Designating the Collins Canal as a Historic Structure

by Stuart Reed

for a discussion with the Miami Beach Historic Preservation Board
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The Historic Preservation Board has the authority to recommend that properties be designated as historic structures if they are significant in the historical, architectural, cultural, aesthetic or archeological heritage of the city, and if they meet at least one of the eight criteria listed in section 118-592 of the Miami Beach City Code.

The Collins Canal satisfies two of the eight criteria for historic designation: 1) it is associated with events that made significant contributions to the history of Miami Beach, and 2) it is associated with the lives of persons significant in the city's past history.

A brief excerpt below from a biography of Carl M. Fisher by his cousin, Jerry M. Fisher, The Pacesetter: The Complete Story of Carl G. Fisher (Friesen Press, 1998; Kindle version, locations 2503 to 2575), sheds light on how the construction of the Collins Canal in 1912 was significant in developing and transforming Miami Beach and its accessibility (portions referring directly to the Collins Canal are **in bold and highlighted**):

Chapter 12
OF COCONUTS AND AVOCADOS
(end of chapter)
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> In 1907, Collins was the sole owner of a five-mile strip of land between the Atlantic Ocean and Biscayne Bay. The area he farmed was a mile long, 700 feet wide, on the high land west of Indian Creek. A tenant who worked the farm lived in a wooden house there while Collins resided in a hotel in Miami.
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> Clearing the 160 acres that made up the farm was expensive. At first Collins hired blacks to clear the land with plows, axes, machetes, and mattocks, but it was a time-consuming job, costing up to $300 an acre. Contacting some of the businessmen he knew in the North, Collins ordered sixteen-ton, thirty-five horsepower tractors, which he himself designed with knife-bladed wheels. "The knives chopped up the buried scrub palmetto roots that had been giving so much trouble. Special gang-plows brought them to the surface and permitted their quick removal." The savings was substantial, only a $30 cost per acre. The tractors did more work than 50 men.
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> Collins planted 2,945 avocado trees propagated by George B. Cellon, a local plant expert. He paid $1 per tree. Making the new crop prosper took

some doing. The trade winds blew sand on the new plants and the salt of the sea could cause damage. Field, anticipating another failure, had had enough. He sold out to Collins in 1907. Collins became the owner of 1670 acres of oceanfront land, four and one-half miles along the Atlantic side and a mile along Biscayne Bay.

At first, it looked as though Field was right. The first planting was not very successful. Individual burlap windbreaks were tried, but they were expensive and could be used only during initial growth. Then Collins discovered the Australian pine; he planted them as a barricade. They grew quickly and protected the new plants on the Atlantic side of the groves. Elsewhere they were planted in squares. The new plants required daily irrigation, accomplished through an overhead pipe system. This method promoted evaporation and was later replaced by subsoil irrigation.

There was also a transportation problem. Boats taking the harvest to market were running aground on the turtle grass flats. Collins had grown four acres of Cavendish bananas and other tropical fruit, plus some garden vegetables. Any delay in the hot sun was detrimental to all of his produce. In 1911, Collins told his family and friends in New Jersey his solution: a mile-long canal that would also cut the distance to Miami in half. His friends thought him crazy; his family worried about the expense. They wished to inspect the property in person. Sons Lester, Arthur and Irving, spent three weeks in Florida.

At the age of 74, Collins was planning to spend thousands of dollars on ventures that could risk his and his family's fortunes. His son Irving organized his brothers Lester and Arthur, Thomas Pancoast and himself as "support and safety valve for the Florida venture." They agreed to invest in the project, contingent upon John Collins building a bridge as well. A bridge that would bring motor traffic would encourage development of a winter resort and raise the value of the property. The family formed the Miami Beach Improvement Company with this end in mind. The only family members willing to move to Miami to oversee the new projects were Thomas and Katherine Pancoast. Pancoast saw a bright future for the new company from the beginning. "He was flabbergasted at the progress that had been made and at the quality of the produce being raised between the rows of young avocado trees ... overnight he became an enthusiast." Eighteen carloads of Red Bliss potatoes had been grown that year. "'Such potatoes!' said Pancoast. They were not the kind that were soggy when cooked, they were firm and mealy, fell to pieces under your fork and simply melted in your mouth.'" But it was the avocado orchard that took precedence. Pancoast knew that he was needed more in Miami Beach than in New Jersey. The next year he and his wife moved to Miami Beach, Collins' son Irving having bought out his business interests in New Jersey.

