Miami Beach in 1920

The Making of a Winter Resort

The Making of America Series

Abraham D. Lavender

THE
MAKING OF AMERICA
SERIES

MIAMI BEACH IN 1920

THE MAKING OF A WINTER RESORT

This photograph shows many people standing or swimming in the Atlantic Ocean, in front of Smith's Casino. Many of the bathing suits are rented, with "Smith" written in big letters across the front.

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THE MAKING OF A WINTER RESORT

ABRAHAM D. LAVENDER

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FRONT COVER: *The Flamingo Hotel, which opened with an invitation-only party on December 31, 1920, was Miami Beach's first large luxury hotel and helped begin Miami Beach's emergence as America's Greatest Winter Resort. This postcard shows a tea party with dancing on the Biscayne Bay side of the Flamingo.*

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Dedication and Acknowledgments

I express a special appreciation to my mother, Velma, to whom I dedicate this book. She was born on October 12, 1920, the day after 50 women of Miami Beach were entertained with refreshments, stunts, and dancing at Smith's Casino, the same day the first kindergarten class started at Miami Beach's new Ida M. Fisher Elementary School, and the day before the *Miami Metropolis* cautioned tourists that the clay and sand roads in North Carolina, South Carolina (where she was born), Georgia, and north Florida were difficult to travel and required extreme caution because of heavy rain.

I began research on this book in 1996 and a number of people have helped since then. Most of the voluminous research of the *Miami Herald* and the *Miami Metropolis* was conducted at the Otto G. Richter Library at the University of Miami, so thanks go to the library staff, especially to Eduardo Avella.

Research of Miami Beach's city council minutes and other city records was made possible by the support of Richard Brown, then city clerk of Miami Beach, and a dedicated historian, to whom appreciation is expressed. Thanks go to the staff of the Florida and Genealogy rooms at the Miami-Dade Public Library in downtown Miami and the library staff at Florida International University.

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Appreciation is expressed to Myrna and Seth Bramson for the loan of two special photographs, including the rare photograph of Joe's Stone Crabs Restaurant, from their amazing collection of south Florida memorabilia. Appreciation is expressed to the Historical Museum of Southern Florida, especially to Dawn Hugh, for a number of photographs.

Special appreciation is expressed to Larry Wiggins, who not only assisted me in several specific research questions, but also graciously loaned nearly 30 photographs from his truly impressive collection of south Florida postcards. Seymour Gelber, former mayor of Miami Beach; Robert Parcher, city clerk; Lillian Beauchamp of the city clerk's office; and Richard Brown, former city clerk, helped with photographs from the Miami Beach collection, so thanks go to them. Dr. Paul George is thanked for his comments on the manuscript.

Christine Riley, Sarah Williams, and Mark Berry at Arcadia Publishing were helpful and supportive, and to them go thanks. This book was delayed a year while I underwent treatment for cancer, so a special thanks for Arcadia's patience. A very special thanks to those who made it possible for me to still be here, especially Dr. Michael Ross, Dr. Michael Troner, Dr. Cristina Lopez-Penalver, and their assistants.

The board of directors of the Miami Beach Historical Association, which I serve as president, helps promote a strong interest in Miami Beach history, and so thanks go to the board members, Dr. Judith Berson-Levinson, Tony Brooks, Carolyn Klepser, Stuart Reed, and Commissioner Luis Garcia. Thanks also go to Mayor David Dermer for his interest in Miami Beach history and for his support of the association.

James H. Snowden owned one of Miami Beach's most palatial residences in 1920. The house was used in 1920 for shooting scenes for the movie The Flapper. *The Fontainebleau Hilton Resort at 4441 Collins Avenue now occupies the site.*

Prologue

While there have been several excellent books written on the general history and personalities of the Miami and Miami Beach areas, this book is different. Miami Beach in 1920 presents a year in the life of a little city, the year in which Miami Beach truly began to think of itself as "America's Greatest Winter Resort." As author and historical sociologist, I chose to use the "slice of history" approach, taking a short period of time, but exploring interesting and unusual facts about the daily happenings during that exciting year. This book emphasizes the aspects of the city that were oriented to tourists and the activities that led to the building of America's greatest winter resort.

