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Gaytrification:

Financial Incentives and the Making of a Gay Social Enclave in Wilton Manors, Florida,  
1990 - 2000

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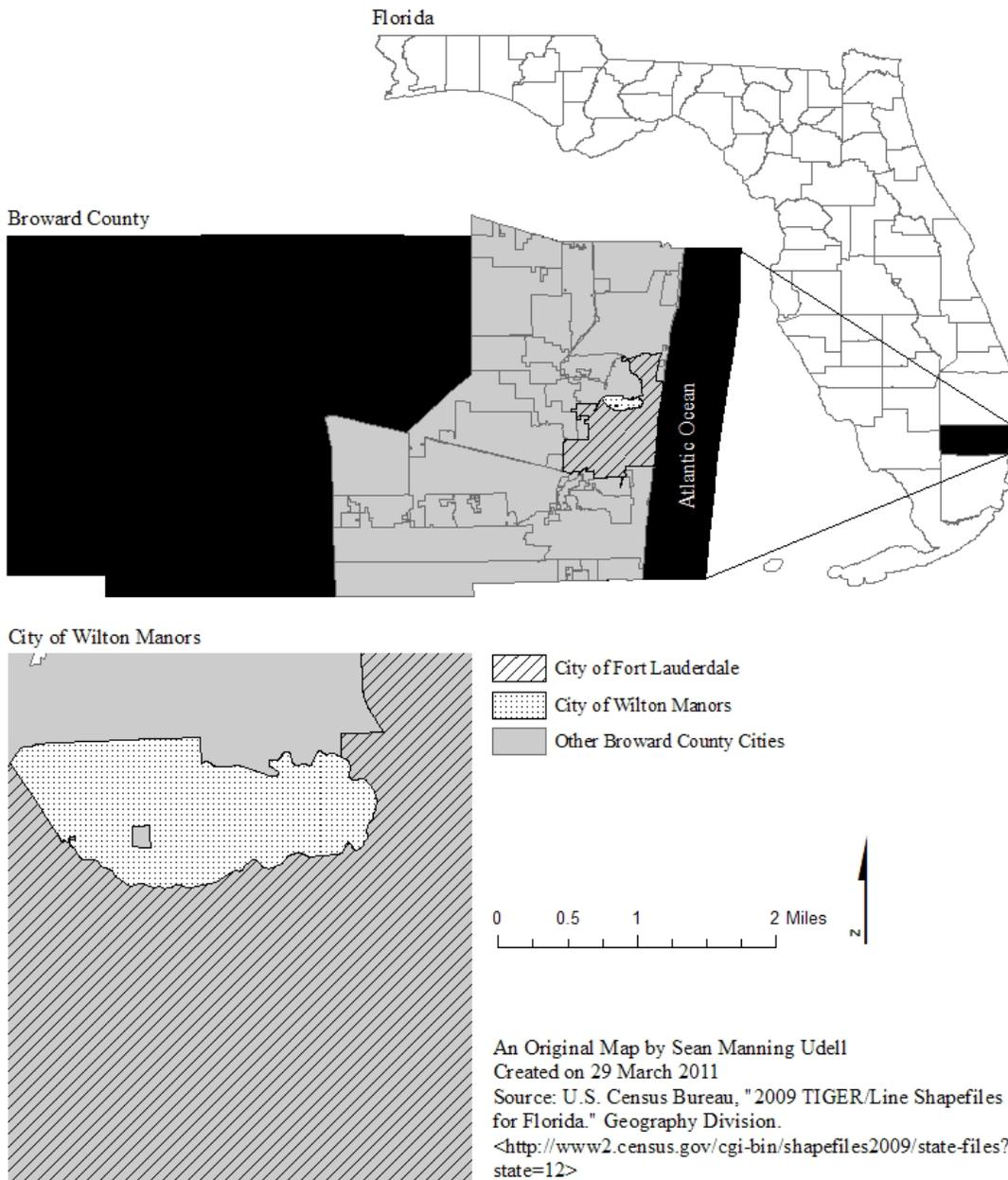
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STATE OF FLORIDA WITH TWO INSETS:  
1) BROWARD COUNTY AND 2) CITY OF WILTON MANORS



## Introduction

In my early teenage years, my father frequently took my sister and me to dinner at the Galanga Thai Kitchen and Sushi restaurant, located on the northeast end of Wilton Drive in a freestanding, one-story, red and black building with a dramatic a-frame roof in Wilton Manors, Florida. Though my family has resided in the neighboring City of Fort Lauderdale for my entire life, we would make the trip to Galanga for two reasons: its superb curry and perpetually entertaining social scene. No matter what night we dined at Galanga, my family seemed to be the only heterosexual family in the entire establishment, enveloped in a sea of buff and manicured gay men who would be dining at tables ranging in size from two to twenty. The maître-d, Chris, always greeted us with a new, sassy quip about my father's heterosexuality, and several waiters would jokingly welcome us by exclaiming, "The family is here!" By the time that I came out of the closet at sixteen years old in 2005, I regarded Galanga and its surrounding city of Wilton Manors – which had already been deemed a "gay Mecca" by the Associated Press a year earlier<sup>1</sup> – with a particular affection.

As a gay teenager wrestling with his sexual identity, I would have found it impossible to ignore Wilton Manors. Driving into the city from the south end of Wilton Drive, the first establishment one passes is the free-standing Dairy Queen, a white hut with a red, shingled roof and a perpetually long line of muscular, middle-aged men in tank tops. Just north of that is Tropics Restaurant and Bar, a block-long, burnt-orange building topped with a gay pride flag. Across the street and to one's left, more gay pride flags emerge from a one-story strip of four shops directly on the sidewalk; one is a gelato

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel La Corte, "Wilton Manors, Florida, Emerges as a Gay Mecca," *Associated Press*, June 2, 2004, <<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P1-95145836.html>>.

shop, the next is an openly-gay real estate agent's office, the next is a designer male underwear shop, and last is a gay sports bar. The sets of single-story storefronts continue, all with cute, kitschy names like the Naked Grape Wine Bar or Tiny Treasures Puppies or Art Frenzie. Then, the block-long, turquoise thrift store named Out of the Closet sets an even more explicitly gay tone to Wilton Drive, and this theme continues north with shops like Painted Pickle deli, Tops & Bottoms clothing store, Java Boys coffee shop, and Humpy's Pizza. Indeed, the dozens of gay-themed stores with lighthearted names are too numerous to recount here, but they line Wilton Drive in a series of one-story buildings on both the east and west sides, from the southern to northeastern tips of the thoroughfare. As I went to college and learned the histories of notorious gay American communities such as Greenwich Village, New York or the Castro, San Francisco, I knew that I would one day need to return to Wilton Manors and learn more about the gayborhood that had left such an impression on me in my youth.

On June 8, 2010, during the preliminary stages of research for this study, I received an email from Don Reuter, author of *Greetings from the Gayborhood* and a self-described gay historian from New York City. In the small world of gay history, Reuter had heard from another gay historian that I planned on writing my undergraduate senior thesis about the boom of the gay community in Wilton Manors. He gave me a copy of his book about gay neighborhoods as a source for this thesis. Reuter's short account of gay movement into Wilton Manors provided me with the first published "history" of the growth of the gay community in this small South Florida town. "Things changed once Wilton Manors...impressed us [gay and lesbian people]," writes Reuter. "Over the passing generations the area became a considerable low-income black community.

Therein, our interest laid bare a troubling aspect to gentrification – one group’s ‘coming out’ may have come by way of pushing out another.’<sup>2</sup> In other words, Reuter argues that the gay and lesbian movement to Wilton Manors displaced poor African Americans, and that the episode is emblematic of a larger reality of gay-driven gentrification.

Though an interesting tale and a central part of the conventional wisdom of gay neighborhood development, the evidence does not at all support the claim that gays and lesbians pushed out low-income blacks from Wilton Manors. In fact, the U.S. Census demonstrates that Wilton Manors was ninety-seven percent white in 1980;<sup>3</sup> by 2000, that number dropped to eighty-six percent.<sup>4</sup> As this work will demonstrate, the significant gay and lesbian movement to Wilton Manors gained momentum during that same time period, meaning that gay settlement in this city occurred simultaneously with Wilton Manors’ increasing racial heterogeneity, thus turning Reuter’s argument on its head. Though *Greetings from the Gayborhood* does not bear the imprint of an academic press – and the author himself admits that he “did not have sources for that claim, *per se*”<sup>5</sup> – Reuter’s book remains the only published work that addresses Wilton Manors’ gay transformation. While I agree with Reuter that Wilton Manors’ change adds to historians’ understanding of how gay movement has affected receiving communities, his fictitious account perpetuates a misleading – and possibly pernicious – narrative of gentrification spurred by gay and lesbian movement – or what I will call “gaytrification” – pitting gays against other minority groups. Considering the central question of this study, which is to

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<sup>2</sup> Donald F. Reuter, *Greetings from the Gayborhood*, New York: Abrams, 2008, 29 – 30.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Census of the United States*, 1980, Florida, Broward County, census tracts 509 & 510, indexed by race.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Census of the United States*, 2000, Florida, Broward County, census tracts 509 & 510, indexed by race.

<sup>5</sup> Donald F. Reuter, phone interview by author, September 17, 2010.

understand how Wilton Manors became the third most concentrated city of gay people in the United States,<sup>6</sup> Reuter's account must be addressed and amended.

This study examines how Wilton Manors became the city-sized gay and lesbian enclave<sup>7</sup> that it is today, specifically uncovering its transformation from a white, heterosexual family bedroom community from its founding in 1924 through the late 1980s to its current status as a burgeoning "gay Mecca." To residents who have lived in Wilton Manors throughout the transformation, the city's metamorphosis has been quite severe. However, the very structure of Wilton Manors helped set the stage for its unique gay revival in the 1990s. A 1950s-style bedroom community of Fort Lauderdale with a strong history of community service and initiative, the town's aging residents and dispersing families helped lead to its downturn in the 1980s, setting the stage for its gay-fueled revitalization and "gaytrification" in the 1990s.

In contrast to the popular narrative within the historiography of gay community formation – particularly with regard to gay neighborhoods in New York or San Francisco – which posits that gays have historically chosen their places of residence based on the presence of artistic communities with tolerant residents, this essay will argue that economic incentives encouraged initiatives that moved gay people into Wilton Manors throughout the 1990s. Specifically, real estate agents catering to a gay clientele helped initiate the first wave of gay movement into the city in the first years of the 1990s, marketing Wilton Manors as "the new Victoria Park" – Fort Lauderdale's well known

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<sup>6</sup> The Urban Institute, "Fact Sheet: Where do Gay Couples Live?" Washington, D.C., <[http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/900695\\_GL\\_FactSheet.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/900695_GL_FactSheet.pdf)>. Pg. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Here, "enclave" finds its definition in Mark Abrahamson's book *Urban Enclaves*, which claims that an enclave is a residential community defined by people who share one or more particular demographic characteristic and live in an area with defined borders, institutions catering to the area's particular demographic, and a clear indicator of dominant status of the social group.

gay neighborhood at the time – and initiating a chain migration of gays to Wilton Manors. Moreover, redevelopers and commercial entrepreneurs capitalized on the central business district's depressed rents, opening up several gay businesses between 1997 and 1998 and attracting significant local media coverage that further propelled the already-growing gay community in Wilton Manors, thereby establishing a destination migration for the city. By March 2000, Wilton Manors had elected the nation's second city council with a gay majority<sup>8</sup> – the first had been West Hollywood, California – reflecting the overall air of acceptance for gays and lesbians required in order to usher in this transformation. Within a decade, the town had morphed well beyond real estate agents' expectations as the new Victoria Park, becoming a sovereign municipality with unique economic, social, and political opportunities for its gay enclave.

A small city of about 12,000 residents, Wilton Manors, Florida may seem to be an odd candidate for a focused historical study. The Florida town is young, given its 1947 incorporation as a village. Moreover, the city's two square-mile area inherently limits its size, and its topography as an island enveloped by the much larger Fort Lauderdale and Broward County metro area cloisters the "Island City" from public attention. However, if history is the study of change over time, then Wilton Manors offers a unique story about gay life in America, a Southern town that became consumed by the rapid growth of its gay community within the short span of a decade at the end of the twentieth century. Moreover, the municipality's story expands the current historiography on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) settlements beyond the northeast or west coasts of the United States, offering new clues regarding the way in which gay and lesbian people

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<sup>8</sup> Lisa Arthur, "Wilton Manors Votes in Majority Gay Council," *The Miami (Florida) Herald*, March 15, 2000, sec. B.

manage to form residential clusters and this demographic group's involvement in the gentrification process.

## **Methodology**

An area with a notoriously transient residential community, South Florida offers unique hurdles to historians. Given the region's relatively new population – most of its growth occurred in the second half of the twentieth century – there are fewer archival documents such as letters or diaries than might be desired by a historian. In its place, the research for this study began with formal interviews of as many longtime residents as possible. In total, I communicated with over fifty longtime residents and interviewed two-dozen people with significant involvement in Wilton Manors, where each of the twenty-four in-person dialogues lasted for one to two hours. These people come from various walks of life, though of particular interest were city politicians, real estate agents, small business owners, other Wilton Manors professionals, and those involved in the Wilton Manors Historical Society. Though all are not explicitly referenced in this work, my interviewees shared their own personal archives and stories, which led me to find more people, information, and data. Moreover, the archival resources of the Wilton Manors Public Library, Wilton Manors Historical Society, Broward County Historical Commission, and Stonewall Library and Archives, which hold many of the gay guides, government documents, neighborhood newsletters, and newspaper reports used in this work, proved invaluable. Finally, the data of the United States Population Census from the decades within the 1950 - 2000 period provided the essential demographic information necessary for understanding Wilton Manors' most basic changes through the final decade of the twentieth century.

