
DORSEY MEMORIAL LIBRARY

100 NW 17TH STREET

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
DORSEY MEMORIAL LIBRARY
AS A HISTORIC SITE

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Passed and
Adopted on _____

Resolution No. _____

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I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Historic Names:

Dorsey Memorial Library

Current Name:

Vacant

Location:

100 NW 17th Street
Miami, Florida

Present Owner:

City of Miami
Asset Management Division
444 SW 2nd Avenue, Suite #325
Miami, Florida 33130-1910

Present Use:

Vacant

Zoning District:

R-3

Tax Folio Number:

01-3125-048-1150

Boundary Description:

Lot 1 of Block 33 of the plat of WADDELL'S ADDITION, as recorded in Plat Book B at Page 53, of the Public Records of Miami-Dade County, Florida.

Classification:

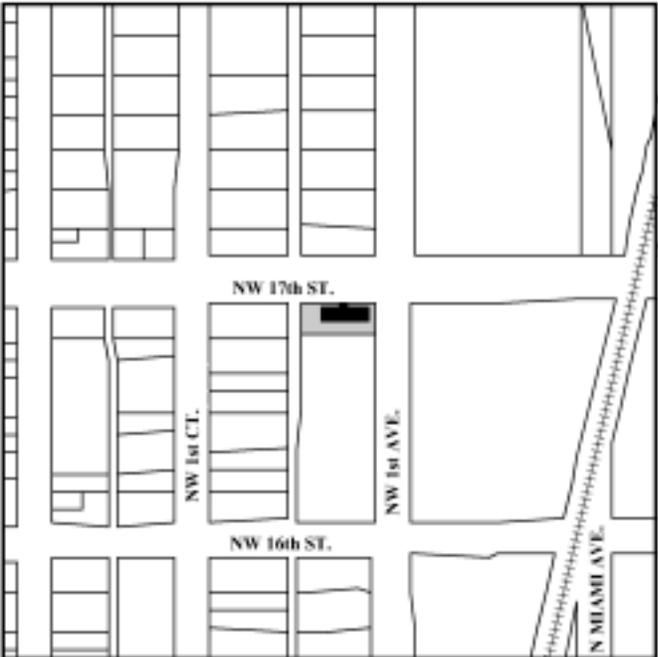
Historic Site

DORSEY MEMORIAL LIBRARY

100 NW 17TH STREET




location




site plan

II. SIGNIFICANCE

Specific Dates:

1941

Architect:

Phineas Paist and Harold Steward

Builder/Contractor:

M.R. Harrison Construction Company

Statement of Significance:

The Dorsey Memorial Library is significant for its historical associations and stands as a testament to the segregation of the races, and in Miami, the lingering prejudice towards people of color. The building played a key role in the education of many African-American citizens who lived in the Overtown area during a time when there were few educational options. In the all-too-recent past, African-Americans in Miami suffered egregious treatment and limited civil rights, as they were severely limited in their choices of places to live, socialize, recreate and educate. Amazingly, it was not until 1938 that the first library in Miami was created to accommodate African-American citizens. The Dorsey Memorial Library, which opened in 1941, was the second to serve the African-American public and is located in Overtown, formerly known as "Colored Town." It was the first city-owned building constructed specifically for library purposes, and was used for 20 years until the branch was relocated to newer and larger quarters and renamed the "Dixie Park Branch Library."

The earliest libraries in Miami-Dade County were organized in 1894 in the independent communities of Lemon City and Coconut Grove, before their incorporation into the City of Miami in 1925. The City of Miami's first library was founded due to the efforts of the Ladies Afternoon Club, later known as the Woman's Club of Miami. While it maintained a reading room as early as 1905, the club's first facility opened in 1913 at the corner of Flagler Street and SE 2nd Avenue on property donated by Henry Flagler. That building, which later was demolished, was actually the club's headquarters, but contained a public reading room as required by Flagler's donation. When the Woman's Club moved to its present location at 1737 North Bayshore Drive, the Flagler Memorial Library was established within its facilities.

In 1951, the City of Miami opened an impressive main library in Bayfront Park. In December 1965, the City of Miami agreed to offer its services to citizens in

unincorporated Metropolitan Dade County, and to other municipalities that did not offer library services. The current Miami-Dade County Public Library System was created in 1971 when the City of Miami transferred its library system to the County. The future of the new county library system was ensured by the passage of a \$34.7 million bond issue in 1972 to construct additional libraries.

Gradually, the remaining independently operated libraries elected to join the County. By 1985, a new main library designed by the internationally renowned architect Phillip Johnson opened in Downtown Miami and the system grew to include 31 libraries.

As segregation was practiced in Miami into the 1950s, the government's provision of facilities for African-Americans was minimal. It was left to the African-American community to see to its educational, recreational and spiritual needs. The building of the Dorsey Memorial Library is testament to the energetic and determined leadership of the Black community.

