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Finding Aid - Bernhardt E. Muller Collection (ASM0655)

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Repository:	University of Miami Special Collections
Title:	Bernhardt E. Muller Collection
ID:	ASM0655
Date:	1925-1960 (date of creation)
Physical description:	19.8 cubic ft.
Dates of creation, revision and deletion:	

Summary information

Administrative history / Biographical sketch

Note

Bernhardt Emil Muller was born in Fremont, Nebraska on December 27, 1878. He studied at L'Ecole Des Beaux Arts in Paris from 1903 to 1905, then traveled and studied for a year in Italy, France, Austria, and Germany. He began his career as a draftsman for the New York architectural firm of Trowbridge and Livingston in 1906. In 1909 he became a designer for the firm of Robert J. Reiley. Muller moved on to the firm of D. Everett Waid in 1912 where he was also employed as an architectural designer until 1914, when he opened his own office in New York City.

Muller's earliest known work in South Florida dates to 1923 when he designed a number of Mediterranean and Spanish-style houses in the Miami area.

In 1925 Bernhardt Muller met Glenn H. Curtiss, the owner and developer of Opa-Locka, at the recommendation of Mr. Curtiss' mother, Mrs. Lua Andrews Curtiss. In a 1927 article appearing in the Opa-Locka Times, Muller relates the story of how he visualized the new development. He decided that an opportunity was at hand to make an architectural theme for a new community from a literary work. One night the architect read a copy of The One Thousand and One Tales of the Arabian Nights. Muller was fascinated by the descriptions of the Tales, and he said that he re-lived the fantasies in his dreams that night. The following morning he wired Curtiss with his ideas. Later, they met at the site that was to become Opa-Locka, where Muller described his concept for the city's architectural design, derived from the individual stories of the Arabian Nights. Curtiss agreed that the Arabian Nights theme would make for a unique and exciting development.

During November of 1925, from his New York office, Muller designed several of the prominent buildings which would form the new town, including the Opa-Locka Company's Administration Building, the swimming pool (Bathing Casino), and an Archery Club. The Richter Library's collection has records of eighty-six of Muller commissions; although it is not known exactly how many buildings Muller designed, it is estimated to be about one hundred. As construction progressed and sales increased, Opa-Locka was incorporated as a town in May 1926.

Following the devastating hurricane that struck Miami on September 17, 1926, the Florida Land Boom went bust and progress at Opa-Locka slowed. Glenn Curtiss decided in the summer of 1927 to put all

un-built plans for the young city on hold until the economy improved. As a result of further decline in land sales, the ensuing Great Depression of 1929, and Curtiss' death in 1930, virtually no buildings were executed after 1928. Muller, who remained in New York, went on to do other work, particularly in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

In 1942 Muller retired from full-time practice, closed his office, and went to work for George M. Sharp, Inc., as the interior designer for luxury ocean liners. This association lasted until 1955.

A member of the First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Maplewood, New Jersey, Bernhardt Muller designed a number of Christian Science churches, located mostly in the state of New York. The American Architect Directory of 1956 lists his most notable designs for these churches as those in Brooklyn (1918), Hempstead (1924), Forest Hills (1925), Bronxville (1929), and Flushing (1930), all in New York, as well a building for a new congregation in Opa-Locka (1930). Muller was noted for his design of small suburban houses in Short Hills, Maplewood, and Millburn, New Jersey, mostly of the Tudor English motif, which was characteristic of his own home in Millburn.

Muller was elected to membership in the American Institute of Architects (A.I.A.) in 1924; he was a member of the New York City chapter. Muller attained the status of Emeritus member of the A.I.A. in 1952. He was also a member of the Summit (New Jersey) Art Association.

Little of Bernhardt Muller's personal life is known. He was married in 1919 and his wife died in 1958. The couple had no children. According to Frank S. Bush, a friend of Muller's, he was known as a man of great foresight, unimpeachable reputation and integrity, in addition to being thoughtfully creative. In 1959, at age 80, Mr. Muller returned for a "Pioneer Days" celebration in Opa-Locka, his first visit to the city since the late 1920s. In an interview with Opa-Locka's newspaper, the North Dade Hub, Muller explained the original intent of his scheme for Opa-Locka:

In planning the city, our [Muller and Curtiss] idea was to avoid the only too-well known checkerboard idea of development with the visual square boxes planted on each lot, making a composite of architectural abortions with which we are surrounded on all sides in America.

