

**UNIVERSITY
OF MIAMI**

OFFICE of CIVIC &
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



Preliminary Designation Report

Prepared by:

UM Office of Civic and Community Engagement

ALPHA Plan, LLC

This is a Preliminary Designation Report for the vacant office building at 1021 NW 2nd Avenue. The property is historically significant because of its association with Lawson Edward (“L.E.”) Thomas. Thomas, a civil rights activist and the first black judge in Miami-Dade County, used this site as his law office for nearly 30 years. He was engaged in a variety of groundbreaking civil rights campaigns and lawsuits throughout South Florida, including organizing a protest against the customary exclusion of blacks from Miami’s beaches and a successful lawsuit against the Broward County School Board in 1946 for unequal treatment of black students.

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Lawson Edward Thomas' Overtown Law Office

1021 NW 2nd Avenue

Preliminary Designation Report



February 2016

This report was prepared by Jorge Damian de la Paz, University of Miami's Office of Civic and Community Engagement in collaboration with Alexander Adams, AICP, CNU-a, ALPHA Plan, LLC.

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1. GENERAL INFORMATION

Historic Name:

Lawson Edward Thomas' Overtown Law Office

Location:

1021 NW 2nd Avenue

Tax Folio Number:

01-0101-060-1130

Legal Description:

P W WHITES RE-SUB BLK 16

PB B-34

LOT 28

LOT SIZE 25.000 X 110

Date of Construction:

1936

Architect:

unknown

Contractor/Builder:

unknown

Primary Land Use:

