

**City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting**  
**Pocket Item**  
**March 11, 2025**  
**Police and Fire Headquarters**  
**2151 Salzedo Street, Coral Gables, FL**

**City Commission**

**Mayor Vince Lago**

**Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson**

**Commissioner Melissa Castro**

**Commissioner Ariel Fernandez**

**Commissioner Kirk Menendez**

**City Staff**

**City Attorney, Cristina Suárez**

**City Manager, Alberto Parjus**

**City Clerk, Billy Urquia**

**Public Speaker(s)**

**Joanne Myer**

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Agenda Item

Pocket Item

Mayor Lago: The other item that I wanted to put on the agenda, but we ran out of time, we are going to deal with it with the Merrick Minute was bringing up Joanne Myer, who has an item that she'd just like to quickly read into the record. Thank you.

Ms. Myer: Thank you, Mayor. Good morning, I'm Joanne Myer and I stand before you today with a proposal for the Commission to encourage the leadership of the University of Miami to reinstate the George Edgar Merrick name and legacy at the university. Prior to 2020, if one visited the University of Miami website and clicked on the "About" tab, one would have found information about its founder, the man whose students of his time hailed as the "Father of the University." Today, you will not find George Merrick's name on the website. Commission members are well aware of the events that have led to this, but for those listening who may be new to the area or are unaware of the story, I need to provide some context. It will become very clear as I describe this that context is important. In 2020, a small group of students went on the hunt and found a 1937

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speech that George Merrick delivered to the Miami Realty Board entitled, “Planning the Greater Miami for Tomorrow.” This is the transcription of that speech. This is the original from that time. From it they lifted one phrase out of context and concluded that George Merrick was a racist. A petition was circulated. Despite the efforts of historians and interested parties to share the preponderance of evidence to refute the narrative of Merrick as a racist, much of which is found in the Merrick papers at the university’s own rector library, the petition carried the day and ultimately resulted in the removal of the Merrick name from the university website and from a parking facility. A campus street and the Merrick Building still bear the name, because the building was named in the honor of George’s father, Soloman, and the university did not have authorization to change the street name. We have Karelia Carbonell and members of the Historic Preservation Association of Coral Gables to thank for bringing this issue to the attention of the public and taking action to formalize recognition of our city’s founder with the institution of the annual Founders Day on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, Merrick’s birthday. Mayor Lago, Vice Mayor Anderson and Commissioner Menendez, you were there at the very first Founders Day celebration, which took place at City Hall. The city made Founders Day official, and you all are to be commended for that. It is time for the Merrick name and legacy to be similarly celebrated at the institution of higher learning just down the road. I believe that a message from you, the Commission and City Manager, to the university leadership can accomplish that. I have a draft of a letter with supporting sources that I would like to read to you. My hope is that it will be sent to the university with all of your signatures. This will be addressed to James Echevarria, President and Chief Executive Officer, Manual Cadre, Chair of the Board of Trustees, Laura Silvers, Chair of the Centennial Honorary Committee for the University, Francis Marine Davis, Secretary of the Board of Trustees, and Associate Vice President, Rudy Fernandez, Executive Vice President for University Operations and External Affairs, Jacqueline Menendez, Vice President of Communications, Rena Wright, Vice President, Government Affairs and Community Relations. The subject, Reinstating George Edgar Merrick’s name and legacy at the University of Miami. During our city’s centennial year, we are recognizing and celebrating the visionary who, as the Miami Herald put it at the time of his death, demonstrated the poetic idealism, practical vision, and hardiness of character that surmounts adversity and recognizes no personal defeat. Yet, the name of the man who donated the land on which the university prospers, supported the institution financially even when his own resources were stretched to the limit, and to consider this place of learning his greatest legacy is not found on your website. The following sentence appears in the history tab in the “About” section of the site today. The University of Miami was chartered in 1925 by a group of citizens who felt an institution of higher learning was needed for the development of their young and growing community, just a group of citizens. It is our strong feeling that the university is missing a significant opportunity to communicate that the institution was founded by a man who was not of his time, but ahead of his time, an altruistic person who was an advocate for the working people. The grandson and son of abolitionists, George Merrick was a person who stood up for the underdog in his writings, speech and actions. He wrote stories of and built communities for the black Bahamians for whom with

