



Highlights of Bonnet House History

- ❖ Construction of Bonnet House began in 1920 on 35 acres of ocean-front Ft. Lauderdale property given to Frederic Bartlett, a painter and muralist, and Helen Birch Bartlett as a wedding gift from Helen's father, Hugh Taylor Birch. When questioned about the size of the "house lot" he was bestowing on the couple, Mr. Birch replied, "Oh, as far as you can swing a cat!"
- ❖ As the ultimate expression of his artistic training, creativity and whimsy, Frederic Bartlett, although not a formally educated architect, designed every facet of Bonnet House himself, sketching the original study on the back of a menu.
- ❖ Bonnet House, named for the lily found in abundance on what was then called Bonnet Slough, was designed around a central courtyard with open loggias to take advantage of the pleasant South Florida winters.
- ❖ So rugged and nearly inaccessible was the location of the future Bonnet House at the time of construction that materials needed to be transported to the site by barge from the intracoastal waterway through a canal dredged for the purpose. These materials were off-loaded in a boathouse built amongst the mangroves.
- ❖ Eschewing the popular styles for South Florida mansions of the day, such as Addison Mizner's Mediterranean Revival structures or James Deering's Italian Villa Vizcaya, Frederic Bartlett instead created a unique two-story, plantation-style home which he decorated himself from floor to ceiling with tromp l'oeil murals, shell collages and faux marble surfaces.
- ❖ The *Ft. Lauderdale Sun Sentinel* in 1921 went so far as to describe Bonnet House as the "Medieval Castle at Las Olas," a cross, in their words, between a French villa and a medieval castle.

- ❖ The extensive property includes, in addition to the main house, several outbuildings comprising a caretaker's residence, household staff quarters, a woodworking shop, garage and a storage room for tools and equipment. A gatehouse once stood on the corner of Birch Road and Sunrise Boulevard.
- ❖ After Frederic Bartlett's wife, Helen , a talented musician and poet, died in 1925, work on the house slowed, but was eventually completed. The Bartletts continued to add-on and remodel parts of the house for years after initial construction began.
- ❖ Frederic Bartlett married Evelyn Fortune Bartlett in 1931. As a surprise gift to her in 1938, Frederic erected the Shell Museum, an intimate rotunda with shelves lining the walls to hold their massive shell and coral collection. Attached to this room was a greenhouse for Evelyn's extensive orchid collection and a tropical-looking bar lined with bamboo.
- ❖ The Bartlett's greatly enjoyed entertaining guests. Two other structures were added to the property for just this purpose, a tent-like pavilion overlooking a pond on the south side of Bonnet House and a small wooden theater built on an island in the northernmost slough. In order to feed their insatiable appetite for various exotic shells with which to embellish their home, the Bartletts charged an admission of one shell per person to attend the viewing of their home movies in the Island Theater. After the original theater burned down, a reproduction was built in its place.
- ❖ Local resources were often used in the building of Bonnet House. Salt water and beach sand were used to fabricate the concrete blocks on-site and clay tiles, made to look as if they were marble, were manufactured in Ojus, a small town north of Miami. Native limestone and Dade County pine are also incorporated into the construction. A wooden chickee bridge was covered in palm thatch by a local Indian family.
- ❖ The Bartletts efforts extended to the landscape where they planted a desert garden of palms and succulents to beautify the front entrance and an allée of palms on the south shore of the slough that leads to a classical dry stone fountain of Frederic's design.