COLLINS CANAL HISTORIC STRUCTURE

DESIGNATION REPORT



Photograph view of palms on Collins Canal, 1931

PREPARED BY

CITY OF MIAMI BEACH PLANNING DEPARTMENT

JUNE 13, 2023

CITY OF MIAMI BEACH

HISTORIC STRUCTURE DESIGNATION REPORT

COLLINS CANAL

PREPARED BY

City of Miami Beach Planning Department

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CITY OF MIAMI BEACH

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I. REQUEST

On April 12, 2022, the Historic Preservation Board passed a motion (7-0), directing the Planning Department to prepare a Preliminary Evaluation and Recommendation Report relative to the possible historic designation of Collins Canal as an individual historic structure.

On November 8, 2022, the Historic Preservation Board reviewed a Preliminary Evaluation and Recommendation Report relative to the possible designation of Collins Canal and directed staff to prepare a Formal Designation Report.

Pursuant to section 118-591(b) of the City Code, on November 9, 2022 the City Commission was advised of the action of the Historic Preservation Board via LTC 471-2022.

II. DESIGNATION PROCESS

The process of historic designation is delineated in section 2.13.9 of the Miami Beach Resiliency Code and outlined below:

Step One: A request for designation is made either by the City Commission, the Historic Preservation Board, other agencies and organizations as listed in the land development regulations, or the property owners involved. Proposals for designation shall include a completed application form available from the Planning Department.

Step Two: The Planning Department prepares a preliminary evaluation report with recommendations for consideration by the Board.

Step Three: The Historic Preservation Board considers the preliminary evaluation to determine if proceeding with a designation report is warranted.
The designation report is an historical and architectural analysis of the proposed district or site. The report:

1) describes the historic, architectural and/or archeological significance of the property or subject area proposed for Historical Site or District designation;
2) recommends Evaluation Guidelines to be used by the Board to evaluate the appropriateness and compatibility of proposed Developments affecting the designated Site or District; and
3) will serve as an attachment to the land development regulations.

Step Four: The City Commission is notified of the Board's decision and the initial boundaries proposed for designation. Within 60 days of the vote of the Historic Preservation Board to direct the Planning Department to prepare a designation report, the City Commission may, by a five-sevenths vote, deny or modify the proposed request for designation.

Step Five: The designation report is presented to the Historic Preservation Board at a public hearing. If the Board determines that the proposed site or district satisfies the requirements for designation as set forth in the land development regulations, the Board transmits a recommendation in favor of designation to the Planning Board and City Commission.

Step Six: The Planning Board will hold a public hearing on the proposed designation and shall consider the proposed historic designation as an amendment to the land development regulations and, subsequently, transmit its recommendation to the City Commission.

Step Seven: The City Commission may adopt an amendment to the land development regulations by a five-sevenths majority vote, which thereby designates the Historic Preservation Site, Structure or District after one public hearing for a parcel of land less than ten contiguous acres or after two public hearings for a parcel of land that is more than ten contiguous acres.

III. RELATION TO ORDINANCE CRITERIA

1. In accordance with section 2.13.9(b) of the Miami Beach Resiliency Code, eligibility for designation is determined on the basis of compliance with the listed criteria set forth below.

    i. The Historic Preservation Board shall have the authority to recommend that properties be designated as historic buildings, historic structures, historic improvements, historic landscape features, historic interiors (architecturally significant public portions only), historic sites or historic districts if they are significant in the historical, architectural, cultural, aesthetic or archeological heritage of the city, the county, state or nation. Such properties shall possess an integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling or association and meet at least one of the following criteria:

        1. Association with events that have made a significant contribution to the history of the city, the county, state or nation.

        2. Association with the lives of persons significant in the city's past history.

        3. Embody the distinctive characteristics of a historical period, architectural or design style or method of construction.

        4. Possesses high artistic values.

        5. Represent the work of a master, serve as an outstanding or representative work of a master designer, architect or builder who contributed to our historical, aesthetic or architectural heritage.

6. Have yielded or are likely to yield information important in pre-history or history.

7. Be listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

8. Consist of a geographically definable area that possesses a significant concentration of sites, buildings or structures united by historically significant past events or aesthetically by plan or physical development, whose components may lack individual distinction.

ii. A building, structure (including the public portions of the interior), improvement or landscape feature may be designated historic even if it has been altered if the alteration is reversible and the most significant architectural elements are intact and repairable.

iii. The historic preservation board shall consider if the historic buildings, historic structures, historic improvements, historic landscape features, historic interiors (architecturally significant public portions only), historic sites, or historic districts comply with the sea level rise and resiliency review criteria in section 7.1.2.4 of the Miami Beach Resiliency Code.

2. The proposed Collins Canal Historic Structure is eligible for historic designation as it complies with the criteria as specified in section 2.13.9(b) of the Miami Beach Resiliency Code outlined above. Staff finds that the proposed Collins Canal Historic Structure possesses integrity of location, setting, feeling and association.

i. Additionally, the proposed Historic Structure complies with the following criteria specified in section 2.13.9(b) of the Miami Beach Resiliency Code outlined above:

1. Association with events that have made a significant contribution to the history of the city, the county, state or nation.
Satisfied.
The Collins Canal, completed in 1912, is the oldest surviving manmade structure in the City of Miami Beach and is associated with the initial development period of City as agricultural farmland. The dredging and opening of the Collins Canal and the construction and opening of the Collins Bridge across Biscayne Bay made the island conveniently accessible to mainland Miami and paved the way for Miami Beach's subsequent development as a unique oceanfront resort that significantly benefitted greater Miami and the County, State and Nation.

2. Association with the lives of persons significant in the city's past history.
Satisfied.
The construction of Collins Canal was part of John Stiles Collins' (1837-1928) agricultural project that began over a century ago. The Collins Canal, Collins Avenue, Collins Park and the John S. Collins Memorial Library (now the Bass Museum of Art) were all named for this visionary Miami Beach pioneer.