## Chapter 1: Bust, Then Boom in Wilton Manors' Early Years

Though the Seminole tribe of American Indians was the first group to occupy the land now known as Wilton Manors, the city's historical society attributes the founding of their hometown to a land purchase by Ned Willingham in 1924. Willingham purchased the property from Billy Johnson, a farmer who had tilled the land for thirteen years prior to the exchange.<sup>9</sup> About one-third the area of what is now considered Wilton Manors, the purchase extended from the island's bank on the Middle River and expanded west towards Dixie Highway.<sup>10</sup> After several subsequent purchases of smaller parcels of land, Willingham had acquired 345 acres by the beginning of 1925, and made plans to develop the area into a "high-class residential suburb."<sup>11</sup> The developer's expenditure of \$62,000 on a grand entranceway – one that was meant to reflect the Casa de Salinas in Salamanca, Spain<sup>12</sup> – speaks to Willingham's lofty expectations. However, despite various attempts to convince upper-class real estate buyers to invest in Wilton Manors, the Willingham Development Company ceased advertising in April of 1926 after having sold only three plots of land.<sup>13</sup>

Two hurricanes in 1926 and 1928<sup>14</sup> and the death of Ned Willingham in 1927<sup>15</sup> stalled Wilton Manors' development for ten years before another entrepreneur would envision the settlement to be a successful business venture. North Ireland native George Richardson, a successful golf course builder who had started establishments in Detroit,

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<sup>9</sup> Cynthia Thuma, *Images of America: Wilton Manors*, Chicago: Arcadia, 2005, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart B. McIver, *The Island City: The Story of Wilton Manors*, Wilton Manors: The City of Wilton Manors, 1997, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> McIver, *Island City*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

Tarrytown, and Fort Lauderdale,<sup>16</sup> decided to build his ideal retirement residence in Florida in 1936. Familiar with the South Florida area, Richardson sought out an undeveloped area where he could build his final golf course and a home for his retirement, and he found that space in Wilton Manors.<sup>17</sup> By 1937, the course opened for business and became the city's first draw for tourism.<sup>18</sup> With at least one defining attraction in place for Wilton Manors, the town realized modest growth for the next decade, officially incorporating as the Village of Wilton Manors in 1947 with a population of 350 people.<sup>19</sup>

While Willingham's vision of Wilton Manors as a relatively quiet, residential suburb persisted through the first half of the twentieth century, the decade between 1950 and 1960 ushered in tremendous change for the tiny village. As Broward County's population quadrupled during that decade, from 83,933<sup>20</sup> to 333,946 people,<sup>21</sup> that of Wilton Manors increased ten-fold, from 833 to 8,257.<sup>22</sup> According to Wilton Manors historian Cynthia Thuma, veterans of World War II and the Korean War fueled much of the rapid growth as they looked for new homes in which to raise their young families.<sup>23</sup> Racing to accommodate the unprecedented growth, the city annexed the rest of the two square mile island on which it had initially incorporated and constructed its first fire and police departments, elementary school, and public library.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the village

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<sup>16</sup> McIver, *Island City*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Census of the United States*, 1950, Florida, Broward County, all census tracts, indexed by total population.

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Census of the United States*, 1960, Florida, Broward County, all census tracts, indexed by total population.

<sup>22</sup> McIver, *Island City*, 43.

<sup>23</sup> Cynthia Thuma, email message to author, 25 March 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Thuma, *Images of America: Wilton Manors*, 29, 31, & 35.

officially transformed into a city in 1953<sup>25</sup> and witnessed significant growth in the city's administrative infrastructure and bureaucracy with the erection of a city hall<sup>26</sup> and full-time administrative positions.<sup>27</sup> Despite Ned Willingham's vision of a strictly residential community,<sup>28</sup> commercial building also followed the boom in residential population and community infrastructure. Most emblematic of this shift in plans for Wilton Manors may have come in the destruction of the original, grand welcome towers (which had been meant to create an exclusive, upper-class ambiance for the community) in order to make way for a new A&W Root Beer drive-thru restaurant. That restaurant became just one of dozens of working-class establishments that sprouted on Wilton Drive during the town's burgeoning decade. By 1960, the town had acquired three shopping centers, entertainment facilities, and shops along the length of Wilton Drive,<sup>29</sup> establishing an easily navigable and coherent commercial downtown for Wilton Manors, which would become one of the infrastructural frameworks that ultimately made the city appealing to a strong network of gay and lesbian commercial enterprises at the end of the twentieth century.

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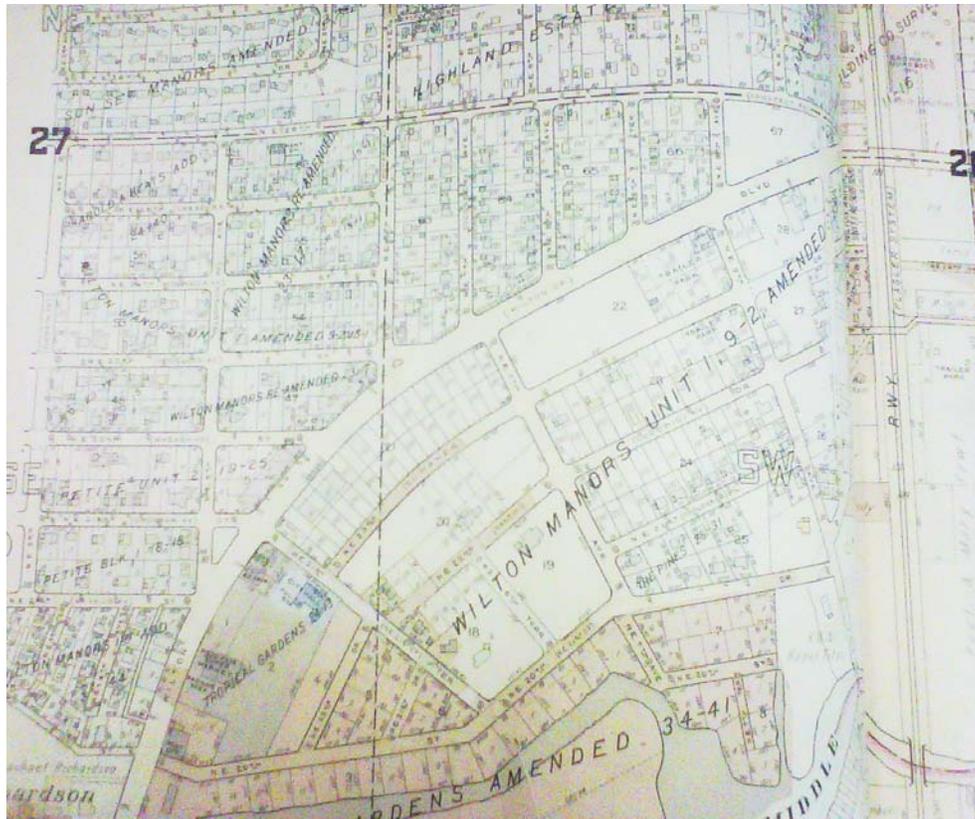
<sup>25</sup> Thuma, *Images of America: Wilton Manors*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> McIver, *Island City*, 43.

<sup>28</sup> Thuma, *Images of America: Wilton Manors*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> McIver, *Island City*, 42.



**Figure 1 - Map of Wilton Drive in 1950. Note that the zoning of property along Wilton Drive (curved street at center of map) is residential, which changed to commercial development in the 1960s after the surge in working-class residents. Map accessed at the Broward County Historical Commission and reproduced with their permission.<sup>30</sup> Photo credit: Sean Manning Udell.**

Despite the sharp increase in total population during the 1950s, there was little change in the demographic composition of Wilton Manors during this time. Like those who initially settled the region at the start of the century, the town was uniformly white – at a rate of ninety-nine percent – and maintained a similar uniformity in the predominance of heterosexual families.<sup>31</sup> In line with the greater South Florida economy, the service industry employed the majority of Wilton Manors’ residents, most of whom would have been considered middle-income wage earners. By the 1970s and 80s the

<sup>30</sup> County of Broward, Florida. “Zoning: Broward County, 1950,” Map #31, Accessed at the Broward County Historical Commission, Reproduced with permission.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Census of the United States*, 1960, Florida, Broward County, Wilton Manors, indexed by race and household.

population growth slowed. Though the population did rise between 1960 and 1970 to 11,005 people, this can be seen as relatively slow in the context of the county's growth, which doubled in size to 620,069 residents during the same time period.<sup>32</sup> The town's twentieth century population peaked in 1980 with 12,773 individuals residing within the city limits, a sixteen percent increase compared to the county's sixty-four percent surge to 1,018,200 residents in that same period.<sup>33</sup>

The interpretation of these demographic trends by Stuart McIver and Cynthia Thuma – Wilton Manors' two official historians – speaks to their assumptions of who belonged in the Island City. For example, McIver explains the plateau in population growth by arguing that the city had been “built out,” adding, “Growth would necessarily be slow since the city was essentially an island.”<sup>34</sup> Though a valid assessment if only considering single-family homes and single-story commercial venues as the appropriate structures for Wilton Manors, McIver's “built out” conclusion speaks to older residents' specific vision for the city as a low-density, single-family household community. McIver leaves the possibility of high-density construction in this South Florida town entirely unaddressed, even though this would become the reality for parts of Wilton Manors by the first years of the twenty-first century. Moreover, neither author addresses the issue of race in either of their books, save the first pages of Thuma's work where she describes Willingham's vision for an all-white, elite residential community. This is a striking omission, considering that the entire town was ninety-nine percent white until 1980, when the non-Hispanic white majority declined insignificantly to ninety-seven-and-a-half

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<sup>32</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Population Census of the United States*, 1970, Florida, Broward County, all census tracts, indexed by total population.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Population Census of the United States*, 1980, Florida, Broward County, all census tracts and tracts 509 & 510, indexed by total population.

<sup>34</sup> McIver. *Island City*. Pg. 55.

percent.<sup>35</sup> That this jarring residential segregation goes entirely unquestioned by the two official Wilton Manors city historians suggests a normalization and expectation of the city as a place for suburban whites.

This chapter encapsulates a summary of all that has been published about Wilton Manors' history. The story reflects what many longtime residents remember of the town before 1980: Wilton Manors embodied the spirit of the "all-American town." City Commissioner Scott Newton, a third-generation Wilton Manors resident, reminisced, "My grandfather built the first house I lived in in Wilton Manors. My mother was a homemaker. ...And I knew all of my neighbors, and we partied with each other at the grill and on the street all the time."<sup>36</sup> Unlike Greenwich Village in New York City or the Castro in San Francisco, Wilton Manors was not an artistic or free spirit commune. Instead, Wilton Manors' residents took pride in the dozen little league teams, interconnected Christian communities, and small-town values. The following chapter will explore how the aging and decline of "baby boom" families in the 1980s in Wilton Manors made the city susceptible to its seemingly unlikely gay transformation.

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<sup>35</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Population Census of the United States*, 1980, Florida, Broward County, census tracts 509 & 510, indexed by race.

<sup>36</sup> Scott Newton, interviewed by author, Oakland Park, Florida, January 12, 2011.

## Chapter 2: Setting the Stage for Gaytrification

By the late 1980s, everything had changed. Though Wilton Manors' reputation as an idyllic, all-American, white, heterosexual family town grew rapidly in the 1950s and was followed by a modest population growth through the sixties and seventies, the Island City's population peaked in 1980 and proceeded to decline through that decade.<sup>37</sup> The turnaround of the 1980s proved puzzling for both residents of the time and this author. While it is difficult to articulate one narrative that entirely explains the city's change in the 1980s, newspaper accounts and city documents of the period offer insight into some of the reasons for decline. One elucidation comes from the array of newspaper quotations from frustrated city residents of the 1980s, many of who were outspoken about the mismanagement of the Wilton Manors city government. Indeed, the Broward County Historical Commission boasts an entire folder brimming with newspaper articles pertaining to the city's elections throughout the 1980s,<sup>38</sup> where the local media frequently portrayed the debates as a battle between the "old guard" and "reformers."<sup>39</sup> Another account by the city's 1989 comprehensive plan argues that more passive processes ushered in the change: as the town's children grew up and moved out of the small South Florida town, household size decreased and the average age of the city crested.<sup>40</sup> City officials argued that without the presence of young, nuclear families, the

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<sup>37</sup> *The City of Wilton Manors 1989 Comprehensive Plan: Volume II*, Pompano Beach: Darby and Way, Inc., 4.

<sup>38</sup> Broward County Historical Commission, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, folder: "Cities, Broward County, Wilton Manors, history 1."

<sup>39</sup> David Jackson, "Steen tops Rouser in Manors election," *Sun-Sentinel* (Broward County, Florida), November 20, 1985, sec. B.; Editorial Board, "Election '86: Wilton Manors," *Sun-Sentinel* (Broward County, Florida), March 9, 1986, sec. CP.

<sup>40</sup> *The City of Wilton Manors 1989 Comprehensive Plan: Volume II*, 49.

community spirit that had buoyed Wilton Manors for decades had waned.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, these officials claimed that the demographic shift resulted in lower household incomes, fewer city revenues, and more costly expenses,<sup>42</sup> which likely affected city services such as code enforcement. Even without one explanation for the decline, it became uniformly clear to residents and city officials alike that sections of Wilton Manors began to demonstrate increasingly derelict appearances through the twentieth century's penultimate decade.

By the late 1980s, residents and officials of the City of Wilton Manors expressed a sober mood regarding the deteriorating state of their city. Immediately following her election in March of 1988, Mayor Sandy Steen began a very public campaign that drew attention to the desperate situation of the city. Inviting the local press with her on night tours of the city that she conducted in tandem with Wilton Manors police, Mayor Steen bluntly assessed the corroding infrastructure and appearance of the city. Regarding Highland Estates, now one of Wilton Manors most redeveloped neighborhoods, Steen claimed, "Human beings should not be allowed to live the way these people do....It's a deplorable situation for children."<sup>43</sup> Another comment emblematic of Steen's rhetoric referred to the city's large trailer park located on Wilton Drive, now the city's burgeoning commercial thoroughfare, "I didn't realize Wilton Manors had it's own city dump. It is absolutely disgusting. They have got to be compelled to maintain some sort of minimum

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<sup>41</sup> *The City of Wilton Manors 1989 Comprehensive Plan: Volume II*, 49.

<sup>42</sup> Tamara Kerrill, "Built-Out Cities Are In Decline," *The Miami (Florida) Herald*, September 19, 1993, sec. BNE. (Though the article was not written in the 1980s, it looks retrospectively at the previous decade.)

