

The Annexation of the City of Coconut Grove

by Grant Livingston

The city of Coconut Grove,¹ along with the towns of Silver Bluff, Allapattah, Little River, Buena Vista, and Lemon City, was annexed to the city of Miami by means of an election held on September 2, 1925. The election was held under a Florida statute enacted in 1905 allowing a single vote to be taken by all voters in the annexing city and the territory to be annexed. An examination of the election returns shows overwhelming support of the annexation within the city of Miami, Little River, Buena Vista and Allapattah, a mixed vote in Silver Bluff, and overwhelming opposition to it in Coconut Grove.² One of Coconut Grove's pioneers, Commodore Ralph Munroe, described the event:

Not content with actual growth, Miami began to reach out, like Los Angeles, and absorb its smaller neighbors—not always to their satisfaction, or even with their consent! For the state law most curiously provided that in cases of proposed consolidation between two communities the question shall be decided by a *joint vote*³ of the two, so that where such a union is manifestly to the advantage of the larger town, the smaller is robbed of all voice in the matter. Such was the case with Coconut Grove, which felt itself not only at a considerable distance from Miami, but in complete contrast to its citizenship needs and interests, and not in the least interested in helping to pay the rapidly mounting expenses of the ambitious young city. Its resistance was effective for a time, but eventually a joint election was held, and Coconut Grove was swallowed, willy-nilly, like a trout by a bass.⁴

The Annexation Law of 1905

Prior to 1905, annexation required that residents of both the annexing city and the territory proposed for annexation approve the move. Florida law called for a two-thirds majority vote in each area. A revised annexation bill, before the Florida Legislature in 1905, however, specified only that a two-thirds majority of voters in the entire district was necessary in order for annexation to occur, "including alike the voters within the then existing corporate limits of the [annexing] city or town, and those to be included [by the election] within the corporate limits."⁵ The law specified that voters must be specifically registered for the annexation vote. This was to be the impetus for an ambitious special voter registration drive in the city of Miami in 1925. The law also excluded the annexed territory from liability for any existing bond indebtedness of the annexing city. This clause would prove to be significant in the city of Miami's first attempt at annexing Coconut Grove (and other areas) in 1923.

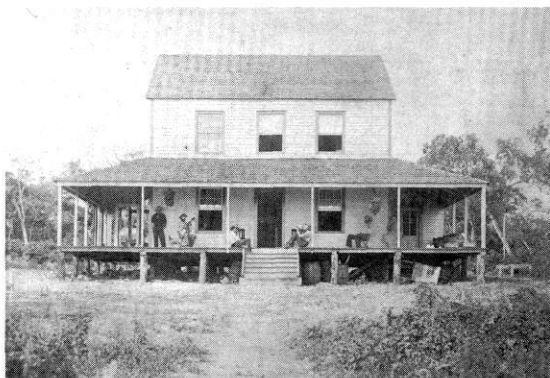
The revised annexation bill was approved by the Florida State House on May 8, 1905, by a vote of 31-14. It was passed, with minor amendments, by the Florida Senate, and was signed into law by Governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward on May 29, 1905. The 1905 law was in effect in the 1920s, when the annexation of Coconut Grove occurred, and remained on the books essentially unchanged until 1961, when the law was revised to once again require that a separate vote be taken in both the annexing city and in the territory to be annexed.⁶

Early Coconut Grove and Miami

Coconut Grove's opposition to annexation can be understood by an examination of its history, which was quite distinct from that of the city of Miami. Formerly known as Jack's Bight, Coconut Grove was a thriving community years before 1896. Ralph Munroe, while squatting temporarily on the banks of the Miami River in the 1870s, met and convinced Charles and Isabella Peacock to open an inn in Coconut Grove, known as the Bay View House, or the Peacock Inn, by promising to bring guests to it in winter. Munroe fulfilled his promise by bringing an odd assortment of creative types. The 1885-86 winter season saw the arrival at the Peacock inn of Counts Jean de Hedouville and James Nugent, as well as Kirk Munroe, a well-known writer of boys' adventure stories, among others. The Bay View House also served

as the catalyst for Kebo, the black Bahamian settlement along Evangelist Street (now Charles Avenue in Coconut Grove). Two workers hired by Peacock were among the first settlers of that community.⁷

Before the arrival of the railroad in Miami, the Bay View House was the only hotel between Lake Worth and Key West.⁸ Naturally, it was



The Peacock Inn or Bay View House was the center of Coconut Grove life in the late nineteenth century.

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the Bay View House which played host to Henry Flagler and Julia Tuttle at the time of their first meeting. They lunched on a delicious repast prepared by Isabella Peacock while working out the understanding by which Flagler agreed to bring his Florida East Coast Railway to Miami in exchange for

a portion of Mrs. Tuttle's land. The written form of this agreement is commonly known as Miami's "birth certificate." Upon the arrival of the railroad, and the opening, in 1897, of Flagler's Royal Palm Hotel, the city of Miami exploded in growth, quickly surpassing Coconut Grove in size.

