

The Spanish River Papers

WINTER 1983

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OLD CITY HALL, HOME OF BOCA RATON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Jeanne Nixon Baur, Artist

A report to the membership of

**Boca Raton Historical Society, Inc.**

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## AFRICA, U.S.A.

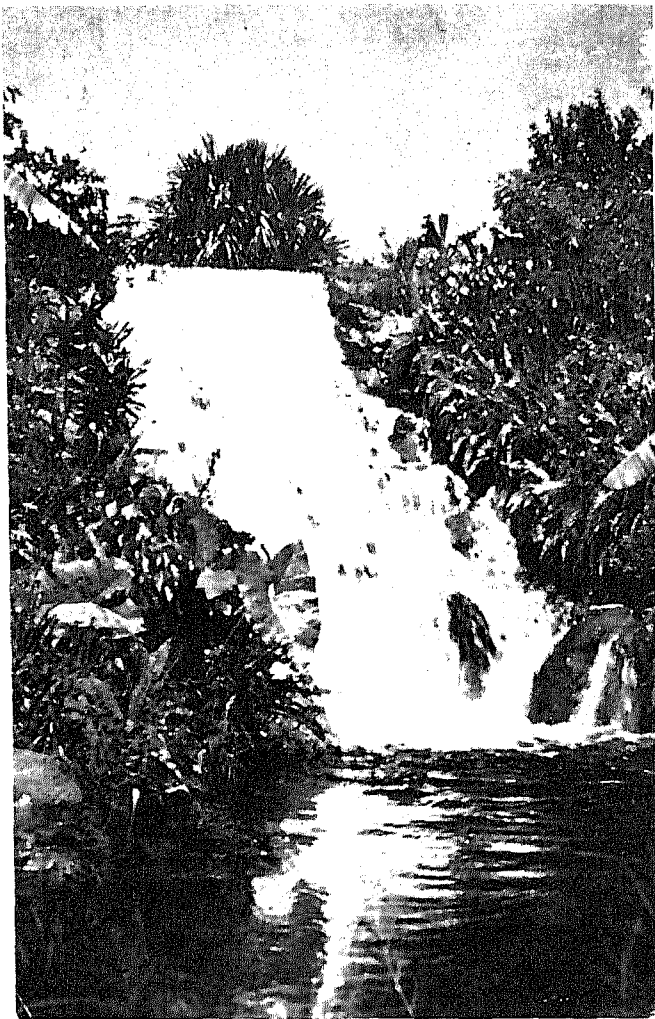
RESIDENTS OF BOCA RATON'S CAMINO GARDENS live on land which once housed Africa, U.S.A., one of America's best-known tourist attractions. Today Africa, U.S.A. is almost forgotten, but in the 1950s up-and-down the East Coast of the country signs directed travelers to Boca Raton and its small piece of re-created Africa. The 1 August 1960 edition of *Life*, then still a mass-circulation weekly pictorial magazine, carried a cover picture of the Boca Raton attraction. The story, on American "theme parks . . . aimed at being educational," gave as much coverage to Africa, U.S.A. as to Walt Disney's new California Disneyland. Moreover, on a typical day as many as two thousand tourists made the "sociable safari" amongst the freely roaming African animals.

Africa, U.S.A., the creation of John D. Pedersen, a Fort Lauderdale real estate investor who had a life-long love affair with the "dark continent," opened in 1953 with hundreds of animals and a lushly landscaped tropical garden. It closed just eight years later in September 1961. Although remaining popular with tourists, the park fell victim to the population pressures of the developing Gold Coast and the African red tick.

Neighbors living in a new housing development to the south of the amusement park complained of the traffic and noise. Other new subdivisions to the west of the attraction convinced Boca Raton officials to extend Camino Real. To acquire the right-of-way they condemned some Africa, U.S.A. land. Then federal agricultural agents discovered African red ticks at the tourist attraction early in 1961. As the first ever found in North America, an immediate quarantine line was thrown across the southern end of the peninsula, and thousands of dollars worth of animals were ordered destroyed at the park.

Pedersen sold his remaining animals to various zoos, though some of the African fowls eluded his capture. Residents of the new Camino Gardens often found peacocks in their gardens. As a protection to these remaining fowls, the City of Boca Raton erected "Peacock Crossing" signs on Camino Real, but the signs proved too popular to souvenir collectors. The peacocks, unfortunately, soon disappeared. One legacy of Africa, U.S.A. still remains. Today, Muscovy ducks are as common in Boca Raton as pigeons in other cities.

