

## BIG BOSS: THE STORY OF THE BIRCHES AND THE ROOTS, PART 1 BY J. KENT PLANCK



In 1894, Chicagoan Hugh Taylor Birch began purchasing hundreds of acres of wild, windswept South Florida coastline in the hope of creating a huge, isolated, personal retreat in what is today Fort Lauderdale.

Then, in the early 1920s, Birch gave a two-thirds share in much of this acreage that lay south of what is today Sunrise Boulevard to his daughter Helen and her new husband Frederic Clay Bartlett, and Frederic then designed an

informal winter hideaway that would later come to be known as “Bonnet House”.

But it was Hugh Taylor Birch who actually supervised much of the Bonnet House construction while Frederic and Helen traveled abroad. And it was Hugh Taylor Birch who – in the late 1920s, despite his deep grieving over Helen’s premature, unexpected death – protected and sustained this estate along with the rest of his Florida property when his son-in-law Frederic no longer wanted to come here.

Still, Hugh Birch then welcomed Frederic back six years later – with his new wife Evelyn Fortune Lilly – to share what had in the meantime become Hugh’s solitary winter home. And then, for more than a decade afterwards, the aging Hugh continued to take the lead in protecting and enhancing the Bonnet House acreage along with his other Florida land.

Thus, the story of Bonnet House truly begins with, and has been greatly influenced by, this giant of a man who was known simply – to employees, friends and family – as “Big Boss”. This is the story of “Big Boss” and of those most dear to him.

There are two important points to take away from this story that over the years – perhaps

unintentionally – have been somewhat romanticized out of it.

**First:** Hugh Birch was not simply interested in protecting the natural environment. He very much wanted to make money off his land where he could, and he often did. And though he certainly did preserve, during his lifetime, huge tracts of land from commercial development, his ultimate goal was not to preserve the natural landscape, but to “improve it” – his words – as he saw fit. Thus, he made extensive alterations and additions to much of it.

**Second:** Hugh Birch did not acquire his South Florida land only along the coast or in a unitary fashion – nor pay only a dollar an acre for it, as is often said. Rather, he purchased it over a span of nearly 40 years; much of it was far inland and scattered all over Fort Lauderdale; and, though he didn’t pay very much for it by today’s standards, he did indeed pay more, on average, than a dollar an acre.

### **Birch’s Roots Are Humble**

Hugh Taylor Birch was born August 2, 1848, and he hailed from hearty, pioneer stock. His father, 47-year-old Erastus Mitchell Birch, had been born in Dutchess County, New York, in 1801, and Hugh’s 35-year-old mother Sally had been born in nearby West Stockbridge, Massachusetts, in 1813, one of seven children of Hannah and William Milligan. Sally and Erastus married in West Stockbridge around 1830, and then moved west to Gowanda, a village in New York’s Cataraugus County south of Buffalo. Erastus carved out a farm from densely timbered land, and Sally gave birth to two children: William, the first year, and Phoebe Jane, around 1833.

In 1835, the Birches moved further west to north-eastern Illinois, settling along the Des Plaines River in Lake County’s Newport Township near the Wisconsin border. Four more children were born to the Birches there: Sally, named for her mother, around 1835; George Haviland, 1839; John Milligan, named for Sally’s brother, 1843; and Hugh Taylor, in 1848.

# LETTER FROM THE CEO

BY KAREN BEARD

## What's New at Bonnet House?



Bonnet House regularly applies for competitive grants to support our operations. In a recent panel review, we were asked, “What’s new and exciting at Bonnet House?”

We quickly scrambled to describe all our new events, programs, classes, etc. And as a matter of fact there is something very new to share in this newsletter.