Although the five miles between the centers of Coconut Grove and Miami seem short today, the distance was great enough to allow the two communities to retain their distinct identities. In 1913, Miami annexed unincorporated land in three directions, narrowing the gap between itself and Coconut Grove. Nineteen sixteen was the year Everest G. Sewell, a pioneer Miami merchant, and the Miami Chamber of Commerce began their highly successful national advertising campaign.⁹ With slogans like "It is always June in Miami," and "Where the Summer spends the Winter," the Chamber blanketed northern states in publications promoting Miami. Between 1914 and 1924, its advertising expenditures exceeded \$1 million.¹⁰ In the meantime, the city's population increased from 29,571 in 1920 to 47,000 in 1923, the year of the first annexation attempt.¹¹

1919—Coconut Grove incorporates, and expands slowly

The first outright conflict between Miami and Coconut Grove came just after World War I. During the war, the federal government built a



Coconut Grove's Dinner Key was an important aviation venue and, later, the site of Miami's city hall. HASF 1989-011-3957

naval air station in Coconut Grove. After the war was over, there was disagreement over whether the air station should remain as a permanent facility. Boosters of the city of Miami, such as Everest G. Sewell, believed that the station should stay, and campaigned for its permanent location there, while Coconut Grove resident James Deering disagreed in a letter to his influential neighbor, William Jennings Bryan.^{12,13}

Although the Coconut Grove side won this fight, it became apparent that Miami was expanding so quickly that it would soon come in direct contact with Coconut Grove. It was at least in part for this reason that Coconut Grove chose to incorporate as a town.¹⁴ Barely a year after its incorporation, Coconut Grove's mayor, William V. Little, called for his municipality to annex a larger territory, to enable the town to be incorporated as a city. The Coconut Grove Town Council minutes of June 21, 1920 include a letter from the mayor advocating extending the town limits, "to include all territory that is now generally known as Coconut Grove . . . [to have a petition] circulated chiefly in Mundyville and along the Ridge. . . One thing that might happen

[if this is not done] would be that Coconut Grove might find itself without enough registered voters to become a city instead of a town.”¹⁵

On January 3, 1921, a petition was presented from voters “between corporate limits of Coconut Grove and the city of Miami,” asking to be incorporated into Coconut Grove. The minutes from the town council do not specify how many signatures appeared on this petition, but the council appears to have acted on it. On January 17 the following ordinance was adopted:

Ordinance proposing to extend the Corporate Limits of Coconut Grove ... [technical description of the limits of the territory to be annexed appears here] ... said annexation shall be effective 45 days after the approval of this ordinance by the Mayor, provided the same shall be approved by a majority of two-thirds of the registered voters actually voting at an election held in the same district, and [by a two-thirds majority] at an election to be held in the Town of Coconut Grove as hereinafter provided ...¹⁶

The ordinance is notable for the fact that it required a two-thirds majority in both the existing town of Coconut Grove, and also in the proposed new territory, in order for the proposed annexation to occur. This stipulation stands in marked contrast to the language of the ordinance by which Miami annexed Coconut Grove in 1925.

1923—Miami’s initial attempt at annexation

The first mention in the Coconut Grove Town Council minutes of the proposed annexation of Coconut Grove by Miami occurred on January 15, 1923. A committee from the neighboring town of Silver Bluff was present at the meeting to request “minor changes in the boundaries of the two towns so crossing of so many lots by the boundary lines may be eliminated.”¹⁷ Both towns were at that time subjects of proposed annexation by the city of Miami, which had published a resolution seeking to expand its city limits on January 9, 1923.¹⁸

... a general discussion followed regarding the annexation of Coconut Grove to Miami. Dr. S.L. Jeffrey presented two petitions to the Council requesting that the Council take any necessary action to prevent annexation to Miami. A committee consisting of Aldermen Emerson, Price, Swanson, and Dr. Jeffrey was appointed to confer with Commissioners of the city of Miami regarding their intentions in the matter of this proposed annexation.¹⁹

This committee met with the Miami City Commission on January 16, 1923. There was also a representative present from the town of Allapattah. The committee presented its opposition to annexation, and asked what they might expect if annexation were to occur. They were told by Mayor C.D. Leffler "that the City Commission was unable to make any promises or statement at this time," and that, "the commission could not do anything but let it go to an election."²⁰

On January 25, a special meeting of the Coconut Grove Town Council was called.²¹ The purpose of the meeting was to discuss ways to head off the annexation movement. "Mayor Matheson . . . called the meeting to determine if anything can be done to amend the Town Charter to prevent annexation to Miami." A general discussion followed. It was agreed that postcards ("Return Postal Cards") were to be sent to voters and other taxpayers within the limits of Coconut Grove, with the following questions:

- 1) Are you in favor of being annexed by the city of Miami under the present movement?
- 2) Do you desire the Town of Coconut Grove to present to the state legislature an amendment to the present charter (*sic*) providing that Coconut Grove cannot be annexed to any other city without the consent of the majority of the registered voters of Coconut Grove?

The canvas by postcard was held, and the following results were reported on February 5, 1923.²² Those favoring annexation numbered 42, while those opposed were 155. There were 162 proponents of legislative action to make annexation more difficult, and just 36 who opposed such action. Two weeks later, on February 19, the minutes of the Coconut Grove Town Council reflect that there was discussion of Representative Ben Willard's "Act of the Legislature for Coconut Grove." Also, City Attorney Floyd L. Knight was commissioned to draft a section of the new city charter relating to non-annexation.²³

By then, however, annexation in 1923 was a dead issue. The city of Miami had withdrawn Ordinance 605, the annexation ordinance, at the city commission meeting of January 23, 1923.²⁴ The minutes provide no explanation for the action, but the reason appears in a letter from the city attorney, A.J. Rose, dated January 22, which was also entered into the minutes.²⁵ The letter quoted the sections of the 1905 annexation law pertaining to bond indebtedness, and another law

regarding amendments to city charters, and conferred recommendations about the appropriate timing of annexation elections and bond issue elections. Thus, legal questions over bonds appear to have been the reason for the cancellation of the annexation election in 1923.