As a professor of sociology at Florida International University, the state university in Miami, I have approached the topic through sociological eyes, looking at demographic groups, social, economic, and political life, and the lives of people who played important roles. Because of the tourism orientation, heavy emphasis has been put on tourist activities and on the winter residents and visitors who were a large part of life in Miami Beach in 1920.

In order to help give a realistic feeling of the times, I have included some descriptive and revealing phrases in quotation marks and sometimes I have used the terminology of 1920 to help add to the sense of realism. There was strong racism and racial segregation in Florida in 1920, and some of the terminology, although offensive at times and thankfully not used today, reflects the reality of the time.

In 1920, most married women were referred to as "Mrs." followed by the first and last names of their husbands. I have attempted to find and give the women's own first names, and have been successful in most cases. Miami Beach had major restrictions against Jews in 1920 and I have tried to show the extent of this discrimination in different areas of the city. Miami Beach was a new city in 1920, with people from many geographical backgrounds, and I frequently illustrate this diversity by listing places of origin.

There was great enthusiasm in Miami Beach in 1920, and this was frequently illustrated in newspaper articles. Although newspapers are the source of much of the material, I also used letters, city council minutes, unpublished material from the city's archives, verbal and written interviews, genealogical records, census

records, city directories, photographs, and published books, articles, and pamphlets in order to give a broader picture.

My love affair with Miami Beach began in the middle 1960s when I first visited the city. After moving to the Miami area in 1977 as a professor, I spent much time in Miami Beach and, since 1989, have been actively involved in the civic and political life of the city. I have gained a better understanding of the city by serving as special assistant to the mayor in the early 1990s, director of a transition team that helped restructure city committees and boards, housing commissioner and vice-chair of the city's Housing Authority, chair of the Homeless Committee, founding president of the Miami Beach Historical Association, a member of the Jewish Museum's Education and Culture Committee, and author of over 17 articles on the historical, ethnic, and political life of the city.

I chose the year 1920 largely for two reasons. First, it was a very important year in the city's life and the real beginning of the city's march to greatness as a winter resort. It was not only the year that the city got its first large, luxurious hotel, it was the year that the causeway opened, the trolley began operating, the city got its first automatic telephone system, first post office and Miami Beach address instead of being a rural route of Miami, first public school, first PTA, and first religious house of worship. Second, it was also important that the city's first census was taken in 1920 and that the 1920 detailed census data was released in 1992, becoming available for in depth research in the following several years.

Imagine yourself in the year 1920 and see what life was like for people in "the exciting little city on the edge of greatness."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Abraham D. Lavender, a native of New Zion, South Carolina, received A.B. and M.A. degrees in psychology from the University of South Carolina, and a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Maryland in 1972. He has lived in the Miami area since 1977 and is a professor of sociology at Florida International University, the state university in Miami. His previous books include *Black Communities in Transition: Voices from South Florida*, *Jewish Farmers of the Catskills*, *French Huguenots*, *Ethnic Women and Feminist Values*, and *A Coat of Many Colors: Jewish Subcommunities in the United States*. He is the author of over 100 journal articles, research reports, encyclopedia articles, or book reviews.

1. Early History

Before proceeding with the remarkable story of Miami Beach in 1920, let's back up and look in more detail at the past. Native Americans had long lived in the area that would become Miami Beach when, in 1567, a Spanish mission was established to try to Christianize them. The Native Americans, however, had their own religions with which they were satisfied and the mission soon ended without success. As late as the middle 1800s, the area was still inhabited by a few Seminole Native Americans, not descendants of, but successors to, the earlier Tequesta tribe. Various records suggest a few brief occasional visits to the area, but modern interest in development did not begin until the 1870s, when the area was visited by Henry B. Lum and his son Charles Lum of Red Bank, New Jersey.

