

# THE ORIGINS OF MIAMI'S LIBERTY CITY

by

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Liberty City — most Americans know of it only as the scene of the worst urban ghetto riot since the 1960s. Three days of rioting in May 1980 left 18 dead and property damage of more than \$200 million. Television brought the riot into the living rooms of the American people — terrifying images of smoke and flames, random violence and killing, and police confrontations with rampaging blacks. Numerous post-riot analyses attempted to probe the underlying causes of the Miami racial explosion.<sup>1</sup> But few sought to explain the historical forces and political dynamics which brought Liberty City into being in the first place. Based on long-buried federal housing records in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., this article attempts to do just that.

The chief — and surprising — finding is that Liberty City had its origins in 1934 as a single New Deal housing project for blacks, and that its location was determined by Miami's downtown civic elite, who hoped to eliminate the area of black settlement near the central business district.

It is one of the axioms of twentieth-century urban history that President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal forged a new relationship between the federal government and the cities. Traditional interpretations emphasize the positive aspects of the new federal interest in the cities — the vast array of programs for urban reform and urban development. Recent historical research, however, has begun to sketch out a somewhat

different analysis, one which suggests that New Deal urban programs had negative as well as positive consequences. For example, some urban historians have demonstrated that New Deal work and welfare programs actually strengthened rather than dismantled the old political machines. Others have concluded that New Deal city planners relentlessly promoted the automobile culture, while simultaneously undermining mass transit systems. Still other historians have noted the New Deal's mixed record in the area of housing; slum

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clearance and public housing projects were promoted only in lukewarm fashion so as not to offend powerful advocates of the free-market economy.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while it is clear that the New Deal initiated a new era of federal-city cooperation and activism, it is now evident that this new relationship entailed unanticipated costs.

This was clearly the case in Miami during the New Deal era, particularly in housing. New Dealers, in cooperation with local political and business leaders, implemented federal public housing and mortgage programs in Miami by mid-1930s. A succession of federal housing agencies financed several public housing projects, first for blacks and then for whites. These efforts stemmed from the liberal reformist impulse of the New Deal. But because their implementation was left largely in local hands, the Miami programs had long-term and not altogether positive consequences in shaping the city's future growth and development.

New Deal housing reform began in 1933, when FDR's new Public Works Administration (PWA) launched a nationwide slum clearance and public housing program. The PWA's Housing Division first supported limited-dividend housing corporations in a number of cities, but it soon went on to direct federal housing construction. Both methods, generally, were slow in producing results, and by 1937 the PWA had initiated only seven limited-dividend projects and 49 public housing projects. In 1937 the United States Housing Authority (later reorganized as the Public Housing Administration) replaced the PWA as a provider of public housing, working through state and local housing agencies.<sup>3</sup>

Action on public housing in Miami began in late 1933, when the limited-dividend Southern Housing Corporation submitted an application to the PWA Housing Division. Organized by several leading members of the city's downtown white business elite, the Southern Housing Corporation wanted both slum clearance and low-cost housing for Miami's blacks. The project soon floundered for lack of private investment, but in 1934 the PWA decided to go ahead with a federally financed housing project.<sup>4</sup>

The need for such action on housing for blacks was compelling. By the early 1930s, most of Miami's black population of over 25,000 was crowded into a 350-

acre section just northwest of the central business district known at the time as "Colored Town." Today it is called Overtown. The area was covered over with tiny, dilapidated shacks, sometimes as many as fifteen on a single 50ft. x 100ft. lot. Most buildings lacked electricity, toilets, bathing facilities, and hot water. Municipal services were noticeable by their absence, streets were unpaved and unlit, and contagious diseases were rampant.<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, these cramped and unsanitary living conditions left much to be desired. In its application to the PWA, the Southern Housing Corporation contended that "the sanitary conditions are a menace to the whole city...and a shame and disgrace to the respectable citizens of Miami." Obviously the situation was worse for the blacks who lived there.<sup>6</sup>

Blacks were heavily concentrated in this shack town because there were few other places for them to live in Miami at the time. A small black community had been established in Coconut Grove, mainly by Bahamian blacks who came to Miami early in the twentieth century. Further north, two small black subdivisions emerged in the 1920s. At first a sparsely settled but integrated area, Brownsville, was located between Northwest 41st Street and Northwest 53rd Street and west of 27th Avenue. Developed by a white real estate man named Floyd W. Davis, another subdivision was home to a few hundred blacks in the neighborhood of Northwest 62nd Street and 17th Avenue. The New Deal housing program provided Miami's civic elite with an opportunity to do something about black housing conditions in the central Negro district, but it also had important implications for the future development of Liberty City.<sup>7</sup>

