

# Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, Inc.

## Southeast Chapter

### Newsletter No. 108 – August, 2008

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**Southeast Limited**

#### WHAT A BEAUTIFUL DEPOT! (Too Bad it Wasn't!)

Seth H. Bramson, MBA, MS

This article is condensed from Seth's article of the same title which will appear in the September '08 issue of the Journal of the 11th Judicial Circuit Historical Society, published by the Historical Museum of Southern Florida on behalf of the Miami Chapter of the Florida Bar. FEC Images from *Speedway To Sunshine*, Courtesy of Mr. Seth Bramson. © 2008 by Seth H. Bramson.

Some of our readers may be aware of the fact that the Dade County Courthouse was built between 1925 and 1928 and was placed on the [National Register of Historic Places](#) in January of 1989. When built, it was the tallest building in Florida.

What many may not know, however, is that the Florida East Coast Railway (FEC) arrived on the shores of Biscayne Bay on April 15, 1896. After using a very small wooden structure located close to what was then Twelfth Street (today's Flagler Street) for their depot for just a few months, they moved to a site just east of Avenue B (Northeast Second Avenue) near Sixth Street. The railroad depot remained in that location with trains backing in and out until, with the completion of the Key West Extension in January of 1912, it became feasible to build a new station along the mainline (where Metrorail runs today) at Tenth Street and Avenue E (200 Northwest 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue). The original domed Dade County Courthouse served well until the great Florida boom of the early and mid-1920's, when it was unable to handle the crush of business. So, in 1925 construction began on one of Miami's—and Florida's—greatest and most stately landmarks, the Dade County Courthouse that would replace the existing edifice. (To Page 2)



A standard FEC publicity photograph at Miami, Florida.



**The ubiquitous Dade County Courthouse looms in the background of this circa 1950 view of the Miami Station, with the implication that the courthouse was the FEC Miami Station.**

Fifth Street crossing, aim his massive tripod-mounted hooded Graflex toward the station, and click off image after image of the steam locomotives impatiently snorting, their air brake reservoirs giving off regular blasts of steam and their crews anxiously awaiting the highball. In the winter of 1935-36, in the height of the great Depression, there were seven different days on which six sections of the all Pullman “Florida Special” departed Miami for points north! The selection of superb Wolfe portraiture (of scenes as well as people) is extensive, but along with the Key West Extension views the shots that show the Courthouse rate and rank as some of the most striking and dramatic. The FEC’s advertising department—no dummies they!—knew they had a winner and as early as 1928 began showing the Courthouse in most of their issued-yearly descriptive booklets as if it was their station. Photo after photo in brochure after brochure gave the impression that when one arrived in Miami one would find this magnificent depot welcoming them to “the magic city.” Of course, that was not the case! (To Page 3)

### **Announcements:**

- September 11<sup>th</sup> - Regular SE Chapter meeting.
- October 9<sup>th</sup> - Regular SE Chapter meeting.
- November 2<sup>nd</sup> – Gaithersburg Maryland train show.
- November 13<sup>th</sup> - Regular SE Chapter meeting.

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### **SOUTHEAST CHAPTER OFFICERS**

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**Miami's rapid transit now runs where the FEC once originated America's premier winter passenger trains, and with the exception of the courthouse itself, the only hearkening back to those glorious days of great passenger train service are the planes that still carry banners exhorting the tourists to "See Silver Springs."**

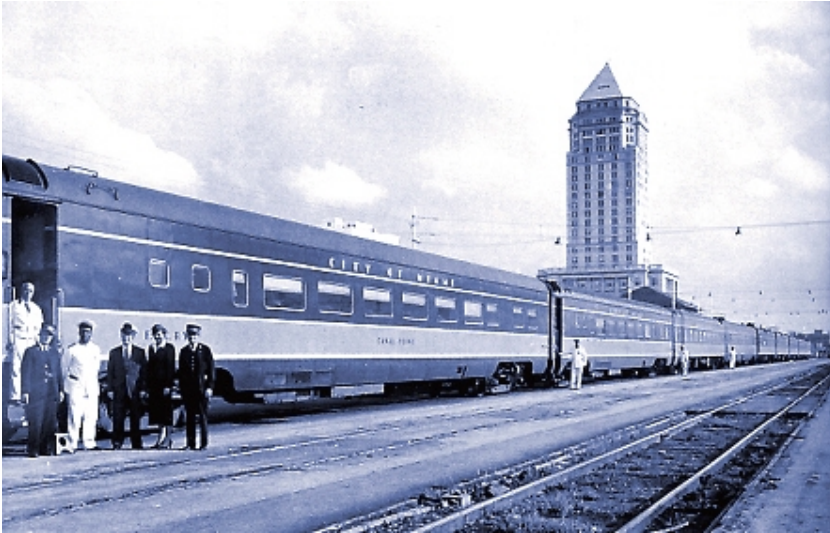
The "real" depot had been built out of Dade County pine, was solid as a rock and impervious to termites. It opened as a one story building but a second floor was added in the 1920's to house the terminal superintendent, switchboard and trainmasters. The first floor housed the ticket office, white and colored waiting rooms, a snack shop, storage areas, the stationmaster's office and a crew check-in area. A concrete baggage room just north of the station was added later and a large commissary to service the dining cars of nine different railroads was also built on the property.

