

# Designation Report

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## Key Biscayne Beach Club

685 Ocean Drive  
Key Biscayne, Florida  
Built: 1958



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Miami-Dade County

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## I. General Information

**Historic Name:**

Key Biscayne Beach Club

**Current Name:**

Key Biscayne Beach Club

**Location:**

685 Ocean Drive  
Key Biscayne, Fl 33149

**Present Owner:**

KEY BISCAYNE BEACH CLUB

**Tax Folio Number:**

24-5204-002-0030

**Legal Description:**

1ST ADDN TO BISC KEY ESTS PB 53-19  
N175FT OF TR G LESS W100FT LOT SIZE 175.000 X 559

**Date of Construction:**

1958

**Architect:**

Robert Fitch Smith

**Contractor/Builder:**

Vernon J. Posey and Son

**Primary Land Use:**

3515 TOURIST ATTRACTION/EXHIBIT : ENTERTAINMENT

**Present Use:**

Beach Club

**Zoning:**

Muni Zone: PC  
PA Zoning: 9100 MISC. ZONING

**Impacts:**

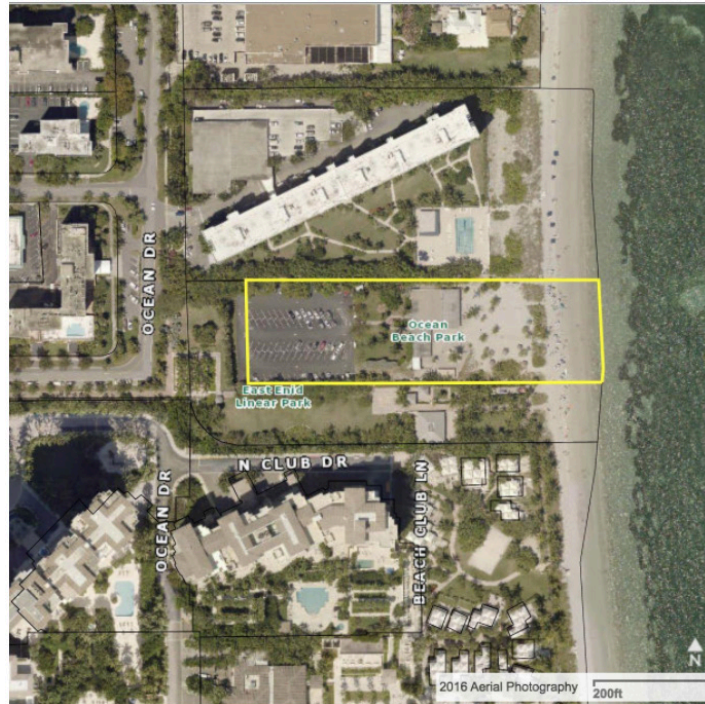
The Miami-Dade County Office of Historic Preservation is required to review any exterior changes and/or additions, demolition, or new construction to the designated resources.

Most approvals are handled in-house directly by the staff of the Office of Historic Preservation.

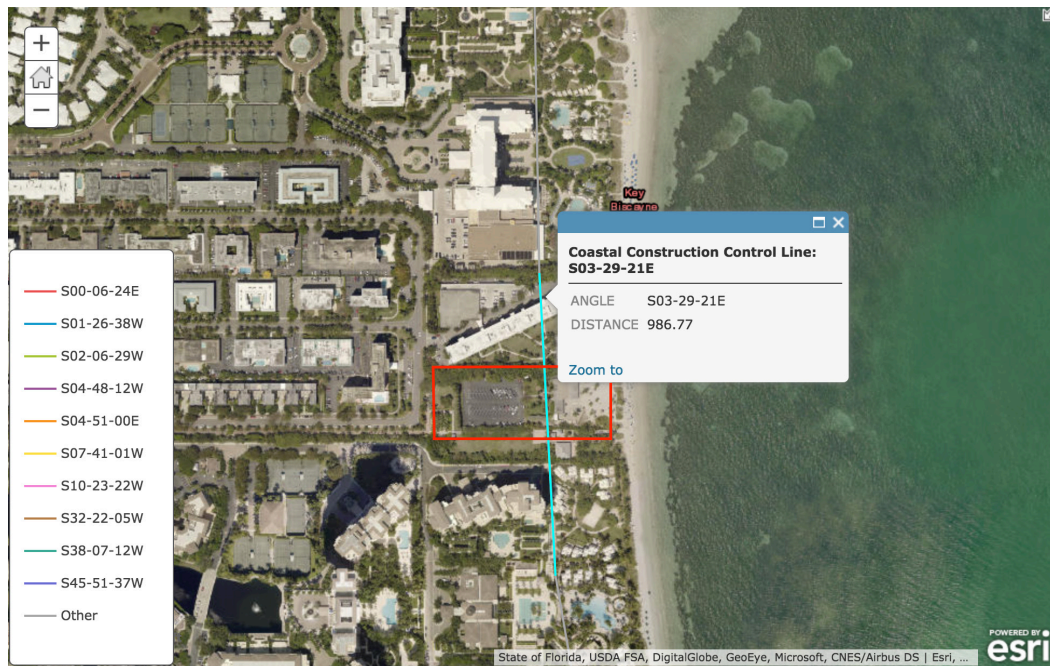
Major alterations require approval by the County Historic Preservation Board.

