

**Villa Seville**  
**262 Sunset Avenue**



**DESIGNATION REPORT**

**March 22, 2023**

**Landmark Preservation Commission**

**Palm Beach, Florida**

# **DESIGNATION REPORT**

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## **Table of Contents**

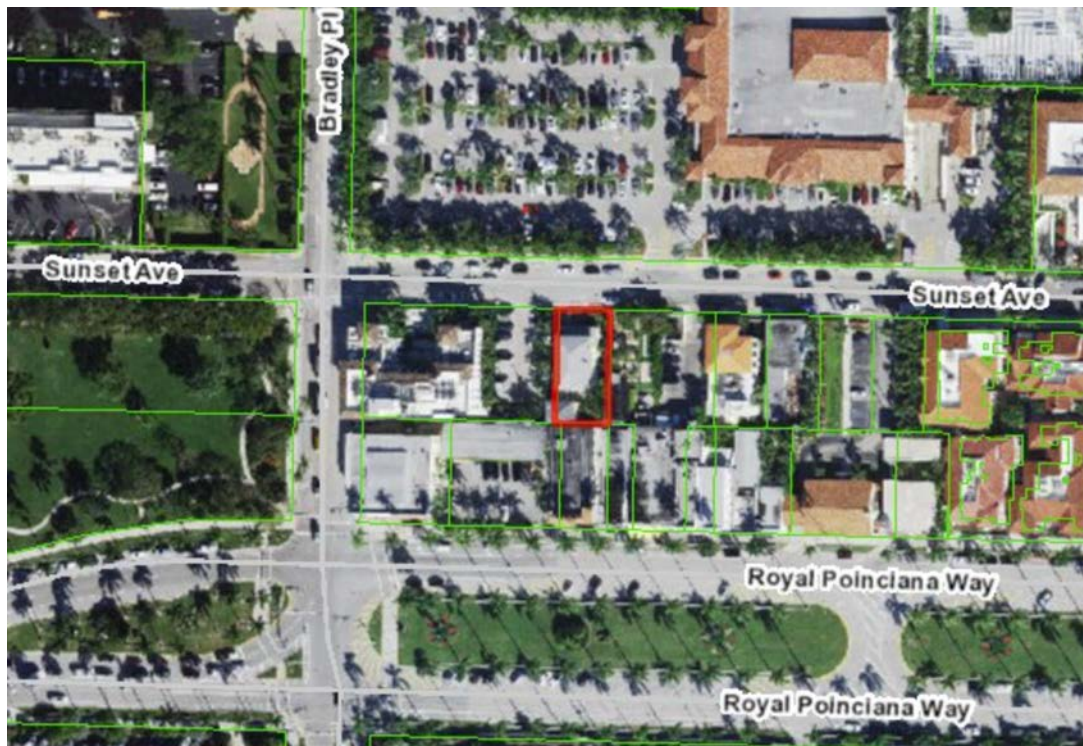
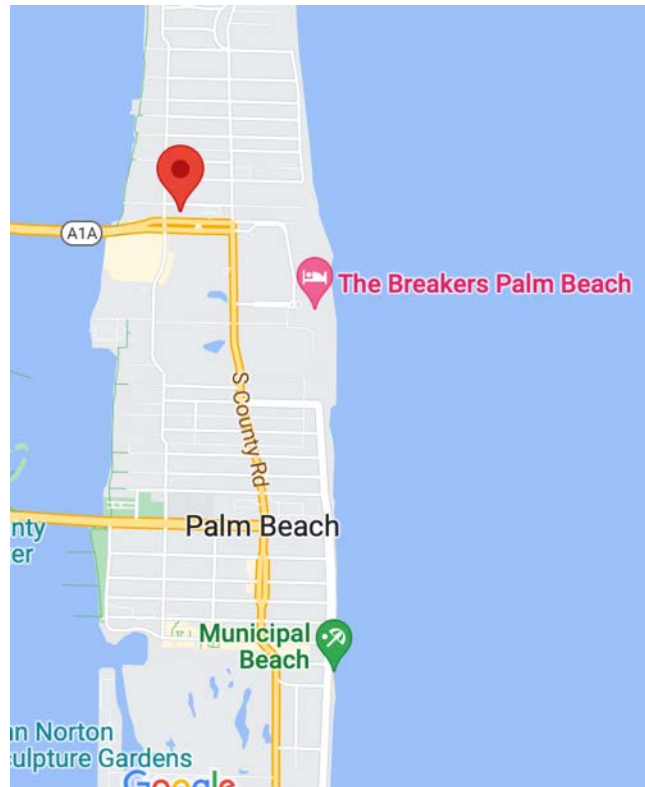
I.	GENERAL INFORMATION	2
II.	LOCATION MAP	3
III.	ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION	4
IV.	HISTORICAL INFORMATION	6
V.	BUILDER'S BIOGRAPHY	9
VI.	STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE	12
VII.	CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION	12
VIII.	SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	14

