

The Carver Village Controversy

By Teresa Lenox

Restricted to designated areas, Miami's growing black community had little choice in where they could purchase land, build a home, or rent a decent apartment. In 1951, the pressure of population expansion finally broke the rigid barriers of segregation in Miami. Acts of violence and terrorism followed.

In the early morning of September 22, 1951, thunderous dynamite blasts tore gaping holes in the walls and foundation of Carver Village, an apartment complex located in the Edison Center section of Miami.¹ For months, Carver Village had been the center of an emotional and controversial issue--black integration of a white neighborhood.

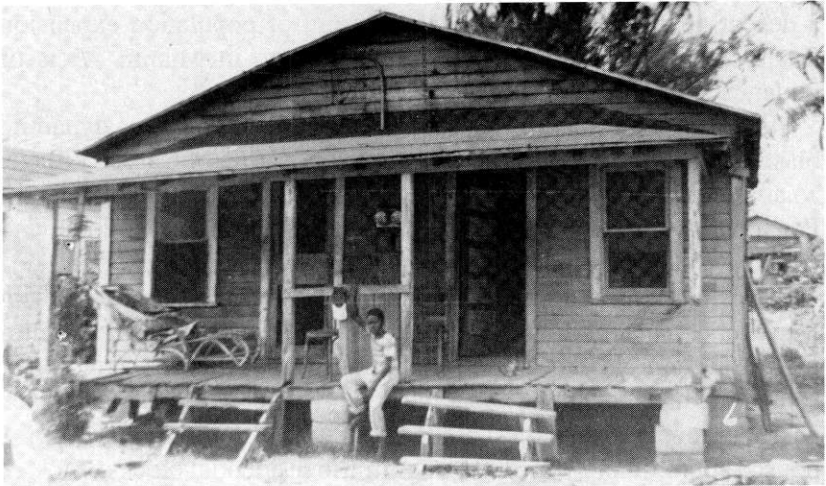
Housing in Miami's black community had been a serious problem for several years in Miami. Twice in 1951 citizens voted overwhelmingly for slum clearance and public housing. Everyone agreed that something had to be done about the deplorable conditions in the black neighborhood.² The largest of the ghettos, the Central Negro District, housed approximately 37,000 blacks in 136 residential blocks. Most of the residents did without electricity, running water, and garbage collection, creating conditions ripe for contagious diseases.³ The slums had to be cleared and public housing provided for the displaced residents. On this issue blacks and whites agreed. Yet, no one could agree on where to locate the new black housing project.⁴

One black housing project had been built in 1937. Located in Edison Center, the Liberty Square project had been heralded as the largest housing project in the south and the most beautiful in the country. However, Liberty Square was surrounded by a six-foot stone wall.⁵ The

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wall, a physical and mental barrier, stood as a reminder to blacks to keep out of the white areas. For the black community, the wall became a source of tension. For the whites, it stood as a safeguard against blacks invading their neighborhood. That was all soon to change.⁶

Malcolm Wisheart and John Bouvier had built two private housing projects in Edison Center; one black project inside the wall and one white project on the other side. Units in the black project filled quickly while units in the white project, known as Knight Manor, remained half empty. Realizing the need for black housing, Wisheart and Bouvier renamed 216 units Carver Village and opened them to blacks in June of 1951. This decision tore down the barrier of segregation and began a wave of terrorism that brought shame to the city and citizens of Miami.⁷



In 1951, Miamians voted twice for slum clearance and public housing.