7. Be listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
Partially Satisfied.

A portion of the Collins Canal is located within the Collins Waterfront Architectural District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places on November 15, 2011.

ii. A building, structure (including the public portions of the interior), improvement or landscape feature may be designated historic even if it has been altered if the alteration is reversible and the most significant architectural elements are intact and repairable.
Satisfied.
The original alignment of the Collins Canal has been maintained since its construction in 1912.

iii. The historic preservation board shall consider if the historic buildings, historic structures, historic improvements, historic landscape features, historic interiors (architecturally significant public portions only), historic sites, historic districts comply with the sea level rise and resiliency review criteria in section 7.1.2.4 of the Miami Beach Resiliency Code.

Criteria for ordinances, resolutions, or recommendations:

1. Whether the proposal affects an area that is vulnerable to the impacts of sea level rise, pursuant to adopted projections.

   The unified sea level rise projection for Southeast Florida updated in 2019 projects the anticipated range of sea level rise from 2000 to 2120. The projection highlights three planning horizons:

   Short term: by 2040, sea level is projected to rise 10 to 17 inches above 2000 mean sea level.
   Medium term: by 2070, sea level is projected to rise 21 to 54 inches above 2000 mean sea level.
   Long term: by 2120, sea level is projected to rise 40 to 136 inches above 2000 mean sea level.

   The upland areas immediately adjacent to the Collins Canal are especially vulnerable to the impacts of sea level rise.

2. Whether the proposal will increase the resiliency of the City with respect to sea level rise.

   The proposal complements near, mid-term and long-term efforts to increase the resiliency of the City with respect to sea-level rise. The canal provides for alternative transportation means within the City and serves as an important recreational corridor. Modifications to upland properties in close proximately to the canal will likely be necessary to further the City's resiliency initiatives.

3. Whether the proposal is compatible with the City's sea level rise mitigation and resiliency efforts.

The proposal is compatible with the City's efforts to increase the resiliency of the City with respect to sea-level rise.

IV. DESCRIPTION OF BOUNDARIES

The boundaries of the proposed Collins Canal Historic Structure include the portion of the Collins Canal (excluding seawalls or similar structures and bridges) from Biscayne Bay on the west to Lake Pancoast on the east. (MAP 1)

V. PRESENT OWNERS

The present owner of the canal is the City of Miami Beach.

VI. PRESENT USE

Canal/waterway.

VII. PRESENT ZONING

Not Applicable.

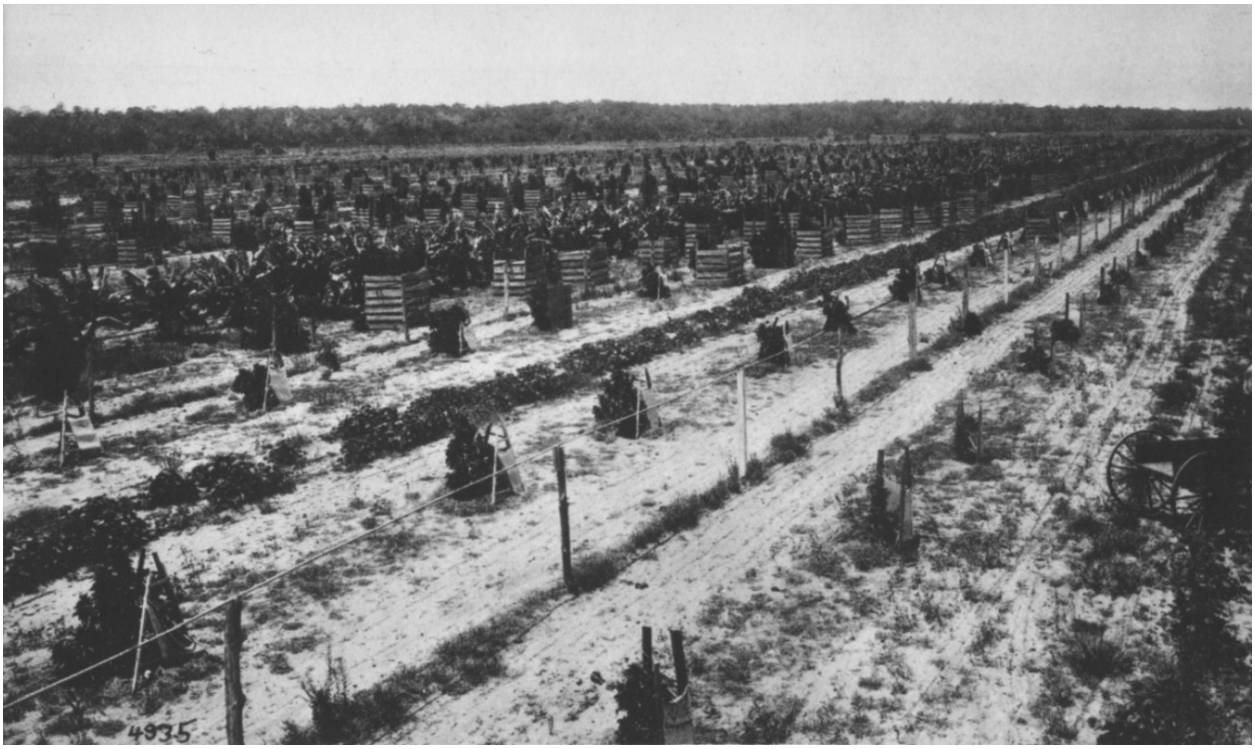
VIII. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Miami Beach was originally part of the 65-mile coastal tract that was planted with coconuts in a commercial project by New Jersey investors Henry Lum, Elnathan Field, and Ezra Osborn. Lum purchased from the government the oceanfront land from today's 11th Street to Fisher Island in Miami Beach. Field and Osborn bought from the government the coastal land that extended from the Lum property north to Jupiter and south to Key Biscayne. Together Lum, Field, and Osborn acquired all the coastal land, with minor breaks, between Key Biscayne and Jupiter by early 1883.[1]