Frank Sessa, in "Real Estate Expansion and Boom in Miami and its Environs during the 1920s," a doctoral dissertation written in 1950, also cited the bond indebtedness issue, and the influence of Chester Masslich, who was instrumental in the sale of \$500,000 in city of Miami bonds in 1922.²⁶

...in the middle of the debate the city decided to withdraw its call for an election to extend city limits ... [its decision] seems to have been influenced by legal complications in the city charter and the advice of a New York bond attorney, Chester B. Masslich, who advised that the sale of bonds would be difficult if a part of the city was exempt from bond indebtedness.²⁷

The annexation process was temporarily derailed. The opinion of the voters of Coconut Grove was clearly expressed in the postcard poll, and the mayor and Coconut Grove City Council seemed committed to taking all possible action to prevent further attempts by the city of Miami to annex Coconut Grove. Perhaps the annexation, which occurred in 1925, was inevitable, but the March 1923 election for city commission and mayor of the city of Coconut Grove may have been pivotal in determining the future of the city. Dr. Jeffrey, who was the first person to bring the issue of non-annexation before the town council, ran for the mayor's seat, and was opposed by Alderman H. deB. Justison. Justison prevailed in the election by a vote of 171–134, to become Coconut Grove's fourth, and final, mayor. The minutes of the first meeting of the city council after Justison's election indicate that he was far less opposed to annexation than Jeffrey. The following excerpt is indicative of this fact:

Mr. F. E. Case brought up the question of annexation to Miami. He had with him a petition signed by some of the voters and property owners of Coconut Grove to be presented to the Governor asking that Coconut Grove not be annexed to Miami. This petition was read by the clerk. Mr. Case asked that the Council go on record as being opposed to the annexation of Coconut Grove.

Mayor Justison asked that the Council go carefully and thoughtfully before committing themselves one way or another.

Attorney Knight explained the process by which local legislation goes through the Legislature and advised how best to get this local bill through if it is to go through at all.

Mayor Justison suggested that the best way is to see the local Senator and Representative and to get their cooperation.

Mr. Case and Alderman Smith state their opinion that open action and publicity would gain the end best.

Alderman Matheson moved, and Alderman Reynolds seconded, that the Council go on record as being opposed to the annexation of Coconut Grove by any other municipality, unless such action be favored by a majority of the voters of Coconut Grove. This was carried unanimously.²⁸

For the time being, the annexation issue was dropped. For a lengthy period, annexation by the city of Miami was not mentioned in the minutes of the Coconut Grove City Commission. In fact, more than two years passed before the issue came up again on July 20, 1925, and then only in response to the call by the city of Miami for a new annexation election.

1925—Coconut Grove annexed despite opposition

On July 7, 1925, the city of Miami passed an ordinance to extend its city limits to include Coconut Grove, Silver Bluff, and several other communities, and set the election for September 2, less than two months away.²⁹ This move for annexation was better organized than the one in 1923, and proved successful.

Since the 1905 statute required that a special registration be held for this election, a massive registration effort was required. This effort was spearheaded in Miami by the "Committee of 400," part of the Miami Chamber of Commerce, and headed by Roddy Burdine, the



Roddy Burdine, Miami's Merchant Prince, led the fight for the annexation of Coconut Grove and other communities to the city of Miami. HASF 1989-011-19468 (N)

department store magnate. Burdine helped devise the committee's strategy, and some of its meetings were held at his offices at the Burdine's Department Store in downtown Miami.³⁰ In July 1925, Burdine observed that, "Should the city limits be extended by voters at annexation September 2, Miami will be the largest city in the state."³¹ Burdine turned over the chairmanship of the Committee of 400 to Miami civic leader A.J. Cleary when the effort appeared to be taking up too much of Burdine's time, but he remained involved in the annexation effort.

Despite the fact that Cleary's wife was ill and out of town during this campaign, he spent nearly all of his time working toward the annexation vote.³² A large rally was held in downtown Miami's Royal Palm Park on August 7. The speakers included Mayor E. C. Romfh, Worth Trammell, a jurist, and former mayor C. D. Leffler. Miami's short-lived pictorial newspaper, *The Illustrated Daily Tab*, described the festival atmosphere at this gathering:

Trammell was greeted with applause as he urged the voters to "make Miami the New York City of the South." Several hundred persons availed themselves of the opportunity extended by Tax Collector Simpson and Roddy Burdine and Edward Wells to pay their poll taxes on the grounds. Mutchler's orchestral band entertained the crowd with a musical program. Percy Long, soloist, responded to repeated encores.³³

The *Illustrated Daily Tab* described the Committee of 400's efforts to stimulate voter registration, "through the medium of four-minute speakers on the streets and in the theaters, banners, newspapers, and virtually every other form of advertising ... to reach every eligible voter in the city of Miami and affected territory."³⁴ The *Tab* also reported that more than one thousand automobiles had been borrowed from prominent Miami citizens to "parade through the streets of Miami bearing placards, 'Hop In And Vote For Annexation.'"³⁵ When the registration was completed, Cleary was still concerned that the votes might not be enough to prevail, as the *Miami Herald* noted on August 29, 1925:

A.J. Cleary—acting chairman of the Committee of 400—which has had charge of the registration work stated, "Every voter who has registered must consider it his duty to vote on the question of annexation. Unless everyone in Miami eligible to vote does this we stand in danger of seeing the annexation measure defeated."