Designated resources are eligible to take part in the County's Ad-Valorem Tax Exemption program, and are eligible for any historic preservation grants that may be available at the time.

## Maps



*Map, Office of the Property Appraiser Detailed Report of 685 Ocean Drive, Key Biscayne, (2017).*



*Map Coastal Construction Control Line at 685 Ocean Drive, Key Biscayne, FI, Miami Dade GIS Open Data (2017).*

## I. Significance

### a. Date

The current building was built in 1958 and inaugurated on January 28th, 1959.

### b . Statement of Significance:

The building at 685 Ocean Drive, Key Biscayne, FL is historically significant for its central role in the early social history and community development of Key Biscayne. It is also significant as the work of master architect, Robert Fitch Smith, and in its methods of construction.

### c. Relationship to Criteria for Designation

The Key Biscayne Beach Club is significant under the following criteria, as set forth in Section 16A-10 of the Miami-Dade Historic Preservation Ordinance:

***Criteria Sec. 16A-10(1)(a), Is associated with distinctive elements of the cultural, social, political, economic, scientific, religious, prehistoric, paleontological and architectural history that have contributed to the pattern of history in the community, Miami-Dade County, south Florida, the State or the nation.***

Since it was constructed, the Key Biscayne Beach Club has served as the community's social gathering point and contributed to Key Biscayne's sense of community. Community members, and religious and philanthropic organizations based in Key Biscayne have hosted and continue to host events and activities at the Club. Some events include 4th of July parade, Key Biscayne Presbyterian Church fundraisers, and Lions Clubs fundraisers. The consistent membership rate and continuity as a recreational and community center exemplifies the cultural and social trends of Key Biscayne.

***Criteria Sec. 16A-10(1)(b), Is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.***

The Beach Club is associated with significant people that exemplify the affluent community and social history of Key Biscayne. It has had numerous members and guests that have made a significant contribution to the history of the community and the nation. This Beach Club served as a gathering place for Key Biscayne residents and historically significant figures, President Richard Nixon and his group of confidantes, Charles G. (Bebe) Rebozo and Robert Abplanalp. As the Watergate scandal unfolded, President Nixon would reside in Key Biscayne and frequent the

Club. Contemporary significant figures are current members of the Key Biscayne Beach Club, like Emerson Fitipaldi, Carlos Vives, Andy Garcia and the dela Fortuna family.

*Criteria Sec. 16A-10(1)(c), Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, style or method of construction or work of a master; or that possess high artistic value; or that represent a distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.*

The Key Biscayne Beach Club was designed by noted Miami architect, Robert Fitch Smith. He is credited with designing many civic structures like churches, schools, and industrial and recreational projects in Miami. He also designed residential structures like the “Java House” and the historically designated Bay Oaks Home for the Aged and was the first Dean of Architecture at the University of Miami.

The Key Biscayne Beach Club is also distinguishable for its functional and robust method of construction, which has secured its structural integrity despite being on the coast and having experienced major hurricanes since 1958. The building includes original features like the terrazzo floors, tiles and water fountain, all of which are in excellent and functioning condition.

