

The Rich and Forgotten History of Black Coconut Grove podcast
Episode 1 transcript 10/18/2021

Rebecca Peterson:

Welcome to The Rich and Forgotten History of Black Coconut Grove, a podcast by Black Legacy Residents of Coconut Grove with Vizcaya Museum and Gardens that showcases how heritage is powerful and empowers us. In three episodes matriarchs will share their experiences in Coconut Grove, a small community in Miami, Florida, to demonstrate the strength and perseverance of the community and inspire listeners today and into the future.

My name's Rebecca Peterson, I'm the Community Programs Manager at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens in Miami, Florida. I'm one person on a team of people at the museum that's been working with matriarchs from Coconut Grove to uncover stories about people who may have worked at the estate more than 100 years ago.

It's important to say from the outset, Karen, Vizcaya's Archivist that we'll hear from in this episode, and I are White. Everyone else on this podcast is Black. We've been recording remotely together during the entire COVID 19 pandemic, which prevented us from being able to gather and record in person. Before we jump in, here's a little bit of background. Vizcaya was the winter estate of James Deering, a wealthy White Chicago born industrialist. But that's not Vizcaya's whole or only story, or even close to it.

To tell a more complete and deeper story, Vizcaya went to our neighbors in Coconut Grove, a community that predates the incorporation of the City of Miami and was founded in the late 1800s by Bahamian pioneers.

Karen Urbec:

The Grove.

Rebecca Peterson:

That's Karen Urbec, Vizcaya's Archivist. And another of the team at the museum working with the matriarchs from the Grove.

Karen Urbec:

Miamians have a habit of abbreviating the names of local neighborhoods. Coral Gables is referred to as the Gables, Miami Beach is referred to as the Beach and Coconut Grove is the Grove. The Grove was originally settled by Whites, but it wasn't long before Black Bahamians came to live and work in the area, contributing their knowledge of farming and building in a subtropical climate. It was these contributions from Black Bahamians that allowed Coconut Grove to thrive.

Rebecca Peterson:

In terms of climate and terrain, there were very few differences between the Grove and the Bahamas. This may have given confidence to newcomers. There were plenty of differences though,



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between the lived experience of Black Bahamians in The Bahamas and in Coconut Grove, in terms of social interactions and race relations. Here's Edwina Prime talking about her grandfather. Interestingly years after her grandfather visited the Grove Edwina herself, migrated to the US and still lives in Coconut Grove today.

Edwina Prime:

As a matter of fact, I've heard stories from my grandparents as to how they felt when they first came to America, starting in Key West, and then moving on up into the Miami area. And one of my grandfathers was so terrified after he got here, he just got on the boat and went back to Nassau, when he found out how people were being treated and so forth.

Rebecca Peterson:

Many of those Black Coconut Grove Bahamians worked at Vizcaya, supporting its construction and later its operation on the farm and in the gardens. Some of the people who live in the Grove today are descendants of those founding Bahamians and supported our process to uncover stories about those workers of the early 1900s. We started this work in 2019 with three matriarchs in the Grove. Here they are:

Leona Cooper Baker:

My name is Leona Louise Cooper Baker.

Carol Davis Henley Bird: Bird:

I'm Carol Ann Davis Henley Bird.

Edwina Prime:

I am Edwina Winifred Marie Davies Prime.

Rebecca Peterson:

In the process we learned the matriarchs are concerned that, and this is a quote, "Our story isn't being told and when it is, it's being told by someone else, and it's being told wrong." In response, together, we created a series of in-person events that were transitioned to this podcast after the onset of the pandemic. We also learned through those conversations that Coconut Grove is not about geography. "The Grove" refers to a specific community of people wherever they are.

Carol Davis Henley Bird:

In The Bahamas the economy had started to fail in the mid-1800s.

Rebecca Peterson:

That's Carol, one of the matriarchs, and she's the granddaughter of E.W.F. Stirrup a Bahamian pioneer of Coconut Grove.

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Carol Davis Henley Bird:

And so in order for more opportunity for jobs, not necessarily to stay, but to get monies to take back to their family, many of them migrated to Key West where things were booming, and they worked in the sponging industry. They were the shipwrecks and that's part of what they did in The Bahamas as well, until some law was passed that kept some of the shipwrecks from ending up near there. And they did various things that they could do.

