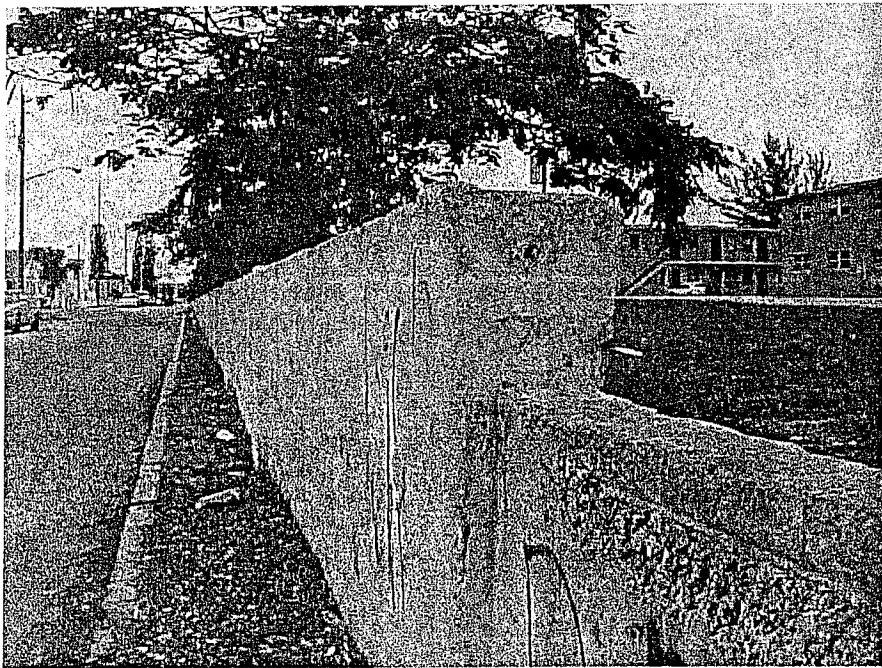

LIBERTY SQUARE WALL FRAGMENT

Northwest 12th Avenue

Northwest 62nd Street to 67th Street

Designation Report



City of Miami

REPORT OF THE CITY OF MIAMI
PRESERVATION OFFICER
TO THE HISTORIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION BOARD
ON THE POTENTIAL DESIGNATION OF THE
"LIBERTY SQUARE WALL FRAGMENT"
AS A HISTORIC SITE

Prepared by Timothy A. Barber, Black Archives and
Research Foundation, Consultant, with
Ellen J. Uguccione

Approved by Kathleen Slesnick Kauffman
Preservation Officer

Passed and
Adopted on December 05, 2006

Resolution No. HEPB-2006-99

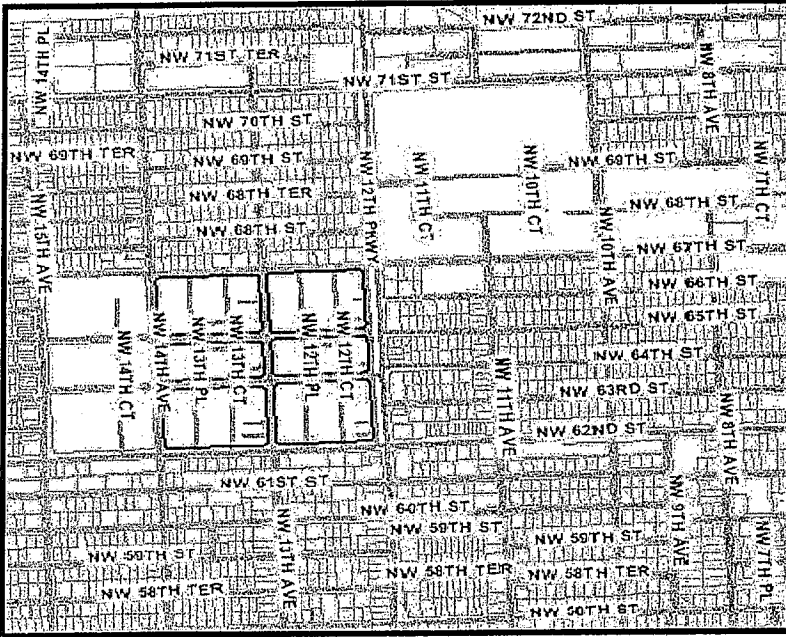
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LIBERTY SQUARE WALL FRAGMENT