What Bernhardt Muller found upon returning to Opa-Locka were not the charming, beautifully-designed Moorish Revival buildings he had created. In addition to many altered and demolished buildings of his design, he found a collection of plain, unappealing structures, much like any other American town could exhibit, which he sought to avoid in his work. In an address to the city's Chamber of Commerce, Muller attempted to convince its citizens to continue pursuing Curtiss' dream: to make a distinguished, livable city, unique character. His speech warned the city's officials to prevent Opa-Locka from becoming a "meaningless jumble of unrelated buildings, painted in hideous colors." While Muller's intent was to inspire the city to action, local officials were offended by the architect's criticism.

Muller left Opa-Locka, the city of his dreams ruined; he returned to Short Hills, New Jersey, where he continued his architectural practice until about 1962. At age of eighty-five, Bernhardt E. Muller died in September, 1964.

The site of the present city of Opa-locka was originally a hammock inhabited by the Seminole Indians called "Opatishawocka-locka." As Europeans arrived in South Florida, the hammock was variously named "Cook's Hammock" or "Ford's Hammock" by settlers. It came into the hands of James H. Bright, a West Dade cattle rancer, around 1917.

During the Land Boom of the 1920s, Bright's partner, Glenn Curtiss, chose the site of

Opatishawockalocka for development of a suburb. Curtiss shortened the Indian name to "Opa-locka" in 1921 for use as a street name in Hialeah. Late in 1925, the Opa-locka Company was formed.

Curtiss learned from his two previous city building ventures, Hialeah and Country Club Estates, that if he created a planned community where residents would live, work, shop, and play, his real estate development would be a success. His concept paralleled the "Garden City" movement of Britain's

Ebenezer Howard, who, in 1898, advocated the construction of new, self-sustaining towns outside large cities to alleviate congestion and uncontrolled growth.

To make his development profitable, Curtiss decided a distinct character was needed, something different from George Merrick's Coral Gables and other new developments in Florida. Curtiss hired Clinton MacKenzie as the town planner; MacKenzie had earlier designed the street arrangements for Coral Gables and Country Club Estates. Burnhardt E. Muller of New York City was employed as supervising architect. Muller's thematic proposal was the fantasy style depicted in The One Thousand and One Tales of the Arabian Nights. Glenn Curtiss became excited about the idea for his new community, and allowed Muller to adapt the stories in the book to the development's building plans. On December 11, 1925, the Opa-locka Company was formed, with Curtiss as controlling stockholder and his half-brother, G. Carl Adams, as president. Miami retailer Roddy Burdine also held stock in the company. Construction began in December 1925; the town was announced in local papers on January 14, 1926.

Bernhardt Muller exercised design control over the community's building program. His assistants, Carl Jensen and Paul Lieske, were based in Opa-locka; they coordinated on-site efforts and reported back to Muller in New York. Muller personally approved all designs, specified the finishes, and suggested landscaping. He is said to have personally supervised the mixing of pains for principal buildings belonging to the Opa-locka Company. Muller also altered the plans of businesses and home-owners which Curtiss had forwarded to New York; Curtiss insisted these private designs fit into the Moorish Revival motif prevailing in Opa-locka.

On May 14, 1926, the Municipal Charter for the Town of Opa-locka was voted upon at the fire and police station, adjacent to the Opa-locka Company's Administration Building; the vote for the incorporation was 28-0. The town continued to grow through the summer of 1926; the administration building was occupied late in July, and the town's Chamber of Commerce was formed in August.

Progress continued at Opa-locka and slowed only slightly after the hurricane of September 17-18, 1926. Damage in the town was widespread but not severe; the only buildings reported destroyed were two portable wooden schoolhouses and some workmen's housing. Other buildings suffered water damage, broken windows, missing tiles, and some toppled roof ornaments. With the relief and rebuilding efforts provided by Glenn Curtiss, Opa-locka took on a new spirit of building.

Late in 1926, civic improvements were completed, providing the residents with new facilities and services. The Archery Club opened and gave residents the unique sport of "Robin Hood Golf," a game introduced by Howard Hill, where players shot arrows at coconuts mounted on stakes placed in the holes of the golf course. The Olympic-sized Bathing Casino became the site of weekly aquatic shows, extravaganzas that included diving exhibitions there. The Zoo, Dade County's first, featured an aviary and bear pit, attracting many weekend visitors. A fire department and volunteer police force was formed, a postmaster designated, and several clubs organized.

A special census taken at Opa-locka on December 15, 1926 put the town's population at 251, but neglected to add 29 blacks counted separately, bringing the actual total to 280. Opa-locka grew little more after that, as the deepening economic depression and land "bust," caused by the September hurricane, finally began to affect the town, despite generous financial backing by Curtiss.

