

126 Root Trail



DESIGNATION REPORT

February 19, 2025

Landmark Preservation Commission

Palm Beach, Florida

DESIGNATION REPORT
126 Root Trail

Table of Contents

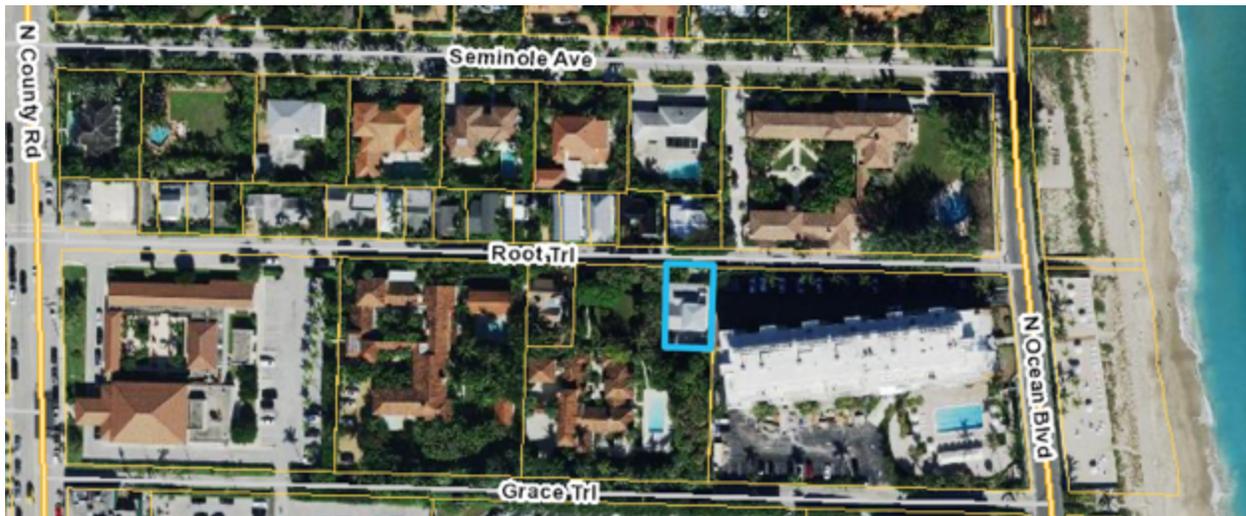
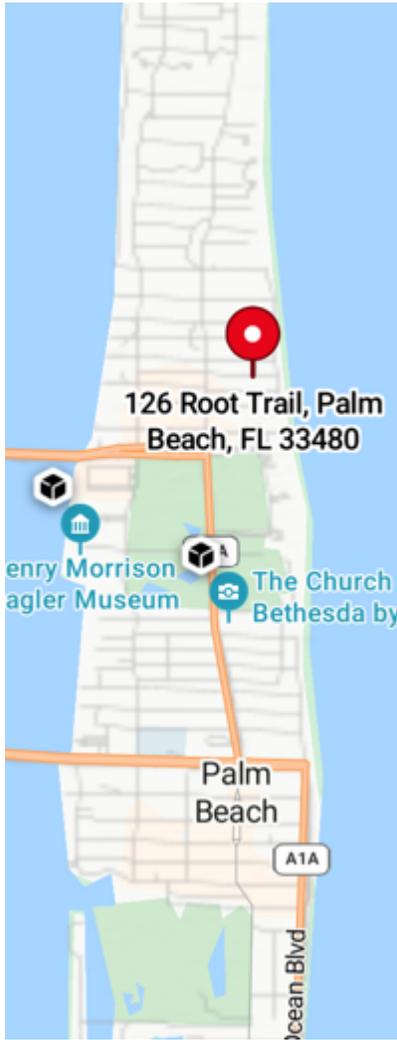
I. GENERAL INFORMATION	2
II. LOCATION MAP	3
III. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION	4
IV. HISTORICAL INFORMATION	7
V. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE	10
VI. CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION	10
VII. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	12