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whom he had worked side-by-side as a youth. These were people with him, he developed friendships and for whom he had an abiding respect. In the Forward to his series of sketches entitled, “Men of the Magical Isles” Merrick wrote, very few realize today how much our big country owes its very foundation to the Bahaman negros. He used the word Bahaman rather than Bahamian. And another statement. When our true pioneers are fittingly monumented, they must surely be an inspiring one for the Black Bahamans. In addition, Merrick had immense respect for women and paid those in his employ the same salaries as men. Contained herewith is a suggested content for your website “About” section. These are excerpts from historian Arva Moore Parks’ book, George Merrick, Son of the South Wind. Existing verbiage that appears on the website is in black, suggested copy is highlighted. I won’t read all of the copy that was already on the website in the interest of time, but I will read what we are suggesting the university consider adding to their website. That Coral Gables founder, George Merrick, gifted 160 acres of land and \$5 million dollars toward a \$15 million-dollar endowment. Denman Fink’s renderings which were in keeping with Merrick’s Mediterranean Revival aesthetic staggered our imagination. When Merrick visited the campus in the early days, he addressed the student body and felt encouraged by what he saw as the enthusiastic response he received. A few days later, students named him the official Father of the University and honored him with a dance at the Country Club. In his later years, Merrick remarked that he considered the university his greatest legacy. Due to the hurricane, the real estate bust, and the Great Depression, the Denman Fink, Phineas Paste, Paul Chalphant, architectural plans for the campus were never realized. This is a sentence that would appear after what is already on the website. When Merrick learned that the university had not been able to pay faculty for two months, and feared its first year would be its last, he arranged for the Coral Gables Corporation to pay for a fundraising event at the Biltmore. In 1928, huge debt and limited income also hampered the struggling UM. Each semester both the Board of Regents and the public questioned whether the school should or would reopen. Despite overwhelming financial problems of his own, Merrick continued to view the university as one of his highest priorities. He was an unabashed supporter of President Boman Ash and frequently helped convince him not to resign. Beginning in the fall of 1928, in contrast to his absences elsewhere, George attended every UM Board meeting. In early 1929, the board completely reorganized to include more national members who promised large donations. George was particularly outspoken at the meeting and was one of the few founding members asked to remain. Merrick served as Regent and Trustee until his death in 1942. We leave you with Merrick’s closing remarks from his 1937 speech to the Miami Realty Board. Truly, not alone is the university our greatest paver of the way for our commercial prosperity by way of Pan America. Truly, not only is it our greatest tool for tropical research, discovering new products, new processing, but above all, we need the University of Miami with all its means in science, theater, art, literature, symphony orchestra, adult education, forms, we need it, I say, most as a great livening of the material lump that Miami is so greatly endanger of becoming. We need it more and more as a great livener as our highest Miami inspiration. Merrick could have imagined no greater personal achievement than to be able to crown his City Beautiful with a superior highly

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respected university. The times dictated that he was not able to fully bring that dream to fruition in 1925. However, 100 years is long enough to wait to see that vision made real. The university remains the evidence of his desire is housed within its walls. It is high time to recognize and pay homage to the man that students once hailed as Father of the University, George Edgar Merrick. That would be the end of the letter and the letter would be accompanied by many sources that refute the original petition, including a video from Black Archives Director, Dorothy Fields, speaking of Merrick in a 2020 video, unpublished Forward of the Man of the Magical Isles, the Way Shores images from the Coral Gables Museum, the exact text from the Planning For a Greater Miami Tomorrow speech, and etc., etc. I know it's going to be a long meeting, so I'm not going to read all of those things, but my proposal is that this letter with all of the contexts be sent to the University of Miami with signatures of the City Manager and all of the Commission.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Through the Mayor. I'm happy to report to you that there is support for this, the University of Miami. On February 25<sup>th</sup>....event, I had the opportunity to speak to Professor Nathan James Topano, who's followed up and emailed me and introduced me to Jeanne Marie Lewis, the Executive Director of Strategic Initiatives and we started a conversation exactly for this purpose to do the restorations. My request, as a friendly amendment is to add and copy this letter to the Strategic, get the title correct here, College Executive Director of Strategic Initiatives, Jeanne Marie Lewis and I have the email address to include so that we can continue this conversation, because looking for the right individual for a while to help move this through the university and I think we have the support that we need and we just need to – this letter is an excellent way to help this individual within Strategic Initiatives area to move forward on this faster.

Commissioner Menendez: Through the Mayor please. I recommend a suggestion to the administration, when you schedule the annual Development Agreement meeting, it's a meeting between the elected officials of Coral Gables, the Administration, the President of the University and all the Board of Trustees, an annual meeting regarding our Development Agreement and I think the proper time at that point to have it as a discussion item, so we can have leadership from the city and leadership from the university all together at the same time, and have that discussion. So, I suggest or recommend to the administration that you find a way to include that discussion.

Mayor Lago: So, I'd like to see today, if possible, support from the Commission to send it to the University of Miami and put it on the agenda.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'll move it.

Mayor Lago: We can put it on the agenda to have it at the Development Agreement and have a conversation in regard to the matter, hopefully ratify it between the university and the City of Coral Gables.

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Commissioner Castro: I'll second that.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'm going to forward to you the email chain that I have.

Mayor Lago: So, Mr. Clerk, we have a motion and a second.

Commissioner Castro: Yes

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

(Vote: 5-0)

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

Ms. Myers: Thank you.