

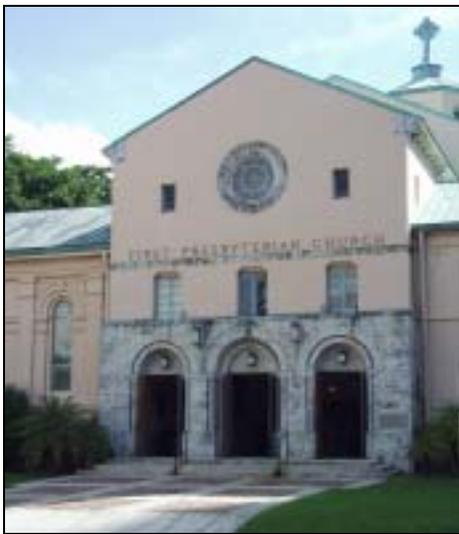
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# FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

609 BRICKELL AVENUE

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## Designation Report



City of Miami

REPORT OF THE CITY OF MIAMI  
PRESERVATION OFFICER  
TO THE HISTORIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION BOARD  
ON THE POTENTIAL DESIGNATION OF THE  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
AS A HISTORIC SITE

Prepared by Ellen Uguccione for Janus Research,  
Consultant

Prepared by Sarah E. Eaton, Preservation Officer

Passed and  
Adopted on \_\_\_\_\_

Resolution No. \_\_\_\_\_

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I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Historic Name:

First Presbyterian Church

Current Name:

First Presbyterian Church

Location:

609 Brickell Avenue  
Miami, Florida 33131

Present Owner:

The First Presbyterian Church  
609 Brickell Avenue  
Miami, FL 33131

Present Use:

Religious

Zoning District:

Sd-5

Tax Folio Number:

01-0210-030-1010

Boundary Description:

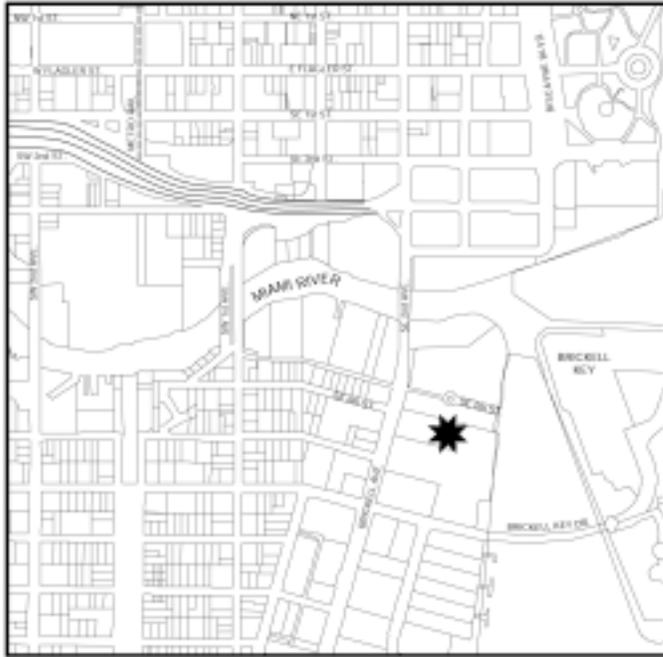
Lot 2 of Block 103 of the plat of MARY BRICKELL'S ADDITION, as recorded in Plat Book B at Page 113, of the Public Records of Miami-Dade County, Florida.

Classification:

Historic Site

# FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

609 BRICKELL AVENUE



location



site plan

## II. SIGNIFICANCE

### Specific Dates:

1949

### Architect:

Lester Geisler

### Builder/Contractor:

Unknown

### Statement of Significance:

The First Presbyterian Church is architecturally significant because it represents an exceptionally fine example of late Mediterranean Revival styling in Miami. The church building is also significant for its important historical associations with the city's oldest and most influential religious group.

The exterior of the First Presbyterian Church embodies the distinctive characteristics of the Mediterranean Revival architectural style, a popular design expression throughout the 1920s and 1930s in South Florida. Its appearance as late as 1949 constitutes a rarity in the use of such a style at mid-century. The visual composition of the church is architecturally noteworthy for its stylistic features and use of local materials.

The First Presbyterian Church houses Miami's oldest congregation, having been organized in April 1896. The new congregation first worshipped in a tent at what is now the corner of North Miami Avenue and SE 2<sup>nd</sup> Street. Henry M. Flagler, the man responsible for providing a railroad link to Miami, donated the lots for the construction of a permanent church building in 1900. Flagler, himself a Presbyterian, also provided all the money for the actual building costs of both the church and manse. That church, located at the corner of East Flagler Street and SE 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, served the congregation until the 1940s.

The First Presbyterian Church was made nationally known by William Jennings Bryan, who was a member of the church and taught a Sunday School class there. Bryan, a U.S. Congressman and Secretary of State under Woodrow Wilson, became a political evangelist and fundamentalist Christian. He worked for passage of state laws preventing the teaching of

Darwinism and, in 1925, acted as prosecutor in the famous Scopes Monkey Trial, in which a Tennessee schoolteacher challenged just such a law.

The new and present church building was completed in 1949 and is the only remaining structure associated with this important early congregation. The present church building houses what is know as the Flagler Memorial Chapel, whose interior contains salvaged portions of the original First Presbyterian Church building constructed in 1900.