Report produced by Murphy Stillings, LLC

I. General Information

Location:	126 Root Trail Palm Beach, Florida
Date of Construction:	Early 1900s to circa 1912
Historic Name:	Sea Shell Cottage
Architect:	Unknown; Likely Local Builder
Present Owner:	William F. & Sheila C. McHenry
Present Use:	Residential
Present Zoning:	R C
Palm Beach County Tax Folio Number:	50-43-43-14-00-002-0030
Current Legal Description:	14-43-43, East 50 Feet of West 728.7 Feet of Subdivision P of Government Lot 2

II. Location Map



III. Architectural Information

The house located at 126 Root Trail is a Frame Vernacular dwelling built circa 1900-1912 during the turn of the century Flagler Era in Palm Beach. It is located on the south side of Root Trail between North Ocean Boulevard and North County Road. Root Trail is a narrow one-way street running west to east with mostly narrow lots with early Frame Vernacular houses lining the street.¹



126 Root Trail is a very good example of an early twentieth century South Florida Frame Vernacular residence. Frame Vernacular buildings represent the most typical method of construction used by South Florida and Palm Beach's early pioneers. The term "vernacular" refers to a structure that is not of a pure design style but is loosely based on the features of other architectural styles and is inherently practical and functional. Frame Vernacular structures were generally built by local builders using traditional techniques, locally available materials and influenced by the climate of the area in which they were constructed. Identifying features of this style include a wood frame structure surfaced with wood siding, a gable or hip roof, and limited decoration including wood trim, exposed rafter tails, vents and brackets. In Palm Beach and other South Florida communities, wide overhanging eaves, porches, wood sash windows and pier foundations are additional common features found in Frame Vernacular dwellings.

¹ Originally the east end of Root Trail had frame dwellings, but in 1922 Mizner designed the William Warden house on the north side of Root Trail at 200 N. Ocean Boulevard and in 1968 the Ocean Towers North Condominium was constructed on the south side of Root Trail at 170 N. Ocean Boulevard.

126 Root Trail is a one-story dwelling with a partial second-story addition constructed of wood framing on masonry piers and surfaced with wood siding. The structure is covered by gable and hip roofs surfaced with standing seam metal while much of the foundation is bordered by lattice screening. The side and rear gable roofs have overhanging eaves with simple exposed rafter tails. The front entrance is composed of a multi-light door fronted by a screen door and is sheltered under a covered entry porch supported by square posts with brackets and surrounded by a wood porch rail. Also within this entrance porch on the front facade are two-over-two sash windows, including a pair west of the entrance flanked by shutters along with a single window further west and a single window east of the entrance. The eastern end of the porch terminates at the kitchen which is flush with the north edge of the porch and features an entry door on the west side entered from the front porch as well as two narrow three-over-three sash windows on the front elevation. Above this section is a small deck surrounded by a lattice rail that can be accessed by multilight wood doors facing north. In the rear of the property is a one-story frame accessory building with side gabled roofs.² Access to the rear of the property is through simple wood gates on both the east and west sides of the dwelling.³



² Neither the rear of the property nor the accessory building can be seen from the public right-of-way. The 1919 Sanborn Map shows an accessory building at this property so it likely was built at the same time as the dwelling.

³ The front of the property features a narrow driveway, a stone walkway and a white picket fence while the east end of the property has a large masonry wall separating it from the parking lot of the Ocean North Condominium.



126 Root Trail has had additions and alterations since its construction well over 100 years ago. While the house was constructed in the early years of the twentieth century, the first building permit for the property on file with the Town of Palm Beach was not taken out until 1939 when the owner Marguerite Gallard took out a permit for repairs.⁴ The major renovation and additions to the property took place in 1989 when owners Wendy Cohen and Bruce Helander commissioned architect Alexis Anderson to design a second story addition and an interior remodel. At the time the property had five units, and the owners restored it to a single family residence utilizing as much of the original design and materials as possible.⁵ In 2016 and 2020 a number of windows and doors were changed to hurricane impact windows and doors.⁶ At an unknown date decorative brackets replaced simple brackets on the front porch posts and a more decorative screen door replaced an unadorned screen door at the main entrance. Despite these additions and alterations, the house maintains the original character of the dwelling and its size, scale and style make it an important building in retaining the Old Florida ambiance along historic Root Trail.⁷

⁴ The second permit wasn't taken out until 1964 when owner Marguerite Gallard took out a permit for repairs to the porch roof.