<sup>43</sup> Vicki McCash, "Cleaning up the Island City Wilton Manors City Council Member Leads a Fight for New Program to Improve Marginal Areas," *Sun-Sentinel* (Broward County, Florida), April 20, 1988, <[http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1988-04-20/news/8801240956\\_1\\_code-enforcement-trailer-park-city-manager](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1988-04-20/news/8801240956_1_code-enforcement-trailer-park-city-manager)>.

standard.”<sup>44</sup> Though perhaps the mayor’s rhetoric was alarmist, city officials had in fact worried aloud about the deteriorating situation in Wilton Manors for at least two years before Steen’s campaign. In October of 1986, the City Council formally adopted a neighborhood redevelopment plan for Highland Estates following a six-month study of the declining area,<sup>45</sup> and by 1987, Community Maintenance Officer Harold Horne, along with the Community Advisory Board and Code Enforcement Board, had launched a public campaign to hold business owners and residents accountable to city code already on the books.<sup>46</sup> Examples of dilapidated and generally unappealing appearances pervaded the Island City.

Negligent code enforcement, however, provided just one of the city’s struggles; additionally, increasing crime rates began to plague Wilton Manors in the late 1980s. Remembering the city during that time, resident, community activist, and real estate agent Celeste Ellich, who moved to Wilton Manors in 1984, remembers, “We had bad areas, we had some blighted neighborhoods...we had project-type rental buildings. And this building here used to be a Piggly Wiggly, and they used to have guards in there.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, during the year that Ellich first moved to Wilton Manors, the city’s robbery rate jumped 286 percent, from fourteen robberies in 1984 to fifty-four in 1985.<sup>48</sup> In fact, Wilton Manors Police Chief Bernard Scott cited thefts at grocery stores like Piggly

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<sup>44</sup> Vicki McCash, “Cleaning up the Island City Wilton Manors City Council Member Leads a Fight for New Program to Improve Marginal Areas.”

<sup>45</sup> Stephan d’Oliveira, “Wilton Manors Accepts Redevelopment Study,” *Sun-Sentinel* (Broward County, Florida), October 19, 1986, <[http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1986-10-19/news/8603030530\\_1\\_redevelopment-study-darby](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1986-10-19/news/8603030530_1_redevelopment-study-darby)>.

<sup>46</sup> Stephen d’Oliveira, “Codes Key Priority in Manors,” *Sun-Sentinel* (Broward County, Florida), January 11, 1987, <[http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1987-01-11/news/8701020668\\_1\\_code-enforcement-sign-law-wilton-manors](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1987-01-11/news/8701020668_1_code-enforcement-sign-law-wilton-manors)>.

<sup>47</sup> Celeste Ellich, interviewed by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 6, 2011.

<sup>48</sup> Kelly Leon, “Robberies leap 286 percent in Wilton manors during ’85,” *Fort Lauderdale News/Sun-Sentinel* (Florida), April 23, 1986, sec. CP.

Wiggly to be a top concern, recommending, ““women not leave their purses in grocery baskets or lay them on top of the car while transporting groceries.””<sup>49</sup> Compared to the county’s thirty-six percent increase in robberies during the same period, and considering the city’s eighteen percent increase in overall crime rate,<sup>50</sup> Wilton Manors was undergoing a unique change that rocked its core identity as a quiet, isolated town. The police chief partly blamed the deteriorating situation in Wilton Manors on the increasing lawlessness in bordering Fort Lauderdale neighborhoods just south of the Island City.<sup>51</sup> Considering the open borders between the two cities, the police chief alleged that Fort Lauderdale’s criminals could easily come into Wilton Manors, commit a robbery, and escape back to Fort Lauderdale. ““It’s [high crime areas] right at the city limits of Wilton Manors and Fort Lauderdale and the culprits can be gone before we get a chance to respond,”” argued Scott.<sup>52</sup>

Another problem that the city faced during this decade concerned a declining population, and this reality seemed to have caught city planners by surprise. In the *City of Wilton Manors 1989 Comprehensive Plan*, the report admitted, “The 1980 Comprehensive Plan predicted a growth to 15,927 however these figures have been considerably revised to show that for the period from 1980 to 2020 the City will gain an additional 431 persons to a count of 13,173.”<sup>53</sup> Though the report admitted previously lofty goals for future growth in the city and conceded some of the reality of the declining population in Wilton Manors, the 1989 report, given its publication before the 1990 Census, actually underestimated the population decline problem in Wilton Manors. In

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<sup>49</sup> Kelly Leon, “Robberies leap 286 percent in Wilton manors during ’85.”

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> *The City of Wilton Manors 1989 Comprehensive Plan: Volume II*, 4.

fact, between 1980 and 1990, the city's population declined by 905 people, from 12,711 to 11,806, creating a seven percent decrease in city residents during the period.<sup>54</sup>

Considering that the Comprehensive Plan had predicted a much more modest decline of 129 residents during the 1980s,<sup>55</sup> Wilton Manors seemed to have deeper residential trouble than city officials were willing to admit or recognize.

While the Comprehensive Plan may have painted a rosier picture of Wilton Manors' residential population than actually existed, it documented a straightforward assessment of the aging housing stock in the city. "Since 1980 the amount of residential construction activity that has taken place in Wilton Manors is minimal,"<sup>56</sup> the report bluntly states. Moreover, the plan notes that construction on sixty-six percent of the city's houses took place between 1950 and 1970, and by 1975, ninety-four percent of all of the city's housing had been constructed,<sup>57</sup> meaning that many of Wilton Manors houses were old (by South Florida standards), small, and in need of significant improvements by the turn of the 1990s. Moreover, the median gross rent for the city, when adjusted to 1999 dollars, declined from \$718 to \$589,<sup>58</sup> a point avoided by the 1989 assessment. As the city plan points out, however, the reality of Wilton Manors' housing was not all bad news, as the older properties and lower prices seemed to provide an outlet for a younger population who could begin to claim Wilton Manors as their new home.

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<sup>54</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Population Census of the United States, 1980 & 1990*, Florida, Broward County, census tracts 509 & 510 (excluding Lazy Lakes population of 31 people), indexed by total population.

<sup>55</sup> *The City of Wilton Manors 1989 Comprehensive Plan: Volume II*, 134.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 45 - 46.

<sup>58</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Census of the United States, 1980 & 1990*, Florida, Broward County, census tracts 509 & 510, indexed by housing.

Though the city rightly concluded that depressed housing prices would help usher in a new wave of residents, the city's conception of who would be included in the population regeneration missed the mark as well. "It is expected that this decline will be brief and a moderate increase will commence as newly 'marrieds' and young families begin to move into the City,"<sup>59</sup> repeated the city plan. In fact, just two years after that report's adoption by the city, local media quickly called this conclusion into question. In a full-page feature called "Divorce City" on the cover of the Lifestyle section of the *Sun-Sentinel*, Broward County's primary newspaper reported that Wilton Manors ranked number one for divorced men and women in the county per capita.<sup>60</sup> Considering Wilton Manors' historic image as a small, family town, this article further demonstrates the town's quickly changing demographic reality. However, the article concluded that divorcees, lured by the cheap housing of Wilton Manors, were moving into the city, meaning that the longtime residents were likely not the ones getting divorces.<sup>61</sup> Though the format of the data makes a confirmation of this theory difficult, the rationalization that Wilton Manors experienced a significant movement of recently-divorced people, who likely had lower household incomes than their married counterparts, speaks to the particularly low housing prices in Wilton Manors at the turn of the 1990s.

Beyond reporting on divorced people in Wilton Manors, the extensive article included a paragraph about other emerging demographic groups in the city, particularly, African Americans, Latinos, and gays:

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<sup>59</sup> *The City of Wilton Manors 1989 Comprehensive Plan: Volume II*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Liz Doup, "Divorce City," *Sun-Sentinel* (Broward County, Florida). September 4, 1991, sec. E.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Those who know the community say that Wilton Manors has changed in recent years. As older residents move on or pass away, younger people with families to raise settle in. In addition, blacks and Hispanics now count themselves among Wilton Manors residents in greater numbers than in the past. And a visible gay population adds to the city's diversity.<sup>62</sup>

In a thorough review of mainstream local newspapers during this period, this quotation from 1991 comprises the first public acknowledgment of gay movement into Wilton Manors. Moreover, the news report even provides some explanation for how a growing gay presence in Wilton Manors was even possible, claiming that an aging population began to free up some of the aged housing stock. Here, the local press, the city's 1989 comprehensive plan, and longtime residents, agree.

In fact, the 1989 city report takes an entire page to posit this same conclusion regarding the city's aging population,<sup>63</sup> and several longtime residents involved in the town's real estate or history called attention to this first demographic change when recounting their memory of Wilton Manors' generational transition. "People were going into retirement homes," recalled Tim Singer, longtime Fort Lauderdale resident and Wilton Manors real estate agent. "There were some very nice, very clean, original condition properties that we would respectfully call old lady properties. ... Those began turning over."<sup>64</sup> Another Wilton Manors real estate agent, Carla Infante, who by several accounts<sup>65</sup> opened up the first "gay real estate office" in Wilton Manors, similarly recalled the generational shift of home sales during the turn of the 1990s. "The typical seller in Wilton Manors during that time period was an eighty to ninety year old woman

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<sup>62</sup> Liz Doup, "Divorce City," 6.

<sup>63</sup> *The City of Wilton Manors 1989 Comprehensive Plan: Volume II*, 49.

<sup>64</sup> Tim Singer, interviewed by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 6, 2011.

<sup>65</sup> Carla Infante interviewed by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, October 29, 2010; Celeste Ellich, interviewed by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 6, 2011; Tim Singer, interviewed by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 6, 2011; Gayle Borden, interviewed by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 11, 2011.

who maybe lived alone and couldn't keep it up anymore. There were a lot of old couples or old people selling. ... And most of the buyers were first-time buyers and they were leaving their apartments and getting their first house, because that's first house price range."<sup>66</sup> Wilton Manors historian and Broward College professor Cynthia Thuma expressed the trend in blunter terms, "You had people leaving in the 80s and early 90s, and part of it was because of death. Generational residents were dying out."<sup>67</sup> There exists, then, a clear consensus that part of the entre by new, gay residents was made possible by the exit of old people who had owned their Wilton Manors home throughout the prior decades.

The argument that an aging population alone gave rise to a new class of gay buyers, however, is insufficient. Instead, it is important to understand how the seemingly negative changes in the Island City actually created an opening for new gay and lesbian residents. As it has been noted, the city increasingly became concerned with its lagging aesthetic sensibility, a problem that could only be rectified by residents with the capital and time to make the necessary home improvements. Legally barred from adopting children and thus armed with potentially more flexible pocketbooks and schedules, gays and lesbians proved to have the means necessary to execute residential facelifts. This will be more thoroughly explored in the following chapter. Moreover, in the face of a rising crime rate, the city needed to attract new residents who harbored fewer concerns with the rising delinquency. The lack of vulnerable children in gay households helped to assuage this social group's concerns, and particularly to gay males, the rising crime rate would have been even less concerning, given that the vast majority of criminals targeted

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<sup>66</sup> Carla Infante interviewed by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, October 29, 2010.

<sup>67</sup> Cynthia Thuma, interviewed by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 7, 2011.

women.<sup>68</sup> Finally, the city's relatively low housing prices, combined with its geographic proximity to Fort Lauderdale's most desirable gay neighborhoods, made Wilton Manors alluring, allowing new residents to accept some of the town's drawbacks. This, too, will be substantially expanded upon in the following chapter.

Thus, by the turn of the 1990s, the stage was set for the coming gay influx into Wilton Manors. With a housing stock where the median age of houses was forty-four years old,<sup>69</sup> new residents had to be ready to repaint, re-landscape, and remodel. Moreover, given the smaller nature of these old-Florida, country-style homes, the new residents would have to maintain a smaller household than the average heterosexual family, limiting many of Wilton Manors' homes to singles or couples with no children. Given the rising crime in the city, incoming residents also needed to be relatively comfortable with a city of potentially more lawlessness. In sum, the buyer in Wilton Manors at the turn of the 1990s needed to be someone looking for a cheap fixer-upper and who was ready to help re-build a city. As the "Divorce City" article briefly suggested, gay and lesbian people would emerge as the most prominent demographic group that could fit the requirements of a 1990s Wilton Manors homebuyer. It will be shown in the following chapter that real estate agents channeled these buyers into the Island City, marketing Wilton Manors as a city ready for a gay comeback as other Fort Lauderdale neighborhoods popular with the gay community became too expensive for many gay home seekers.

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<sup>68</sup> Kelly Leon, "Robberies leap 286 percent in Wilton Manors during '85."

<sup>69</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Census of the United States*, 1990, Florida, Broward County, census tracts 509 & 510, indexed by housing.

### Chapter 3: “The Next Victoria Park”

As Wilton Manors deteriorated in the 1980s, several neighborhoods in nearby Fort Lauderdale flourished. One of these, Victoria Park, enjoyed a particularly strong revival in the 1980s. Just one-and-a-half miles southeast of the troubled Island City and within walking distance from Fort Lauderdale’s downtown, Victoria Park gained notoriety as Fort Lauderdale’s “urban village,” with original, 1950s-style bungalows in the shadow of the city’s downtown. As many of the neighborhood’s residents had been the original owners from the 1950s, those aging occupants began to yield to a new generation of buyers in the 1980s. By 1990, the *Miami Herald* reported, “But now the word is out...and people are waiting in line to buy before property values climb. During the last decade, Victoria Park has developed as an adult community because the small homes discouraged large families.”<sup>70</sup>

More than just a desirable neighborhood for childless adults, Victoria Park became widely known as *the* gay residential community in Fort Lauderdale. Though early newspaper accounts did not openly acknowledge the sexual identities of the “young adult community” moving into Victoria Park, gay guides of the period – including the *Pink Pages*, the *OutPages*, and the *Gay and Lesbian Fun Maps of South Florida* – all highlighted Victoria Park in their reviews of Fort Lauderdale’s gay life.<sup>71</sup> Throughout the 1970s and 80s, Fort Lauderdale had been gaining a positive reputation in both the gay

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<sup>70</sup> Xose F. Alvarez-Alfonso, “Genteel Character of Victoria Park Appeals to All Ages,” *Miami (Florida) Herald*, September 21, 1990, sec. H, <[http://www.lexisnexis.com/lncui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T11236617190&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=29\\_T11236617116&cisb=22\\_T11236617115&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=247195&docNo=15](http://www.lexisnexis.com/lncui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T11236617190&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=29_T11236617116&cisb=22_T11236617115&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=247195&docNo=15)>.