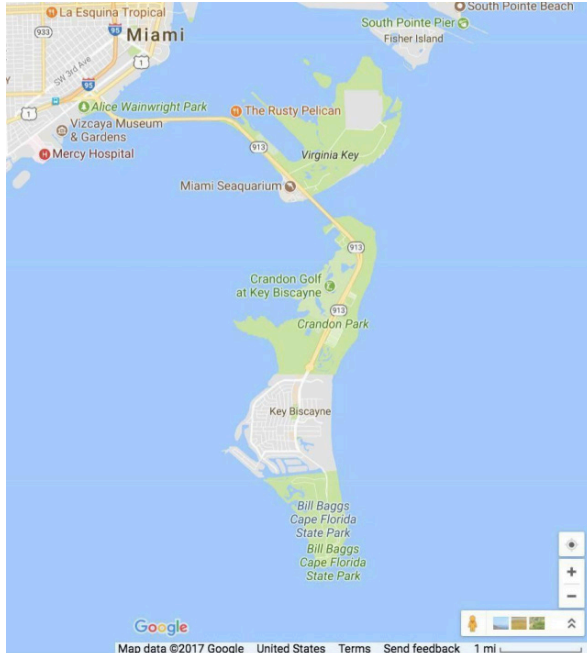
## **II. Historical Information**

**Date of Erection:** 1958

**Architect:** Robert Fitch Smith

### **Historical Context**

In 1908, Key Biscayne’s ownership was divided between James Deering, who owned the southern third of the island, and William J. Matheson, who owned the northern two thirds of the island (“History Of The Island Of Key Biscayne - Village Of Key Biscayne”). The northern two thirds eventually operated as the largest coconut plantation in the continental United States during the first half of the 20th century, managed by Matheson’s community of plantation workers that lived on the island (“History Of The Island Of Key Biscayne - Village Of Key Biscayne”). After the 1926 Hurricane devastated Miami, the onset of the Great Depression and Matheson’s death in 1930, the plantation was not operating as successfully as it once did (“History Of The Island Of Key Biscayne - Village Of Key Biscayne”).



Division of land ownership in the 1900s still outlined in today's Key Biscayne (2017)

In the 1940s, the Matheson heirs agreed to donate the northern 680 acres of the island to create Crandon Park in exchange for the Rickenbacker Causeway (“Key Biscayne: Island Retreat Transformed By Bridge | Flashback Miami”). Once the island became easily accessible by bridge, real estate interest on the Key boomed. The remaining Matheson property, stretching across the middle of the island, was sold to developers, most notably the Mackle brothers – Frank, Elliott and Robert — who paid \$25 million for 220 acres in 1950 (The Mackle Company).

In the area they purchased, they created Biscayne Key Estates: a development of 553 three-bedroom, 1,100-square-foot houses whose residents were promised beach access. This promise to beach access led to the creation of the Club.

In the last weeks of 1950, the first residents arrived into these “Mackle” homes, which make up more than half the single-family houses on the island today (“Key Biscayne: Island Retreat Transformed By Bridge | Flashback Miami”). In late 1951 Biscayne Key Estates subdivision rapidly became a community and the developers, the Mackle Co. Inc., appointed the first Beach club board (The Islander).



Left: 1952 Mackle Company Poster (“Key Biscayne To Westwood Lakes”, 1952).



Right: 1950 Island Paradise (“Key Biscayne To Westwood Lakes”, 1950).

In order to fulfill their promise of beach access for its residents, the Mackle Brothers had appointed the Beach Club board, but still had to buy beachfront property for the Club. Since their business model relied on speculative investments, they didn't have enough funds to purchase beachfront property that they could transform into their beach-access point (O'Brien). As a result, they had to go to the Investors Diversified Services (IDS) in Minnesota and ask for a loan to purchase the land from the Mathesons (O'Brien). In January 1952, IDS agreed to loan them the money and to lease the Club's present property to Key Biscayne for 99 years for \$1 a year. For 18 years, club managers had sent \$1 a year to IDS until they decided in 1971 to pay the outstanding balance of \$80, which clears them until 2051 (O'Brien). Upon expiration of the lease, the Club has the option to renew its long-term lease for the land with Ameriprise. While Key Biscayne Beach Club holds a long-term lease for the land from Ameriprise, the Club owns the building. The zoning restrictions only allows the use for water recreation and cannot be used for commercial or residential use (O'Brien).