As I reported in our last newsletter, the Island Theater had either burned down or was dismantled sometime in the 1960’s. When it was replicated in the 1990’s the roof was made of palm thatch. Over the years the thatched roof did not hold up well and has been replaced a number of times. Recently discovered photos of the original Island Theater revealed that the roof was made of cedar shake shingles. I am happy to report that through the generous donation of funds from our Bonnet House Alliance, the original cedar roof has been replicated. Our roofers took great care to make it historically accurate. The new roof looks great and a permanent roof will allow us to use this lovely little building for many more activities. The new roof is architecturally more appealing and sets off the design elements of the walls. So, something new is actually something old.

But still that question “what’s new at Bonnet House” got me thinking about some of the perhaps even more important new things that regularly occur at Bonnet House.



I had the pleasure of watching good friends get married here. That’s certainly a new beginning for them, starting life together as husband and wife. How special that their new life began at Bonnet House.

We have been fortunate to attract almost 300 volunteers. Many are retired from other careers. There’s a new beginning for you; an encore career working in a beautiful estate doing very rewarding work. For some of our

volunteers it is the most rewarding work of their lives.

I recently reconnected with a number of former business associates (who are still friends) who knew me as an executive of a very large corporation. Several of them recently came to visit Bonnet House. I was able to take them on a tour around the grounds. Two of them remarked that I was a “new” Karen and they liked the new me, who obviously was enjoying what she does.

Every day the adults and children who come to visit are newly inspired by the art, ecology, history and beauty of this historic estate. Many of them begin a new hobby like growing orchids or even decide to study art, or work at an historic site because of their new inspiration.

When a child from an underserved Fort Lauderdale community comes to Bonnet House and gets to see the ocean for the first time, it certainly was new and exciting for her.



Most every summer, there are babies born on the property. Swans and monkeys fill our days and it’s so nice to watch their parents take such good care of them. Children get to witness the “circle of life” when the swans are fed, and then the fish come to feed and then the water birds scoop up the fish. Recently, manatees mated in our private canal and a dolphin swam there, too. There’s always something new to see!

Coming to an historic estate like Bonnet House inspires people to have a greater appreciation for beauty and history and sense of place. To quote Joe Lalli, EDSA President and CEO, “Every time I visit Bonnet House I find something new that inspires me.” I would agree with him. Although I have been the CEO of Bonnet House for nine years and have been in every room and almost every square inch of the grounds, I never fail to notice something “new,” something that I had never noticed before. Our wonderful historic property is so rich in so many details; it would take a lifetime to fully appreciate it all. Now, who says that an historic home can’t be new and exciting?

# DEVELOPMENT NEWS

BY PATRICK SHAVLOSKE, DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR

## Impressions of Florida a Great Success



3rd Place Winner, Douglas Williams  
*Everglades Sunset*

Bonnet House's 11th annual juried art exhibition, *Impressions of Florida*, opened on February 11th with a lavish cocktail party sponsored by LXR Luxury Resorts & Hotels and catered by 360° Catering from the

Hyatt Regency Pier Sixty-Six. The opening event, co-chaired by Dev Motwani, Lois Schmatz, and Pat Smith, was an immense success with almost 300 guests in attendance. Fifteen pieces of art were sold contributing to a record net of over \$73,000 raised for Bonnet House. Guest juror Janet Gold selected F. Cole Wolford as first place winner for *South Beach Passage*, Ronald Shelley as second place winner for *Cabbage Palms*, and Doug Williams as third place winner for *Everglades Sunset*. John Bowen, Sandy Dolan, Rita Houldsworth, Stephen Left, and Vince Neradka were selected for honorable mention awards. Nia Nakis was the people's choice winner for her painting, *Springtime*. *Impressions* will remain on exhibit during regular tour hours through April 10th

with paintings not purchased opening night remaining for sale.

## New Book about Bonnet House Nears Completion

Bonnet House is pleased to announce that it will soon be publishing a new book entitled *Bonnet House: A Legacy of Artistry & Elegance*. Written by Bonnet House volunteer and docent, J. Kent Planck, the book will chronicle anew the history of Bonnet House and the lasting impact left on our community by the Bartlett and Birch families. The book will be hardcover and feature archival and new photographs of the property, many taken by members of our Bonnet House Fine Artist group. Frederic Bartlett's granddaughter, Elisabeth Bartlett Sturges, has chaired the effort to underwrite the project, and as all production costs have been covered, 100% of sales proceeds will directly benefit Bonnet House. Look for the book in the Bonnet House Museum Shop and on the Bonnet House website in late spring.