<sup>71</sup> All guides accessed at the Stonewall Library and Archives in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 1350 E. Sunrise Blvd., 33304.

South Florida community and the growing gay tourist population;<sup>72</sup> while much of Fort Lauderdale's gay community resources, such as bars and hotels, had been scattered across the entirety of the city, the emerging "out" population laid claim in Victoria Park through the 1980s. As Victoria Park's gay appeal increased, residents – regardless of sexual orientation – widely attributed the improving home appearances and increasing property values in Victoria Park to the boom in gay residents.<sup>73</sup> In 1998, *City Link* – a free, local, weekly South Florida newspaper – wrote, "Eastern Broward County has one of the largest gay populations in the state and it's no secret that gays, predominately male, have gentrified areas like Victoria Park and Poinciana Heights in Fort Lauderdale."<sup>74</sup> Here, *City Link* gave voice to what longtime Fort Lauderdale residents repeated throughout the interviews conducted for this study: as gays moved into neighborhoods like Victoria Park, they made home improvements that raised the level of desirability and property values for the areas in which they were inhabiting, thus turning a profit for themselves and real estate agents after selling these improved homes just a couple of years later.

Without hesitation, real estate agents familiar with the gay market in Victoria Park during the 1980s and 1990s consistently described a story where gay movement into

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<sup>72</sup> *Gay and Lesbian Tourism* extensively explores Fort Lauderdale's history as a gay destination. Particularly attributing the industry's growth to the innovation of Richard Grey, who opened the Marlin Beach Hotel, the first gay hotel in Fort Lauderdale, the book explores how Fort Lauderdale became a model for other cities looking to market themselves as a gay tourist destination in order to increase both tourism and settlement in the region. Though this is not a historical work *per se*, the book articulates how Fort Lauderdale successfully marketed to gay tourists, and the accounts in the book echo the accounts of those experts interviewed for this study. Book citation: Guaracino, Jeff. *Gay and Lesbian Tourism: The Essential Guide for Marketing*. Oxford: Elsevier, 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Carla Infante, interviewed by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, October 29, 2010; Dean Trantalis, interviewed by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 5, 2011; John Castelli, interviewed by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 6, 2011; Celeste Ellich, interviewed by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 6, 2011; Tim Singer, interviewed by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 6, 2011; Gayle Borden, interviewed by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 11, 2011.

<sup>74</sup> T.M. Shine, "A Gay Ol' Town," *City Link*, June 24 – 30, 1998, 21.

Victoria Park served as the catalyst for that neighborhood's revival. Tim Singer, a real estate agent and longtime gay Fort Lauderdale resident, remembered the following:

And a bunch of guys from California, Southern California, would come over here, paying cash for these [Victoria Park] properties, paying sixty, maybe eighty thousand dollars. Putting in French doors. Painting them. Putting mulch in the yard. Refinishing the floors. And then flipping them, maybe making ten, fifteen thousand dollars on the sale. And they were selling to other gay couples moving into the area. And that's really how Victoria Park became the first real gay neighborhood at the end of the 80s.<sup>75</sup>

Though some may instinctively question any narrative that suggests that one demographic group has a particular affinity for any activity – in this case, a gay predilection for remodeling and redecorating – it is important to distinguish the difference between stereotypes and what Singer describes here. The gay buyers who were purchasing and flipping homes in Victoria Park, according to Singer, had incentives beyond a gay gene: profit. With Fort Lauderdale already set as a destination for gay people, Singer describes a set of individuals who looked to capitalize on that particular market. Gays were coming to Fort Lauderdale as a place to vacation, and other gays capitalized on this by revitalizing depressed real estate and selling it at a profit to gay people who were looking to make Fort Lauderdale their new home.

Victoria Park's success is essential to understanding the gay movement to Wilton Manors, because Victoria Park provided a model case for real estate agents when they began to work together to market Wilton Manors as the next destination for gay settlers in the early 1990s. That said, it is worth noting that the number of realtors familiar with the gay Victoria Park market and ready to move into Wilton Manors comprised a very small pool of agents. Both the tight-knit gay market in Victoria Park and the reportedly

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<sup>75</sup> Tim Singer, interviewed by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 6, 2011.

“homophobic, old boys network” in the Wilton Manors real estate monopoly, Park Place Realty, limited the number of gay realtors negotiating in the Island City to just three in the first years of the 1990s.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, three successful realtors, Gayle Borden, Carla Infante, and Tim Singer, clearly made headway in Wilton Manors, and many real estate agents I spoke with gave most credit to Infante for leading the way in the creation of the town’s gay real estate market.<sup>77</sup> Though these real estate agents had neither negotiated home sales in the Island City before the 1990s nor had any of them previously resided within the city limits, their success in Victoria Park and desire to find a new, comparable location led them to pursue Wilton Manors.

Despite initial resistance from Park Place, gay real estate agents’ initiatives in Wilton Manors proved successful as offers from gay buyers became too tantalizing for Wilton Manors’ sellers to ignore. “Everyone wanted to know what was going to be the next Victoria Park,” recalled Tim Singer, “and Wilton Manors was the logical place to go.”<sup>78</sup> Carla Infante, agreed:

So, all of a sudden, myself and a handful of other realtors started showing Wilton Manors to gays who wanted to buy in Victoria Park. ... So we’d take people to Victoria Park and we’d take them to Poinciana Heights and then we’d say, “Well, let me just show you Wilton Manors.”

And they’d say, “What?”

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<sup>76</sup> Four different real estate agents cited Park Place Realty as both “homophobic” and an “old boys network” that made selling in Wilton Manors initially very difficult. Interviewed by author: Gayle Borden; Celeste Ellich; Carla Infante; and Tim Singer.

<sup>77</sup> Gayle Borden, interview by author; Celeste Ellich, interview by author; Carla Infante, interview by author; Tim Singer, interview by author; John Castelli, interview by author; Robert Russuto, phone interview by author, October 20, 2010; and Doug Blevins, phone interview by author, October 21, 2010.

<sup>78</sup> Tim Singer, interviewed by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 6, 2011.

And we'd say, "Let me just show you." And we'd go out there and they'd say, "Oh my God!"<sup>79</sup>

As a tiny city nearly enveloped by Fort Lauderdale, Wilton Manors had virtually no outside name recognition. Few – if any – gay buyers from outside of the Fort Lauderdale area ever approached a real estate agent with the desire to see homes in Wilton Manors. Instead, agents like Infante and Singer guided buyers there. With gay demand for property in Victoria Park outweighing all possible supply – Victoria Park had only 8,700 residents – the opportunity emerged to market Wilton Manors to the growing number of gay people looking to move to the Fort Lauderdale area. While some real estate agents remembered that Park Place Realty initially would not cooperate with agents bringing in a gay clientele, that resistance quickly crumbled. Infante, the first realtor with a gay following to move her agency to the Island City, rented a storefront in the same space as Park Place in 1993, and eventually took over the entire building.<sup>80</sup>

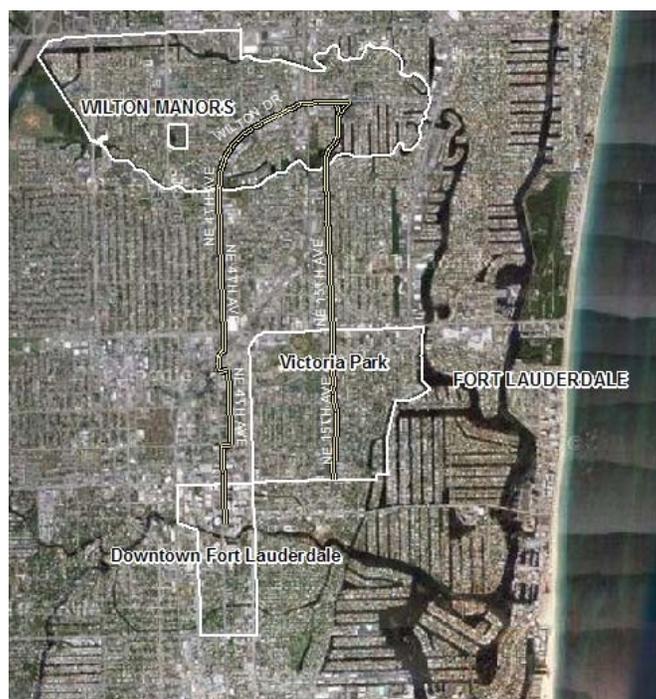
Just one-and-a-half miles northeast of Victoria Park, Wilton Manors' geographical and physical structure made the town the next best thing for the buyer who could not afford Victoria Park. Not only is the town close to the desirable, gay Fort Lauderdale neighborhood, but it is close in three of the best possible ways. First, Wilton Manors is east of Interstate 95, which is important in South Florida because nearly all middle and upper class homes are east of this interstate (save outlying suburbs to the far west). Next, the Island City is west of U.S. Route One, a dividing line that leaves South Florida's most expensive real estate to the east and more moderately priced property to the west. That Wilton Manors is to the west of Route One helps provide some stability

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<sup>79</sup> Carla Infante, interview by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, October 29, 2010.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.; Celeste Ellich, interview by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 6, 2011.

for property values, helping to ensure a middle-class tradition in the city. Finally, the Island City is directly accessible to Victoria Park and downtown Fort Lauderdale via Fifteenth and Fourth Avenues, ensuring a relatively short commute between the bedroom community and some of Fort Lauderdale’s most popular communities. Beyond geography, Wilton Manors’ infrastructure appealed to buyers as well. With properties that were larger than those in Victoria Park, but with prices approximately fifty percent less than the average home in Victoria Park, the Island City’s homes were a relatively good deal.<sup>81</sup> In Carla Infante’s words, “You got more bang for your buck.”<sup>82</sup>



**Figure 2 - Wilton Manors and surrounding areas of Fort Lauderdale, including the Victoria Park neighborhood and downtown, with NE 4<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Avenues highlighted. An original map by Sean Manning Udell. Satellite Image from Google and data files from U.S. Census Bureau & Broward County Department of GIS.<sup>83</sup>**

<sup>81</sup> Personal files of Gayle Borden and interviews by author with Borden, Celeste Ellich, Carla Infante, and Tim Singer.

<sup>82</sup> Carla Infante, interview by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, October 29, 2010.

<sup>83</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. “2009 TIGER/Line Shapefiles.”

<<http://www.census.gov/geo/www/tiger/tgrshp2009/tgrshp2009.html>>; Broward County GIS. “GIS Download Center.” <<http://gis.broward.org/GISData.htm>>.

Beyond the appealing physical structure of Wilton Manors' properties, the city's layout itself proved compelling to buyers as well. As Gayle Borden, one of the other early 1990s gay realtors for Wilton Manors, points out, the Island City had its own commercial district with walkability to-and-around that business area, which is distinct from the Victoria Park neighborhood:

[Potential buyers] could walk their dogs somewhere and not just be in a residential area. And in Wilton Manors, that was one of the only places that you'd be able to achieve that. So us realtors, we started marketing that, saying, "You don't want to spend the money on Las Olas<sup>84</sup> and the area there...if you want something really where we know we'll be able to grow it up and have a community there you should move to Wilton Manors."<sup>85</sup>

Though Wilton Manors suffered substantial decline before 1990, its structure and history offered buyers something very unique to South Florida: a close-knit town with a structure that promoted walkability. With the arching Wilton Drive – the center of the city's central business district – sweeping through Wilton Manors' core, neighborhoods to the east and west of the Drive are connected to the commercial zone through many entry points, creating a series of short blocks that promote walkability between neighborhoods and businesses. Indeed, the structure of the city is as close as any South Florida city has come to the urban ideal argued by Jane Jacobs, the famous urban planner of the twentieth century who postulated that short, navigable city blocks were one of the best structures to promote community within the urban setting.<sup>86</sup> Considering that Wilton Manors had always prided itself as a small village within a bigger city, it is little surprise that real estate agents began to market these features to a population aspiring to live in Victoria

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<sup>84</sup> Las Olas is an area of downtown Fort Lauderdale close to Victoria Park.

<sup>85</sup> Gayle Borden, interview by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 13, 2011.

<sup>86</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Vintage Books, 1992, 183.

Park, a neighborhood which had initially proved appealing for the original character of its houses and its location near the city center of Fort Lauderdale.

That said, Wilton Manors' woes at the turn of 1990 cannot be glossed over, and real estate agents required buyers with a particular vision for meeting the town's potential and the spirit to be a part of renewal. Realtors' previous Victoria Park clients made that task a bit easier. "Two clients of mine ring a particular bell," Gayle Borden recalled. "They bought early and renovated at the beginning of Victoria Park. And when Victoria was selling at crazy crazy prices, and they wanted to keep a place down here, they saw what could happen in Wilton Manors and bought a place there."<sup>87</sup> Not only did Wilton Manors offer a source for repeat business for realtors, but also the movement of pioneering clients into the ailing town presented further offered desirable referrals. Borden added, "They had friends who came to us and bought in Wilton Manors, too, and helped build."<sup>88</sup> For Carla Infante, this became the primary source of her business: "We were a gay office so we had a big gay clientele. It was referral after referral after referral."<sup>89</sup> In fact, the quick rise of Infante's gay customers encouraged her to be the first gay realtor with a large gay following to open an office in Wilton Manors proper in 1993.<sup>90</sup> While Infante realized success with friends-of-friends, Borden found referrals by customers-of-customers to be her primary outlet for sales in Wilton Manors. The realtor for Richard Grey, the owner of the first gay hotel in Fort Lauderdale, Borden often received clients from Grey when his hotel guests expressed interest in buying a home.

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<sup>87</sup> Gayle Borden, interview by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 13, 2011.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Carla Infante, interview by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, October 29, 2010.

<sup>90</sup> Claimed by Carla Infante and verified by the following Wilton Manors real estate agents: Gayle Borden, Celeste Ellich, Tim Singer, John Castelli, Robert Russuto, and Doug Blevins.

