

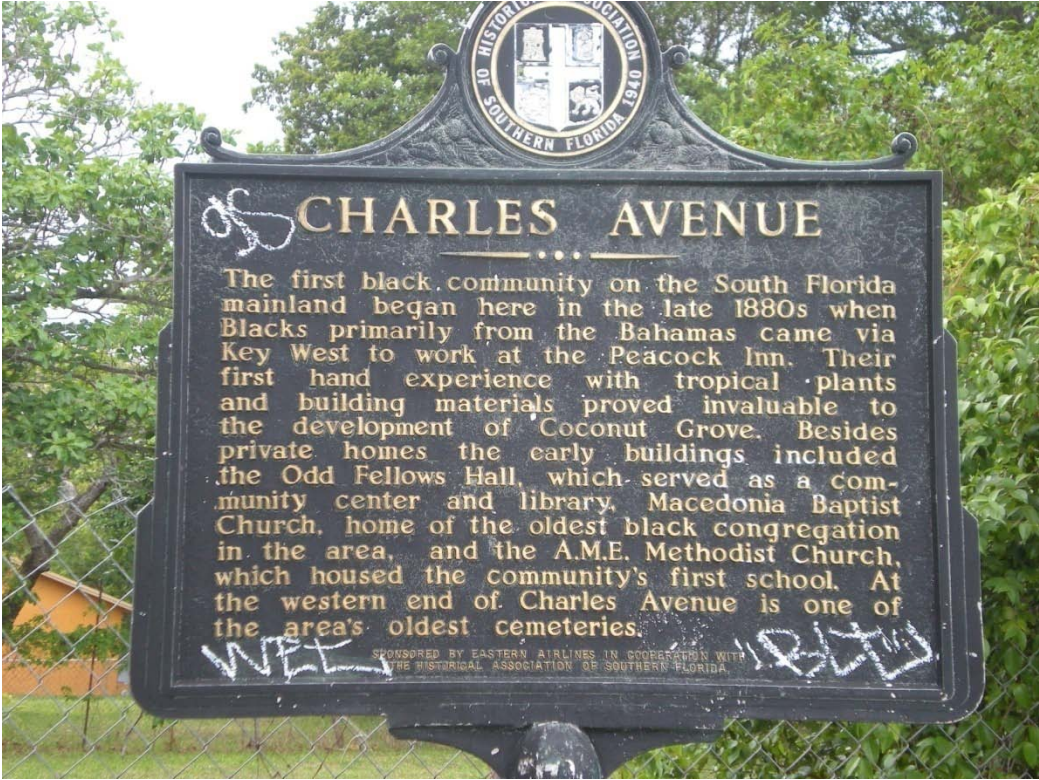
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# Evangelist Street/Charles Avenue