Donald W. Curl  
Editor



"Zambezi Falls at Africa U.S.A.—in a colorful setting of tropical plants and flowers, it is Florida's largest scenic waterfall."

## Builder Recreates Africa At Boca Raton

Ted Gore, *The Fort Lauderdale News* 25 August 1952.

John Pederson long dreamed dreams of Africa. He read many factual books about it and saw numerous first-hand motion picture accounts, but he never found time to make the trip. Six months ago Pederson assigned his only son, Jack, to cross the South Atlantic and begin the monumental task of bringing Africa back to him.

The first chapter of this saga is expected to be completed when Jack arrives at Port Everglades during the first week of October aboard what could be termed a "modern day Noah's Ark." With the African wayfarer will be a herd of 60 zebras, six Abyssinian asses, 20 ostrich and a pair of cheetahs.

According to Pederson, there is apt to be a sprinkling of elephants, hippopotamuses and colorful African fowl.

Among the shipboard zebra clan are the last of the Grevey species. Pederson acquired the first permit ever issued to capture this nearly extinct animal on Crown lands of Kenya and Tanganyika. They cost him \$1,000 each.

That's only the beginning. Another cargo to arrive at some later date will consist of 25 giraffe, 10 eland, 10 kudus, 10 oryx besas, and 10 chimpanzies. Elands, Kudus and oryx besas are varieties of antelope.

The complete menagerie will occupy a 350-acre site at Boca Raton to be known as Africa, U.S.A.

A year's sweat and labor has already gone into developing the former palmetto patch into what is to be the largest and finest tropical plant-life and zoological garden in the United States.

Cleared and planted, half of the plot already is nurturing thousands upon thousands of plants, shrubs and trees. A sample of the list, which reads like a horticultural catalogue, includes 3,000 royal poincianas, 6,000 bougainvilleas, 6,000 fireball and single poincianas, tens of thousands of hibiscus and other tropical flowers.

There are several hundred kinds of fruit trees from all over the tropical world—1,000 bananas, tea, vanilla, tapioca, sago, chicle, palms, sausage, kapok, ginreg, camphor, henna, pickle, lipstick, ebony, mahogany, olive; and thousands of caladiums of a hundred different kinds, many with leaves over 10 feet high; bamboo and numerous others.

Along six miles of jungle roads, Madagascar banyans will lift their canopy heads, and over the acres of graze land, African torpedo grass and millet will nourish the denizens of the dark continent, and

flocks of imported birdlife.

Planted last fall, trees that were one foot high then, now reach 15 feet and more. Coffee plants are already bearing beans.

A visit to the \$1,000,000 gardens, scheduled to open to the public in November, will show you this: A 30-foot waterfall cascading 275,000 gallons of water a minute onto an 800-foot stretch of flower-decked rapids leading to a seven-acre artificial lake; a 160-foot geyser which blows its lid every hour and five minutes; miles of winding rivers; acres of grassy plains, and patches of natural dense jungle.

A further touch of African reality will be a mud and thatch native village to act as a resting point during tours of the area. Here chimps will demonstrate their agility while visitors relax and wait for the next tour train.

The trains, appearing like streamline Diesels, are rubber-tired affairs with a capacity of 50 persons in three cars. They will depart from the attraction's administration building every hour or so.

And through the entire tour, there will be nary a fence between the customers and the animals. For this reason, Pederson has limited his stock to non-carnivorous species. Except for the two cheetahs, which will be restricted; and a thousand alligators.

For the time being, Pederson has constructed 10-foot high corral fences in which to pen the animals lest they get out amidst the luscious torpedo grass and kill themselves from overeating.

"The beasts will have been on a dry hay diet during the 40-day voyage from Africa," he explained. "We'll have to break them into their new green diet slowly before allowing them the open range."

Army engineers will dredge out the hyacinth-clogged Hillsboro River which runs through the tract, affording sightseeing boats from Ft. Lauderdale, Miami and Palm Beach access to the gardens. Pederson will also have his own tour boats for trips through his man-made rivers. To supply these water courses with fresh water, he had to pipe it under the Hillsboro River.