The area that became Miami Beach was described as having the following:

> A sand ridge running along the ocean side [which] was covered by a tangled mass of sea grapes. The peninsula that would later become an island was a haven for rattlesnakes, mosquitoes, wildcats, raccoons, 'possum, rabbits and bears.[1]

Nonetheless, the Lums, with dreams of starting a coconut plantation, bought several hundred acres of land from the government, going from close to present-day Lincoln Road south to Fisher Island. They returned to New Jersey and interested a group of local investors in the venture. Two men, Ezra Asher Osborn and Elnathan T. Field, both of Middletown, New Jersey, less than 10 miles from Red Bank, were the major investors in a corporation for buying and developing land. Osborn and Field purchased 65 miles of oceanfront land from the government, with breaks going for 100 miles from Cape Florida to north of Jupiter, including all the land in today's Miami Beach north of the Lum property. Bought for just 75¢ to $1.25 an acre, the land had been purchased under provisions of the Great Swamplands Act of 1850, which encouraged development of Florida land.

Beginning in the winter of 1882, Osborn and Field tried to develop a coconut plantation. By 1885, over 300,000 coconut plants from Trinidad, Nicaragua, and Cuba had been planted on their property, including the Miami Beach part.

Workers are shown clearing mangroves in Miami Beach on March 27, 1920. About two-thirds of Miami Beach's current land was originally under water or cleared from mangroves.

Fortunately, on Miami Beach, an old Native American trail meandered north and south among the trees. The trail was widened for the mule teams. Unfortunately, the wild marsh rabbits and rats ate most of the young plants' shoots and the coconut plantation was a failure.

One of the smaller investors in the Osborn-Field project had been John Stiles Collins, also of Middletown, New Jersey. Collins, a friend of Field, had invested $5,000 in the project. In 1896, Collins came to look into his failed investment and to inspect the area. He saw potential, bought Osborn's share of the land, and became Field's partner. In 1907, Collins and Field began clearing massive mangrove roots and scrub palmetto trees to plant an avocado grove, which was 1,000 feet from the Atlantic Ocean, 700 feet wide, and 1 mile long, running north from about present-day Twenty-eighth Street. After a disastrous failure in the summer of 1907 because of salt and spray blowing from the ocean, Field sold his share to Collins, who then became the owner of 1,670 acres of oceanfront land.

Thomas J. Pancoast, Collins's son-in-law from New Jersey, came to Miami Beach in 1912 on behalf of the Collins family to see what the feisty 74-year-old Collins was up to with the family money. Collins had started an avocado grove, which, by 1920, would be advertised as the largest in the world. However, soon after Pancoast's arrival, the two men shared a vision that a city could be developed and, in 1912, they formed the Miami Beach Improvement Company for that purpose.

Meanwhile, in May 1912, two Miami banking brothers, John Newton Lummus and James Edward Lummus, originally from Bronson, Florida, were the major shareholders in the Ocean Beach Realty Company, which purchased about 600 acres of mostly swamp and mangrove land at the southern end of the peninsula, which had once been part of the Lum property. The swamps and mangroves were so thick that an ax was necessary to cut one's way through. Nevertheless, the Lummus brothers planned to develop the land, actually preceding Collins by five months in filing plats for development. The Lummus brothers filed their first plat on July 9, 1912, and Collins filed his first plat on December 11 of that same year.

Since about 1910, people from Miami had been going to Miami Beach by boat to enjoy the shore where, by 1912, there were two casinos (pavilions), Smith's Casino and Hardie's Casino, both at the south end of Miami Beach. Collins and Pancoast realized that future growth depended on connection with the mainland. They also needed transportation for their avocados. In 1911, for example, Collins was shipping about 18 carloads of produce, mostly avocados, "out of the swamps of Miami Beach." In 1911, Collins dug the Collins Canal, connecting his farm and future development lands to Biscayne Bay. In 1912, Collins and Pancoast began building what was advertised as the longest wooden bridge in the world (2.5 miles). The Lummus brothers loaned Collins $25,000 to start the Collins Bridge, but by 1913, Collins did not have enough money left to complete the

The J.N. Lummus family home, built in 1915, was at 1200 Ocean Drive. The house was named "Salubrity," seen written in wrought iron above the sidewalk.

project. Collins and Pancoast had also started building a casino on the ocean side of today's Collins Avenue between Twenty-second and Twenty-third Streets.

