
BLACK POLICE PRECINCT AND COURTHOUSE 1009 NW 5TH AVENUE

Designation Report



City of Miami

REPORT OF THE CITY OF MIAMI
PRESERVATION OFFICER
TO THE HISTORIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION BOARD
ON THE POTENTIAL DESIGNATION OF THE
BLACK POLICE PRECINCT AND COURTHOUSE
AS A HISTORIC SITE

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Passed and
Adopted on 9/17/2002

Resolution No. 2002-54

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I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Historic Name:

Colored Police Precinct Station / Negro Precinct Station

Current Name:

Black Police Precinct and Courthouse

Location:

1009 NW 5th Avenue
Miami, Florida

Present Owner:

City of Miami
P.O. Box 330708
Miami, FL 33233-0708

Present Use:

Vacant

Zoning District:

G/I, Government and Institutional

Tax Folio Number:

01-3136-081-0010

Boundary Description:

Tract A of the plat of JEFFERSON REEVES HEALTH CENTER SUBDIVISION, as recorded in Plat Book 148 at Page 32, of the Public Records of Miami-Dade County, Florida.

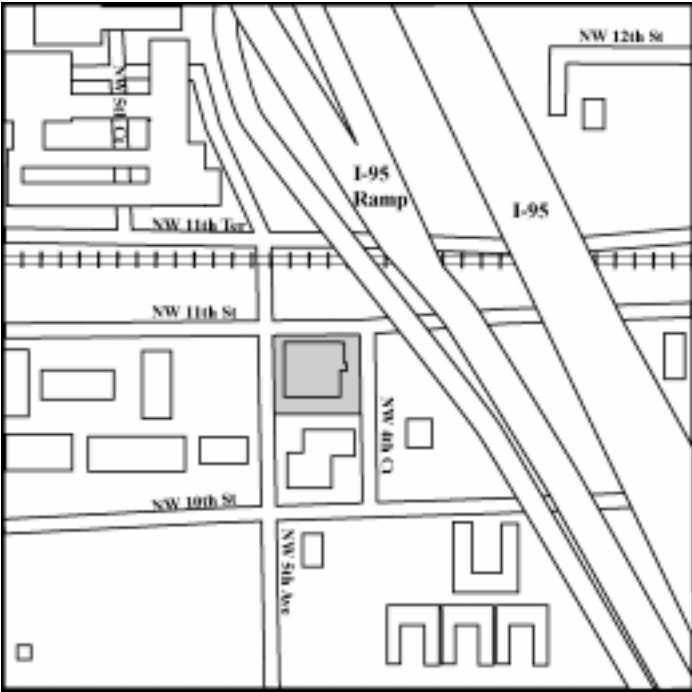
Classification:

Historic Site

BLACK POLICE PRECINCT AND COURTHOUSE 1009 NW 5TH AVENUE



location



site plan

II. SIGNIFICANCE

Specific Dates:

Original Building: 1950
One Story Addition: 1957

Architect:

Original Building: Walter C. DeGarmo
One Story Addition: Department of Engineering, City of Miami

Builder/Contractor:

Unknown

Statement of Significance:

In the current era, where universal civil rights is accepted as an inviolate principal, it is profoundly important to recognize the time in our history when the segregation of races was the order of the day. The former Black Police Precinct and Courthouse remains as a testament to those pioneering African-American police officers who, under the most egregious of circumstances, made significant strides in attaining equality, and who distinguished themselves both in their once-limited locality and the entire city, and then went on to influence national policy. The building itself was designed by master architect Walter DeGarmo just two years before his death, and represents his facility in adapting to a broad range of designs.

Historical Context:

The Creation of "Colored Town" (1896–1940)

In 1896, the vote to incorporate the City of Miami passed with 368 men voting. Of that number, 162 of the voters were Black, for the most part comprised of laborers working on Henry Morrison Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway, which made its appearance in Miami that same year.