**BONNET HOUSE:**  
A Legacy of Artistry  
and Elegance

## INTRODUCING THE NEW BONNET HOUSE SPECIAL EVENTS ALL-INCLUSIVE PACKAGE BY NICHOLLE MAUDLIN, EVENTS MANAGER

As many of you know, weddings and special events are very popular at Bonnet House from October through May. We spend a lot of time finding and researching the best vendors possible to satisfy our client's wants and needs. Companies that provide great service and respect the historic nature of the museum are referred to our clients in the hopes that they will choose our preferred vendors. In an effort to encourage clients to use caterers, in particular, those that take good care of the estate and to make planning easier for our clients, the Bonnet House Special Events Department has introduced an All-Inclusive Package that includes the property rental fee, along with food, beverage, staffing and rental services. We are proud to be working with CA Company Catering on this new project. The owners, CA and Marta Messana have worked at Bonnet House for years and have successfully delivered quality events for weddings and special events, including our own Bonnet House donor events.



The rates for the All-Inclusive Package start at only \$130 per person!!! Clients can also add and upgrade items to customize the package to suit their event. A more detailed list of what is included in the package is available online at [bonnethouse.org](http://bonnethouse.org) under the property rental section of the web site. The Bonnet House Special Events Department will continue to rent the property to clients who prefer to use the caterer of their choice, provided they carry the proper license and insurance to work at Bonnet House. The list of our preferred caterers is quite impressive and lists very professional, full service caterers.

As these caterers and other vendors continue to deliver elaborate events, they will help maintain Bonnet House's reputation as one of Fort Lauderdale's top and most exclusive venues. Thank you to all of them for making us look so good!!!!



# THE LILY PAD

## NEWSLETTER OF THE BONNET HOUSE ALLIANCE

### A NOTE FROM THE ALLIANCE PRESIDENT BY SANDY CASTEEL



Sandy Casteel

As I write, we are once again in the final preparation stages of Entirely Entertaining XVI. We have a great team working under the leadership of Ken Farley, our Ways and Means Chairman, Sue Nesbit, Suzan Hinckley and Candace Ford. Our 28 table designers have picked up on the theme of the Fort Lauderdale Centennial and the 90th birthday of Bonnet House and are doing such interesting spin-offs of those events this year. We also will see two 50th anniversary tables from Carroll's Jewelers and Cross Stitch Cupboard. We have a wonderful menu planned, baskets full of beautiful gifts and a silent auction offering--among other amazing items--an elegant Celebrity Cruise. The Alliance is so privileged to have, in my mind, the most beautiful venue in South Florida to present Entirely Entertaining XVI, so success is ready to be celebrated. Thank you to ALL the dedicated volunteers who make the event possible.

Our "just for fun" party for the BHA volunteers is set for April 11th in the Social Room at LeClub, 2845 NE 9th Street. The condominium is just north of the Bonnet House west gate. We will be parking in the House parking area and have an easy walk to the party. Watch for details from Rosalie Rusovick in our Alliance e-mail. It will be great fun.

The Annual Meeting of the Alliance is set for Bimini Boatyard on SE 17th Street



Basket Prep. Team (left to right)  
Ann Powell, Patsy Hawkes, Suzan Hinckley,  
Fran Young, Rosalie Rusovick, Georgia Elf-  
man, Anna LaViolette and Patti Kearson.

on Monday, March 28th. New officers will be elected at that time. In addition, our ongoing celebration of Fort Lauderdale's Centennial at that meeting will consist of a program on the 1961 movie "Where the Boys Are." Ted Drum, Fort Lauderdale native, realtor and restaurateur, will share his stories of that historic and exciting time 50 years ago. If any of you remember actor George Hamilton, Ted has some great stories about him.