News of the owner's decision to rent to blacks spread quickly through Knight Manor. The white residents immediately formed the Dade County Property Owner's Association. They retained attorney William J. Pruitt to help keep blacks out of Knight Manor. Led by Ira David Hawthorne, the Property Owner's Association met with the Miami City Commission several times to plead for help with their problem. The commissioners, however, understood that something had to be done about the shortage of black housing and refused to help the association. Shocked by the City Commission's decision, citizens and residents took matters into their own hands.⁸

On July 14th the Ku Klux Klan distributed hate literature and burned giant letter Ks in four locations around Carver Village. The campaign escalated when Knight Manor residents organized an "Indignation Meeting" and "Mammoth Motorcade" to demonstrate white supremacy. After the meeting, cars filled with whites circled Carver Village honking horns and flashing search lights. During the motorcade an employee of *The Miami Daily News* shot and wounded a black man.⁹

Mr. Daniel Francis, a long-time resident of the area, recalled that during more than one motorcade whites threw rocks at windows in Carver Village. Whites also posted signs and patrolled the area during the summer, warning blacks of trouble if they moved into Carver Village. Tensions rose to fevered pitch when reports surfaced that 76 units of Carver Village had been sold to black project managers George Bubee and Stanley Sweeting.¹⁰

All efforts by the white community to keep blacks out of Carver Village failed. The first blacks moved in during the week of August 11. In September, David Hawthorne, of the Property Owners' Association, again went to the City Commission to ask for help. This time he requested that the city secure Carver Village through negotiations or condemnation. Hawthorne believed this would end the tension and he had little problem convincing the commissioners. Before a packed meeting, commissioner Louie Bandel offered the motion to begin negotiations "to condemn buildings at Carver Village...and to acquire them by eminent domain for municipal purposes other than public housing." Bandel also went on record stating that this resolution would not be a permanent solution to the problem. Earlier during the meeting Commissioner Perrine Palmer asked Hawthorne what would prevent the owners from allowing Blacks to rent their property east of Carver Village. Hawthorne assured Palmer that whites already occupied those units. Unconvinced, Commissioner Palmer offered an amendment to the resolution--the city acquire the entire project owned by Wiseheart and Bouvier. This suggestion received thunderous applause from the audience. Bandel refused to accept the amendment.¹¹

At this point, the meeting turned into a political battlefield. When Bandel refused to accept the amendment, Palmer accused him of "trying to fool these people, because the election is close..." He went on: "I am going to second Mr. Bandel's resolution with my tongue in my cheek..." With this, Bandel retorted, "You are determined to beat me in the election...I welcome your opposition." The resolution passed four to one. The City of Miami would acquire, through condemnation, Carver

Village and the units would be used as fire and police sub-stations and office space for the city's sewage disposal project.¹²

The commission's decision to condemn Carver Village only added more tension to the situation. *The Miami Daily News* called the decision "a vote-getter, no more and no less." Everyone seemed to agree that making Carver Village out-of-bounds for blacks did nothing to solve the real issue. As one black man put it, "Negroes went out to Edison Center not to make trouble... They went out there so they could live in clean apartments with little yards around them. You don't see much of that in Negro town."¹³

Some citizens were outraged at the commission's decision. Attorney Victor Levine, referred to the decision as an "extravagant squandering of tax funds." As a taxpayer, Levine filed a suit to halt the condemnation proceedings. After all, the cost of acquiring Carver Village exceeded Miami's Treasury by \$1.3 million.¹⁴

The situation literally exploded on September 22, 1951. At 2:15 a.m., two 100-pound boxes of dynamite ripped two holes into the walls of an untenanted building in Carver Village. The dynamite shattered windows, twisted doors off their hinges, and ripped off the roof. Police estimated the damage to be in excess of \$200,000. A third box containing 80 sticks of dynamite failed to detonate. The blasts shook the whole Northwest section of Miami. Dan Francis, who lived a few blocks away, grabbed his shotgun and headed for Carver Village. "You see," he stated, "I knew what had happened." A large group of blacks and whites gathered around Carver Village, but the newspapers reported no other disturbances. The Miami Police Department followed several leads to no avail.¹⁵

