

## **Homestead Bayfront Park**

In 1938-39 Deeds dated 11/16/38 and 2/6/39 covered the lands given to Dade County for park purposes by South Dade Farms, represented by James Sottile. The tract consists of approximately 1,200 acres, extending from Campbell Drive on the north to 660 feet south of the Florida City Canal on the south, and from the Bay to S.W 97th Avenue on the west side, in Section 16, 20, 21 Township 57 Range 40. The park area fronts a little more than two miles on the Bay with frontage on both sides of Mowry, North, and Florida City Canals. There were numerous restrictions in the deeds, but County Commissioner J.D. Redd of District 5 who originated the park idea, and handled the negotiations with South Dade Farms, was able to obtain satisfactory solutions. Mr. Redd had worked for many years with Mr. Sottile on road and canal matters in the South Dade area. One of the provisions in the original deed required that the access road, or main entrance, be near the north end of the deeded property. Early planning showed that such a requirement would be unduly costly as it would require at least two vehicle bridges. North Canal, towards the southern portion of the tract, had an over the Mowry Canal due north by an improved road. North Canal also had road on either side that extended all the way to the Bay. North Canal also had been deepened a little out in the bay.

The County had no specific funds available for any development work, but had planned to submit a proposal to the W.P.A. Preliminary plans were prepared to widen the south side of the canal to provide tie-up space for boats, and provide fill for a parking area. The project was also to construct a substantial two-story caretaker's house at the area. Plans included the excavation of an atoll-shaped swimming pool and further canal deepening extending into the bay. Mr. Sottile agreed to the plans for a start on the improvements. It was understood, however, that at some future date if a more direct approach from the north as an entrance proved feasible the County would undertake such construction. Approval then was received from W.P.A administration to proceed with the improvements. The County was to furnish materials and supplies and the W.P.A to pay payroll costs. Equipment was to be a joint responsibility. After work started in May, 1939, Commissioner Redd helped the project tremendously by making available to the Park Department a dragline without cost, in between District No. 5 road and bridge jobs.

As the Park improvements progressed, Commissioner Redd scheduled the upgrading and surfacing to the road along the south side of the North Canal. When the boat docks were completed, they were occupied as soon as they were available to the public. Most of the boat owners wanted channel markers at the bay entrance to the canal. The Coast Guard required that they be installed under a permit and that they be lighted, however, there were no electric supply lines in the vicinity. The closest power source was the City of Homestead power line and because of economic reasons they wouldn't extend the lines of the bay.

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This problem was solved by installing a windmill electric generator on top of the two-story house, and a bank of

storage batteries in a corner of the first floor. A blinking light was placed on the entrance channel marker and another on the roof of the house.

There was also the problem of a water supply. Well could not be drilled so close to the bay and the closest available public water supply and south of North Canal. A location was found about

½ mile south of North Canal Drive, about halfway between North Canal and Florida City Canal. It offered the best possibility of obtaining fresh water. Four widely spaced shallow wells were drilled on the half acre, and connected to a centrally located windmill, driving a small capacity water pump. The tower for the windmill was purchased through a mail order farm equipment catalog. Two large steel water tanks were installed on concrete cradles. The tank closest to the windmill pump was purely for water storage. A pipe from the bottom of this tank was connected to a pressure water pump which in turn pumped water into the second tank. Two inch and 1½ inch pipelines connected this tank to supply lines in the park on the waterfront. Bottled water, however, was used for drinking and cooking. The “Rube Goldberg” setup operated satisfactorily pumping water slowly, and in small quantities from the shallow wells and the layer of fresh water floating on top of the brackish water, into a storage tank then pumped under pressure into the park.

Development of the park stopped with World War II when the entire area and improvements were leased to the U.S Government for use as a crash boat base in connection with the Air Force operations at Homestead Air Force Base. Only the shell of the two-story building had been constructed and the Air Force only did such work on it as to make it livable and useable. In 1947, the Air Force discontinued use of the Homestead Bayfront Park crash boat site, and relinquished their lease on the property.

In submitting a Bond Issue for completion of work at other parks in 1947, the County had added \$250,000 in General Obligation Bonds for the development of Homestead Bayfront Park. With their approval, work also started again at Homestead. The two-story residence building beach; an enlarged marine and parking area; and a new entrance road were constructed. Homestead Power and Light Company then extended power line to the park. The County installed new water mains to connect to Leisure City Water Plant, and restrooms and a refreshment pavilion were built. The park was dedicated on January 28, 1939.

Although it had a rough early history, Homestead Bayfront Park was actually the fifth name added to the growing list of major parks. Commissioner Redd of District No. 5 Homestead, although not originally on the Park Committee of the Board, had indicated an early interest in Parks and in the new Roadside Improvement Program. It was in 1938 he informed the Park Committee of the Board that he had asked Mr. James Sottile of South Dade Farms to give the Bayfront land to the County for a park. Redd wanted to add money for the Homestead Park in the 1939 bond issue for Homestead Bayfront Park. Commissioner Redd was insistent that some sort of a start be made at Homestead Park.

A W.P.A project was set while a development plan was being prepared. Top priority was the deepening of North Canal at the Bay end as far out as a dragline could work itself and the widening and deepening of the canal to provide a boat docking area.

