that John Gramling's persistence had prevailed and the project is revived as a direct federal housing project. By this point in time the Southern Housing group had apparently purchased the land and, although their potential for profit probably had lessened by virtue of the government's change of approach, they would nonetheless stand to gain

by the sale of the land to the United States although no longer in a position to develop the property themselves. On July 19, 1934, an internal memo within the PWA's Housing Division recommending that "the project be immediately considered for Federal housing, as there seem to be no items which would hinder action" is approved.

In fact there remained a very formidable item which could, and which would, hinder action. John Gramling's relief during the latter part of 1934 proved to be only a lull before the racial storm of 1935.

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In 1935 Liberty City was a small and isolated black enclave which was located north of 62d street and west of seventeenth avenue. The area to the east of Liberty City was sparsely settled by whites although the density substantially increased to the east, between Miami-Edison High School, then all-white, and Biscayne Bay. Blacks did not live to the east of seventeenth avenue.

In the spring of that year, after several months of silence during which time the government proceeded with the process of acquisition of the property, white opposition to negroes residing east of seventeenth avenue flared in the form of the Nor'West League, headed by Roger Herndon and a vocal constituency who wired President Roosevelt on behalf of "hundreds of families to who booms, hurricanes, banks and the Depression have left nothing but their modest homes." "Won't you", they implored the President "help us - the not-so-rich folks of the rural northwest area of Miami?" warning that extending the negro area east "would cause infinite racial strife and bloodshed".

The Nor'West League in early July generated a petition bearing the signatures of 2600 white property owners which they circulated widely and effectively. Florida Senators Frank Trammel and Duncan Fletcher, as well as Representative W.J. Sears and A.B. Wilcox, upon receiving the petitions, expressed their reservations regarding the project in separate communications to the Department of the Interior. The Nor'West League was joined by a second group opposed to the project, the Colored Town Protective League.

Suddenly and decisively on the defensive, John Gramling wrote of the petition drive to the Division of Housing on July 12 that Roger Herndon "took with him about 20 ne'er do wells" as well as paid workers to gather the petitions. Of the Colored Town Protective League he wrote "It is their business to keep the negroes in the filthy little hole where they are now, so they may extort from them every dollar of their hard earned

wages".

The protest continued to generate momentum, however, when on July 12 the County Commission adopted a Resolution opposing the project as did the City of Miami Commission the following month, notwithstanding their Resolution in support of the project passed in the less turbulent atmosphere of 1934.

The opposition took the Division of Housing by surprise, and work on the project came to a halt during the spring and summer of 1935. A memo signed by the Director of the Division, Horatio Hackett tersely announced "This project has been temporarily suspended. It has been decided to cease all work on it until further notice." Reacting quickly, Gramling wrote Hackett "I heard today that the project had been killed. If the trouble is on account of that fellow Herndon who got a lot of signatures to a petition, I can have a counter-petition signed by real people and about half of those who signed the Herndon petition... Not only that, these people do not live near the negro settlement."

But the project appeared dead in the water once again. A rally with attendance reported at 500 gathered to protest the project at Miami-Edison High School. No editorials or statements of support from elected officials were to be heard as spring turned to summer. Officials, such as the Mayor of Miami, who had previously been supportive, went on record now as being opposed.

In Washington Angelo Clas replaced Horatio Hackett as Director of the Division of Housing just two weeks after Hackett's memo terminating operations.

On May 22 Clas wrote to an official in Miami that "During the last week our representatives have been in Miami and believe that the project will not be retarded further." In June he wrote to Representative Spires that "after a careful analysis and consideration of all objections, there seems to be no valid reason for changing the site".

Clearly, Gramling had a sympathetic ear in Washington. When the Miami attorney attributed the passage of the County Commission Resolution to vested interests on the part of some Commission members, Clas quickly asked for details: "If these statements are to be validly used, they must be substantiated with irrefutable data. Please obtain evidence to substantiate these statements, so that we may be in a position to use them".

