

HOME & DESIGN

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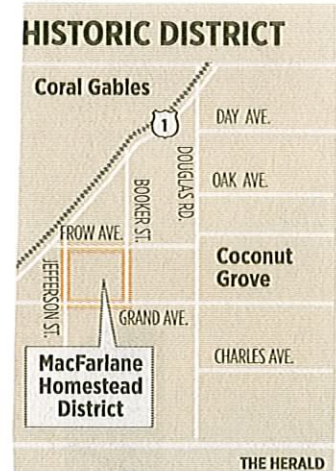
SUNDAY, APRIL 25, 2004 | EDITOR: TERESA MEARS tmears@herald.com | 305-376-3674 or 954-764-7026 ext. 3674 | THE HERALD

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PIONEER HISTORY: Peggy Gibson, left, lives in a house that was a soldiers barracks; it was moved to Florida Avenue in 1929. The house that Katherine Ramsey, right, lives in was built by her father, with help from family members. Antoinette Price, bottom, was born and raised in the house where she lives on Frow Avenue.



Historic Coral Gables cottages, many built by Bahamian settlers who worked for George Merrick, will be restored.



C.W. GRIFFIN/HERALD STAFF

LEADERS: Leona Cooper-Baker and brother William Cooper worked for recognition of the neighborhood.

Katherine Ramsey remembers helping her father work on renovations to their southeastern Coral Gables home, a home he built himself out of rock and sand.

"Really, the whole family built the house," Ramsey said. "My sisters, my brother and I used to have to come home from school and put in the rocks. Some of the rocks we would dig up from the yard. My father would cement the rocks together, then smooth it off. Weekends everyone helped other families with their building."

Ramsey, now 75 and a retired nurse, is still living in the house on Frow Avenue where she was born in the 1920s.

It's one of four homes that will be repaired and restored with a \$496,000 grant from Miami-Dade County and \$15,000 from the city of Coral Gables. The homes, on the southeastern edge of Coral Gables adjacent to Coconut Grove, are part of a neighborhood of about 30 homes built mostly by Bahamian workers who played a key role in helping George Merrick build Coral Gables.

• HOMES, FROM 1H

Many of the early residents were carpenters and stonemasons experienced in the use of coral rock in construction. Those who were not builders worked in Coral Gables, Coconut Grove and Miami as gardeners, domestics, hospital aides, chauffeurs and laborers in fruit-packing factories on South Dixie Highway.

The small bungalow-style houses had a Bahamian flavor. Some had tin roofs and front porches where families gathered in the evenings to rest and socialize with neighbors.

Other houses were long and narrow, one room wide. They were known as "shotgun" houses, because a person could conceivably stand at the front door, fire a shot-

gun and the pellets would pass through the house without obstruction.

Much has changed in South Florida since those homes were built in the 1920s and '30s. Some of the houses are still owned by the families of the original owners, but they lack the funds to combat the ravages of time and weather. Preservationists hope to secure other grants to rehab nine additional homes in the neighborhood, bounded roughly by Jefferson Street, Frow Avenue, Booker Street and Grand Avenue.

CLOSE NEIGHBORS

Antoinette Price, 68, was born and raised in the house where she lives on Frow Avenue. Her father worked as a carpenter for Merrick and her

mother worked as a domestic. "Everybody knew everybody else," recalls Price, who worked as a nurse. "Everybody helped everybody else.

We didn't have electricity. We had kerosene lamps for light and cooked on kerosene stoves. We got cold water from iron water pumps in the front or back yard and we never had a refrigerator. We had iceboxes."

The movement to restore the old houses and preserve the history they represent is a result of a long campaign by the Lola B. Walker Homeowners Association, led by William Cooper and his sister, Leona Cooper-Baker, who have also worked to ensure that early black residents of Coral Gables got proper recognition for their roles in the early development of the city.

"Now that it is becoming a reality," Cooper-Baker said, "it is like a dream come true."

The official name of the area is the MacFarlane Homestead District, named after Flora McFarlane, one of the first school teachers, even though the spelling is different. *Merrick Moments*, published by Coral Gables to mark the city's 75th anniversary, relates that "Miss Flora" came to Miami in 1886 as a companion to pioneer Commodore Ralph Munroe's mother.

In a quest to homestead public land, she purchased 160 acres, selling off some of it

later to various owners. Her certificate for homesteading was signed by President Grover Cleveland in 1893.

According to Dona Lubin, historic resources director for Coral Gables, 19.61 acres of Miss Flora's 160 were purchased by a securities corporation of which Merrick was a part, and the property was annexed to Coral Gables. In 1993, the subdivision was designated a local historic district and soon after was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

SOURCE OF MONEY

The bulk of the funds for the restoration is coming from the Miami-Dade Office of Community and Economic Development in conjunction with the Miami-Dade Office of Historic Preservation.

"This proves that we can meld historic preservation with the provision of decent and affordable housing," said County Commissioner Jimmy Morales, who helped the homeowners obtain the grant.

The restoration and grant process will be managed by North Miami-based Platinum Property Management and an affiliate company, Redeveco Corp., a real estate and consulting firm. The company is now hiring architects and engineers to determine exactly what will be done to each home.

Peggy Gibson's house on Florida Avenue was originally a soldiers barracks. It was moved to its site in 1929, then remodeled by her family. Her father worked at the incinerator and her mother took in ironing at home.

Gibson, who is retired from food service work at schools and hospitals, remembers scrubbing the hardwood floors with a piece of cloth that was folded over a piece of wire screen.

"We all scrubbed our floors that way and we used to wash with that brown Octagon soap," she remembered. "We worked hard and when nighttime came, after we sat out on the porch a while, we were ready for bed."

Growing up, people stayed close to home, with life centered on church.

"Forget television," said Price, who lives at 125 Frow Ave. "There was no such thing as television then.

"We did things like shoot marbles, jump rope, fly kites, play hopscotch and climb trees.

"Hardly anybody had a car," she added. "We walked to school, church, everywhere."

Ramsey remembers, though, that her father had an old Ford. "We all knew when he was coming home," she recalled. "You could hear him coming in that old car from way down Douglas Road."

While they are nostalgic when looking back, Price, Gibson and Ramsey are looking forward to their homes being restored. The fourth home to be restored is owned by Beverly Denham on Florida Avenue.

"Memories are nice and those days are something to remember," Price said. "We've been a part of history. But it sure is going to be good to get the house in shape."