⁵ There were no floor plans or elevations of this project, but from building permit descriptions it appears that the second story and front roof deck were added, the crawl space was enclosed by lattice, a new roof was installed, the back patio was tiled, the driveway and hardscape were altered and the interior had demolition and reconstruction work including new mechanical systems to change the five-unit building into a single family residence.

⁶ This is according to permits applied for in 2016 and 2020.

⁷ The added decorative front porch posts and screen door could easily be changed back to their simpler appearance.



2nd Story Rear Addition

IV. Historical Information

The houses on Root Trail are distinctive in Palm Beach as they are the oldest remaining collection of dwellings from the pre-1920s boom time era and the early history of 126 Root Trail is deep-rooted in pioneer families that were instrumental in the founding of Palm Beach and its earliest real estate transactions.⁸

The history of Palm Beach started long ago when Native Americans inhabited the island, with the Jaega people arriving at least 3,000 years ago. White settlers began arriving in modern-day Palm Beach following the Civil War with Hiram F. Hammon making the first homestead claim in 1873 in present day Palm Beach.⁹ Following Hammon, homesteads were claimed by numerous Palm Beach pioneers who after their homestead obligations were complete were able to sell off their land and become the early “realtors” of Palm Beach.¹⁰ However, not all land was acquired through homestead claims and many early settlers purchased their land from the State of Florida through the Internal Improvement Trust Fund created in 1855 to manage land transferred to the state by the federal government.

⁸ Murphy Stillings, LLC 138 Root Trail Landmark Designation Report, 2018.

⁹ Hiram Hammon filed the first homestead claim in what would later be named Palm Beach taking advantage of the Homestead Act that Congress had passed in 1862 that enabled any U.S. citizen to claim up to 160 acres of surveyed government land as long as the person agreed to live on it and improve it for five years. Hammon’s homestead amounted to 169 acres, according to Florida homestead records, and it included present-day Worth Avenue and Hammon Avenue and stretched the entire width of the island, from the ocean to the lake. He settled on the land in 1873 and built a thatched palmetto shack he shared with friend and fellow pioneer William Lanehart who took an adjoining homestead. When Hammon sold his land for over a million dollars around 1918, it was believed to be the country’s most valuable claim filed to date.

¹⁰ Some of these better known early pioneers included George and William Lanehart, Albert Geer, Moore, Frank and Elisha Dimmick, David and Roswell Brown, Enoch Root, and Edmund, John and Dolinda Brelsford.

In the 1880s Palm Beach began to see more winter visitors and some of the early residents created businesses to support the tourists including Elisha Dimmick expanding his house to open the first hotel and the Brelsford brothers opening a general store and post office along with a schooner that made runs between Palm Beach and Jacksonville. However, the area remained a small community and did not grow significantly until Standard Oil business magnate Henry Flagler became instrumental in transforming the island of jungles and swamps into a preeminent winter resort by extending his Florida East Coast Railway southward to the area and opening the immense Royal Poinciana Hotel in 1894 and the Breakers Hotel in 1896. While most of the wealthy society members spent the winter season at the Island's hotels, there was still a need for smaller cottages attractive to the Island's workers. The houses along Root Trail were mostly smaller dwellings that workers at the nearby hotels and businesses could afford to own or rent.

