

## Historic Parcel Along 100-Block of South Biscayne Boulevard

While the developers of One Bayfront Plaza begin demolition of the former First National Bank building, we take a look back at all that once occupied that parcel of land along Biscayne Blvd.



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Figure 1: View of Royal Palm Park from the rooftop of the Royal Palm hotel in 1918.  
Courtesy of Florida State Archives.

The block bracketed by Biscayne boulevard to the east, SE Second street to the south, SE Third avenue to the west, and SE First street to the north, is a parcel of land that has been host to some of Miami's most prominent institutions over the city's more than 128-year history. What was incorporated into the city's first park, which hosted the first baseball diamond in the municipality, gave way to several other prominent facilities after the parcel was no longer part of Royal Palm Park.

A temporary exposition center, a strip mall with two prominent downtown theaters, and the home to Miami's oldest bank were several of the uses of this one block parcel in the heart of the city's center. At the time this article is published, the former First National Bank building at 100 South Biscayne boulevard is being razed and will be replaced with a super-tall tower reaching

1,049 feet consisting of 93 floors of mixed use. The new project will be called One Bayfront Tower and is expected to be completed by 2030. This is the history of the parcel of land along the 100-block of South Biscayne boulevard where this new super tower will be constructed.

### **Royal Palm Park (1896 – 1930)**

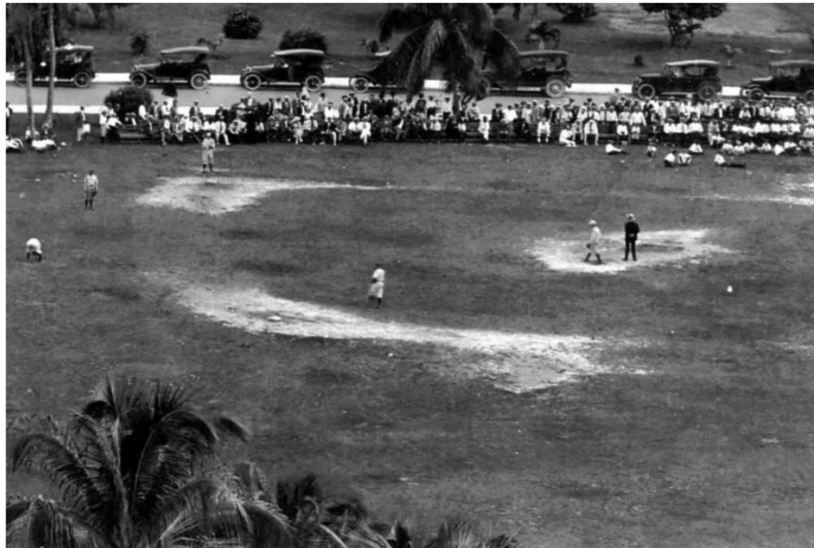


Figure 2: Baseball game on the Royal Palm Park diamond in 1917. Courtesy of Casey M. Picket.

As part of the grounds of the Royal Palm Hotel, the city's first luxurious inn constructed by the Florida East Coast company, were a beautifully landscaped garden south of the hotel building, and a large park north of the structure. Royal Palm Park, as it was named, became the center of outdoor activities during the city's first three decades. A band shell, a baseball diamond, and a small driving range were just some of the amenities that could be found in the park during its heyday.

On the northwest corner of the park was land donated by Flagler for the First Presbyterian Church. When the Great Commoner, William Jennings Bryan, agreed to conduct Sunday school services for the church, the crowds got too big for the chapel and were moved to the bandshell in the park.

In addition to church services, concerts, conventions, and fairs, the park hosted many baseball games in the diamond that sat in the center of what would become the 100-block of Biscayne Boulevard. Baseball was the most popular sport in town and watching amateur clubs compete on the diamond was a favorite pastime of early Miami residents.



Figure 3: Extension of SE First Street from SE Second Avenue to the Boulevard in 1925. This extension bifurcated Royal Palm Park once it was completed. Courtesy of Miami-Dade Public Library, Romer Collection.

Shortly after Bayfront Park, a publicly financed and managed park, opened in 1924, Royal Palm Park was only used by the hotel for private functions. The bandshell was moved from Royal Palm to Bayfront Park, and the baseball diamond was left abandoned. When the city extended SE First street from SE Second Avenue to Biscayne Boulevard in 1925, the project bifurcated the former Royal Palm Park. Prior to this project, SE First street stopped at the edge of the park along SE Second Avenue.

Following the great hurricane of 1926, which had a devastating impact on downtown Miami, the Royal Palm Hotel was nearing its end. The extension of SE Second Avenue from the Miami River to SE Second street in 1928 required that part of the hotel be demolished. By 1930, almost the entire facility was razed leaving just the footprint of Miami's first luxury hotel. The vacated land, which included the 100-block of SE Biscayne boulevard, remained vacant and unused until it became the temporary home of a major trade show in the late 1930s.

