

# Tequesta

VOLUME ONE

AUGUST, 1942

NUMBER TWO

## George Edgar Merrick

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THE Historical Association of Southern Florida mourns the passing of George Edgar Merrick, one of its founders, and its first president, who died in the early morning hours of Thursday, March 26, 1942, at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami, Florida.

His is the story of a dreamer and his accomplishments, of a builder who made a beautiful vision become a reality, of a writer, a poet, a philosopher, a lover of the beautiful, a creator, a thinker, and with it all, a very human man. To understand him, we must know his family background and his life story.

George Merrick did not know very much about his maternal forebears, except that, in his mother's near kin folk were numbered famous artists, writers and musicians. His mother herself was a painter, specializing in nature and delighting in transferring to canvas, portrayals of the beautiful tropical flowers surrounding her home in southern Florida. She was also a musician, and found time in her busy pioneer life to instruct her daughters on the piano and organ. There is no doubt that George's artistic ability came to him from his mother's family.

George Merrick was descended in the eighth generation of his paternal line from a Welsh ancestor, John Merrick, who emigrated from Wales to Talbot County, on the eastern shore of Maryland in 1669. John Merrick was of pure Celtic stock, and the family are still in possession of the same ancestral estate, "Bordorgan," Angelys, Wales, where Merricks have lived for over a thousand years. The motto on the family crest is, "God, Enough; Without God, Nothing." John Merrick, and after him, his descendants, lived through seven generations on their original grant of land in Maryland, and George's father, Solomon Greaseley Merrick, was born there. Solomon Merrick married Althea Fink of Springdale, Pennsylvania, whom he met while they were both attending Lebanon Valley College, at Annville, Pennsylvania. After her graduation,

Miss Fink had taught art and penmanship in the college. Solomon Merrick later graduated from Yale University, and assumed the pastorate of the Congregational Church at Gaines, New York. Solomon and Althea Merrick had seven children. Their eldest child, George Edgar, was born on June 3, 1886, at the home of his maternal grandparents in Springdale, Pennsylvania. When George was eight years old, his father left Gaines, and accepted a call to the old Plymouth Church at Duxbury, Massachusetts. George completed grade school there, and attended Partridge Academy for a year.

His parents, induced by the rigorous winters typical of New England, decided to seek a milder climate in Florida. The Reverend Merrick corresponded with Reverend James Bolton, pastor of the Community Church in Coconut Grove. He sought his advice and through him, learned of the one hundred sixty acre Gregory homestead in Dade County which was for sale. He purchased this homestead, without seeing it, with his life savings of eleven hundred dollars.

George Merrick was early in life interested in writing and some of his boyhood poems were published in the Springdale Press. But this phase of his character had to stay dormant for a time, for he and his father preceded the family to Florida to make sure of suitable living conditions. They arrived during the Spanish-American War. The Miami area was quarantined on account of a yellow fever epidemic. George, then a boy of thirteen, went with his father to a friend's home on the Loxahatchee River, where they spent several months waiting for the quarantine to be lifted.

They found much hard work awaiting them when they reached their homestead. Only one acre was under cultivation. They cleared more land, planted vegetables, and set out many varieties of fruit trees. They made the cabin already on the land as habitable as possible with the limited means at their disposal. They overcame the many trials of a pioneer life with courage, always saying, we will be able to do this or that, "when the groves begin to bear."

By the time Mrs. Merrick and four children (one daughter died in the north and a son was born in Florida) arrived, the vegetables were being marketed. This was not so easy in those days. George hauled them with mule and wagon over narrow rough roads to Miami, where he sold as much as possible to the Royal Palm Hotel, which had its opening season in the winter of 1898-1899. Any remaining of his load had to be peddled to stores or to housewives. Miami was a small village at that time. It had been incorporated two years previously on July 28,

1896, with a population of five hundred and two persons, including Negroes. The town extended, mainly, from the railroad tracks on the west to Biscayne Bay on the east, and from the river on the south to what is now eleventh Street. It was a tiresome whole day's trip from his home to Miami and back again.

During this time, his education was not neglected. His father had long dreamed of establishing a small, congenial colony of retired professional men. A few came, and he sold, or, in a few instances, gave them small plots of land. George was tutored by one of these men, a retired Yale professor, to enable him to enter Rollins College at Winter Park, Florida, in 1907. During the one year he spent there, his writings received favorable notice. He was an editor of the school paper and won the Ronan medal for oratory. In the fall of 1908, he enrolled in the New York Law School, then a part of Columbia University. He divided his time between writing and the study of law, but writing was nearer to his heart. He had several short stories accepted, and won a short story contest conducted by the New York Evening Telegram with his story "The Sponger's Delilah." The prize story was printed in the issue of February 24, 1910.