This note wraps up my Lily Pad messages to the Bonnet House family members. I can't thank the Alliance enough for coming alongside of me and making this Alliance presidency a special experience. From Jazz & Chocolate to Entirely Entertaining, from mango chutney to Bonnet House planners, it has been such a joy.

See you along the Melaleuca Parkway. I hope to have time to be a real volunteer next season.



EE Planning Team (left to right)  
Rosalie Rusovick, Ken Farley, Sue Nesbit,  
Suzan Hinckley, Candace Ford, Rose Holland and  
Nicholle Maudlin

## BONNET HOUSE ALLIANCE CALENDAR SPRING/SUMMER 2011

### MARCH

28 General Alliance Membership Meeting, 11:00 am, Luncheon at Bimini Boatyard, 1555 S.E. 17th St., Ft. Lauderdale 33316. Cost: \$30.00 Members, Staff and Guests. RSVP to Rose Holland, 1919 N.E. 33rd Avenue, Ft. Lauderdale 33305.

### APRIL

11 Volunteer Party at the Social Room at LeClub, 2845 NE 9th Street, Ft. Lauderdale 33304. RSVP to Rosalie Rusovick at (954) 565-5419 or rusovick@gmail.com

### MAY

2 Executive Committee Meeting, 10:00 am; Board of Directors' Meeting, 11:00am at Sandy Casteel's home at 1135 N. Rio Vista Blvd., Ft. Lauderdale 33301  
9 General Alliance Membership Meeting, Induction of Officers for 2011-2012, 11:00 am at Riverside Hotel, 620 E. Las Olas Blvd., Ft. Lauderdale 33301. Cost: \$35.00 Members, Staff and Guests. RSVP to Rose Holland, 1919 N.E. 33rd Avenue, Ft. Lauderdale 33305.



Impressions of Florida,  
Honorable Mention Winner  
and Alliance Member,  
Rita Houldsworth for  
Melaleuca Drive



# THE LILY PAD

## NEWSLETTER OF THE BONNET HOUSE ALLIANCE

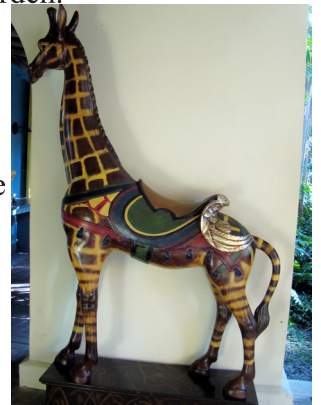
### CATCHING UP WITH THE ALLIANCE PROJECTS BY SANDY CASTEEL



We are happy to announce that almost all of the designated items on our Alliance Wish List have been beautifully completed at this time. Take a walk or tram down to the Island Theater and admire the newly completed cedar shake shingle roof. The theater roof looks architecturally more appropriate and will allow year-round usage we have not previously had. In addition, the second giraffe has returned to Bonnet House, bright and fresh, and now stands proudly near the loggia dining area. The carved monkey the Bartletts purchased at the Plaza Hotel antique shop has also come home with its broken arm now back in place. The cat and pelican from the Courtyard tables will be finished soon as will the parrot that usually stands guard by the door to the Hibiscus Garden.

Photos from the Kampong have been so valuable in determining proper coloration and restoration of these pieces. The careful upgrading of electrical and plumbing needs and restoration in the Bride's Room have also been completed. Maintenance of the Cadillac has been done, curatorial upgrades for cataloguing the Bonnet House collection have been installed, new carpeting and fresh tile have been laid in the Museum Shop, and pruning of the historic Bonnet House orchard rounds out our list.

The Alliance is always proud to be a major supporter of the ongoing restoration at Bonnet House Museum & Gardens. Check out the pictures. You will be thrilled with the quality and care with which Stephen Draft has guided this work. Thank you so much, Stephen!