The author, who spent innumerable hours at the station, recalls, on numerous occasions, hearing passengers ask incredulously, "isn't that (referring to the Courthouse) the station?!!" Obviously, it wasn't, but that made no difference to the passenger traffic department of the railway, which exploited the Courthouse as faux-depot at every opportunity. Interestingly, the brochures and booklets showing the Courthouse never mentioned that it was *not* the depot, simply implying by photographic relationship that it was. Sadly, the strike by non-operating employees that began on January 22, 1963 ended the FEC's passenger service, the last photos of FEC trains entering or leaving the station being taken On January 21<sup>st</sup>. The "Courthouse as depot" ruse ended forever that day.

Wolfe photographed the trains from both ends, with the observation cars at the south end of the station trackage prior to departure looking north and, of course, the huge majority of the shots showing the Courthouse taken from the north end looking south. Wolfe was not prejudiced toward steam or diesel locomotives, nor was he interested in whether the train's equipment was heavyweight or streamlined passenger cars. Rather it was the magic he could work with his camera that he was interested in.

From 1895, when the name of the railroad was changed from " Jacksonville , St. Augustine & Indian River Railway" to "Florida East Coast Railway" the company issued descriptive booklets or brochures glorifying the east coast of Florida and describing each of the towns and cities the trains passed through. As Miami grew in importance the descriptions and details of information relating to "the magic city" would increase. The 1934-35 "Florida East Coast" descriptive booklet, for example, contains fifteen photographs of the greater Miami area, one of them showing a steam locomotive heading north with only the very south end of the station visible, the most prominent part of the image being the Courthouse looming in the background, the very strong implication being that that building was the railroad station.

Ticket agents on railroads as diverse as the New York, New Haven and Hartford, Pennsylvania, New York Central, Illinois Central, St. Louis—San Francisco, Chicago & Eastern Illinois, Louisville and Nashville, Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis, Central of Georgia, Atlantic Coast Line, Seaboard Air Line, Southern Railway always made sure they had FEC advertising pieces and timetables on hand, and were prepared to tell travelers what a beautiful station the FEC had in Miami. (To Page 4)



**Above left, One of the country's premiere passenger trains in the streamline era was the "City of Miami." The train, in its brown, orange and yellow striped livery, with "City of Miami" painted above the windows was a sight to behold. Right, there are three sections of train 88, the Florida Special, on this stunning January day in 1936, and the Filipino bands along with the train's hostesses pose for publicity photographs prior to departure.**

Railroad buffs also took delight in photographing the FEC's trains with the courthouse in the background. It is not an exaggeration to state that in the railfan community nationwide, there are thousands of views of passenger trains with the Courthouse behind them. Like Wolfe, many railfans photographed the trains so that, while the passenger cars or steam or diesel locomotives may have been the primary focus of the lensman's interest, the Courthouse in the background appeared to be the station!

When the FEC and other railroads began buying diesel locomotives various paint schemes were chosen, but inarguably and unquestionably the most magnificent diesel locomotive paint scheme ever designed was the stunningly beautiful red and yellow with narrow silver stripes of the FEC.

Wolfe, with his incredible eye, had set the stage for one of the most gloriously stunning and certainly famous in railroad publicity annals photographs ever taken. The incredible color, the red and yellow of the diesels juxtapositioned with a stunningly deep blue sky set off by the Courthouse *uber alles* is one of the most striking and memorable railroad photos ever made.

The story of the FEC is replete with confluence and coincidence, from Henry Flagler coming to Florida to the extension of the railroad to Miami and Key West, the building of the hotels and innumerable other examples. It is possible that, in the intertwined histories of Miami and the railway, the placement of the Courthouse vis-à-vis the location of the FEC's Miami station may be one of the greatest examples of both the confluence and the coincidence in the grand and glorious histories of both entities.

#### THE AUTHOR

Seth Bramson founded the Miami Memorabilia Collectors Club. He is the senior collector of memorabilia concerning the Florida East Coast Railway, Florida transportation, Miami and Floridiana in America. Company Historian of the FEC Railway, his book, "*Speedway to Sunshine*" is the official history of that famous line. He is the author of 14 books and more than 60 articles, and is Adjunct Professor of History at Florida International University.

#### **Southeast Chapter - Meeting Minutes Recap:**

The meeting on July 10<sup>th</sup> of the Southeast Chapter of the R&LHS was called to order at 6:40 pm by Chairman Bill Howes. There were 8 members present. Secretary's report: The minutes for the June meeting were approved. Treasurers Report: Robert Van Nest reported \$8996.94 in the balance. The treasurer's report was approved by the members present. Robert was reviewing an account in which to place a portion of the funds. John Leynes advised the group that the Henry Plant Video is about 45% complete. At future meetings, members will give 10-15 minute presentations about their favorite locomotive. The Program was given by Larry Shughart and Bill Howes, on Whistle Stop Campaign Trains.