In July Clas reacted to the apparent fickleness of the City of Miami Commission in a letter to its Clerk responding to the Resolution opposing the project: "I am somewhat puzzled by the resolution in view of the repeated assurances of approval given to representatives of this Division by Mayor Fosey and Commissioners Sewall and Rigby".

That same week he delivered an ultimatum to the Nor'West League:

I am so firmly convinced of the justice of our carefully and deeply considered decision that I can see only two alternatives in this matter. One, that the project proceed on its present site; or two, that the project be abandoned and that Miami lose the benefit of the substantial sum which will be expended, and the great benefit to local labor and the building industry in general.

Copies of the letter were sent to Senators Fletscher and Trammell and to Representatives Sears and Wilcox. Clas had tossed the gauntlet and dangled the carrot. The politicians were silent and the Nor'West League would fold its tents by autumn.

In late August Gramling wrote to Clas "I do hope that the little handful of objectors will not deter you from such a wonderful work", and Clas replied by return mail "I have no further concern for the unreasonable objections of a small group whose legitimate interests cannot possibly be affected by our activity. I wish again to express my appreciation of your courageous stand and consistent devotion to the project".

Today negotiations such as those which culminated in the origins of Liberty Square would have been facilitated by air travel and what would be lost in written documentation would be compensated for in face-to-face communication. Although the files suggest that Gramling visited Washington in early 1934 and that Clas vacationed in Miami in late 1935, there is no evidence that the two men ever met. Clas would serve as Director of Housing for only one year and would leave government completely within one year. Sadly, his name does not appear on the tarnished plaque that now hangs outside the project community center.

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The opposition now silent, it was full speed ahead in 1936. A new player, his parochial shortcomings scarcely hidden, was Clarence Coe, the local District Manager appointed by the PWA Housing Division to implement the construction and tenant selection process in Miami.

At the first meeting of the Miami Advisory Committee on Housing, which body included such luminaries as Dr. Marvin Smith who was to expound the theory of the transmission of venereal disease which doomed the swimming pool, the minutes reflect the initial consideration of the selection of the Project Manager:

The duties of a manager of the project were discussed in that he should possess mechanical knowledge as to the installation of equipment, be his own auditor, select the tenants and see that they are comfortably situated and provided with various facilities, satisfactorily handle numerous operating agreements with municipal authorities. Colonel Coe assured the committee that the manager would be a white man.

Two weeks later, emphasizing the latter point, Coe wrote to Angelo Clas "You will note also again the Advisory Board have placed themselves as definitely on record as being opposed to a colored manager of the 62d street project".

Coe's evident sensitivity regarding this point may have been inspired by the presence in his office of a black intern by the name of James E. Scott, a World War I veteran referred to tangentially in correspondence as "the colored student attending the management school". It apparently did not escape notice that Scott would be a logical person to play a role in the new housing project soon to be opened.

Nor did the absence of black input into the entire process totally escape attention. Discussion of the appointment of a black advisory group began during the spring of 1936, as construction of the 236 unit project neared completion.

Coe's attention appears to have been far more drawn to form than substance in creating this body:

There are good psychological reasons why the name 'colored' or 'negro' should be left off in designating the membership of this Board, and by bringing the Housing Manager in between would prevent any contact between the two Boards except such as the Housing Director may deem necessary.

In making this recommendation to H.A. Gray, the new Director of Housing who replaced Angelo Clas in August, Coe generously attributed his inspiration to John Gramling and another member of the Advisory Board, W.A. Burrell: "Both Mr. Gramling and Mr. Burrell were born in the black belt of the south and are perhaps, in my opinion, better qualified to advise us as to how a situation as this should be handled than anyone else I know."

The black advisory group was appointed and was to consist of John Culmer, chairman, Kelsey Pharr, Dr. W.B. Sawyer, Charles Thompson and, after some hesitation, attorney T.R. Toomey. Their assigned task was to name the project.

