

Designation Report

**“Villa Serena”
The William Jennings Bryan Residence
3115 Brickell Avenue**



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Passed and
Adopted On: 12/4/2007

Resolution: 2007-67

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I. General Information

Name of Resource or Historic Name:

“Villa Serena”

The William Jennings and Mary Bryan Residence

Location:

3115 Brickell Avenue

Miami, FL 33129

Present Owner:

Mr. and Mrs. Gaspar Nagymihaly

3115 Brickell Avenue

Miami, FL 33129

Present Use:

Private Residential

Zoning District:

Residential/Single-Family (R1), with an NCD-3 and SD 18.1 overlay, designated as an Environmental Preservation District

Tax Folio Number Per Property Appraiser:

01-4139-001-2710

Boundary Description:

The 200 feet lying south of Lot 101, Block B, Brickell’s Flagler Subdivision, as recorded in Plat Book 5, Page 44 of the Public Records of Dade County, Florida.

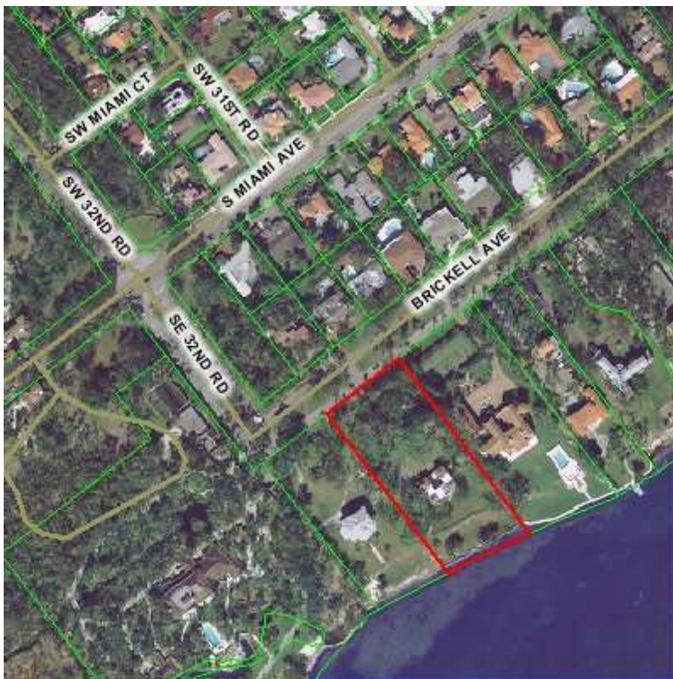
Classification:

Historic Site

3115 Brickell Avenue, Miami, FL 33129



Source: Miami-Dade County Property Appraiser, 2007



II. Significance

Date of Construction: 1913
Architect: unknown
Builder: unknown

Statement of Significance:

The Villa Serena property, home to legendary American William Jennings Bryan, has frontage on both Brickell Avenue and Biscayne Bay. This residence is a very early example of a palatial estate. This masonry home was fashioned in a Spanish Mediterranean style, utilizing groups of large windows and incorporating a courtyard space to take maximum advantage of the bay breezes, and provide outdoor access.

The size and proportions of the estate are typical of a period in Miami's history when mansions were commonplace along Brickell Avenue. The quality and size of the homes earned Brickell Avenue the sobriquet "Millionaire's Row". Villa Serena is one of very few of these magnificent structures remaining.

William Jennings Bryan purchased the property in 1912 from Mary Brickell, an influential Miami pioneer, for about \$30,000. Construction took place during 1913, and was almost finished in December of that year.¹ The structure was designed to fulfill Mr. Bryan's wish that it would stand forever. Its first test occurred in September 1926 when the great hurricane which flattened most of Miami left Villa Serena's poured concrete structure virtually untouched.