Tuesday night Cleary will send 4,000 telegrams reminding voters to be at the polls Wednesday, and laying out the polling places.³⁶

Everest G. Sewell, president of the Miami Chamber of Commerce, who was in New York at the time of the election, and therefore unable to vote, nevertheless expressed his support in a telegram to the *Miami Herald*:

It will be impossible for the city to keep pace with the needed improvements if this election should fail. It is most important that Miami's harbor should be started at once. The present embargo on freight should convince the most skeptical pessimist of the fact.

Cleary placed several advertisements in the *Miami Herald* on the day of the election. An ad on page one insisted that, "It's Your Personal Business—cast your vote for annexation." Another, on page nine, exhorted voters to, "Vote early today FOR Miami City Annexation. VOTE at polling place where you register." The *Herald* observed that, "Last-minute efforts by the 'Committee of 400' included the sending of 2000 telegrams to persons known to be favorable to annexation, urging them to vote in favor ..."³⁷

Coconut Grove appeared to have been caught by surprise by the new move for annexation. No comments about the planned annexation appear in minutes of the Coconut Grove City Commission until after the July 7 ordinance was passed. Additionally, on June 9, 1925, less than three months before the city of Coconut Grove would cease to exist, a special act of the State Legislature provided for the city to adopt the commission/manager form of government. Why would Coconut Grove make the effort to change the form of government at that late date? It seems to be further evidence that the annexation move was not anticipated by Coconut Grove. Once the election was set however, the city commission of Coconut Grove made its opposition to annexation clear, by resolving, "that the City Commission of the City of Coconut Grove is in favor of an action of injunction or otherwise being brought to test the constitutionality of the proposed annexation of the City of Coconut Grove to the city of Miami as proposed by the city of Miami . . ."³⁸

If the city of Coconut Grove was surprised by the annexation movement, it appears that the new city of Coral Gables, incorporated on April 27, 1925, was not. If the city of Miami sought to expand its tax base, why not annex George Merrick's new development? The following

letter, addressed to the Miami City Commission from Merrick and other Coral Gables officials, indicated that Coral Gables anticipated this possibility:

Gentlemen,

In accordance with our verbal understanding with you gentlemen, we, the undersigned City Commissioner of the City of Coral Gables, recently chartered by the Legislature of Florida, do hereby give you our personal assurance that just so soon as it is possible for Mr. Merrick to complete his development plans in Coral Gables, we will all be glad to use our best endeavors to bring the municipality of Coral Gables into the municipality of Miami. We feel sure that there will never be any opposition to this move as we are all interested in creating Greater Miami, but we are glad to go on record as favoring the annexations that there may be no misunderstanding of our feeling and policy on the subject.

Thanking you gentlemen for your courteous cooperation in assisting us to secure the city charter, we are

Yours very truly,

George Merrick

Telfair Knight

Charles F. Baldwin

Edward E. Dammers

F. W. Webster³⁹

One may reasonably infer from the language of this curious letter that there was a prior meeting and agreement between officials of Coral Gables and Miami. Miami had much to gain, in the way of an increased tax base, by annexing Coral Gables, but much to lose by opposing George Merrick. First, there were estimated to be 2,500 summer residents in Coral Gables in 1925, enough to endanger the two-thirds margin needed for annexation to succeed if their opposition was to be organized.⁴⁰ The two cities were working toward similar goals. For instance, the building of the street trolley between downtown Miami and Coral Gables was about to be undertaken. The franchise was to be granted to Merrick's Coral Gables Rapid Transit Corporation by means of a special election to be held on August 31, just two days before the annexation election.⁴¹ Advertisements taken in the *Miami Herald* were quick to note, "This is Not the Miami City Annexation Election," to avoid confusion.⁴² A spirit of cooperation existed between the two

cities. Contrast this with the history of confrontation between Miami and Coconut Grove dating back to the naval air station conflict.

The developers of Miami Shores, located northeast of the city of Miami, also attempted to remove themselves from the annexation election. As the Coral Gables representatives did, they cited the desire to complete their development before being annexed. The Miami Commission denied this request, as the minutes of its July 14, 1925, meeting explained:

Mr. Frank K. Ashworth appeared before the Commission and stated that the new boundaries of the city of Miami proposed to be voted upon at an election to be held September 2nd would incorporate part of the subdivision development known as "Miami Shores" and requested, on behalf of the developers, that the subdivision be not incorporated with the city of Miami until the developers had completed their improvement program. The matter was discussed by the Commission and it was the sense of the members present that the boundaries as fixed by the Ordinance adopted July 7th should not be changed.⁴³

The annexation issue was addressed again on several occasions by the Coconut Grove City Commission before the election of September 2. Mayor Justison was absent from the city commission at all meetings between July 20 and September 7. E. W. Ayars was appointed acting mayor in Justison's absence at the August 3 meeting.⁴⁴ The Coconut Grove Commission met in "adjourned session" three more times during that week.⁴⁵ Little information about the content of these meetings is recorded in the minutes, but one could surmise that the annexation election was the prime issue discussed. On August 11, a proposal was made that the city of Coconut Grove be a party to the suit brought by J. T. G. Crawford against the annexation of Coconut Grove to the city of Miami.⁴⁶ It carried unanimously. The minutes of August 17, 1925 note the visit from a representative of Silver Bluff: "Mr. Potter of the Silver Bluff Town Council is present and asked what action Coconut Grove was taking in regard to the annexation movement of Miami. Mr. Potter stated that the Town of Silver Bluff was willing to cooperate with Coconut Grove to stay out of Miami."⁴⁷