Rebecca Peterson:

Some of those "various things" were taking the skills that they developed in The Bahamas and applying those skills to their new lives in the states. Here's Enid Curtis Pinkney.

Enid Pinkney:

My name is Enid Curtis Pinkney. I was born October 15th, 1931

Rebecca Peterson:

She's 90. And even though not a resident of Coconut Grove, she visited the community often and through her actions has become an important part of preserving Black history in Miami.

Enid Pinkney:

My father was a farmer in The Bahamas and a sponger. He used to dive for sponges. During that time that was supposed to be good money. There was a song out, *Sponger Money Never Dies*.

When he came to Miami, he didn't have any land to farm, so he went into gardening and because he knew about growing things and about the earth. So he went into gardening. Now my mother was a Clarke and her people were from Exuma and my great, great, great grandmother owned a lot of property in Exuma. They called it Clarke Land. And my mother used to talk about that all the time. She used to say that we own property from sea to sea, but it didn't register with me because by being born here, I couldn't see any Black people owning any oceanfront property.

Rebecca Peterson:

These Bahamians, whether they originally intended to stay or not, wanted a community to feel like and *be* home for themselves, for their future children, for their neighbors, because it wasn't every man alone; they wanted a community. They wanted to be part of a family, a village. For those newly arrived Bahamians community meant they looked after each other. It meant checking in on folks as you made your way home from work, or keeping an eye on kids who were out and about in the neighborhood, making sure that everyone was behaving themselves. Speaking with Karen, Vizcaya's Archivist, Iral Porter, Carol's sister and another of E.W.F. Stirrups granddaughters tells a story of an unofficial chaperone while a young couple took an evening stroll. For Iral, this is a demonstration of how tightknit the community was.

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Iral Porter:

We were a family, a village. And anybody, any adult, had the right to say something to a child if they were misbehaving. I've had the lady from across the street to come over in her bathrobe to send me in the house when I was standing out there talking with my boyfriend. Wasn't doing anything, just standing out there. And of course I went in the house because I knew that's what I'd better do. And the next morning her husband was over reporting that she had to send me in the house. And then we started walking down another street, Florida Avenue. And then Mr. Jackson, who lived on Florida would start walking the dog. So you knew that there were people who cared about you and were going to report to your family whatever you did.

Rebecca Peterson:

There are dozens of stories like this. Another one of the matriarchs, Leona, resident and Black Grove historian shared a story with me about a time on a bus with friends. One of the local girls got a little rude with another passenger and Leona recalls being scared. Here she is.

Leona Cooper Baker:

I don't even remember how the argument started, but there was this girl on the bus and she, what we call talking back. And she talked back to that lady, but let me tell you the joke about it, Rebecca. I was so scared. Why was I so scared? Because there were two ladies on that bus going to work, doing the day's work wherever, like my mama did only mama went in another section of Coral Gables, but they lived in my neighborhood. One lady's name was Ms. Carter. And the other lady's name was Rosalie Bethel. I remember them disliking that. And I said, "Oh my God." I told my girlfriend, I said, "When I get home, what I'm going to do is to tell mama what happened." I figured that was my way out, because I knew they were going to tell mama that I was with this group of girls. Okay.

Rebecca Peterson:

The Grove community was looking out for more than just children behaving properly. There are also stories of the community coming together when someone was in need. The story that comes to mind is about Uncle Yankee, as he was known. This is a longer story because this is exactly how stories happen. A group of people sitting around together reminiscing, sharing their individual stories, which are wrapped up in the story of the larger community. We're lucky to have this one and it's only because Leona, who we just heard, thought documenting stories of the people in her community was important. And in the 1980s, she started making cassette and VHS recordings of community stories told in her living room, specifically for the purpose of preserving them. One of those tea parties, as Leona calls them, is where this next clip comes from.

Rebecca Gibson:

I had to come home and look after my father. So that was the last of me going to school. Along came Mr. Ruben Gibson.

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Rebecca Peterson:

This is Rebecca Gibson, affectionately known as "Becca Mama." In the recording Leona introduces Becca Mama with reference. She says, "we are extremely proud of Becca Mama because she's one of the first people to have moved into this area where I was born and raised." In the recording, Leona calls Becca Mama, "our special historian," and says that Becca Mama is the one they call whenever there's a question about the history of the community. Here Becca Mama is talking about going back and forth between college and tending to her parents while they were ill, before she moves into the story about uncle Yankee.