From Main Hwy to SW 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue

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Designation Report



Historic and Environmental Preservation Board



City of Miami

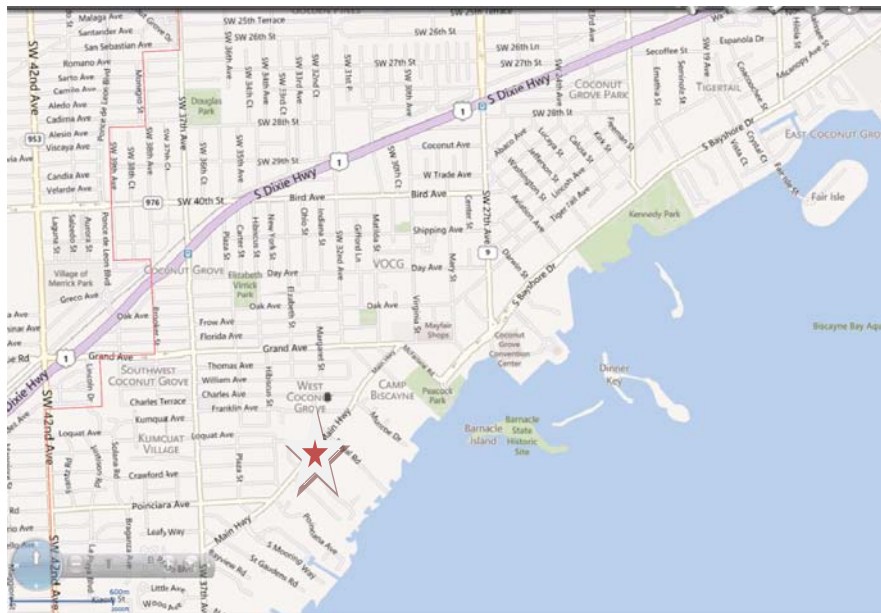
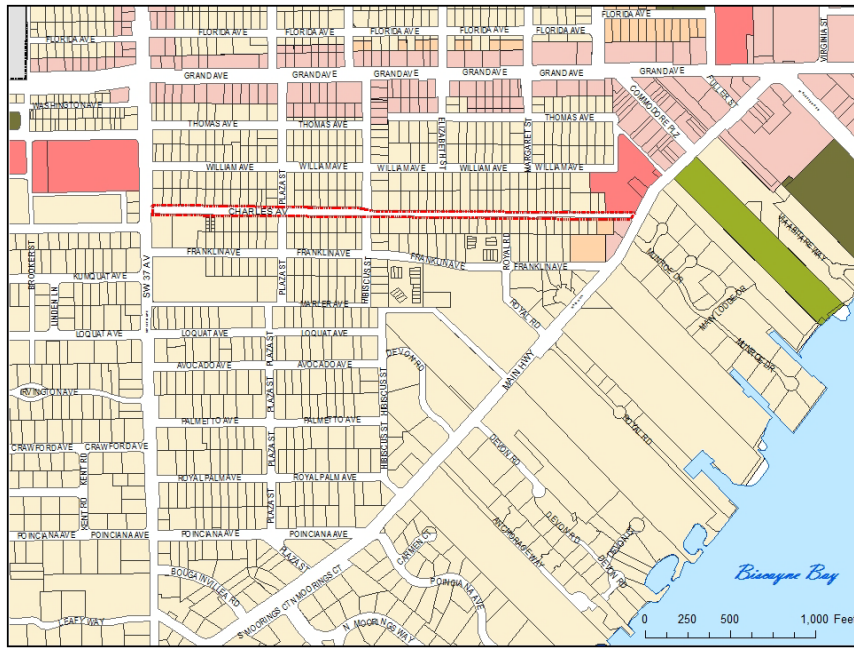
REPORT OF THE CITY OF MIAMI  
PRESERVATION OFFICER  
TO THE HISTORIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION BOARD  
ON THE POTENTIAL DESIGNATION OF THE  
EVANGELIST STREET/CHARLES AVENUE  
AS A HISTORIC SITE

WRITTEN BY MARINA NOVAES

Reviewed by Arva Parks

JUNE 2012

# Location and site maps



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## I- General Information

Historic Name: EVANGELIST STREET

Current Name: CHARLES AVENUE

Date of Construction: c.1900

Location: COCONUT GROVE

Present Owner: CITY OF MIAMI

Present use: AVENUE

Zoning: T3-O

Folio No.: N/A

Boundary (Legal Description): The entire length of Charles Avenue right-of-way from Main Highway to SW 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue (Douglas Road)

Setting: Charles Avenue is located in between William Avenue (north) and Franklin Avenue (south) in Coconut Grove, Florida; and extends from Main Hwy (east) to SW 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue (west).

Integrity: Charles Avenue has integrity of location, design, setting, feeling, and association.

## II- Statement of Significance

The legacy of the most peculiar and unique street in South Florida is directly associated with the Bahamian community that settled in the area known today as West Grove (or West Village) in Coconut Grove. Evangelist Street, as it was first named due to the number of churches it had, symbolizes the thriving black community that helped shape Coconut Grove and of which the local history could not be told separately.

The particularity of West Grove development, which started on Evangelist Street, is the reflex of the circumstances that it came about; to understand it, it's necessary to acknowledge the culture of these skilled people that came to U.S. from the Bahamas not as slaves but as free men and women in search for a better life.