Northwest 12th Avenue

Northwest 62nd Street to 67th Street



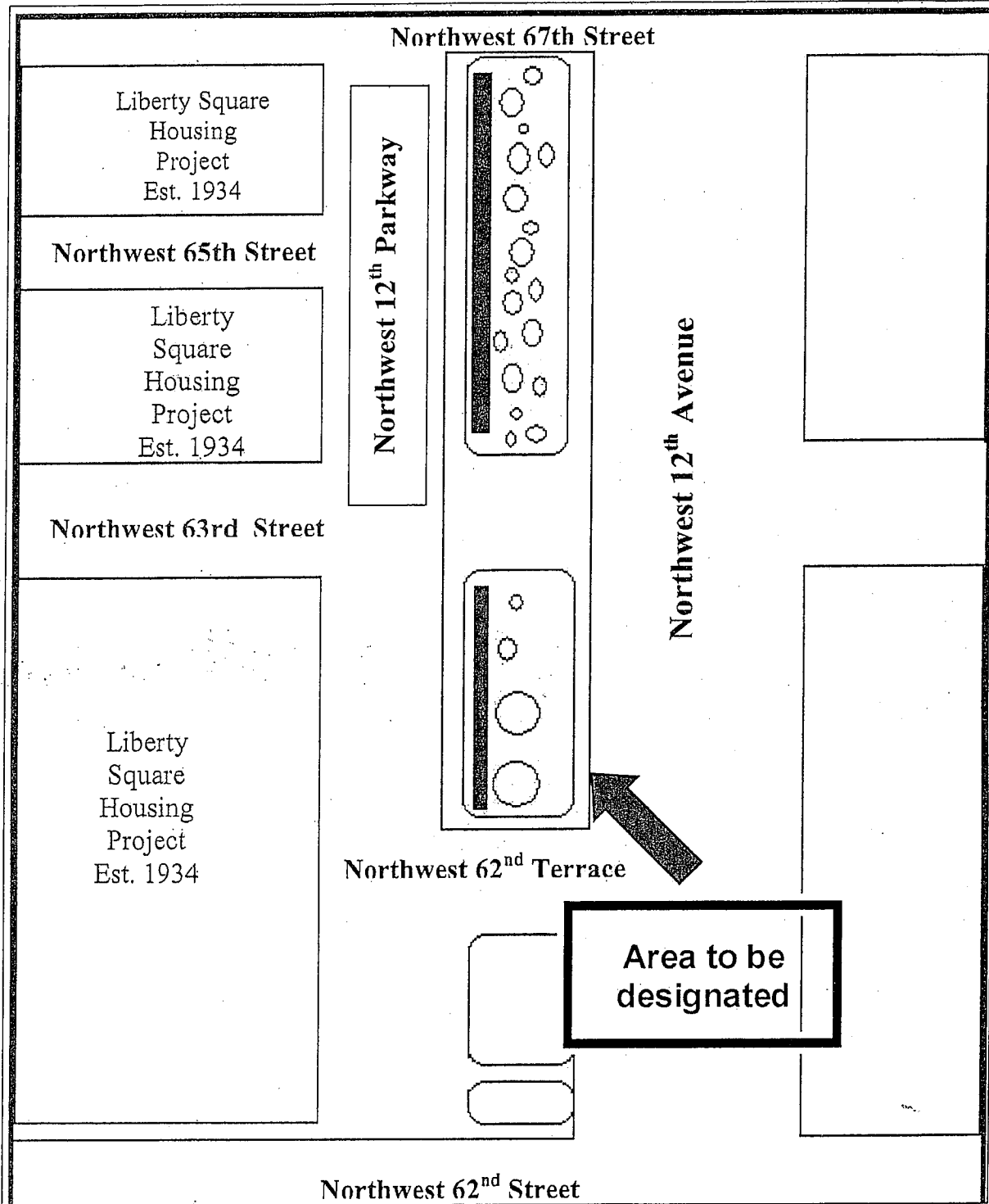
Location




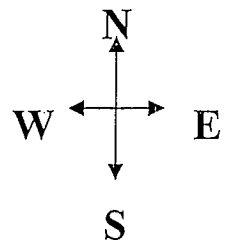
Site plan

Detailed Map

Northwest 12th Avenue between Northwest 62nd to 67th Streets



 The Liberty Square Wall Footprint



I. General Information

Type of Resource:

Wall fragment

Historic Name:

None

Current Name:

Liberty Square Wall
Model City Wall
The Wall

Dates of Construction:

c.1938

(Date the first section of the Liberty Square complex was completed)

Location:

Public Right-of-Way
NW 12th Avenue between NW 62nd and NW 67th Streets

Present Owner:

The wall is in the Public-Right-of-Way
and is under the jurisdiction of the City of Miami's
Public Works Department.

Zoning

Adjacent to
5000-Multi-Family; High Density Residential

Boundary Description of HC Zoning District:

The Public Utility Tract of Public Housing Projects Florida 5-2 and 5-3, according to the Plat thereof, as recorded in Plat Book 53, Page 71, of the Public Records of Miami-Dade County, Florida.

Classification:

Historic Landmark

II. SIGNIFICANCE

Specific Dates: Late 1930's

Architects: Not applicable

Builder/Contractor: Unknown

Statement of Significance:

The wall in Liberty City was built in the late 1930s in connection with the construction of the Liberty Square housing development, Florida's first government-subsidized public housing complex. It functioned as a barrier, separating the newly established African-American neighborhood on the west side of N.W. 12th Avenue, from the already established white neighborhood on the east side. This concrete barrier remained for many years as a result of the "Jim Crow" era which haunted American history over the years. The seven foot wall was eventually demolished, and what remain today are the remnants of the structure running along a median that separates N.W. 12th Avenue from N.W. 12th Parkway.

Over the years the greater Miami area has undergone substantial change as farm and timber lands were converted into residential subdivisions. In northwest Miami, previously characterized by pineland, the area was first home to a primarily white population, and then shifted to a primarily African-American enclave. This area, which became known as "Liberty City" (an area city planners now call "Model City"¹), is generally bounded by Northwest 17th and 19th Avenues and 62nd to 71st Street.

In the 1920s, white communities developed in areas east of Northwest 12th Avenue and south of 62nd Street simultaneously. Floyd Davis, a white landowner, platted the lots and constructed moderately priced housing to attract the white middle-class. Davis later hired Alonzo Kelly, an African-American, to sell lots to African-Americans, and by the beginning of the 1930s, this northwestern "suburb" was a thriving middle class white neighborhood with a relatively small African-American population.

African-Americans had bought land and built many homes within the boundaries allotted to them in the Liberty City area. So in the mid 1930s, when the federal government proposed to build a public housing project, they chose to build the housing project on the border of the already established African-American settlement in the Liberty City area. The project was designed to relieve the

¹ The characterization of the area as "Model City" occurred at about the same time as President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty." The Model Cities program he initiated sought to bring physical and social changes to impoverished areas throughout the nation.

extremely crowded conditions in Overtown (originally called "Colored Town"), which was set aside in Miami's original charter (1896) as the one area for African-Americans to settle.

The Building of Liberty Square

By 1930, the census recorded 25,116 residents living in Overtown's 343 acres. Housing conditions for many were dismal, and accounts from the period claimed "...there are from three to fifteen shacks on a city lot of 50'x 150'." Largely as a result of health concerns, public housing proponents successfully promoted the construction of Liberty Square, Florida's first public-housing project and the first in the nation constructed exclusively for African-Americans.

Initial funding for the project was through the Works Progress Administration, to be built on government-owned land bounded by N. W. 62nd Street on the north, 12th Avenue on the west, 15th Avenue on the east and N. W. 67th Street on the south. When this vacant, wooded area was cleared for the project's construction, the buffer of land previously separating an occupied white area of Liberty City along the eastside of Northwest 12th Avenue from those African-Americans already occupying the west side (which had grown to include Northwest 15th Avenue) was eliminated.

Liberty Square was a model for multi-family housing and was designed by noted local architects Phineas Paist, Vladimir R. Virrick, C. Sheldon Tucker, Harold D. Steward, Walter C. DeGarmo, and E. L. Robinson. Printed materials noted that residents would have such modern amenities as hot and cold water, electric lights, a private bathroom, built-in refrigerators and kerosene stoves. Perhaps more importantly, the design insured that there was plenty of open space, with only one quarter of the site given over to the building footprints.

