

LOCAL OBITUARIES

‘She was a force to be reckoned with.’ RIP Miami historian, activist Arva Moore Parks.

BY ANDRES VIGLUCCI

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The Biltmore is Miami's National Historic Landmark located in the exclusive Coral Gables area. The 273-room hotel resembles classic Italian, Moorish, and Spanish architectural influences spread over 150-acres of tropical landscape. BY BILTMORE HOTEL

Arva Moore Parks, a towering Miami figure who gave shape to the city's saga as a historian and who fought fiercely as a preservationist to save many of its most iconic landmarks, has died.

Parks died Sunday at home in Miami's Shenandoah neighborhood. She was 81.

Parks had been in isolation at home during the coronavirus pandemic with a grandson who was watching over her, William Guerra. He found her slumped over her desk, where the indefatigable Parks had been at work on one of her many projects, said her daughter, Carey Guerra.

No specific cause of death has been determined, Guerra said. Parks had been in physical therapy for an undisclosed ailment, but seemed much better in recent weeks, said friends who seemed stunned by her passing. The historian had been in touch with friends as recently as Saturday by phone or social media.

"She was still working for Miami until her last breath, telling Miami's story," said lifelong friend and colleague-in-arms Dorothy Jenkins Fields, founder of the Black Archives History and Research Foundation of Miami, who called Parks her "soul sister."

beyond the library, encompassing a resolute activism on behalf of her beloved city and neglected historic sites ranging from Coral Gables to Coconut Grove, Little Havana and Brownsville.



Historian Arva Moore Parks talks about the creation of Coral Gables in a room dedicated to the early days of the city on Monday, October 17, 2011, just days before the opening of the new Coral Gables museum. PATRICK FARRELL MIAMI HERALD FILE

A proud Miami native, Parks grew up during the city's post-World War II boom and witnessed downtown Miami's peak, fall and revival — a resurgence she helped engender.

As chair of the city's planning and zoning board during the administration of Mayor Manny Diaz, she vocally supported both preservation of important landmarks and development of compatible, mixed-use urban projects that would bring life and commerce back to the same urban center where she went for movies, hamburgers and church as a girl.

As an early champion of historic preservation, she also helped create Coral Gables' noted preservation program in the 1970s. She was the first chair of the city's historic preservation board, and helped lead efforts to protect founder George Merrick's family home and the Biltmore, both then badly rundown and in danger of demolition. Parks famously persuaded Gables commissioner Dorothy Thompson to cast the deciding vote in favor of preserving and renovating the long-abandoned hotel under city ownership.

Though a firm believer in mixing the old with the new, she could be a sharp-tongued opponent when development threatened the integrity of a historic site. When a developer proposed tearing down the rear of the Freedom Tower and attaching an overpowering glass skyscraper to the historic building in the early 2000s, Parks helped rally opposition to the plan — which she said made the iconic monument look “like the hood ornament on a Buick.”

At times that role also put her at odds with powerful development and political interests. But her stature as a historian and her ability to marry passion with authoritative legal and historic arguments earned her widespread respect, even if she didn’t always win.

“She would enter the fray and be so poised and articulate,” said Ellen Ugucioni, whom Parks helped recruit to run Coral Gables’ preservation department in 1980. “She had that confidence but it wasn’t overbearing or arrogant. And she took on some pretty big opponents.

“I don’t know where she got her chops, but if you had Arva on your side, you were golden. The legacy she leaves is enormous. She was a force to be reckoned with.”

Parks later led the Coral Gables Museum during its inception, and wrote a 2015 biography of the city’s founder, *George Merrick: Son of the South Wind*. Perhaps her magnum opus, it took years to research and write but helped complete a rehabilitation she had long pursued for Merrick, who had been mostly forgotten after losing control of the city in the real estate crash of 1926.

She was instrumental in the commissioning of a statue of Merrick that stands outside Coral Gables City Hall, and in the creation of a statue of Miami pioneer Julia Tuttle, whose key role in the city’s founding Parks felt had been overshadowed, near the Miami River. The skirt on the Tuttle figure bears scenes from Miami history, which was Parks’ idea.

“Arva was our second Miami mother after Julia,” said Alyce Robertson, a former Miami city administrator who worked with Parks on the second of two documentary films on Miami she wrote the script for. “Miami, the Magic City” and “Our Miami, the Magic City” were produced in 1980 and 1994, respectively, by the Junior League of Miami and director Carl Kesser for public television.

Parks also mentored a generation of activists and historians who turned to her for advice and public backing when trying to document and save endangered community landmarks.

Educator and preservationist Enid Pinkney said Park’s extensive and meticulously organized archive of photographs, images, documents and memorabilia proved a valuable resource in her successful campaign to preserve and reopen the [Hampton House](#), a hotel in historically black Brownsville that had once been a meeting place for Miami’s black elite and visiting celebrities.