During the course of three years, over 300,000 coconuts were shipped in from the Caribbean and cast ashore to be planted by a mobile work crew. The first camp site for the coconut planting operations was located in the area of today's Lummus Park. The planters had sown 38,000 coconuts by the fall of 1883, and the camp moved south to Key Biscayne. The subsequent camp sites were located at the Biscayne House of Refuge, just south of today's 72nd Street, and then the Ft. Lauderdale House of Refuge about nine miles south of the Hillsboro Inlet. By the third year of work, they had planted 334,000 coconuts of the originally proposed 450,000, and the company's finances were virtually exhausted. It was at this point that John Collins, a Quaker and a horticulturalist from New Jersey, was advised of the project. He advanced $5,000 to his friend Field so that the work could proceed. The coconut planting project was unsuccessful, but it was the first major effort to commercialize Miami Beach. [2]

[1] Howard Kleinberg, Miami Beach (Miami, Florida: Centennial Press, 1994), pp. 10-14.
[2] Ruby Leach Carson, "Forty Years of Miami Beach," Tequesta, volume XV, 1955, pp. 6-7.

In 1896, Collins traveled to Miami to investigate the failed coconut planting project. After examining the Field and Osborn property, he still saw agricultural promise in the coastal tract. Collins bought Osborn's share of the property and became partners with Field in 1907. They established a farm west of Indian Creek roughly between present day 30th Street and 46th Street.[3] It was located 1,000 feet west of the ocean and was a mile long and about 700 feet wide. The land clearing for the farm eventually covered 160 acres.



Photograph of the Collins farm, ca. 1908

Farm buildings were constructed on the western shore of Indian Creek at today's 41st Street. Collins planted 2,945 avocado trees in the summer of 1907 and 1908. In 1909, Collins bought Fields' interest and became sole owner of the land from what is now 14th Street to just south of 69th Street between the Atlantic Ocean and Biscayne Bay. In addition to avocado trees, Collins planted potatoes, bananas, and mango trees. By 1913, Collins' farm occupied a full 300 acres, 200 of which were planted with avocado trees. At its peak, there were a total of 10,000 avocado and mango trees growing in the farm's orchard.[4]

"At first it appeared [Collins'] efforts with avocados would parallel the failure of earlier coconut plantings. In the case of avocados, the wind sweeping in off the ocean across the narrow strip and Indian Creek and into his orchards was damaging the crop."[5] "To protect the young grove from the wind, Collins planted the twin lanes of Australian pine trees which later became Pinetree Drive."[6]

[3] Biscayne Engineering Company, Miami Beach Improvement Company, "Plat of the Ocean Front Property," 11 December 1912, sheets 1 and 2.
[4] Charles Edgar Nash, The Magic of Miami Beach (Philadelphia: David McKay Company, 1938), pp.86-89 and 107.
[5] Kleinberg, p. 24.
[6] Carson, p. 8.