Relationship to Criteria for Designation:

As stated above, the First Presbyterian Church has significance in the historical and architectural heritage of the City of Miami; possesses integrity of design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association; and is eligible for designation under the following criteria:

3. Exemplifies the historical, cultural, political, economic, or social trends of the community.

The First Presbyterian Church houses Miami's oldest congregation, having been organized in April 1896. While this is the third location for the congregation, it has met continuously since its founding. Henry M. Flagler, the man responsible for providing a railroad link to Miami, provided the lots and funding for the erection of a permanent church building in 1900. The First Presbyterian Church was made nationally known by William Jennings Bryan, who was a member of the church and taught a Sunday School class there.

5. Embodies those distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or method of construction.

The First Presbyterian Church represents an exceptionally fine example of late Mediterranean Revival styling in Miami with elements of the Romanesque mode. While the Mediterranean Revival style was popular throughout the 1920s and 1930s in South Florida, its appearance as late as 1949, the year the First Presbyterian Church was constructed, is rare at mid-century. The visual composition of the church is architecturally noteworthy for its stylistic features and use of local materials.

### III. DESCRIPTION

#### Present and Original Appearance:

#### Setting:

The First Presbyterian Church is situated on a three-acre parcel of land that is located between Brickell Avenue and Biscayne Bay, between SE 6<sup>th</sup> Street and SE 7<sup>th</sup> Street. The church faces west onto Brickell Avenue. High-rise office and condominium buildings surround it.

A paved driveway runs along the south edge of the lot to a large parking lot on the east side of the church, abutting Biscayne Bay.

#### Exterior Description:

The First Presbyterian Church is a four-story masonry edifice executed in the Mediterranean Revival style of architecture with elements of the Romanesque mode. The church building was designed to house 1,200 worshippers and was completed in 1949. The First Presbyterian Church is a cruciform-plan building supported by a masonry structural system. The exterior walls are clad with a combination of stucco and native keystone, and its roof is covered with standing seam copper. A two-story school building addition is located directly behind the church and is physically connected to the main structure.

The exterior of First Presbyterian Church is characterized by a projecting central section that features three arched entrance portals and terminates in a gable roof. The central gable is perpendicular to the wings of the two-story sections that flank it on the north and south. Decorative brackets emphasize the shallow eaves of the roof overhang. The wing to the north of the entrance is the Flagler Memorial Chapel, whose interior contains salvaged portions of the original First Presbyterian Church building constructed in 1900. The chapel is the most decorated portion of the church, and features compound arches in relief carried on rectangular pilasters that frame the stained glass windows. The exterior actually recreates the exterior of the 1900 church structure.

The wing that extends to the south of the central entrance reflects a simpler architectural vocabulary tied more to then-current preferences in style. The two-story section contains three evenly spaced windows on the first and second floor. Their only embellishment is a cutout in the lintel of the second floor windows, and a simple band course that divides the stories.

The sanctuary of the church rises to a height of four stories and terminates in a gable roof running in an east-west direction. The side elevations feature

broad planes of stuccoed surface embellished by bands and moldings of cast stone. Narrow windows that are framed by an arch springing from pilasters in relief are regularly spaced along the side elevations. The altar is situated within a semicircular apse end, and behind it is a two-story portion that contains meeting rooms.

Interior Description:

The interior decoration of the church is rather simple except for that found within the Flagler Memorial Chapel. The woodwork and decorative ornament comprising the chapel's interior were brought to their new site from the original 1900 church building, which stood at the corner of East Flagler Street and SE 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. The chapel's interior contains old oak pews, ornately carved window surrounds that delineate the arched stained glass windows, and a carved balcony to the rear of the chapel.

The interior of the main sanctuary is rather austere in that its walls are all smooth plaster and its ceiling is covered with original acoustical tiles. The most outstanding features of the main sanctuary are the stained glass windows, which stand out against the plain surrounding surfaces. The interior and exterior of the church have not been altered since the building was completed.

Contributing Structures and/or Landscape Features:

The contributing structure within the site is the First Presbyterian Church. Also considered as contributing is the interior of the main sanctuary and the Flagler Memorial Chapel. Contributing landscape features include all specimen trees on the site.



First Presbyterian Church  
609 Brickell Avenue  
Northwest (front) façade  
2002

### III. PLANNING CONTEXT

#### Present Trends and Conditions:

The First Presbyterian Church is situated on a three-acre parcel of land that is located between Brickell Avenue and Biscayne Bay. The property has been appraised at more than \$25 million. The congregation has dwindled in size to about 130 parishioners, an alarming drop from the 1,400 parishioners who belonged to the church just 15 years ago. Consequently, the long-term future of the church building is uncertain.

#### Preservation Incentives:

The ongoing maintenance of the property encompassed by the First Presbyterian Church is a daunting financial burden for the members who comprise the congregation. The building and grounds are a rare exception to the streetscape of Brickell Avenue's high-rise office and condominium buildings. The rarity of the resource combined with the quality of its architecture and history creates a rare opportunity to save a most unique resource. While it may no longer serve the immediate needs of the Presbyterian congregation, there may be other opportunities for its use by another religious affiliation.

Should that not be a feasible alternative, there may be adaptive use possibilities for the space to be utilized in some other manner. One available financial incentive for substantial rehabilitation projects conducted according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards that could include the adaptation of the building for other uses, is the property tax abatement program currently available in Miami-Dade County.

V. Bibliography

Kleinberg, Howard. "Early Church Met in a Tent," Miami News, 29 January 1983, p. 4-C.

"160 Churches Include All Denominations," Miami Herald, 28 July 1929, p. 22.

State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Archives, History and Records Management. "Florida Master Site File: Historic Site Data Sheet" for 609 Brickell Avenue, "Statement of Significance."

Taft, Adon. "One of City's Oldest Churches May Sell Brickell Site," Miami Herald, 30 May 1983.