Miami's original Charter called for a separate area to be set aside for African-Americans, first known as "Colored Town." The commercial spine of NW 2nd Avenue defined that area, which eventually became known as "Overtown." The population of Overtown soon expanded almost exponentially as migrants from northern Florida and other southern states arrived. Émigrés from the Bahamas, Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago expanded the growing settlement

even further. Conditions deteriorated when the boundaries of the area did not increase in size to correspond to the expanding need.

Between 1910 and 1920, such disreputable businesses as juke joints, taverns, and houses of prostitution appeared along the northeastern edges of "Colored Town." By their very nature, these establishments had more than enough criminal incidents to keep the police occupied with a steady stream of transgressors.

The Miami Police Department and the Dade County Sheriff's Office were responsible for keeping the peace. Stories of routine beatings and the torture of Blacks, coupled with the openly espoused racist views of both then Sheriff Dan Hardie and Police Chief Leslie Quigg, combined to create an incendiary condition.

African-American leadership fought back through the formation of the Colored Board of Trade and the Greater Miami Negro Civic League that provided a forum for their views and complaints. These leaders attended every City Commission meeting, making their presence known and arguing for services that included African-American policemen. While some progress was made, including the creation of the first Black high school in 1923, race relations themselves did not make the progress needed to fully ease tensions between the races.

By the 1940s, the area called "Colored Town" had become an overcrowded slum, where residents had no access to running water or indoor plumbing, and even electricity was a luxury few could afford. As conditions worsened, African-Americans were relegated to an area north and west of Overtown that became known as Liberty City.

The Second World War and Its Consequences (1944-1963)

When the United States entered the Second World War, Blacks were extensively recruited to serve in the Armed Forces, although they were relegated to performing only in menial roles. In Miami following the war, the returning Black soldiers caused the Black population to swell, contributing to the need for greater law enforcement opportunities in the historically Black neighborhoods.

In 1944, the City's Black population had reached 43,187, with most living in the Central Negro District, formerly called "Colored Town." In a feverish lobbying effort, leaders of the newly created Negro Citizens League finally convinced the City that a Black police presence was essential. Don D. Rosenfelder, Public Safety Director (then the Department that had responsibility for police services), began his recruitment of the men who would become the first Black policemen by asking Black leaders to nominate suitable candidates. There was still such resistance on the part of many Whites that the training of the Black officers was achieved "under extreme secrecy."

The First Black Patrolmen

On September 1, 1944, five African-American men made history when they were sworn in as the City of Miami's first Black police officers. They were: Ralph White, Moody Hall, Clyde Lee, Edward Kimball, and John Milledge. These pioneering men, however, were not referred to as "officers" as were their White counterparts, but instead, as "patrolmen."

These patrolmen were assigned to the "Central Negro District," an area that included parts of Liberty City and Colored Town (Overtown). The newly created Black police force became a division independent of the White police force, and first operated from the office of dentist Ira P. Davis at 1036 SW 2nd Avenue. The patrolmen were allowed to arrest only African-Americans, and had no authority over Whites. There was no job security or retirement benefits, as the patrolmen were not classified as civil service personnel as were their White counterparts.

In a 1986 Ph.D. dissertation entitled "The History of the Black Police Force and Court in the City of Miami" for the University of Miami, Arthur Chapman summarized the role that those first policemen would play:

The primary effort by the Precinct was to eliminate all overt manifestations of crime on the streets. The original five were directed to clear the crowded sidewalks, stop all gambling and profanity, and to confiscate any weapons seen. Any suspicious person or "known troublemaker" was to be stopped and "frisked." Should any of these persons be found with a weapon, they would be promptly arrested. In effect, the police utilized illegal acts to deal with illegal acts. The result was that crimes of violence in the Black areas were reduced by fifty percent.

One year later, the number of Black patrolmen had grown to 15, with three additional men expected to be hired in the near future. The patrolmen were assigned to the historically Black areas of Coconut Grove in March 1945, and a sub-station opened. The men were given a prescribed route in traveling between Overtown and Coconut Grove that would keep them from interacting with Whites as much as possible.

