

Preservation News

A Publication of the Lee Trust for Historic Preservation

• Spring 2006 •

Phone (239) 344-0100

The Caloosahatchee River: Downtown Fort Myers

From the beginning, the Caloosahatchee River has figured prominently in the history of the City of Fort Myers. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the River served as a transportation corridor to this land. The development of the military fort, Fort Myers, was oriented along the riverfront and by 1855 it was one of the largest in the state. After the Seminole Wars, the Civil War, and after the last soldiers left the compound, the area attracted fisherfolk and villagers dependent upon the River for their existence.



When the plat for downtown Fort Myers was recorded in 1876, it reflected a roadway and lot configuration oriented towards the River. In fact, First Street was the riverfront street. Steamboat service began in the early 1880s and commerce picked up. The dredging and deepening of the Caloosahatchee that began in 1881 resulted

in a navigable link between the Big Lake and the Gulf of Mexico. By the time Thomas Edison visited in 1885, Fort Myers had become an official town, and wood framed structures were going up quickly. Steamboats transported mail and supplies to and from the area. By 1900, there were approximately 3,000 inhabitants in Fort Myers.

The riverfront was important to the economic development of Southwest Florida in the early twentieth century. The world's largest packing plant was constructed on piers in the Caloosahatchee River in 1910. It utilized the newly installed railroad system to ship fruits and vegetables up north. Excursion boats transported visitors and residents alike along the river to the barrier islands. Crossing the

Note from the President:

This issue of Preservation News focuses on events relating to the Caloosahatchee Riverfront. The LTHP Board is actively engaged in different activities that help promote the preservation of historical resources and activities along the River. Some of these activities are chronicled in this issue. Please note the "Action Item" boxes throughout this newsletter and consider assisting our efforts whenever possible.

river became important to the area's development, and in 1924 the Freemont Street Bridge opened.

By 1927 the riverfront housed the City Dock and it was the departure point for Pleasure Pier, a city structure situated on piers in the River. Pleasure Pier hosted many social and political events until it was dismantled in 1943. The Yacht Basin was an undertaking of the WPA (Works Project Administration) that took two years to complete, employing local workers during the Depression. The Yacht Basin continues today as the City's only venue with a net positive cash flow.

Another City venue – the Exhibition Hall – was constructed in 1954 as an example of post-war Modernist architecture. The design of the building was uniquely suitable for civic use as it employed laminated curved beams that spanned a wide space without interior supports. Its orientation along the riverfront maximizes the view of the River, and its proximity to the Yacht Basin reflects the focus on public riverfront activity.

Centennial Park began as a one-half acre scenic area known as Sunset Park. In August 1985, the City began the Centennial Park and Wharf Project with *continued on page 5*

Action Item: The Lee Trust supports preserving the Exhibition Hall as part of the future redevelopment of the public Riverfront. We are interested in your memories, experiences, and pictures of the Hall. If you have photos or memorabilia to share, please call the Lee Trust at 344-0100.



LEE TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION, INC.

The mission of Lee Trust is to preserve the sites and buildings of historical, archaeological and architectural significance to Lee County through both advocacy and acquisition.

Lee Trust for Historic Preservation

•••

2006 Board of Directors

William Grace, President
Earl E. Smith, Vice-President
Gina Sabiston, Secretary
Susan Grace, Treasurer
Directors:
Jane de Lisser
Kay Holloway
Mary Rawl
Marsa B. Detscher, Ph.D.

•••

Honorary Board of Directors

Keith Arnold
Jan Brown
Berne Davis
Mariel Goss
William H. Grace
Nina Houghton

•••

Lee Trust for Historic Preservation, Inc. was founded in 1993 and is dedicated to preserving and developing the heritage of Lee County and its municipalities.

Lee Trust publishes Preservation News, a quarterly newsletter, in March, June, September, and December.