Support for the PWA housing program was widespread among Miami's business and political leadership. If the correspondence in the housing records in the National Archives is any guide, Miami attorney John C. Gramling seems to have served as the point man for the civic elite in securing federal housing in Miami. Arriving in Miami as a young man in 1898, Gramling became active in public affairs, serving first as a justice of the peace, then as city judge, county judge, and state's attorney. By the 1920s, Gramling had emerged as an important city booster. He established his own law firm and became involved in local Democratic politics, real estate development, and extensive sugar cane pro-

duction near Lake Okeechobee. As one writer put it in 1921, Gramling was "deeply interested in everything that tends to build up the city and community."<sup>8</sup> When the limited-dividend Southern Housing Corporation was organized in 1933, Gramling provided the chief motivating energy. That project failed, but Gramling remained undeterred. In a barrage of correspondence with federal officials in 1934 and 1935, Gramling argued the case for the black public housing project and, once it was approved, guided federal officials through the thickets of state and local politics.

Gramling was not the only supporter of public housing for blacks in Miami. By early 1934, the PWA project had been endorsed by the *Miami Herald* and the *Miami Daily News*, as well as the Miami City Commission and a long list of civic and business leaders, some of whom were appointed to the Miami Advisory Committee on Housing. The black community was supportive, too. The *Miami Times*, the city's black newspaper, editorialized in favor of the project. Through such groups as the Miami Colored Chamber of Commerce and the Negro Civic League, Miami's black leadership endorsed a public housing plan for blacks. As Gramling put it in a letter to Eugene H. Klaber of the PWA Housing Division, "all of our papers and best citizens are in favor of the project."<sup>9</sup>

So far, so good. The story laid out here in its essential outlines conforms to a traditional view of the federal-local relationship during the New Deal era. The New Dealers wanted to help with urban problems, and Miami's local leadership took advantage of federal largesse to improve their town. But there is another side to this story as well — one partially hidden in the PWA records and other sources in Washington. These materials address the crucial question of motivation. The evidence clearly suggests that the Miami civic elite sought to eliminate the downtown black community district. Liberty Square, the proposed black public housing project, was to be located on Northwest 62nd Street between 12th and 14th Avenues and was envisioned as the nucleus of a new and distant black community five to six miles from the city core.

Let's look at the evidence. First, the Miami civic elite was not noticeably altruistic when it came to the black community. John Gramling's hostile attitude toward blacks, for instance, was

well known. As Paul George noted in his history of the Miami police, while serving as a city judge Gramling often praised the police for clamping down on Bahamian blacks who preached or practiced racial equality.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, A. B. Small, a county judge, civic leader, and active promoter of the black housing project, expressed a fairly typical kind of paternalism toward blacks. In a 1935 letter to PWA Housing Director A. R. Clas, Small wrote: "I am one of those, being a true-bred Southern man and a descendant of slave owners, who feel that the negroes are the wards of the white people and that we ought to be very scrupulous in trying to see to it that they are given proper living conditions, and I am one of those who would do anything I can to bring this about." It was in "the best interest of the city," Small argued in his benevolent way, to build the PWA project not downtown where most of the blacks lived, but at the 62nd Street location.<sup>11</sup>

Second, Gramling and other white promoters of federal housing for blacks in Miami consistently used a public health argument as the primary justification for the black project five miles north of the city. In their correspondence with federal officials, Gramling and others repeatedly depicted the black shacktown near the business district as "a constant and deadly menace to the health of the community." Syphilis, tuberculosis, and influenza were widespread in the area. Gramling noted on numerous occasions, but it was the whites, not the blacks, that he was worried about. "From this cess-pool of disease the white people of Greater Miami draw their servants," Gramling wrote to Klaber of the PWA in February 1934. Again in October, Gramling used a similar argument: "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 that we can get a servant freed from disease."<sup>12</sup> So much for the altruism of the Miami civic elite.

Miami's white leaders worried about the oft-stated health "menace" in the black community, but they also used this argument to mask another motive. Indeed, PWA and other records clearly reveal this underlying purpose of the Miami business and political leadership — that of completely displacing the downtown black neighborhood. Writing to Klaber in February 1934, Gramling tipped his hand about the true purpose

of the new project: "The people of Miami realize that something must be done and the newspapers agree with me that it ought to be done in the manner so that we could eventually remove the entire colored populations from the dump in which they are now living."<sup>13</sup>

Opponents of the Liberty Square project — including white "Colored Town" slum lords and whites who lived near the 62nd Street location — also recognized the hidden agenda of the downtown civic elite. For example, a citizen's group called the Nor'west League deluged Washington with protests over the location of the new black housing project. According to the League, the housing program was "a secret project instigated by self-interested businessmen, real estate developers or officials ...anxious to shove its negroes anywhere to get rid of them." As Isabelle Sander-son, secretary of the Nor'west League bluntly put it in a letter to the PWA, "everybody thinks this model negro settlement idea is lovely — for somebody else's neighborhood."<sup>14</sup>

The removal of blacks from "Colored Town" would pave the way for slum clearance and the expansion of the Miami business district. Despite the depression, Miami was growing rapidly in the 1930s. The city's population rose by 64 percent from 110,637 in 1930 to 172,172 in 1940. Dade County population increased by over 87 percent during the decade. The bust was over, and if boom times were not yet fully back, tourism, real estate, building, and business were looking good.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, the business community perceived the arrival of federal slum clearance and housing programs as an opportunity for pushing out the boundaries of the central business area.