Most Bahamians that settled in Coconut Grove were from the island of Eleuthera in the Bahamas where the majority of inhabitants were runaway slaves from West Indian plantations; many came with the Loyalists from the Carolinas as slaves during the American Revolution; and others were dropped there after slaves ships were liberated by British sailors when England abolished slave trade in 1807. The descendents of these former slaves moved through the Florida Keys with the Conchs becoming accomplished fisherman and seaman off the Florida coast, not unlike their forefathers who lived as freemen on the sea coast of West Africa.<sup>1</sup> They were excellent sailors, some even became ship captains; and besides being seaman, wreckers, and working in the agriculture the Bahamian people were also in the sponging and turtling industry.

The mass immigration from the Bahamas to U.S. in the late 1800's was due to the Island's rocky soil that got exhausted and agriculture became unsustainable affecting the food supply and the means of living of many Bahamians that came to the Florida Keys to grow pineapples (a very lucrative industry at that time)<sup>2</sup>. Being the South Florida's topography similar to that of the island, the Bahamians knew how to plant this land and soon they made South Florida like home.

George E. Merrick, founder of the City of Coral Gables, former President of the Historical Association of Southern Florida, and one of the founders of the University of Miami wrote in 1941: "Through the 70's, 80's, and right through the 1890's, they were practically the only available workers, the Georgia Negroes did not come in any volume until after 1900, after the coming of the railroad. In this West Indian period all of our heavy laborers were Bahaman Negroes. I believe these Bahaman Negroes had a most distinct and important influence, in that they brought inspiration to many of the first English, French, Northern and Southern planters; to all of those early settlers who at first were skeptical of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.kislakfoundation.org/millennium-exhibit/andrews1.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.kislakfoundation.org/millennium-exhibit/andrews1.htm>

the coral-rocky country, forbidding and desolate from the planting standpoint. In the Bahamas there is the same coral rock; and the Bahaman Negroes knew how to plant on it; and how to use it: and they knew too that all kinds of tropical trees would grow and thrive on this rock. They, too, had a vital influence upon our civilization in bringing in their own commonly used trees, vegetables and fruits. Soon these supplemented all those that had been brought in by the Bahaman whites – the sea-living Conchs. Such things were introduced as the pigeon pea, soursop, star-apple, sugar-apple, Jamaica apples, and all the anons – caneps, sapotes, and dillies. These fruits can still be found in best profusion in the Bahaman colored village in Coconut Grove (which was first called Monrovia, and which was the first Bahaman Negro settlement on the Bay) and also in their villages at old Lemon City, Cutler, and Perrine. These Negroes had built their homes in their own island of the coral-rock, and they brought here their skill in masonry building. Today, some of the oldest buildings in Coconut Grove and old Cutler are of the same construction which has been in use for one hundred and fifty years in the Bahamas. Built without cement with only the native lime mortar, these houses have withstood the countless hurricanes of the Bahamas! This knowledge of building with the native coral limestone came with Bahaman Negroes, as did so much other valuable knowledge and experience in the building of walls, roads, other uses of the coral; and uses of the land, and of the sea.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the first Bahamians to arrive in Coconut Grove was Mariah Brown who was brought from Key West to work in the Bay View House which was later, renamed the Peacock Inn. Charles and Isabella Peacock arrived from England in 1875; they met Commodore Ralph Munroe in 1881 who told the Peacocks if they built a hotel he would bring in the tourists from Staten Island, NY where he lived before moving definitively to Coconut Grove in 1889. The Peacocks opened the Bay View House (the first hotel in South Florida mainland); the first building was located on a ridge overlooking the bay, the Bay View House (1883) was a large home with extra rooms for guests, a store, and a post office.<sup>4</sup>

Mariah Brown was born in Eleuthera in 1851 and came to U.S. in 1880. She and her three daughters (little is known about her husband) lived in Key West where she worked as a washer woman before coming to Coconut Grove to work at the Peacock Inn which was already the center of the community in the late 1880s. Upon her arrival, Mrs. Brown and her family lived at the Peacock Inn and circa 1890 she purchased a piece of land from pioneer Joseph Frow for \$50.00 and built there her home which was within walking distance of the Peacock Inn<sup>5</sup> located on a “back road” (Main Hwy) that linked Coconut Grove with the more remote farming community of Cutler towards the south.<sup>6</sup> Mariah

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<sup>3</sup> Merrik, George E., “Pre-Flagler influences on the Lower Florida East Coast”. Tequesta - volume one. March, 1941.