Contributors to this Newsletter:
Bill Grace
Mary Rawl

•••

Lee Trust is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation and all gifts made to Lee Trust are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

A copy of the official registration and financial information may be obtained from the Division of Consumer Services by calling tollfree within the State of Florida 1-800-435-7352. Registration does not imply endorsement, approval, or recommendation by the State.

The Caloosahatchee Riverfront: Dean Park's Stroll Through Time

Every three years, the residents of the Dean Park open their homes and gardens to the public.

On March 5, 2005, more than 600 people toured 8 diverse homes in the Dean Park community. "The response to our fourth home tour was absolutely heart warming", stated Michele Nugent, president of the Dean Park Historic District, Inc. "Our guests were extremely gracious, as well as fascinated by the history of our homes and neighborhood. It was truly a rewarding experience for the homeowners and all the people who worked so hard for this wonderful event."



Visitors tour the Staley Home on Rhode Island in Dean Park

The homes on display included the Staley and Robb homes on Rhode Island Avenue, both built around 1922, the Cralle Home (ca. 1925) on Providence Avenue, the Tichenor Home (ca. 1922) on Palm Avenue, and the Slappey Home (ca. 1925) on Michigan Avenue. The tour also included the Furen Home (ca. 1946) on Michigan Avenue and Bryant Home on First Street, both built around 1955. The Homes on the Tour reflect the diversity in architecture found in the Dean Park neighborhood.

John Morgan Dean created the Dean Park neighborhood along the river just



The Home Tour included the newly painted Robb Home on Rhode Island

east of Downtown Fort Myers and on the west side of Billy's Creek. The main streets associated with the neighborhood include Rhode Island, Providence, Michigan, and First Street, between Palm and Evans. Home construction began around 1915 and continued until the Depression. The community reflects diverse architecture, including Mediterranean, English Tudor, Spanish, and Moorish styles.

LTHP Board Member Brad Newton's home was part of the Tour. Board Members Gina Sabiston and Mary Rawl also volunteered their assistance. Proceeds from the Home and Garden Tour go to Dean Park neighborhood improvements and the Lee Trust for Historic Preservation.



Mirasol

The preservation of the Boomer Estate came closer to becoming a reality. On Tuesday, March 15, 2005, the Lee County Commission approved the sale/purchase option agreement for the County and State's joint acquisition of the Boomer Estate in Estero. On Thursday, March 17, 2005, the Governor and Cabinet also agreed to the acquisition. The price for the 100 acre property is \$14.5 million which will be split between the county and the state. The Estate will be a preserve managed by the Florida Department of State Division of Parks and Recreation.

The Boomer Estate is located across the river from the Koreshan



Recent View

State Park. The Boomers were devoted Koreshans. When Mrs. Boomer left the Unity and her residence in the Planetary Court in 1917, the Koreshans built her a house named "Mirasol". The Boomer women were very artistic so the house has many interesting details and murals.

Many thanks go to Judith Warrick, a Fort Myers native and acquisition agent in Tallahassee, and Keith Gomez and Lynda Riley here in Lee County for their diligence and hard work. Most importantly, we thank Nola Boomer and her family for allowing the preservation of this property for future generations.

Art Hall Restoration

The Koreshan Unity Alliance has received a Special Category Grant from the Florida Department of State, Division of Historic Resources to complete the restoration to the circa 1905 Art Hall located within the Koreshan State Historic Site. The grant, in the amount of \$261,000.00, will be used to stabilize the structural aspects of the building, remove a modern restroom, restore the exterior siding and reconstruct the porches as they originally existed.

The Art Hall houses a large collection of artwork by Douglas Arthur Teed and other Koreshan artists. It is also the home for many Koreshan artifacts such as the rectilineator which is the instrument the Koreshans used to prove we live inside the world.



LEE TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION, INC.

Archaeology Notes

Work has begun on construction of an underground archaeological exhibit at the Mound House on Fort Myers Beach. The Mound House is located atop a Calusa Mound. A 20 x 40 1950's swimming pool has been removed and the cavity left in the mound will be transformed into an archaeological exhibit displaying the various levels of activity on the mound. The public is invited to participate in the archaeological aspects of the project. Call Theresa Schober at 239-765-0685. You can call the same number if you are interested in the full moon kayak tours offered at the Mound House.

