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Arch Creek - Early South Florida Settlement

By Juan L. Riera

As the saying goes, it is all about location, location, location. Arch Creek is a stream that is very well located about ten miles north of present-day Miami. The area is located not far from Biscayne Bay and was settled by Tequesta Indians perhaps 1,500 years ago, due to the seafood and easy transportation provided by the bay and stream.

In 1856, U.S. Army soldiers cut a “military trail” connecting Fort Lauderdale, founded during the Seminole Wars, and the location moved two or three times to Fort Dallas at the mouth of the Miami River, a distance of about twenty-seven miles. The trail was eight feet wide and it crossed a unique limestone bridge spanning forty feet. The surrounding area soon attracted a settlement that became known as “Arch Creek.”

In a discussion of south Florida geology, archaeologist Irving Eyster noted, “Of all the openings in the limestone ridge, Arch Creek was the most unique. Here the water cuts under the oolite limestone, rather than through it. This left an arch forming a natural bridge.”¹



There is an intriguing history associated with the natural bridge. The strikingly beautiful area around the limestone bridge, as seen on the photograph side of a circa 1950s postcard [Figure 1], became an attraction for picnics and gatherings.

But in the early 1970s, when Arch Creek became the property of the Chrysler Corporation, their plans called for the construction of an automobile showroom, and a new and used car agency. Chrysler requested a zoning change from the City of North Miami, which would have allowed them to pave the area and build a garage on the

Figure 1. Natural Bridge, Arch Creek.

property. Vigorous opposition came from the Tropical Audubon Society, the Miami-West Indian Archaeological Society, the Keystone Point Homeowners' Association, and the members of the Arch Creek Trust.

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A song ("Meet Me at The Bridge")² was written by conservationist Jessie Freeling for the Save-the-Bridge movement that led to the creation of Arch Creek Park:

*While waiting for my friend one day upon old Arch Creek shore,
My mind slipped down that timeless stream to what had been before.
I saw the ages meeting there because the rock ridge led,
To such a place of beauty that everybody said;*

*Meet me at the bridge at old Arch Creek.
Meet me at the bridge, the little natural bridge.
The natural bridge where all good friends meet.*

After almost a year of intense lobbying, the State of Florida agreed to purchase the land for a state park. The State's Land Acquisition Trust allocated \$822,000 to buy 7.9 acres of property east of the Creek.

A group of local citizens, who later formed the organization Arch Creek Trust, went to Tallahassee in February 1973, to finalize the agreement. On the night they returned, the natural bridge collapsed and fell into the creek. Rumors of sabotage ran through the community, and the Metro-Dade Police Bomb Squad was called out. Nothing was discovered, and experts generally agreed later that the fall was probably due to constant vibrations from passing trains, or erosion, or just old age and decay.

Even before 1890, a handful of adventuresome pioneers were traveling through the area and some spent brief periods around the natural bridge and surroundings. In 1891, a Mr. J. Ihle was the first permanent settler to the area, having bought eighty acres from the State of Florida at \$1 an acre. The area was so remote that that it is believed his closest neighbor to the north lived in the area of present-day Fort Lauderdale, about 16-17 miles away. He built a temporary palmetto frond shelter and for the next 27 years he grew shallots, coontie, squashes, bananas, sugarcane, Puerto Rican pineapples, lemons, guava, limes, rose apples, Jamaican apples, and tomatoes. Sounds kind of like a modern farmers' market in Miami.

In 1896, the railway arrived in Arch Creek as it progressed to Miami, arriving there in summer of 1896. By 1905, the Arch Creek Railroad depot, located at modern 125th street, became the center of activity for the community. According to one source, the post office and a school opened in 1905 near the rail depot, which is incorrect. According to the Greater North Miami Historical Society, the post office opened in 1903, which is substantiated by the postcard [Figure 2] with a cancellation of December 1st, 1904. According to Deane Briggs, this is one of the two or three earliest known cancellations for Arch Creek.

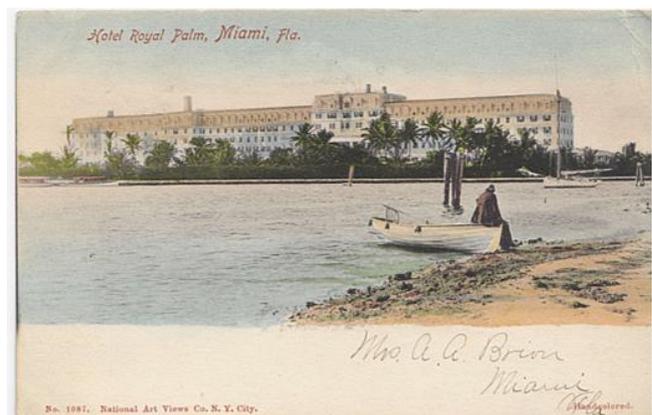
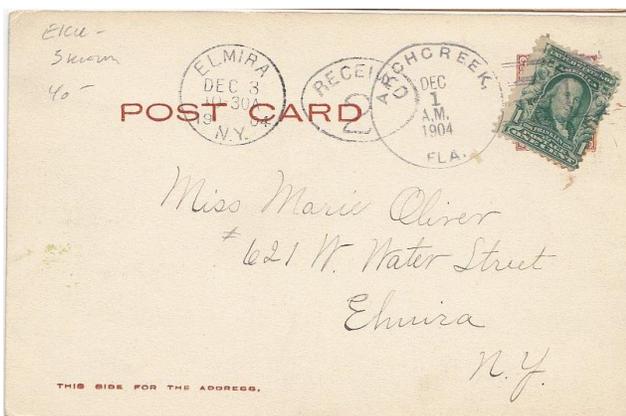


Figure 2. Royal Palm Hotel postcard. One of earliest known Arch Creek cancellations.