Miami, Boom and Bust

The first people in South Florida were Paleo-Indians. They discovered the area more than 10,000 years ago. Hundreds of years before Christopher Columbus discovered the New World, the Tequesta Indians lived there. Abundant food supplied from the land and sea made life easy.

Miami took its name from the Miami River. The river was named for a Tequesta Indian word believed to mean "big water." The Tequesta had Miami to themselves until the Spanish claimed it in the 1500s.

Pedro Menendez de Aviles and his men visited the Tequesta settlement in 1566. Spanish settlers built a mission at the mouth of the Miami River by 1567. They built a fort in 1743. Many Spanish colonists, along with residents of other lands, established homes and farms along the Miami River and Biscayne Bay.

People came from the Bahamas to South Florida and the Keys to hunt for treasure from the ships that crashed onto the treacherous Great Florida reef. Some accepted Spanish land offers along the Miami River. At about the same time, the Seminole Indians arrived, along with a group of runaway slaves. In 1821, the United States purchased Florida from Spain.

In the 1830s, Richard Fitzpatrick bought land on the Miami River from the Bahamians. He operated a successful plantation where he cultivated sugar cane, bananas, corn, and tropical fruit. Fort Dallas was located on Fitzpatrick's Plantation on the north bank of the river.

The area became a war zone during the Second Seminole War. Most non-Indian residents were soldiers stationed at Fort Dallas. It was the most devastating Indian war in American history. It caused almost a total loss of population in the Miami area.

After the Second Seminole War ended in 1842, Fitzpatrick's nephew, William English, reestablished the plantation in Miami. He charted the "Village of Miami" on the south bank of the Miami River and sold several plots of land.

The Third Seminole War (1855-1858) was not as destructive as the second one. Even so, it slowed down the settlement of southeast Florida. At the end of the war, a few of the soldiers stayed. Some of the Seminole remained in the Everglades. However as late as the 1890s, only a handful of families made their homes in Miami.
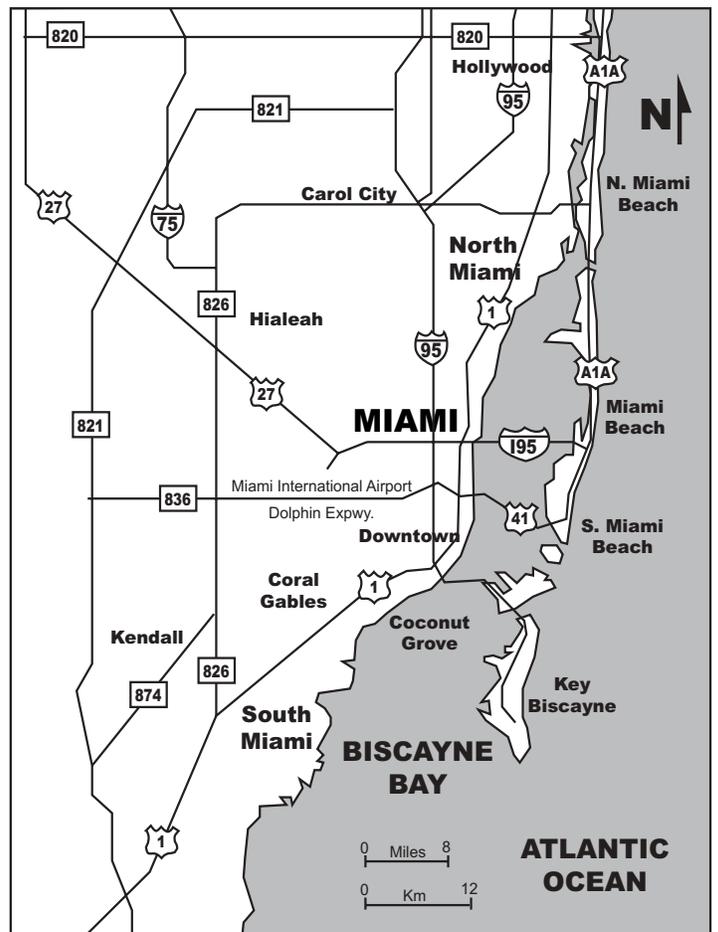
Map of the local Miami area.