“When we started with Hampton House, she had pictures I didn’t even know existed,” Pinkney said. “She was so resourceful. Everybody called her.”

Fields added: “She was the lightning rod for history and preservation in Miami. And she was very interested in helping students, interns and others. If you took an interest in Miami’s history, she was interested in you.”



Miami historian Arva Moore Parks was among the guests who celebrated the 125th anniversary of the Coconut Grove Woman's Club on Feb. 19, 2016. *MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM*

Arva Moore was born in Miami of Southern stock. Her father, Jack Moore, a lawyer, came to Miami in the 1930s at the height of the Great Depression. Parks said she learned her love of history, and her disdain for racial segregation and discrimination, from him.

"I got my sense of history and my passion for Miami from my father. He always had his nose in a history book, taught me historical facts, a love for the Constitution and took me around and told me things about Miami. 'Remember this,' he would say," Parks once wrote in the Miami Herald. "I was taught to respect everyone regardless of their race, religion, gender or ethnicity. My father often spoke out against segregation and anti-Semitism."

Moore and her parents lived in a wooden bungalow in Riverside, today known as East Little Havana. She and a brother would walk or ride bikes to movies at the Trail Theater, today a protected landmark, on Southwest Eighth Street. When she was in fourth grade, the family moved to the new suburb of Miami Shores. There she forged what would be a lifelong and close friendship with Adele Khoury Graham, wife of former Florida Gov. and U.S. Sen. Bob Graham.

Adele Graham said they were "best friends" for 70 years and she named one of her daughters Arva after Parks. Their two families shared regular visits and trips abroad for decades, she said.

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often thought of her as Saint Arva. Her greatest devotion was to her children, for whom she felt such love and pride. Arva's happiest times were her family gatherings."

"She loved Miami and never wanted to leave. Arva made Miami a magic city through her brilliant writings and well-respected recounting of South Florida history to anyone who would listen... I will miss her very much. But I know she is already trading notes with Barbara Capitman, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Julia Tuttle, and other women leaders who, like Arva, have made Miami such a special place."

After graduating from the University of Florida, Parks launched her career as a history teacher at her alma mater, Miami Edison High School in the days of public school integration; Parks would later help lead a successful campaign to save the school building from demolition.

During a summer training program at the University of Miami, Parks met her mentor, Florida historian Charlton Tebeau, who encouraged her to enroll in grad school and pursue Miami history. She did, earning a history master's degree at UM with a thesis on Coconut Grove.

Parks wrote that her interest in preservation was sparked when she lived with her first husband, Robert Parks, and their children in a home on South Greenway Drive in the Gables. The house, which she later learned had been designed by eminent architect Walter DeGarmo — whose other works she would later champion and help preserve — was run-down and the Gables considered a passe relic, but Parks was intrigued by the Mediterranean architecture and the city's history and began a long study of Merrick's ideas and original plans.



Robert H. McCabe, president of Miami Dade College from 1980 to 1995 with his wife, historian Arva Moore Parks, in 1997. Al Diaz *MIAMI HERALD FILE*

After they divorced, Parks married [Robert McCabe](#), the educator who led and expanded what is today Miami Dade College, forming what would be one of Miami's preeminent couples during their 21 years of marriage. McCabe died in 2014 at age 86.

Though Parks' personal and professional interests lay in the city's earlier days, friends say she embraced a changing Miami and its diverse population with enthusiasm. That extended to a late-career conversion to supporting preservation of the city's rich tapestry of modern architecture, including Miami Modern. That led her to provide key support to campaigns to preserve the Marine Stadium and a quixotic effort to save the Miami Herald's longtime bayfront headquarters from demolition.

Parks firmly believed, as she often said, that there's no other place like Miami.

"How lucky I was to be born and grow up in Miami," she wrote in the Herald. "Miami taught me to be open to change and to adapt to the unexpected. It taught me to accept people and welcome newcomers. It gave me an eagerness to learn.

include everyone in the story. Each day, I realize more and more that there is no better place to live if you want a jump start on America's future and always have a great story to tell.”

At the time of her death, Parks was working on editing a set of short stories by Merrick, who was also a poet, among other projects.

Parks is survived by two children, Carey Guerra of New York and Gregory Parks of Miami, and three grandchildren. Another son, Robert Parks, died two years ago.

No funeral arrangements have been made, but are likely to be private because of the pandemic, Guerra said. The family hopes to hold a public memorial for Parks sometime in the near future.



Historian Arva Moore Parks, at the Coral Gables Museum, wrote a book about Coral Gables founder George Merrick. CARL JUSTE
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Historian Arva Moore Parks, at the Coral Gables Museum, wrote a book about Coral Gables founder George Merrick. [CARL JUSTE CJUSTE@MIAMIHERALD.COM](mailto:CARLJUSTE@MIAMIHERALD.COM)



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