On June 13, 1952, the club's 250 family members were then invited to the Club for a free wiener roast (The Islander). Historically, the Club hosted many social functions that were organized by both individual members and organizations. Many of the functions were reported in Key Biscayne's community newspaper, like annual Halloween parties, Presbyterian Church fundraisers and miscellaneous functions. Families gathered at the Club, and there were swimming lessons in the summer and regular sunday volleyball matches (The Islander). Some of the Key's social highlights included the 4th of July celebration and the Miss Key Biscayne divbeauty pageant, which took place at the Club (O'Brien). Coverage of some of the Club's events in local newspapers suggests the Club's central role in the community. For Key Biscayne natives, the Club has always been the pulse of Key Biscayne, with regular social events and gatherings (O'Brien).



*The Islander Newspaper's Front Page with Images of Social Life at the Beach Club (1967)*



### ***Notable Members***

In order to be a Beach Club Member, you have to own property on the island, pay an initiation fee, and an annual fee (O'Brien). Though the initial rates are unknown, today's initial membership fee is \$6000 with an annual fee of \$575 (O'Brien). Beach Club membership prerequisites have not changed since the Beach Club's founding in the 1950s.

When residents started to move into Key Biscayne in 1952, the Club had 250 family members (The Islander). However, not much is known about the Club's amenities or structure at that time. In 1958, the Club grew to 705 members, who contributed an extra \$75 from the year prior to help fund the construction of the present building (Sandpiper). In 1966, the Beach Club had 876 families (The Islander). According to the present Club Manager, Mike O'Brien, there have been around 700 family Club members for the past 30 years.

Key Biscayne's notable and affluent community is reflected in the Club's members. Some historic members include Miami Dolphins player Bob Griese and 7 generations of the Vernon family, whose popular drugstore in the Key was bought out by Eckerd. Jack Roland Murphy or "Murph the Surf", who was involved in the biggest jewel heist in American history at the American Museum of Natural History, also frequented the Beach Club and would regularly climb the palm trees (O'Brien).

Perhaps the most high profile Club Members were former President Richard Nixon and his friends. In late 1968, Richard Nixon became a Key Biscayne property owner (Greenhouse, Linda). He became a member of the Key Biscayne Beach Club in 1969. Charles G. (Bebe) Rebozo, one of Nixon's confidantes lived next door to Nixon and was a member of the Club from 1968-1974. Another Presidential friend named Robert Abplanalp bought property at 478 Bay Lane, and was also a member from 1970-1974. His property became Secret Service's Headquarters. This compound became known as the Winter White House, which Nixon would frequent throughout his tumultuous presidency.

A "Watergate" file in the Club's records includes a photo of Nixon at the Club and a congressional order for the President of the Beach Club to appear before the Senate Select Committee of Presidential Campaign Activities in 1974. This suggests the Club was involved during the Watergate scandal investigations and could be a place where Nixon and his confidantes discussed the break-in at the Democratic headquarters or was a place to which Nixon and his confidantes retreated.



Left Image: Photo taken in January 1965 Left to right: Mitzi Ward OConnell, “Bebe” Robozo, Nixon, Carl Roland Young (General Club Manager), & Maureen Mole (1965). Right Image: A copy of Rules of Procedure for the Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities found with a note with Lee Sheehy’s information (2017).

Evidence of past and present significant members can also be seen in the bricks that lie outside of the building. Current members include notable individuals, like movie director Andy Garcia and semi-retired Brazilian automobile racing driver Fitipaldi. Edgardo Defortuna, president of Fortune International Realty, and his family are also members of the Club. The Portelas, the Bustamantes and the Fischer families also have their names engraved in the bricks. The substantial number of engraved bricks with family names show community members’ connection to the Club. The consistent membership rate and use of the building as a recreational center shows how the building has become a center for Key Biscayne community life throughout the years.



Memory Bricks (2017).