Liberty Square was intended to be self-sustaining. The plan, which was monumental in its size, included provision for several stores, swimming pools and a community center housing an auditorium and library. Working class families flocked to Liberty Square, and there was a great pride of ownership. When Liberty Square was first built, city bus service did not extend out that far, so the complex operated its own jitney service to transport residents to their jobs in the city.

The first residents moved into the complex in early 1937. On September 3, 1937, the Housing Authority of the City of Miami, Florida was created, and charged with the administration and funding of housing for the less-fortunate. The first addition to the complex was opened in June, 1940, and a second addition opened in August of that same year. The complex now had a total of 925 one, two and three bedroom apartments.

A Racial Backlash: The Creation of a Barrier

Not every one was happy about this new housing complex. Because this was a time in the history of the United States when African-Americans and whites were

segregated both by law and custom, white residents protested the proposed location because it infringed on the invisible, but ethnically known boundary line for the area. The Liberty Square project drew upon an undisguised racism among the city's decision-makers. It also generated several decades of racial tension in the northwest area. "Oh, they made a big fuss about that," Duncumbe said of an irate white community. "They said, "they (the government) might build it, but they (blacks) would never live in it." (*The Miami Times*, 13 May 1976. p. 2)

Because of opposition from white neighbors on the eastside of 12th Avenue, a wall was built to separate the two neighborhoods. At that time for African-Americans, Liberty City was restricted to NW 61st Street to 74th Street and from "The Wall" to Northwest 22nd Avenue. "The Wall," as it was known by most African-Americans then, was at Northwest 12th Avenue, extending from 62nd Street to 67th Street. It was built with city funds to appease the white opposition by separating the new African-American community from the white communities just east of it.

While no documentation has been located for the construction of the wall itself, residents who lived in the area recall the erection of the wall simultaneously with the housing project. The Liberty Square project had been heralded as the largest housing project in the south and the most beautiful in the country. However, Liberty Square was surrounded by a six-foot stone wall. (*The Crisis*, 49, March, 1949,87). The wall stood as a physical and mental barrier to African-Americans to keep out of the white areas. For the black community, the wall became a source of tension, and for the whites, it stood as a safe guard against blacks invading their neighborhood. Residents remember the height of the wall being too high to even look over into the neighboring communities from either side.

In the 1950's, a mass departure of white residents began due to the racial tension in the neighborhoods, and culminating with the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the African-American community began to grow in the Liberty City area. It was during this period that the demographics of this area received its strongest shift. With this major change in the ethnicity of the Liberty City area, the need for a racially motivated physical barrier was no longer needed. It is believed that it was during the tenure of Miami Mayor Maurice Ferre's term that "The Wall" came down. Only a fragment (the subject of this nomination) of the wall remains as silent witness to an era of intolerance and racial hostilities.

Relationship to Criteria for Designation:

The Wall has significance in the historical heritage of the City of Miami; possesses integrity of design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association; and is eligible for designation under the following criteria:

1. The site of a historic event with significant effect upon the community, city, state, or nation.

The Liberty Square Wall reflects a time in United States history when African-Americans and whites were separated by laws and customs. This wall fragment is a visible reminder to the community, city, state, and nation that at one time in the nation's history, separation of the races was lawful and a matter of course. This remnant of the "Liberty Square Wall" is a tangible symbol of the pervasive discrimination once commonplace in America. The wall is not to be celebrated, but remembered as a testament to the many who fought against the hatred borne of segregation, and whose perseverance ultimately saw the world change for the better.

2. Exemplifies the historical, cultural, political, economical, or social trends of the community.

The Liberty Square Wall is a testament to the changing social, historical and cultural traditions in an area that transitioned from timberland, to a pervasively white community, to a largely African-American population. The construction of The Liberty Square Wall, which culminated in its eventual removal serves as witness to America's evolving race relations. What was once a social barrier is now a social reminder of the struggle for equality which affected so many lives.