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The W.P.A project was approved and Commissioner Redd was most cooperative in aiding the progress of the work. He provided without cost to the Park Department a ¾ yd. dragline. The Project covered the operations salary and the Park Department scraped up enough to pay for the gasoline and the dynamite to break up the rock. Commissioner Redd also had his District Road crews rebuild, widen and resurface the entrance road on the south side of the canal. Salvage railroad ties were used to bulkhead the marina area and the boat service docks where fueling facilities were provided. Along with the dragline work, construction was underway on a

two-story building with living quarters upstairs for the park custodian and space downstairs for a refreshment stand. The park was too removed to be within any utility area that could furnish water or electricity to the park. Boat owners immediately petitioned for entrance channel lights, and water was of course a necessity. Two "Rube Goldberg" installations partially solved both the electricity and water problems. They are covered in a previous paragraph.

With the completion of the Homestead Air Force Base and its increased use, the United States took over Homestead Bayfront Park in an unfinished state as crash boat base, operational twenty-four hours a day. The channel deepening and widening had been completed. A flashing light at the channel entrance and a light had been installed on the roof of the unfinished two-story building. The water supply was adequate for sanitary purposes and there was parking for fifteen to twenty cars. The building roof was dried in only with no finish layer. The exterior of the building lacked a stucco coat and the interior was totally unfinished. The Air Force in taking over the building promised to finish it, but didn't. They cancelled their lease in 1947 and removed all of their property from the park, except a minimum facility pistol target range which they had built on a trash and overburden rough filled strip along the Bayfront about 200 yards south of the marina.

The Air Force had moved out with encouragement from the County just about the time the \$250,000 bond issue became available for completing capital improvements at the park in accordance with the plan. A bathing atoll similar to the one at Matheson Hammock was excavated into the rock layer by dragline and clamshell, and an artificial beach created with a mixture of hauled in sand and a very fine pellet material hauled in from the Navy water treatment plant at Florida City. The plant pumped water to Key West and the pellets were a byproduct of the water softening process. The two-story was constructed with a piling supported roof and the walk hung from the piling. A contract was let to construct a beach pavilion with public restrooms, refectory, lifeguard and first aid office and beach chair and umbrella rental storage.

A much larger marina was developed by excavating the south side of North Canal on arc from the vicinity of the boat service building. A boat launching ramp was installed at the west end of the marina. Upon petition of boat owners a boat hoist was designed and built adjacent to the boat service building. Built on piling and a beam superstructure with an electric hoist traveling on a rail, it picked up trailered boats and lowered them into the water adjacent to the bulkhead.

During its successful operation a mysterious incident took place. The hoist was designed with a maximum capacity which was prominently displayed on a sign at the pick-up point. One morning a car pulled up with a trailered boat which was covered with a lashed on waterproof tarpaulin. The driver was questioned about the contents of the boat contained fishing gear, was equipped with factory installed lifting rings and was well within posted hoist limits.

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The boat was lifted off the trailer and started to move along the rail towards the bulkhead when the electric hoist failed and let the boat fall to the ground. The Dock master thought the boat must have been overloaded because the posted capacity of the hoist was well within manufacturers rating for a safety factor. He started to try and look under the tarp but was prevented by the three men from the car. They would not identify themselves and two of them remained to guard the boat while the third was left in the car. The Park Police were notified and

the Park Superintendent instructed that if the car came back before the police arrived to record the car license number, trailer and boat number.

About an hour later the Park Director received a call from the Sheriff's office with the simple message, "Have all your people stay away from the boat" and further, "somebody will call to ascertain the amount of damages to the hoist." Later that morning the Park Director received such a call and the caller was quoted the estimated cost of repairs. Early in the afternoon of that same day, a man appeared in the Park Director's office and handed over the exact amount of money quoted in the telephone call. The money was in a plain envelope and amounted to at least a couple hundred dollars. The man delivering the money refused a receipt for the money and left without identifying himself. The Department's next problem was how to turn the money in. It was learned right then that getting credit for delivering it to the Finance Department was not easy. "Where did you get it, why did you get it and what do you have for an explanation?", were the questions. Nobody wanted to believe: "A man came by the office and left \$200 in an envelope on the desk." With the previous experience of group use of the Trail Glade Range and the signs of the times, the call of the incident could be none other than a CIA operation.

Material resulting from the enlarged marina excavation was used to provide an improved entrance road and a greatly enlarged parking area.

In order to serve the increasing number of boat owners in South Dade and eliminate the time consuming trips to Miami River boat yards for dry dock services, the Park Department contracted for the design and construction of a marine railway with haul out equipment. The facility included extra boat dollies and trackage to accommodate several boats at a time.

During the period of segregated facilities, a small atoll swimming beach was completed on the north side of North Canal with custodian quarters, restrooms and a small refreshment stand. After desegregation of Park the north side atoll was converted into a launching ramp and the parking area enlarged to create a family camping area. With the planning of the new building and the addition of several facilities, power needed to operate electric service was extended to the Park. Another major capital improvement covered by the bond money was the extension of an adequate water main to and into the Park from the Leisure City water plant.

Homestead Bayfront Park was officially dedicated on November 13, 1955.

Ref: [Lyshia Lowman, University of South Florida](#)  
[National Park Service, Biscayne National Park](#)