

# MIAMI BEACH

## PLANNING DEPARTMENT

Staff Report & Recommendation

Historic Preservation Board

TO: Chairperson and Members  
Historic Preservation Board

DATE: November 8, 2022

FROM: Thomas R. Mooney, AICP  
Planning Director

SUBJECT: HPB22-0537, **Collins Canal – Possible Designation of an Historic Structure.**

A presentation by the City of Miami Beach Planning Department to the Historic Preservation Board of a Preliminary Evaluation and Recommendation Report relative to the possible designation of the Collins Canal as a local historic structure.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Direct the Planning Department to prepare a formal historic designation report for the proposed Collins Canal Historic Structure.

### **BACKGROUND**

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 the Collins Canal as an individual historic structure.

### **DESIGNATION PROCESS**

The process of historic designation is delineated in Sections 118-591 through 118-593 in Subpart B of the Land Development Regulations of the City Code (Chapter 118, Article X, Division 4). An outline of this process is delineated 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 of the City Code, 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 the proposed Developments affecting the designated Site or District; and
- 3) will serve as an attachment to the Land Development Regulations of the City Code.

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

Step Five: 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 of the City Code and, subsequently, transmit its recommendation to the City Commission.

Step Six: The City Commission may adopt an amendment to the Land Development Regulations of the City Code which thereby designates the Historic Preservation Site or Historic District after (1) public hearing for a parcel of land less than ten (10) contiguous acres or after (2) public hearings for a parcel of land which is more than ten (10) contiguous acres.

### **PRELIMINARY EVALUATION**

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 11<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 was advised of the project. Collins was a Quaker and a horticulturalist from New Jersey. He advanced \$5,000 to his friend Field so that the work could proceed. The coconut planting project was unsuccessful,

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Kleinberg, Miami Beach (Miami, Florida: Centennial Press, 1994), pp. 10-14.

but it was the first major effort to commercialize Miami Beach.<sup>2</sup>

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 30<sup>th</sup> Street and 46<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>3</sup> 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. Farm buildings were constructed on the western shore of Indian Creek at today's 41<sup>st</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> Street to just south of 69<sup>th</sup> 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.

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*Photograph of the Collins farm, ca. 1908*

"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."<sup>5</sup> "To protect the young grove from the wind, Collins planted the twin lanes of Australian pine trees which later became Pinetree

<sup>2</sup> Ruby Leach Carson, "Forty Years of Miami Beach," *Tequesta*, volume XV, 1955, pp. 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Biscayne Engineering Company, Miami Beach Improvement Company, "Plat of the Ocean Front Property," 11 December 1912, sheets 1 and 2.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Edgar Nash, *The Magic of Miami Beach* (Philadelphia: David McKay Company, 1938), pp.86-89 and 107.

<sup>5</sup> Kleinberg, p. 24.

Drive." <sup>6</sup>



*Photograph of the Collins Canal (lower left), Lake Pancoast (middle right) and Collins' farm (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.<sup>7</sup> 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 dredged the marshy southern end of Indian Creek (today's Lake Pancoast). The company 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

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<sup>6</sup> Carson, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Carson, p. 9.

southern edge of Indian Creek southwest to Biscayne Bay. The fill from the Collins Canal was used to create today's Dade Boulevard.<sup>8</sup>

When the canal was nearing its completion in 1912, Collins began construction of a two-mile long wooden bridge across Biscayne Bay from the outlet of the Collins Canal. This bridge was an engineering feat comparable to Flagler's overseas highway to Key West. Construction of the bridge totally depleted Collins' funds when it was a half-mile short of completion. It was finished in 1913 with the financial aid of Carl Fisher in exchange for 200 acres of land. The Collins Bridge was later replaced by the present-day Venetian Causeway.<sup>9</sup> The Collins Canal was completed in 1912 and survives as the oldest manmade structure in Miami Beach. Today, the approximately 1.2-mile-long canal is primarily used for recreation and is crossed by 7 vehicular bridges and 2 pedestrian bridges.