Soon after their arrival in Florida, his father accepted the pastorate of the Congregational Church in Coconut Grove. The family all attended there and his sister, Ethel, played the organ. Distances seemed greater then, with inadequate means of transportation, and it was a labor of love to travel the weary miles at first with mule and wagon, later with horse and carriage, and still later, "when the groves began to bear," in one of the early Maxwell cars. It was, therefore, quite fitting that George Merrick should be on the Board of Trustees who later built the artistic Plymouth Congregational Church.

Reverend Merrick's health failed and George left school to assume the management of the home place, entering into the partnership of "S. G. Merrick and Son." When his father died in 1911, he assumed the entire management of the plantation. In the period between 1911 and 1920, he gradually built up the largest and most prosperous plantation in the area, having over a thousand acres under cultivation, chiefly in citrus and tropical fruits. The first full carload of grapefruit shipped from Dade County came from his groves. Coral Way, at that time was a narrow, shady road of crushed and rolled coral rock, bordered on either side by the beautiful Merrick groves. The original cabin had been followed by a new house in 1900, and in 1906 an artistic coral house was erected in front, including the original four room house. This spacious

house with wide verandas had a colorful tile roof, which led them to name it "Coral Gables," and the entire acreage with the house was called "Coral Gables Plantation." Thus it was that when the City he later planned came into existence, it was named after his home place.

In 1916, George Merrick married Miss Eunice Peacock, only child of Robert Alfred S. Peacock and Lillian Frow Peacock of Coconut Grove. Mr. Peacock came to this area from England in 1878 and formerly had owned and operated the old "Peacock Inn," first tourist hotel in the Biscayne Bay country. Miss Peacock was educated in the local schools, and attended the Model School for Girls in Trenton, New Jersey.

George Merrick served as County Commissioner in Dade County from 1914 to 1916. He was much interested in the development of transportation and good roads, by means of which the back country could be developed. He was an early advocate of the Tamiami Trail, and a causeway across the bay, both of which projects were begun during his term as County Commissioner. He also was one of the group who persuaded S. Davies Warfield to extend the Seaboard Railway to Miami.

The dream that later materialized in the founding of the City of Coral Gables, developed in George's mind during his boyhood years. His father's idea of interesting a small congenial group of retired educators and ministers to settle on small tracts was developed and expanded until he had a vision of a great and beautiful city. To gain experience and to increase his capital, he entered the real estate field, still, however, retaining active management of the Merrick Groves. He became vice-president, in charge of the development department, of the Realty Securities Corporation, and, in association with Clifton D. Benson and the late T. O. Wilson, founders of the company, developed and sold a number of subdivisions, among which were North Miami Estates, Riverside Farms, Kirkland Heights, Grapeland, Coconut Grove Subdivision, Goulds, Acadia, Aqua Vista, and, later, Twelfth Street Manors and South Bay Estates. This was his deliberately planned apprenticeship for the city building which was to follow.

After having worked out on paper the plans, essential details, and limits of his "dream city," he began to turn his ideas into a reality. The first streets were laid in the spring of 1921. He brought together outstanding artists, architects, city planners, and engineers, many of national repute, to assist in the building of Coral Gables, his "City Beautiful." Between the spring of 1920 and the fall of 1923, over fifty million dollars was expended under his direction in permanent improvements and buildings. During the same period, nearly one hundred fifty million dollars

was received in the sale of Coral Gables property throughout the entire nation. Over three thousand salesmen were employed at one time. Eighty-six large Coral Gables busses brought people from the states east of the Mississippi and many of them purchased homesites and today are residents of Coral Gables. Over three million dollars was expended in advertising. Able writers, artists and orators contributed to this unique system of advertising and sale, the like of which has never been known before or since. Among these notables, were Rex Beach, Denman Fink, Phineas Paist, and William Jennings Bryan. Mr. Beach wrote eloquently on "The Miracle of Coral Gables," and Mr. Bryan lectured daily at the Venetian Pool for nearly two years.

Outstanding among the Coral Gables institutions founded by George Merrick were the Miami Biltmore Hotel ensemble, consisting of a four hundred room hotel, with its beautiful Giralda Tower, and the Miami Biltmore Country Club, with its two eighteen-hole golf courses designed by Donald Ross. Both buildings are unusual in design and equipment. The million dollar Douglas Entrance and the Venetian Pool (transformed from an unsightly rock pit), the City Hall—all are monuments to his love of beauty.

