

Flagler Grove

The Birth of Kendall – Part 3

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June, 2009

Trustworthy surveyor and railroad foreman, John J. Hinson was appointed manager of Henry Flagler's Kendal Grove in 1904 at the age of 35. The decision was made to clear a northwestern portion of the acreage for use as a citrus grove. The remaining strip of land around the south and east of the grove would remain undeveloped and serve as protection against disease, fire and "other objectionable features." The working grove would then be defined by SW 100th Street on the north, SW 104th Street on the south, Dixie Highway on the west and a line about 100 yards west of SW 72nd Avenue on the east.

Hinson, a large man standing over six feet tall and weighing over three hundred pounds, had the land cleared and set out the citrus grove on the tract in about 18 months. During the first three or four years of operation, Hinson reported personally to Flagler on all details of the work. Often en route to the Keys on his special coach, Flagler would stop at Kendall and take Hinson aboard, question him thoroughly on all matters pertaining to the grove, and put him off in Homestead to take the next train back to Kendall.

The first permanent resident of both Kendall and what would become the Village of Pinecrest, Hinson built his home in Kendal Grove on the southeast corner of Flagler Boulevard (SW 102nd Street) and US 1, facing the unpaved Dixie Highway. The home was cool and comfortable, with a wide porch that ran around the perimeter and windows and doors for every room opening onto the porch. Although no electricity ran into Kendal Grove, Hinson had a windmill that furnished running water to the two baths in the home, the citrus packing house and the worker's quarters, east of the house.

John Hinson became Dade's first County Commissioner of South Dade (District 4) on July 6, 1909, serving on the five-member board for seven and a half years. During prohibition and later during the depression, many of the men of Kendall supported their families by bootlegging. According to rumor, Mr. Hinson was a kingpin of the business, selling liquor on a wholesale basis, unmolested by authorities. No doubt his service as Commissioner encouraged the police to look the other way.

In June, 1913, Hinson, a widower since his first wife, Ada Lee, died in 1909, having had two sons and a daughter, married school teacher and widow, Elizabeth Dowling, who had two sons and a daughter of her own. Elizabeth gave up her newly-appointed position as Assistant Principal of Larkins School (South Miami) to marry John and manage the household. The six children were brought up in the Grove, completing Kendall's first family.

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Hinson built a small 20' by 20' store west of the tracks on Kendal Avenue (SW 77th Avenue) just north of Smoak Road (SW 100th Street). In April, 1914, Kendall's first Post Office began operation out of the Hinson store. Early on, Hinson's retail business consisted primarily of trade with the local Seminole Indians and occasional use of one of his four combination-lock post boxes.

Kendall's first resident, entrepreneur and County Commissioner, John J. Hinson, died in 1928 at the age of 59.

In October, 1920, wealthy citrus grove owner and real estate developer, George Edgar Merrick, purchased the 200 acres of Model Land Company now known as Flagler Grove for \$110,000 or \$550 an acre. At the time, Merrick was just beginning the development of Coral Gables on 1,600 acres of pinewoods and citrus grove just a few miles to the north. Merrick saw the potential of Kendall real estate and intended to develop Flagler Grove as his next project, but it was only six months later that he had a change of heart. In April of 1921, George Merrick found himself overextended with his land holdings and in order to concentrate his efforts on the completion of Coral Gables, sold Flagler Grove to his business partner, Richard H. Rice.

Dick Rice had come to Miami from Arizona as a teenager in 1903 with his father, Tom, and settled in the Shenandoah neighborhood of Miami. He attended Miami High, married Key West schoolteacher Naomi Mayolini in 1911 and made his fortune with his Coconut Grove Boat Yard and his father's citrus grove and real estate holdings.

Although by 1923 the Florida land boom was in full swing, with real estate prices skyrocketing in a flurry of northern investment, Dick Rice maintained the Flagler Grove as a profitable working citrus grove throughout the 1920s. Rice hired Bahamians to pick fruit who were paid by the box. Asa Smith, a leader in the Coconut Grove Bahamian community, worked for the grove for forty years and could look at a grove and accurately estimate the size and quality of the fruit, as well as how many boxes could be picked. Asa was responsible for gathering the harvesting crews together each season to pick the 70 acres by hand.

When the Great Hurricane of '26 arrived in September of that year, the town was destroyed, the boom had turned to bust and Miami had a three-year head start on the Great Depression. After the storm, Rice and Smith had the unpleasant task of resetting all 7,000 grapefruit trees, with the aid of a carload of two-by-fours. Fifty thousand boxes of unripened fruit lay rotting on the ground, unfit for sale.

In the depths of the Great Depression in 1933, Dick and Naomi Rice moved into the Hinson House in Flagler Grove with their four children, Dick Jr., Billy, Ruth and Bobby. Naomi pulled some strings with a friend whose husband worked for FP&L and had electricity brought into the home.

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In addition to the wholesale business, the Rices ran a roadside fruit stand from the property, and Naomi sold decorative boxes with a jar of homemade guava jelly in each box. They did a brisk business, especially during the tourist season. Dick Rice tried his hand as a restaurateur, opening the Village Barn Grill in a log cabin style building and serving such specialties as squab, frog legs, and lobster from Italian and French chefs. Unfortunately, customers could not be convinced to travel so far south of the city for gourmet fare.

Just as the trees were recovering from the 1926 storm, the Category 5 Labor Day Hurricane of 1935 hit Islamorada, decimating Flagler's railroad to Key West and undoing all of Rice's grove restoration. The weary family offered Flagler Grove for sale at \$30,000, but in the depths of the depression, got no offers.