III. Present and Original Appearance

Originally, the Liberty Square Wall is said to have been almost seven feet (7') in height and was flanked by tall Australian pine trees. Currently, fragments of the Liberty Square Wall span from Northwest 62nd Terrace to 67th Street. On the east side of the wall, there is a difference in height of approximately one foot, due to the higher elevation of the ground on the east. On the west side of the wall, the ground elevation is much lower but is consistent along its span. The height of the wall varies along the western span two to three feet in some areas. The wall is constructed of concrete and has a consistent width of between eight and ten inches along the length of the structure.

IV. Planning Context

Ordinarily, the statements contained in the planning context are related to possible incentives that often take the form of tax consequences. However, in this unusual case where the type of resource is not a building associated with human habitation, those incentives are not operative.

Rather, there is an opportunity for the Liberty Square Wall Fragment to serve some educational benefit, reminding others of the heroic struggle and the evolution of race relations within this community. As such, a commemorative plaque, incorporating a narrative, would be most suitable at this location.

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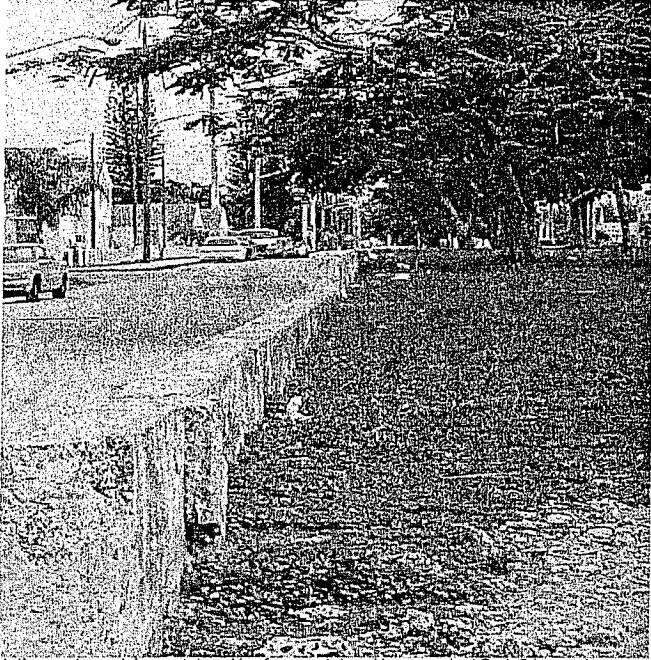
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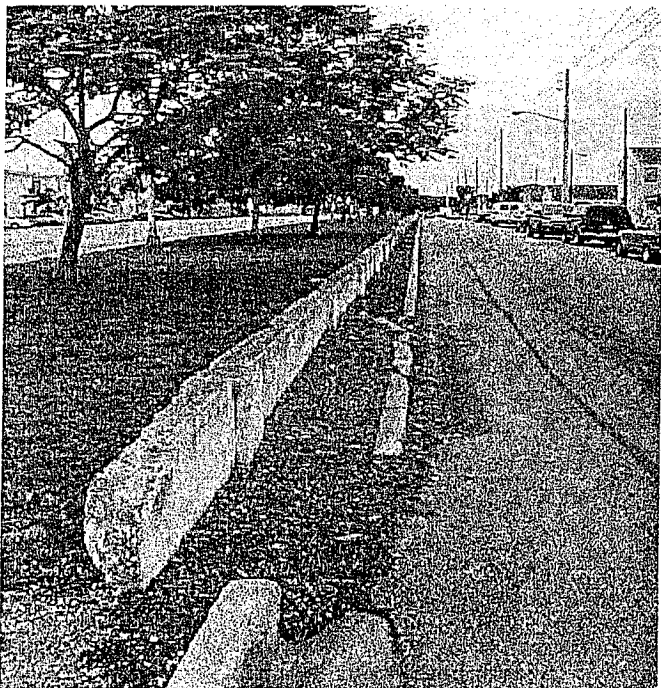
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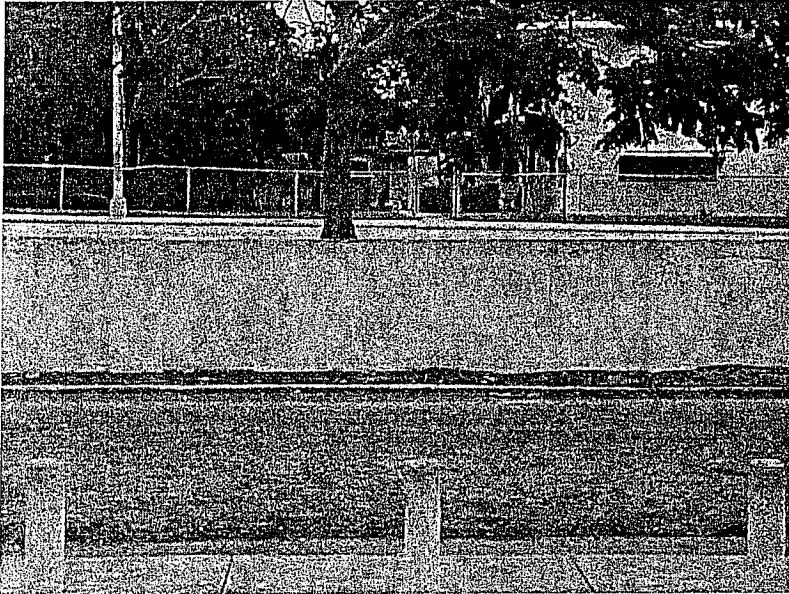
PHOTOGRAPHS