Whatever reservations delayed Mr. Toomey's addition to the advisory process failed to curb his enthusiasm for his task. He promptly wrote to Gray in Washington that his group had decided upon "Utopia" as first choice and "Toomeyville" as second. Gray wrote back that "Utopia" was too general and that, while Toomey was to be applauded for the high esteem in which he was evidently held by his peers, the name selected should not be that of a living person.

The final name selection was made thereafter by the Coe group, apparently without much further regard for the input of the black advisors. Dr. Smith, who had earlier propounded his theory of the transmission of syphilis, produced the name "Liberty Square":

The argument which decided the name Liberty Square was that Liberty City was a well-known name in Miami, that this project is within the limits of Liberty City (sic) and it was the thought of the Advisory Board that the name 'Square' would in a certain way separate the project itself from the remainder of Liberty City which will, no doubt, completely surround the project after complete development is made.

Added to the rationale was the fact that once the project was expanded to the east of fourteenth avenue, it would occupy a complete square.

The task of naming the project now behind it, the Advisory Committee turned its attention to the dedication ceremony, and to the bronze plaque that would be part of the observance.

The dedication ceremony had been originally set for January of 1936 and it had been hoped that Harold Ickes himself might attend. The date was later postponed and reset for October 15, at which time the project would be substantially complete, less the refrigerators, ranges and the landscaping.

In September John Gramling suggested to Gray a date in November or December, when tourists would be present in large numbers, and added "but if it is going to help the Administration to have it before election then, of course by all means it should be held even though the project is not yet completed".

Gray politely replied that the election was not a consideration, that the project belonged to the people of Miami and that tourists, for that reason, should not be a consideration. The dedication ceremony, needless to say, occurred before the completion, before the plaque, and before the election.

Colonel Coe apparently had some difficulty with arranging for speakers. He wrote Gray "I am discussing the matter with Mayor Fossey and it may be possible to work this out as a city function. However, the project being outside the City of Miami it might make it desirable to have the dedication handled by the Dade County Commission. Several of the members are not favorably disposed toward the project".

Mayor Fossey, then under Grand Jury indictment for perjury, spoke at the uncompleted site on the windy afternoon of October 15, 1936. The words of the Mayor, dedicating a site which he had opposed in a resolution a year earlier and which was nevertheless located outside of his city, have been lost to posterity. No doubt John Gramling's prediction a week earlier that the Mayor would be glad to deliver an address "in order to create ambition and aspiration in the negroes to live in such a wholesome, refined and educational center" provides an accurate summary of what was in fact said.

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Unlike the dedication ceremony, there would be no rush to complete the bronze plaque which today adorns the east wall of the community center facing forteenth avenue.

First mentioned in 1935 it would not be ready for the dedication in October of 1936. It would not in fact be ready until 1939, when the Division of Housing had been abolished in favor of the new US Department of Housing. The original date to have been inscribed had been "1935". This was changed to the present inscription of "1935-1938" which gives the dates not of the construction of Liberty Square, but rather of the construction of the plaque, which took twice as long to complete as did the housing project.

Reasons for the delay are suggested in the correspondence from Coe to the Division of Housing.

Relative to the role of John Gramling and the black advisory group, he wrote to Angelo Clas "I hardly know what title to give him for if there was anyone who was the originator of the project it would be John C. Gramling... I am wondering if it would be desirable to have the names of the colored advisory board placed upon this tablet".

Clas responded "I should very much like to have Judge Gramling's name included on the tablet, because I know he is the one man in Miami who is responsible for the existence of the project... I am perfectly willing for the names of the Negro Committee to be included on the tablet if that is the wish of

the Committee..."

Six weeks later Gray had replaced Clas as Director of Housing. Coe, perhaps betraying a streak of opportunism, wrote to his new supervisor that it would be appropriate to place Gray's name, either with or without that of Clas, upon the tablet. After consultation with the Division, Gray responded that his own name would only appear on sites commenced after his having taken the position of Director and that the tablet should bear the name of Angelo Clas.