The new year opened with the town preparing for the "Arabian Nights Fantasy," organized in conjunction with the arrival of the first Seaboard Air Line Train. Curtiss diligently persuaded the railroad to build their line through his town, providing rights of way for tracks and a station. Dressed in Arabian costumes, the townspeople stopped the train on the afternoon of January 8, 1927. Turbanned horsemen riding white stallions, camel-riding sheiks and "women of the harem" greeted the train. John W. Martin, Governor of the State of Florida, and S. Davies Warfield, President of the Seaboard Air Line Rail Road, were presented with proclamations and a town-wide celebration.

On May 1, 1927, Opa-locka became a chartered city; by this, though, the decline brought about by the land "bust," had set in. Home construction ground to a halt, and the railroad curtailed its schedule. By midsummer Glenn Curtiss decided that all buildings then under construction would be completed, but all future works would be delayed until the economy improved. Long-range plans that included an Egyptian section, Chinese section, and an English village were put on indefinite hold. Nevertheless, Curtiss personally financed the maintenance needed on the Opa-locka Company's buildings for the next three years.

Glenn Curtiss' death in 1930 and the concurrent Great Depression ended any immediate plans to continue development of Opa-locka. As the economy worsened, buildings fell into disrepair, and outside influences, particularly the United States Navy, began to change Opa-locka.

In January 1931 a naval reserve base was commissioned on the site of Curtiss' Florida Aviation Camp, a bequest he made to increase employment in his city. However, the Navy had a far-reaching impact on Opa-locka that Glenn Curtiss would never have allowed. In 1932 the archery clubhouse was converted to the base's officer's club. In 1938 the Navy annexed the city's golf course and Cook's Hammock, bulldozing portions of the hammock Curtiss had set aside as a park, as well as the entire golf course. The Navy's impact during World War II was even more detrimental; low-cost housing, not in keeping with the city's Moorish style, was built for the base's personnel to accommodate the population explosion from 500 in 1940 to almost 5,200 just ten years later. The repeated decommissioning and reactivation of the base created severe fluctuations in Opa-locka's population, employment, and economic health. By 1986 Opa-locka had become a city of 15,000 enveloped by the Miami-Fort Lauderdale megalopolis. The once-distant suburb now had all the modern conveniences of a large city but its problems as well. Yet a new spirit arose to revive what has been lost of Glenn Curtiss' dream of the ideal city. The City Hall and the fire/police station were restored to their original conditions. The Hurt Building and Seaboard's train station were also planned to be restored as part of the community's resurgence. Eighteen building were selected for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, based on their architectural significance, and another forty-five buildings are being locally designated.

IAt is hoped that the Library's Muller Collection will be beneficial in assisting the restoration of Opa-Locka's treasure of Moorish Revival buildings, the largest such collection in the United States.

Administrative history / Biographical sketch

Note

A. Curtis Wilgus was born in Plattville, Wisconsin in 1898. Wilgus, an educator, bibliographer, historian, author, lecturer and delegate to several Pan American conferences, contributed to the development of Latin American studies in the United States. He developed an interest in Latin American history during his years as a graduate student, and received a doctorate in Latin American history from the University of Wisconsin. From 1924-30 Wilgus taught history at the University of South Carolina, established a night school and organized the South Carolina History Association.

From 1930-51, Wilgus held a teaching position at the George Washington University. He served as academic dean for two years and organized and directed the Center for Inter-American Studies. The Center, which opened in 1932, coordinated and promoted the teaching of Latin American affairs. Through the Center, Wilgus arranged annual seminar conferences. These symposium classes, taught by leading authorities, drew graduate students from around the country. Wilgus edited the seminar lectures, published

by the University Press in the following volumes: Modern Hispanic America, The Caribbean Area, Argentina, Brazil and Chile Since Independence, and Colonial Hispanic America.

As director, Wilgus also arranged exhibits of Latin American textiles and art, promoted Latin American studies in high school history clubs, and supplied high schools with books, pamphlets and photographs. He cultivated relations with Latin American diplomats and with other Pan American organizations, and organized the Center's "Pan American Day" programs.

Upon leaving George Washington University, Wilgus accepted a post at the University of Florida at Gainseville where he organized and directed another Latin American Center, the School of Inter-American Studies. Wilgus began another series of annual conferences and also edited lectures for publication. During his years at the University of Florida, Wilgus focused on Caribbean studies, organizing several conferences on this topic.