## **IV. Architectural Information**

### **a. Description of Site**

The Key Biscayne Beach Club is located on the eastern coast of the Key. The entire lot size is 97,825 sq. ft, which is accessed through an entry driveway. There is a paved parking lot that lines the front of the building with a grassed area in between. Brick pavers create a path to the main entrance, where there is an American flag post. Some of these brick pavers have family members' names engraved on them. To the left of the path lays a historic ship anchor donated by the Key Biscayne Historic Society.

The interior of the beach club is around 4,600 Sq. Ft, while the beachfront/outdoor area is 10,000 Sq.Ft (O'Brien). The interior has large window openings with roll-down accordion shutters. To the south of the property, there is a patio with concrete picnic tables. The beach lies to the east of the building, which was built past today's coastal construction line. A low masonry wall laid out in a zig-zag path separates the outdoor paved patio with the sandy beachfront. To protect the Key Biscayne beach from erosion, the beach shore was restored for the first time in 1987. It has been restored 3 times since then.

### **b. Building & Features**

Once the Club Board approved Vernon J. Posey and Son's bid as the contractor company, the Beach Club's present building started going up Oct. 15th 1958 (Sandpiper). Herb Hoodwin, the coordinator between the contractors and architect, wanted to make the building as maintenance free as possible (The Sandpiper). Members discussed the building's design, and subsequently worked with Architect Robert Fitch Smith to come up with plans within budget (The Sandpiper). Robert Fitch Smith, who was the first Dean of the University of Miami's Department of Architecture. Smith also designed various other historic buildings like the Biscayne Plaza Shopping Center, Miami's first suburban strip shopping center; the University Baptist Church of Coral Gables; Shenandoah and Westminster Presbyterian Churches; North Hialeah Methodist Church; The Museum and Garden House at the Fairchild Tropical Garden; Bay Oaks Home for the Aged; and the National Register-listed "Thomas Arden "Doc" House" in South Miami (Historic and Environmental Preservation Board). Smith passed away in 1964, making the Beach Club among his later works.

The building doesn't exemplify one particular style, with functionality and longevity as a priority. It could be categorized as a vernacular style building, reminiscent of the Minimal Traditional style that emerged in the 1930s and 40s, blended with the horizontality and functional quality of the mid-century style architecture. Overall it is a simply, one-story building divided into distinct southern and northern wings. It is a low slung, one-story building made of concrete block, while the lavatories and kitchen are fully tiled. The southern wing has a flat roof that extends over a central walkway, connecting it to the northern wing. This portion is slightly taller with a central gable roof that extends into a flat roof that covers the club room. Wooden eaves overhang the roof on the exterior, providing some degree of shelter from the sun. The building originally had a "huge

screen and roofed area, a club room and office, outside showers, lavatories and a restaurant with a landscaped patio on the beach side” (The Sandpiper). The screened area was eventually enclosed in the 1960s, when Club members decided it would be more functional that way (The Islander).

### c. Interior

The floors in the club are the original terrazzo floors that were installed in 1958, which also have shuffleboards. While the marble chipped floors have seen 4 feet of sand after Hurricane Andrew in 1992, the floors are in very good condition with very few cracks.



*Terrazzo floors with shuffle boards (2017).*



*Left: Aerial photo taken after Hurricane Andrew (1992).  
Right: Photo of interior after Hurricane Andrew (1992)*

Other than the equipment, the kitchen has not been remodeled and contains original blue tiles from 1958. The porcelain water fountain is also original from 1958 and is still functional. Anecdotally, the fountain is said to be the first public water fountain in Key Biscayne (O'Brien).



*Left: Kitchen Tiles (2017). Right: Porcelain Water fountain (2017)*

#### **d. Exterior**

##### **Storage Unit**

What is now used as the Beach Club's general storage unit, was originally used to house a transformer during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. At that time, Mariel Curtis, the first woman Manager of the Key Biscayne Beach Club, was approached by the Navy for permission to build it. According to Mike O'Brien, the current manager, and other lifelong members of the Club, the Navy had asked other institutions on the Key for permission to build a shelter for the transformer, and Ms. Curtis of the Beach Club was the only one that accepted. The transformer was used to power Fowey Light, which ran a cable from the Beach Club to the lighthouse 6 miles away. Before the Navy removed the transformer from the unit in 1967, O'Brien removed the label that was attached to the transformer to keep for the Club records.