Because the Black patrolmen were not allowed to join the Police Benevolent Association, the Miami Colored Police Benevolence Association (MCPBA) was founded in 1946. The patrolmen were finally granted Civil Service status in March 1947.

Construction of the Precinct Station

By the late 1940s there were more than 40 Black officers, and the City decided that it was time to construct a separate facility. That building would serve both as a headquarters for the patrolmen, and as a courthouse where accused African-Americans were tried for their crimes in a municipal court with an African-

American judge presiding. The creation of a special Black municipal court was a highly significant achievement that did much to provide equal treatment under the law.

The Miami City Commission authorized the construction of a “colored police precinct station at NW 11th Street and NW 5th Avenue” in August 1949. The award for the design of the building went to long-time Miami/Coral Gables architect Walter C. DeGarmo.

Walter C. DeGarmo (1876–1952) earned his reputation as an architect of distinction early on as a member of the original team of architects that set the standard for the Mediterranean Revival design of the emerging City of Coral Gables. DeGarmo came to Miami in 1904 from the offices of John Russell Pope in New York. Pope, educated at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, designed the National Gallery and Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C.

DeGarmo was immediately sought after and designed significant early Miami buildings, including the 1907 Miami City Hall (demolished), the 1916 McAllister Hotel (demolished), and the 1907 Miami Fire Station No. 1 (demolished). In addition to a prodigious number of designs for private residences, DeGarmo collaborated with Paul Chalfin and Phineas Paist in the design for the Colonnade Building and the Douglas Entrance in Coral Gables, both completed in 1926.

During World War II, DeGarmo resided in Panama City (Florida), where he designed liberty ships. He returned to Coral Gables in 1945 and reopened his practice from offices in the Colonnade Building, a building of his own design. The Black Police Precinct and Courthouse was designed just two years before his death at the age of 76. The building is particularly important in illustrating the evolution of DeGarmo’s career, in that it illustrates the architect’s range and ability to adapt to then-current architectural trends.

This 1950 building is clearly representative of the era in which it was built, as it departs from the historicism of Miami’s previous architectural expressions and sets itself solidly in the genre loosely classified as “Modern.” The building relies on its form and the arrangement of its parts for its visual impact; therefore there is an absence of surface ornament.

The Police Precinct and Courthouse functioned in this location until July 1963. At that time, the Black officers were transferred to the police headquarters, at 1145 NW 11th Street, for an integrated roll call. The closure of the building seems to have been more a matter of fiscal policy than civil liberties. As the *Miami Herald* article of July 26, 1963, entitled “Police Abolish Negro Precinct” reported:

The move, said Colonel D.D. Pomerleau, Director of Public Safety, is to increase efficiency and eliminate duplication of physical properties and assignments.

The article made it clear that the Black officers would continue to patrol the "...Negro sections of the city."

Although the history of the Black Police Precinct occurred in more recent chronological time, numerous men associated with this building have made extraordinary contributions towards the integration of African-Americans in the law enforcement field. They include:

Leroy Smith, who joined the force in 1950, was promoted to Sergeant in 1955, became the first Black Lieutenant in 1966, and the first Black Major in 1974.

Clarence Dickson, the first Black officer to attend the Police Academy in 1960, who became the first African-American Chief of Police in Miami's history in 1985.

Perry Anderson, the first Black Commander of the Miami Police Enforcement and Motor Unit in 1980.

Robert Ingraham, the first motorcycle officer, former Mayor of the City of Opa-Locka, and current Dade County School Board member.

Lawson E. Thomas (deceased), Municipal Judge, who was first appointed to the Black Precinct Courthouse where he presided from its opening in 1950 through the 1960s. In his first year, the judge handled 6,374 cases and collected more than \$60,000 in fines and forfeitures.