Carl G. Fisher, age 38, a supposedly retired multi-millionaire from Indianapolis, Indiana, had recently discovered Miami through his assistant, West Virginia–native John Hale Levi, and had built a home there. He burst upon the scene as Collins was running out of funds and loaned the necessary $50,000 to complete the bridge. Fisher obtained several hundred acres of land between the Lummus brothers to the south and the Collins-Pancoast interests to the north as part of the deal, and he began grandiose plans to build a dream winter playground. Only a few people lived in the area and only a few buildings existed, but things would never be the same after Fisher and the Collins Bridge arrived. Fisher also loaned money to the Lummus brothers to help with the development of their land and, in return, they gave Fisher 105 acres of swampland from Lincoln Road south to Fifteenth Street.

There was skepticism about the dream, however, and growth was slow. A large portion of what would become Miami Beach was still mangrove swamp and was infested not only with rattlesnakes, mosquitoes, and wildcats, but also with rats, crocodiles, and other such animals, who had their own ideas of the good life. Mules had largely been replaced by machines for the roughest mangrove clearing, but in 1920, mules were still used for lighter clearing work and for farming in Miami Beach. Mangrove clearing was rough, but much of the water area in Biscayne Bay between Miami Beach and Miami was only a few feet deep, allowing for relatively easy development. In 1913, J.N. Lummus and Crate Bowen, Fisher's attorney, went to Washington, D.C. to obtain the first government permit for dredging and filling land. The Lummus brothers and Fisher, within a year, had moved 6,000,000 cubic yards of bay bottom onto the mangroves of Miami Beach south of Lincoln Road.

From 1914 to 1928, Fisher would dredge or fill about 2,760 acres of land, adding to the original 1,600 acres of the sandbar, so that about 63 percent of Miami Beach would be positioned on mangrove that had been cleared and filled in or on low land that had been filled. Fisher was well aware of the power of place, of how our surroundings affect us, and he had a grand vision. While the Lummus brothers worked together, and Collins and Pancoast worked together, Fisher's top assistant and confidant was John Hale Levi.

In 1914, to encourage the building of homes, the Lummus brothers gave away 32 lots near the ocean south of Fifteenth Street, today's famous Ocean Drive and SoBe (South Beach). These homes were all completed and occupied by the latter part of 1914. Fisher sold bigger lots for more expensive homes, but the Lummus brothers sold smaller lots at moderate prices to anyone who was white, law-abiding, and could pay the down payment. By 1915, the area had only about 150 residents and real estate sales of the combined three developers—the Lummus brothers, Fisher, and Collins-Pancoast—were only $35,264. Meanwhile, 3 miles across the shallow Biscayne Bay on the mainland, the booming city of Miami, which had a population of 5,471 people in 1910, was growing toward a population

of 29,549 just ten years later. Miami Beach did not have a population count in 1910 because it was not a separate area, but the count would have been only a few people.

With the dream still going strong, on the night of March 26, 1915, with a population of only about 150 people, Miami Beach's 33 registered voters (all men) gathered in the Lummus building on the northeast corner of Ocean Drive and Biscayne Street (in front of today's Penrod's) and incorporated the area as the Town of Miami Beach. The town consisted of the Lummus holdings (Ocean Beach Realty Company), the Fisher holdings (Alton Beach Realty Company), and part of the Collins and Pancoast holdings (Miami Beach Improvement Company), going from Government Cut in the south to today's Fontainebleau Hotel in the north. All of the voters lived on the Lummus development except for three, who lived on the Collins development. At that time, none lived on Fisher's property. J.N. Lummus built his own home at 1200 Ocean Drive. Across the street was a beautiful lawn, surrounded by palm trees, and beyond that were the beautiful waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

John Newton Lummus was elected the town's first mayor and served from 1915 to 1918; Thomas J. Pancoast was the second mayor from 1918 to 1920; and Lummus's brother-in-law Thomas E. James was the third mayor from 1920 to 1922. John Newton Lummus Jr., son of the first mayor, nephew of the third, and a champion swimmer, was the fifth mayor, serving from 1926 to 1928. John Hale Levi served on the city council from 1918 until 1947, including five years served as mayor from 1937 to 1941 and 1944 to 1945. Louis F. Snedigar, the fourth mayor, served from 1922 to 1926 and later served two more terms, remaining the city's longest serving mayor ever with eight years and seven months.