*Left Image: Storage unit on the left built in 1962 (2017). Right Image: Lead tag of the transformer that powered Fowey Light during the Cuban Missile Crisis (2017).*

## Anchor

In front of the building, there is an anchor which was donated by the Emmons family. The Emmons family lived on Key Biscayne and had this anchor displayed in front of their house on Harbor Drive and McIntyre Street. They acquired the anchor from a barge that was located on the backside of Key Biscayne (O'Brien). The anchor was found in El Salvador, and is believed to be from the 1800s because of its shape. After Mr. Emmons passed, it was moved to his son's house in Weston. It was then donated by his family to the Key Biscayne Historical & Heritage Society. It was placed in front of the Club in the 1980s and has since become a symbol for the Club and the various functions hosted there (O'Brien).



*Ship Anchor (2017).*

## Chickee Huts

The chickee huts have been in the Key Biscayne Beach Club's landscape since the 1960s. They are built with thatched palmetto leaves, and are supported by cypress poles. Today's huts are slightly damaged from Hurricane Irma, with the exception of those built by a Miccosukee company (O'Brien).



*Left Image: Chickee Huts in 1967 (The Islander). Right Image: Chickee Huts after Hurricane Irma (2017)*

### Parking Lot

The parking lot was paved in 1952 and has not changed since. The image below shows Beach Club to the right, with the same parking lot. Its surrounding area, however were still very much underdeveloped at the time, and one can still see vegetation where buildings stand today.



*Aerial Photo with the Beach Club to the right (1952).*

### III. Planning Context

#### Present Trends and Conditions:

The Beach Club continues to serve the community as a recreational facility and a gathering center, and has no intention of changing their purpose. Membership requisites have remained constant, ensuring that Club members are from the Key Biscayne community. The club's current 700 members use the facility to access the beach, play volleyball, and host events, like members have historically done. Despite its high risk location on the coastline, it has survived all hurricanes since 1958 with very little structural damage. The Beach Club remains one of the few construction projects from Key Biscayne's early beginnings and hopes to remain so.

### IV. Standards for Certificates of Appropriateness

Standards for Certificates of Appropriateness will follow the general guidelines as recommended for historic sites, as detailed in The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties as developed in 1992 and codified as 36CFR Part 68 in the July 12, 1995, Federal Register (Vol. 60, No. 133). However, ordinary maintenance and minor repairs/alterations will not be subject to review.

### V. Evaluation of Integrity & Criteria

The consultant has performed a site visit to photographically document the Key Biscayne Beach Club and has conducted research into the historic context of the site to evaluate the historic significance of the site. The Key Biscayne Beach Club maintains a high degree of its historic integrity. Alterations and improvements that have been undertaken since the original construction in 1958 have maintained the historic character-defining features, such as its layout, its spatial relationship to the ocean and beachfront, original building materials, wooden roof

eaves, terrazzo floors, and exterior patio features.

Further, the consultant has determined that the Key Biscayne Beach Club, located at 685 Ocean Drive, Key Biscayne, FL, meets three of the objective criteria for designation. This evaluation is based on the historic context and architectural and social qualities of the site, as the Club in the early social history of Key Biscayne, it is associated with persons significant in history, and is the work of a significant architect.

## VI. Contributing Features

All exterior façades of the building are contributing resources. Beyond the built structure, the outdoor patio area and associated masonry wall as well as the sandy beachfront with Chickee huts are integral to the historic character and setting of the Key Biscayne Beach Club. As such, these elements are considered contributing features. Any proposed alterations to features that contribute to the significance and integrity of the Key Biscayne Beach Club require submittal of a Certificate of Appropriateness.

## VII. Representative Photos



*Front Entrance (2017).*



*Driveway (2017).*



*Panorama taken towards North (2017)*





*Panorama taken towards West (2017)*



*Panorama taken towards West, closer to the structure (2017).*



*Panorama taken towards West, closer to the structure (2017).*



*Concession stand (2017).*



*Club Interior, looking East (2017).*

## VIII. References

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