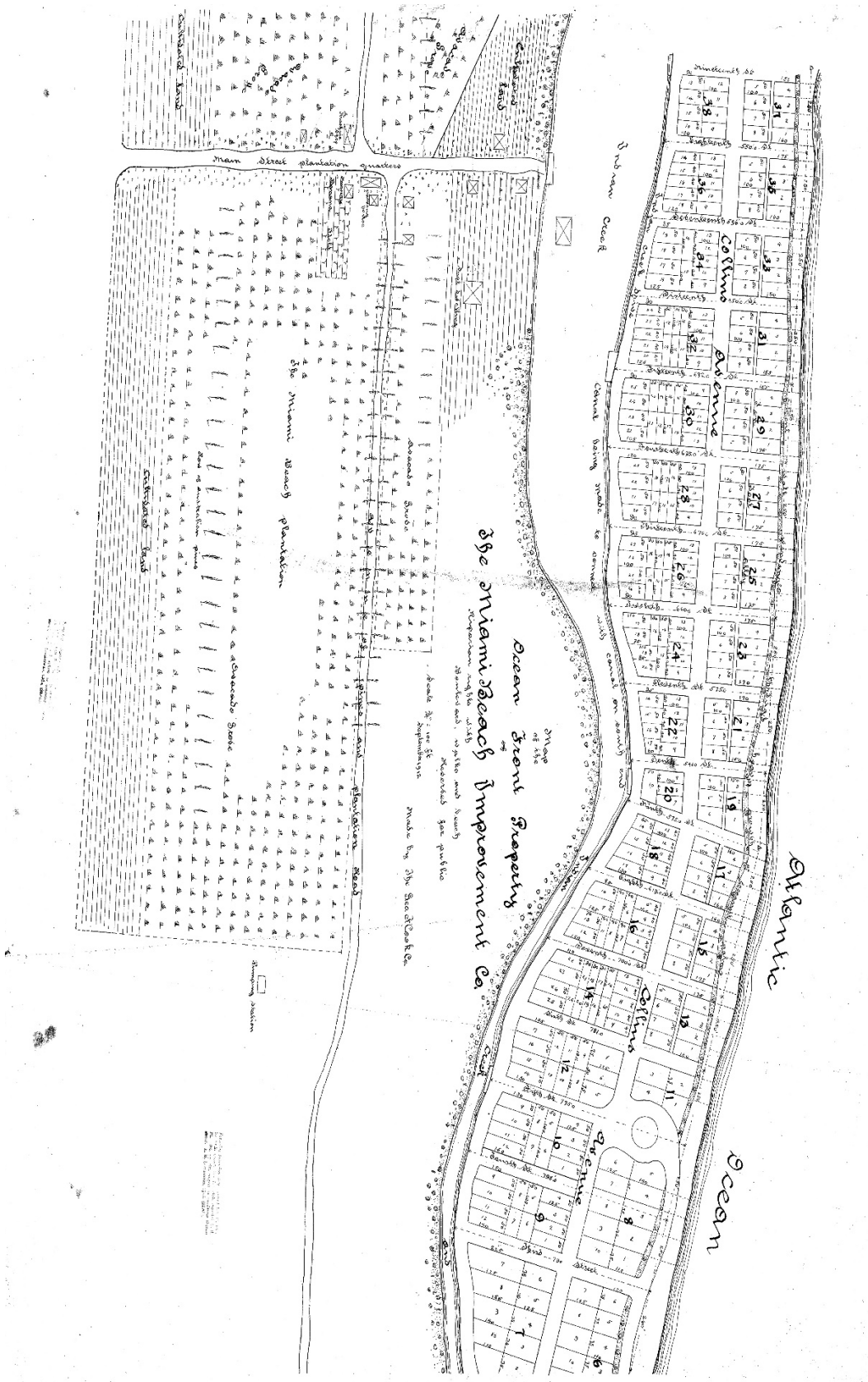


Photograph of the Collins' farm (left), Collins Canal (lower left) & Lake Pancoast (right), 1914

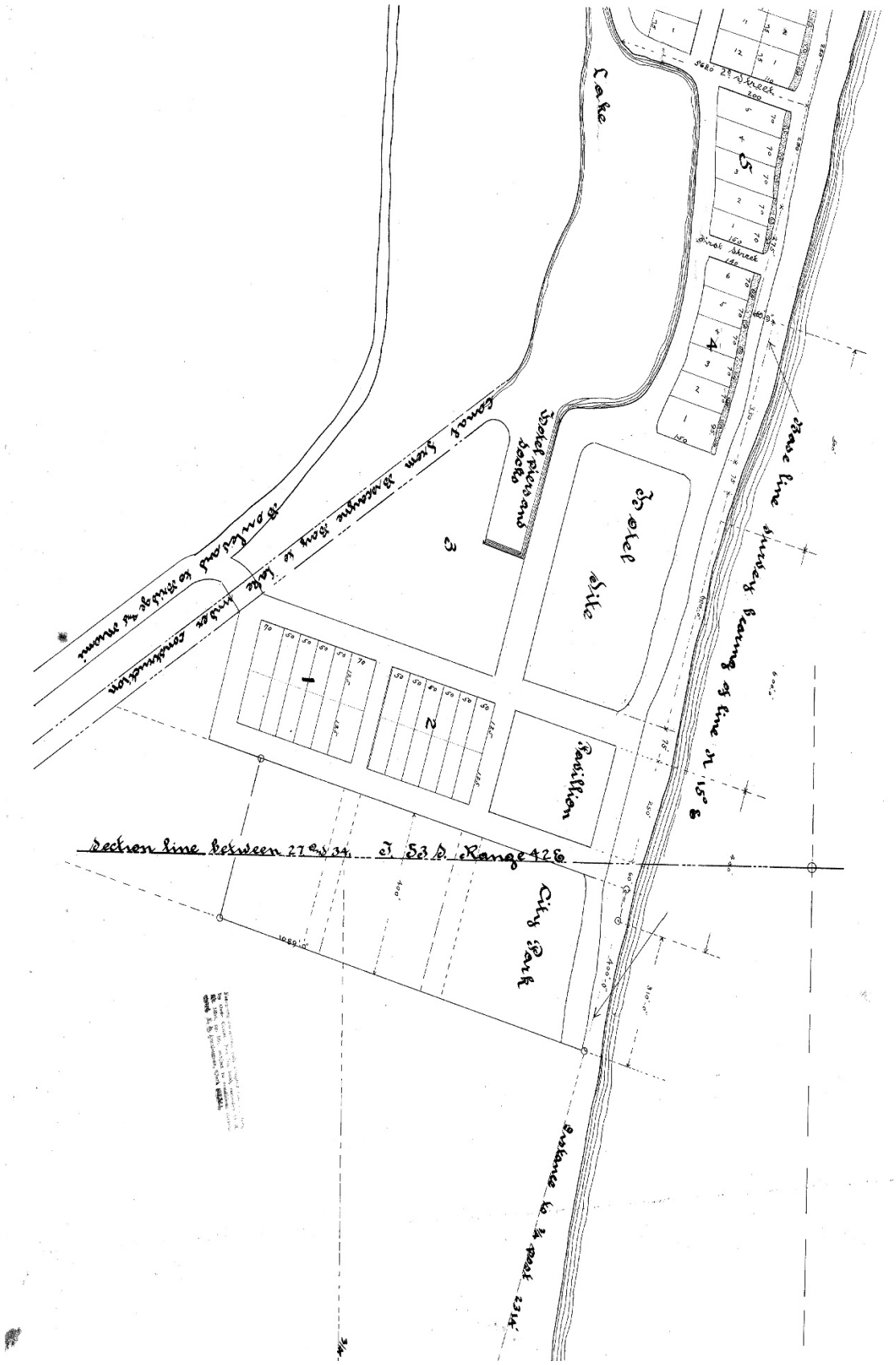
Collins was joined in Florida by his sons Arthur, Lester, and Irving Collins, and his daughter Katherine and her husband, Thomas J. Pancoast. On June 3, 1912, the family formed the Miami Beach Improvement Company.[7] This appears to be the first official use of the term "Miami Beach", even before the town was incorporated (Miami Beach was incorporated as a town on March 26, 1915, and later as a city on May 1, 1917). The company platted some of their land holdings for sale and also planned two other ambitious projects: a canal linking Indian Creek to Biscayne Bay and a 2.5-mile-long wooden bridge across the bay.

The railroad that Henry Flagler brought to Miami in 1896 opened the market for Collins' agricultural crops but transporting the crops from the Beach to the trains in Miami was a tedious process. The produce was carried overland to the western edge of the barrier island where it was then barged up a seven-mile loop around the shallows of Biscayne Bay to Miami. In 1911, Collins decided to build the Beach's first canal from Indian Creek to Biscayne Bay to move the crops more easily to market by eliminating the overland route. The canal was cut from a grass-covered pond on the southern edge of Indian Creek (Lake Pancoast), southwest to Biscayne Bay. The arduous task of clearing the land and subsequent work was performed by a mostly black workforce, many from the Bahamas and southern states.