Report produced by MurphyStillings, LLC

## **I. General Information**

Location:	262 Sunset Avenue Palm Beach, Florida
Date of Construction:	1920
First Owner:	Benjamin F. Hoffman
Historic Name:	Villa Seville
Builder:	Benjamin F. Hoffman
Current Owner:	NED 262 Sunset LLC
Present Use:	Commercial
Present Zoning:	C-TS – Commercial Town Serving
Palm Beach County Tax Folio Number:	50-43-43-22-31-000-0380
Current Legal Description:	Floral Park Lots 38 & 39

## II. Location Map





### III. Architectural Information

Historically known as Villa Seville, the building located at 262 Sunset Avenue is a two-story Prairie style masonry building constructed in 1920 by prominent Palm Beach builder Benjamin F. Hoffman for approximately \$12,000.<sup>1</sup> Prairie style buildings were mostly constructed from 1900 – 1920 and are generally two stories and feature low-pitched hipped roofs with widely overhanging eaves that typically are boxed, one story wings or porches and facade detailing emphasizing horizontal lines often with massive square porch supports. Of the four principal Prairie house subtypes, 262 Sunset Avenue is the hipped roof, symmetrical, no front entry design.<sup>2</sup>



262 Sunset Avenue is a rectangular shaped stucco-covered masonry building with a low-pitched hip roof with wide overhanging boxed eaves surfaced with asphalt shingles.<sup>3</sup> The one-story porch on the front facade has massive, battered piers that reach from the ground and support the porch roof which like the main roof is low-pitched with wide overhanging boxed eaves surfaced with asphalt shingles. The

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<sup>1</sup> Palm Beach Building Permit #130, June 2, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Savage McAlester. A Field Guide to American Houses: The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America's Domestic Architecture. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2015. Pages 550-564.

<sup>3</sup> The 2003 re-roofing permit states that the new shingles will be fiberglass, however, fiberglass shingles are mostly asphalt shingles with additional fiberglass added and are more fire resistant.

porch, which from an early time was screened in, is now enclosed with ribbons of multi-light sash windows. The second story front facade has symmetrical fenestration with pairs of multi-light sash windows flanking an oval window in the center.

The west elevation features the main entrance on the first floor with a wood paneled and glazed door flanked by narrow sidelights. This appears to be the original location of the main entrance. Above this entrance is a porch with a simple metal rail and a single door used to access the porch. The rear elevation has two single entrance doors, one on the first floor and one above on the second accessed by an exterior spiral staircase. The windows throughout the building are metal, divided light, sash windows, several which are paired or grouped in ribbons of three.



In the southwest corner of the property is a two story masonry accessory building that was built in 1920 as a garage apartment but is now just an accessory building.<sup>4</sup> Currently the front facade which faces north has a single entry door on the first floor and symmetrical four-over-four sash windows on the second floor.

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<sup>4</sup> There is a permit in 1925 for a garage to be constructed in pine by the owner's son. If this building was constructed it has since been demolished.