Root Trail was named for Enoch Root, a Palm Beach pioneer who in the early 1900s served as a Postmaster and Justice of the Peace ¹¹ Enoch Root and his wife Victoria were artists who started spending their winters in Palm Beach in 1889 and in 1892 they purchased a tract of land extending from the lake to the ocean along present day Oleander Way and Root Trail where they built a house for themselves and additional cottages for artists.¹²

The south side of Root Trail where 126 Root Trail is located is part of the land owned by early Palm Beach pioneer David Brown and is part of Government Lot 2 that runs the length of Root Trail and stretches to the south. The first recorded transactions of this area that included Government Lot 2 appears to be David Brown deeding the property to his son Roswell "Ros" K. Brown in 1893. The following transaction for the same property came later that year when Ros Brown deeded the property to Dorinda H. Brelsford, another early Palm Beach pioneer.¹³

¹¹ Records of the County Clerk indicate Enoch Root was involved in the initial transactions on Root Trail and The Lake Worth Pioneer Association Records indicate Root Trail was named after Enoch Root. A May 2, 1988, Palm Beach Post Newspaper Article, "Root Trail: A Neighborhood Unto Itself," quotes a resident stating that Root Trail was named after Root's Pineapple Farm, however there is no evidence supporting this claim. Root's Subdivision, which originally consisted of 18 lots on the north side of Root Trail, is one of the oldest subdivisions in Palm Beach.

¹² Francis Gilmor. "History of Palm Beach County Art Club One of Fascinating Chapters in the Annals of the City," Palm Beach Times 17 February 1924. Enoch Root did not appear to exhibit professionally in Palm Beach; however he was an early and possibly founding member of the Palm Beach County Art Club. In 1911, Enoch was elected to the first Palm Beach Town Council. Enoch was a founding member of the Lake Worth Pioneer Association, open to those who settled in Palm Beach prior to 1893. He was also an active member of the Palm Beach Property Owner's Association, the Masons and the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.). Victoria was a member of the Guild of Bethesda-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church, a group of notable Society women integral in fund-raising for the church.

¹³ Land transactions began being recorded in the Clerk of Court Records in 1891 when this land was still part of Dade County. Palm Beach County was established from part of Dade County in 1909.

David Brown, his wife Fannie and their five children were among the earliest settlers on the shores of Lake Worth arriving in June of 1876. In 1870, they moved from Illinois to Jacksonville, and there David met Mason Dwight who offered to sell him his house, located in what would be Palm Beach just north of where the Royal Poinciana Hotel was later constructed. Brown took a chance and along with fellow Illinoisians Elisha Dimick, Frank Dimick and Albert Geer they traveled south to Lake Worth. When they arrived they were so captivated by the area they determined to make their homes there. When the Dimicks and Geers came back with their families, the Browns took them all in until their own houses were built.¹⁴ According to Ros Brown, Lake Worth pioneer families extended hospitality to anyone passing through the area, friend or stranger. Like his father David, Ros was active in early land transactions along the east shore of Lake Worth.¹⁵

Edmund Munger “E.M.” and John Hale “Doc” Brelsford, the sons of Dr. James R. and Dorinda Hale Brelsford, arrived on the shores of Lake Worth in May 1880 on a hunting and fishing trip. They liked what they found and bought Frank Dimick’s house on the east side of the lake in present day Palm Beach. E.M. went back to Ohio and returned in the fall to join Doc with his widowed mother Dorinda and sister Minna. The Brelsford brothers constructed a general store on what became known as Brelsford’s Point and built a dock for their schooner “Bessie B” to unload supplies from Jacksonville. The store became a gathering place as well as a post office with E.M. Brelsford as the postmaster. The Brelsford’s sold their store location in 1893 to Henry Flagler, who later built his mansion Whitehall on the property¹⁶. During this time, their mother Dorinda Brelsford homesteaded land and was active in buying and selling property along the east shores of Lake Worth. As noted previously, in 1893 she bought the part of Government Lot 2 that included the stretch along the south side of Root Trail where 126 Root Trail is located. She owned this property for twenty-three years before selling it in 1916. Due to the lack of building permits or other early records, it is not clear what year the house was constructed, but from research it appears that the house was built in the early 1900s prior to 1912. The evidence to date this building prior to 1912 includes its existence on the 1919 Sanborn Insurance Company Map, its listing in the Palm Beach 1916 City Directory,

¹⁴ In 1885, the heads of the families around the lake decided it was time they had a school. David Brown and Squire J.C. Hoagland each gave half-an-acre of land for the building site. Other settlers donated lumber that was brought from Jacksonville by the Brelsford Brothers, free of freight charges. Roswell Brown and George Lainhart built the school which opened in March of 1886

¹⁵ Ros was twelve years old when he moved with his family to the shores of Lake Worth in 1876. On the lake, Ros met Charlie Pierce, another boy his age who lived a bit south on Hypoluxo Island. Together they had many adventures and grew to manhood in the Pioneer era in south Florida. Sometime after 1893 he moved with his wife Anna to the state of Washington.