## Ford Exposition Center (1936 – 1937)

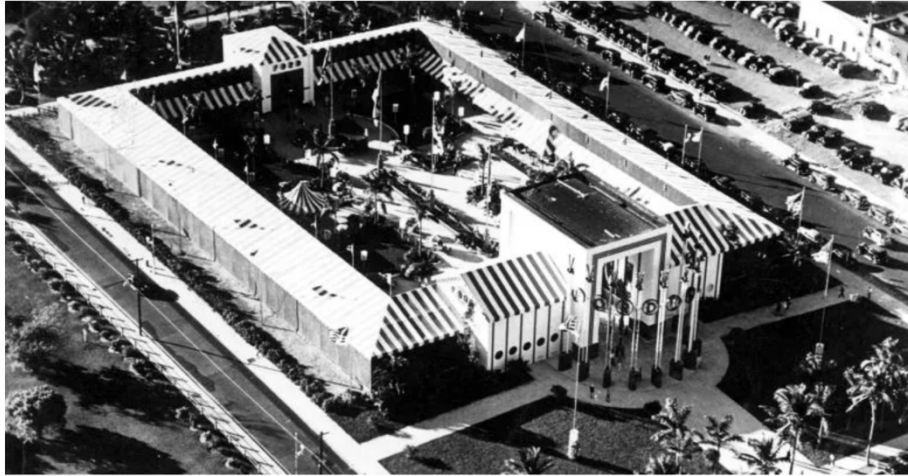


Figure 4: Aerial view of the Ford Exposition Center in 1937. Courtesy of Larry Wiggins.

During the depths of the Great Depression, the Ford Motor Company selected Miami to host their Ford Exposition Center. The promoters of the event were hoping to make the center constructed for Ford a permanent exposition center on the 100-block of SE Biscayne boulevard, but ultimately the structure only served the city of Miami for one year after it was constructed.

However, from the time of the Ford Motor Exposition Center's grand opening on January 15, 1937, until it was shuttered after the Knights Templar Conclave in the fall of 1937, the facility attracted a lot of out-of-town visitors during a difficult economic time for Miami, as well as the rest of the world. The Ford Exposition attracted over 500,000 visitors to downtown Miami, and the Knights Templar organization was responsible for bringing in more than 50,000 members and guests to the Magic City for its Conclave in July of 1937.

By August 14, 1937, the Miami City Commission authorized the dismantling of the exposition center building and once again the land was cleared and remained vacant until a well-known businessman leased the land and constructed a strip mall on the parcel in 1941.

## Royal Center Strip Mall (1941 – 1957)



Figure 5: Aerial of the Royal Center strip mall on July 8, 1952. Courtesy of Casey M.

Edward Claughton Sr. was known for developing strip center malls and operating theaters throughout the southeast United States when he purchased the 100-block of SE Biscayne boulevard in 1941. He owned the Urmev Hotel in downtown Miami, the former site of the Brickell Apartments and other lots in the Brickell neighborhood, but may best be remembered for purchasing and expanding Burlingame Island, which was later renamed Brickell Key on Claughton Island.

Following the removal of the temporary exposition center in 1937, Claughton very shrewdly negotiated a contract for the exclusive rights to lease the 100-block parcel of land from the Model Land Company, which was the Florida East Coast company's division which managed real estate holdings. However, he did not exercise that right until he formed the Royal Palm Investment corporation just prior to the contract's expiration on March 1, 1941. The agreement included an option to buy the property for \$400,000.

His plan was to construct an L-shaped strip center that would consist of two separate buildings, one with a 170-foot frontage on SE Third Avenue, and 66 feet on SE First Street. The other building had a 125-foot frontage on SE First Street and a depth of 60 feet, which was able to accommodate seven store units. The land to the east of the pair of buildings was used as a surface parking lot. The first building included a 1,000-seat movie house called the Royal

Theater which became one of several downtown theaters that so many mid-century Miami residents routinely frequented. The Royal Theater held its grand opening on December 7, 1941.



Figure 6: Aerial of downtown Miami in 1951. The Royal Center strip mall is seen on the left just north of the parking lot. Courtesy of Florida State Archives.

In addition to the much larger Royal Theater, there was a smaller cinema that opened in the Royal Center, directly to the east of the larger picture house, called the Embassy Theater. The strip mall occupied the 100-block parcel until a couple of years after the passing of Ed Claughton Sr. on May 10, 1955.