Gone is Forever...

Please join us at the
Preservation Rally
Saturday, May 6, 2006 at 9:00 am
on Edwards Drive

to let our city officials know that
Historic Preservation, and our city's past, is an
important part of Fort Myers' future... Our Legacy.

Save our Exhibition Hall/Riverfront

The developer chosen by the City to redevelop much of the downtown waterfront has chosen not to include the Exhibition Hall in its plans. Andres Duany recommended that the Hall be saved and adapted to a public use compatible with the redevelopment. Like many of his other recommendations, the City has chosen to ignore this recommendation.

For years the City has been attempting to demolish the structure by neglect. The Lee Trust instituted a professional engineering assessment of the structure. In spite of the neglect, the structure remains physically sound. In 2003 the City commissioned historic preservation architect, Linda Stevenson, to determine the historic significance of the Hall. She reported that the structure, designed by architect D. Bradford Scoville, was built in 1954. The most significant architectural feature is the arched roof that defines the interior volume. The large wooden bent arch was a popular structural type enclosing large spaces with no interior support. Many such structures were built in the 1950's.

With regard to the historic significance of the structure, Stevenson stated "The evaluation criteria for stylistic and historic character of structures from this period are similar to those for older structures." The significance to the community is a key determinant in the value of the resource. Stevenson found that the Exhibition Hall is historically and architecturally significant based on the Secretary of Interior Standards. It serves as an important reminder of the history and physical development of the City and of the waterfront area. It was part of a continuing plan to provide entertainment and recreation along the downtown waterfront. The Hall is associated with organizations that contributed to the history of the City, with the many community events that occurred there including the Edison Pageant of Light Ball. Among many nationally famous entertainers who played there, Elvis performed at our Exhibition Hall before he became famous.

The distinguishing characteristics of this architectural style (Modernism) are:

- The structural system of wooden bent frames.
- The rectangular tower with vertical grooves.
- The use of varied material on different planes.
- The exterior cladding materials.
- Interior Material including terrazzo floors.
- The use of glass along the north facade to open areas to the waterfront.
- The interior paired metal V-columns in the north addition.

The architect concluded with an evaluation that the structure is in fair to good condition and could be incorporated in redevelopment plans as have similar buildings in other communities.

Despite the findings of the architect and the recommendations of Andres Duany, the City is pressing ahead with the developer that has chosen not to include the preservation of the Exhibition Hall in its plans.

Please call, write or email the Mayor and Council:

Councilman Levon Simms
Councilman Randall Henderson Jr.
Councilman Warren Wright
Councilman Michael A. Flanders
Councilwoman Veronica Shoemaker
PO Drawer 2217
Fort Myers FL 33902

**Please join us Saturday, May 6th at 9:00 am
on Edwards Drive at the Exhibition Hall
to rally support to save our building!**

a \$4.4 million improvement program. The Caloosahatchee River was backfilled to create an additional six acres. When the Project ended three years later, Centennial Park had a fishing pier, seawall and bulkhead, riverwalk with interpretive exhibits, children's play area, picnic area, pavilions, benches, restrooms, and extensive landscaping. The City constructed a public boat ramp and parking area in 1989 utilizing Florida Boating Improvement Program grant funds. This boat ramp is located on the east end of Centennial Park and abuts the Exhibition Hall on the west side.

Action Item: The public boat ramp is threatened by future redevelopment of the riverfront. Please contact city leaders and express your opposition to the removal of the boat ramp.



