
E.W.F. STIRRUP HOUSE

3242 CHARLES 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
E.W.F. STIRRUP HOUSE
AS A HISTORIC SITE

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Passed and
Adopted on _____

Resolution No. _____

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I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Historic Names:

E.W.F. Stirrup House

Current Name:

E.W.F. Stirrup House

Location:

3242 Charles Avenue
Miami, Florida

Present Owner:

Stirrup Properties Inc.
3619 Percival Avenue
Miami Florida 33133-4909

Present Use:

Vacant

Zoning District:

R-1

Tax Folio Number:

01-4121-007-5420

Boundary Description:

Lots 25 and 26 of Block 30 of the plat of FROW HOMESTEAD, as recorded in Plat Book B at Page 106, of the Public Records of Miami-Dade County, Florida.

Classification:

Historic Site

E.W.F. STIRRUP HOUSE

3242 CHARLES AVENUE




location




site plan

II. SIGNIFICANCE

Specific Dates:

1897

Architect:

None

Builder/Contractor:

E.W.F. Stirrup

Statement of Significance:

The E.W.F. Stirrup House is a significant surviving structure from the late nineteenth century that reflects the social history of the City of Miami, is associated with one of Miami's pioneering African-American citizens, is a superior example of wood frame vernacular architecture and is constructed of Dade County pine, a local building product that was once plentiful but now is a relic of the past.

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. Ebenezer Woodbury Franklin Stirrup migrated from the Bahamas to South Florida in 1888 and worked as a carpenter's apprentice in Key West, and then as a laborer in a pineapple field in South Dade. He ultimately became a millionaire Coconut Grove property owner. Stirrup built his home in Coconut Grove, using all his construction skills to create an impressive, yet understated, residence for his family. Mr. Stirrup lived in the house until his death in 1957, a total of 58 years.

Mr. Stirrup is remembered today as an extraordinary example of entrepreneurship, a man who made the transition from immigrant to enormously successful Coconut Grove landholder, and who built more than 100 houses for African-Americans. His is an amazing legacy, as his success is all the more incredible when it is remembered that his accomplishments took place in an overwhelmingly segregated and discriminatory environment. When Ebenezer Woodberry Franklin Stirrup died in 1957 at the age of 84, he was not only one of the largest landholders in Coconut Grove, but also had done much to improve the housing conditions of the African-American community.

Stirrup was born on Governors Harbor Island off Eleuthera in the Bahamas in 1873. He was the illegitimate child of his Bahamian servant mother and her wealthy white employer, from whom he took the Stirrup name. A nine-year-old Stirrup was

left in the care of relatives when his mother died. Determined to advance, Stirrup saved his meager earnings and in 1888, at the age of 15, emigrated to Key West to live with an uncle. He became an apprentice to his carpenter uncle, and learned the skills of woodworking and construction.

Stirrup would remain in Key West for 10 years, but during that time he would return to the Bahamas to marry his childhood sweetheart, Charlotte Jane Sawyer. When Mr. Stirrup became disenchanted with the arrangement made with his uncle, which required him to give part of his earnings to his elders, Stirrup moved to Cutler, then a settlement 14 miles south of the mouth of the Miami River. There he worked in the pineapple fields by day and cleared land for home sites in the evening. In lieu of cash, Stirrup was sometimes paid in land, the nucleus of what would become a vast accumulation of valuable real estate. The first of the 10 Stirrup children (six of whom were to survive into adulthood), named Kate Biscayne, was born in Cutler.

In 1899, when he was 25, Stirrup moved the family to Coconut Grove, where he was employed by James Deering as both a chauffeur and a farm worker on Deering's magnificent estate, *Villa Vizcaya*. (Other sources indicate that Stirrup worked for Charles Deering and even others give his employer as William Deering, the father of James and Charles). Eventually, Stirrup's land holdings increased and when Coconut Grove pioneer John Frow offered to sell land in Coconut Grove, Stirrup was in a position to purchase a significant number of lots.

Stirrup and his wife began to construct frame houses to rent to other Bahamians who were immigrating to South Florida. The houses were built of sturdy Dade County pine, and were simple structures based on Bahamian housing types. Stirrup and his wife, who was employed as a laundress, built the homes together and were said to have built them at night after a full day's labor.

Kate Stirrup Dean, the eldest daughter, recalled in a 1976 interview that:

Father believed in every family having a house, a yard and a garden, so you would feel like you had a home. He felt that people became better citizens when they owned their own homes.

Stirrup constructed more than 100 homes in his lifetime, providing an opportunity for newly arrived Bahamians to actually own their first home. Many of the houses built by Stirrup remain, and are concentrated around Charles Avenue (originally named Evangelist Street) close to the present-day Coconut Grove Playhouse, and the heart of the Bahamian community. Stirrup's own home is at the head of Charles Avenue, and has survived as a legacy to its builder.

The community of Coconut Grove began in the 1860s when land grants were offered on this prime bayfront property. Edmund Beasley, John Frow and John and Edward Pent were the earliest landholders. In 1873, the Coconut Grove Post Office was opened, giving a name to this pioneering community.

The Grove thrived when Charles and Isabella Peacock came to the area and purchased 31 acres from John Frow. In 1883 they opened the first hotel on the South Florida mainland, the Bay View House, later renamed the Peacock Inn. As South Florida continued to grow and flourish, more and more labor was needed.