As police kept guard, an uneasy quiet prevailed at Carver Village. City Attorney John W. Watson drafted a letter to the Assistant U. S. Attorney, Fred Botts, asking an opinion on the legality of a declaration of a state of emergency "in view of civil rights statutes."¹⁶ Except for alarming area residents, the bombing of Carver Village "aroused no serious public reaction."¹⁷ David Hawthorne asked the City Commission to vacate the Negroes from Carver Village; they refused his request, stating no law existed by which they could be evicted. After a few weeks Wiseheart and Bouvier hired a night-watchman to patrol Knight Manor and the police removed their guards.¹⁸

In spite of increased purchases of arms and ammunition by whites, the month of October saw no disturbances at Carver Village. The dynamiting, however, continued. Three times during the month of

October, Jewish synagogues and schools were blasted. Miami Police Chief Walter Headley saw no connection between these bombings and the Carver Village bombing. He perceived the blasts at Carver Village as the work of professionals, while the bombings of the synagogues appeared amateurish. The police chief said, "the explosions were Communist-inspired to incite racial hatred."¹⁹



Police inspect Carver village after bombing, 1951.

A writer for *The Nation* magazine saw it differently. "The Ku Klux Klan," he wrote, "have long used terror to keep Negroes inside the ghettos assigned to them, and their program for exploiting any minority has included anti-Semitism." He went on to cite Miami's long history with the Klan and police support given the organization.²⁰ David Hawthorne went so far as to accuse Blacks of the bombings in order to receive Jewish support.²¹ Indignant over the bombing of their synagogues, the Jewish community united with the black community to demand a stop to these acts of violence.

On November 30th at 2:12 a.m. a second blast rocked Carver Village, totally demolishing two units. The culprits again placed the dynamite in an untenanted building, suggesting that they did not want to kill but only intimidate. Mrs. Senecheria, the wife of Miami's new mayor, told reporters that she had received a threatening phone call. The caller told her "to get the Negroes out or we'll blow the whole place apart." The night watchman, employed by Bouvier and Wiseheart, had driven past the complex just a few moments prior to the blast and saw "nothing out of the ordinary." A bomb expert from Chicago, in Miami to aid local officials, sorted through the debris, but found little evidence. Police Chief Headley insisted the explosion was "an attempt [by the Communists] to create racial discord."²²

Black leaders accused the Miami police of not doing enough to halt the bombings. Outraged, Miamians demanded a stop to the violence that swept their resort city. The dust had barely settled from the last explosion when, on December 2nd, three more bombs exploded. The first blast hit Carver Village at 3:57 a.m., but caused no damage. The second blast thirty minutes later shattered the windows of a Jewish synagogue. The third bomb exploded harmlessly at 5 a.m. in a southwest residential area.²³

Finally, spurred into action, Governor Fuller Warren dispatched Adjutant General Mark Lance of the Florida National Guard to Miami to study the situation. The Governor also sent an investigator from his office to assist local officials in their investigations. Miami police believed the bombings on December 2 to be the work of pranksters. Regardless of who was responsible, the citizens of Miami were frightened and ashamed. Jewish and black leaders met with the city and county commissions to plead for an end to the bombings. The Committee Against Bombing, a Jewish group headed by Burnett Roth, offered the Miami City Commission a plan to end the violence. Their plan called for F.B.I. intervention, regulated dynamite sales, and a \$5,000 reward for the capture of those responsible for the recent atrocities.²⁴

A newly elected city commission met on December 5. Guarded by six policemen and four detectives, the commissioners took several actions to help end the wave of bombings. In order to attack what they felt to be the basic problem, the commission passed an emergency measure to obtain additional low-cost housing and federally financed slum clearance. To get the slum clearance underway as soon as possible, they passed a resolution asking the Miami Housing Authority to acquire Knight Manor, Carver Village, and the adjacent vacant land

(also owned by Bouvier and Wisheart) to be used for a low-cost housing project.²⁵ The previous commission had recommended the purchase of only Carver Village. This change in decision suggests that Miami city officials were ready to do something about housing the black community.