Before any building had been started in Coral Gables, George Merrick had made plans to build a great university. He gave one hundred-and-sixty acres of land and pledged four million dollars, one million of which he made immediately available. The main building was started. The cornerstone was laid dedicating the University to the memory of his father on February 4, 1926. Thousands of spectators, including many noted men, were present. The pledges to the endowment fund amounted to nearly eight million of the goal of fifteen million dollars. Few of the pledges, except that of Merrick, materialized, due to the devastating hurricane of September, 1926, and the ensuing financial depression. However, the University of Miami, whose start Merrick had made possible and whose early achievement he largely guided, opened its doors to nearly eight hundred students on October 15, 1926. The school was housed, not in the magnificent building originally planned, but in the nearly completed Anastasia Hotel on University Drive. The original building stands, skeletonlike, the only unfinished structure of boom days in Coral Gables. The school has steadily progressed, fulfilling George Merrick's dream since it is also serving the youth from many Latin-American countries. The University has been unusually fortunate in that it has numbered on its faculty from the beginning outstanding educators, many of whom were willing to forego the larger remuneration received

in large northern universities, in order to help in the building of a new one. George Merrick served as Regent and Trustee of the University from its beginning to the time of his death.

Millions were spent in tropical planting, gathered from all the tropical world. The plans for each building had to be submitted for approval to a planning board so that each structure would conform to the type building allowed in the particular neighborhood. The broad thoroughfares which meet in beautiful plazas with their Spanish wells, pools, and fountains, make a sight nowhere else to be seen.

In 1920, the Four Seas Company, of Boston, published Mr. Merrick's "Songs of the Wind on a Southern Shore," a compilation of his Florida and Caribbean poems. A second edition was published in 1926. Before and since that time, many of his writings, including poems, short stories and historical articles have appeared in various publications, including the Christian Science Monitor, New York Times, Tequesta, and in a number of Latin-American magazines. At the time of his death, he was compiling a volume of nature poems, as well as a volume of short stories based on pioneer days of South Florida.

George Merrick was decorated by King Alphonso of Spain in 1927 for his wonderful expression of Spanish architecture in Coral Gables, and was made a "Don of the Order of Isabella De Catolica."

The financial collapse which followed the terrible hurricane of 1926, brought financial disaster for Mr. Merrick. The Merricks voluntarily sacrificed all of their assets in an endeavor to complete Coral Gables and to hold it together as a City entity. The latter aim was eminently successful, but thereafter, the control of his wide realty holdings passed into other hands. The Merricks bravely started out to begin all over again. For a few years, they operated the Caribbee Fishing Camp on Matecumbe Key, on land bequeathed to Mrs. Merrick by her father, R. A. S. Peacock. A hurricane completely destroyed this camp in the fall of 1935.

In 1934, they both entered the real estate field, when "George E. Merrick, Incorporated," was formed. Mr. Merrick served as Chairman of the Dade County Planning Board from 1935 to 1939. He had always advocated County zoning and spent much time in the work of the Dade County Zoning Commission, of which he was chairman from 1937 to 1939. Under his leadership, the Dade County Zoning Code, which is a model code for county areas throughout the United States, was worked out. He was a Director of the Fairchild Tropical Garden.

He was never particularly interested in the money he could make, did make, and refused to keep, when reverses came to Coral Gables. After the crash came, he had not a foot of soil to his name. His dream of a beautiful city had become a reality, but one in whose destiny he no longer had a guiding hand. He had built well, but of those who admire its charm today, few know its true story.

Mr. Merrick was appointed Postmaster of Miami, after receiving the highest grade of the sixty-six taking the competitive civil service examination for the post. He was sworn into office on June 1, 1940. He immediately applied his energetic, able mind, and his creative genius to the task of improving the service rendered by the Miami post office.

During the fall of 1939, Mr. Merrick and Gaines R. Wilson conferred together as to the feasibility of the formation of a historical society in South Florida, to include Cuba, the Bahamas and the Keys. In response to their invitation, a small group of those interested in the project met on January 4, and January 18, 1940. They set up definite plans for such a society, which they named the "Historical Association of Southern Florida." Mr. Merrick acted as Chairman at these preliminary meetings, and was chosen by unanimous approval to be the first president. His assistance in planning the scope of the program to be undertaken and his influence in securing members has been invaluable. He served as President of the association until May, 1941. His interesting article on "Pre-Flagler Influence on the Lower Florida East Coast," was a valuable contribution to our program, to the society's journal, "Tequesta," and to the historical record of the region. He knew his subject, and gave those who were fortunate in hearing him, a new insight into the history of the section.

Saturday afternoon, March 28, 1942, was a sad occasion for the family, the friends and associates who gathered by the hundreds at the Plymouth Congregational Church to show their love and respect for George E. Merrick. Men and women of all walks of life came to pay tribute to the backwoods' farm lad who became one of the area's most outstanding citizens. His mortal remains lie interred beside those of his parents in Woodlawn Park Cemetery, but his memory lives on in the hearts of his friends and in the beautiful City he planned and founded.