[7] Carson, p. 9.



Miami Beach Improvement Company Subdivision, 1912 (Collins farm depicted on the right side)



Miami Beach Improvement Company Subdivision, 1912 (canal noted as under construction)

On July 6, 1912, the following article appeared in the Miami Herald giving great insight into the scale of Collins' plans for Miami Beach, including the nearly completed canal:

THE GREAT IMPROVEMENTS NOW BEING MADE AT COLLINS' RANCH, ACROSS BAY

Besides making one of the greatest citrus fruit plantations in the world, a resort—a miniature Coney Island will be provided—blocks and lots laid out, big hotel to be built, canals cut and bridge across bay to be built—the work now under way and that contemplated.

John S. Collins, of Moorestown, New Jersey, though just about as much at home in Miami, builded better than he knew when he acquired title to some 1,600 acres of land on the peninsula east of the city over two decades ago. Twenty years would seem a long time to wait, ordinarily, before starting to improve a bit of real estate such as that, but Mr. Collins was in no hurry. The investment, it is safe to assume, did not represent such a tremendous amount, bought at the time it was, the taxes were small and it was not until four years ago a start was made on what it is now proposed to make the show place of all show places in Dade county.

Mr. Collins is one of the largest fruit growers and exporters in the United States, having thousands of aces in peaches and other small fruits in Georgia and New Jersey, and eventually his fame in that direction will be extended to include the tropical fruits now so scarce in the northern markets—avocadoes, mangoes and grapefruit.

Much Interest Manifested.

Interest in the Collins ranch has been revived greatly within the last few months by reason of its close association with the bridge that is to be built across the bay, starting from a point about a mile above the city limits. All the holdings formerly standing in the same of J. S. Collins have been transferred to the Miami Beach Improvement Company, which company is also to be the builder of the bridge referred to.

Four years ago the work of improving the tract was begun, it being under charge of Charles Spier, now general manager of the company, and since that time operations have gone on more or less without interruption, 300 acres at present being clear and under cultivation. Each year a certain number of avocadoes and mangoes have been planted until now there are 9,000 Trapp and Pollack avocadoes and 300 Mulgoba mangoes growing, varying from one to four years of age. Last season quite a quantity of the ground was devoted to potatoes, which yielded a total of 17 cars of 400 crate each. In the ocean side of the tract, for more than a mile, are cocoanuts planted at regular intervals.

Cutting Canals.

When it was decided to improve the property, but before thoughts of a bridge across Biscayne Bay had been dreamed of, Mr. Collins concluded a short cut to the ocean beach would be necessary before the proposition could be made as attractive as it should be.

Securing a dredge, a channel was first made from a point out in the bay a quarter of a mile off, just missing the south end of Bull's island [Belle Isle] and ending where the canal proper begins.

The canal, it was intended, should cut directly across the peninsula to a small lake at the head of what is known as Indian Creek, though slough would be a better name for it. The work progressed slowly and another dredge was added to the little fleet, the latter being set to work dredging out a narrow and shallow channel in the creek a short distance below the lake.

Machines Near Together.

These two machines are now within a few hundred yards of each other and by September 15th, according to the estimate of Thomas J. Pancoast, secretary and treasurer of the company, they will have met, and the public will be invited to inspect one of the neatest propositions to be found in the entire county.

With a width of thirty feet on top and a depth of approximately six to eight feet, almost all of the pleasure craft will be enabled to reach the elaborate resort it is proposed to establish. One of the dredges is at work on the canal and is a mile inland. Within less than a hundred […] is made with the head of the small lake. A suction dredge is to follow in the wake of the former, cleaning out the bottom and adding to its depth. Just at present the dredge in the canal is crossing a reef of coquina rock, about two feet of which is blasted out.

To Start on Bridge.

According to Mr. Pancoast, work is to be begun on the bridge across the bay immediately. The eastern end of it will first strike land on Bull's Island, which is crossed, and then comes a couple of small spans and the peninsula is reached directly at the mouth of the canal now being dug. Fifty feet back from the north bank of the canal has been cleared and for a mile the boulevard that is to be a continuation of the bridge follows that bank, then crosses the canal and in a couple of hundred yards inscribes a circle around a plot that has been set aside for a big hotel.

Space has also been allotted for a pavilion and, in fact, if the expressed intentions of the management are carried out, a miniature Coney Island will arise from what but a short time ago was a tangled mass of mangrove and palmetto. Still another drive planned is a beach boulevard that shall follow the shore line for over a mile and be a model of its kind.

Lots to Be Sold.

Though primarily intended as a big fruit ranch, Mr. Collins has decided the proposition offers too many advantages to be kept from the public, and has laid out lots facing the beach boulevard. These are being improved as rapidly as possible and by fall will be ready to be offered to the public.