“His customers would call us looking to buy a piece of property, and given the price range and what they were looking for, we would show Wilton Manors.”<sup>91</sup> Thus, the referral process itself helped build the gay community in Wilton Manors, considering that a chain of friends and acquaintances used the same real estate agents who showed homes in the same areas. With similar social networks, economic backgrounds, and geographic predilections, gay referrals often inspired real estate agents to lead potential buyers to what they saw as the best fit for these preferences: Wilton Manors.

While referrals certainly proved vital to some real estate agents’ success, the relatively small niche market of gays moving to Wilton Manors in the early 1990s demonstrated that realtors could not rely entirely on references in order to drive their sales. Both Tim Singer and Gayle Borden advertised heavily in local gay publications like *OutPages*, which offered visitors a perspective on the South Florida gay scene. Nearly every edition of the *OutPages* between 1990 and 1995 featured multiple advertisements by Singer and Borden.<sup>92</sup> Singer succinctly stated, “We advertised hard.”<sup>93</sup> Indeed, real estate agents heavily targeted buyers who were moving to South Florida from somewhere else. Because so many gay tourists came to the Fort Lauderdale area and then decided to stay, realtors who wished to attract this business needed to create a presence in materials read by gay out-of-towners. Moreover, a gay real estate agent proved particularly useful for outsiders looking to settle in the right place. As Singer explained, “I think a lot of gay people feel more comfortable working with a gay agent, especially if they’re coming into an area where they don’t know how they’ll be received.

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<sup>91</sup> Gayle Borden, interview by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 13, 2011.

<sup>92</sup> Accessed at the Stonewall Library and Archives in Fort Lauderdale. Box information: "Directories (Phone Directories, Business & Service Directories) Florida & South Florida/FT. Lauderdale/Miami".

<sup>93</sup> Tim Singer, interview by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 6, 2011.

And they want to be somewhere where they'll be comfortable.”<sup>94</sup> With little else to draw from outside of this feeling of trust, newcomers could be more easily convinced that Wilton Manors would be a solid investment for someone entirely new to the area. While advertisements were useful in recruiting new buyers to Wilton Manors, they were also a way to create and solidify customer relationships. As Borden pointed out, “A lot of our customers owned gay publications, and we'd want to support them, so it just snowballed from there.”<sup>95</sup> Supporting gay publications signaled support for the community, an essential business tool for entrepreneurs benefitting from a close-knit and isolated community.

Observers noted that new gay homeowners in Wilton Manors paid special attention to home renovation, which improved the aesthetic quality and the value of their homes. Gay and straight commentary attributed the home remodeling to a specifically “gay” character, drawing on and further promoting a common gay stereotype. In a 1998 *City Link* article reflecting on the movement into Wilton Manors in the early 1990s, author T.M. Shine quoted Brad Casey, then-owner of the gay weekly *Scoop*, saying, “The gays see an old rundown house and they say, ‘Wow, what can I do with that?’ It’s evolution.”<sup>96</sup> Wilton Manors historian Paul Kuta agrees, “The cliché is true, when gays move into an area, the aesthetics of the area climb.” Straight City Commissioner Scott Newton echoed this, and raised the common perception into a direct comparison between gay and straight residents, “All of a sudden the gay community would move in and fix up their house to look really nice, you know. And they’d be next door to a guy who had a

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<sup>94</sup> Tim Singer, interview by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 6, 2011.

<sup>95</sup> Gayle Borden, interview by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 13, 2011.

<sup>96</sup> T.M. Shine, “A Gay Ol’ Town.”

half track, you know, and an air boat, and three trailers, one of them broken down with half a part.”<sup>97</sup> In another interpretation, Gayle Borden argues, “What’s great about the gay real estate market is that gay people see twenty steps above other people. They could see even with just one place or two little places they could see the potential.”<sup>98</sup> Indeed, every person – regardless of sexual identity or neighborhood background in Wilton Manors – cited this phenomenon of gays having a particular ability to restore homes in the city. The first openly gay mayor of Wilton Manors, John Fiore, similarly reflected on this point in *Florida Trend* magazine, “‘If you talk to people who have done redevelopment areas all around the country, you’ll hear that the gay community has been important in redeveloping these areas.’”<sup>99</sup>

In fact, to the extent that gay homeowners have contributed to the gentrification of neighborhoods, their success may be attributable to demographic characteristics, and not any “gay gene” or particular foresight. One hypothesis that some use to explain the gay revitalization of neighborhoods posits that childless gay couples have fewer expenses and thus have more disposable income than heterosexual families. Neil Gomoluh, a Wilton Manors gay resident and owner of Better Bodies gym, the first gay-oriented health club in that city, reflected in 1998 on the early 1990s housing renewal, “A lot of times, we [gay couples] have double incomes. So we have disposable income that we put into our homes.”<sup>100</sup> Indeed, *GLBTQ*, the largest LGBT encyclopedia, claims, “...gay men in

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<sup>97</sup> Scott Newton, interview by author, Oakland Park, Florida, January 12, 2011.

<sup>98</sup> Gayle Borden, interview by author, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, January 13, 2011.

<sup>99</sup> Pat Dunnigan, “Regeneration: Wilton Manors’ mayor is betting that the city’s large gay population will speed up redevelopment,” *Florida Trend*, March 2002, 22.

<sup>100</sup> Liz Doup, “The New Wilton Manors: Broward’s ‘Island City’ is Becoming Known as a Gay-Friendly Community,” *The Miami (Florida) Herald*. August 22, 1998, sec. G, <<http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/lnacui2api/results/docview/attachRetrieve.do?smi=LOGOS&key=11090&componentseq=1&type=201&inline=y>>.

particular are often at the vanguard of gentrifying neighborhoods. This is because they tend to have a higher percentage of disposable income and often want to live in urban centers that are tolerant and culturally vibrant.”<sup>101</sup> The article reflects some of the wider agreement among LGBT people around this hypothesis. While this may be what people – including many gays and lesbians themselves – believe about the financial power of the LGBT community, this widespread conclusion is also likely the result of the visibility of one particular segment of the gay and lesbian population. Given that most residents of South Florida during the later half of the twentieth century are not originally from the area, many of the gays and lesbians in the region would similarly have required greater mobility in order to move to Wilton Manors, suggesting that these anecdotes about elevated disposable income are a result of observations of a specific, privileged segment of the community. Moreover, in the context of Florida legal code, which until the final months of 2010 explicitly barred homosexuals from adopting children,<sup>102</sup> gay couples in Florida in the 1990s were likely different from those in most other states. Given that most gay families in Florida could have no dependents, state code required that most Wilton Manors’ gay households bear fewer financial obligations. By understanding the specific factors behind this city’s gay community, it becomes easier to rationalize why gays might be known for their supposed predilection for fixing up their homes, given that home improvements increase household equity and that circumstances offered these gay residents the initial capital to pursue home renovations.

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<sup>101</sup> Mikaila Mariel and Lemonik Arthur, “Gentrification,” *GLBTQ*, 2007, <<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?hid=11&sid=3e1d0987-6203-4377-ac1a-22d7314f8476%40sessionmgr4&vid=5>>.

<sup>102</sup> Jeff Kunerth, “Florida’s gay-adoption ban unconstitutional, court rules,” *Orlando (Florida) Sentinel*, September 22, 2010, <[http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2010-09-22/news/os-gay-adoption-ruling-reaction-20100922\\_1\\_gay-adoption-ban-gay-adoption-martin-gill](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2010-09-22/news/os-gay-adoption-ruling-reaction-20100922_1_gay-adoption-ban-gay-adoption-martin-gill)>.

Faced with pressures on the Victoria Park housing market, realtors with experience with gay homebuyers began to market Wilton Manors as the next venue for gay gentrification. Though high rates of vacancy in the business district and softening property values in the housing market had resulted in a depressed economy in Wilton Manors, South Florida's gay real estate agents assured their customers that this provided an opportunity for buyers, given the undervalued status of most of the city's properties. Though the assurances may have been a self-fulfilling prophecy, the vision came to be, with gay residents moving into the city at the start of the 1990s and spurring a chain migration that would ultimately lead to a much larger movement of gays to Wilton Manors. Unlike the narratives of other gay enclaves where residents moved to a particular area for its notoriously accepting attitude, real estate business strategies and financial incentives fueled Wilton Manors' residential movement, with depressed home prices offering the prospect of significant future dividends.

#### Chapter 4: The Gay Awakening of Wilton Drive

While the Wilton Manors real estate market proved enticing to gay and lesbian buyers at the start of the 1990s, the boom of gay small businesses in Wilton Manors in the latter half of that decade offered South Florida observers a much more obvious sign of the growth of the gay market in the Island City. The Wilton Manors business district, which extends along Wilton Drive and N.E. 26<sup>th</sup> Street – the city’s main thoroughfares – had been in clear decay following the closing of one of the city’s largest vendors, Piggly Wiggly, in 1991,<sup>103</sup> and it has already been argued that the suffering of Wilton Manors businesses started a decade before that supermarket’s closing. However, the increasingly empty businesses district, which had an overall vacancy rate of forty percent,<sup>104</sup> offered the potential of a revival to some onlookers; real estate agents like Gayle Borden articulated this point when trying to convince gay and lesbian homebuyers to choose Wilton Manors. Ultimately, this proved to be the winning prediction. By 1998, politicians and reporters heralded the city as transformed. Though growth would continue even further after 1998, its new status as an “exclusive...gay ol’ town” was set by that year.<sup>105</sup>

When asked about the turnaround in Wilton Manors’ business district, longtime residents unanimously point to the 1997 opening of Georgie’s Alibi restaurant and bar as the catalyst. Indeed, in the same year that Alibi opened, at least fourteen other gay-owned

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<sup>103</sup> Lisa Arthur, “Wilton Manors Embraces New Image,” *The Miami (Florida) Herald*, October 11, 1998, sec. BR.

<sup>104</sup> Shine, “A Gay Ol’ Town.”

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.; Lisa Arthur, “Wilton Manors Embraces New Image;” Liz Doup, “The New Wilton Manors: Broward’s ‘Island City’ is Becoming Known as a Gay-Friendly Community,” *The Miami (Florida) Herald*, August 22, 1998, sec. G.

and gay-themed establishments began to welcome customers.<sup>106</sup> Much of this revitalization occurred in the Shoppes of Wilton Manors, the strip mall that was home to Georgie's Alibi. Though the Shoppes had been one of many eyesores on Wilton Drive with a staggering vacancy rate of seventy percent in 1995, the plaza was one hundred percent leased by 1998.<sup>107</sup> Businesses that explicitly catered to the gay community filled the void in the Shoppes, including Gay Mart clothing store, the Otherglades bar, Better Bodies Gym, Licks ice cream shop, and One Lump or Two coffeehouse.<sup>108</sup> Outside of the Shoppes strip mall, an eighty-person law firm, a drug store, another gay bar, and various other businesses quickly emerged on Wilton Drive in 1998, leading to a ninety percent occupancy rate along the town's main thoroughfare, no small feat considering that ratio had been as low as sixty percent just three years before.<sup>109</sup>

Though the popular conception among longtime residents argues that Georgie's Alibi proved the catalyst for Wilton Manors' commercial revitalization, the surge of gay businesses in the Shoppes of Wilton Manors was actually a result of an entrepreneurial mall management company, Redevo. With an eye on the growing gay population in Wilton Manors, Redevo approached the city in 1995 with a plan to redevelop the Shoppes; the company promised to invest millions of dollars into the project as long as the city first changed some of its zoning on Wilton Drive. Specifically, Redevo wanted the vast parking requirements for bars and restaurants to be reduced and asked for the removal of a prohibition on issuing liquor licenses to establishments within 1,000 feet of

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<sup>106</sup> Liz Doup, "The New Wilton Manors: Broward's 'Island City' is Becoming Known as a Gay-Friendly Community."

<sup>107</sup> Lisa Arthur, "Wilton Manors Embraces New Image."

<sup>108</sup> *Outpages: The Directory With a Sense of Community, South Florida's Resident and Visitor Guide*. Ed. Yvonne Rohrabacher. Fort Lauderdale: Out Pages Inc., 1999.

<sup>109</sup> Shine, "A Gay Ol' Town," 21.

each other.<sup>110</sup> With the prospect of such a substantial investment, Wilton Manors obliged Redevo, agreeing to declare an “Arts and Entertainment District” along the entirety of Wilton Drive simultaneously with the reopening of the renovated Shoppes of Wilton Manors.<sup>111</sup> As requested, the district dramatically reduced the parking requirement for new bars and restaurants and removed the space requirement between establishments with liquor licenses.<sup>112</sup>

Not only did Redevo help convince Wilton Manors to make its central business district friendlier to bars and restaurants, but also the company recruited four of the plaza’s largest gay establishments to the new shopping center: Georgie’s Alibi, the Otherglades bar, Gay Mart, and Better Bodies Gym.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, Redevo’s property manager Anda Ashkar admitted to the *Sun-Sentinel* that the company’s business plan for the Shoppes included the creation of a gay business zone.<sup>114</sup> By centralizing several gay businesses into one shopping plaza, Redevo managed to follow through on a vision that gay bar owners, including George Kessinger of Georgie’s Alibi, had considered several years earlier. Before 1997, gay bars in the Wilton Manors/Fort Lauderdale area were dispersed throughout the city; the 1990 edition of the “Gay and Lesbian ‘Fun Map’ of South Florida” vividly illustrates this point with its map of the Fort Lauderdale-Wilton Manors area, where twenty-five gay bars are indiscriminately scattered throughout the

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<sup>110</sup> Scott Newton, interview by author, Oakland Park, Florida, January 12, 2011; Lisa Arthur, “Wilton Manors Embraces New Image.”

<sup>111</sup> Lisa Arthur, “Wilton Manors Embraces New Image;” Joanne Fanizza, interview by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 13, 2011.

<sup>112</sup> Paul Kuta, interview by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 10, 2011.

<sup>113</sup> Lisa Arthur, “Wilton Manors Embraces New Image;” John Castelli, interview by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 6, 2011.