For evening visitors, Pederson has planned a series of multi-colored spotlights around the falls, lake and geyser.

"When this is completed," he said, "we'll be able to produce a thousand different water displays, comparable to Fourth of July fireworks shows."

Under consideration at this time is a trained porpoise act; ostrich races, orchid jungle and a water ballet exhibition.

Pederson developed his yen for the African wilds long ago as a boy reading jungle adventures. Later,

Mrs. Pederson shared his love of tropical plants.

Jack, 29, got the coveted African chore.

"I wanted to go over," Pederson recounted, "but Lillian, my wife, said no, so Jack went. Besides, I've had my hands full getting things here moving.

"Speaking of a small world," he added, "who does Jack run into over there but Armand Denis, formerly of the Chimpanzee Farm at Dania." Denis, Pederson said, was directing a technicolor motion picture at the time.

A former Southern Pacific Railroad employee in Niland, Calif., Pederson came to Ft. Lauderdale in 1934. Sensing the future growth of the city, he purchased large tracts of land throughout the city, but mostly in the northwest from whence Wilton Manors has sprung.

He had long thought of opening a botanical garden, but when he spied the 350-acre tract immediately west of Federal Highway, and within the Boca Raton city limits, his passion for re-creating Africa was aroused.

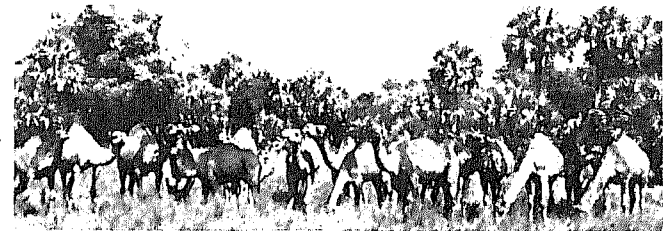
A trip by jeep through the property convinced him of the possibilities of such a venture, and he chose a point 40 feet above sea level, the highest point in South Florida, as his headquarters site.

He now lives on that high point with his wife and 26-year-old daughter, Shirley, where he can supervise every new blade of grass. His red jeep is never at home, but perpetually bumping through the jungle with Pederson at the wheel.

The former railroadman and contractor has considered all the angles. There were 1,000,000 paid admissions at Silver Springs last year. Pederson is convinced he can pull a good many of them to Africa, U.S.A. And when he does, Boca Raton and surrounding communities are bound to benefit. The proposed World's Fair of 1954-55 on the Dade-Broward county line is expected to prove an early bonanza for the gardens.

"In three or four years time when the growth here has reached its peak, we'll have another garden of Eden," Pederson predicted.

An offshoot of the gardens may be a cureall for local lawns. The imported grass, Pederson claims, makes a fine dark green lawn, resistant to chinch bugs, and thrives in drought areas. Chinch bugs and water shortages are frequent visitors here.



## Gardens Open

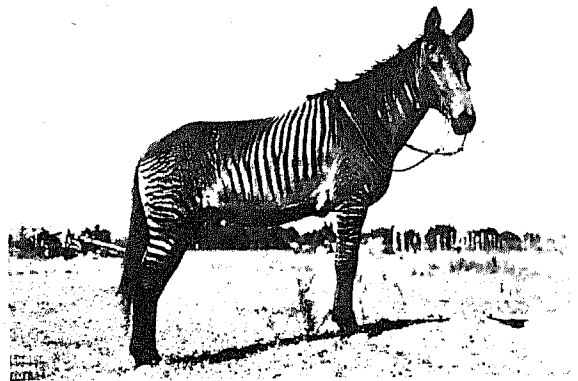
from the **Miami Herald** no date, c. February 1953

John A. Pedersen said Saturday the tropical gardens in his ambitious Africa USA in Boca Raton, 40 miles north of Miami, are now open free to the public.