Relationship to Criteria for Designation:

The Black Police Precinct Building has significance in the historical heritage of the City of Miami; possesses integrity of design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association; and is eligible for designation under the following criteria:

2. Is the site of a historic event with significant effect upon the community, city, state, or nation.

The Black Police Precinct and Courthouse is a powerful reminder that recalls a social system that once claimed that the White and Black races should remain separate from one another. Through the heroic efforts of a few, the status and condition of the Black population was significantly improved.

The building is the location of the first municipal court where Blacks administered justice for Blacks. It is also the location where Black patrolmen banded together to change the inequities of a segregated institution.

In a 1951 *Miami Herald* article, "Dixie Chiefs Laud Negro Policemen," the City of Miami is credited with a pioneering role in the South's "Negro Officers for

Negroes” movement. The article noted that since Miami hired the first Black Patrolmen in 1944, “...that one or more cities in every Southern state has hired Negro policemen—not only metropolitan centers, but such towns as Talledga, Alabama, Ahsokle and High Point, North Carolina, and Clover, South Carolina.” The article went on to say that “...Negro officers have eliminated many old race hates and have reduced crime by as much as 50 percent in some instances.”

In 1951, the 41 uniformed Negro police officers in Miami were the largest Negro police force in the South; Louisville, Kentucky was second with 36.

3. Exemplify the historical, cultural, political, economical, or social trends of the community.

Although it was created as a separate Division with notable disparities between White and Black officers, the Black Police Precinct and Courthouse reflects the changes that came about as much of the American South became subject to Federal laws that prohibited discrimination.

The perceived necessity for the separation of the races is today an embarrassment replete with injustices; however the former Black Police Precinct and Courthouse is a positive testament to the progress of Miami’s growing civic consciousness, and as such, is a profoundly important link to the City’s social evolution.

III. DESCRIPTION

Present and Original Appearance:

Setting:

The Black Police Precinct and Courthouse is located at the northwest corner of NW 11th Street and NW 5th Avenue, and faces west onto NW 5th Avenue. The original building was constructed at a cost of \$60,000 in 1950 and was designed by Walter C. DeGarmo.

A driveway from the NW 5th Avenue side extended along the south side of the building to the rear or east elevation, and exited onto NW 11th Street. The drive is now overgrown and only remnants remain. The lot measures 145' x 150'.

Chain link fencing surrounds the perimeter of the property. A concrete retaining wall approximately 16" high is located on the north side. There are no significant landscape features on the site.

Exterior Description:

The original building plan was "L" shaped, with a two-story section at the north end, placed perpendicularly to the one-story block that extended along NW 5th Avenue. In 1957, a one-story addition to the southeast changed the building's plan from an "L" shape to a rectangle.

The Black Police Precinct and Courthouse has a reinforced concrete structural system set on a poured concrete slab foundation. The exterior walls are covered with a smooth stucco finish and the flat roof is covered with built up materials. The primary entry on NW 5th Avenue consists of a two-story block at the north end. A double leafed door with a horizontal roof projection above provided access. Concrete retaining walls flank the sidewalk leading up to the main entrance. A one-story rectangular section then extends to the south, parallel to NW 5th Avenue.

The east or rear elevation, closest to NW 4th Court, features a cantilevered roof that extends across the drive acting as a porte cochere. The cellblocks for both men and women were located in this area. In keeping with the need for heightened security, "concrete fixed louvers and adjustable wood jalousies outside in each cell panel" were used to enclose the openings.

The two-story section on the west and east elevations originally contained metal awning windows, but the openings are now blocked in for security purposes.

The two-story section on the NW 11th Street side (north) featured rectangular window apertures that contained metal awning windows. Much of the wall mass is taken up with windows allowing for additional ventilation.

The two-story section of the south elevation contained a single rectangular aperture on the second story, now enclosed, that contained 8" x 8" units of glass block.

1957 Addition:

The addition maintains the stark simplicity of the original building. It continues the use of a flat roof, and the doors and windows follow the same proportions and configuration of those in the original building.