Miami's Nationally-Prominent Citizen

William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925) was born in Salem, Illinois and began a life dedicated to public service, becoming the first Democratic congressman from Nebraska. Bryan was nominated for U.S. president in 1896, 1900, and 1908 but lost each of the elections. Bryan also served as Secretary of State under President Woodrow Wilson's administration from 1913-1915.

In 1925, towards the very end of his life, Bryan earned notoriety as the prosecutor in the famous Scopes "Monkey" Trial, which tested the state of Tennessee's right to prohibit the teaching of evolution. While Bryan won the contest, the decision was later overturned on appeal.

¹ Villa Vizcaya, the James Deering estate was completed in 1916.

² "William Jennings Bryan, Miamian," *The Miami News*. June 18, 1988.

Bryan was lauded for his oratory which held listeners spellbound. He gained an enormous popularity with the American people through the publication of his weekly newspaper called *The Commoner*. Bryan championed the cause of the average American criticizing the influence of the wealthy on government policy.

William Jennings Bryan and his wife Mary E. Baird arrived in Miami on November 23, 1912, "amid great fanfare, and immediately became the center of attention. People sought his opinion on every matter, whether worldly or local."² His wife had come to Florida in advance seeking a place where they could build their winter home.

Starting on the west coast and finding no parcels that suited her, Mrs. Bryan traveled through Orlando and then southward to Miami. When she got off the train in Miami and saw the blooming bougainvillea covering the station and smelled the balmy air, she knew this was the place to begin "investigations." The *Miami Metropolis* reported in January of 1912 that Miami was "being honored by the presence of Mrs. William J. Bryan, wife of the distinguished Commoner, who will remain here until the arrival of Col. Bryan."³

The Perfect Location

Mrs. Bryan hired a land surveyor, and together they found a piece of property with 209 feet of shoreline along Biscayne Bay. The land had been homesteaded by William and Mary Brickell, and was virtually an arborist's dream. The property had over eighty different trees and shrub varieties, including gumbo limbo, wisteria, avocado, mango and other tropical fruit trees. The growth was so dense, that one had to use an axe to chop the way through the property. Mr. Bryan left much of the natural growth of the property, for "nature is the best landscape gardener after all is said and done."⁴

A Castle Arises

It was Mrs. Bryan who actually sketched the first drafts of the plans for the home, which was patterned after an old Spanish Castle. Mr. Bryan would name the property "Villa Serena" because he looked upon it as a retreat where he could find rest from the turbulence of his political life.

² "William Jennings Bryan, Miamian," *The Miami News*. June 18, 1988.

³ "Mrs. W.J. Bryan Now in Miami as a Visitor," *Miami Metropolis*, January 12, 1912

⁴ "Bryan Home Nearly Completed," *Miami Daily Metropolis*, April 11, 1913.

A *Miami Daily Metropolis* article dated April 11, 1913 stated that the Bryan home was nearly completed, with the roof being painted and the floor being laid. The contract called for completion by July 1, though the contractor was busily working to have it finished beforehand. On December 19, 1913, the Bryans left Washington D.C. for Miami for their first visit to their new home. The home took roughly eight months to build.

The building and grounds were developed at the enormous cost of \$15,000 (by 1913 standards). The house covered an area of 60 feet x 60 feet, and was one story in height, featuring a two-story tower at each corner, which would be used for the bedrooms. The decorative Cuban tile used throughout the house was handpicked by the Bryans directly at the factories and the four fireplaces that were finished in rare Italian marble were rescued from a demolished mansion in Washington D.C. The home was stuccoed in white with a pale green Cuban tile roof.

A rooftop garden was built between the front towers, and numerous radish beds were created on the grounds for Mrs. Bryan was particularly fond of them. Along the roadway, a beautiful stone wall was built, which Mr. Bryan personally helped build, working side by side with the laborers he had hired.