Yesterday a number of the business and professional men of Miami made a trip to the Collins property as guests of Mr. Pancoast. Included in the number was George B. Cellon,

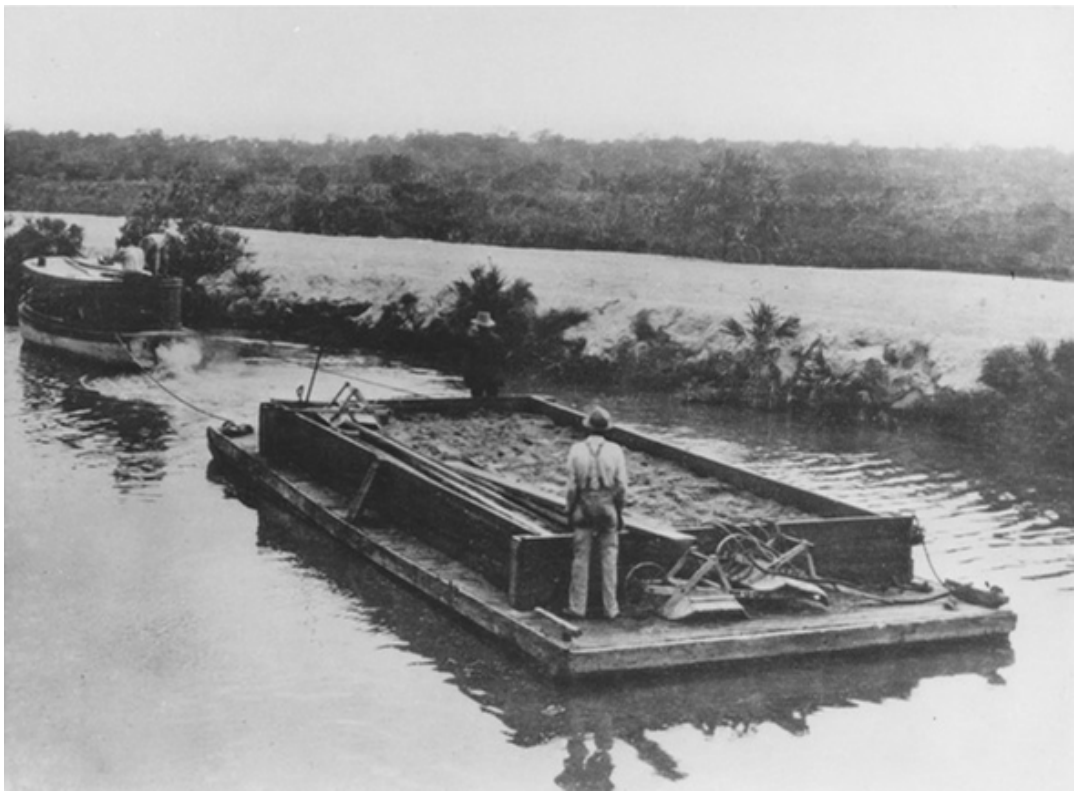
> *who has been labeled the "Burbank of Florida" for his success in budding and in-arching avocadoes and mangoes, and he it was who predicted with the present rate of increase of the acreage of tropical fruits now being carried on by Mr. Collins, in the course of five years he would have the most valuable and greatest income producing orchard of its side to be found anywhere in the world.* [8]

The completion of the Canal not only afforded transportation of Collins' agricultural produce, but also allowed landfill and building materials to be brought by barge into the center of the island. As the canal was nearing its completion in 1912, Collins began construction of a 2.5-mile-long wooden bridge across Biscayne Bay from the mainland to Belle Isle, terminating at the outlet of the Collins Canal. Construction of the bridge totally depleted Collins' funds when it was a half-mile short of completion. The bridge was finished in 1913 with the financial aid of Carl Fisher in exchange for 200 acres of land. The fill from Collins Canal was used to create Dade Boulevard[9] making the last connection from the mainland to Collins' newly plated subdivision along the ocean. The completion of the bridge was a major turning point in the history of the future city. The bridge allowed for easy access to the barrier island from the mainland resulting in almost immediate development. The short-lived bridge was replaced with the Venetian Causeway after only seven years of use as part of the construction of the Venetian Islands.

Today, the approximately 1.2-mile-long canal is primarily used for recreation and is crossed by 7 vehicular bridges and 2 pedestrian bridges. The Collins Canal, completed in 1912, survives as the oldest manmade structure in Miami Beach and serves as a reminder of the extraordinary history of the City and the contributions of John S. Collins and his family. While much can be said of the Collins family's visionary plan, the successful completion of the canal is due in large part to the primarily black and immigrant workforce.

[8] "The Great Improvements Now Being Made at Collins' Ranch, Across Bay", Miami Herald, July 6, 1912.
[9] Kleinberg, pp.24-25.

IX. HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHS



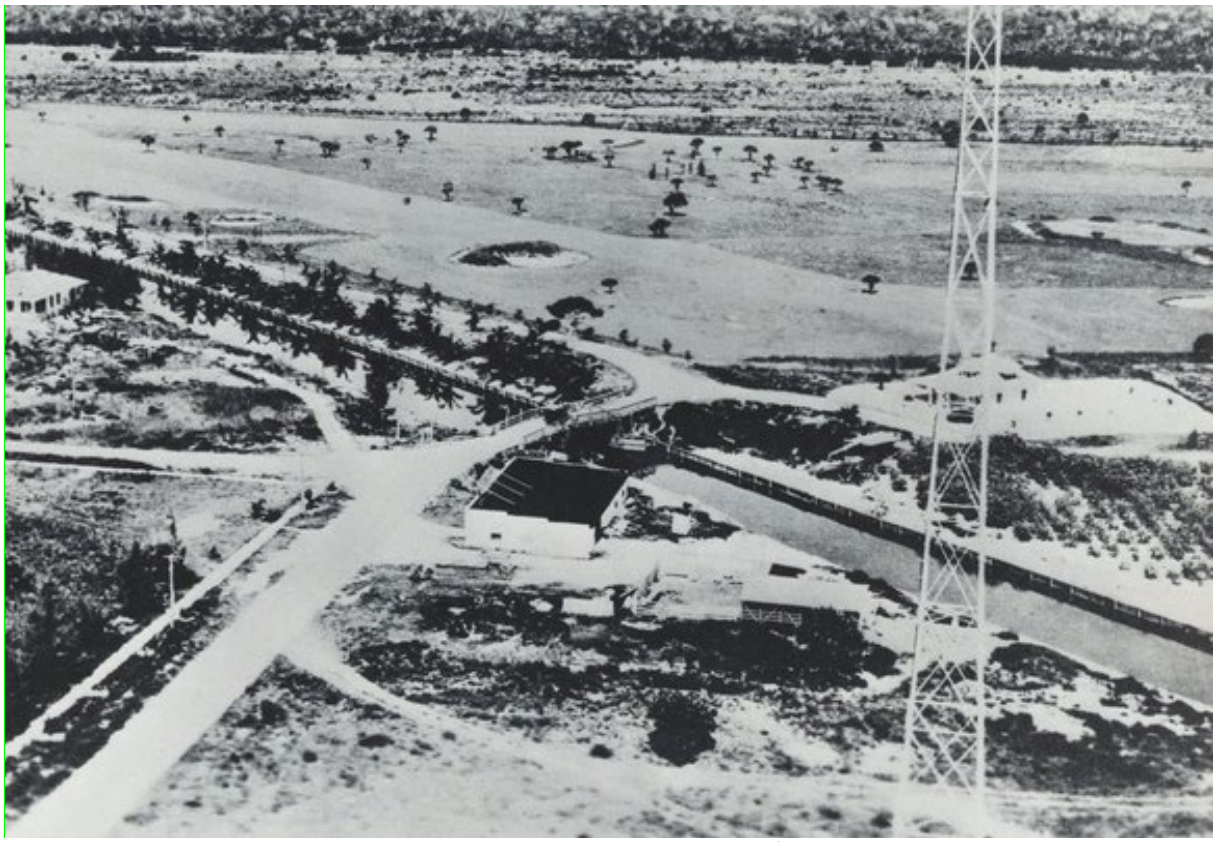
Photograph of Collins Canal at Meridian Avenue, 1913