While the addition does modify the original plan shape and obscures the first floor of the south elevation, its modest one-story scale and dimensions do not destroy the integrity of the original building.

Contributing Structures and/or Landscape Features:

The subject structure, including its addition, is a contributing structure. There are no contributing landscape features on the site.



Figure 1: Front and South Elevations, Facing Northeast
Photograph taken by Amy Streeleman, August 2002



Figure 2: Entrance and retaining walls flanking sidewalk, Facing East
Photograph taken by Amy Streeleman, August 2002



Figure 3: North Elevation, Facing Southeast
Photograph taken by Amy Strelman, August 2002



Figure 4: North and East Elevations, Facing Southwest
Photograph taken by Amy Strelman, August 2002



Lt. Raymond Tanner swears in Miami's first black police officers on Sept. 1, 1944, in front of offices shared by dentist Ira P. Davis and physician Rodney H. Portier at 1036 NW Second Avenue. The offices were to serve temporarily as a headquarters for the black police. Taking their oaths, from left to right: Ralph White, Moody Hall, Clyde Lee, Edward Kimball, John Milledge. Officer Milledge was sworn in on Nov. 1, 1944.

Figure 5: Miami's First Five Police Officers from left to right: Ralph White, Moody Hall, Clyde Lee, Edward "Tops" Kimble, and John Milledge. Photograph taken on September 1, 1944. Photograph courtesy of *The Miami News*.

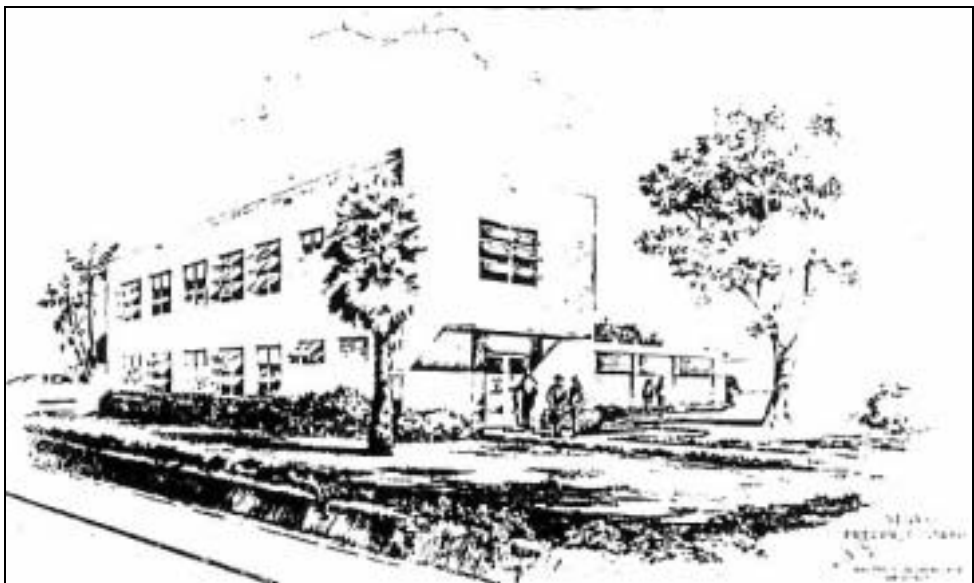


Figure 6: De Garmo rendering of the Black Police Precinct from circa-1950. Image courtesy of Arva Moore Parks.