At the meeting, speaking on behalf of the property owners of Edison Center, David Hawthorne stated, "It is unfair for the authorities to uphold this situation since these colored people have not invested the first dime in this white section." Mr. Hawthorne recommended that the commission declare an emergency and clear Carver Village of all its residents. The commissioners had no comment.²⁶

The commission also passed three specific resolutions in response to the bombings. First, they offered a \$3,000 reward for the apprehension of the criminals responsible for the bombings. Second, they created a \$5,000 fund for the police department to pay for overtime relating to the bombings. Third, they passed an ordinance regulating the sale and use of dynamite in Miami. All of the commission's decisions passed unanimously.²⁷

Miami received some unwanted national attention after the December 2 bombings. The Justice Department began a study as requested by the Anti-Defamation League.²⁸ Representative Louis B. Heller, a Democrat from New York, said that if the Justice Department did not push the inquiry immediately, he would introduce a severe bill to curb such action "against racial and religious groups, their property and institutions."²⁹ Heller also wrote a letter to Florida's Attorney General, J. Howard McGrath, urging him to find the culprits of this "wave of vandalism" and bring them to justice before the violence spread to other communities.³⁰

The violence did spread into a north Florida community. On the night of December 25, 1951, a bomb exploded beneath the home of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's leader, Harry T. Moore. Moore died enroute to the hospital; his wife was critically injured. At first, some officials believed the bomb-murder of Harry Moore to be linked with the Miami bombings.³¹ This could never be proven. However, the thread of hatred, bigotry, and violence had been woven into all of these incidences.

The murder of Harry Moore brought swarms of F.B.I. agents into Florida. On January 8, 1952, Attorney General Howard McGrath widened the F.B.I. investigations to the bombings in Miami. Meanwhile, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League, Benjamin

Epstein, met with Governor Warren to confer about a statewide program to halt the violence. Epstein recommended a survey of local areas to determine racial or religious tension and a project, at the community level, to combat the "basic issues of racial and religious hatreds."³²



On November 30th, Carver Village was bombed for a second time.

As February approached, with no further bombings reported, Miamians began to calm down. But, the recent violence had not been forgotten. F.B.I. agents continued their investigations while officials laid the groundwork for a proposed Dade County Council on Community Relations. The Council, composed of leading white and Black Miami citizens, set as its objective a community-wide effort to better

relations between racial and religious groups. In New York, *The Americans Protesting Florida Terror* suggested an "Americanism" educational program for Florida.³³ In Washington, D.C., Representative Heller proposed a federal law carrying a penalty of death for acts of violence inspired by racial or religious prejudice. In addition, Senator H. Alexander Smith of New Jersey asked for an immediate report by the F.B.I. on the recent wave of terrorism in Florida and for a determination by the Justice Department on the adequacy of federal laws.³⁴

Finally, on October 6, 1952, over a year after the first bomb was set, Attorney General James P. McGranery asked a federal grand jury to review the evidence gathered by the F.B.I. concerning Carver Village bombings. McGranery stated that he believed "there have been violations of the Civil Rights statutes...and other federal laws."³⁵ The jury thought that the testimony on Carver Village would take approximately three weeks. The first witnesses to testify were the F.B.I. agents who had investigated the possible civil rights violations at Carver Village. The jury also ordered twelve other witnesses to produce all records of the John B. Gordon Klavern of the Ku Klux Klan in Hialeah. On December 9, two months later, the federal grand jury returned indictments against four people; three men and a woman: William G. Orwick, Harvey G. DeRosier, Arthur F. Udgreen, and Mrs. Helen Russell. All four surrendered to federal authorities after being indicted for perjury.³⁶

The grand jury charged William Orwick, a linotype operator in Miami, on two counts of making false statements pursuant to the Federal Employees Loyalty Program and to the provisions of the National Security Act of 1947. Orwick told F.B.I. agent Melvin Jett that he had not been a member of the Ku Klux Klan since 1946 and that he had no knowledge that Sports, Inc., in Hialeah, was used as a front for John B. Gordon's Klavern. Investigators showed that Orwick had been a member of the Klan during the years 1950 and 1951 and that he also knew Sports, Inc., to be a Klan meeting place, because he had attended regular meetings there.³⁷