It would be more than two years before the tablet's completion. It bears neither Gray's name nor that of Angelo Clas, but rather that of the man who succeeded both of them.

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By the beginning of February, 1937, thirty-six tenants were living at Liberty Square. On February 11 the first baby born in a public housing project in the United States was born there, at 6228 N.W. 14 Avenue, to George and Maggie Lambert.

The baby boy was given the name Leclair Gray Lambert, Leclair for the middle name of Interior Secretary Harold Ickes and Gray for the Director of Housing. Mr. and Mrs. Lambert conclude their letter to Mr. Gray by adding to the birth announcement "We must also add that we are very pleased with our new home".

Today Leclair Lambert is forty-nine years of age and lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where he works as a museum curator. While aware that he was the first child born in Liberty Square, he was not aware that he was the first child ever born in public housing. He is a historian and is delighted to hear that there is an interest in commemorating this fiftieth anniversary of his birthplace. He has suggestions for funding from historical associations and is anxious to attend.

Maggie Lambert, his mother, became a school teacher and George, his father, was a parks manager for the City of Miami. Colored parks, of course. They are both deceased. His only sibling, a sister, teaches school in Los Angeles. The Lamberts, like many of the original residents of Liberty Square who became professionals, were forced to move out in the late 1940's because their income levels were too high.

All of the original families who came to Liberty Square in 1936-1937 were two-parent families and all were employed. Today less

than one family with children out of twenty is a two-parent household and the unemployment rate in the project is about seventy-five percent. 6228 N.W. 14 Court looks much the same today as it did when Leclair Lambert lived there, albeit very run-down. But today the tenant is an unemployed single woman raising a ten-year old daughter on an annual income of \$3,250. Far from Utopia, Liberty Square today provides a showcase for the urban phenomenon labeled the "feminization of poverty".

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Angelo Clas died, in Honolulu where he lived the last twenty years of his life, in 1970. His daughter today resides in Chevy Chase, Maryland. His few years in the Roosevelt administration, she recalls, were something of an anomaly. He was an architect all of his life and has left buildings of architectural significance in Milwaukee, in Washington D.C. and Maryland, where he returned to his profession after leaving the PWA, as well as in Hawaii. He was a Fellow in the American Architectural Institute.

Nowhere is Liberty Square included as one of his edifices. His daughter does not recognize the name or the place.

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John Gramling died in Miami in 1967 at the age of 78. He was a pioneer here, coming from Alabama in 1902. His wife Irene is still alive and still lives in the home, near Twelfth Avenue and Coral Way, in which they lived fifty years ago. They had several children who are deceased or long since moved away, the nearest in Savannah being a daughter named Claire Alice.

Neither Irene nor Claire Alice recall very much about the origins of Liberty Square and none of his files or correspondence survive.

But they both clearly recall their father's reasons for becoming involved. Floyd Davis was a very substantial land owner who owned most of what is Liberty City today as well as property stretching from Broward County to the Keys. John Gramling was his attorney whose function it was to facilitate the sale of much of this land and it was this relationship that was to inspire the formation of the Southern Housing venture. The 1933 application to the federal government does not mention Floyd Davis and states that the land which was to become Liberty Square belonged to a "midwestern land company". Property records reveal the information in the Southern Housing application to be at least misleading and none of the surviving files of correspondence in the National Archives mention the relationship between Davis and Gramling.

None of John Gramling's survivors express interest in attending an observance of the founding of Liberty Square this summer. It is all so very long ago and they are all too old to travel.

They ask whether the project is near where the trouble occurred in May of 1930. And they recall that John Gramling did get his name on a plaque, although they do not know what became of it.

The plaque is on the wall outside the community center at Liberty Square. Moone knows its history or its significance. The bronze is so worn and tarnished that the words can hardly be made out.

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