Photograph of Collins Canal looking east from Alton Road, 1916



Aerial photograph of Miami Beach and Collins Canal, 1917



Aerial photograph of Collins Canal at 23rd Street, 1918



Photograph of Collins Canal, Belle Isle and the Collins Bridge, 1920



Photograph of Collins Canal with the Hubbell residence (1818 Michigan Avenue), 1930

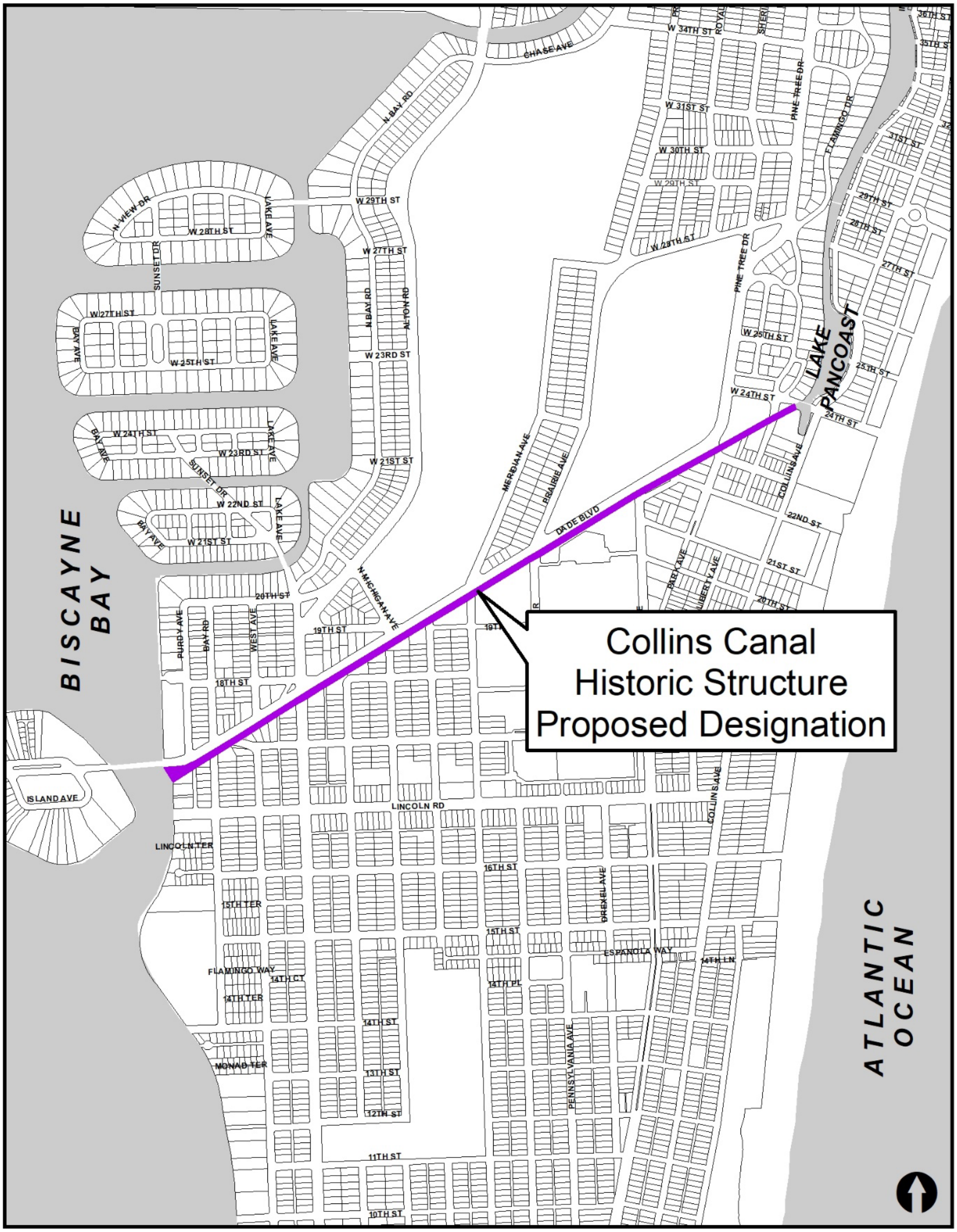


Close up of Collins Canal, 1931

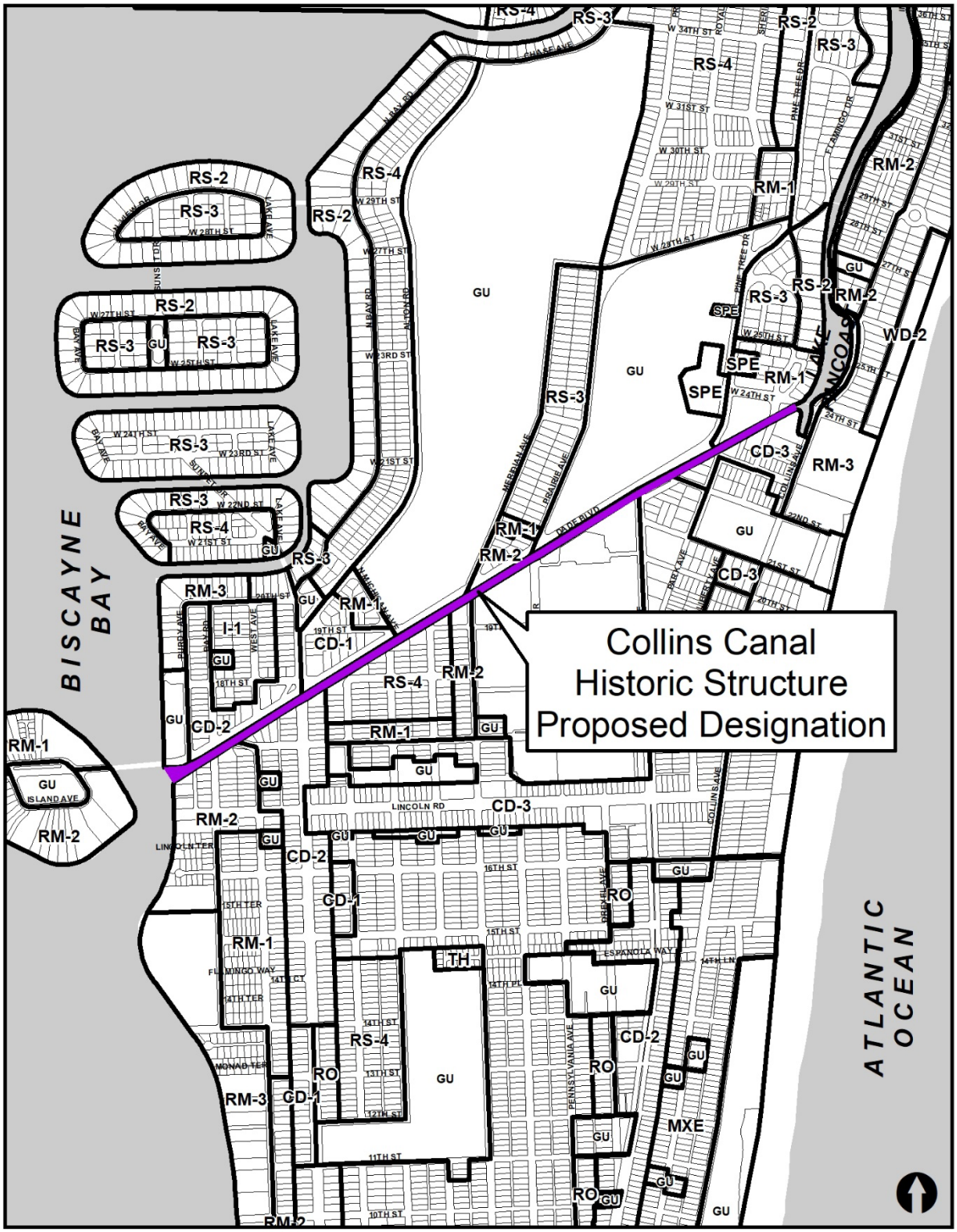


Photograph of Jack Dunn Boat Company (1740 Alton Road) and Collins Canal, 1938

MAP 1: Proposed Collins Canal Historic Structure Boundaries



MAP 2: Zoning Districts surrounding the proposed Collins Canal Historic Structure.



XII. PLANNING DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Criteria for Designation:** The Planning Department finds the proposed Collins Canal Historic Structure to be in compliance with the Criteria for Designation listed in Section 2.13.9(b) of the Miami Beach Resiliency Code.

2. **Site Boundaries:** The Planning Department recommends that the boundaries of the historic site consist of the Collins Canal waterway from Biscayne Bay to Lake Pancoast. **(MAP 1)**

3. **Areas Subject to Review:** The Planning Department recommends that the areas subject to review shall include the canal and shall exclude the seawalls or similar structures and bridges.