The scene began to change as a few wealthy and influential pioneers arrived. Julia Tuttle and William and Mary Brickell had a real impact on the Miami area. In 1895, a record freeze hit most of north Florida. At the time, Henry Flagler's railroad was bringing thousands of rich northerners to sunny Florida. Flagler met with Tuttle and received fresh orange blossoms to assure him that the Miami area was frost-free. Flagler agreed to extend his railroad into Miami. In exchange, Tuttle and the Brickells provided Flagler with land.

On April 13, 1896, the first train entered Miami. The city incorporated that same year. One year later, Flagler opened the famous Royal Palm Hotel in Miami. It had five stories, more than 400 rooms, and attracted the rich and famous.

All kinds of people came to Miami. Most of the early merchants were Jewish. Blacks provided the primary labor force for the building of Miami. Black Americans and Bahamians made up one-third of the city's people. The city's black residents were allowed to purchase land only in one area of Miami. As a result, Colored Town, later called Overtown, developed.

By the turn of the century, the State of Florida began draining the Everglades in order to provide more usable land. Speculators bought millions of acres from the state. They marketed the property all over the country. Sometimes investors paid for land that was actually underwater.

The Miami River empties into Biscayne Bay at the heart of what is now the Miami central business district. In 1913, a bridge was built across Biscayne Bay to create a man-made beach paradise offshore of Miami. The bay was dredged and a sandbar became Miami Beach.

Miami's tourism industry began to grow. Brickell Avenue became "Millionaire's Row" when many wealthy visitors built sprawling vacation homes there. One home, Villa Vizcaya, is a grand mansion built in the Italian Renaissance style. Built between 1914 and 1916, it employed ten percent of Miami's population during its construction. By the Roaring Twenties, the city's population had soared to 30,000. Coral Gables, Miami Shores, Lemon City, and Coconut Grove all became part of the city in 1925.
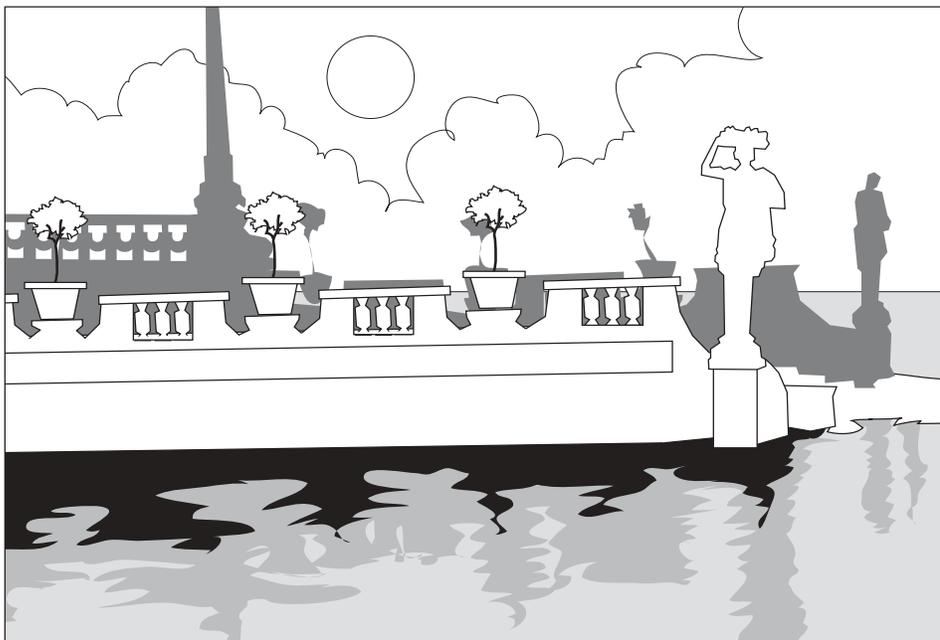
By 1926, the real estate boom was over. In September, a massive hurricane swept through. A depression followed. The Great Depression had come to Miami three years earlier than to the rest of the nation.

James Deering's home, Viscaya is surrounded with sculpture, gardens, and an ornate dock.