<sup>114</sup> Lisa Arthur, “Wilton Manors Embraces New Image.”

thirty-six square mile area.<sup>115</sup> Several bar owners had seen this dispersal as an obstacle for maximizing business, claimed John Castelli, former owner of Fort Lauderdale's largest and longest running gay club, the Copa. Castelli remembered that some viewed Wilton Manors as a possible remedy. He recalled, "In the beginning of the 90s, I had interaction with Wilton Manors because George Kissinger wanted to start a gay business guild. ...The idea was like the Las Vegas Strip; the more gay businesses we could get in Wilton Manors, the more it's the destination."<sup>116</sup> Upon the realization of this concept, Neil Gomoluh, the operations manager of Better Bodies Gym, echoed this sentiment, "I think the thing that makes this all work is the gay community has a destination, a place it can come to and go to the gym, get some ice cream, have some lunch or dinner and then go for a drink."<sup>117</sup> Among gay business owners in South Florida, the idea of centralizing some of their community in Wilton Manors made financial sense. Because the costly restoration of dilapidated commercial infrastructure turned out to be the hurdle to this vision, it would take significant capital – beyond what any single entrepreneur could muster – to unleash Wilton Manors' potential for any new businesses. Seeing a potential financial reward in the gay community, an outside developer proved to be the catalyst to turn the concept of a gay business district into a reality by investing millions into the Shoppes of Wilton Manors, influencing the city to change its zoning laws, and courting gay entrepreneurs to the revitalized commercial stock.

Though the renovation of the Shoppes of Wilton Manors is widely claimed by residents as the birth of the gay business district in the Island City, there existed a

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<sup>115</sup> "Gay and Lesbian 'Fun Map' of South Florida: 1990 Edition." Brooklyn: The David James Press, LTD, 1989.

<sup>116</sup> John Castelli, interview by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 6, 2011.

<sup>117</sup> Lisa Arthur, "Wilton Manors Embraces New Image."

presence of gay venues in the city before the Alibi revolution. Oldest among this small group of businesses was the JJ's Other Side, a lesbian bar on Wilton Drive that had been open throughout the 1980s and remained open until 1996. Another location, 2209 Wilton Drive, had hosted several gay bars from the late 1980s through to the present, including Palms in 1989,<sup>118</sup> Club Classics in 1993,<sup>119</sup> Kicks in 1999,<sup>120</sup> and most recently Tropics. Another establishment, Chardees restaurant, opened in the early 1990s and remained open through the middle of the following decade. Admittedly, the list is short enough to count on one's hands, yet the volume proved significant enough for the small city in the early 1990s that the *Sun-Sentinel* already declared Wilton Drive to be "an oasis for gay businesses" as early as 1996, before the Shoppes' renovation.<sup>121</sup> In fact, this article by a mainstream, county newspaper made two keen observations and predictions. First, the writer exhibited the opinions of some business owners who speculated that Wilton Manors could be the next Coconut Grove,<sup>122</sup> a reference to a commercial and residential district in Miami that became defined by a large, out, gay population during the 1980s and early 1990s. These quotations by entrepreneurs highlight the fact that some business-minded people in Wilton Manors saw early on that the city's gay population signaled potential treasures. Second, the article cautioned that the blighted Shoppes of Wilton Manors still proved a significant hurdle for the city and its ability to court gay businesses.<sup>123</sup> Given the plaza's extensive area and ramshackle situation, the Shoppes

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<sup>118</sup> "Gay and Lesbian 'Fun Map' of South Florida: 1990 Edition."

<sup>119</sup> *Outpages: The Directory With a Sense of Community, South Florida's Resident and Visitor Guide*, Ed. Yvonne Rohrabacher, Fort Lauderdale: Out Pages Inc., 1993.

<sup>120</sup> Carol Moran, interview by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 7, 2011.

<sup>121</sup> Mike Meiners, "Wilton Drive 'An Oasis' for Gay Businesses," *Sun-Sentinel* (Broward County, Florida), May 19, 1996, <[http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1996-05-19/news/9605160587\\_1\\_gay-male-couples-gay-clientele-gay-friendly-businesses](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1996-05-19/news/9605160587_1_gay-male-couples-gay-clientele-gay-friendly-businesses)>.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

served the dual role as the emblem of the city's business potential but also a sign that more needed to be done in order to ensure Wilton Manors' revitalization. The *Sun-Sentinel's* 1996 article ends with a quotation from a gay business owner, Brad Casey, who calls upon leadership by the city council to provide incentives for the Shoppes redevelopment,<sup>124</sup> signaling some residents' belief that the next step for Wilton Manors' gay growth included this plaza's restoration.

Considering this course of development, Redevco's decision to redevelop the Shoppes of Wilton Manors may have been less of a lynchpin moment for the city and more of a logical extension of the business growth already taking place in Wilton Manors. Not only did the Island City host a handful of notable gay businesses at the turn of the 1990s, but also the period in which Redevco chose to redevelop the Shoppes included the context of some publicity and hype that called attention to the potential gay bounty in Wilton Manors. The fact that Redevco courted gay businesses and invested so much into the Shoppes suggests that the company made decisions based on a process involving significant market research that demonstrated value in marketing to gays. It has already been shown that by 1996 there existed a visible gay residential community in Wilton Manors, and gay businesses were likely seen as a way to build on that market presence. In that light, there existed an economic rationale to redevelop the Shoppes of Wilton Manors, and the move may not have been quite as revolutionary as the memory of longtime residents suggests.

Regardless of the interpretation of the redevelopment of the Shoppes of Wilton Manors, however, it is clear that the plaza's success inspired state-funded capital

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<sup>124</sup> Meiners, Mike. "Wilton Drive 'An Oasis' for Gay Businesses."

investment in Wilton Drive in order to further the economic revitalization. First, the Florida state government conferred the status of “Florida Main Street” upon Wilton Drive and established a “Community Redevelopment Agency” for the central business district, both measures which directed state tax dollars to specific street aesthetic projects like new gooseneck street lamps and more elegant signage.<sup>125</sup> Moreover, the Florida Department of Transportation simultaneously committed 1.7 million dollars to a beautification project along Wilton Drive, which included road resurfacing, new curbs, and more attractive landscaping.<sup>126</sup> Even more grandiose, business owners like Kessinger had further plans to pitch to city and county officials regarding other upgrades to Wilton Drive. Though some of the plans did not come to fruition – including a concept where a large archway laced in multicolored fiber optics would greet cars upon entry to Wilton Drive via the north or south entrance – other ideas pitched by gay entrepreneurs were seized by city planners, including proposals to slow down traffic on Wilton Drive, to widen sidewalks, and to allow outdoor cafes.<sup>127</sup> The period of government partnership with gay commercial venues and general interest in the central business district demonstrated the kind of economic potential – and tax revenue – that public officials saw through the gay commercial interest in Wilton Manors. Indeed, the influx of gay dollars into city coffers is what made later municipal improvements even possible.<sup>128</sup>

Though a wide majority of straight residents expressed relief and appreciation for the gay gentrification of the Wilton Manors central business district, some business owners demonstrated clear dismay with what they saw as the city’s courting of gay

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<sup>125</sup> Lisa Arthur, “Wilton Manors Embraces New Image.”

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Shine, “A Gay Ol’ Town,” 24.

<sup>128</sup> Scott Newton, interview by author, Oakland Park, Florida, January 12, 2011.

businesses where the most notable establishments had once been an A&W Root Beer or a Five-and-Dime. In a July 1, 1998 letter to then-City Manager Dan Keefe, Virginia Flaherty, owner of the long-time, family-owned About Town and Lock, claimed to speak for Wilton Manors' "majority" and extensively articulated her concern with the city's courting of the gay community.<sup>129</sup> Essentially, Flaherty wrote three complaints. First, she disapproved of what she saw as undue aid by the city for the gay community, writing, "There are many businesses all over the city...that employ a lot of people and service our community regardless of sexual orientation and without a lot of help from the city."<sup>130</sup> Second, she worried about how heterosexual parents "feel about raising their children in a city nick-named a Gay Ol' Town."<sup>131</sup> Finally, Flaherty questioned the extent to which the city actively promoted itself as a gay-friendly city, arguing that new initiatives showed "little respect for the families and church members in town."<sup>132</sup> In personal interviews, several straight residents, including City Commissioner Scott Newton and real estate agent Celeste Ellich, articulated the significant pocket of straight resistance to the influx of the gay community into Wilton Manors, and agreed that Flaherty's letter is emblematic of the homophobia that existed then and even continues today. Even the city's former mayor King Wilkinson had been accused in both the 1996 and 1998 city elections of actively trying to deny business permits to gays.<sup>133</sup> Though this particular allegation and

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<sup>129</sup> Virginia Flaherty, "Letter to Dan Keefe, City Manager," July 1, 1998. Accessed at the personal archive of Paul Kuta, Wilton Manors Historical Society.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* Paragraph 3.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* Paragraph 4.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* Paragraph 5.

<sup>133</sup> Steve d'Olivera, "Mayor of Manors Accused of Making Anti-gay Comments," *Sun-Sentinel* (Broward County, Florida), March 3, 1996, <[http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1996-03-03/news/9602290441\\_1\\_gay-candidate-city-s-gay-community-gay-restaurant](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1996-03-03/news/9602290441_1_gay-candidate-city-s-gay-community-gay-restaurant)>; Lisa J. Huraish, "Mayor Accused of Being Anti-gay," *Sun-Sentinel* (Broward County, Florida), March 5, 1998, <[http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1998-03-05/news/9803040493\\_1\\_gay-owned-businesses-gay-man-lesbian-political-group](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1998-03-05/news/9803040493_1_gay-owned-businesses-gay-man-lesbian-political-group)>.

its repercussions for the mayor will be explored in the following chapter, Wilkinson's purported homophobia as a city official suggests a significant swath of such sentiment.

Despite the fundamental homophobia in Flaherty's letter to the city manager, she still logically questions the city's courting of the gay community. Why would the city and state government change zoning policy and direct road improvement funds in order to further encourage the movement of gays to Wilton Manors? There are at least three explanations. The first has already been explored in Chapter Three, which suggests that gays ostensibly offered higher disposable incomes that would be particularly useful to the beleaguered infrastructure. The second is one that city officials and developers discussed publicly through newspapers and city meetings during the late 1990s, which argued that aid to gay businesses did not just help gays, but also benefitted straight residents who could now frequent the emerging businesses in their city. This rationale has received a mixed response. While a straight politician like Commissioner Newton claims, "I can't think of one place in Wilton Manors that I wouldn't walk into at any time of the day,"<sup>134</sup> others like Celeste Ellich admit that some straight residents see a gay pride flag in the front of a shop and read "keep out."<sup>135</sup> One other theory explaining the Wilton Manors' interest in courting its emerging gay community comes from urban historian Alison Isenberg, who has documented city governments' attempts to create themes for their central business districts as a way to revitalize those regions. In her book *Downtown America*, which studies the rise, fall, and rebirth of downtown culture in American cities, Isenberg displays how some cities have realized tremendous success when constructing

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<sup>134</sup> Scott Newton, interview by author, Oakland Park, Florida, January 12, 2011.

<sup>135</sup> Celeste Ellich, interview by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 6, 2011.

and marketing their downtown for a particular group.<sup>136</sup> According to Isenberg, Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco, CA was the first successful example of a themed business district; a project that developed over the first five years of the 1960s, the district used the Ghirardelli Chocolate Factory as a way to historicize the area and make the region appealing to tourists.<sup>137</sup> As a result, commercial sales and rents skyrocketed in the district, creating a model that has been used in several dozen American cities up until the present day.<sup>138</sup> By rezoning Wilton Manors' central business district as an "Arts and Entertainment District" and agreeing to help developers fashion a shopping center with gay appeal, the City of Wilton Manors seems to have realized success using a model similar to the one that Isenberg describes. At the very least, the Island City's municipal and state governments were at least willing to try to court gays as a way to aid Wilton Manors' beleaguered commercial zone.

With prominent gay pride flags lining the city's main thoroughfares and kitschy names for each establishment, the rapid growth of gay businesses in 1998 codified Wilton Manors' status as a gay social enclave. Here, "social enclaves" finds its definition in Mark Abrahamson's book *Urban Enclaves*, which examines North American residential communities that are defined by people who share one or more particular demographic characteristic. For Abrahamson, an enclave must exhibit defined borders, institutions catering to the area's particular demographic, and a clear indicator of dominant status of the social group.<sup>139</sup> By adding institutions for an already-growing community, the growth

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<sup>136</sup> Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A history of the place and the people who made it*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

<sup>137</sup> Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America*, 283 – 285.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 292 – 295.

<sup>139</sup> Mark Abrahamson, *Urban Enclaves: Identity and Place in America*, New York: St. Worth Publishers, 2005, 7.

of gay business in the latter half of the 1990s resulted in Wilton Manors comprehensively completing its transformation into the status of gay social enclave. In this particular regard, the story of Wilton Manors' gay community growth has resonance in the current literature. In fact, Abrahamson identifies gay bars as one of the most significant historical meeting places for gays and lesbians in his chapter about the Castro district in San Francisco, one of America's first historically gay neighborhoods.<sup>140</sup> Among the array of Castro gay bars, Abrahamson's book identified Finocchino's as one of the most central meeting places for gays in the Castro,<sup>141</sup> suggesting another parallel with Wilton Manors, where citizens similarly saw a business, Georgie's Alibi, as a centralizing force in the community. Though Abrahamson did not go as far as this argument has in asserting that business enterprise capitalized on the gay market, there is a basic agreement that gay commercial venues have proven necessary for the cohesiveness of the community.

While Wilton Manors and the Castro may seem similar in this regard, the process of the creation of Wilton Manors' gay businesses proved to be quite different from Abrahamson's model in the Castro. Abrahamson describes a scenario in the Castro where "concentrations of gays and lesbians supported a proliferation of bars primarily catering to specialized clientele,"<sup>142</sup> suggesting that the district's growing gay population gave birth to its own establishments. Though that may have been the case for some of Wilton Manors' watering holes, the vast majority of the bars that moved to the city in the 1990s had already existed in Fort Lauderdale for years before. For Georgie's Alibi, the Otherglades, and Bill's Filling Station, the most notable bars that moved from Fort

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<sup>140</sup> Mark Abrahamson, *Urban Enclaves: Identity and Place in America*, 158.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

Lauderdale to Wilton Manors, the choice to move seems to have been more based in the drive for further financial success instead of serving the local gay community. Though the assertion that Wilton Manors lured bar owners from Fort Lauderdale with monetary profit may not seem too radical given capitalism's incentive system, the argument of financial motivation is essentially missing from the wider history of gay and lesbian community formation. More often, bars are described as a safe space for the community, and while this may be true, one wonders if this is the actual reason that gay bars open their doors. Though other gay social enclaves require further study, in Wilton Manors, the idea of the community center came after the prospect of larger profit.