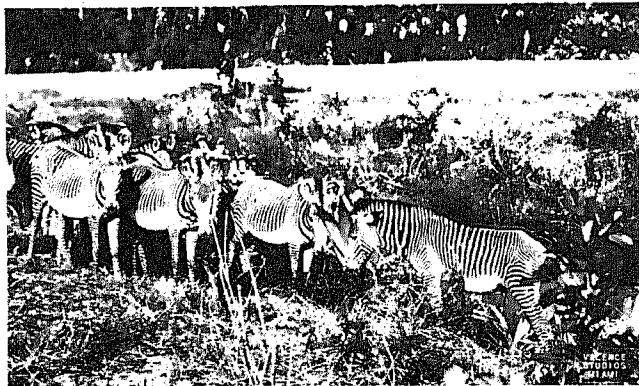
The gardens include a waterfall, a geyser and 55,000 plants, all of which Pedersen said have not yet been marked for identification by visitors.

Africa USA also includes a 300-acre "jungle" which Pedersen is stocking with wild animals. For a train that tours the jungle, however, there is a charge, Pedersen said.

He said the gardens probably will remain open free "for at least six months" until the development is completed.



ZEE-HORSE AT AFRICA U.S.A., BOCA RATON, FLORIDA



GREVY ZEBRAS AT AFRICA U.S.A., BOCA RATON, FLORIDA

## Pedersen Sells 'Africa, U.S.A.'

from the **Palm Beach Post** 20 October 1961

Boca Raton—The 177-acres on which "Africa U.S.A.," was located has been sold for \$1,000,000, John P. Pedersen owner, said Thursday night.

The contract, Pedersen said, calls for \$10,000 to be paid immediately, \$90,000 within 15 days after the abstracts have been drawn and the remaining \$1 million on or before December 15.

Robert E. Prount Asicü and Henry H. Tise of Rhode Island are the buyers, Pedersen said.

The compound in its hey-day contained zebras, ostriches, camels, antelopes, cheetahs, monkeys, giraffes, elephants, and numerous other animals native to Africa.

A number of these animals have been sold for a reported \$180,000. There are still a lot of animals yet to be sold, Pedersen reported.

The attraction closed September 4 after eleven years of operation.

The western extension of El Camino Real caused Pedersen to give up the long-time attraction after condemnation proceedings were filed.

State Agriculture Commissioner Doyle Conner announced Thursday that all state and federal quarantines on cattle fever ticks were lifted in Florida Tuesday, with the exception of "Africa, U.S.A."

African red ticks were found a year ago for the first time in North America at the tourist attraction.

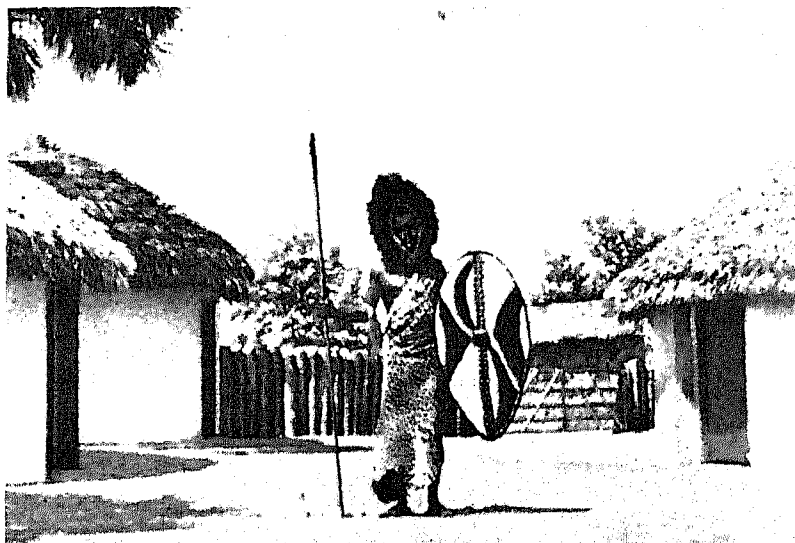
Conner said a cattle fever tick outbreak discovered May 31, 1960 in south Florida led to a quarantine line being established across the peninsula through Ocala. Animals moving northward from the 32 counties below the line were checked for ticks. More than a million cattle in the infested areas were dipped to rid them of insects.

More than 1.2 million animals, or about 97 per cent of those south of the quarantine line were inspected during the eradication program, Conner said.





A tourist's view of the African warrior. Snapshot from the collection of the Society.



"Masai Warrior in Jungle Town at Africa U.S.A., one of the interesting stops on tour of 'Africa U.S.A.' by miniature trains."