Former Coconut Grove Mayor Hugh Matheson filed a petition for injunction in circuit court on August 21, asking that the city of Miami be prevented from holding the annexation election. The petition,

according to the *Illustrated Daily Tab*, argued that annexation would result in a large tax increase for citizens of Coconut Grove to pay for



Hugh Matheson, member of the prominent Matheson family and mayor of Coconut Grove in the 1920s. Courtesy of the Biscayne Bay Yacht Club.

city of Miami developmental projects not benefitting Coconut Grove. The injunction was also asked because the city of Coconut Grove and the city of Miami were not “immediately adjacent,” as required by the annexation statute. A further argument was that the statute was “illegal because it would allow Miami to annex Coconut Grove, but would not allow Coconut Grove to annex Miami.”⁴⁸ A.J. Cleary responded the following day to the taxation argument saying, “Complaint has been made by

some voters in the adjacent territory that annexation will cause an increase in their taxes. At present the tax rate in these municipalities is almost nothing while they reap millions in profits because they are in the Miami territory and truthfully a part of Miami, but pay no taxes.”⁴⁹

The petition for injunction was denied by Judge E. F. Atkinson on August 26. During the hearing, Mr. Matheson’s council argued that the state annexation law itself was unconstitutional.⁵⁰ The *Tab* reported that an appeal to the State Supreme Court was to be filed immediately, and that “while he does not anticipate stopping the election, Mr. Matheson, should he win in his appeal, hopes to declare the election null and void.”⁵¹

Matheson was also responsible for the appearance of a series of advertisements in Miami newspapers on behalf of the Coconut Grove City Commission. On August 27, the Commission’s minutes recorded “a motion by H. M. Matheson that the city manager of Coconut Grove be authorized to arrange proper ads for the different papers, instructing

the people why they should vote ‘no’ on annexation.”⁵² The following advertisement appeared in the *Miami Herald* on Monday August 31, two days before the annexation election was held. It is signed “representative citizens of Coconut Grove:”

“Coconut Grove Lays Its Cards on the Table”

We are being forced into Miami against our wills
by the use in this election of an unfair law passed twenty years ago
and which has never been used:

If 2/3 of voters in a territory are in favor the cities are joined . . .
not, mind you, 2/3 of the votes in Coconut Grove,
but 2/3 of ALL the votes cast in Miami and
the territory to be annexed!

Coconut Grove has not more than 240 votes against
possibly 25,000 in Miami

WHAT CHANCE DO WE HAVE?

Not a chance unless our good Miami friends, who believe in fair,
square dealing will go to the polls on September 2 and
VOTE NO on the annexation question.⁵³

A similar advertisement appeared in the *Miami Tribune* on September 1, with slightly different wording:

VOTE NO!

Vote against the Annexation Question on Wednesday, September 2
The Citizens of Coconut Grove appeal to Miami’s sense of FAIR PLAY

Coconut Grove is being forced into Miami by the use of unfair,
obsolete election laws that were passed in 1905, but which have never
been used in any election in the State of Florida until this time, as far
as we have been able to learn . . .

IS THIS FAIR?

IS THIS RIGHT?⁵⁴

The Coconut Grove ads did not seem to have influenced many voters in the city of Miami. When the votes of the September 2 election were counted, over 97 percent of the votes in the five precincts voting within the city of Miami were in support of annexation. Little River, Buena Vista, and Allapattah also voted overwhelmingly for their towns to be annexed, by votes of 81, 82, and 83 percent, respectively. A 59

percent majority in Silver Bluff also favored annexation. In Coconut Grove, over 87 percent voted against annexation. Because most of the voters lived in Miami, the total number of votes were 88 percent in favor of annexation.

Voting Results for September 2, 1925

Election for the city of Miami to Annex

Little River, Buena Vista, Allapattah, Silver Bluff, Coconut Grove
and certain unincorporated areas⁵⁵

No.	Precinct Location	Registered	For	Against
1	Little River	278	154	36
2	Buena Vista	367	217	48
3	Miami (NE 2 Ave, 24 St.)	526	400	5
4	Allapattah	326	181	37
5	Miami (No 2 Fire Station)	300	240	7
6	Miami (Downtown)	1368	1048	17
7	W Flagler & 17th Ave	479	369	17
8	S Miami Ave & 10th St.	291	222	15
9	Silver Bluff	111	51	36
10	Coconut Grove	240	26	180
	Total	4286	2908	398

On the day following the election, Coconut Grove's unhappiness with the election results was clear, but there were mixed reports over what was to be done next. The *Herald* published the results under these headlines, "Greater Miami Wins at Polls in Heavy Vote, 9 of 10 precincts carried. Coconut Grove, which fought proposal in court, goes against plan."⁵⁶ The *Miami Daily News and Metropolis* indicated that there would be no further fight with the election results, "town officers declared they knew of no move on the part of the village to carry their opposition to the state and federal courts."⁵⁷ The *Miami Tribune* told quite a different story, under the headline "Grove Prepares for Hot Contest over Annexation:"

Coconut Grove will fight annexation. The community was grooming itself Friday [September 4, 1925] to battle "Greater Miami" on the question of being annexed without its consent.