¹⁶ E.M. Brelsford used part of the proceeds from this sale to build a Greek Revival style mansion called The Banyans at 1 South Lake Trail.

and Root Trail property owner and resident Dolinda Brelsford providing a quit claim deed to the Town for the south half of the path leading from Root Trail to the beach in 1912.¹⁷

The first residents listed in the City Directory for this property then known as Sea Shell Cottage were Mills O. “M.O.” Cottrell and his wife Susie R. Cottrell who purchased the property from Dorinda H. Brelsford in August of 1916. The Cottrell’s were early residents of Palm Beach having moved to the island in the mid-1890s. For over 30 years, Mills O. Cottrell worked for Flagler entities first as chief of the railroad police and later as chief of police in charge of watchmen at the Florida East Coast Hotel Company grounds which included both the Royal Poinciana and Breakers hotels. During the Cottrell’s ownership of the property from 1916 to 1939, a number of other workers of the Royal Poinciana Hotel and Flagler East Coast Hotel Company resided at the property during the winter season. Marguerite Gallard purchased the house in 1939 and owned it for thirty-eight years. The property had several owners before it was purchased in 1989 by Wendy Cohen and renowned Palm Beach artist Bruce Helander, who together undertook a project to turn the dwelling from a five-unit building back into a single family residence. The current owners, William and Sheila McHenry, purchased the property in 1995 and have been admirable stewards of the house for the past thirty years.

V. Statement of Significance

In a town well known for its grand estates, the residence at 126 Root Trail is significant as one of the oldest remaining examples of Frame Vernacular architecture in Palm Beach. Its association with a number of the Town’s early pioneer families and its location in the unique community of Frame Vernacular residences along historic Root Trail increases the property’s significance.

VI. Criteria For Designation

Section 54-161 of the Town of Palm Beach Landmarks 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:

¹⁷It is not certain that Dorinda Brelsford was living in a house on this property, but she did own the property and was said to be a resident on Root Trail. The 1916 City Directory is the earliest version available so there is no listing of who was living there prior to 1916.

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

The residence at 126 Root Trail, originally known as Sea Shell cottage, reflects the broad cultural, economic and social history of the Town of Palm Beach. The early history of this property is associated with important pioneer families who were intrinsic in the initial development of Palm Beach when the area was still part of Dade County. While much of Palm Beach was becoming the winter destination for the wealthy and prominent, there was still a need for smaller cottages to provide nearby housing for employees of the local businesses and those who wanted more modest accommodations. Root Trail was named for Enoch Root, an early pioneer of Palm Beach who laid out the street and platted the subdivision along the north side of the trail. Sea Shell Cottage and the other houses along Root Trail are unpretentious dwellings, constructed on small lots in close proximity and have an Old Florida charm not found in other areas of Palm Beach. 126 Root Trail exemplifies an important part of Palm Beach’s early history and deserves protection as its loss would be detrimental to the historic charm of the Town and the special Root Trail enclave.

(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 craftsmanship.”

126 Root Trail is a good example of the Frame Vernacular structures that were prevalent in South Florida at the beginning of the twentieth Century. Frame Vernacular architecture is noted for its simplicity and modest origins with the design and construction based on the local environment and available materials, as well as the builder’s knowledge and experience. The residence features a number of characteristics that are representative of South Florida Frame Vernacular structures, including frame construction, masonry piers, wood siding, steeply pitched roofs with exposed rafter tails, sash windows, and porches. While the Frame Vernacular style is widespread in South Florida, its scarcity in the Town of Palm Beach and its location on Root Trail increases the significance of 126 Root Trail as a historic architectural resource.

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