Throughout its 103-year history, there have been additions and alterations to 262 Sunset Avenue. At an unknown time, the front porch was enclosed with windows though as early as the 1930s it appears that the porch had been enclosed at least with screens. A number of one-over-one sash windows on the second story were changed to awning windows and later changed to multi-light metal sash windows. Other one-over-one sash windows, mostly on the first floor, were also changed to multi-light sash windows. A porch was added over the main entry on the west facade and a door on the second floor was added to access this porch. A ramp was added on the west elevation to provide handicap accessibility to the main entrance. The original roofing material has been replaced several times and now the roof is covered with asphalt shingles. A spiral staircase was added to the rear of the building and a door was added on the second floor to access this staircase. Despite these additions and alterations, the building still retains its historic Prairie style, its original massing and much of the original fenestration.



Historic Photo, circa 1930s

#### **IV. Historical Information**

Villa Seville was constructed as a dwelling in 1920 by distinguished Palm Beach builder Benjamin F. Hoffman. The dwelling was built at 262 Sunset Avenue in a

section of Palm Beach that was developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Palm Beach was still a small community when Henry Morrison Flagler first visited in the early 1890s. Flagler had just received permission to extend his FEC Railroad all of the way to Miami and when visiting Palm Beach, he became so captivated with the Island that he purchased the McCormick Cottage plus ten surrounding acres and four hundred feet of lake frontage and built the immense Royal Poinciana Hotel from 1893-1894. In April of 1894, Flagler's FEC Railroad reached West Palm Beach and in 1895 the first railroad bridge was completed over Lake Worth linking the mainland to Palm Beach. This bridge, which had its eastern terminus just south of the Royal Poinciana Hotel, allowed scores of wealthy visitors to be transported directly to the island. What became Main Street and the Floral Park subdivision initially developed in relationship to Flagler's FEC Railroad extension into Palm Beach.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the Royal Poinciana Hotel, another early institution that contributed to the growth and glamour of Palm Beach was Bradley's Beach Club. Opened in 1898 by brothers Colonel Edward Riley "E.R." and John Roger "J.R. Jack" Bradley on the present site of Bradley Park, the Casino flourished with high stakes for high society and stayed running as a private club until 1946.

Sunset Avenue was first known as Munyon Avenue, named for its owner James Munyon who owned the large lake-to-ocean parcel just north then then Flagler Avenue. Prior to 1910, much of this area was occupied by African Americans who rented various cottages clustered within an area known as the Styx.<sup>6</sup> During the Spring of 1910, Beach Club owners E. R. and Jack Bradley paid Munyon \$55,000 for the 264-foot-wide lake to the ocean parcel that bordered the north side of the Bradleys' Main Street property. By December, the Bradley's had spent more than \$35,000, dredging 60,000 yards of soil creating an acre of new lakeside ground and filling-in ponds and the marshland where Styx buildings once stood. The Bradley's platted their new development as Floral Park, renaming Munyon Avenue Sunset Avenue, and after engineering street improvements, they began selling off the residential and commercial lots. The Bradley's hired Lewis Henry Green, a realtor

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<sup>5</sup> MurphyStillings, LLC., Royal Poinciana National Register Historic District. National Register of Historic Places, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Many people who lived in the Styx helped build and later worked at Flagler's hotels. After the Bradley's purchased and redeveloped the land, most of the Styx residents moved over the bridge to segregated neighborhoods in West Palm Beach.



from California to promote the project and auction off the lots. Green offered prizes to potential buyers and sold out the project within a few hours on February 19, 1912.<sup>7</sup>



1907 Sanborn Insurance Map

In the early twentieth century, Palm Beach society was known as “the cottage colony.” Yearly visitors to the island began to find hotel rooms too small and inadequate for their needs, and although much of the social activities continued to revolve around the hotels, people began to build their own cottages on town lots. Almost every cottage had a name, and the city directories dedicated several pages to “Palm Beach Cottages.” Large and small picturesque “cottages” of seasonal residents lined the north and south sides of Sunset Avenue from the lake to the ocean. Floral Park also became a hub of civic and commercial activity with stores, hotels, restaurants, offices and municipal buildings.<sup>8</sup>

As the result of fighting in Europe during World War I, domestic tourism increased and by the end of the war, Palm Beach had become one of the most important places to spend the winter season. By 1920, when Villa Seville was constructed, Palm Beach was starting its first major building boom that lasted through much of the 1920s, and at the time, there were already approximately forty “cottages” of seasonal residents located on Sunset Avenue.