4. **Review Guidelines:** The Planning Department recommends that a decision on an application for a Certificate of Appropriateness shall be based upon compatibility of the physical alteration or improvement with surrounding properties and where deemed applicable in substantial compliance with the following:

    a. The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

    b. Other guidelines/policies/plans adopted or approved by resolution or ordinance by the City Commission.

    c. All additional criteria as listed under Sections 2.13.7(d)(ii)(2), 2.13.7(d)(ii)(3) and 7.1.2.4(a)(i) of the Miami Beach Resiliency Code.

    d. City of Miami Beach Design Guidelines as adopted by the Joint Design Review/Historic Preservation Board on October 12, 1993, amended June 7, 1994, as may be revised from time to time.

XIII. CURRENT PHOTOGRAPHS



Collins Canal at Biscayne Bay (looking east)



Collins Canal at Lincoln Court Pedestrian Bridge (looking west)



Collins Canal at Lincoln Court Pedestrian Bridge (looking east)



Collins Canal at Alton Road (looking west)



Collins Canal at Michigan Avenue (looking east)



Collins Canal at Meridian Avenue (looking west)



Collins Canal at Washington Avenue (looking west)



Collins Canal at the Carl Fisher Clubhouse (looking west)



Collins Canal at 23rd Street (looking east)



Collins Canal (right) at Lake Pancoast Pedestrian Bridge (looking east)