That said, the gay business entrepreneurs in Wilton Manors were not merely two-dimensional, profit-hungry androids. Indeed, gay small business owners certainly did their part to create a vibrant community in Wilton Manors. For one, the central presence of gay venues in Wilton Manors aided charities like the Poverello Food Bank, a free groceries program for HIV/AIDS patients in Broward County. Lured by the large space and cheap rents, the center moved to Wilton Manors in 1995<sup>143</sup> just as gay-owned and gay-themed businesses emerged in the city. Though Poverello had existed for nearly a decade before moving, the scale of its operation quadrupled in the following decade in Wilton Manors, serving nearly 3,000 Broward County HIV/AIDS patients by 2005 after having served just over 700 people before the move. "The gay community has been very, very supportive of Poverello, and the fact that there are so many gay businesses, it becomes easier to fundraise," argued Thomas Smith, chief financial officer of the food

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<sup>143</sup> Thomas Smith, interviewed by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 12, 2011.

bank.<sup>144</sup> The charity's founder, Catholic priest Father Bill, even quipped that he knew Wilton Manors' bars better than the city's religious institutions, a sign of the importance that bars play in Poverello's fundraising efforts.<sup>145</sup> And despite initial incentives, the centrality of gay businesses in Wilton Manors clearly fostered community and a safe space for the city's gay residents. In an April 13, 2000 *Miami Herald* article about South Florida's gay communities, several Wilton Manors' gay residents cited the gay shops, bars, and cultural opportunities as the venues that make the city comfortable for them.<sup>146</sup> Showing public, same sex affection – which heterosexual couples often take for granted – is obviously easier in a city that boasts dozens of gay-themed establishments within blocks of each other. Though these community institutions initially came together via financial incentives, an authentic, robust, and welcoming gay network still managed to emerge in Wilton Manors.

The City of Wilton Manors, whose central business district had floundered at the turn of the 1990s, realized significant economic success when it managed to convince gay business owners to bring their enterprise to the Island City. Though a few shops and bars oriented towards the gay market had already opened their doors by 1993, the Redevo development corporation's renovation of the Shoppes of Wilton Manors and their simultaneous recruitment of gay entrepreneurs to the commercial plaza spurred a much more significant growth of gay industry in the town. Redevo's decision to pursue this strategy, however, would not have been considered had the municipal government not agreed to rezone the redevelopment area, allowing a denser concentration of bars and

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<sup>144</sup> Thomas Smith, interviewed by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 12, 2011.

<sup>145</sup> Father William "Bill" Collins, interviewed by author, Wilton Manors, Florida, January 12, 2011.

<sup>146</sup> Steve Rothaus, "Gay Communities Maturing in S. Florida Neighborhoods," *The Miami Herald* (Florida), April 13, 2000, sec. E.

restaurants along Wilton Drive. That city officials and developer eyed the gay community as a likely catalyst for economic improvement in the Island City demonstrates significant strides in the way in which this demographic has been included in the American landscape. Moreover, the conscious recruitment of gay industry to Wilton Manors and the subsequently successful birth of an authentic gay social enclave in the city demonstrates a new model for gay community formation. Unlike previous narratives of LGBT bastions in the United States – where authors asserted that artistic or liberal social attitudes in particular areas proved to be the drawing force for the formation of an out gay community – Wilton Manors’ ability to attract this demographic of sexual minorities was born out of the city’s business opportunities.

Central Business District of Wilton Manors



Detail View

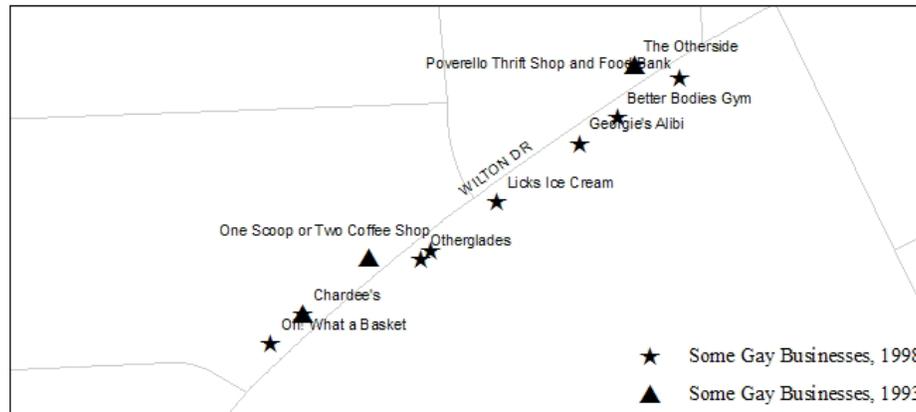


Figure 3 - Map of Wilton Manors' central business district, highlighting gay-themed shops open by 1993 and later in 1998. Detail view on a three-block area of Wilton Drive, where much of the gay business development in the late 1990s took place. An original map by Sean Manning Udell. Data from U.S. Census Bureau and the OutPages.<sup>147</sup>

<sup>147</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. "TIGER/Line Shapefiles." <<http://www.census.gov/geo/www/tiger/tgrshp2009/tgrshp2009.html>>; Rohrabacher, Yvonne. *OutPages: The Directory With a Sense of Community*. Fort Lauderdale: Out Pages Inc., 1993 & 1998.

## Chapter 5: Gay Power in the 2000 Wilton Manors City Election?

As gay businesses began to gain prominence along Wilton Drive and throughout the Island City at the end of the 1990s, the political clout of gay and lesbian people realized a demonstrable surge as well. Though the city had elected an openly gay city commissioner, John Fiore, as early as 1988,<sup>148</sup> reporters and politicians rarely made public reference to his sexual identity,<sup>149</sup> and Fiore himself admitted to “downplaying” his homosexuality in the first half of the 1990s.<sup>150</sup> Nevertheless, that posture began to change in 1996 when Fiore sparked the first documented political conversation about gays in Wilton Manors. Fiore and straight city commissioner Scott Newton spoke out against then-Mayor King Wilkinson for his alleged homophobia with regard to the issuance of new business permits. At the time, Fiore accused Wilkinson of doing everything within his power to stop the permitting of gay-owned businesses, and according to Commissioner Newton, Wilkinson had said to him in private, “We have to do something about Victor Victorias. We don't need these type of people in Wilton Manors. We have too many gays.”<sup>151</sup> Fiore and Newton’s allegations attracted media attention within and outside of the gay community, and laid the basis for a challenge to Wilkinson when he stood for re-election two years later in 1998.

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<sup>148</sup> Pat Dunnigan, “Regeneration: Wilton Manors’ mayor is betting that the city’s large gay population will speed up redevelopment.”

<sup>149</sup> In the June 14, 1990 edition of the Miami Herald, writer Janine Sieja referred to Fiore’s partner as his “roommate” in her article “Long-time Acquaintance Robbed Official.” This seems to have been the common practice when referring to Fiore’s personal life, particularly through the early 1990s.

<sup>150</sup> Jesse Monteagudo, “The Folks who Rule Wilton Manors,” *Gay Today*, March 2000, <<http://www.gaytoday.com/garchive/people/032000pe.htm>>.

<sup>151</sup> Steve d’Olivera, “Mayor of Manors Accused of Making Anti-gay Comments,” *Sun-Sentinel* (Broward County, Florida), March 3, 1996, <[http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1996-03-03/news/9602290441\\_1\\_gay-candidate-city-s-gay-community-gay-restaurant](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1996-03-03/news/9602290441_1_gay-candidate-city-s-gay-community-gay-restaurant)>.

In 1998, the gay community visibly organized against Wilkinson and succeeded in ending his long tenure as a city official. Indeed, the *Miami Herald* called the anti-Wilkinson campaign a reflection of the “new political muscle” of the gay community.<sup>152</sup> In addition to Fiore and Newton’s allegations, Harold Horne, the city’s community development director, released a series of internal city memos that he had written between October of 1995 and February of 1996 that criticized Mayor Wilkinson of “unethical and bigoted requests.”<sup>153</sup> Those memos attracted significant attention when the Dolphin Democratic Club, Broward County’s largest gay political organization, circulated copies to its membership. Though the mayor flatly denied the charges and even attempted to mend relationships with the gay community just weeks before the 1998 election,<sup>154</sup> the attempts proved to be too little, too late. Then-commissioner Jack Seiler, Wilkinson’s only opponent in the mayoral race, won in a landslide with 67.44% of the vote,<sup>155</sup> demonstrating the political peril of being perceived as anti-gay in Wilton Manors by 1998.

In the next city election, just two years later, the gay community demonstrated another showing of its quickly growing political capital when Wilton Manors’ residents elected a majority-gay city council. Becoming only the second American municipality after West Hollywood, California, to elect such a government, the historic vote attracted widespread attention; even *The New York Times* reported on the small town’s local

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<sup>152</sup> Julie Kay, “Gays Rally Against Mayor,” *The Miami (Florida) Herald*, February 28, 1998, sec. BR.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> Lisa J. Huraish, “Mayor Accused of Being Anti-gay,” *Sun-Sentinel* (Broward County, Florida), March 5, 1998, <[http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1998-03-05/news/9803040493\\_1\\_gay-owned-businesses-gay-man-lesbian-political-group](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1998-03-05/news/9803040493_1_gay-owned-businesses-gay-man-lesbian-political-group)>.

<sup>155</sup> Broward Office of Elections, “Municipal General Election: Broward County, Florida, March 10, 1998,” <[www.browardsoe.org/GetDocument.aspx?id=842](http://www.browardsoe.org/GetDocument.aspx?id=842)>.

election.<sup>156</sup> At the front of this new, gay leadership was longtime city politician John Fiore, who finally moved up from the ranks of city councilman to become the first openly gay mayor of Wilton Manors. Gary Resnick and Craig Sherritt's victories in their races for seats on the city council completed the gay trifecta that made Wilton Manors' elected gay majority possible. While the gay business growth and Wilkinson ouster had evidenced clear tolerance and acceptance for the growing gay community, this election embodied the most obvious sign of Wilton Manors' affirmation of its out and growing gay community. Moreover, the political manifestation of acceptance for gays reflects the similarly favorable reception that gay homebuyers and businesses received throughout the decade leading up to the 2000 gay political victory.

Though the three-two gay majority on the city council attracted significant attention for the small South Florida town, no clear consensus emerged regarding the significance of the political change for the gay community. In one view, gay activists from around the country called attention to the race, with some arguing that a gay majority in the Wilton Manors' council "represents a huge step toward mainstreaming and inclusion for gays."<sup>157</sup> In fact, the election heralded such a high political profile that the Lesbian and Gay Victory Fund donated to Fiore's coffers and helped mobilize his supporters,<sup>158</sup> demonstrating how national LGBT advocacy groups saw this small town election as a starting point for bigger wins for gays and lesbians. Sandy Steen, a former mayor of Wilton Manors and Fiore's opponent in the 2000 election, articulated a different

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<sup>156</sup> B. Drummond Ayres, "Florida City Council Has a Gay Majority," *The New York Times*, Mar 19, 2000, sec. A.

<sup>157</sup> Lisa Arthur, "Gays Raising Their Political Profile in Wilton Manors Council Election," *The Miami (Florida) Herald*, February 7, 2000, sec. B.

<sup>158</sup> Lisa Arthur, "Wilton Manors Votes in Majority Gay Council," *The Miami (Florida) Herald*, March 15, 2000, sec. B.

perspective, dismissing sexuality entirely and arguing that the race came down to voter opinions on more basic municipal concerns such as parking availability in the city or Wilton Manors' transition to a paid force of firefighters.<sup>159</sup>

Even the mayor himself did not maintain one interpretation of the win. On election night, he proclaimed, "It's an important milestone for the gay and lesbian community and for the city."<sup>160</sup> But, three months later, in an interview for *George Magazine*, Fiore offered another interpretation. In response to a question about what his win meant for the gay community, he replied, "I didn't have a gay agenda. There's no 'gay' way to fill a pothole."<sup>161</sup> While the shift in tone could be interpreted as political posturing, the new mayor's change managed to divide even the gay community's perspective on the implications of the new gay majority. My interviews with gay residents suggest a positive correlation between the extent to which gays agreed with Fiore's changing interpretation and the belief that the 2000 election did suggest a larger political success for the LGBT movement. In other words, gays who accepted Fiore's own assessment that he was a mayor who "happened to be gay" believe that his win was a significant one for the community. However, gays who were offended by the mayor's alleged backtracking do not consider Fiore's win to have been as crucial of a success for the gay community. Instead, those gays see Jim Stork, Fiore's 2002 successor, as a more pioneering leader for gays in Wilton Manors. Unlike Fiore, Stork often used his platform

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<sup>159</sup> Lisa Arthur, "Gays Raising Their Political Profile in Wilton Manors Council Election."

<sup>160</sup> Lisa Arthur, "Wilton Manors Votes in Majority Gay Council."

<sup>161</sup> *George Magazine*, interview with John Fiore by magazine, June 2000.

as a way to advocate for explicitly gay issues like same-sex marriage, and many considered Stork to be much more “out” in his gay identity.<sup>162</sup>

Political scientist Robert W. Bailey helps explain such divides within the gay identity in his book *Gay Politics, Urban Politics*. Among the study’s arguments, Bailey asserts that the use of sexual identity in politics has historically been born out of the tension between individual goals and collective concerns.<sup>163</sup> That is, there exists a constant negotiation between the individual gay citizen’s satisfaction with his/her current, stable position and the collective gay identity’s desire to attain more political rights. According to Bailey, individuals come to associate with the larger gay identity when it is useful to further their interests, whereas others disaffiliate from the community when that affiliation may jeopardize their current, individual situation.<sup>164</sup> In that light, one can see how a similar tension emerged within the gay community, between those who agreed with Fiore and those who desired more advocacy for LGBT people. On one hand, Fiore was an older gay man who had grown up during a time where social standards made it extraordinarily difficult to be out, let alone fight for political rights. In contrast, others in the gay community interpreted the 2000 gay victory as a potential mechanism to advocate for LGBT civil rights, including the right to same-sex marriage and more extensive non-discrimination laws. Thus, Fiore and his supporters struggled to negotiate the political win, which they saw as an end, with others looked to use this newly acquired platform as a means to further inclusion of LGBT people in American society.