1919 Sanborn Map

<sup>7</sup> Augustus Mayhew, New York Social Diary/Palm Beach, “The White Elephant,” July 1, 2021

<sup>8</sup> MurphyStillings, LLC., Royal Poinciana National Register Historic District. National Register of Historic Places, 2015.

The first known occupant of Villa Seville was Mrs. Herman Dierks from Kansas City. The Dierks family had a timber empire with its headquarters in Kansas City, Missouri and had operations in several western states as well as in Florida. The Dierks family and guests spent at least three winter seasons at Villa Seville.<sup>9</sup> By 1925, Villa Seville was owned by James and Cecilia Kavanaugh. James was a retired naval officer and Cecilia operated the Clinton Hotel at 212 Sunset Avenue Road, later named the Orange Blossom Hotel. For a number of years in the 1930s, the dwelling was owned by William and Lillian Courtnell, and by the 1940s, 262 Sunset Avenue was owned by Lee and Emma Stage. Lee passed away in 1953, but Emma continued to live there and leased out rooms. Emma's son Charles Haggarty owned the house by the 1970s and he and his wife Cecilia lived there until 1995 when they sold it to Frank and Gail Coniglio who changed the dwelling's zoning from residential to commercial. The property was sold in 2000 to Drs. Brad Ochstein and Andrew Turkell who converted the building into the Island Animal Hospital, which still serves as its home today. In 2015, 262 Sunset Avenue was deemed a contributing structure in The Royal Poinciana Way National Register Historic District and in 2022 the building was sold to NED 262 Sunset LLC, owners of the White Elephant hotel located adjacent to the west. NED (New England Development) completed an exceptional renovation of the hotel and in December 2022 received the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach's prestigious inaugural Edward & Susan Elson Award for an outstanding major rehabilitation of a commercial building in Palm Beach.

## **IV. Builder's Biography**

### **Benjamin F. Hoffman**

Benjamin F. Hoffman was born in 1875 in the District of Columbia and worked there before moving to Palm Beach in ca. 1917.<sup>10</sup> Prior to moving to Palm Beach and setting up his business, Hoffman had spent time in Palm Beach visiting with his family.<sup>11</sup> He lived and worked in Palm Beach as a building contractor for nearly thirty years before passing away in 1947. During these years, Hoffman was a prominent and sought-after contractor working with Palm Beach's best architects, including but not limited to Addison Mizner, Marion Sims Wyeth and Bruce

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<sup>9</sup> Newspaper articles indicate that Mrs. Herman Dierks and family spent at least part of the winter season from 1921-1923 at Villa Seville.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin F. Hoffman is listed in the 1918 Palm Beach City Directory and likely moved to Palm Beach in 1917.

<sup>11</sup> A November 12, 1916, Palm Beach Post article stated that Benjamin Hoffman and his mother of Washington, DC were spending the winter in Palm Beach.

Kitchell, as well as constructing buildings of his own design.<sup>12</sup> Hoffman's business was bustling during the 1920s building boom when he was hired by many of Palm Beach's wealthy and prominent residents to construct, alter or add to their properties.<sup>13</sup> One of his first big Palm Beach commissions was Casa de Ensuenos at 800 South County Road for Arthur Claflin at a cost of \$65,000. This was one of Mizner's elaborate designs in 1923, the year the scale and splendor of Mizner's designs raised Palm Beach's architectural profile to greater grandeur.<sup>14</sup> There is currently no biography on Benjamin F. Hoffman, however, the following newspaper articles chronicle some of Hoffman's Palm Beach commissions.

