

# Historic Homes

100 YEARS OF HISTORY – CORAL GABLES HOMES OF 1923

BY KAREN F. BUCHSBAUM



Century-year-old homes were the focus of The Villagers' Annual Holiday House Tour during the recent holidays. Held in the heart of Coral Gables, four beautifully maintained and restored homes joined the Merrick House as tour stops. Although Merrick House, the home of George Merrick and his family, was built earlier, the four private homes on tour are all now one century old.

# Keeping Traditions

800 S GREENWAY DRIVE

The home of Rafael and Ana Peñalver was one of the first homes built in the city. Thought to be designed by H. George Fink, part of Merrick's "dream team," it is one of two private homes that feature coral rock (actually oolitic limestone) quarried from what is now the Venetian Pool.

The entrance to this corner home is accentuated by walls, arches, and a fountain designed by Merrick's uncle, Denman Fink, to enhance and draw attention to significant streets. A period sketch of the home, on display in the Peñalver's foyer, shows the home with most of nearby Coral Way still a dirt road.

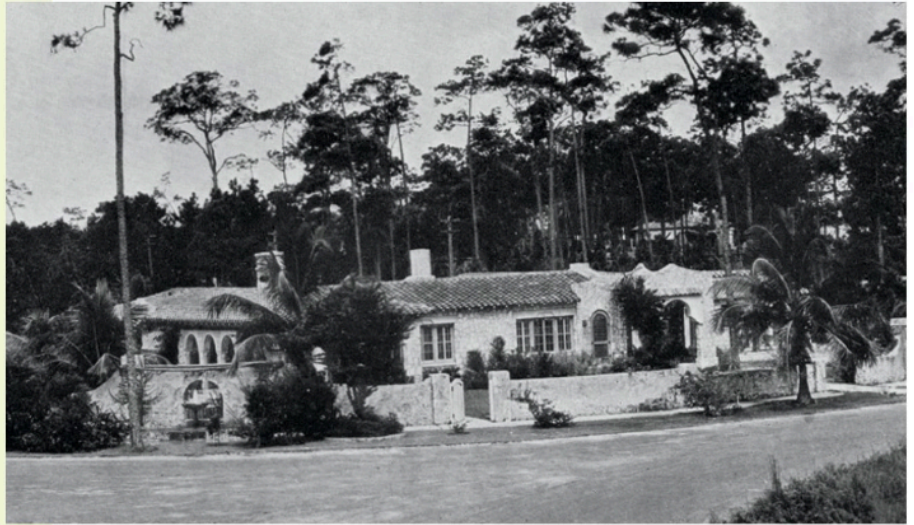
A lawyer by trade, Rafael has long been a noted preservationist, leading the charge to save Miami's iconic Freedom Tower and to preserve Key West's historic San Carlos Institute, the cradle of Cuba's independence movement dating from 1871.

Rafael and Ana's favorite part of the home is the original enclosed stone-walled patio off the back of the house. The expansive yard flows around a newer pool and the original detached garage, which now houses a family room. The family room often serves as a setting for Rafael's guests to exchange and brainstorm ideas, a throwback to the intellectual salons held during the Enlightenment Period of the 17th and 18th centuries which fostered discourse and new ideas.

"For us, this is such a special home," said Rafael. "I love to get an old home and bring it back to life." After 24 years in the house, he feels the charm is worth the fewer closets and smaller bathrooms of days gone by.

You can tell this family loves Christmas. Among the many lovely furnishings and collectible items in the home was a prominently displayed Santa working at his bench. This was the first Christmas decoration bought by the Peñalver family when they came to Miami from Cuba in 1965.

"I really enjoyed meeting every one of the hundreds of people that came on this tour," said Rafael. "I personally greeted them at my front door and I was amazed at how much everyone was interested in architecture and history." ■



TOP: THE HOME OF CORAL ROCK WAS BUILT IN 1923 WHEN NEARBY CORAL WAY WAS STILL A DIRT ROAD.

ABOVE: THE ORIGINAL PERIMETER WALL HAS BEEN RETAINED ON THIS LARGE CORNER HOME.

RIGHT: A FAVORITE PART OF THE OWNERS' HOME IS THIS ENCLOSED STONE-WALLED PATIO AT THE REAR.



# From Tear-down to Rock Star

1043 N GREENWAY DRIVE

Alex and Marta Silva own the second home that features coral rock, which had to be brought back to life. The house had been a neighborhood eyesore for many years and, although it was designed by H. George Fink, it had been so tragically altered through the years and fallen into such disrepair, it was easily a tear-down.

It took someone with vision to see what the home could become. As an architect with an interest in preservation, Alex and his wife saw the potential. It took two years and a lot of structural work; finally, this past Labor Day, the family moved in. Alex, currently a member of the Coral Gables Historic Preservation Board, described the project as “a slow process by its nature” and said working through the process with the City and the Historic Preservation Department was great.

Though he and Marta knew the house was in bad shape, they had some surprises along the way. Many of the original Dade County pine wood joists were in good shape with no termite damage, but it was not possible to remove the plaster that previous owners had applied to cover the coral rock exterior. So, they added another layer of the rock to re-create one of the home’s original, striking design features.