The indictment against Harvey G. DeRosier, a Post Office employee, stated that he had given false statements to the Postal Loyalty Board. Apparently the Loyalty Board learned that DeRosier had been a member of the John B. Gordon Klavern, and that through his job at the Post Office, had been assembling information concerning organizations opposed to the Klan. DeRosier denied membership in the Klan,

saying that he had resigned in 1950 when he learned the nature of Sports, Inc. The jury charged that DeRoser had not resigned but, in fact, had been installed as Klan Kludd (chaplain) in January of 1951.³⁸



In response to the bombings, in 1953, the Florida Legislature passed legislation to control the sale of dynamite.

Arthur Udgreen, a Miami laborer, was charged with one count of making false statements to the F.B.I. Udgreen told F.B.I. agents that he had not taken part in any Klan activities. The indictment states that he participated in the Miami burnings on July 14, 1951.³⁹

Mrs. Helen Russell, a 55-year-old resident of Edison Center, was charged with perjury. She denied under oath that she had met with a

committee of Klansmen to discuss ways of preventing blacks from moving into Carver Village and had requested the assistance of the Klan. The jury also reported that as vice president of the Edison Center Civic Association, Helen Russell organized the protest motorcade in Edison Center during the summer of 1951.⁴⁰ To reporters, Mrs. Russell replied, "I've never lied in my life...I've got a daughter and a fine husband. I've never even been in traffic court."⁴¹

The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Grand Jury had reason to believe that the John B. Gordon Klan had something to do with the wave of violence that shook Miami between September and December, 1951. Despite months of investigation and 3,200 pages of testimony taken in connection with the bombings of Carver Village, the jury never indicted any one of the bombers. The jury said in its defense, "Dynamite leaves no traces, making crimes difficult to solve."⁴² Jurists criticized the absence of laws dealing with the purchase of dynamite and recommended tighter controls. In addition, the jurors pointed to "the Negro housing problem in Miami," stating that the Carver Village bombings demonstrated "the urgent need for slum clearance and adequate housings."⁴³ Referring to the Ku Klux Klan, the jury said, "It is a cancerous growth...a foul pollution in the body politic...[and] is founded on the worst instincts of mankind."⁴⁴

Testimony concerning Carver Village continued until March, 1953. Then, suddenly, the jury swung the spotlight to the murder of Harry Moore. In its investigation, the F.B.I. uncovered a "reign of terror" in Florida that covered a three- to- four year period. In Miami, the Carver Village and synagogue bombings led the incidences cited. The jury also discovered that the home of a black woman, Maime Woodward, had been burned to the ground in 1947 because it was located within a white residential area. Most of the violence had taken place in central Florida. In June, 1953, the Grand Jury indicted six men on counts of perjury. Reportedly, these men had denied under oath that they had been members of the Ku Klux Klan or that they had taken part in a series of violent acts in central Florida from 1949 to 1952.⁴⁵

Though the Grand Jury insinuated that the Ku Klux Klan was involved in the bombings of Carver Village, they could never prove it. So, instead, the jury and everyone else came to the same conclusion, that the bombings of Carver Village had been caused by the failure of the City of Miami and its officials to provide adequate housing for the Black community. Though the jurors attempted, in their feeble way, to chastise the community for its failings, they failed to point out the

inequity of keeping blacks in segregated areas. No one saw, except perhaps the black community, that they had a right to decent housing no matter where it might be located.