Collins had the bridge route surveyed and applied for a franchise to build the two-and-half-mile bridge, but there was opposition. The bridge posed a threat to the Biscayne Navigation Company. Their ferry business would suffer if it were built. Collins made use of a suggestion made to him by Charles H. Ward of Miami: drive his car to the dock and demand that it be ferried to the beach. In the presence of a witness he was refused. On the basis that the beach was useless to him if he could not transport his car back and forth, Collins reapplied for the franchise. This time it was granted. **Work on the canal had already begun. Laying its route through the jungle was impossible; instead, at a point on the bay shore, timber and brush were piled, waiting for a calm day. Then, the bonfire was lit, producing a "tall, dense column of smoke. From the bay shore, the smoke enabled them to align the stakes with some additional smaller fires. The fill from the canal was used for roadbed for the bridge.**

Bids were put out for the bridge. J.I. Conklin was appointed engineer in charge. Work began July 22, 1912. Problems quickly materialized. The marine borer, *limnoria lignorurm*, would devour submerged wood; it had to be protected. Surrounding the wood pilings with concrete was the answer, but using forms proved too slow. The concrete had to harden before the forms could be used again. Instead, Collins ordered sheet iron measuring two feet by six feet, wide enough to use as forms. The iron was rolled and riveted into cylinders and slipped over the pilings into the water. The workmen could now pour the concrete as fast as they could mix it. The forms did not need to be removed. This solution was expensive. The sheet iron and concrete cost $10,000. The estimated cost of the bridge was only $75,000. When the bridge was hallway across, the contracting company failed. Collins' credit was exhausted, and he had no ready cash. The bridge stood unfinished until Carl Fisher came to the rescue.

Chapter 13

A BRIDGE TO DEVELOPMENT

Although John Collins was an Easterner twice Carl Fisher's age, had a farming background, and came from Quaker roots, he and Carl were in many ways alike. Both were successful businessmen willing to take chances, seizing opportunities that others were oblivious to, and making use of new technology and machinery as soon as it became available.

John Collins and Carl first met accidentally when Carl, Jane, and John Levi went exploring in a dinghy and made their way up Indian Creek in the jungle. As Jane recalled: "When we got close to a sort of clearing, there stood a little man. He was a very short man. He had a white beard - it was a white goatee - and the whitest shirt and the bluest suit that I have ever seen. He

wore a bow tie, a polka-dot blue-and-white tie. It impressed me to see a man so immaculately dressed standing amidst all this wild territory." The encounter was brief. Carl asked Collins how to get back to Biscayne Bay, and Collins said, "Turn around and go back the way you came." They did not even know who he was.

In 1912, when Carl decided to help Collins finish the bridge, he lent him $50,000. Collins gave him 200 acres of beach land, one mile long and 1,800 feet wide from the ocean to the bay. **In characteristic fashion, when Carl, Collins and Tom Pancoast went to see the land, Carl raced his speedboat up the newly-dug Collins Canal, the surging waves washing against the banks, causing mud and marl to crumble into the water. Polly Redford cites Tom Pancoast's dismay as he and Collins looked at the damage being caused, but only "groaned, 'Oh, my God! But we can't tell this nut to slow down!" Collins Bridge was finished in May, 1913, costing 33 percent more than the original estimate. It began where Collins Canal reached the bay.** The toll bridge had 2,100 pilings and a 24-foot roadbed, 18 feet of it useable. The Thomas Pancoast family were the first to cross the span by automobile on May 22. Builders, contractors, and journalists accompanied them. The bridge did not reach all the way to the peninsula. It ended at Bull's Island, owned by Carl, and visitors took a foot bridge to the beach. Cars had to be turned around on Bull's Island until a dirt road was built between the island and the beach.