The contributions of the African-American community to the City of Miami actually predate the City's incorporation in 1896. As early as 1880, Black Bahamians arrived in Coconut Grove and began a community that still thrives today.

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 African-Americans, coupled with the openly espoused racist views of both then-Sheriff Dan Hardie and Police Chief Leslie Quigg, combined to create incendiary conditions.

African-American leadership fought back through the formation of the Colored Board of Trade and the Greater Miami Negro Civic League, which 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.

In 1937, the name "Colored Town" was changed to Washington Heights, although it was more commonly referred to as Overtown. 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.

It was in this climate that the first library for African-Americans was created. In 1936, the Women's Society of Christian Services, an organization within the Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church joined with other civic-minded women in the Black community to found the Friendship Garden and Civic Club. Led by its president, Annie Coleman, the club's first project was to create a library for the residents of Overtown. Ms. Coleman offered the use of a grocery store building next to her home. That building, at 2059 NW 6th Court, was converted into a library largely through the combined efforts of the Overtown African-American community. That first library opened in 1936 and was called the Dunbar Library. In 1938, the facility became the Dunbar Branch Library, as it was now officially a part of the City of Miami's library system. The needs of the community would soon make that library obsolete, setting the stage for the construction of the Dorsey Memorial Library.

Dana Anderson Dorsey (1872–1940), often described as "Miami's first Black millionaire," was instrumental in providing for a new library that would be named the "Dorsey Memorial Library." Dorsey, a carpenter by trade, had arrived in Miami from Georgia and made his fortune in real estate and banking. He built many of the houses in Overtown and rented them to the burgeoning population of immigrating African-Americans. With that rental income, Dorsey continued to invest in the land, and at one time owned 21 acres of what is now Fisher Island near Miami Beach.

Dorsey's philanthropy helped to provide greatly needed facilities for African-Americans. In 1937, he donated the Liberty City land on which the Dorsey High School was built. He donated the land to build a new library on February 14, 1940 just 15 days before his death.

The deed conveying the land said this:

That the grantee (Washington Heights Library Association), its successors or assigns, shall within 18 months from the date of this conveyance erect upon said real property a building suitable for use as a public library and shall at all times keep and maintain said public library for the free use,

benefit, education and enlightenment of the members of the Negro races...

Mrs. Coleman and the ladies of the Washington Heights Neighborhood Association and the Friendship Garden Club began to spearhead a request for donations to enable a new library to be constructed. Their fundraising campaign garnered \$2,000 for the building, and the City of Miami donated \$7,000 in order to pay for the building and meet the deadline imposed by Mr. Dorsey.

The library, suitably named after its benefactor Dana Dorsey, opened on August 13, 1941. The building was used for 20 years, well past the time of great social reforms that sought to integrate the races and prohibit discrimination.

The building is designed as a simple rectangular one-story block that contained two wings, each coming off the central main entrance. One of the wings was designated for adults, and the other for children. The library began its initial inventory with some 2,000 volumes that had been housed in the Dunbar Branch.

In 1961, the Dorsey Library was abandoned for the new Dixie Park Branch Library. In keeping with the policy of naming branch libraries after their geographic location, in 1983 the County Commission changed the name at that time to the Culmer/Overtown Branch Library.

Relationship to Criteria for Designation:

The Dorsey Memorial Library 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:

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

The Dorsey Memorial Library reflects the historical, cultural, political and social trends of the City of Miami as the first city-owned building constructed as a library and only the second library in the City to serve the African-American public.

III. DESCRIPTION

Present and Original Appearance:

Setting:

The Dorsey Memorial Library is located at the southwest corner of NW 17th Street and NW 1st Avenue. The main elevation faces north onto NW 17th Street, and occupies a portion of a rectangular 60 x 125 foot lot. Dorsey Park, land also donated by Dorsey the year of his death, is located at northeast corner of the intersection on a diagonal with the Dorsey Memorial Library.

Description

The most distinctive architectural feature of the Dorsey Memorial Library is the central doorway. The plan shape of the building is rectangular with the long side of the rectangle running parallel to NW 17th Street.

The roof is hipped and covered with flat, concrete tiles. The rectangular window openings are evenly spaced along the main (east), north and south (side) elevations. The rear (west) elevation contains doorways for access.