Gramling was not alone in his approach. Other Miami civic leaders were thinking along the same lines. George E. Merrick, for instance, the Coral Gables developer who had lost his fortune in the collapse of the 1920s boom, was back in Miami real estate by the mid-thirties. In a speech to the Miami Realty Board in May 1937, Merrick proposed "a complete slum clearance...effectively removing every negro family from the present city limits."<sup>16</sup>

About the same time, the Dade County Planning Council announced its "negro resettlement plan." This plan, the council asserted, was "based upon very intensive research through the best national authorities and experience, as

well as upon the consensus of the best thought on the subject here in South Florida." The idea was to cooperate with the city of Miami "in removing the entire Central Negro town to three Negro Park locations, and establishment there of three model negro towns." One of the planned communities was to be located on distant agricultural land on the Tamiami Trail west of the city limits; the plan envisioned other black communities west of Perrine to the south and west of Opa-Locka to the north. Distance was not a problem, the planning report noted, since "an exclusive negro bus line service directly from these negro areas to the heart of Miami" would be established. The Dade County Commission unanimously adopted the planning report, and it was enthusiastically endorsed as well by the *Miami Herald*.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the forces unleashed by the New Deal housing program had a dramatic and shaping impact on Miami. The availability of federal housing funds mobilized the civic elite, who saw in slum clearance a golden opportunity to push the blacks out of the downtown area. The Liberty Square project drew upon an undisguised racism among the city's decision-makers. It also generated several decades of racial tensions in the northwest area where the 243-unit project was ultimately completed in 1937.<sup>18</sup>

The seemingly simple decision to provide housing for blacks had other unanticipated consequences, too. Essentially, the Liberty Square housing project became the nucleus of a new and rapidly growing black ghetto — the enormous, sprawling 15-square mile area we know today as Liberty City. A tacit agreement among city officials, black leaders, and real estate developers designated the northwest area of Miami for future black settlement. Previously confined to the limited territory of Overtown, blacks gradually pushed out the boundaries of Liberty City, sweeping into undeveloped land as well as white working class neighborhoods on the northern fringes of Miami. As in such cities as Chicago and Detroit, the racial turnover of existing neighborhoods in Miami was a process filled with conflict and violence.<sup>19</sup>

Although smaller in population, the black central district remained as well, obviously frustrating the ambitious segregation plans of Gramling, Merrick, and the others. But the black-removal goals of the downtown business leader have never completely disappeared

from the scene. The highway building mania of the late fifties and early sixties accomplished some of the black removal program. The construction of I-95 and I-395 gouged wide paths through the center of Overtown. A single interchange on the North-South Expressway (I-95), for instance, destroyed the housing of 2,500 Overtown families in the early 1960s.<sup>20</sup>

Urban renewal programs in the 1960s provided new opportunities to achieve the same end. In a 1964 study, geographer Harold M. Rose noted that "a recently proposed urban renewal project, if instituted, would result in the elimination of this historic center of Negro settlement, which has been blamed for stifling the economic growth of the central business district."<sup>21</sup> More recently, Metro and City of Miami office buildings and parking lots have gobbled up most of southeast Overtown. The so-called Park West Project will bring upscale townhouses, trendy retail shops, and perhaps a sports arena to the eastern fringes of Overtown, placing further development pressure on the formerly vibrant black community. Close observers of the Miami political scene know that the idea of pushing the business district and other redevelopment into what remains of Overtown is fully alive in the mid-1980s.<sup>22</sup>

This Miami research conforms to several recent studies elaborating the powerful and shaping impact of federal intervention on urban development and change since the 1930s.<sup>23</sup> The New Dealers put together a new Democratic coalition — one largely held together by a vast federal investment in urban employment and new urban construction. But although the funding came from Washington, the implementation and direction of these various urban programs was left to local governments and local leaders. The much-vaunted liberalism of the New Deal was often tempered in cities like Miami by segregation and the opportunism of local entrepreneurs. Liberty City remains as a legacy of a well-intentioned policy gone astray.

#### ENDNOTES

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11. A. B. Small to A. R. Clas, May 31, 1935, PHA Records, Box 298.
12. Gramling to Klaber, February 19, 1934, *ibid.*, Box 299; Gramling to Horatio B. Hackett, October 17, 1934, *ibid.*, Box 301.
13. Gramling to Klaber, February 19, 1934, PHA Records, Box 299.
14. Isabelle Sanderson to Hackett, April 19, 1935, PHA Records, Box 297; Sanderson to Clas, May 17, 1935, *ibid.*, Box 297.
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