On the street, in the shops and in the city hall—wherever citizens congregated, there was talk of the approaching battle. It was learned, unofficially, that a committee of leading citizens were in conference with a coterie of well-known Miami attorneys Friday morning. Object of the conference was said to be to determine the exact status of the Grove in fighting the annexation.⁵⁸

The *Tribune* reported that Coconut Grove residents were willing to take the issue to the United States Supreme Court, if necessary.⁵⁹ Miami's city attorney, John Watson, wondered what all the fuss was about:

J. W. Watson, Jr., city attorney, is of the opinion that there will be no trouble with the town of Coconut Grove. He said that the citizens of the Grove undoubtedly were misinformed as to the intentions of Miami regarding their community. He said that Miami had the interests of the Grove at heart and could not understand hostility to the annexation.⁶⁰

On September 7, in the last meeting of the Coconut Grove City Commission, with Mayor Justison once again presiding, a committee of Justison, former mayor Matheson, and City Manager William Sydow was authorized to arrange details of the annexation to the city of Miami.⁶¹ This committee, along with the Coconut Grove city attorney Harold Costello, met with representatives from the city of Miami the same day. Under the headline "Mayor [E.C. Romfh] assures Coconut Grove quick benefits," the *Herald* wrote, "The Coconut Grove delegation requests government under the borough system, and expressed themselves as confident that Coconut Grove would be dealt with fairly by Miami officials. A final conference is to be held Tuesday evening [September 15]." An assistant city manager and a municipal judge were promised for Coconut Grove, and Mayor Romfh also promised that a police precinct and fire station would be maintained there, and that the city of Miami would complete Coconut Grove's improvement programs. A report of this meeting is also recorded in the Miami Commission's minutes:

Mayor H. deB. Justison, Hugh Matheson, the City Manager and the City Attorney of Coconut Grove appeared before the commission in reference to the recent annexation of Coconut Grove by the city of Miami. Matters pertaining to the administration of affairs in Coconut Grove were discussed and it was the sense of

the City Commission that the best possible way to handle the situation would be to create a new department of the city to be known as the Department of Coconut Grove, as well as to create other departments for handling the affairs of other towns and communities taken into the city, and to place at the head of the Department of Coconut Grove the present city manager of



Main Highway approaching McFarlane Road—Grand Avenue. The intersection of these three arteries represented the business center of Coconut Grove.

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Coconut Grove. Mr. Hugh Matheson of Coconut Grove was in favor of creating a ward [borough] system of government, but it was the sense of the Commission that under the present city charter the City Commission had no authority to install such a plan. The committee from Coconut Grove were

assured that it was and would be the policy of the City Commission to aid them in every way to complete the improvements already started; to furnish adequate fire and police protection and to aid them in sanitary matters...⁶²

The *Illustrated Daily Tab* also reported a battle over the borough system at this meeting, but noted a surprising lack of animosity by the meeting's completion: "Owing to bad feelings over the annexation election it commonly was supposed that wild scenes would result from the meeting yesterday. On the contrary, while members of the [Coconut Grove] delegation at first showed slight resentment over being annexed, the meeting developed into a love feast (sic), and when the conference ended in a temporary deadlock, it was apparent that the issue would be settled to advantage of all concerned." One member of the Grove delegation, while agreeing to a compromise, expressed reservations about convincing the Grove citizenry. "This looks good to me," the *Tab* quoted him as saying, "but, you know we voted almost unanimously against annexation. We will have to go back

home and talk this over with the people. They want to be assured of a fair deal.”⁶³

After annexation

The annexation election of 1925 came at the height of the land boom in South Florida. This was a propitious time for the election. A delay of one year could have brought with it a different outcome. The railroad embargo of August 1925 was the first sign that the boom might not last forever. Building was slowed by lack of construction materials, many of which had arrived by ship. The grounding of the *Prins Valdemar* at the mouth of Miami’s harbor in January 1926 all but closed the harbor for months, further isolating Miami. Negative advertising in northern states seeking to stem the flight of capital to Miami may have had its effect, too. Frank Sessa quotes a bulletin from the state of Minnesota which announced, “Go to Florida—if you can afford it. But keep the old farm in Minnesota so as to have something to fall back on.”⁶⁴ The Internal Revenue Service’s decision to tax paper profits on real estate sales put a damper on the wild real estate speculation in 1926. By the summer of 1926 the boom was over. Soon after, the great hurricane of September 1926 ravaged the area.

As promised, in the September 7, 1925 meeting, the city of Miami created a Department of Coconut Grove, and placed at its head the former city manager of Coconut Grove, William Sydow.⁶⁵ One important contribution of the department was the retention of Coconut Grove’s street names. In Coconut Grove, streets run north and south, and avenues east and west, the opposite of Miami’s street system, and many of the streets are named for Coconut Grove’s early settlers. In December 1925, there was a proposal to standardize the street names, so that Mary Street, for example, would become Southwest 28th Avenue. While the Coconut Grove Housekeepers Club did not meet between April 30 and November 9, 1925, and thus seemingly missed the annexation fight, its members did, however, weigh in on the issue of street names. According to the club’s minutes, “Miss Lester presented the matter of changing the names and numbering streets which Mr. Sydow asked our support to prevent. Mrs. Haden moved that Mr. Sydow be informed that our club wished to retain old names of streets and asked that he be requested to represent us before the Miami Council.”⁶⁶ Coconut Grove has kept its original street names to this day.

The end of the land boom signaled the end of Miami's attempt to expand its borders. The annexation of Coral Gables, which George Merrick had gone on record as favoring, never happened. In fact, some of the areas annexed by the city of Miami in 1925 were de-annexed in 1932, in the depths of the Great Depression.