Villa Serena: An Epicenter of Activity

In its heyday, the Bryans entertained such noteworthy figures as President Warren G. Harding and Vice President Dawes; Premier Venizelos of Greece; renowned jeweler and designer Louis Comfort Tiffany; and multi-millionaire neighbor James Deering who owned the farm machinery company International Harvester. Mrs. Bryan would later recall, "Our guests were many and distinguished. All grades of political friends from the lowest to the highest were welcomed."⁵

Bryan was very active locally, promoting the sale of real estate for George Merrick, the founder of Coral Gables. Mr. Bryan gave lectures everyday during the winter of 1924 at the Venetian Pool on the merits of South Florida living and the value of owning property in Coral Gables. A devout Presbyterian, he would regularly give a Sunday Bible sermon to large crowds in Miami's Royal Palm Park, and was even known to address hundreds gathered on his own lawn from the balcony over Villa Serena's door facing the bay.

⁵ *Miami Herald*, 1971

In 1924 Mr. Bryan offered to sell Villa Serena to the City of Miami, proposing that it would be perfect for entertaining distinguished guests. Valued at \$250,000, Mr. Bryan said he would accept payment in city bonds. The deal was never made.

Subsequent Ownerships

William Jennings Bryan died on July 26, 1925, just a few days after attending court in Dayton, Tennessee for the Scopes Trial. The house was sold to a Mr. Sam Carver at a value between \$175,000 and \$250,000. Mr. Carver lived in the home for several years but was eventually unable to pay the financial obligations.

A 1931 *Miami Herald* article headline stated that “Mrs. W. J. Matheson Buys Villa Serena from Bryan Estate” for the sum of \$65,000. She planned to make the estate her home for ten months out of the year, but no other record can be found of her living there (for example, she is not listed as an owner during those years in City directories).

In 1932, during a period of nationwide economic downturn, the Bryan’s children, William Jennings Bryan, Jr. and Mrs. Ruth Bryan Owen (as co-executors of the estate), sold the home to William F. Cheek for \$30,000, well below its actual value. William Cheek was a grandson of Joel Cheek, the founder of the Maxwell House Coffee Company. The house stayed in the possession of Mr. Cheek until his death in 1970 at the age of 87. His estate sold the property for \$275,000 to Mr. Gaspar Nagymihaly in 1971.

Villa Serena still stands today, a testament to the great architects and builders of Miami’s early history, and reminds us of a long gone era when Millionaire’s Row was where Miami’s notable residents lived and entertained.

Application of Criteria for Designation:

The residence at 3115 Brickell has significance insofar as it relates to the historic and architectural heritage of Miami; and possesses integrity of design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. The property is eligible for designation under the following criteria (as numbered in Section 23-4(a) :

1. *It is associated in a significant way with the life of a person important in the past.*
Villa Serena was designed and built for William Jennings Bryan, famous orator, former Secretary of State, and a three-time candidate for the United States' Presidency. Villa Serena was Bryan's haven in Miami until 1925, when the estate was sold to Samuel Carver and Jennings Bryan moved into a home in the southern Coconut Grove area called Marymont. Mr. Bryan died within a year of buying Marymont, making Villa Serena his only true place of residence during the 13 years that he resided in Miami.

3. *Exemplifies the historical, cultural, political, economical or social trends of the community.*
Villa Serena is part of what was then called "Millionaires' Row." It was in these homes where political alliances were forged, great speeches were written, and where many social events, attended by prominent politicians and socialites alike, were held.

5. *Embodies those distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or method of construction.*
The quality of the construction is evidenced by how little has changed on the property through the years. Subject to the ravages of major hurricanes through its long history, (including the deadly storm of September, 1926) Villa Serena exemplifies the type of quality building construction from a time when attention to detail was paramount and skilled laborers practiced their craft.

7. *Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship of outstanding quality or which represent a significant innovation or adaptation to the South Florida environment.*
The use of courtyards was a typical detail of Spanish and Mediterranean style architecture. The open courtyard allowed for air circulation and direct access from the inside to the outside. South Florida's similar climate led to the incorporation of the courtyard as a major organizing detail in Mediterranean

Revival style architecture. The large window openings were also specifically designed to encourage maximum ventilation.