A June 21, 1925, Palm Beach Post article titled "Mr. Hoffman's Work" provides information on some of Hoffman's projects: *"Some of the most important and beautiful of the residential buildings this summer is that being done by Mr. Benjamin F. Hoffman. Mr. Hoffman has been in business here for 14 years and some of the fine residences which stand as monuments to his achievements are those of Mr. George Luke Mesker of Royal Palm Way and the Ocean Boulevard, Pierre Lorillard Barbey of Tuxedo Park whose Palm Beach house built last year is on the North Ocean Boulevard just south of the Rodman Wannamaker property. Samuel D. Lit of Philadelphia whose house was designed by Bruce Kitchell and is the only one in the ocean block of Sunrise Avenue; Frederick S. Wheeler of New York whose residence on Grace Trail was one of the finest houses built in that section of Palm Beach last summer, and the imposing house of Mr. Frederick A. Glidden of Cleveland on the lake front in Vita Serena.*

*One of the great ocean boulevard houses in progress of construction by Mr. Hoffman is that of George Rasmussen of Chicago. It was designed by Mr. Addison Mizner, is to be a two-story stucco structure with a frontage of one hundred and fifty feet. The architectural details include very beautiful Spanish Gothic windows and a magnificent spiral staircase. The house is on the property purchased early in the season*

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<sup>12</sup> Benjamin F. Hoffman likely designed and built the dwelling at 262 Sunset Avenue. In addition, a May 10, 1922, Palm Beach Post article lists other dwellings that Hoffman likely designed and built: Benjamin F. Hoffman builder residence 16' x 25' on lots 164 & 165 Floral Park \$4000; Benjamin F. Hoffman builder residence 44 x 24 on half of lot 15 and all f lot 16 Bungalow Park, \$8000.

<sup>13</sup> Palm Beach Post July 12, 1925: Mr. Benjamin F. Hoffman has just returned from a business trip to New York and Washington and says that everyone north of Jacksonville is Florida mad. The Palm Beach labels on his luggage brought hordes of curious people flocking to his side and he was beset by all manner of questions.

<sup>14</sup> Palm Beach Daily News, January 21, 2020.

*from Mr. Richard Croker through Mr. Bourassa and adjoins the property of Mr. Harold Vanderbilt to the south.*

*Mr. Hoffman is making extensive alterations and additions to the house of Mr. & Mrs. Joseph C. Hutchinson of Philadelphia, which originally was built by Mr. Hoffman for Mr. Pierre L. Barbey. The house is on the North Ocean Boulevard at the corner of Everglade Avenue and the reconstruction plans will not be confined to the interior, but the exterior will present a very marked change and improvement. Other work of Mr. Hoffman which is now in progress includes additions and alterations to the lake front home of Mr. Barclay L. Warburton at Worth Avenue and also that of Mr. Rodman Wanamaker on the North Ocean Boulevard.”<sup>15</sup>*

*A week later, the Palm Beach Post reported, “Mr. Benjamin F. Hoffman has been awarded the contract for the additions and alterations to the residence of Edward T. Stotesbury of Philadelphia. Mr. Addison Mizner who designed the house originally has made the plans for the work now in process and each addition (and there is something important done there every year) adds to the beauty and dignity of the house. It was the first big Spanish house to be built in Palm Beach and set the mark which has been followed ever since for perfection in design and construction.”<sup>16</sup>*

*Later that summer, a Palm Beach Post article described another project Hoffman was working on, “One of the Spanish farmhouses which was part of Mr. Mizner’s original plan to have a straggling Spanish settlement along the coastline of Palm Beach, one which would include all the most picturesque of the type regardless of the century in which it was evolved,, is now being remodeled. The house is that of Gurnee Munn on north Ocean Boulevard and fortunately Mr. Mizner has made*

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<sup>15</sup> Palm Beach Post, June 21, 1925, “Mr. Hoffmans Work.” Page 15. George Luke Mesker house La Fontana on South Ocean Boulevard at the south corner of Royal Palm Way; Samuel D. Lit house La Solana at 139 Sunrise Avenue; Frederick S. Wheeler house Bienstar at 153 Grace Trail; Frederick A. Glidden house Bel Reposo on Clarendon Avenue; George Rasmussen house South Ocean Boulevard; Joseph C. Hutchinson house Mihamo 216 North Ocean Boulevard; Barclay L. Warburton house 456 Worth Avenue; Rodman Wanamaker house 1095 North Ocean Boulevard. The article states that Hoffman had been in business in Palm Beach for 14 years, but 8 years is likely more accurate.