On May 21, 1917, a little over two years after becoming a town and with a population of several hundred, by act of the Florida legislature, the town became the City of Miami Beach. In 1918, the Sanborn Insurance Company, in platting the city's buildings, estimated the population to be 500. In January 1920, Miami Beach's first census reported that the population had increased to 644 people. However, research shows that definitely two and probably three people were counted twice, so the population actually was 642 or 641. Economic growth continued, with an assessed property valuation of $244,815 in 1915, increasing to $335,120 in 1916, $647,503 in 1917, $832,745 in 1918, $2,251,600 in 1919, $3,933,700 in 1920, and $5,540,112 in 1921.

During the year 1920, the seams were bursting loose. The city continued to grow greatly through the Roaring Twenties, part of the great Florida land boom, until the bubble burst in 1925, the great hurricane of 1926 flattened the area, and the stock market began to crash in 1929. The setbacks were only temporary, however, and by the 1930s, Miami Beach was on its way to an even greater future.

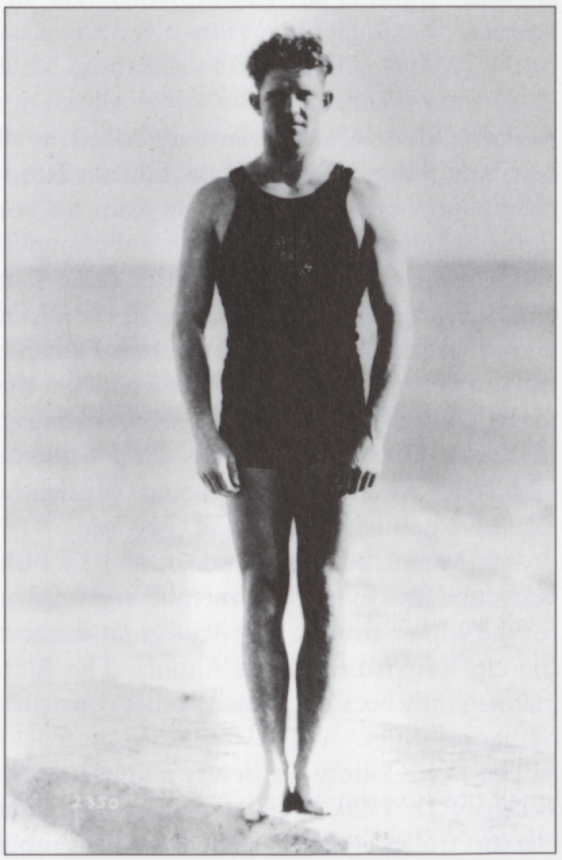
As 1920 had begun, Miami Beach had only a few small hotels and apartment houses. But, during 1920, the three major hotels made significant changes: the small but luxurious Lincoln Hotel on Lincoln Road had a major expansion; the Breakers Hotel put in new decorations and kitchen equipment and added a

tearoom; and Brown's Hotel was redecorated and largely refurnished throughout. New structures, plus additions and renovations to existing ones, were a major part of the city's growth.

Most important to the building of Fisher's dream of Miami Beach as a winter playground was the construction in 1920 of the city's first luxury resort hotel, the 11-story Flamingo Hotel, with 200 rooms, on Biscayne Bay. The Flamingo Hotel had an invitation-only formal dinner and reception on New Year's Eve, December 31, 1920, and opened officially on January 1, 1921.

The Lummus brothers and the Collins interests were major developers of Miami Beach, but it was Fisher who aimed to make Miami Beach the "World's Winter Playground." Fisher poured large amounts of money into developing Miami Beach as a winter-sports playground for the wealthy, with polo, golf, boating, tennis, ladies' horseback riding, deep-sea fishing, and seaplane flying.