In October, 1952, Bouvier and Wiseheart opened more apartments in Knight Manor to blacks. The Miami City Commission rescinded its resolution of December 5, 1951, to acquire Bouvier and Wiseheart's vacant property near Carver Village. Instead, they changed the property's zoning from residential to industrial. Erection of any more housing in the Carver Village area had been blocked. The Miami Housing Authority said it would acquire "the development for white public housing, but only if new areas are designated for Negro housing."⁴⁶

Today, if you ride by Carver Village it shows no signs of having been the site of some of Miami's most extreme racial violence. The Miami Housing Authority never took over the disputed complex. John Bouvier became the sole owner after Malcolm Wiseheart's death.⁴⁷ Carver Village appears clean and well-kept. Potted flowers sit outside and young children play on the manicured lawn. However, something is missing. There are no white faces to be seen. After the bombings, black families continued to move in and the whites slowly moved out. Only remnants of the six-foot stone wall that once surrounded Liberty Square remain. Perhaps the remnants remain as a reminder to the black community of the hardships they underwent just to find a decent place to live.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Miami Daily News*, 22 September 1951.
2. *Miami Daily News*, 17 October 1951.
3. David Gillogly and Reinhold Wolff. "Housing in the Miami Area: Effects of the Postwar Building Boom" (Miami: Bureau of Business and Economic Research, University of Miami, 1951), 12.
4. *New York Times*, 1 January 1952.
5. James E. Scott. "Miami's Liberty Square Project," *The Crisis*, 49 (March, 1949), 87.
6. Daniel Francis interview with author, Miami, Florida, 17 November 1987.
7. Charles Abrams. *Forbidden Neighbors*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), 123.
8. Stetson Kennedy. "Miami: Anteroom to Fascism," *The Nation*, (December 22, 1951), 546; Abrams, *Forbidden Neighbors*, 123; City of Miami Commission meeting minutes, 5 December 1951.

9. Miami Herald, 14 July 1951; Abrams, *Forbidden Neighbors*, 123.
10. Francis interview
11. *Miami Times*, 11 August 1951; City of Miami Commission minutes, 19 September 1951.
12. City of Miami Commission minutes, 19 September 1951.
14. *Ibid.*; Abrams, *Forbidden Neighbors*, 125
15. *Miami Daily News*, 22 September 1951; Francis interview 1987, *Miami Daily News*, 24, September 1951.
16. *New York Times*, 23 September 1951
17. Kennedy, "Fascism," 547.
18. *Miami Times*, 29 September 1951.
19. Kennedy, "Fascism," 547; *Miami Daily News*, 1, 9, 15, October 1951.; *New York Times*, 1 January 1952.
20. Kennedy, "Fascism," 547
21. City Commission minutes, 5 December 1951.
22. *Miami Daily News*, 30 November 1951.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. City Commission minutes, 5 December 1951.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *New York Times*, 4 December 1951.
29. *New York Times*, 7 December 1951.
30. *New York Times*, 9 December 1951
31. *Miami Daily News*, 26 December 1951; *Miami Herald*, 26 December 1951; *New York Times*, 27 December 1951.
32. *New York Times*, 9 January 1952.; *New York Times*, 31 December 1951.
33. *New York Times*, 3 February 1952
34. *New York Times*, 9 February 1952.; *New York Times*, 15 February 1952.
35. *New York Times*, 5 October 1952
36. *New York Times*, 11 December 1952; United States District Court. United States of America vs. William G. Orwick (Miami: Southern District, 1954), Case 8363-m-Cr. The Federal Employee's Loyalty Program was established for the purpose of eliminating employees of the U. S. Government who were disloyal. Membership in any organization designated by the Attorney General to be subversive was in violation of the Loyalty Program.
38. United States of America vs. Harvey G. DeRosier (Miami: Southern District, 1954), Case 8760-m-Cr.
39. *New York Times*, 11 December 1952.
40. "First Fruits" *Time* (December 22, 1952), 18.
41. *New York Times*, 26 March 1953.
42. *Miami Herald*, 26 March 1953.
43. *New York Times*, 26 March 1953.; *Miami Herald*, 26 March 1953.
44. *New York Times*, 26 March 1953
45. *Miami Herald*, 3 March 1953.; *Miami Herald*, 4 June 1952.
46. *Miami Herald*, 7 January 1953.; *Miami Herald*, 6 March 1953.
47. Donald Skoglund interview with author, Miami, Florida, 3 November 1987.

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