



Coconut Grove SPOTLIGHT

Friday, February 26, 2021

Black History—Keeping the Spark Alive

As the end of Black History Month approaches, members of Coconut Grove's Black community are prone to observe that honoring Black history should be a year-round activity, not something we do for a month and then forget about. No one knows this better than Leona Cooper Baker. A resident of the Golden Gate neighborhood in what many people think of as the West Grove. Cooper Baker was born 84 years ago in a house her parents built after migrating to Miami from Eleuthra, in the Bahamas. Although the original house, across the street from George Washington Carver Elementary School, was replaced in the early 1960s by a newer structure, Cooper Baker proudly proclaims that she has lived in exactly the same location her entire life, except for when she went away to college.



Leona Cooper Baker

Cooper Baker is also a devoted historian of her community. She has assembled an extensive archive by collecting historic photographs, books, and articles. Many are mounted on trifold display stands, some have been framed., and some are being digitized The collection is housed at the Lola B. Walker Community Center on Florida Ave. in what's known

locally as the MacFarlane neighborhood—more formally, the [MacFarlane Homestead Historic District](#). “MacFarlane,” as she calls it, is named for Flora MacFarlane, one of the original white settlers of Coconut Grove, who sold the tract of land to Coral Gables founder George Merrick in 1925. (“Mc” became “Mac” through a clerical error. MacFarlane Rd. in Center Grove is also named for Flora MacFarlane, but it’s spelled correctly.)

MacFarlane is bounded by Grand Ave., Brooker St., Jefferson St., and Oak Ave. Golden Gate, on the other side of Grand Ave., is bounded by Grand Ave., Lincoln Dr., Grant Dr., and LeJeune Rd. Both MacFarlane and Golden Gate are technically and legally part of the City of Coral Gables. Culturally and spiritually, however, Cooper Baker and many others who live in MacFarlane and Golden Gate identify more closely with the City of Miami, specifically the West Grove. One of the main reasons is their affiliation with the numerous churches on the



Miami side of Douglas Rd. The three oldest are Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church, Greater St. Paul A.M.E. Church, and Christ Episcopal Church. All are more than 100 years old. Cooper Baker is a lifelong parishioner at Christ Episcopal and will be a leader in celebrating the 120th anniversary of its founding in a few weeks.

Segregation played a major role in people’s lives when Cooper Baker was growing up. Plaza St. was the clear dividing line between the Black and white Grove, and the schools were legally segregated until the mid-1950s. At the time, Carver was a K-12 school. Cooper Baker graduated in 1954, the year of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. Black students were bussed to Carver from as far as Homestead and Florida City. The textbooks for the upper grades at Carver were castoffs from schools like Miami Senior High and Edison. On the rare occasions when Cooper Baker went downtown with her mother and siblings, everyone had to make sure to use the bathroom first. Once downtown, only two bathrooms served Blacks, one at Richard’s department store and the other in the basement of the county courthouse. White and Latino friends told her they’d dared to drink from the Black side of “white/colored” water fountains to see if there was a difference. “That was a luxury I didn’t have,” she says.

Segregation and its underlying assumption of white supremacy were the reality of her world, but Cooper Baker, her family, and her friends derived great strength from their

church, the center of their community. On Sunday they went to morning and evening services.

“It was the Bahamians who came first to Coconut Grove,” says Cooper Baker. “But there were also Black people who came from the southeastern United States, though not as many as the Bahamians. My mother showed the other neighbors who were not Bahamian how to cook pigeon peas and rice and how to make guava duff, a steamed pudding with rum sauce. We had guava trees and other fruit trees all over Coconut Grove then. Now, if you go to the grocery store to buy guavas, they come from South America and they’re very expensive.”

Cooper Baker says she’s convinced that “good and bad people come from everywhere. Some of the best friends my mother had were from Valdosta, Georgia. The Johnsons and the Boykins. I will never forget how nice they were.”



An exhibit commemorates the Goombay Festival.

Segregation “was the world we lived in,” she says. “We knew we had to listen to our parents and do what we could. When we used to ride the bus to go downtown, the bus drivers were a big white lady and also a little white man. He would say, ‘All right, you colored people, move to the back.’ My brother used to say they didn’t just take driving lessons to learn how to drive the bus, they had to take a course in how to be mean to Black people.”

Cooper Baker is an expert at nurturing and sharing the memories of those days. “My main concern,” she says, “is who will take over in the future to make sure our history never gets lost. I don’t see the history being cared for and loved and cherished the way I do and the way a lot of other people in my set do. I have a fear that this younger generation aren’t that interested. When I was coming along, I realized what we’d gone

through. These kids don't care. They have a lot of what they want, computers and possessions. For many of them, life is a bowl of cherries. That's what disturbs me the most. I talk with our children about that. When we have homeowner meetings, I say you need to come and get involved."

Learn more

[University of Miami Law School Center for Ethics and Public Service Historic Black Church Program](#)

[UM Law School Oral History Film Project](#)

[G.W. Carver: A Community School \(online flipbook\)](#)

[Someday We'll All Be Free: The Desegregation of Miami](#) (online flipbook)

[Old Smokey: A Community History](#) (online flipbook)

Note: The G.W. Carver Elementary School/MacFarlane community is currently engaged in a dispute about a proposed Wawa service station planned for the Grand Ave. property across from the school. The Spotlight will report on the dispute and possible outcomes in a forthcoming issue.

In Other News

At the Thurs., Feb. 25, Miami City Commission meeting, both the Villa Woodbine/Carrollton School item and the Dade Heritage Trust lease, two matters of concern to Grovites, were deferred. The Dade Heritage Trust lease is now scheduled for the March 11 meeting. The Villa Woodbine matter has been deferred indefinitely, meaning it will not be considered again for at least six months. It could be brought back to the Commission before then with appropriate notice .

[Groundbreaking for new transit-oriented development project at Coconut Grove Metrorail](#)

Sunday, Feb. 28, is the final day for the [Thrive305 Survey](#)—your opportunity for input into planning for the future of Miami-Dade County.