In 1920, polo fields were increased and improved. The first international United States–Cuba polo match was held in Miami Beach, with the first game being described as the greatest day in the history of the young city. Two new golf courses were being added or planned to add to the one already existing. Boating regattas and races were heavily publicized with national champions participating.



John Newton "Newt" Lummus Jr. was a champion swimmer and Miami Beach mayor from 1926 until 1928.

This 1924 photo shows Miami Beach's city hall (left) at 609 Collins Avenue and the fire station (right) at 607 Collins Avenue. The fire engine was kept in the opening on the right side.

A new indoor tennis court, described as "large enough in which to drill a battalion," was constructed on Lincoln Road under the supervision of a world champion coach. Miles of bridle paths for horseback riding were built, largely at the encouragement of Jane Fisher. Fishing cruises were a new major attraction, and seaplanes took hotel guests for rides. Fisher brought to Miami Beach many world champion players and coaches in several sports for the benefit of affluent winter visitors. He attracted the best-known polo manager in the United States; the six Nelson golfing brothers, who were the largest professional golfing family in the United States; the famous boat racing champion Gar Wood; and the trainer of the 1913 American Davis Cup in tennis. An impressive aquarium and biological laboratory were being constructed during the year and received extensive publicity in *National Geographic*.

The Miami Beach Casino, owned by Fisher and opened to the public, was converted into the upscale members-only Miami Beach Club, with entertainment for the winter visitors. The Art Center was founded, and plans were made to erect the city's first theater, the Altonia. The Altonia was not completed in 1920 as planned only because so many other construction projects were going on that had higher priorities.

The new County Causeway connecting Miami and Miami Beach opened on February 17, 1920, largely replacing the outdated Collins Bridge. The city's first electric trolley system opened on December 8, 1920, also connecting Miami

Beach to Miami and providing local service with 13 stops within Miami Beach. The opening of the causeway and the trolley brought increasing numbers of daily visitors from Miami, with beach crowds repeatedly being referred to as the largest ever at the beach. Miami Beach hosted one day of the first annual Palm Fete, the first of a long-lasting annual famous parade. Hardie's Casino and Smith's Casino were enlarged to serve the growing crowds throughout the year, and numerous small restaurants and shops opened to serve the growing demand. Joe Weiss, who had begun cooking at Smith's Casino, opened his own restaurant called Joe's in 1920 with his wife, Jennie. This restaurant would become famous as Joe's Stone Crabs, a genuine institution still operating in Miami Beach.

The tremendous growth in real estate sales also reflected tremendous growth in residential development, with several palatial homes, major residential projects, and numerous winter homes and bungalows being built. The need for a business district was recognized and small businesses began to grow. The city's first dairy also opened, but it could not meet the growing city's demand for milk.

As 1920 began, most of the streets in Miami Beach were dirt roads, but the year saw a massive paving project and opening of new streets. The opening of Miami Beach's own electric power plant was another landmark event. The first automatic telephone system was installed and a Western Union Telegraph office opened in the little city.

Miami Beach's city hall in 1920 was a small, two-story building that doubled as the fire department. City Hall was in the north side of the building at 609 Collins Avenue and the fire department was in the south side at 607 Collins Avenue. The new fire truck was kept on the first floor of the fire department. Miami Beach was still a rural route of the Miami post office at the start of 1920, but the new city obtained its own post office in December with an impressive building on Fifth Street (demolished only in 1997). The city now had its own mailing address, giving it a new sense of self-identity. In 1920, Miami Beach also opened its first public elementary school, the Ida M. Fisher Elementary School on Washington Avenue, and the first PTA soon followed. For the first time, Miami Beach's children did not have to travel off the peninsula for an education. A second private school was being prepared for wealthy winter visitors. The first religious institution, a Congregational church, was being built during much of 1920. The parish's first religious service was held in the unfinished structure on March 14, 1920.

As all of these developments show, 1920 was a very important year in Miami Beach's history. The city was on the edge of greatness, with much emphasis being put on becoming the country's greatest winter resort.