

Matheson Hammock History

In 1930, William J. Matheson and his son Hugh donated approximately 85 acres of tropical hardwood hammock forest off old Cutler Road to Dade County, to be used and maintained perpetually as a botanical garden. This 85-acre tract referred to as the "Matheson Botanical Hammock" was the original extent of Matheson Hammock Park, which was also the first public park to be established in Dade County.

Shortly afterwards, in 1934-35, Dade County purchased an additional 420 acres of mangroves and hammock lands adjacent to Matheson Hammock Park, thus increasing its size to over 500 acres, with a mile of frontage on Biscayne Bay¹. Matheson Hammock opened in 1930 originally administered by the county's first director of public parks, A. D. Barnes, and designed by the landscape architect William Lyman Phillip; today it is owned and managed by Miami-Dade County. Matheson wanted the land to be used as a park "to preserve the wild and natural beauty." It grew with further donations by the Matheson heirs, purchases by county commissioner Charles Crandon, and other donations to its current 630 acres. Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) crews were assigned to Matheson Hammock in 1936 and began to develop the Bayfront park area. Coral stone buildings rose and the picnic area had a coral stone shelter. Without the use of the inexpensive and skilled labor force under the state and federal assistance programs, it would have been impossible to build the miles of carefully hewn coral stone walls and native stone buildings. The quality of the CCC's work was verified in 1945 when a hurricane resulted in 12-foot waves rolling over Matheson Hammock, causing immense damage to equipment and furnishings, and depositing layers of mud and trash in the park, but the basic CCC structures stood firm and the park recovered.² A Hardwood Hammock limestone ridge parallels the east of Southern Florida and separates it from the vast everglades and Big Cypress Swamp to the west. This ridge is called the Miami Rock Ridge and is made up of oolitic rock, Miami Limestone. This limestone consists of egg-shaped grains of calcium carbonate, called ooids that were deposited when shallow, ancient seas covered South Florida. The Miami Rock Ridge stands between 3 to 12 feet above sea level, and it is upon a portion of this ridge that Miami stands today. Historically, the Miami Rock Ridge was occupied by a vast forest of pineland interspersed with dense stands of hardwood trees called "Hammocks". South Florida Hammocks are unusual because they are dominated by tropical trees from the West Indies, and contain only a few temperate species. Matheson Hammock is a good example of a tropical hardwood hammock that formed on the Miami Rock Ridge.

Hurricane Andrew had humble beginnings, starting as a tropical wave off the west coast of Africa on Aug. 14, 1992 the hurricane made landfall near Homestead in the early morning hours of Aug. 24, 1992. Matheson Hammock Park and Marina were devastated by the impact of Andrew. The Marina was totally destroyed. Warnings of Hurricane Andrew's arrival led to massive evacuations across Florida, Louisiana and Texas and South Florida. Hurricane Andrew's winds were determined to be 165 miles per hour. This bumped the hurricane's previous ranking from a Category 4 to a Category 5. The morning of Aug. 24, 1992; a storm tide of 4 to 6 feet was measured

in Biscayne Bay. Heights as high as nearly 17 feet were measured at the waterfront Burger King International Headquarters. The damage from Hurricane Andrew was staggering, with about \$25-26.5 billion in damages. The area impacted most was a swatch from Homestead and Florida City north to Kendall. Matheson Hammock Marina docks were rebuilt with Floating Docks and the remaining 3 fixed docks that survived the storm.

Matheson Hammock Park and Marina today remains the same with very little change as it was opened in 1930.

¹ City of Coral Gables Historical Preservation. Brief Chronology of Park Development, Page 2.

² Wikipedia; Historical Association of South Florida).