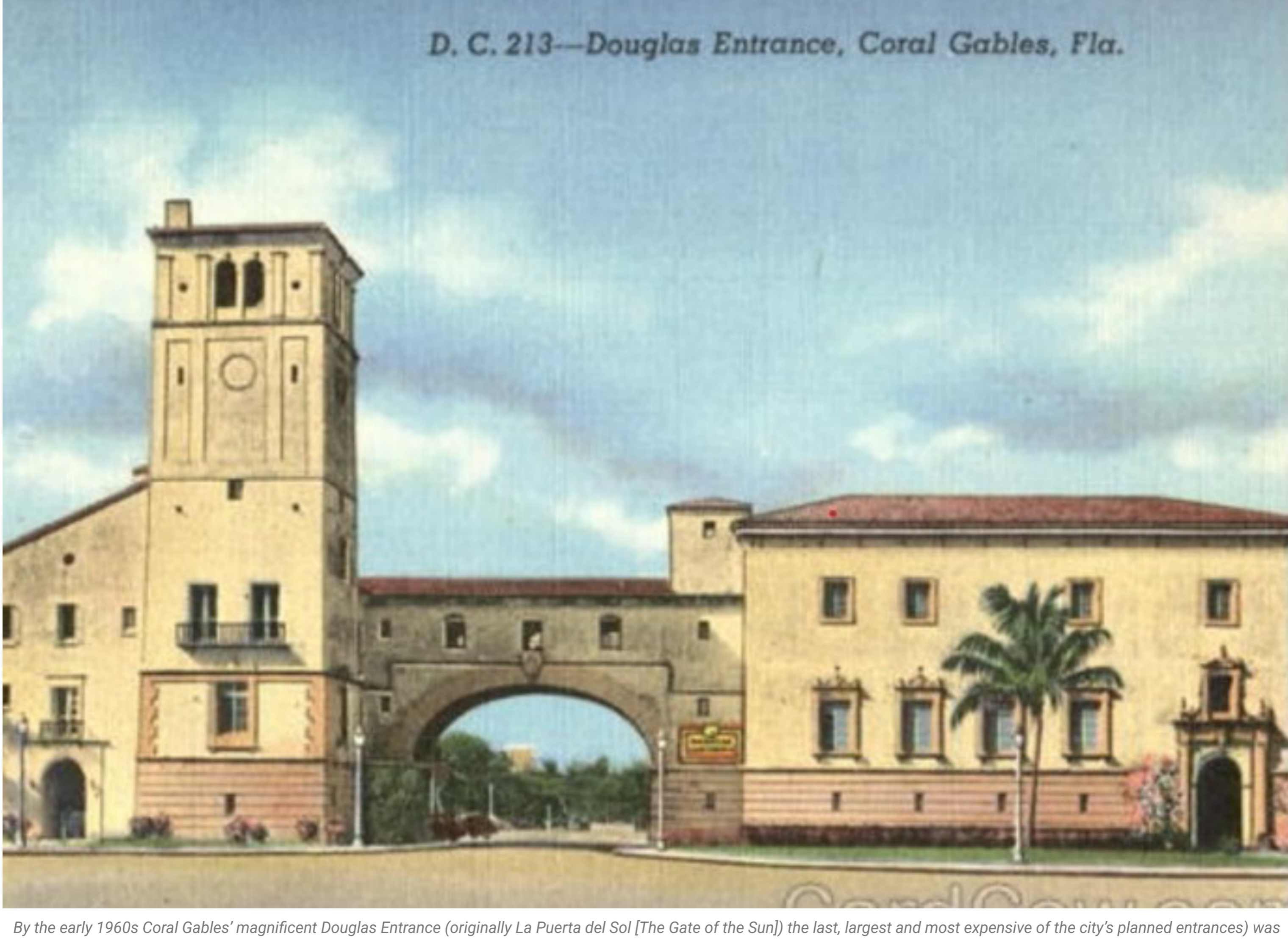


CORAL GABLES GAZETTE

Monday, June 16, 2025



UGUCCIONI: When ‘The Gate of the Sun’ was saved and the rise of The Villagers

June 2, 2025 | OPINION

By Ellen J. Uguccioni

Ellen J. Uguccioni was the first director of the City of Coral Gables Historic Preservation Department.

From where I sit, the 1960s don't seem that long ago. Reality suggests otherwise. The growth of the Historic Preservation movement was in its infancy then, propelled by the demolition of New York's Pennsylvania Railway Station between 1963 and 1966 for the “new” Madison Square Garden. There was such outrage over the loss of the 1910 McKim, Mead and White designed colossus, Americans began to seek a more potent legislative framework from which to protect monuments that defined our history; displayed our creative genius and were integral to our experience of an authentic America from its beginnings.

The nation had previously addressed the preservation of archaeological, architectural and cultural places on public land in the 1906 “Antiquities Act” and later expanded the authority of the National Parks Service in the 1935 “Historic Sites Act.” But it was the “martyrdom” of the beloved railroad station that galvanized U.S. citizens with an increased awareness, challenging the notion that historic things belonged only to those “across the pond.”