One wonders what effects annexation has had on the Grove since 1925. Unlike its neighbor, Silver Bluff, Coconut Grove has retained an identity distinct from that of the city of Miami. Today, the generally recognized informal boundaries of Coconut Grove⁶⁷ include much of the former town of Silver Bluff. Residents of Coconut Grove still prefer their addresses to be written as "Coconut Grove," rather than "Miami". As historian Arva Moore Parks has noted, "they always get their mail!"⁶⁸ Unsuccessful secession movements were undertaken by residents of Coconut Grove in the 1970s and in the 1990s, proving that this issue has not died completely. In 1997, Coconut Grove residents were active in bringing the abolition of the city of Miami to a vote. The vote was reminiscent of the election of 1925. Countywide, the measure was defeated overwhelmingly, but in central Coconut Grove six precincts voted to abolish the city of Miami, the only six precincts in the county to do so.⁶⁹



The Barnacle in the early 1900s. One of Coconut Grove's most historic structures, it was the home of the Commodore Ralph Monroe for four decades. HASF 1955-1-3

In 1971, historian Parks observed that, "Fortunately, though stripped of all official designation, Coconut Grove shows no signs of loss of identity."⁷⁰ This is less true today. Recent years have seen the erosion of the village-like quality of Coconut Grove. Neighborhood-oriented businesses, like grocery stores, drug stores, and the like have been steadily

replaced by tourist-oriented malls and restaurants. The artist-centered sensibility, which began with Ralph Munroe and his group of “crazies” in the 1880s persisted through the 1960s and 1970s, but began to fade in the 1980s and 1990s. Munroe’s home, the Barnacle, still stands, protected as part of the State Park system, but its character is changing as large new buildings surround it. Nothing is more indicative of the change than the steady disappearance of the Grove’s trademark trees. Each successive year finds the percentage of overhanging canopy reduced as developers take advantage of reduced setback requirements.

The annexation of Coconut Grove is not forgotten. As recently as December 1999, *Miami Herald* columnist Howard Kleinberg mentioned it in an article.⁷¹ How would Coconut Grove have developed over the last seventy-five years if it had continued as an independent city? The answer, of course, is purely speculative. But Miami City Hall today stands in an area that would still be the city of Coconut Grove, were it not for the peculiar annexation law of 1905, and the annexation election twenty years later.

Endnotes

¹ *Historic Coconut Grove, Self-Guided Tour*, Junior League of Miami, 1987. The spelling “Cocoanut Grove,” with an extra “a,” was generally used until incorporation in 1919, when the “a” was dropped. For simplicity, the modern spelling, “Coconut Grove,” without the extra “a,” is used throughout this article.

² See table above.

³ Italics are Munroe’s.

⁴ Ralph Middleton Munroe and Vincent Gilpin, *The Commodore’s Story*, (Miami, FL: Association of Southern Florida, 1985), 333-334. Italics are Munroe’s.

⁵ *Acts of the Florida Legislature*, Regular Session, 1905, Chapter 5464, 93.

⁶ *Laws of Florida*, 1961. c.61-350. Section 171.05 was amended.

⁷ Marvin Dunn, *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 34.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Arva Moore Parks and Gregory W. Bush, with Laura Pincus, *Miami, The American Crossroad, A Centennial Journey 1896-1996*, (Simon & Schuster Custom Publishing, 1996), 54.

¹⁰ Paul S. George, “Passage to the New Eden: Tourism in Miami From Flagler Through Everest G. Sewell,” *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LIX (April 1981), 450.

¹¹ Paul S. George, “Brokers, Binders, and Builders: Greater Miami’s Boom of the Mid-1920s,” *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LXV (July 1986), 27, 29.

¹² Arva Moore Parks, *The History of Coconut Grove, Florida 1821-1925*, (Thesis, University of Miami, 1971), 56-61.

¹³ Arva Moore Parks and Gregory W. Bush, with Laura Pincus, *Miami, The American Crossroad, A Centennial Journey 1896-1996*, (Simon & Schuster Custom Publishing, 1996), 66.

¹⁴ *Minutes of the Coconut Grove Town Council*, hereinafter cited *MCGTC*, May 14, 1919, 10. Note: the Town Council became the City Council on February 19, 1923, when Coconut Grove registered its three-hundredth voter. On June 9, 1925, it became the City Commission when Coconut Grove adopted the commission/city manager form of government.

¹⁵ *MCGTC*, June 21, 1920, 89-90.

¹⁶ *MCGTC*, January 17, 1921, 135.

¹⁷ *MCGTC*, January 15, 1923, 263.

¹⁸ *Minutes of the Miami City Commission*, hereinafter cited *MMCC*, January 9, 1923, Book No. 13, 139. Resolution Number 605, as reprinted in the minutes.

¹⁹ *MCGTC*, January 15, 1923, 263.

²⁰ *MMCC*, January 16, 1923, Book No. 13, 144.

²¹ *MCGTC*, January 25, 1923, 264.

²² *MCGTC*, February 5, 1923, 267.

²³ *MCGTC*, February 5, 1923, 269.

²⁴ *MMCC*, January 23, 1923, Book No. 13, 146.

²⁵ *MMCC*, January 23, 1923, Book No. 13, 148. Communication from City Attorney A.J. Rose, January 22, 1923, as entered in the minutes.

²⁶ *MMCC*, August 21, 1922, Book No. 13, 22.

²⁷ Frank Bowman Sessa, "Real Estate Expansion and Boom in Miami and its Environs during the 1920s," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1950), 25.

²⁸ *Minutes of the Coconut Grove City Council*, March 19, 1923, 274.