### **Collins Canal Historical Images**

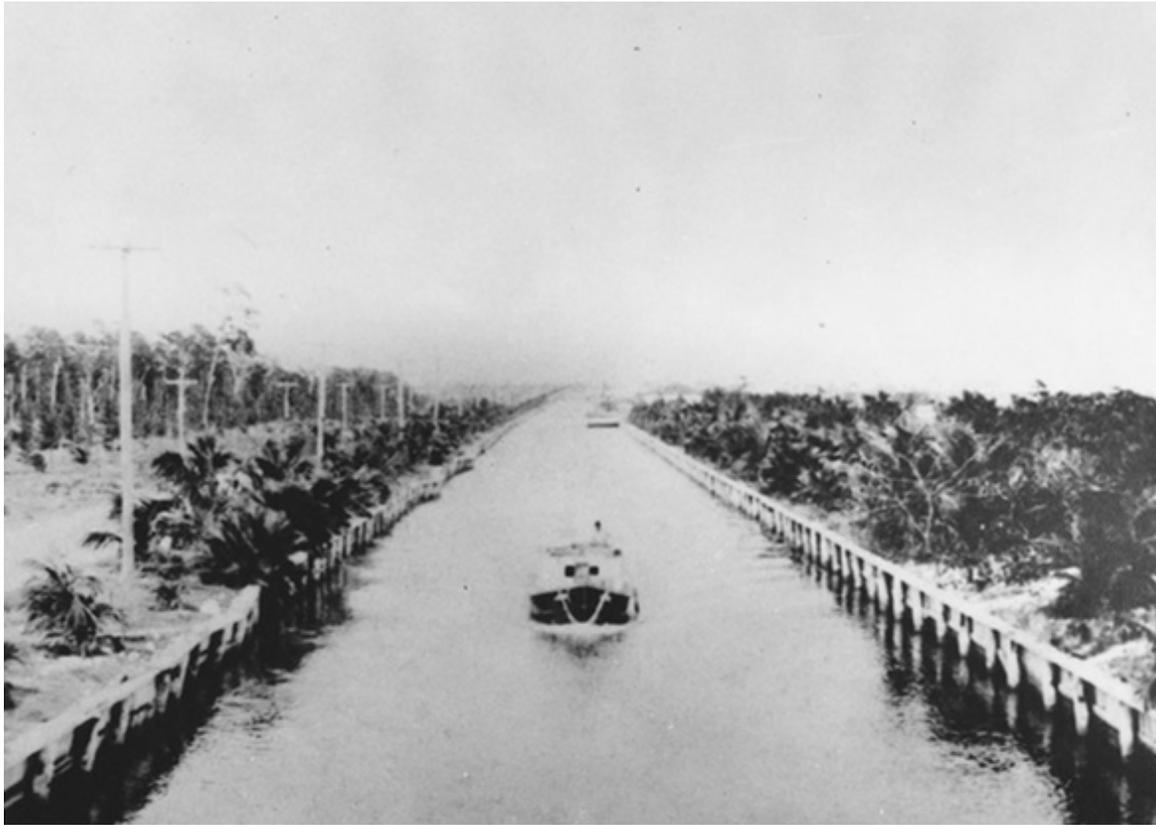


*Photograph of Collins Canal at Meridian Avenue, 1913*

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<sup>8</sup> Kleinberg, pp.24-25.

<sup>9</sup> Kleinberg, pp. 25-30.