Throughout his career, Wilgus concentrated on bibliographic work. He viewed this scholarship as the key to the progress of Latin American studies. He prepared a number of special bibliographies published by the Pan American Union, and with other scholars he established the U.S. Office of Education's Inter-American Bibliographical and Library Association (IABLA), which published the Hispanic American Historical Review (HAHR). Wilgus also established the "Door to Latin America," a bibliographical segment published in several magazines, and later published separately as a pamphlet.

In addition to these activities, Wilgus lectured on historical and educational topics at more than fifty-two universities and colleges around the country. He wrote hundreds of works on Latin America including book reviews, articles, books, bibliographies, syllabi, maps, charts and other teaching materials. He edited World Affairs and The Caravan, and served as editor, or consultant on Latin America, to several publishing and encyclopedia companies. He corresponded with Latin American scholars from several different countries in order to coordinate activities. Wilgus also served as director or founder of a number of Latin American organizations. He received decorations and honors from various Latin American governments and organizations, and held important posts, serving as a consultant to the United States Department of State and the United States Office of Education. Wilgus was appointed by President John F. Kennedy to serve on the Board of Foreign Scholarships, and served with Vice President Nelson Rockefeller as coordinator for the Office of Inter-American Affairs.

In 1967 Wilgus left the University of Florida and moved to Miami where he continued to write and to act as a consultant on Latin America. He also participated in public relations and fund raising activities for various organizations. Wilgus sold his private library containing thousands of volumes to several universities in the South Florida area, and began works on other aspects of Latin America. He died in January, 1981.

Scope and content

The Bernhardt E. Muller Collection is a compendium of newspapers, architectural drawings, renderings, and photographs related to the design and construction of Opa-locka, Florida, the nation's largest concentration of Moorish Revival architecture. The city, incorporated in 1926, was the third Florida suburban real estate development of Glenn H. Curtiss, aviation pioneer and millionaire developer. Opa-Locka is the only known city in the United States that used Moorish Revival architecture as its original theme.

The contents of the Muller Collection fall into two distinct groups: architectural materials related directly to buildings designed by Muller and his staff; and supporting materials presumably collected by Muller that pertain to his work and the city of Opa-Locka. The vast majority of these materials are directly

concerned with Muller's work in the Opa-Locka and Miami area between 1925 and 1928. Supporting materials, including magazine extracts, brochures, and newspapers, date mostly from 1926 and 1927, with a few items from 1928, 1930, 1959, and 1960.

The Muller Collection's importance concerns its detailed documentation of the progress of Opa-Locka from a developer's dream to a constructed city. Opa-Locka was designed according to a specific theme: a combination of Arabic, Persian, and Moorish architectural styles. It is also the first known instance of a town developed from interpretations of a literary work, The One Thousand and One Tales of the Arabian Nights.

The collection contains construction documents, sketches, renderings, and photographs of Opa-Locka's first buildings. Extensive material exists on the designs of the Opa-Locka Company's administration building, now the City Hall, as well as plans for seventeen institutional and public projects, including the Archery Club, Bathing Casino, and Observation Tower, with unbuilt designs for a Golf Club, school, and Mid-Winter Southern States Exposition.

Eighteen commercial buildings are found in the Muller Collection, including many stores and apartments, as well as an unbuilt Chinese hotel. Sixty-three private residences of various sizes and designs are included in these drawings. It is probably that most of the work Bernhardt Muller ever did for Opa-Locka is contained in the collection. The majority of these drawings and materials date from 1926 to 1927, with only three drawings dated later than 1927.

The Muller Collection is significant for its documentation of the history and development of South Florida. The volume of work designed and media contents demonstrate and describe the magnitude of the Florida Land Boom, which peaked early in 1926, just as construction began on Opa-Locka.

The Muller Collection contains newspaper articles describing the hurricane that struck South Florida on September 17 and 18, 1926. The storm's direct effect was a loss of 372 lives and \$159 million in propery, but its long-term results included the onset of the land "bust" and an economic decline that preceded the Great Depression of the 1930's. There are numerous articles and photographs of the hurricane's destruction.

Notes

Title notes

Restrictions on access

The collection is open for research.

Conditions governing use

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Related material

See also Michael J. Maxwell Papers (ASM0229)

Information about related materials is available at http://proust.library.miami.edu/findingaids/ index.php?p=collections/controlcard&id=686

Other notes

- **<u>Publication status</u>**: Published
- **Description identifier**: ArchonInternalCollectionID:887

Series descriptions

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id10600	Item - Floor Plans	1926	6 8 44
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id10603	Item - Floor Plans	ND	6 8 45

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id10613	Item - Floor Plan	1926	6 8 50
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