III. Description

Setting:

The two acre rectangular site on which Villa Serena rests is covered with dense growth. Royal Poincianas and a large array of palms have masked the residence from the street. A three foot coral rock wall with a heavy wrought iron fence rising a total of eight feet is covered with bougainvillea vines and runs the 200-foot length of the property's street frontage. The entry gates are original and are simple heavy wrought iron Spanish gates which match the fence. The posts which support the gates are coral rock and have concrete plates in them which read "Villa" on one and "Serena" on the other.

Exterior Description:

Villa Serena is a two story, steel reinforced, poured concrete structure finished in smooth stucco. The exterior of the home has been painted white ever since its completion in 1913. The house is fashioned in a Spanish Mediterranean style with low hipped roofs covered with clay tile, large overhangs to cool breezes, and an interior courtyard.

The original house plan formed a "U" shape with the open end facing Brickell. This "open" side of the courtyard is actually partially closed off by a concrete curtain wall punctured by an archway, which is the entrance to the courtyard. The main façade of the house faces east to Biscayne Bay. This façade originally featured two story wings which were joined by a one story connection. A later renovation added a second story to the center bay. The original decorative parapet was retained in the design of the new second story addition. Wrought iron details on the gate and main door are of Spanish design and were purchased in Cuba in the 1910s.

On the main façade is a doorway punctuated by a raised pediment designed to match the basket-weave pattern of the home's four chimneys. To either side of this central doorway are matching bands of one-over-one double-hung windows.

The home's architectural expression is very horizontal. This is reinforced by the low pitch of the roof and the banding of windows, which were designed for maximum ventilation.

Alterations/Additions:

William Jennings Bryan resigned as Secretary of State in 1915, fearing that the administration he was serving would bring the country to war. After his resignation, the Bryans made Villa Serena their permanent home, rather than simply their winter retreat. In order to accommodate their year-round residency, a number of changes were made to the house. These changes included the enclosure of the original rooftop garden for a library (turning that whole section of the house into a two story building,) the addition of a breakfast room, and the transformation of part of the porch into a sitting room.⁶

More changes were made to the structure in the early 1930s, when Villa Serena was sold to Mrs. Harriet Torrey Matheson for \$65,000. Mrs. Matheson was negotiating with architects for alterations and additions including a new two car garage with servant's quarters.

When W.F. Cheek purchased the property, it was reported that he was going to move into Villa Serena immediately and that he had ordered extensive improvements to the property, but details were not given on how much of those improvements were to the actual home.

⁶ “William Jennings Bryan, Now Miamian, Tells The Herald of Magic City’s Wonderful Future,” *The Miami Herald*, November 23, 1920

IV. Planning Context

Present Trends and Conditions:

Villa Serena is one of the few remaining estates on the bay side of Brickell Avenue which was once known as “Millionaires’ Row.” Privately owned and relatively unaltered over the years, the home stands as a testament to the grand estate days of Miami’s early history.

The desirability for waterfront lots in Miami has always been paramount, especially for higher density residential projects. However, the property is already located within an NCD-3 (Neighborhood Conservation District 3), which applies certain zoning regulations as it relates to demolition and rebuilding on the property.

Available Benefits:

In June, 2007 the City of Miami enacted the Ad-Valorem Tax Incentive for Historic Properties, which provides for a tax exemption for 100% of the improvement costs for the rehabilitation of a locally designated historic property. The exemption may be granted by the City Commission for a period of up to ten years. If a sizable addition were approved for Villa Serena, it is probable that the new assessed value would significantly increase. The tax exemption would allow the owner to maintain the value of the previous assessment (before improvements) for Miami’s ad valorem tax levy. Over a ten year period, the tax savings could be significant.

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