<sup>16</sup> Palm Beach Post, June 28, 1925. The Stotesbury’s estate was El Mirasol on North Ocean Boulevard.



*the alteration and addition plans and Mr. Benjamin F. Hoffman is doing the work.”*<sup>17</sup>

Benjamin Hoffman continued his successful career in Palm Beach and in 1929 the Palm Beach Times reported, “*Earle P. Charlton, wealthy resident of “Qui-Si-Lana” Palm Beach and River Falls, Mass., announced that he will build four residences this summer in El Bravo and El Brillo sections between the lake and south County Road. Permit for the work has been issued for \$140,000 worth of construction. Plans for the four homes, which will be built by Mr. Charlton as an investment, has been drawn by Marion Sims Wyeth, Palm Beach architect. Benjamin F. Hoffman has been awarded the contract.*”<sup>18</sup>

## **VI. Statement of Significance**

Villa Seville located at 262 Sunset Avenue is a good example the Prairie style of architecture and is significantly important as it is the last remaining “cottage” located on Sunset Avenue where at least 40 others have been demolished and replaced with commercial and apartment buildings and parking lots. The builder, Benjamin F. Hoffman, was a prominent and sought-after contractor who practiced in Palm Beach for nearly thirty years.

## **VII. Criteria For Designation**

Section 54-161 of the Town of Palm Beach Landmark’s Preservation Ordinance outlines the criteria for designation of a landmark or landmark site and suggests that at least one criterion must be met to justify the designation. Listed below are criteria which relate to this property and justification for designation:

### **(1) “Exemplifies or reflects the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the nation, state, county or town.”**

Villa Seville located at 262 Sunset Avenue reflects the broad cultural, economic and social history of the town of Palm Beach. The property was originally built as a dwelling in 1920 at the start of the Palm Beach land and building boom. The end of World War I allowed for incredible growth and prosperity throughout the country and especially in Palm Beach where increased road and railroad construction

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<sup>17</sup> Palm Beach Post, July 20, 1925. Gurnee Munn’s estate was Louwana at 534 North Ocean Boulevard.

<sup>18</sup> Palm Beach Times, April 5, 1929. The houses are 200 El Brillo, 201 El Brillo, 210 El Brillo and 200 El Bravo.

allowed Florida to become more accessible for northerners seeking seasonal respite from the cold winters. This increased prosperity and accessibility drove the need for both increased retail and housing and led to the development of 262 Sunset Avenue. In addition, Villa Seville was built in the Floral Park subdivision, developed by E.R. and J.R. Bradley as one of the earliest subdivisions in Palm Beach and originally was lined with vernacular cottages representative of Palm Beach's early development. 262 Sunset Avenue is important today as the last remaining historic "cottage" located on Sunset Avenue where cottages once lined the avenue but have since been demolished and replaced with commercial and apartment buildings and parking lots.

**(3) "Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or is a specimen inherently valuable for the study of a period, style, method of construction or use of indigenous materials or craftsmen."**

262 Sunset Avenue is a good example of the Prairie style of architecture exhibiting many features of the hipped roof, symmetrical, no front entry sub-type Prairie design with its low-pitched hip roof with wide overhanging boxed eaves, symmetrical front facade fenestration, one-story porch, and the main entry on the side facade. In 1925, it was advertised for sale as a masonry constructed dwelling that could withstand hurricanes and has done so for 103 years. The building's contractor and likely designer, Benjamin F. Hoffman, practiced in Palm Beach for nearly 30 years and worked with a number of the town's most prominent architects, including numerous projects with Addison Mizner, and was commissioned as a contractor by many of Palm Beach's renowned winter residents to build and add to their splendid Palm Beach estates.

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