Designating the Collins Canal as a historically significant structure would provide great opportunities to educate people about Miami Beach's early development by John Collins, Thomas Pancoast and Carl Fisher. It would also provide great opportunities to educate people about Miami Beach's rich natural history.

Collins Canal is a shallow, mile long waterway connecting the Indian Creek, a natural inlet, to Biscayne Bay at Belle Island, one of the city's few natural islands. Stingrays, puffer fish, barracuda, amberjack, an abundance of mullet and baby fry fish, blue crabs, and a diversity of shoreline birds can be observed during walks along the canal and across its bridges.

Although Indian Creek was thoroughly dredged, deforested and sea-walled, it is a natural body of water extending more than half the length of Miami Beach from around Normandy Island at 71st Street to Lake Pancoast at 24th street. It is the longest natural inlet among Biscayne Bay's barrier islands. As a shallow, sheltered body of water it was probably an important, fertile location for fish to spawn and hatch. When people first started coming to visit Miami Beach in modern times, a "crocodile hole" in the northern part of Indian Creek was the area's first tourist attraction. Indian Creek must have had an abundance of fish to support a population of crocodiles.

Most of the southern half of the bay is in Biscayne National Park. Most of the northern half of Biscayne Bay is in the State of Florida's Biscayne Bay Aquatic Preserve, including

the waters in and around Miami Beach's bayfront islands and shorelines. Miami Beach's Atlantic coastline is more than 8 miles long. The city's coastline along Biscayne Bay is far longer than that because of its numerous islands in the bay and curves along the bayside shoreline. According to the United States Census Bureau, the City of Miami Beach has a total area of 18.7 sq mi, of which 11.7 sq mi (62.37%) is water.

Besides the value of educating the public about the Collins Canal's significance in Miami Beach history, designating the canal as a significant historic structure would draw attention to its rich marine and shoreline habitats and would encourage the pursuit of opportunities to revitalize this valuable natural resource. Lake Pancoast, Indian Creek and Biscayne Bay as a whole would also benefit from planting sea grasses, planting mangroves, and managing impacts from boaters, litter and urban activities in Collins Canal.

In recent years, vast meadows of seagrasses around the state disappeared, including in Biscayne Bay, most likely from a combination of leaky, old septic tanks, overuse of lawn fertilizers and pesticides, toxic wastes from roads in stormwater runoff, boaters, and other stresses. Without the seagrasses, there is less oxygen in the water, which is harmful to marine life. There is also more silt in the water blocking out sunlight. With seagrasses dying off around the state, manatees lost important food sources and have been found starving to death. Manatees are an important part of the ecosystem, and if they are not coming here to graze the bay loses important nutrients that other types of marine life depend upon. Without seagrasses and with less oxygen in the water, the bay cannot support as many fish and other marine life, including bottlenose dolphins that depend on a healthy and abundant food chain.

Seagrass restoration projects are underway around Florida with the assistance of a number of national, state, local, educational and non-profit agencies. With its shallow, calm, flowing bay water, Collins Canal offers great opportunities for planting seagrasses. With other habitat enhancements, like planting mangroves, water clarity will greatly improve and marine life will flourish.

Gazing into Collins Canal from its bridges and along its shoreline paths could one day be like looking into a mile long open-air aquarium. Seagrasses planted in the Collins Canal could become a source for seedlings to propagate elsewhere in the bay, where meadows thrived until they recently disappeared. Cleaner water would flow from the canal, with renewed life supported by revitalized marine and shoreline habitats.

All of these benefits would flow from recognizing and designating the Collins Canal as a significant historic structure.

The Collins Canal is the oldest manmade structure in the Miami Beach and it has an impressive story to tell about the City's founders, early development, and natural history.