The Silvas also opened up the closed-in porch and uncovered its arched openings. Originally, the house featured a breezeway connected to another structure apparently used by the original owners as a ballroom. During the renovation, the breezeway was repurposed as the kitchen, and the original open porch and ballroom became an expansive family room and library, with the master bedroom and an office on the second floor. Now the family’s favorite part of their new home, the original tile floor of the porch was kept and showcased.

During the renovation, Alex reports, “we found tons of crazy stuff.” One find was a mystery: mosaic tile found about two feet underground. Not so much a mystery are the hundreds of golf balls salvaged during the two years, now creatively on display on the living room mantel. ■



TOP: THIS CORAL ROCK HOME FROM 1923 WAS DESIGNED BY ARCHITECT H. GEORGE FINK.

ABOVE: THE HOME WAS ALMOST A TEAR DOWN UNTIL THE NEW OWNERS DECIDED TO RENOVATE.

RIGHT: THE CLOSED-IN PORCH WAS OPENED UP TO UNCOVER FRAMED ARCHED OPENINGS.



# Commissioned by George Merrick

1243 ASTURIA AVE

Move-in day was supposed to be August 24, 1992, but Hurricane Andrew had other ideas. Delayed by two weeks, the 1923 home thankfully came through the storm with no damage. Mary Burke and her husband James Tillett became only the third owners of this Mediterranean Revival beauty. Designed by Lewis D. Brumm, one of the six architects working with George Merrick to design homes in the new city, many of the original features have been maintained.

Viewed from the front entry, the decorative woodwork on the porch, the original wood windows, front balcony, multiple arches, and unique scalloped entry are all notable. The kitchen and family room have been remodeled on the footprint of the original kitchen and open-air patio.

Additions through the years have been thoughtfully incorporated, blending seamlessly with the original structure. In 1937, another first-floor bedroom was added by architect Arthur Laidler, who is famous for Versace's Miami Beach home, Casa Casuarina. Mary and Jim added a bathroom and closet to the downstairs, a new office and bedroom, and reworked the upstairs. The original front porch is a favorite spot for the family.

Mary, who is a past president of The Villagers, has carefully protected the original panel doors, casement windows, and glass doorknobs. The home is a perfect setting for the family's antiques and collections. Original exterior elements include the barrel tile roof, vents grouped in a decorative manner, concrete windowsills, and wing walls.

Her advice to anyone thinking of buying a historic home in Coral Gables: "Buy it. It's worth every penny." ■



TOP: THIS 1923 HOUSE WAS DESIGNED BY ONE OF GEORGE MERRICK'S ARCHITECTS.

ABOVE: THE ORIGINAL WINDOWS, ARCHED OPENINGS, AND BALCONY HAVE ALL BEEN RETAINED.

RIGHT: THE EXISTING KITCHEN AREA HAS BEEN REMODELED, AS WELL AS THE FAMILY ROOM.

# Preservationist Perfection

2520 COUNTRY CLUB PRADO

**K**ara Kautz is a professional preservationist. In her role as Assistant Historic Preservation Officer for the City of Coral Gables, she has seen it all – both good and bad outcomes for historic properties. She always knew she wanted to live in an older home, but her husband, Drew Moss, was not so sure. When they saw this Gables' beauty, however, they both knew they had to have it.

The home was not yet for sale when they saw a moving truck and family members packing it up. They acted quickly. They soon discovered very little had been done to the house during the previous 49 years during which only one family owned it. It was a preservationist's dream – there had been no substantial alterations, leading to its designation as a Historic Landmark by the City of Coral Gables.

Designed by Walter De Garmo, the home has exceptional features. In 1925, the original homeowners hired Phineas Paist to add an attached second garage and servants' quarters. There is a painting on the hallway ceiling resembling a carpet and an unusual circular staircase off the kitchen that originally led to a maid's room. That area has been repurposed as a gathering space for teenage children. There is also access to a flat rooftop, designed by De Garmo as an azotea (flat roof deck), with a wide set of masonry stairs leading down to the front of the house.

The fireplace still has its formed concrete surround, now painted a striking blue, and the iron railing on the staircase is still functional. Oak flooring, glass door pulls, original wood casement windows, cabinets in the butler's pantry and kitchen, and much of the lighting are as they were in 1923. The chimney is also a distinctive element. While doing restoration work on the original Cuban tile roof, roofers were stunned to find that each tile was signed by the craftsman who made it, typical of that era. In this case, tiles were by "Jaime."

Kara is a new member of The Villagers and a past recipient of a Villagers scholarship, awarded while working towards her master's degree in historic preservation at the University of Miami. ■



TOP: THIS 1923 HOME IS NOW DESIGNATED A HISTORIC LANDMARK BY THE CITY OF CORAL GABLES.

ABOVE: THE HOME HAD NOT BEEN TOUCHED FOR 49 YEARS UNTIL THE NEW OWNERS BEGAN THEIR RENOVATIONS.

RIGHT: THE ORIGINAL CIRCULAR WOODEN STAIRCASE HAS BEEN RETAINED.