## Dirt Flies; 'Africa, U.S.A.' Gets New Look

Geoffrey Birt, Palm Beach Post-Times 17 June 1962

Boca Raton—Last December 15 there occurred here one of those rarest-of-rare financial transactions—a \$1 million cold cash-on-the-barrel-head deals.

Sold was the famed Gold Coast tourist attraction, Africa, U.S.A. Bought were 177 acres of simulated jungle to be turned into a site for some 450 homes in the \$18,000 to \$36,000 price range.

The seller was John Pedersen; the purchasers were Powdrell and Alexander Inc., primarily a holding company, whose stock is quoted on the American Exchange.

### AUSTRALIA NEXT

In October, 1961, consulting civil engineer Robert E. Prout, of Barrington, R.I., made a swing through Florida "looking for various investments, and I 'hit' Africa, U.S.A.," he said.

Prout said he "understood Pedersen had been made some good offers with substantial down payments, but he demanded \$1 million, all in cash and at one time. Now he's planing to Australia," Prout said.

Prout continued: "There aren't many people able to put up \$1 million in cash, so the market was a limited one."

Prout took his report and plans to Powdrell and Alexander, and the company decided to invest.

"We asked that the payment be made at the First Bank of Boca Raton," Prout said.

This story was told as an anecdote over lunch at a Deerfield restaurant overlooking the mouth of the Hillsboro Canal. County Home Builders' Association executive ssecretary John M. Stanfel had just accepted Powdrell and Alexander's membership. Also present was C.R. Morpeth, also of Barrington, Rhode Island, who joked:

### WITNESSED BY SEVEN

"We wanted Pedersen's banker, Bill Stowe (William M. Stowe, president, First Bank of Boca Raton), to brief him! We were afraid he might not accept our certified check but demand the payment in \$5 and \$10 bills!"

Thus, on December 15 there assembled in Stowe's office seven people: Pedersen and his wife; Prout, representing the company; Powdrell and Alexander's local attorney, Marshall M. Criser, of Palm Beach; bank attorney Robert D. Tylander, of West Palm Beach; bank Chairman of the Board Thomas F. Fleming, and bank President Stowe. The Pedersens had no attorney.

"In 30 years of banking, it's the first time I ever saw a \$1 million transaction," said Stowe, "but, of course, I've always been associated with small banks. I don't think the first bank I worked for, in Milford, Conn., in 1932, had deposits of much more than a \$1 million.

Pedersen was obligated by the contract to clear the area of all its giraffes, ostriches, zebras and other wild animals within 30 days.

"That was quite an undertaking," said the banker.

#### ROAD GARDENS—RIVER CANAL

Within the next 90 days almost another \$1 million will have been spent preparing the area and Africa, U.S.A., will become known by the somewhat "mixed mash" title of Camino Gardens. In Spanish "camino" means road. Therefore, it is farewell Africa, U.S.A.: hail Road Gardens!



The geyser, a tourist snapshot, from the collection of the Society.

Actually, there are three major projects under development on the famed 177-acres:

1. Site Clearing. Nine 35-ton scrapers and four 90-ton draglines are among an estimated \$500,000 worth of machinery at work.

2. Canal Construction. The small canals in Africa, U.S.A., are being widened, deepened and tied together as part of a secondary drainage system to tie in the Hillsboro Canal which runs into the Atlantic.

Also, a new 120-foot wide and 10-foot deep canal is under construction. This will be called El Rio Canal (Rio is Spanish for river, so it is, therefore, the River Canal).

3. Landscaping. While tons of earth are being moved in clearing and road and canal construction, the uprooted trees and shrubs are being manicured, pedicured and replanted. These include valuable foreign importations brought in and developed over the years by Pedersen. This is an estimated \$75,000 landscaping job.

#### BOOST FOR BOCA

The scenic lake and island, visited in the past by many tourists taking boat rides through part of the "jungle," is being preserved, but trimmed and tidied, and a park developed. Boat owners will be able to sail to sea from Camino Gardens.

Homes will be linked with Boca Raton sewerage and water systems by the developers.

"We are, in effect, giving the city about a \$1 million worth of water and sanitary and storm sewer lines, and roads for them to tax," Prout said, "as well as increasing the value of the entire area."

Both Prout and Morpeth have become officers of the Powdrell and Alexander Inc. project here, as project manager and assistant manager, respectively. They were associates in Rhode Island.



