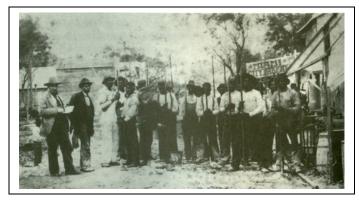


What's So Important About Overtown?

Overtown is one of Miami's oldest communities born before the City of Miami was founded. Henry Flagler, oil magnate turned railroad man, almost single-handedly brought development to Florida by establishing the first statewide transportation system, the Florida East Coast Railroad. But Flagler did not lay the railroad tracks, build the hotels that dotted the landscape from St. Augustine to Key West nor construct Miami's highways and byways. Blacks from the Bahamas, Georgia and other parts of the South did. The historic town of Overtown was the primary place they lived, which due to their hard work, became transformed into a bustling community, yet it struggled under the weight of racial hatred and oppression. Overtown rose to become the cornerstone of Black progress while reflecting the nature of race relations at the turn of the last century and beyond.

How Was Overtown Born?

Southern Blacks began arriving into South Florida en masse after the devastating freeze of the 1890s that wiped out farming in the region. Similarly, the Bahamian economy was collapsing as a result of overplanting, bringing a wave of Bahamians to Florida looking for work.



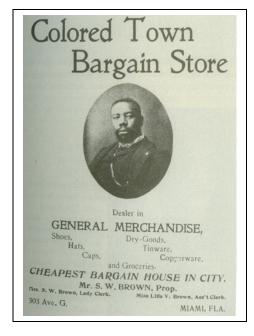
Some of Colored Town's original black founders.

The black community was called Colored Town (although other smaller communities also existed such as Coconut Grove.) Flagler designated the northwest corner of each of the cities he built to become the black living quarters

so that he had a ready source of labor to build his hotels, who could be separated from the white population after working hours.

Colored Town was a crowded, harsh place to live, deprived of even the most basic services, resulting in diseases such as yellow fever and smallpox running rampant.

Thriving Business Community



One of the more successful businesses in Colored Town owned by S.W. Brown. .

Despite these conditions, Colored Town became a leading center of black commerce. D.A. Dorsey became Miami's first black millionaire by building houses for the local black population and starting the first black bank. Besides a plethora of family-owned businesses, a growing black professional community was established which included doctors, dentists, and hospitals. The community also had seven black newspapers and over a dozen community organizations including the Eastern Star Lodge, the Masons, the Elks, the Odd Fellows and more.

Transportation blossomed along the heart of Colored Town, Second and Third Avenues, where automobiles, bicycles, horse-drawn carriages and wagons moved people and wares across the community. The church community provided not

only a spiritual connection for blacks, but also a foundation for social and political activism as well as a source of public welfare.

The Harlem of the South

Most prominent in Colored Town was its entertainment palaces led by the Lyric Theater, which featured vaudeville, music, silent movies and more. Other venues included the Rockland Palace, the Harlem Square Club, the Cotton Club, the Ritz Theater, the Mary Elizabeth Hotel, the Sir John and many more. These clubs and theaters featured the greatest artists of



The Lyric Theater, one of Overtown's premiere venues.

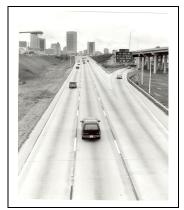
their day including Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, James Brown, Billie Holiday, and Cab Calloway to name a few. This entertainment served as a source of pride for the community but also directly related to entertainment serving the larger white community. Black entertainers who performed for the white community were not allowed to stay on Miami Beach or in traditional hotels, so they performed first for the white community and then in Colored Town, often for free, before getting some shuteye at a hotel in Overtown.

Racism Raises Its Ugly Head

Lynchings were not a rare occurrence in the black community. The Klan formally arrived in Miami in the 1920s, fomenting mob action against blacks, using dynamite to blow up homes, and running blacks out of town through force of violence. The police were not friends of the black community either. Many were from the South where attitudes concerning blacks were mixed at best. Blacks were routinely locked up under dubious vagrancy laws, outright torture was practiced against black prisoners including the use of electric chairs, and occasionally police officers committed murder against the black population with impunity.

The End of an Era

In the 1950s plans were laid to build an extension to Interstate 95. Although



I-95 changed the face of Overtown forever.

several alternatives existed, the chamber of commerce and the road department decided to build the expressway running through Overtown. With urban renewal and expressway construction, over 20,000 blacks lost their homes and a bustling black community lost its footing. What wasn't taken by the construction of the roadway was taken through urban renewal, which for many blacks resulting in their removal from the community.

Overtown today is not dead. Although the population is substantially smaller today than during its heyday, it faces a new threat, gentrification. During the building boom of the mid 2000s, tens of thousands of condos were planned in and around Overtown. Substantially all of the new homes were well above the

affordability threshold of most Overtowners. In fact, the City of Miami was demolishing more affordable housing units than it was building despite the millions of dollars allocated for this purpose.

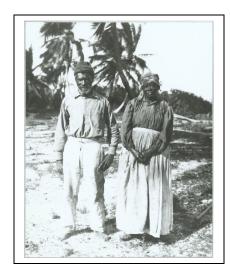
With today's building bust, the black community is seeking creative solutions to solve their housing crisis. Some are working with government officials to insure that money allocated for housing projects goes to low cost housing. Others are organizing to seek alternative avenues of housing for the poor and homeless including organizations such as *Take Back the Land* and the *Miami Workers Center*.

Whatever the solutions will be, Overtowners will need a strong voice so that history does not repeat itself and the community once again fights for its heart and soul.



Power U Center for Social Changes works to organize the community.

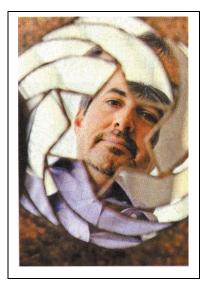
Why Should We Remember Overtown?



Overtown is the epitome of every city in America. Built by invisible workers who worked for subsistence wages while being forced to live in squalor while the larger city prospered. Yet despite the deprivation or maybe because of it, Overtown became a bustling center of black life for over half a century, and many Overtown residents hope its final chapter has not yet been written. Understanding the history and heritage, culture and contributions of Overtown as part of our collective history enriches us all. We share the joys of all that was accomplished and to learn from mindless hate that too often colors

relations between men. The more we learn from our collective history, the better chance our children and grandchildren can build a future that values and enriches our shared journey...

ABOUT THE PRODUCER/DIRECTOR



David Weintraub has been a cultural preservationist for two decades as founder and director of the *Dora Teitelboim Center for Yiddish Culture* and founder of the newly established *Center for Cultural Preservation*. *Golden Side of the Tracks* is his third documentary film, chronicling the lost culture and heritage of American cities and working to create memory projects that support community organizing efforts to revitalize residents' connection to their history.

Weintraub has published thirteen books, produced dozens of cultural programs from art exhibitions to concerts and children's programs to vaudeville. He has

worked as a community organizer, civil rights attorney (he is licensed in five jurisdictions) and as a filmmaker. His first film, *Where Neon Goes to Die*, about the lost Yiddish community of South Beach, won awards and international acclaim.

Weintraub currently runs an environmental advocacy organization in Western North Carolina working to protect its sensitive natural heritage against rampant development. In his "spare time" he is working on a fourth film about southern Appalachian traditions and culture.

Contact: Center for Cultural Preservation, PO Box 1066, Flat Rock, NC 28731 www.saveculture.org