### A THANK YOU FROM EEXVI CHAIRS

Dear Staff, Alliance Members, Committee Chairs, Volunteers, and Table Designers,

On behalf of the Bonnet House Alliance "Entirely Entertaining XVI" Chairman and Co-Chairs, we wish to extend our sincerest thanks to Chef Remi and his staff for our delicious luncheon.

To the Bonnet House Staff, Alliance Members, Committee Chairs and Volunteers, we appreciate your time, talent, and hard work in making EEXVI a successful event. A special thank you to all of you for the splendid job you did at our event. Your positive attitude, enthusiasm, willingness to help, and attention to detail helped us to succeed in many ways.

To our Table Designers, we thank you for the beautiful and creative table designs. Without your talent, this event would not be possible. We are so proud to continue the time-honored tradition of gracious hospitality developed by Evelyn F. Bartlett at Bonnet House.

To all our Sponsors and Contributors, we extend a very special thank you for ensuring that our beloved Bonnet House legacy is preserved for future generations to enjoy.

Again, thank you to all of our valued friends of Bonnet House.

A very special thanks to Mary Belle Cordell, Sharon Binker, Interiors by Decorating Den, Kathy Champaine, Joanne Culligan, Candace Proctor, Marsha Hirshy, Patti Kearson and Susan Lochrie for your continued support of Bonnet House



Sue Nesbit, Candace Ford, Ken Farley,  
Sandy Casteel and Suzan Hinckley

# BONNET HOUSE CALENDAR OF EVENTS

## APRIL - JUNE 2011

### APRIL

- 3 **Centennial Fort Lauderdale**, An exhibition of works by the Bonnet House Fine Artists at the Fort Lauderdale History Center. Opening Reception 12:00pm Sunday, April 3 in the New River Inn. Exhibition runs through June 5, 2011.
- 6 **Calligraphy Workshop**, April 6 - 27, Wednesdays, 9:30-11:00am. \$64 Members, \$80 Non-Members. RSVP 954.563.5393 x122 or susanparker@bonnethouse.org.
- 7 **Young Artist Music Series** featuring Florida Atlantic University Latin Vocal Ensemble, 7:00pm - 9:00pm, Tickets: \$30 - \$40. RSVP www.BonnetHouse.org or (954) 563-5393 x124



Impressions of Florida, 2nd Place Winner  
Ronald Shelley for  
*Cabbage Palms, Dry Season*

### MAY

- 25 **Centennial Discount Day**, In honor of Fort Lauderdale's 100th birthday Bonnet House is offering discount days May through September of 2011. Tell your friends to visit Bonnet House at a discounted rate during the Centennial Discount Days. 1/2 price admission for everyone.

### JUNE

- BAMM (Broward Attractions and Museums Month)** - During the entire month of June all Bonnet House members enjoy free admission to 15 local attractions and museums. Visit BammInfo.org for details.
- 4 & 18 **Centennial Family Day** - Bonnet House is also offering family discount days in honor of Fort Lauderdale's Centennial. Adults are 1/2 price and children 13 and under are free.
- 22 **Centennial Discount Day** - 1/2 price admission for all non-members.



Co-chairs Dev Motwani, Pat Smith, Lois Schmatz

### SCENES FROM IMPRESSIONS OF FLORIDA 2011



Photography courtesy of Clay Weiland  
Catering and event design by 360° Catering  
Hyatt Regency Pier Sixty-Six



Rita Houldsworth, Honorable Mention Winner



J. Christopher Gernert, Emilie Shaw, E. Clay Shaw, Jr.,  
Judy Maus, Tom Maus, Frank Gernert



Louise Sanda, Par Sanda and guest

Through determination and hard work, Erastus Birch raised grain and cattle, and the family prospered. Sally struggled in their harsh wilderness environment to clothe and educate her children.

By the 1850s, the Birches had moved again, to La Porte, Indiana. Erastus dredged the nearby Kankakee River and drained and reclaimed land along its banks. This work may have influenced Hugh's later desire to improve the land he acquired. In payment for his dredging work, Erastus was given title to thousands of acres which ultimately made him a wealthy man.