<sup>4</sup> Burnett, David. “Coconut Grove” in Miami’s Historic Neighborhoods. Dade Heritage Trust Publication, 2001. 87

<sup>5</sup> Day, Jane S. and Eaton, Sarah E. “The Mariah Brown House”. Designation Report. City of Miami. 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Patricios, Nicholas N. “Building Marvelous Miami.” University Press of Florida. 1994. 26.

Brown's house still stands at 3298 Charles Avenue (Evangelist Street) and was designated a Historic Site by the City of Miami in 1995.

Soon more Bahamians started to arrive attracted by the profusion of work; the great success of the Peacock Inn was in part credited to the charismatic personality of Isabella Peacock but also due to Commodore Ralph Munroe that organized the first unofficial tourist season, attracting many tourists to the Grove in the winter of 1886-87.

"Christmas, 1886, was a big event. A community tree was raised at the Bay View House, soon to be known as the Peacock Inn, for perhaps the biggest social event in the history of the whole area. Over fifty people attended, coming by boat from as far north as Lemon City and as far south as the Hunting Grounds (Cutler). A pine tree was decked with ribbon and tinsel, and presents were distributed to all the children."<sup>7</sup> Some of these wealthy tourists would become Coconut Grove's permanent residents and employers.

Ebenezer Woodberry Frank Stirrup was an essential element on Evangelist Street (and West Grove) development. Stirrup was born on Governors Harbor Island in the Bahamas in 1873, a mulatto; his mother was a servant in the wealthy white Stirrup household, his father's family. After his mother died when he was only nine-years-old, he was taken by a relative who made him work and help the family; not happy about that, Stirrup saved money and at the age of fifteen he left the Bahamas to Key West in the late 1880s. In Key West he worked with his uncle as a carpenter's apprentice. He also worked for Charles Deering on his Culter estate and later for his father William in Coconut Grove. In 1894 he went back to the Bahamas to marry his childhood sweetheart, Charlotte Jane Sawyer; they first lived in Key West and then moved to Cutler where he worked as a pineapple cutter during the day and cleared land at night. Sometimes he was paid with land instead of money which he much appreciated. In 1899 the family moved to Coconut Grove, Stirrup was only twenty-five years old.<sup>8</sup>

When pioneer Joseph Frow decided to sell some of his Coconut Grove land, Stirrup wasted no time in buying up a number of lots. Stirrup built small, Bahamian-style rental houses from the plentiful and sturdy pine trees common in South Florida; he and his wife constructed these houses themselves, usually working at night after a full day of work. Stirrup rented these houses primarily to other immigrants from the Bahamas, giving many of the new arrivals an opportunity to save enough money to buy their own homes.<sup>9</sup>

Stirrup constructed more than 100 homes in his lifetime, many of the houses built by Stirrup still remain, and are concentrated around Charles Avenue (Evangelist Street) where he built himself he's own home (3242 Charles Avenue) which was designated a Historic Site by the City of Miami in 2004.

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<sup>7</sup> Parks, Arva Moore. "The History of Coconut Grove, Florida 1821-1925". Master's Degree Thesis. 1971. 32

<sup>8</sup> Dunn, Marvin. "Black Miami in the Twentieth Century". University Press of Florida. 1997. 38

<sup>9</sup> Dunn, Marvin. "Black Miami in the Twentieth Century". University Press of Florida. 1997. 38



Meanwhile, the little concentration of buildings in a stand of palmettos where Mariah Brown's house was located was getting more and more residents, Joseph Frow sold the Bahamians land on a long-term basis for little as fifty cents a week.<sup>10</sup>

"Citing that it was too difficult to bring in supplies or truck their crops over the existing footpath they asked for a road. When the request was denied, they gathered loose coral-rock, loaded their wagons one moonlit night and dumped the rock where they thought the road should be." Evangelist Street was officially born, and soon the little village would thrive.