Lillian Claughton, Ed's widow, decided to terminate the lease that the family held with the Model Land Company in February of 1957 so that a large local bank could construct their new downtown headquarters on the parcel. The Miami Daily News reported that Lillian Claughton explained that "she gave up her lease on the property because she did not want to stand in the way of the bank's development." The Claughton interests still had seven years to go on a ten-year lease, but opted not to force the bank to build around the Royal Center.

## First National Bank Building (1957 – 2024)



Figure 7: First National Bank building at 100 South Biscayne boulevard in 1959.  
Courtesy of Casey M. Picket.

The First National Bank of Miami was founded on December 1, 1902, by Edward C. Romfh along with other Miami city pioneers including E.L. Brelsford, as the organizations first president, W.H. Spitzer, first vice president, and E.A. Waddell, second vice president. In addition, the board also included William Burdine and James E. Lummus.

The organization's first bank building was a two-story small structure on the northeast corner of today's Flagler Street and NE First Avenue. The original building was replaced in 1922 with a ten-story structure that is still standing as the First Flagler Condominiums. The bank was one of two financial institutions in the city of Miami that survived the Great Depression and was the largest bank in Florida by 1946.

By the early 1950s, the bank had outgrown its 1922 constructed building and wanted to erect a new headquarters building to accommodate the changing demands of operating a major financial institution in downtown Miami during the middle decades of the Twentieth Century. A significant number of the bank's clients expressed frustration with the lack of available parking near their Flagler street location, so the bank officials began the search to find enough land to construct a larger facility which could offer onsite parking.

On January 2, 1955, the Miami Herald published that officials for the First National Bank had purchased a block of downtown land bounded by Flagler street and SE Third avenue, just north

of the 100-block of South Biscayne boulevard, with an option to lease part of the block occupied by the Royal Center to its south. The bank had planned to construct a parking garage on the 100-block with the part of the parcel what was not occupied by the existing Royal Center complex.



Figure 8: Construction of the First National Bank building on December 5, 1956. Courtesy of Casey M. Picket, photographer Steve Weever of the Miami Herald.

Within a year, the bank revised its plan for the institution's new facility when they announced that they would begin construction of a self-contained new building and parking garage on the 100-block parcel as opposed to the plot of land they purchased a year earlier. The original idea was to construct the building around the Royal Theater, but after Lilian Claughton agreed to break the lease for the theater, the bank razed the strip mall and constructed their headquarters building on the entire block.

The new First National Bank building gave the bank more than 120,000 square feet of usable space, compared with 60,000 square feet at their Flagler street location. The facility also provided the bank with 400 parking spaces across a three-level parking deck. The building celebrated its grand opening on Monday, February 9, 1959, with the entire project costing roughly \$9 million to complete the 19-story tower.

First National Bank of Miami changed its name to Southeast Bank in 1969 and continued to operate in Florida until it filed for bankruptcy on September 20, 1991. While the bank constructed and occupied 100 South Biscayne boulevard for many years, to many contemporary Miami residents it is probably best known associated with the Vitas Healthcare Corporation



given that the company had been the flagship tenant from 1994 until they vacated the building recently.

### **One Bayfront Plaza**



Figure 9: Rendering of One Bayfront Plaza. Courtesy of Florida East Coast Realty.

Prior to the end of the first decade of the Twenty First Century, the Florida East Coast Realty corporation, headed by Tibor Hollo, purchased the building with big plans to redevelop the property. After several iterations of announcing different versions of a replacement tower for the 100-block parcel, the organization has recently moved forward with One Bayfront Plaza which is currently designed as a super tower topping off at 1,049 feet in height (93 stories), and featuring over 3-million square feet of mixed-use space.

Once completed, this tower will be one of the tallest buildings in Miami at a time when its skyline is changing dramatically. It seems as if a new project is announced every year claiming to become the tallest structure in Miami upon completion.



Figure 10: Demolition of the former First National Bank building on December 21, 2024. Courtesy of Casey M. Picket.

Demolition of the former 19-story First National Bank building commenced in 2024, but made the news in 2023 during Art Basel when the owner of the property gave permission for artists from around the world to cover the building with colorful tags and graffiti. The finished product received mixed reviews from onlookers and political leaders.

After a year of illuminating the skyline with colorful graffiti, one city commissioner demanded that the property's owner complete demolition of the building to rid the tagged structure from the city's skyline. Demolition of the edifice on the 100-block parcel, which the building spans entirely, is expected to be completed by the fall of 2025.

While the property may be seen through a contemporary lens as the end of the graffiti tagged building, the parcel of land on which that building stood for 65 years has a much deeper history in a municipality that is considered young in relation to other well-known international cities. As we witness the next iteration of development of this block, it is worth reflecting on all that occupied this parcel the preceding 128-years before the construction of Miami's next super tower.