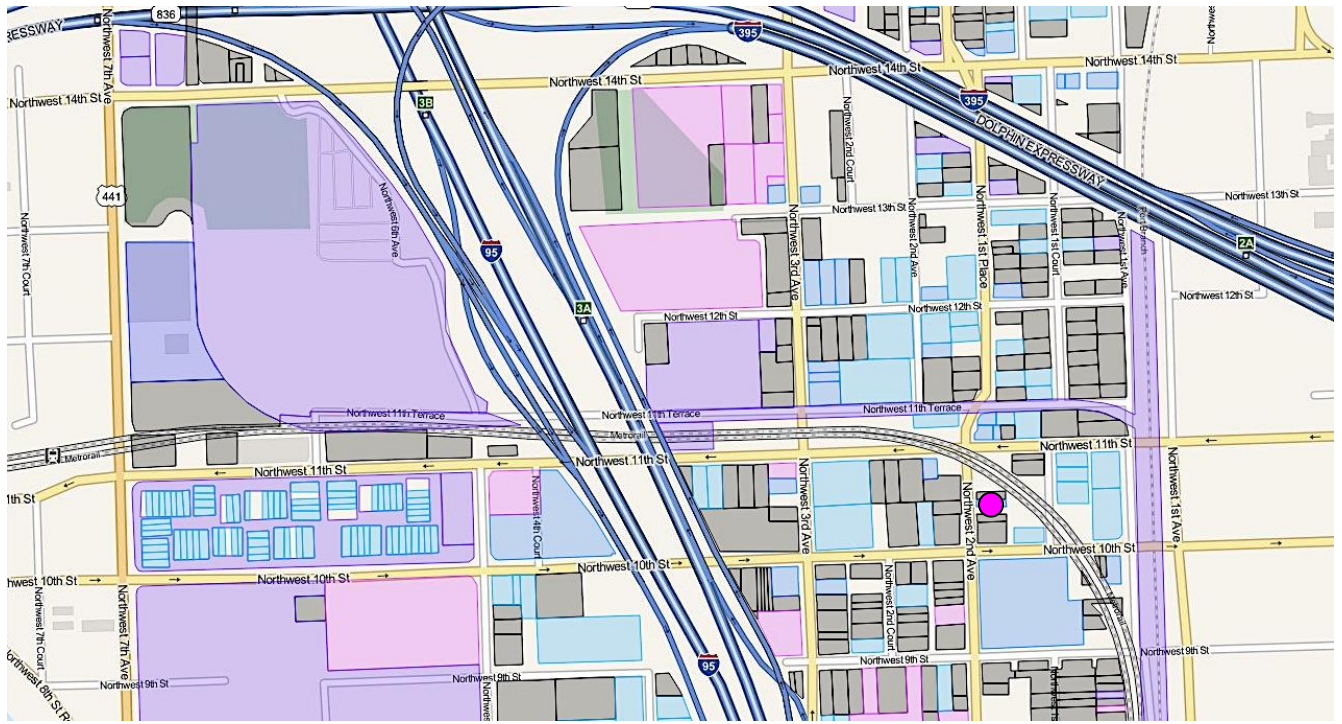
Office building

Present Use:

Vacant

Zoning:

T6-8 O



Map of the general area of the location, University of Miami's Office of Civic and Community Engagement (2015).



1021 NW 2nd Avenue, between NW 10th Street and NW 11th Street, Miami-Dade County Property Appraiser (2015).



Lot 28, Miami-Dade County Property Appraiser (2015).

2. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

a. Specific Dates:

1936 (year built)

b. Statement of Significance:

The simple concrete block building at 1021 NW 2nd Avenue is historically significant because of its association with Lawson Edward (“L.E.”) Thomas. Thomas, a civil rights activist and the first black judge in Miami-Dade County, used this site as his law office for nearly 30 years. Thomas was engaged in a variety of groundbreaking civil rights campaigns and lawsuits throughout South Florida, including organizing a protest against the customary exclusion of blacks from Miami’s beaches and a successful lawsuit against the Broward County School Board in 1946 for unequal treatment of black students (Longa 126-127). Following his numerous legal achievements, Thomas was appointed judge of Miami’s Negro Municipal Court in 1950, becoming the first black judge in the South since Reconstruction (Connolly 127; Longa 125). During his intermittent 8-year tenure as judge, Thomas presided over cases for Miami’s black community involving violations of municipal ordinances and state misdemeanors (Longa 129; Chapman 70). Thomas opened his practice at 1021 NW 2nd Avenue in the late 1950s. After serving as judge, Thomas continued to practice law from the Overtown Law Office until just before his death in 1989. The front of the single story, 3-unit building still retains the practice’s original signage (“THOMAS” and “L.E. THOMAS ATTORNEY”).

c. Relationship to Criteria for Designation:

The Lawson Edward Thomas’ Overtown Law Office is significant to the historical heritage of the City of Miami and is eligible for designation under the following criteria:

1. *Is associated in a significant way with the life of a person important to the past.*

L.E. Thomas made significant contributions to Miami as a community activist, lawyer, and judge. During his lifetime, Thomas was widely considered “black Miami’s most renowned attorney” (Connolly 121). Thomas was the first African-American attorney to present a case in Miami’s municipal court and he holds the historic distinction of being the first black judge in the post-Reconstruction South (Longa 126; Connolly 127). Thomas presided over Miami’s Negro Municipal Court, which was the “United States’ first, and perhaps, only court ever set up on purely racial lines” (Longa 126). Miami’s Negro Municipal Court is currently preserved in Overtown as the Black Police Precinct and Courthouse Museum.

Thomas was involved in a number of successful civil rights lawsuits and actions, including an effective civil disobedience campaign protesting the lack of a black beach in Miami, a legal challenge against the unfair closing of a black school in Broward County, and a lawsuit that helped to restrict exclusionary zoning along racial lines in Miami-Dade County. This Overtown Law Office was the location of various meetings with community and national leaders both prior to and after Thomas’ appointment to Miami’s Negro Municipal Court.

3. *Exemplifies the historical, cultural, political, economical, or social trends of the community.*

The building reflects the historical, political, and social trends of postwar Overtown. Thomas' Overtown Law Office exemplifies the rapidly changing social and political environment of pre-civil rights era Miami-Dade County because of its association with the unique history of Miami's black judicial system. Thomas' Overtown Law Office was also located on one of the most popular and influential streets of Overtown during this era and is one of the few remaining office/commercial structures on Second Avenue still in existence from this period.