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 created the National Register of Historic Places and defined criteria for assessing the character of historic buildings and places. There were significant increases in state and local legislation designed to identify what was deemed to be “historic.” The cause immediately set in motion a balancing act between private and public interests. Private interests argued that landmark preservation laws constituted a “taking” of their development rights. In 1978, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Penn Central Transportation v. New York City* upheld the New York Landmarks Preservation Act, a city ordinance which designated Grand Central Station a landmark and restricted high-rise construction above it. They concluded that it was not a “taking” if the owner received a “reasonable” return on the property's investment. The floodgates were opened to the growth of municipal preservation.

While the nation was becoming ever-more discerning in an approach to historic preservation, some things could not wait. By the early 1960s Coral Gables’ magnificent Douglas Entrance (originally *La Puerta del Sol* [The Gate of the Sun]) at SW 8th Street and SW 37th Avenue – the last, largest and most expensive of the city's planned entrances) was dilapidated, underutilized and for many, an eyesore. The owners began to petition the city for permission to demolish it and build a Food Fair supermarket on the site. Their plans could have gone forward uninterrupted, but the proposed building would require a zoning change for its use. It was THE issue that generated huge local efforts to protect an unquestionably unique heritage that set Coral Gables apart from the looming Miami metropolis.

In October 1964 Coral Gables’ leaders, faced a zoning appeal from the decision of the Planning and Zoning Board which voted to deny the request. The city did not own the property and therefore had no authority to stop development. They did have a say in what could be built. With a 2-2 vote (with Commissioner Jerry Dressel abstaining,) the appeal was technically denied and the development proposal languished. The city was sued.

Led by architect James Deen with the support of the South Florida Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the group campaigned to preserve the complex. Deen persuaded some 60 colleagues in the design field to buy the property (then called the “Douglas Village”) and restore it for their offices/show rooms and a “Galerie of Building Products” open to the public. The Douglas Village Corporation and its president, Deen, purchased the Entrance sited on 10 acres of land for \$265,000 (others report the sale at \$465,000) in September 1965.

Meanwhile, in a brilliant and consequential move, Pat (Mrs. James) Deen created a not-for-profit organization named “The Villagers.” In 1966, the group was chiefly comprised of the architects’ wives who were addressing the fate of the Douglas Entrance from which their name derived. Mrs. Deen may not have known then that “The Villagers, Inc.” would grow to become one of the most hard-working, dedicated and prestigious historic preservation organizations in Miami-Dade County. Now known as the “Miami Villagers,” their mission is to preserve historic buildings and places through education and documentation, advocacy and fundraising. During their long history, The Villagers have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars by their clever, carefully planned events including house and garden tours. Scores of student architects have been granted scholarships to further their education in this field, and hundreds of historic places received grants to restore and maintain the area's singular history.

The successful preservation of the Douglas Entrance would allow the women a short breath, but another threat was just over the horizon. The preservation of the incomparable Miami-Biltmore Hotel and Country Club demanded a Herculean effort from all.

To be continued...

In addition to being the first director of the Coral Gables’ Historic Preservation Department, Uguccioni is also a past president of The Villagers. She served on the Florida Historical Preservation Commission in Tallahassee for 12 years, serving as the Architectural Historian member, appointed by both the Secretary of State and the Governor. Uguccioni was one of the founders of the Coral Gables Historic Preservation Association, a lecturer at the University of Miami’s School of Architecture and a member of the Board of History Miami. She was named a Trustee Emerita by the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation and was awarded its Lifetime Achievement Award. Uguccioni is the author of numerous books, including “The Biltmore Hotel: An Enduring Legacy” and “Coral Gables: Miami Riviera: An Architectural Guide”



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Susan Bennett Manns

JUNE 2, 2025 [REPLY](#)

Wow, so that is how ‘The Villagers’ as an organization came to be. It’s a wonderful reminder that alone we can accomplish little but that together we can change the world! There have been great visionaries among us. Thank you Ellen for this excellent article!!

Michael Galex

JUNE 3, 2025 [REPLY](#)

Thank you for sharing this wonderful success story.

KELLEY C SCHILD

JUNE 3, 2025 [REPLY](#)

Bravo for an excellent article and reminder of The Villagers good work. <http://www.thevillagersinc.org>

Ellen

JUNE 3, 2025 [REPLY](#)

Thank you for reminding us of the importance of Historic Preservation by sharing the history of Douglas Entrance repairs and fortification with us. The evolution of official, necessary Historic Preservation in the United States and the birth of The Villagers organization here in Miami Dade County is meant to be shared often.

Miriam Maer

JUNE 4, 2025 [REPLY](#)

Thank you for this interesting article. I look forward to the next. As we watch the sad demise of our Coconut Grove Playhouse, it is good to be reminded that there are (were) successes, as well.

Lynn Guarch-Pardo

JUNE 4, 2025 [REPLY](#)

Born in Miami 69 years ago, married to an architect for 47 years, and a resident of Coral Gables for 35 years, but I didn’t know the complete backstory of the Douglas Entrance and the birth of the Villagers.

Thank you for an excellent article.

I look forward to more!

Jennifer Grace

JUNE 5, 2025 [REPLY](#)

I can’t wait to read the next installment about the Biltmore! I didn’t want the article to end....What a tremendous gift of history these articles are!

Dorothy Thomson

JUNE 9, 2025 [REPLY](#)

The city of Coral Gables is a better place, due to the endearing efforts of Director Ellen Uguccioni. Much credit is due to her for all of her efforts towards historic preservation. Dorothy Thomson, former mayor

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