*Photograph of Collins Canal looking east from Alton Road, 1916*



*Aerial photograph of Miami Beach and Collins Canal, 1917*



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



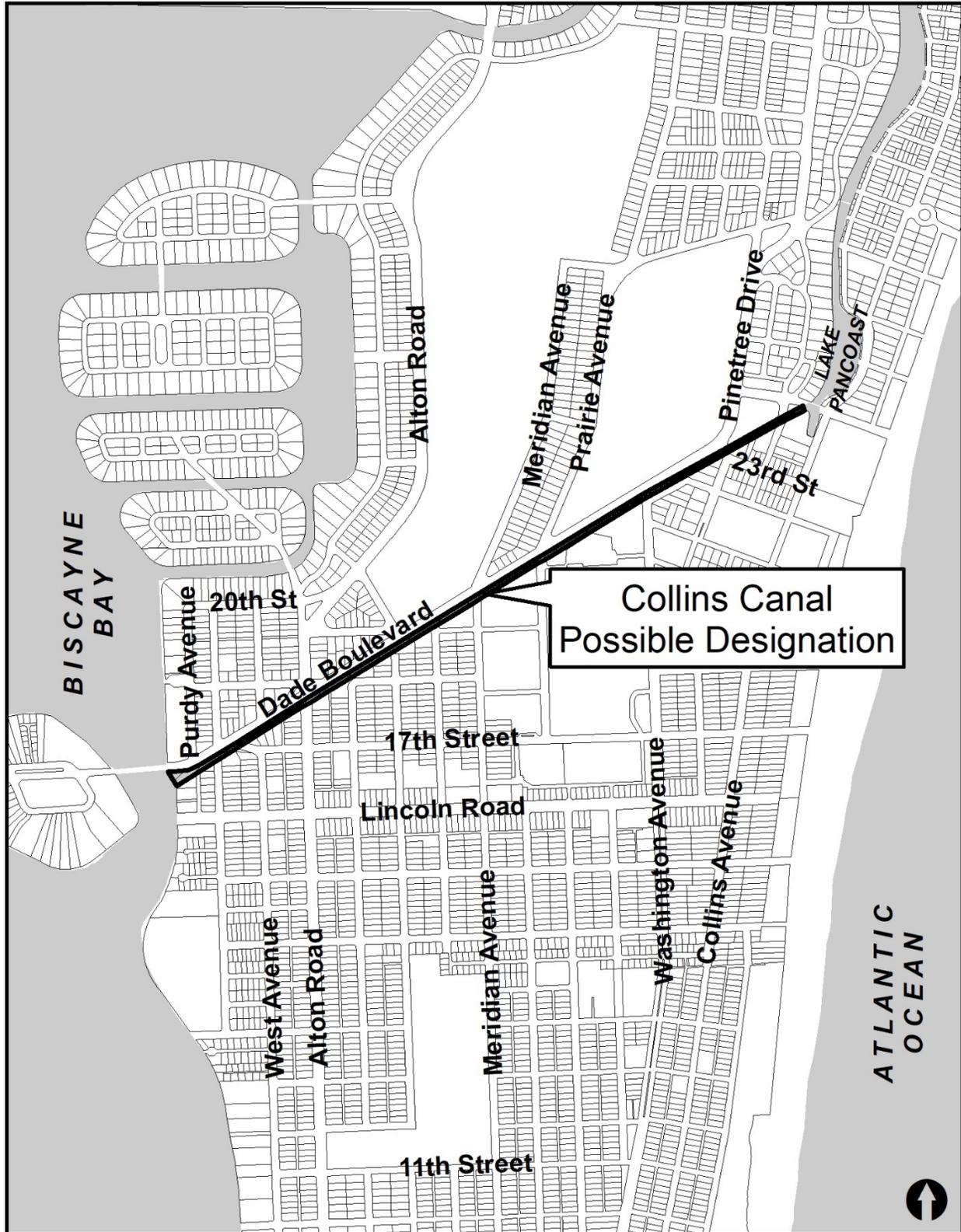
*Photograph of Collins Canal with the Hubbell residence (1818 Michigan Avenue), 1930*



*Photograph view of palms on Collins Canal, 1931*



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



Map of the approximate boundaries of the possible Collins Canal Historic Structure

## RELATION TO ORDINANCE CRITERIA – Preliminary Evaluation

Sec. 118-592. - Criteria for designation.

- (a) 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) Possess 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.
- (b) 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.
- (c) 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 Chapter 133, Article II, as applicable, pursuant to Section 118-592.

Below are staff's preliminary findings:

- (a) 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;**

*Satisfied; the Collins Canal, constructed 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 the Miami Beach's subsequent development as the 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 of 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 remarkable 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.*

**(b) 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.*

**(c) 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 Chapter 133, Article II, as applicable, pursuant to Section 118-592.**

(b) 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 proximity 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.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Based upon the research and evidence presented herein, the historical and architectural significance of the proposed historic structure based upon the applicable designation criteria noted herein, and in accordance with Chapter 118, Article X, Division 4, of the Land Development Regulations of the City Code, the staff of the City of Miami Beach Planning Department recommends that the Historic Preservation Board direct staff to prepare a formal historic designation report for the proposed Collins Canal Historic Structure.