3. Description of Connection to Criteria for Historic Designation:

a. History of Judge Lawson Edward Thomas

Thomas was born in Ocala, Florida in 1898 and attended Florida A&M College (later University) and University of Michigan Law School. Thomas moved to Miami in 1935 and was already an accomplished lawyer before becoming involved in Florida's incipient civil rights movement. In 1937, Thomas became the first black attorney to present a case at trial in the City of Miami (Longa 126). In May 1945, Thomas participated in a "wade-in" at a whites-only beach in Miami to protest the area's lack of a black beach, almost a decade before the national civil rights movement began to take hold (Garvin, Sainato, and Dixon 2015). This action resulted in local officials designating Virginia Key a blacks-only beach in August 1945 (Connolly 122-123; Garvin, Sainato, and Dixon 2015).

Throughout the 1940s Thomas was involved in a number of civil rights lawsuits throughout Florida. Thomas filed and tried the first teacher equalization salary suits in Lake and Marion Counties and in 1946 assisted in the lawsuit that succeeded in restricting Miami-Dade County from formally zoning along racial lines (Longa 126-127). Thomas also sought an injunction and declaratory judgment against the Broward County School Board for closing a black school during the winter agricultural season without closing any nearby white schools (Longa 127). Thomas later collaborated with Thurgood Marshall and also represented Mary Thomas Bethune of Bethune Cookman College (John Thomas interview 2015).

In 1950, Miami's Mayor Robert L. Floyd nominated Thomas for judge of Miami's Negro Municipal Court making Thomas the first black judge in Miami-Dade County and the first in the South since Reconstruction (Longa 125-127). In the first year of his court, Judge Thomas presided over 7,000 cases and collected nearly \$60,000 in forfeitures (Chapman 77). Thomas served as judge until 1955. In 1959, he was reappointed judge and served until 1961. During and after his second tenure as judge, Thomas practiced law from 1021 NW 2nd Avenue until just before his death in 1989.

During his lifetime, Thomas was a prominent member of a number of various local civic and community organizations, including the Negro Service Council (a forerunner of the Urban League of Greater Miami), the Adelphian Club, YMCA, the Dade County Welfare Planning Council board, as well as a trustee of Overtown's Bethel A.M.E Church (John Thomas interview 2015; St. Petersburg Times 1954). In honor of his memory and various achievements, the Miami-Dade Board of County Commissioners renamed the downtown Courthouse Center the "Lawson E. Thomas Courthouse Center" in 2000.

b. History of Miami's Black Judicial System

Thomas was the first black judge in Miami-Dade County of the first black court in the United States (Longa 126). From 1950 to 1955 and 1959 to 1961, he presided over court cases involving black defendants arrested by Miami's black patrolmen (Longa 129 & 133). In the Jim Crow South, black residents had limited equal protection under the law. Thomas believed his post as judge provided black Miami "a measure of self-government within the bounds of segregation" (Connolly 127).

On May 22, 1950, Thomas began presiding over the Negro Municipal Court. Located in Overtown at NW 11th Street and NW 5th Avenue, the precinct building included a police station, courtroom, and judge's chamber (Chapman 71).



Courtesy of the State Archives of Florida. Judge Thomas is pictured in the front row, second to the right along with Miami's black patrolmen (c. 1952).

The Negro Municipal Court was the "realization of a dream" for several of Miami's prominent black leaders, including Reverend John Culmer and Dr. Ira P. Davis (Longa 125). Miami's black court on average heard up to 9,000 cases per year (Longa 129). Under Judge Thomas' court, many of Miami's black defendants experienced equal protection and due process for the first time (Longa 138). While serving as judge, Thomas continued to provide legal services to Miami's black community from the Overtown Law Office.