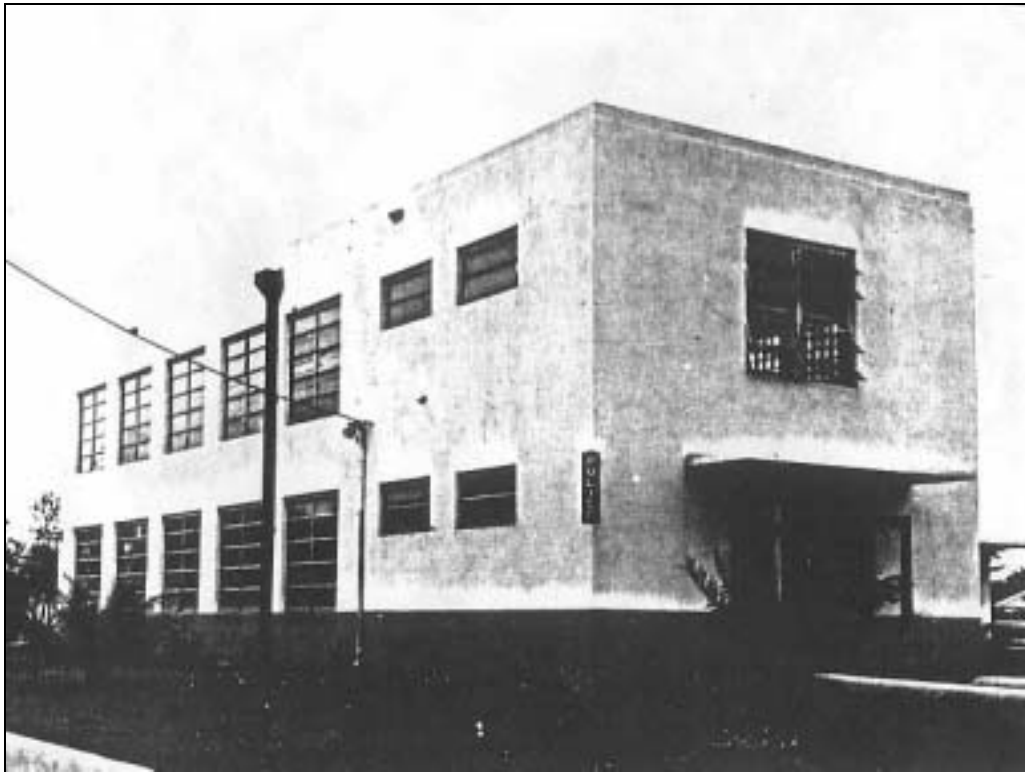


Figure 7: Photograph of the Black Police Precinct from circa-1955. Photograph courtesy of Arva Moore Parks.

IV. PLANNING CONTEXT

Present Trends and Conditions:

The Black Police Precinct and Courthouse is located in a principally African-American neighborhood in the community of Overtown. The building has been mostly vacant since its closing in 1963.

The Precinct Building requires significant repair primarily due to the general lack of proper maintenance since the building was vacated. The City of Miami Retired Police Officers Community Benevolent Association, Inc. (COM-R-POCBA) was incorporated as a not-for-profit organization in August 2000. The major goal of the organization is to see that the former Black Police Precinct building is restored for use as a museum and for a tutorial outreach program aimed at students attending schools in the nearby vicinity.

In July 2000, the Miami City Commission unanimously approved a resolution to allocate \$125,000 in Community Development Block Grant funding from the FY 2001/2002 budget to assist the COM-R-POCBA in their efforts to restore the building as a museum. The Retired Officers Association hired preservation architect Richard J. Heisenbottle to create a feasibility study to restore and convert the building to a museum. Mr. Heisenbottle estimated that the project, which includes structural repairs, new mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and life safety systems, new roofing, insulation, and windows and doors, as well as the installation of an elevator to satisfy the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, would cost \$1,188,781.50. All work will be in compliance with the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Structures*.

The Retired Police Officers Association is actively seeking funds to continue the project, and has submitted a Special Category grant to the State of Florida requesting \$416,000.00. If funded by the Florida Legislature during the 2003 session, the funds would become available in July 2003.

Preservation Incentives:

The preservation of the Black Police Precinct and Courthouse in this historically African-American section of the City is an appropriate and long-term recognition of a most significant era in the City's social history. The local historic designation of the building will add a special pedigree to the importance of the building that will be of invaluable assistance to the future grant-raising efforts of the association.

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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