Art Fest along the Riverfront on Edwards Drive

The City purchased an additional acre of land adjacent to the Park in 1991, and leased that land to the Royal Palm Sailing Club. Centennial Park is used today by a multitude of government agencies, special interest groups, and service organizations. A partial list of users includes the Florida Fish and Wildlife Service, Florida Marine Patrol, Lee Sheriff, Mote Marine Lab, Florida Dept. of Environmental Protection, the March of Dimes, American Heart Association, Art Fest, Junior League, Fort Myers Track Club, Drum Circle, Latin Jazz Festival, Celtic Festival, Lee County Schools, Fort Myers Boat Show, Edison Festival of Lights, the Farmers' Market, and various craft shows, concerts, and festivals.

Today, the riverfront is confronted with development pressures from all sides. The Exhibition Hall suffers from demolition by neglect. The Hall is slated to be part of a redevelopment scheme proposed by WCI; that proposal does not include the restoration of the Hall, but its demise.

The other public uses along the waterfront – the public boat ramp and Centennial Park – are also under assault from private development pressure. The public boat ramp and associated parking lot is cited as a waste of riverfront land. A vague promise to retain a public boat ramp along the riverfront – but not in Downtown Fort Myers – is offered by the City. Boating has been part of the very historic fabric of downtown Fort Myers, and its relocation to outlying areas further removes the public from this historic identity.



Getting ready for the Edison Festival of Lights Parade, in front of the historic Exhibition Hall (notice tarps on roof)

Rather than extend the Park westward to the basin and the Park's logical boundary, as recommended in Andres Duany's Downtown Redevelopment Plan, the City is in the process of giving additional land on the western riverfront boundary to private development in exchange for non-riverfront land. This private development (The Vue) involves the construction of a residential high rise tower on the boundary of the park. There are concerns that this development shall forever change the character of Centennial Park and the Downtown Waterfront.

The Lee Trust for Historic Preservation is concerned about the impact that new development and redevelopment shall have on our Downtown Fort Myers riverfront. We will continue to press the City Council and Mayor to recognize and respect our historic resources, and encourage them to preserve our irreplaceable landmarks. Please join us in this effort. Contact the members of the Fort Myers City Council and Mayor (239.332.6700) and urge them to keep our history in mind as they plan for our future.



Getting Ready for the Edison Festival of Light Run



Centennial Park Event



Memorials in Centennial Park, across from Harborside



Membership Application/ Renewal Form

Name _____

Street Address _____

City, State, Zip _____

Phone _____

E-Mail Address _____

Save a stamp and email my meeting notices.

I am a: New Member Renewing Member

Level of Membership:

- Benefactor - \$500 and up
- Patron \$250
- Sponsor \$100
- Contributor - \$50
- Family - \$30
- Individual - \$20

In addition to my gift, a matching gift will be made by: _____

Make checks payable to Lee Trust for Historic Preservation and send to: _____
(Name of Company)

Lee Trust for Historic Preservation - Membership Chair
P.O. Box 1035 • Fort Myers, Florida 33902-1035

*Membership is for the calendar year. Dues are payable on January 1
and are considered delinquent after the annual meeting in February of each year.*

2006 Dues Are Due!

Tired of seeing our historic buildings torn down? Want to know more about historic preservation? Then join Lee Trust!

Lee Trust is a nonprofit organization formed to promote preservation and assist our community when historic resources are threatened. We have a Revolving Fund Program to buy threatened historic structures. We also provide assistance and seek to educate the public about our community heritage. Our primary sources of funding are membership dues, gifts and fundraising events organized by volunteers.

Please fill out this form and send it in with your check. In addition to selecting your membership level, you may elect to be notified of meetings and events via email, saving the Trust the cost of postage. Consider an additional donation as a Contributor or Sponsor and help increase our Revolving Fund. For more information about Membership contact Susan Grace at (239) 939-3579 ■



Looking to the future with an eye to the past...

LEE TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION, INC. P.O. Box 1035 • Fort Myers, Florida 33902-1035

JOIN THE RALLY HAVE A VOICE!

Please join us at the
Preservation Rally
Saturday, May 6, 2006
at 9:00 am
on Edwards Drive

to let our city officials know
that Historic Preservation,
and our city's past,
is an important part of
Fort Myers' future...
Our Legacy.