### The Birches Move to Yellow Springs

Years earlier back east, Erastus had met Horace Mann, a Massachusetts educational leader and Congressman known as the "father of American education" for his advocacy of tax-supported public schools. Erastus admired Mann and struck up a correspondence. In 1852, Mann accepted the presidency of fledgling Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and four years later, in 1856, he wrote and asked Erastus to come help administer it.

So the Birches moved again, in 1857, to Yellow Springs, in west-central Ohio. Hugh was nine years old. Erastus became an Antioch trustee, and he managed its business affairs as college treasurer.

The Birches lived in a house that Hugh remembered as "one of the most beautiful" in town and Hugh became best friend of Horace Mann's youngest son Benny. But life would change quickly for the Birches. Horace Mann died in 1859, just two years after the Birches arrived. And in 1861, Erastus and his three oldest sons – William, George and John – enlisted in the Union army when the Civil War broke out. Only thirteen years old at the time, Hugh stayed home with his mother and sisters.

Hugh had been so well taught at home by Sally back in their wilderness days that he had entered the Yellow Springs common school at his appropriate grade level, and then advanced to the Antioch Preparatory Academy that readied students for the college. There, he grew close to Principal Edward J. Orton, a Harvard-educated geologist who later became president of Antioch and then the first president of Ohio State University. Orton first inspired Hugh's love of nature as, together, they explored a beautiful glen adjacent to the campus.

Hugh's mother Sally was especially happy in Yellow Springs after years in the wilderness. But ill-health – begat by those years of struggle – brought early death at age 50 in 1863. So Erastus and his sons came home from the war.

Hugh would later characterize Erastus as "one of the richest men" in Yellow Springs, and Erastus was reputed to have given major financial support to Antioch, in both "gold" and land before his 1884 death. But Hugh would also later say that he had to pay his own way through college working on a farm, that he was "a poor boy [who] had to work for every dollar of tuition." Perhaps Erastus was simply trying to develop in him the same kind of hard work and determination that he felt had led to his own success. Or perhaps Hugh was simply doing a bit of legend-building in his later years.

Entering Antioch in 1866, Hugh thought an appreciation of the environment was so important that – over faculty objections – he got the school to substitute a course in natural history for the otherwise required Greek. Hugh also became captain and star pitcher for the Antioch baseball team. They lost only one game in 1869: to the nation's first professional outfit, the Cincinnati Red Stockings. Antioch got creamed, 41-7. Hugh formed a drama club, too, and he played Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the first play ever staged at Antioch.



Hugh Taylor Birch  
Pitcher Antioch College  
Baseball Club, 1869

But he tried to cram four years' school work into three, and the accelerated schedule, extracurricular activities, and farm work – combined with what an older, more reflective Birch would call a "disinterest with numbers" – contributed to his flunking analytical geometry his senior year. Hugh petitioned the faculty to make it up through independent study in natural history, but they turned him down. Disappointed, but undeterred, Hugh decided to move on, to study law in Chicago.

Part II will be featured in the next issue of The Newsletter

Monica Estevez, Marketing Manager,  
is the editor of this issue of **The Newsletter**



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Impressions of Florida  
 1st Place Winner - F. Cole Wolford  
*South Beach Passage*

**The Newsletter**

APRIL - JUNE 2011

**MEMBERSHIP FORM**

- \$55 Individual  
 Annual admission pass for one  
 10% discount in the Museum Shop and reduced fee for programs
- \$90 Couple  
 Annual admission pass for two  
 10% discount in the Museum Shop and reduced fee for programs
- \$125 Parrot and Family  
 Annual admission pass for two adults and all children in  
 household under age 18  
 15% discount in the Museum Shop and reduced fee for programs

Additional membership levels available. For more information,  
 please call (954) 563-5393 x140 or visit [www.bonnethouse.org](http://www.bonnethouse.org).

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