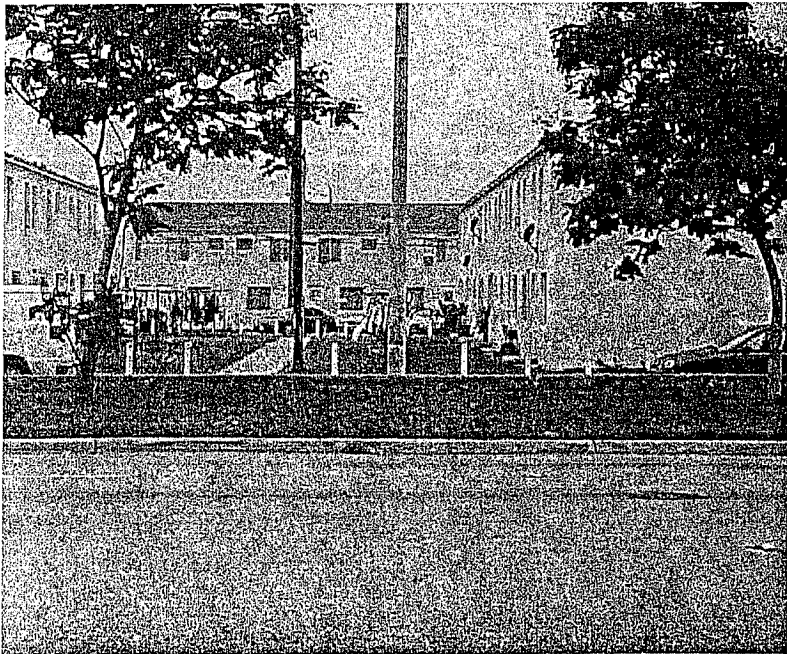
View Looking North from Northwest 63rd Street
The Black Archives, History & Research Foundation
of South Florida, Inc, June 2005



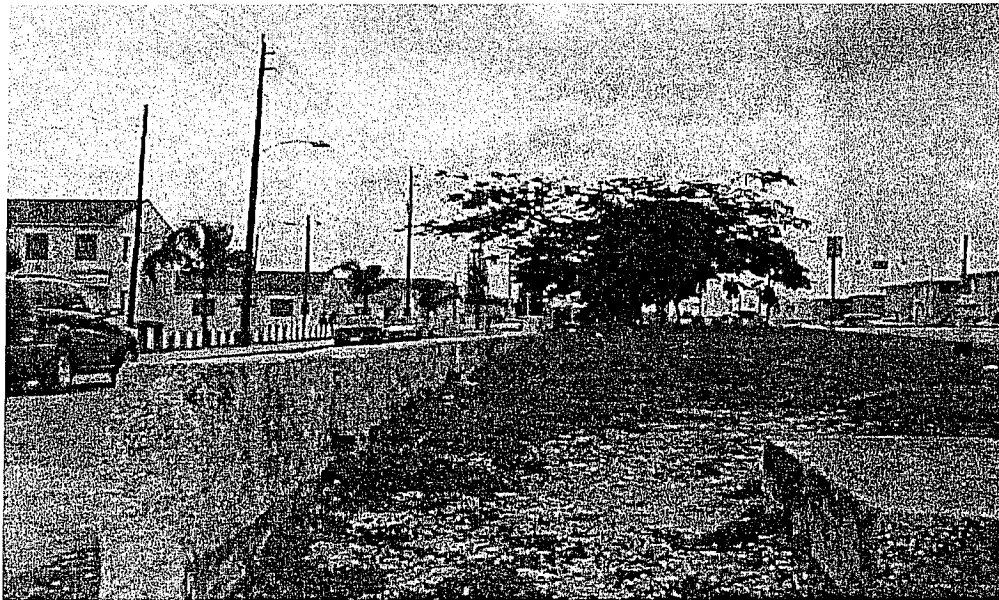
View Looking South from Northwest 67th Street
The Black Archives, History & Research Foundation
of South Florida, Inc, June 2005