On July 1963, Miami's City Manager ordered all city buildings and recreational facilities desegregated and the Negro Municipal Court was closed (Longa 137).

c. Connection to the History of Overtown

Overtown initially housed black workers who built Henry Flagler's railroad, extending it to Miami and encouraging future settlement. The area quickly became a vibrant community and the centerpiece of black life and culture in Miami. As in other places in the South, black residents in Miami were subject to Jim Crow policies and Black Codes, which restricted their civil rights. Despite these limitations by the mid-1900s, Overtown had grown into a thriving community.



Clipping of a newspaper article on Judge Thomas. St. Petersburg Times (1954).

Overtown's social height lasted from around 1940-1960 (Dunn 143). During this period, Second Avenue contained over 140 separate proprietorships, including Thomas' Overtown Law Office (Connolly 102). Second Avenue, then called Avenue G and "the Stem," was "home to black Miami's most impressive businesses" and contained an abundance of dance halls, restaurants, theaters, and hotels (Connolly 102). Overtown's various businesses and professional firms like Thomas' Overtown Law Office flourished during the mid-century period helping to promote a sense of community pride. Thomas' Overtown Law Office is deeply connected to Overtown's history as a focal point of civil rights reform and as part of the neighborhood's social and commercial height. The building is one of the few remaining office/commercial structures on this thoroughfare still in existence from this period.

c. 1021 NW 2nd Avenue's Present and Original Appearance

The Masonry Vernacular style property was constructed as a mixed-use building, containing commercial office/store space as well as three residential units attached to the rear of the office. These rear rental units each contain an individual living room, kitchen, and bathroom. The flat-

roofed concrete building has a stucco exterior and like many Masonry Vernacular style buildings features a simple rectilinear plan.

The modest concrete block structure is an example of the second generation of neighborhood buildings built in Overtown. From the late 1800s until the mid-1920s, most of the structures in the neighborhood were made of wood construction. Beginning in the 1930s, as the area recovered from the Great Depression, more structures began to be made out of concrete, local stone, and lime-based slurry. Concrete blocks were easily manufactured from local materials. Unlike other buildings in Miami during this era, many of Overtown's early concrete buildings lacked heavy ornamentation, quarried stone facades, or other period motifs. The Overtown Law Office uniquely breaks from this tradition with some modest but distinctive classical details on the front of the building in the form of a row of low-relief pilasters. Most of Overtown's private structures during this time were built to achieve functionality without any excess costs.

Several obvious alterations to the exterior of the property includes the infilling of all the building's windows and doors. However, these alterations were not finished with any stucco or paint and are within the structure's original openings. These modifications are all reversible. The present state of disrepair to the structure's interior was due to vandalism and neglect. None of the building's permanent walls or floors has been changed.

L.E. Thomas' son, John Thomas, and Clarence Woods, Executive Director of the Southeast Overtown/Park West Community Redevelopment Agency (SEOPW CRA), describe the existing structure as being close to the building's original condition. The building retains the original signage of Thomas' law practice.

The building currently needs new roofing, painting, cleaning, as well as other repairs.

1071 NW 2nd Avenue has survived Overtown's rapid changes. In the mid-twentieth century, many of Overtown's structures were lost due to the completion of the Interstate Highway (I-95), urban renewal, and more recently due to neglect and disinvestment. In the 1980s riots led to the abandonment or destruction of numerous structures throughout the area. The construction of the Metrorail also cut through the neighborhood, and a portion of the rail line is behind 1071 NW 2nd Avenue. The most recent changes to Overtown's built environment are due to increased urban redevelopment activity. Most of the lots near the office building are currently empty due to demolition, fires, or redevelopment. The Overtown CRA is in negotiation with the Thomas family estate to purchase and renovate the structure.



City of Miami Tax Historic Tax Card Photo, 1021 NW 2nd Avenue (c. 1940s).

5. Representative Photographs



1021 NW 2nd Avenue: Original signage above the front door (2015).



Eastern elevation (2015).



Western elevation (2015).



Southern elevation (2015).



Northern elevation (2015).

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