Rebecca Gibson:

So that was the last of me going to school. Along came Mr. Ruben Gibson and he told me a lot of fancy stories. So I felt so sorry for him. I decided that I would try to make his life a happy life. And so anyway, we married and when we were married almost a year, that Christmas he went visiting, like people used to do in those days on Christmas morning, they went dressed and went around in the neighborhood to their friends to greet them, say Merry Christmas to them. And when he came back, he was quite upset. Wondered why. He said, "Do you know..." There was an old man, Uncle Yankee, we used to call him. That was his nickname. He had lived in Key West for many, many years and he was a sponger. So this he continued to do until he was not a young man anymore, but he heard about Coconut Grove. He left Key West, came up to Coconut Grove to work. They said there was lots of building and all that going on.

Well, Uncle Yankee, he so sick he wasn't able to continue working. He married this lady, and she came with him and brought her granddaughter. And she was going to put her granddaughter through school here in the Grove. Well, after Uncle Yankee couldn't work she packed her back and her granddaughter's bag. And they went to Palm Beach to stay where her daughters were. So he was left in the house all alone, depending on what the neighbors would do for him. And people would cook, and they would give him and all that sort of stuff and they would bathe him. And that's what they did in those days. Whether you had family or what, they would all get together and take care of you.

Rebecca Peterson:

Becca Mama's parents came to the Grove in the early 1900s because they were invited, essentially, to keep company with a, another resident during her first pregnancy in the states. After the birth of the baby, Becca Mama's parents stayed and became part of the community that would later grow into something like we heard about with Uncle Yankee. Stories of the community coming together to support each other. Here's Carol again, talking about her grandfather E.W.F. Stirrup who's one of the community's founders.

Carol Davis Henley Bird:

My grandfather's mother died when he was around nine or 10. And he was being raised by his White father and relatives, more as a laborer. And so he actually decided at 15 that he needed to go to Key West and seek out this opportunity he had heard about it. Plus, I'm

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sure he was driven because he really had not had much of a family life, no one really to look after and care about what he felt about. And so he worked long enough, got tired of paying his relatives certain amount of money, I guess, for the jobs he did. And he eventually went back and got his sweetheart, which is what a lot of Bahamians did, even once they got to the Grove. They went back to a sweetheart that they had before the age of 15, married her, brought her over here and came up to the pineapple fields and then eventually to Coconut Grove.

But in achieving his wealth, the beginning of it was that in that time many of the homesteaders, who were White, had a lot of land because of the Homestead Act, but no money. So they paid in land and that's how he first started getting some of his land. And then later on, he himself bought actual lots. And he was driven to be successful and to start his family and make sure his family had a home and everything. And he worked the land at night, his land, and he worked other people's land in the daytime and constantly accumulating. And as a measure, I don't think he planned to become wealthy, that wasn't his plan. His plan was to be able to provide for his family and have a family that he didn't have. And that's why once he started building houses, he felt that every Bahamian family should have their own house, a garden, a yard; that was important to him.

Rebecca Peterson:

Ebenezer Woodbury Franklin Stirrup Sr. was born in 1873, in The Bahamas, out of wedlock. Stirrup's mother was a Black Bahamian and his father, a White European. Stirrup made his fortune amassing land, first his payment, and then purchasing on his own. Over the course of his life he built over 100 houses to rent or sell and never foreclosed on anyone. Stirrup lost a lot of valuable land and cash during the Great Depression, but died with 317 parcels of land still in his possession. This accomplishment is all the more impressive given segregation, which was in full effect throughout his lifetime. Here's Leona talking about Stirrup and his granddaughter, Carol, who we've heard from, but Leona calls her Carol Ann.

Leona Cooper Baker:

Well, my story is different than what Carol Ann has, because Carol Ann's background is different because of her granddaddy, who made provisions for. And that's why I've always respected them so much. And I always talk about her family, the Stirrup family, because he had a vision to buy up property and he helped so many other Bahamian people to be encouraged, to get them to work and try to save a little bit. So you could finally buy and own a house. So that's how a lot of us in the Grove made it, and our parents. And I knew Rebecca, that I wasn't going to do housework all of my life. Okay. I knew that wasn't going to happen for me. And when people would come home who did domestic work, like my mom did, and they would tell about what the rich White folks' children had done. And she'd say, "See, you all got to think like that too."