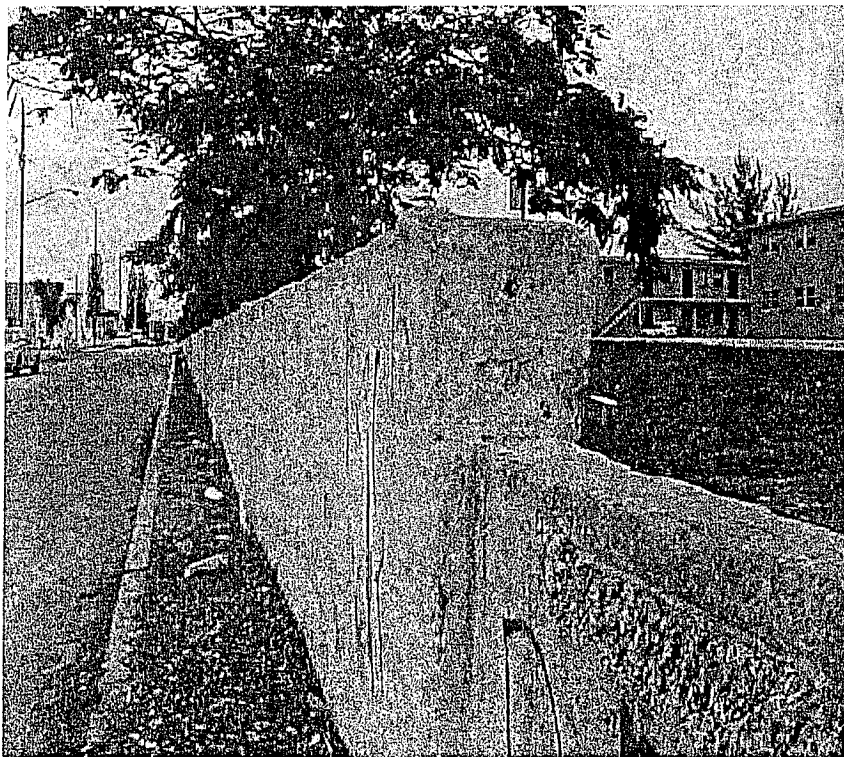
View Looking East
The Black Archives, History & Research Foundation
of South Florida, Inc, June 2005