A tourist saw the giraffes at close range. Snapshot from the collection of the Society.

## From Tanganyika Territory

from the Boca Raton News 3 September 1964



Virtually in the shadow of the new Florida Atlantic University lies the residential community of Camino Gardens, itself a relative newcomer to the Boca Raton scene.

"In a sense, the University and Camino Gardens have paralleling objectives in helping fulfill dreams and ambitions—one on the educational level, the other in providing the ultimate in modern Florida living for discriminating home owners," Robert Prout, Camino Gardens manager, says.

And certainly, the standards set by both contribute to the area's cultural-economic picture.

Set in a 177-acre locale steeped in natural charm and beauty, the Powdrell and Alexander, Inc., development will observe its second anniversary this fall.

Much has been accomplished since a veritable army of engineers, landscapers, architects, decorators and salesmen first began converging on what, until Powdrell and Alexander made its unusual one-million dollar cash purchase, had been the famed tourist attraction, "Africa, USA."

The progress provides a striking "then" and "now" contrast.

Where wild animals once roamed freely, today there are rolling greens and beautiful, wide waterways. Picturesque, winding streets are flanked by scores of homes in the \$25-60,000 class, still surrounded by much of the area's original lush terrain.

Literally hundreds of exotic trees, shrubs and other plants have been preserved for enjoyment of residents. Added to the natural setting are rustic foot bridges, mirror-like lakes, picnic areas, docking facilities and a botanical garden.

Camino Gardens residents enjoy full municipal services (including police and fire protection, water, sewerage, paved streets, sidewalks) and other benefits, according to Prout.

While the community lists beauty as its most honored resident, overall stability of design and landscaping must be considered its hallmark. One need look no further than its colonial-styled entrance gate and administration building to pick up the theme.

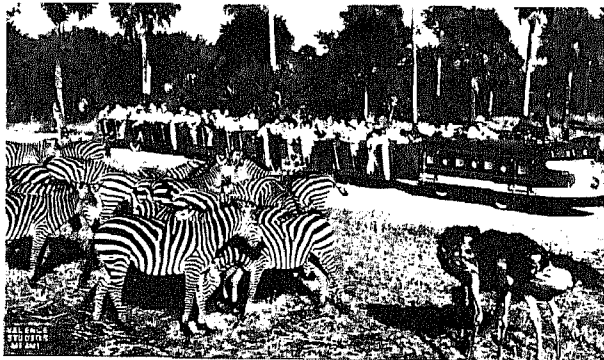
This blending of New England "Americana" and modern "indoor-outdoor" Florida architecture is carried out in every phase of Camino Gardens' development. It is especially evident, however, in a dozen model homes, each available with customized variations of its own.

In addition to careful blueprinting of each detail, Camino Gardens' popularity stems from many of the special services it offers. For example, the employment of professional interior designers for its model homes, so that prospective buyers can see how their home will look when properly and tastefully furnished. Also, retention of a color coordinator to assist in the 112 color and design decisions involved in the construction of a single custom-built home.

"We have set a high standard of quality and elegance at Camino Gardens, in keeping with the tradition of Boca Raton," Prout declared. "Now that tradition is being expanded by the new Florida Atlantic University. We're privileged to join our fellow citizens in welcoming this fine educational institution to our midst."



Looking north at Federal Highway and Camino Real, 1959.  
From the collection of the Society.



TRAIN RIDE AT AFRICA U.S.A., BOCA RATON, FLORIDA

## DONATIONS

TO THE BOCA RATON HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES  
FOR 1982-1983.

Florida Architecture of Addison Mizner donated by Rio B. Wagner.

Two- 3 by 5 color photographs of Boca Raton Railroad Station c. 1960, donated by Mrs. John Buckley

Misc. papers and letters regarding Boca Raton Coast Guard Auxillary, donated by Sue Wright.

True Magazine article of 1957 on Addison and Wilson Mizner, donated by Warren Harris.

Leather bound photograph album c. late 1800s, donated by Raymond T. Rickards.

Survey of "Floresta," c. 1932, donated by Elvera F. Poole.

Wardrobe trunk, donated by G. Mason Gross.

Modern Manuscripts by K. Duckett; misc. periodicals, technical leaflets on archives and preservation, donated by Phyllis Knowles.