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<sup>162</sup> Trevor Aaronson, “Pretty Boy Stork,” *New Times Broward-Palm Beach*, May 6 2004, <<http://www.trevoraaronson.com/story/?storyID=37>>.

<sup>163</sup> Robert Bailey, *Gay Politics, Urban Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, 29.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

Despite the varying interpretations of the 2000 election of a gay majority, newspaper accounts seemed determined to reach a conclusion. Though papers like the *Sun-Sentinel* and *The Miami Herald* had covered the election by consistently highlighting that candidates rarely discussed sexual orientation in their campaigns, nearly all of the local coverage of the 2000 election included the word “gay” in its headlines, calling attention to the potential historical moment at hand. By the time the election had yielded the majority-gay city council, these same newspapers considered the Fiore-Resnick-Sherritt wins as a logical progression to other inroads that the gay community had already made in Broward County, including a countywide non-discrimination policy and domestic partnership law.<sup>165</sup> Thus, much of the mainstream dialogue suggested that the gays’ win in Wilton Manors provided a victory that extended far beyond potholes, despite Fiore’s rhetoric. At the very least, the 2000 Wilton Manors election helped to further frame the city as a place where gay and lesbian people were welcome, a vital need for those looking to further capitalize on the LGBT residential and commercial markets.

With all of the media attention and excitement within the gay community about the new leadership in Wilton Manors’ City Hall, many wondered how the new, gay leadership would exert their influence for gay and lesbian causes. City Commissioner Resnick wasted little time in using his position to effect change for Wilton Manors’ gay residents. In the wake of the June 28, 2000 United States’ Supreme Court decision in *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale*, where the court determined that the first amendment protected the Boy Scouts’ right to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, Resnick launched the first campaign by a Floridian municipality to restrict funding for anti-LGBT

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<sup>165</sup> Lisa Arthur, “Wilton Manors Votes in Majority Gay Council.”

organizations like the Boy Scouts.<sup>166</sup> Though Wilton Manors offered neither monetary nor in-kind support for its local Boy Scout troop 519, the proposed ordinance would have prohibited the solicitation of city employees for donations to discriminatory groups like the Boy Scouts.<sup>167</sup> Moreover, Resnick's campaign enticed other cities that did donate to the Boy Scouts to pursue actions that would restrict such funding.<sup>168</sup> Two weeks into the campaign, however, Resnick discovered that Wilton Manors did not even have an anti-discrimination policy on record, which extended Resnick's campaign to a larger one that argued for the city to formally adopt a more sweeping policy.

Though the proposed ordinance ultimately passed, the experience was not without controversy and served as a lesson for Commissioner Resnick regarding the limits of advocacy on issues specific to gays, regardless of the majority sexual identity of those in power. Religious organizations within Wilton Manors proved to be the most vocal opposition to the anti-discrimination policy, organizing a small protest of twenty-five people outside of City Hall on September 9, 2000 – though a simultaneous rally by proponents for Resnick's policy was reportedly much larger<sup>169</sup> – and sending dozens of members to city council meetings to speak out against the proposed ordinance.<sup>170</sup> While some of these protesters overtly objected to gay and lesbian people, other opponents

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<sup>166</sup> Daniel de Vise, "Local Cities Eye Cuts to Boy Scouts," *The Miami (Florida) Herald*. August 8, 2000, sec. B.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*; In fact, neighboring city Fort Lauderdale gave a yearly sum of over \$4,000 to their own Boy Scouts troop. In the wake of Resnick's campaign, the city voted in a 3-1 decision to cut funding to their Boy Scouts troop. See "Boy Scout issue disrupts gay town" by Thomas C. Tobin in the *Halifax Daily News* from October 8, 2000, 24.

<sup>169</sup> Paul Brinkley-Rogers, "Anti-Gay-Rights Rally Upstaged by Counter Protest," *The Miami (Florida) Herald*, September 10, 2000, sec. BR.

<sup>170</sup> Megan O'Matz, "Manors urged to defeat ordinance," *Sun-Sentinel* (Broward County, Florida), September 27, 2000, section unknown, clipping found in the personal archives of Paul Kuta, Wilton Manors Historical Society Member; Joanne Fanizza, "President's Message," *Tropical Pines Civic Association Newsletter*, October 2000.

claimed to merely object to the proposal's negative impact on the community as a whole. "Wilton Manors is now a city in pain," lamented Joanne Fanizza in her "President's Message" on the front page of the October 2000 Tropical Pines Civic Association newsletter.<sup>171</sup> A self-identified straight ally to lesbians and gays, Fanizza still demonstrated deep frustration with the question, "Why is this happening here? Why in our little city?"<sup>172</sup> Even Fiore, the openly gay mayor, took issue with the ordinance, worried that the fraught debate could roll back the "hard-won air of tolerance" that gays had won in the election just months before.<sup>173</sup>

Despite the Boy Scouts scuffle, where some of the city's gay leaders found the limit to their activism, the overall effects of the 2000 election had little to do with the trajectory of the city. With gay real estate and commercial entities already flooding the Wilton Manors market, the continued demand in these sectors following the 2000 election seems to have been an extension of an already growing trend. Regardless of that growth, the examples of the battle for the anti-discrimination ordinance or Mayor Fiore's changing tone regarding the meaning of his win for the gay community showed the limits of gay politicians' ability to actively advocate for policies that would singularly serve the gay community. After all, a gay majority on the city council did not make Wilton Manors a "gay city," as some journalists and activists tried to suggest. At most, the city's gay demographic amounted to thirty percent of the total population by 2000,<sup>174</sup> a testament to the fact that gay city officials would have to demonstrate primary affiliation to the city as a whole. In that light, the gay wins in 2000 in Wilton Manors cannot be seen as a turning

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<sup>171</sup> Joanne Fanizza, "President's Message."

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>173</sup> Thomas C. Tobin, "Boy Scout issue disrupts gay town," *Halifax Daily News*, October 8, 2000, sec. News, 24.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

point for the city, but rather a reflection of the ongoing change that had already started in the Island City at the start of the decade.

## Conclusion

After a decade of growth in Wilton Manors, where the city's gay population grew at a rate that was six times the national average,<sup>175</sup> the Island City's gay community portended even greater financial incentives by the beginning of the new millennium. While the boom of this social enclave in the 1990s had been defined by two tracks of growth – real estate transactions and small business endeavors – more grandiose commercial ventures in the early years of the twenty-first century obfuscated such distinctions. Instead, the development of relatively enormous multi-family and multi-use complexes amalgamated gay residential and commercial markets in order to promote the new, gay lifestyle in Wilton Manors, one where the community's restaurants, bars, shops, and social centers were within walking distance of quarter-of-a-million-dollar condos packed into multi-story towers. In the first years of the 2000s, thirteen such developments were under construction, with Wilton Station highlighted as the most ambitious of the complexes.<sup>176</sup> One hundred and twenty million dollars in cost and ten acres in size, the development made a significant bet on gay interest among prospective Wilton Manors residents, marketing heavily to the community in local and national gay guidebooks and plastering photographs of same-sex, male couples sharing Vespa's or whirlpools on the construction site's edifice, on billboards, and on the Internet.<sup>177</sup> Indeed, the marketing

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<sup>175</sup> Ginia Bellafante, "A Gay Boomtown Is More Mainstream And Less Cliché," *The New York Times*, May 15, 2004,

<[http://www.lexisnexis.com/lncui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T11632877699&format=GNBFI&sort=RELEVANCE&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=29\\_T11632877619&cisb=22\\_T11632882801&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=6742&docNo=1](http://www.lexisnexis.com/lncui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T11632877699&format=GNBFI&sort=RELEVANCE&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=29_T11632877619&cisb=22_T11632882801&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=6742&docNo=1)>.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> *OutPages*, *Pink Pages*, & *GayYellow Pages* from 2001 – 2005 all accessed at the Stonewall Library and Archives. Box information: "Directories (Phone Directories, Business & Service Directories) Florida & South Florida/FT. Lauderdale/Miami". Photographs on billboards observed by author during Wilton Station's construction in 2004 and 2005. Photographs on website referenced in Ginia Bellafante, "A Gay Boomtown Is More Mainstream And Less Cliché."

campaigns for the new mixed zoning complexes that catered to a particular vision of the most desirable “gay lifestyle” marked a complete coming out for the city’s gay industry.

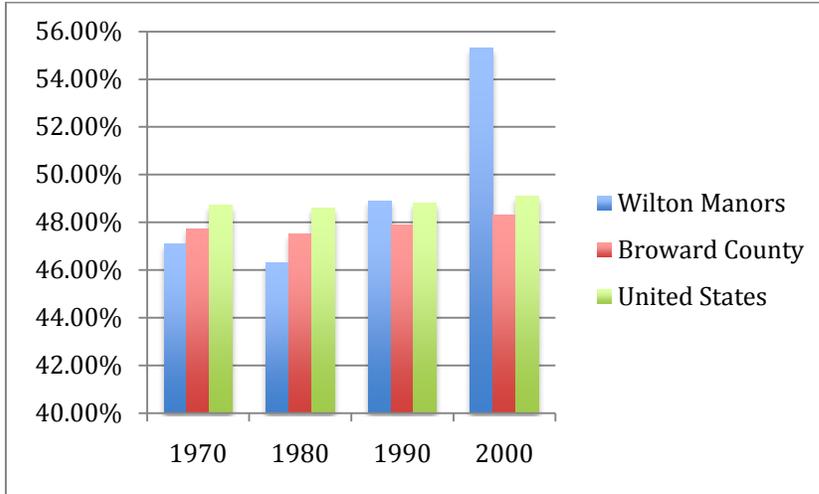
Though developments like Wilton Station marked a new era for Wilton Manors in terms of the projects’ density and zoning, the promotion and success of these residential/commercial complexes reflects many of the strategies pursued by gay business entrepreneurs in the last decade of the twentieth century. Like the Wilton Manors real estate agents and small business owners of the 1990s who capitalized on a growing population of gays in the Fort Lauderdale area and marketed Wilton Manors as an emerging node for gay life in the region, Wilton Station merely expanded on this vision. Like the growth of the 1990s, Wilton Station appealed to a particular segment of the gay population: visibly out people with the capital to afford the lifestyle and aesthetics that developers marketed. Moreover, Wilton Station, with its bold advertisements of men displaying affection for other men, relied on a relatively new air of tolerance for gay people that had also been required during the gay development of the 1990s. As *The New York Times* wrote in 2004, “Wilton Manors is to urban revitalization what ‘Will and Grace’ was to prime-time television -- proof that people may be more accepting of gays than polls suggest.”<sup>178</sup> But in order to realize the economic success that it achieved, Wilton Manors proved to be much more than just “accepting of gays.” Indeed, city officials, residents, and nearby entrepreneurs in South Florida proved that direct engagement with the gay community could yield significant financial reward, establishing a new model for gay social enclave formation via economic incentives.

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<sup>178</sup> Ginia Bellafante, “A Gay Boomtown Is More Mainstream And Less Cliché.”

**Appendix**

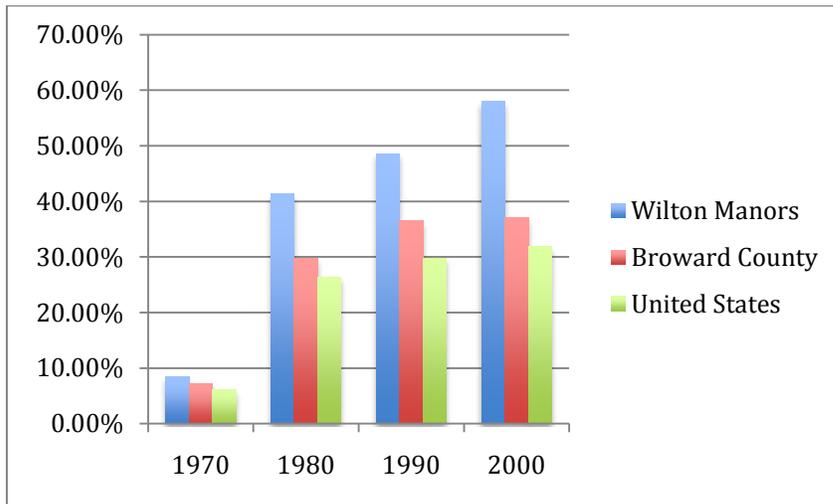
Proportion of Males According to the Census<sup>179</sup>



	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>
<b>Wilton Manors</b>	47.1%	46.3%	48.9%	55.3%
<b>Broward County</b>	47.7%	47.5%	47.9%	48.3%
<b>United States</b>	48.7%	48.6%	48.8%	49.1%

<sup>179</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Census of the United States*, 1970, 1980, 1990, & 2000, United States, indexed by sex; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Census of the United States*, 1970, 1980, 1990, & 2000, Florida, Broward County, all census tracts, indexed by sex; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Census of the United States*, 1970, 1980, 1990, & 2000, Florida, Broward County, census tracts 509 & 510, indexed by sex.

Proportion of “Non-Family Households,” as Designated by the Census<sup>180</sup>



	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>
<b>Wilton Manors</b>	8.4%	41.4%	48.6%	58%
<b>Broward County</b>	7.3%	29.8%	36.6%	37.1%
<b>United States</b>	6.1%	26.4%	29.8%	31.9%

<sup>180</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Census of the United States*, 1970, 1980, 1990, & 2000, United States, indexed by household; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Census of the United States*, 1970, 1980, 1990, & 2000, Florida, Broward County, all census tracts, indexed by household; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Census of the United States*, 1970, 1980, 1990, & 2000, Florida, Broward County, census tracts 509 & 510, indexed by household.

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