In January, 1937, the Grove was finally sold to realtor, Kenneth S. Keyes of the Keyes Company, who created Flagler Grove Estates, Inc., developing it into small groves and home sites with two-bedroom, one-bath homes on acre lots for \$5,750. Under the motto, *"The Gateway to Better Living at Lower Cost,"* Keyes promised in his 1941 brochure that, *"Here are ideal country home sites that offer you breathing space, privacy, and above all, economical, happy living. The land is high, and the soil deep and exceptionally fertile. Here you can raise flowers, vegetables, avocados, limes, mangos, oranges, grapefruit and other tropical fruits. Several homes have already been built by people you would be glad to have as neighbors."*

The site of the Hinson Home was sold to zoo animal broker, Alton V. Freeman in August of 1938 and was transformed from pioneer home and packing house into a world-famous tourist attraction, Miami's Rare Bird Farm.

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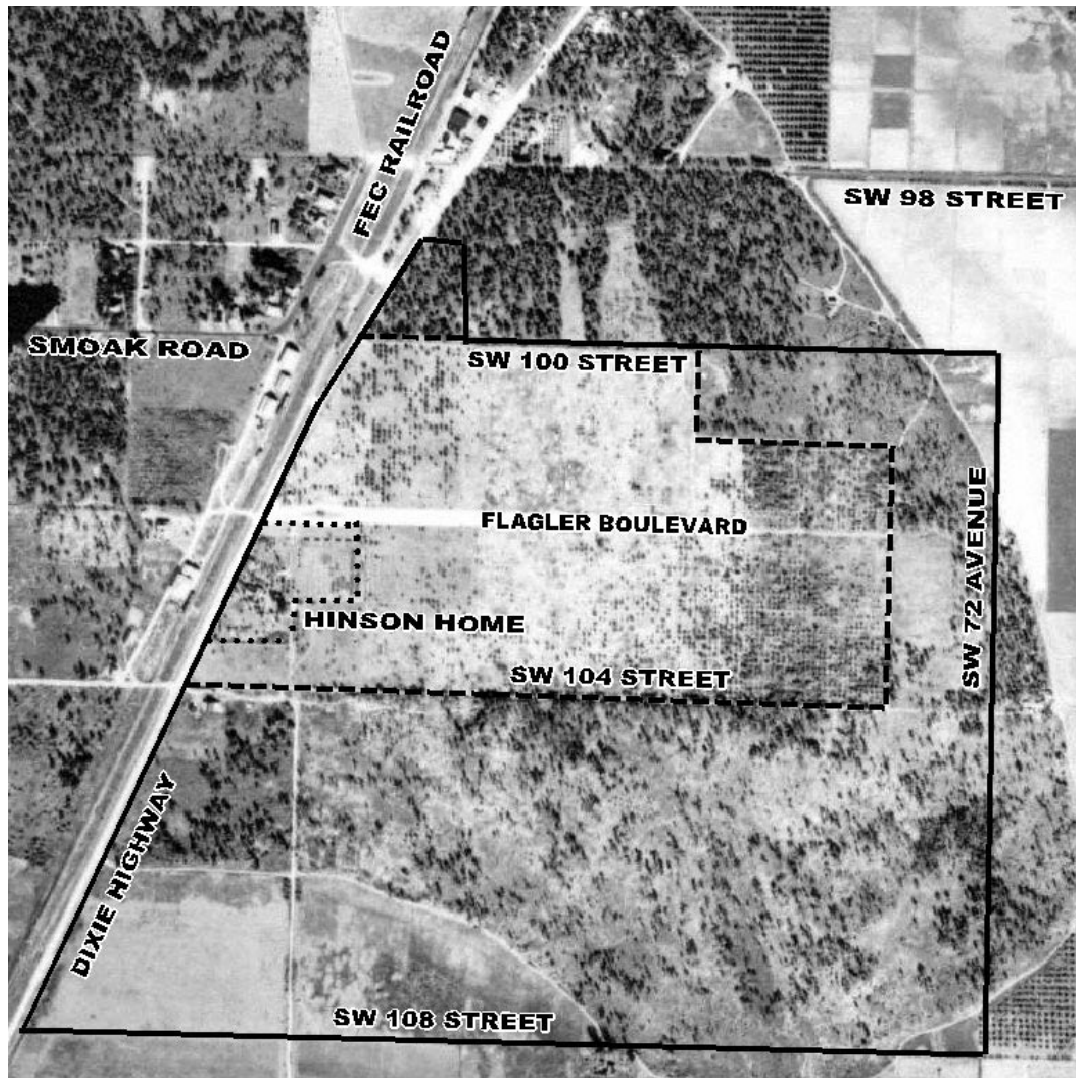
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1938 aerial map illustrating the Flagler Grove property – defined by a solid line, the working grove – defined by a dashed line and the Hinson Property – defined by a dotted line. By the time of this photograph, the Grove had been badly damaged by the twin blows of two major hurricanes within nine years.

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Oil-burning smudge pot, used to protect temperature-sensitive citrus groves from freezing temperatures.



Grave marker of John Hinson's first wife, Ada Lee, located at Pinewood (Cocoplum) Cemetery in Coral Gables.

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The 1926 Hurricane created a 12 foot storm surge and left 55,000 FPL customers without power for days. Many of the estimated 325 to 800 lives that were lost, perished after the eye passed over Miami Beach and downtown for 35 minutes, tempting residents to roam outside, unaware of the devastating back side of the passing storm.



The '26 Hurricane brought massive destruction well inland, flipping wooden homes like playing cards and leveling citrus groves.

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George Edgar Merrick



Dick Rice

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Merrick had big plans for developing Flagler Groves, but was forced to sell to Dick Rice in 1921 in order to complete the development of Coral Gables.