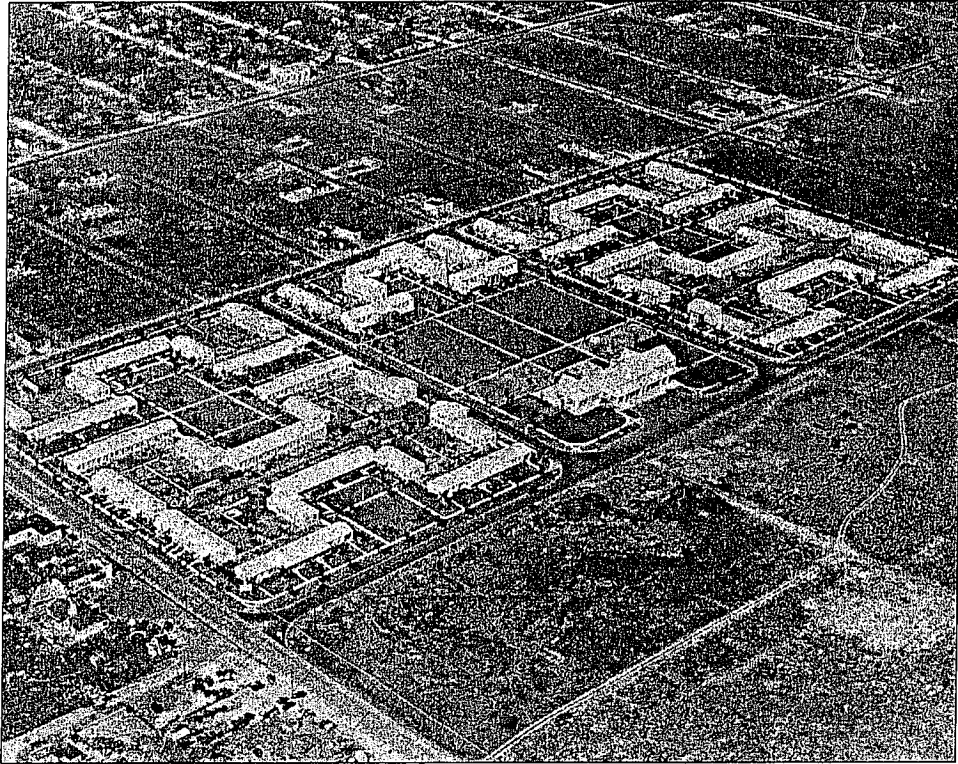
View Looking West from Northwest 12th Avenue
The Black Archives, History & Research Foundation
of South Florida, Inc, June 2005.



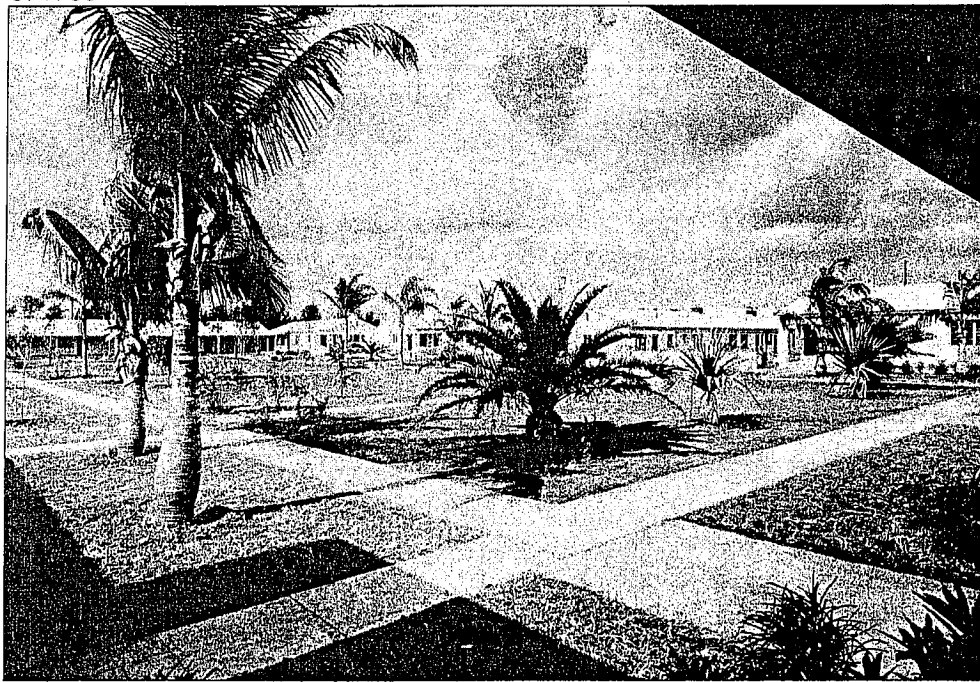
East side of wall, View Looking Northwest from 63rd Street
The Black Archives, History & Research Foundation
of South Florida, Inc, June 2005



West side of wall, View looking northeast from 63rd Street
The Black Archives, History & Research Foundation
of South Florida, Inc, June 2005



Aerial View of the Liberty Square Housing Project
Courtesy, The Historical Museum of Southern Florida, Miami News Collection
c. 1938



Detail, Liberty Square Housing Project
Courtesy, Historical Museum of Southern Florida, Miami News Collection
1940