Earlier, a sizable Bahamian community had grown up in Key West, and as opportunities for work increased, many of these Bahamians migrated north to Coconut Grove and the Miami area in general. The success of these areas was greatly influenced by the Bahamian's skills. Many early farmers thought that the rocky soil was not suited to agriculture. The Bahamian immigrants had the same conditions on their island home and could teach the new landholders the value of the land. George Merrick, the founder and developer of the City of Coral Gables is quoted in Marvin Dunn's book *Black Miami in the 20th Century* as stating:

In the Bahamas, there is the same coral rock; and the Bahamian Negroes knew how to plant on it; and how to use it; and they knew too that all kinds of tropical trees would grow and thrive on this rock. They, too, had a vital influence upon our civilization in bringing in their own commonly used trees, vegetables and fruits.

Merrick went on to acknowledge the importance of the Bahamian labor force to the construction trade. "They knew how to make a lime mortar from rock and how to use it in building rock houses and walls."

The Stirrup family residence is one of the few remaining wood frame buildings in all of Miami-Dade County, and certainly one of the oldest. The home is clearly a product of the nineteenth century.

The key elements that reflect its nineteenth century origins are its extremely narrow proportions, the size and shape of the fenestration, and its L-shaped plan. This design is based on a builder's tradition, and was especially popular throughout America in the last half of the nineteenth century.

There is more than one way to describe this property type. In their book *A Field Guide to American Houses*, Virginia and Lee McAlester describe it as a "front gable folk house." In a more detailed article, Barbara Wyatt of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin described it as a "Gabled Ell." Wyatt explains that this type was especially common in late-nineteenth century America, and was almost exclusively a residential type. The Gabled Ell takes the form of two gabled wings that are perpendicular to one another, and that are frequently of different heights. The longitudinal face parallel to the street almost always had the lower height.

The result was typically an L-shaped plan. Ms. Wyatt explains that the form allowed for outdoor living space (the porch) and a sheltered entrance. Entry is always via the porch at the "ell," or junction of the two wings.

The Stirrup House neatly fits this description. The plan shape and the form that places two wings perpendicular to each other to create an "ell," and the porch are the distinguishing characteristics of the type. Its frame construction and clapboard siding reflect the type that proliferated in early Miami.

The Stirrup House has been altered, but those alterations are reversible, and overall represent a minimal change to its overall character. Those alterations include the addition (or enclosure) of the second story at the junction of the two wings, and the replacement of the windows with a historically incorrect type.

The residence is constructed of Dade County pine, once plentiful here and almost indestructible. The existence of this wooden building from the late nineteenth century is remarkable and is a rarity in South Florida.

Relationship to Criteria for Designation:

The E.W.F. Stirrup House has significance in the historical and architectural 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:

1. Is associated in a significant way with the life of a person important in the past.

Ebenezer Woodbury Franklin Stirrup came to Florida with nothing, but through his entrepreneurial talent, became a substantial landholder in Coconut Grove. Mr. Stirrup affected the lives of many other African-Americans as he built housing that enabled them to have a degree of security and quality of life as they began the American experience. This house served as Mr. Stirrup's residence for 58 years.

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

The E.W.F. Stirrup House reflects the historical, cultural, political, and social trends of Miami. The story and life's work of E.W.F. Stirrup reflects the impact of segregation on the African-American community. Stirrup, who began his career as a craftsman, was intimately associated with the community that grew up along Charles Avenue in Coconut Grove. It was that long-standing community that educated the children, provided for spiritual needs, and created a sense of belonging that was otherwise denied African-Americans in the larger society.

4. Embodies those distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, period, or method of construction.

The E.W.F. Stirrup House embodies the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural period. The Stirrup family residence is one of a few surviving

wood frame residences from the late nineteenth century. Its narrow proportions, the size and shape of its fenestration, and its L-shaped plan are characteristics frequently associated with nineteenth century residential architecture.

7. Contains elements of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship of outstanding quality or which represent a significant innovation or adaptation to the South Florida environment.

The E.W.F. Stirrup House contains materials of outstanding quality that are native to South Florida. The residence is built of Dade County pine, once a prolific species in the region. Dade County pine is one of most enduring materials that was to be found in the area and is unique to the South Florida environment.

III. DESCRIPTION

Present and Original Appearance:

Setting:

The E.W.F Stirrup House faces north onto Charles Avenue and occupies the westernmost portion of a rectangular 100 x 100 foot lot. It is flanked by buildings on the east and west.

Description:

The residence is composed of a modified "L" plan shape, and is two stories in height. It is covered in a wood clapboard siding that terminates in wide cornerboards at the junction of the wall planes.

A porch extends across the space created by the ell, and contains the main entrance to the building. The piers supporting the roof of the porch are simple rectangular posts that frame a porch rail. The balustrade features turned wooden balusters that are probably not original to the residence.

The second story, directly above the open first floor porch, displays an enclosed space that continues the pattern of siding and corner boards established in the main residence. The shed roof butts into the building immediately below the eaves of the gable roof. The space created is awkward and is most likely a later alteration that served to provide additional living space.

The two-story, gable roofed wing that is perpendicular to the street contains scalloped shingles in the gable end. The roof extends beyond the wall plane and features wooden rafter tails. Windows are rectangular and possess a wooden window surround. The windows themselves are later replacements and are not consistent with the historic period of the home.

Contributing Structures and/or Landscape Features

The E.W.F. Stirrup House is the only contributing structure on the site. The property contains a variety of mature trees and shrubbery.



E.W.F. Stirrup House
3242 Charles Avenue
North and west façades
2002

IV. PLANNING CONTEXT

Present Trends and Conditions:

Presently the Stirrup House is vacant, but is in good condition. The windows appear to have been only recently replaced. The house still commands a distinguished presence on Charles Avenue, recalling the earliest beginnings of the community.

Preservation Incentives:

The preservation of this house is integral to the interpretation of the Bahamian experience in South Florida. Along with the rehabilitation of the Mariah Brown house in close proximity, the Stirrup House serves as witness to the struggle and achievement of these early pioneers.

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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