"Town officials relented and soon the road was extended to where Hibiscus Street intersects today. Charles Avenue is narrow and out of line, especially when viewed from its entrance on Main Highway, because it was laid out by homesteaders and not surveyors."<sup>11</sup>

The road was called Evangelist Street because of its churches, Macedonia Baptist Church, which was first called St. Agnes Baptist Church (the oldest black congregation), A.M.E. Methodist Church, former St. Paul's Methodist Church (housed the first black school), and St. James; there was also the Odd Fellows Hall which was a community center and later served as a library for the village as well. As the area grew, Evangelist Street was extended to Douglas Road and later had its name changed to Charles Avenue after Joseph Frow's son, Charles Frow.

Soon Charles Avenue became the spine of the community, Esther Mae Armbrister, remembered as interviewed by Willian Labbee in 1991: "Back then they called Charles Avenue by the name Evangelist Street, until they named it in the late Twenties after an early settler called Charles Frow. But this street was it. It was the main drag. It was the hopping place to be, William Avenue to the north was a back street, nothing but a cow path for years and years. Both Charles and Franklin, the next one over to the south, were rocky, rocky, rocky, nothing but crushed rock – they used to call Franklin Rocky Road, when I came here; they had eventually gotten 'round to tarring them."

"All the business, everything was right here on Charles Avenue. Old Man Joe Major had a bicycle shop. Old Man Stirrup had a grocery store. There was a soda shop and ice cream parlor. And then they had a Cleaner's, belonged to Old Man Summons. He died last year; I didn't even know it. Father Culmer had a pressing club – a cleaner's – before he was a priest. He also was an organist at Christ Episcopal Church. After he got married and moved to Overtown and he became a priest at St. Agnes."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Parks, Arva Moore. "The History of Coconut Grove, Florida 1821-1925". Master's Degree Thesis. 1971. 39

<sup>11</sup> Cave, Donald H. "Grove's Charles Avenue." Miami News. January 5, 1971, Sec. A. 16

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/1991-07-31/news/black-grove-feature/full>

The first subdivision in West Grove was officially platted in March 1910 by E.W.F. Stirrup<sup>13</sup> who slowly bought more and more land; over the years, he owned most of Coconut Grove downtown among other properties, such as properties in Cutler, along Flagler Street in Miami and the cemetery (one of the oldest in Coconut Grove) on Charles Avenue which is called the "Charlotte Jane Memorial Cemetery" after Mrs. Stirrup.

George Simpson, a member of the Stirrup family by marriage, said: "... It was a wish of E.W.F. Stirrup Senior, who, by the way, laid out Charles Avenue, laid out the street before he built his house there; he built his house on one end of the street and a cemetery for the community and his family on the other end of the street."<sup>14</sup>

Eventually, Stirrup became one of the wealthiest men in Coconut Grove. During the Great Depression, Stirrup lost most of his land and about \$70,000 in cash when Biscayne Bank failed. But when he died in 1957 at age 84 he still owned 317 parcels of land in Coconut Grove.<sup>15</sup>

Another Bahamian valuable contribution to South Florida was architecture and the know-how of constructing simple sturdy houses able to withstand the most intense hurricanes; they were also durable, made of pine trees which are termite resistant, and affordable, made of local material as pine wood and coral-rock.

The shotgun house style can be traced back to West Africa. It is an architectural style that enslaved Africans, particularly the Yoruba, brought with them to the countries of the Caribbean and to the United States.<sup>16</sup> The name "shotgun" was given because of the typical alignment of the house's doors; supposedly, a bullet fired at the front door would pass straight through the house and out the back door. The rooms are lined up, one behind another, usually the living room, then one or two bedrooms, and the kitchen at the back. The shotgun houses are usually tiny (12 FT wide) constructed on piers with no set back from the street, a front porch, wood frame and wood siding and sometimes, chimneys made of stone.