Rebecca Peterson:

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Before we dig into more stories, the matriarchs asked us to make sure that the stories shared and the picture those stories painted didn't make it seem like Blacks and Whites were at odds all the time because cooperation happened between Blacks and Whites. It just happened less frequently. Actually race dynamics, when they weren't being explicitly spoken about, were an undercurrent during all of the interviews for this podcast and in our conversations generally, with the matriarchs and community members in the Grove. Thelma Anderson Gibson shares a story about her father who was very light skinned, being able to go where other Blacks couldn't. She giggles as she remembers him buying ice cream for his kids who had darker complexions. Take a listen.

Thelma Anderson Gibson:

So when I came up in Coconut Grove it was called Colored Town, we had Colored Town and White Town. Everything was separate. And I was reared in a small house on Charles Avenue, 3382 Charles Avenue, which had just three rooms in the hallway. It had a big front porch, which served as our living room, and a little back porch. We had no running water and no electricity. So we studied by a lamp light, did everything by lamp light.

What's an interesting thing, my father was a very light skinned person, was able to go into places that his children couldn't go into. So we used to laugh every now and then we'd get a chance to skate up to White Town. And the theater, the playhouse house was right there on the corner. And there was a drug store. And my father would go in and buy ice cream and bring it out to his little colored children. And we would laugh, "Oh, they don't know Pop is colored." They didn't know Pop was colored so he could go into places that we can go into.

Leona Cooper Baker:

Also, there was a thing about the water fountains. I remember that very clearly, there were hard times. There were hard times. And then I always remember people saying, and they still say it now. They would drink the water to see if it tasted the same. I say, "Yeah." It tasted the same to you, but you could still drink from both fountains, but I couldn't. I could only drink from one and you could from mine and yours. So there was still a difference.

Rebecca Peterson:

This difference played a part, and still plays a part, in the perception of Blacks, both for those who are not Black and for Blacks themselves. Here's Carol again, talking about the lasting impacts of segregation.

Carol Davis Henley Bird:

I can tell you this as well. This is the one thing that segregation did, is that as long as you kept us separate, it's easy to convince everybody that we are inferior. And as much pumping up and stuff that your teachers do for you to say, "You're great," and whatever. If you've never competed, and you still hear this other voice telling you, "You are inferior."

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Rebecca Peterson:

It's interesting, Carol. I thought when you said, by keeping us separate, it's easier to make everybody believe that we are inferior, that the "everybody" was referring to White people, and that's not where you were headed.

Carol Davis Henley Bird:

No, we feel that way as well. I didn't go around feeling that I was inferior to Whites, but it does make you apprehensive.

Rebecca Peterson:

Next time on The Rich and Forgotten History of Black Coconut Grove we'll dig into more about the accomplishments of Black Bahamians, despite the obstacle of segregation and its lasting impacts. We'll meet more of the matriarchs and residents, and learn how sharing their stories of achievements and perseverance lifts them up and changes the pattern of self-doubt for future generations.

Edwina Winifred Marie Davies Prime passed on September 8th, 2021 in the home that she shared with her husband, Carl, where they raised their family together. She was surrounded by her children, Carl, Winifred and Edwin. Edwina was a valued member, not only of her community in which she served several leadership roles, such as president of the Lola B. Walker Homeowners Association for the last 13 years, but also of this team.

She joined the very first meeting with Vizcaya and the two other anchor matriarchs, Leona and Carol. And we've appreciated getting to know her, to befriend her and to hear her stories over the years. Her passing is a great loss to us all and we are inspired by her example to continue gathering and sharing all of our stories.

The Rich and Forgotten History of Black Coconut Grove was created by:

Edwina Prime:

Edwina Winifred Marie Davies Prime.

Leona Cooper Baker:

Leona Louis Cooper Baker.

Carol Davis Henley Bird:

Carol Ann Davis Henley Bird

Wendy Wolf:

Wendy Wolf. I'm Deputy Director for Learning and Community Engagement at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens.

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Diana Peña:

Diana Peña, School Programs Manager

Remko Jansonius:

Remko Jansonius. I'm the Deputy Director for Collections and Curatorial Affairs at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens.

Karen Urbec:

Karen Urbec. And I'm the Archivist and Digital Collection Specialist at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens.

Rebecca Peterson:

I'm your host, Rebecca Peterson. And production was generously funded by Cathy L. Jones.