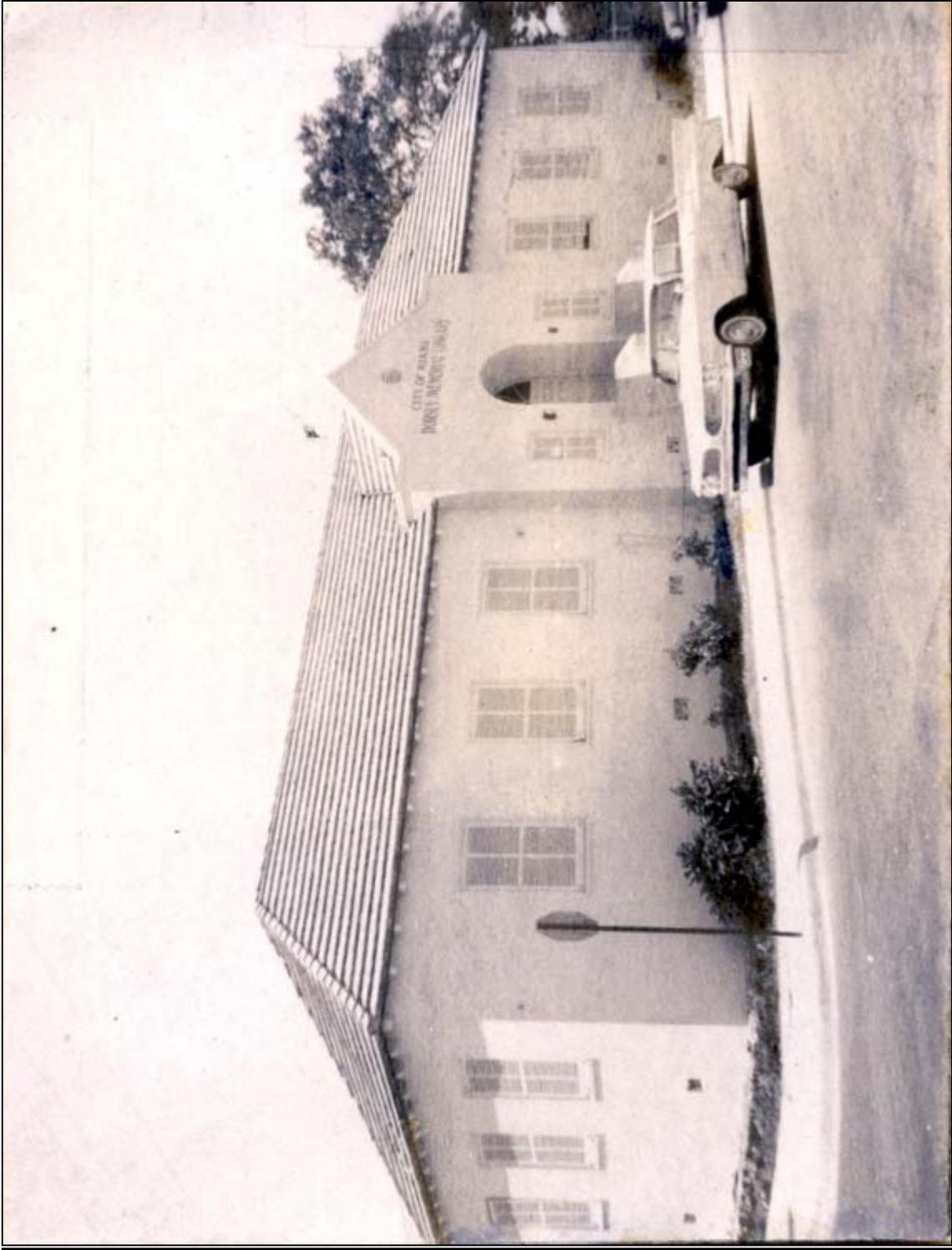
The entry bay, placed in the center of the east elevation, projects from the main wall mass and is approached by a series of risers that lead to a landing and vestibule area. The doorway itself is round-arched and the projecting entrance bay terminates in a gable. There is a minimal amount of ornament used in the design, and its decorative treatment is limited to the use of the staggered concrete roof tiles, the outrigger beams projecting below the roof line, and the classical references of the keystone, arch and bulls-eye window in the gable end of the entry bay.

Contributing Structures and/ or Landscape Features

The Dorsey Memorial Library is the only contributing structure on the site. There are no landscape features present on the site.



Dorsey Memorial Library
100 NW 17th Street
North (front) and east façades
2002



Dorsey Memorial Library
100 NW 17th Street
North (front) and east façades

IV. PLANNING CONTEXT

Present Trends and Conditions:

The Dorsey Memorial Library is abandoned and neglected. Previously, the City of Miami had declared the building unsafe. While the City has taken steps to secure the building by blocking the windows, without sufficient maintenance, it will continue to deteriorate. The community of Overtown has suffered major destruction of its historic resources in the past. The preservation of the Dorsey Memorial Library would be a particularly appropriate monument to the lives of its pioneering citizens.

Preservation Incentives:

The preservation of the library is integral to the interpretation of the African-American experience in South Florida. The preservation of the Dorsey Memorial Library is especially appropriate as it represents the enlightenment that education brings to ignorance.

IV. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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"Island Opposite Miami Sold for Colored Resort," *The Miami Metropolis*, 1 May 1918.