The shotgun houses are usually one story high, the roofs can be gabled or hipped with overhanging eaves and wooden shingles; they originally had double-hung sash windows and some type of ornamentation such decorative wooden brackets and/or ornate porch railings.

Some variations to the style can be found, such as houses with one and a half or two stories in height, wider houses, and some side-by-side duplexes. Below a few examples of shotgun houses found in West Grove.

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<sup>13</sup> "Coconut Grove is Town of rare interest" Miami daily Metropolis, March 3, 1923.

<sup>14</sup> City of Miami minutes. City Commission hearing of May 26, 2011 regarding changing the land use of the Stirrup house at 3242 Charles Avenue. Ordinance No. 10544.

<sup>15</sup> Dunn, Marvin. "Black Miami in the Twentieth Century". University Press of Florida. 1997. 41.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.kislakfoundation.org/millennium-exhibit/andrews1.htm>



While white settlers were building their large homes scattered throughout the abounded land, the Bahamians were building their small shotgun houses very close one to another with no set back from the street. Their houses constructed in a way where one doing household chores inside could easily keep their eyes on the children playing on the backyard and be aware of who was coming or going on the street, all at the same time.

This behavior can be explained by the cultural tradition inherited by their ancestral West Africans; Denise Andrews says on her essay (The Bahamian Influence on the South Florida Shotgun House): "The history of African people suggests that members of a community were families, or clans – a single lineage. The communities basically were composed of one head of household and the extended family members of the household – which could be hundreds of people. Compounds were created so that families could live together communally. Traditionally there was no concept of privacy or single mindedness as we know today. Family and family life was central, intimate and communal."<sup>17</sup>

The function of the house (shotgun) was to give shelter; all the activities were outdoors interacting with the community; Esther Mae Armbrister said: "When people were married once upon a time, they would march. One woman lived on William Avenue and she marched in her wedding gown from her house all the way around Hibiscus with her wedding party. They used to walk in the streets from their house to the church or wherever it was they were going to get married. They walked the streets with someone holding their gown. You would look out the window and see the whole wedding party go by. One time two sisters got married – they lived down on Charles Avenue – and they walked from across the street to their house and got married on the front porch. The street was blocked off. Then they had a party, and all the food you would want."<sup>18</sup>

Rebecca Gibson Johnson (another long time resident) recalled, "Mr. Stirrup used to sit on his porch with his legs crossed and just look at everybody go by. He used to say everyone was his brother or his sister. He would wave at everybody. Anything that happened overnight was told to him. He didn't have to go anywhere to hear what was going on. White and black people came. His wife was his secretary. He was a loan master. He owned houses and rented them out."<sup>19</sup>

Clearly Mr. Stirrup didn't rent these houses to get rich (which eventually happened) but to help his folks, his "family"; it is obvious that he could have built himself a mansion with all the luxury money could buy to accommodate his large family (he had ten children) but he never did, as he never left his community. So did other members of this once

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.kislakfoundation.org/milennium-exhibit/andrews1.htm>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/1991-07-31/news/black-grove-feature/full>

<sup>19</sup> Dunn, Marvin. "Black Miami in the Twentieth Century". University Press of Florida. 1997. 42.

prosperous community of simple happy people that made this piece of land just like home. The true meaning of sense of place and community living could be experienced in West Grove at its heydays. Charles Avenue is like no other in a sense that it tells the history of South Florida and signifies so much for so many black or white.

Since the annexation of Coconut Grove with the City of Miami in 1925, a transformation, especially on the East Grove (white), occurred; when the real estate market became a lucrative business and charming East Coconut Grove available, high-rise after high-rise went up, business after business opened and West Grove was left neglected, essentially for being a black neighborhood, with no infrastructure, forgotten with its small old houses. The effects of the segregation era also played a huge role in the decline of West Grove.