Boca Raton History and Romance of the Past and Visions of the Future, published in the 1950s by Harley Gates; Jupiter Lighthouse in the Early 1880s by Bessie DuBois; misc. newspaper articles, donated by Mrs. Frank Shober.

Bound edition of 1936 Palm Beach Post-Times "Historical Number;" 2 large WWI photographs of Kate Rickards; 2 large bound volumes of the New York Times pictorial "War Extra--1917-1919;" WWI soldiers cap; 1917 front page, donated by T.M. Rickards, Jr.

One- large framed floral oil painting in hand-carved antique frame by Mary Denninger, donated by Mary Denninger.

Large map of Boca Raton c. 1950, donated by Eugene Goerke.

30 by 40 mounted black and white aerial photograph of Boca Raton c. 1960; 30 by 40 mounted black and white aerial photograph of Boca Raton c. 1977, donated by John Rosenkrans.

Six-8 by 10 black and white negatives; 6-24 by 36 mylar prints made from 1926-27 revised tracings of Boca Raton Town Hall by William Alysmeier, Architect, donated by Herbert Jacobs of Boca Atlantic Blueprints.

Six-sheets original tracings of Boca Raton Town Hall, revision of 1926-27, William E. Alysmeier, Architect, donated by Ralph L. Alysmeier.

2 by 1 1/2 negative of early Riveria Section, original eleven houses built by L. Zimmerman, donated by W.K. Youngblood.

Ladies 1920s dresses; baby clothes, lace cap, donated by Floy Mitchell.

Misc. papers, photographs, and books, donated by Helen Howard.

Misc. cards and letters; old postcard collection belonging to Harry Chesebro, donated by Helen Howard and Ethyl Chesebro.

American Flag and flagpole with original stanchion used in Old Town Hall, donated by the City of Boca Raton.

Laminated *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, 13 January 1863, donated by Mr. and Mrs. Herman Becker.

Collection of photographs, newspapers, and brochures; first issue of *Boca Raton News*, donated by the first editor Margaret Olson.

China place plate by Lamberton Scammel "expressly for Boca Raton" --probably designed and ordered for the Cloister Inn by Addison Mizner, c. 1926, donated by Mr. and Mrs. Rubin Reid.

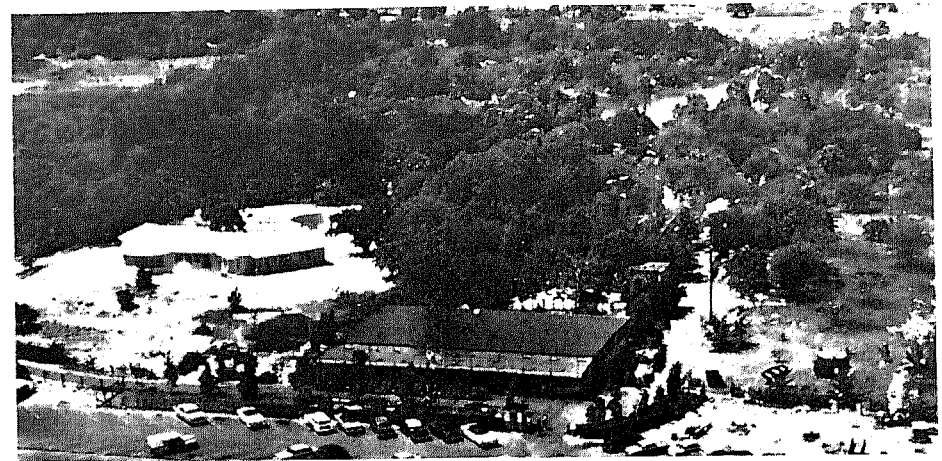
Four-black and white photographs, donated by Causeway Lumber.

Manikins: one adult and one child, donated by Mr. and Mrs. Howard McCall.

*Lords of the Land*, book about land speculation including sections on Boca Raton, Flagler, etc., donated by Peggy McCall.

1956 photograph of "Old Betsy" Boca Raton's first fire-engine, donated by Nelson Bolan.

Original roof tiles, one signed, from Cloister Inn, and wrought iron gutter support from Cloister Inn, donated by Boca Raton Hotel and Club.



The administration building of Africa, U.S.A. with the Pedersens house and jungle gardens in the background.

BOCA RATON HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.  
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