²⁹ *MMCC*, July 7, 1925, Book No. 14, 529. An ordinance entitled: "An ordinance extending the corporate limits of the city of Miami so as to include the adjacent territory, whether incorporated or not, not now included within the limits of the city of Miami, so that the corporate limits of the city of Miami shall include all the territory included within the description in section one of this ordinance and shall incorporate all the inhabitants within the same, and to call an election of the qualified voters of the entire territory proposed to be included within the corporate limits and to provide for the registration of all persons residing within the entire territory to be included within the proposed city limits eligible to qualify to vote at such election, and providing for the location of the polling places at such election."

³⁰ Paul George, "Miami's Merchant Prince: Roddey Burdine and the Burdine Department Store," unpublished manuscript, 133.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² "Directed Greater Miami Campaign," *Miami Herald*, September 3, 1925, 1-A.

³³ "6,000 Hear Annexation Plea at Mass Meeting Held in Park," *Illustrated Daily Tab*, August 8, 1925, 1.

³⁴ "Plans Laid For Final Annexation Drive," *Illustrated Daily Tab*, August 26, 1925, 2.

- ³⁵ “1,000 Autos For Use of Annexation Voters,” *Illustrated Daily Tab*, August 28, 1925, 1.
- ³⁶ “Success of the Special Election Would Add Suburbs To City Limits,” *Miami Herald*, August 29, 1925, 1-A.
- ³⁷ “It’s Your Personal Business,” *Miami Herald*, September 2, 1925, 1-A, “Annexation Up Today,” *Miami Herald*, September 2, 1925, 3-A, and “Vote Early Today,” *Miami Herald*, September 2, 1925, 7-A.
- ³⁸ *Minutes of the Coconut Grove City Commission*, hereinafter cited *MCGCC*, July 20, 1925, 529.
- ³⁹ *MMCC*, May 12, 1925, Book No. 14, 481. Letter from the Commissioners of the City of Coral Gables to the Miami City Commission, dated May 4, 1925, as entered into the minutes.
- ⁴⁰ Helen Muir, *The Biltmore: Beacon for Miami, Revised and Expanded Edition* (Miami:Valiant Press, 1998), 8.
- ⁴¹ *MMCC*, July 14, 1925, Book No. 14, 539.
- ⁴² “To Every Citizen Who Believes in Miami’s Prosperity and Wishes to Assure its Continuance,” *Miami Herald*, August 29, 1925, 3-D; (August 30, 1925): 5-E.
- ⁴³ *MMCC*, July 14, 1925, Book No. 14, 539.
- ⁴⁴ *MCGCC*, August 3, 1925, 531.
- ⁴⁵ *MCGCC*, August 4, August 5, and August 7, 1925, 535.
- ⁴⁶ *MCGCC*, August 11, 1925, 537.
- ⁴⁷ *MCGCC*, August 17, 1925, 541.
- ⁴⁸ “Injunction Is Asked on Annexation,” *Illustrated Daily Tab*, August 22, 1925, 2.
- ⁴⁹ “Annexation Most Practical Solution of Miami’s Problem, A.J. Cleary Says,” *Illustrated Daily Tab*, August 23, 1925, 3.
- ⁵⁰ “Writ To Halt Vote on Annexation Denied,” *Illustrated Daily Tab*, August 27, 1925, 2.
- ⁵¹ “Annexation Adherents Issue Urgent Pleas as Registration Time Limit Nears,” *Illustrated Daily Tab*, August 28, 1925, 1.
- ⁵² *MCGCC*, August 27, 1925, 543.
- ⁵³ “Coconut Grove Lays its Cards on the Table,” *Miami Herald*, August 31, 1925, 7-C.
- ⁵⁴ “Vote No,” *Miami Tribune*, September 1, 1925, 11-C.
- ⁵⁵ *MMCC*, September 8, 1925, 607. Figures reported in the *Miami Herald* vary slightly from these.
- ⁵⁶ “Greater Miami Wins at Polls in Heavy Vote, 9 of 10 Precincts

Carried," *Miami Herald*, September 3, 1925, 1-A.

⁵⁷ "Miami Extends Bounds to 50 Square Miles", *Miami Daily News and Metropolis*, September 3, 1925, 2.

⁵⁸ "Grove Prepares for Hot Contest Over Annexation," *Miami Tribune*, September 4, 1925, 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ "Mayor Asserts Greater Miami To Hurry Work," *Miami Tribune*, September 3, 1925, 1-A.

⁶¹ *MCGCC*, September 7, 1925, 545.

⁶² *MMCC*, September 7, 1925, Book No. 14, 599.

⁶³ "Coconut Grove, Miami Make Peace, Annexation War Ends In Love Feast," *Illustrated Daily Tab*, September 8, 1925, 2.

⁶⁴ Frank Bowman Sessa, "Real Estate Expansion and Boom in Miami and its Environs during the 1920s," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1950), 284. Sessa quotes "Terrible Crash is Sure to Come," in the *Immigration Bulletin*, Minnesota Department. of Conservation, October 12, 1925; George, "Brokers, Binders, and Builders," *FHQ*, LXV, 46-49.

⁶⁵ *MMCC*, September 8, 1925, 606.

⁶⁶ *Minutes of the Coconut Grove Housekeepers Club*, December 3, 1925.

⁶⁷ Map of Coconut Grove, Coconut Grove Chamber of Commerce, 1997.

⁶⁸ Arva Moore Parks, *The History of Coconut Grove, Florida 1821-1925*, (Thesis, University of Miami, 1971).

⁶⁹ Karen Branch and Dan Keating, "City's Abolition Found Favor in Six Precincts" *Miami Herald*, September 6, 1997, 1-B.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Howard Kleinberg, "Was county's name change the will of the people?" *Miami Herald*, December 14, 1999, 7-B.