Alex Joseph Plasencia states on his graduate thesis: "East Coconut Grove had already acquired a water system, and most of its residents had septic tanks, running water, and proper bathrooms. On the other hand, West Coconut Grove continued to use the same well system, which contained contaminated water. At night the contents of the privies was collected by city trucks. The process was unpleasant as the contents often dripped out, and the smell permeated the air. These privies also attracted swarms of insects. Improving utilities in West Grove was a serious problem in need of a remedy."<sup>20</sup>

Instead of implanting a sanitary system in West Grove to solve the problem, a "slum clearance" campaign was launched when many houses were lost and many residents moved away. If not for the work of community leaders such as Theodore Gibson and Elizabeth Virrick among others, West Grove today would be only in the memory of a few.

According to Plasencia: "West Coconut Grove has been considered behind the times when it comes to the creature comforts taken for granted by others on a daily basis. Instead of air conditioning, most people in the West Grove simply opened their front and back doors and allowed the breeze from off Biscayne Bay to fill their homes with the fresh air that one might have in the Bahamas. But it is not only a loss of natural air conditioning, but the loss of a large part of the Bahamian culture which makes the situation so disheartening. For ever since becoming part of Miami in 1925, the people of West Grove have been in a constant struggle to preserve their community."<sup>21</sup>

Many initiatives were taken to protect and save West Grove and Charles Avenue from being lost, all failed. Several studies were conducted that found the area eligible for

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<sup>20</sup> Plasencia, Alex Joseph. "A History of West Grove from 1925: Slum Clearance, Concrete Monsters, and the Dichotomy of East and West Coconut Grove." Graduation Thesis, Clemson University. May 2011, 33.

<sup>21</sup> Plasencia, Alex Joseph. "A History of West Grove from 1925: Slum Clearance, Concrete Monsters, and the Dichotomy of East and West Coconut Grove." Graduation Thesis, Clemson University. May 2011, 21.

historic districts, both West Grove (as a whole) and Charles Avenue (individually), that never went through, a Neighborhood Conservation District (NCD) was created to protect historic properties in 2005 (buildings are still being lost), Individual properties have been designated historic, such as Mariah Brown House and E.W.F. Stirrup House (both vacant), and a few historic marks have been placed mostly to educate visitors.

Today, Charles Avenue lies silently in the same setting, with the same extension and width; Stirrup house at one end and the cemetery at the other and some scattered historic buildings in-between. Some cultural Bahamian events still take place in Coconut Grove such their traditional Goombay Festival (on Grand Avenue) but the vibrant community that it once was is dying out as their children adapt to the new customs and comforts of modern days and the old generation struggles to keep their culture alive.

### **III- Description**

Charles Avenue is a narrow road 5850 ft (1.11 miles) long by 30-50 ft wide, it's located in Coconut Grove, FL in between William Avenue (north) and Franklin Avenue (south), it starts on Main Highway (east) and ends on SW 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue (west). Charles Avenue intersects Hibiscus and Plaza Streets. Mostly residential, the avenue houses two churches, one cemetery, and two designated historical sites. The historic Coconut Grove Playhouse is located at the corner of Charles Avenue and Main Hwy. Three blocks long, Charles Avenue is a pleasant narrow road with narrow sidewalks, the trees are typically located inside the properties line, generally one-story small homes and a few historic shotgun houses are evenly distributed along its length.

## IV- Application of Criteria for Designation

Evangelist Street/Charles Avenue has significance as it relates to the historic heritage of Miami and possesses integrity of setting, feeling, design, association, and location. The property is eligible for designation as a historic site under the criteria (1), (3), (4) and (8) as numbered in Sec. 23-4 (a), of Chapter 23 of the City Code.

(1) Are associated in a significant way with the life of a person(s) important in the past (Mariah Brown and E.W.F. Stirrup);

(3) exemplify the historical, cultural, political, economical, or social trends of the community;

(4) portray the environment in an era of history characterized by one or more architectural styles (shotgun);

(8) have yield, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history (Charles Avenue sits on a high probability archaeological zone).



## V- Bibliography

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## IV- Photographs



E.W.F. Stirrup House



Mariah Brown House



Odd Fellows Hall Sign



Cemetery

