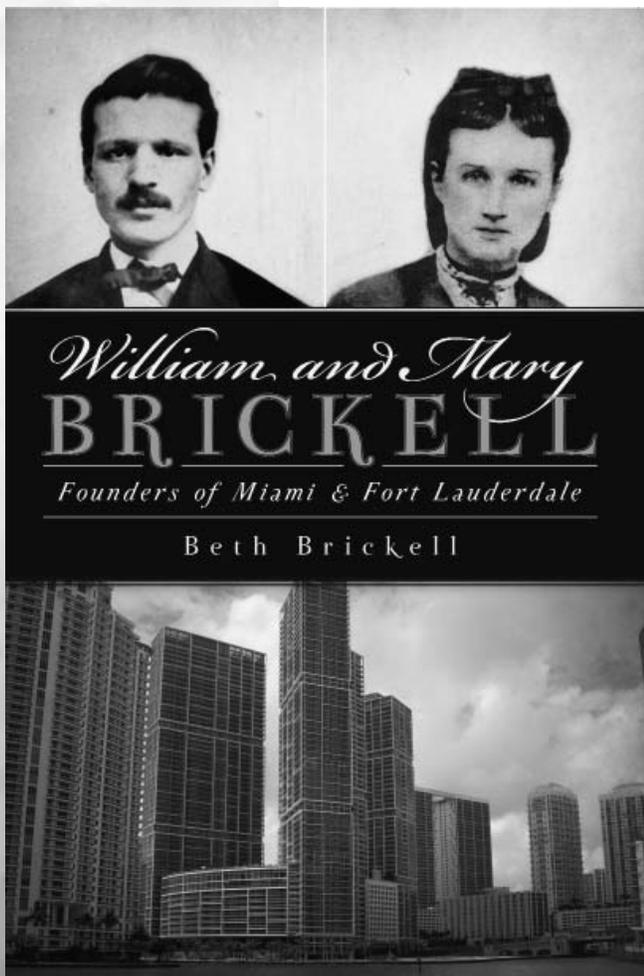


William and Mary Brickell

Founders of Miami and Fort Lauderdale

by Beth Brickell



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For anyone who has wondered how two great cities, Miami and Fort Lauderdale, first grew from a primeval wilderness, the answer is often given that Henry Flagler extended his railroad here from Saint Augustine.

To the readers of local history who inquire further, “But how did a railroad magnate come to be interested in such an unsettled area in the first place?,” the answer comes, “Julia Tuttle sent him fresh orange blossoms after the Central Florida crop was destroyed in a great winter freeze” in 1895.

But for the real aficionados of South Florida’s relatively short history, the Tuttle story turns out to be something of a myth. Both Miami and Fort Lauderdale actually owe their existence to a cranky Ohioan and his English wife who shunned publicity, lost all their papers in a storm and had no living descendants.

Author Beth Brickell, pronounced Brick-ELL, is a Hollywood, Calif., producer and former journalist who first encountered the BRICK-ell name while starring in a 1960s television program, *Gentle Ben*, filmed in Miami. Forty years later, she returned to uncover the long-buried story of the “First Family” of Miami. Ms. Brickell somehow got carried away with the depth of her research, contacting sources from Australia (where William Brickell first made his fortune) to California and Ohio. She ultimately wrote an entire book.

Though she is no relation to the subjects of her book, Beth Brickell spent more than a year re-creating the life of William Brickell (d. 1908) and Mary Brickell (d. 1922), from hundreds of minor references, many of them so obscure that *none* of the writers of historical books and articles on 19th century Dade County were aware of them. The family had become so obscure that no photograph of Mrs. Brickell was discovered until

1992! An examination of the end notes and biography attests to the superb detective work in finding the sources.

Historians have largely ignored the Brickells while Tuttle's stature as the so-called "Mother of Miami" grew steadily after her 1898 death. All that remains of the Brickell name is the bridge and avenue that run through their former land holdings in Miami. But just a few facts demonstrate how the Brickells have been given undeserved short shrift:

- In 1874, the Brickells were the only private landowners in present-day Broward County. Mary later testified that she maintained a grove there, reachable only by sailing up the New River from the ocean, or by canoe through the back route of the Everglades. Adding to their original holdings, they bargained directly with Flagler in 1895 to establish the Town of Fort Lauderdale when the population of the entire area of what is now Broward County was no more than 20 people.
- The Brickells came to the Miami River in 1872 and opened the first store, an Indian trading post that was the center of the slow-growing community for many years prior to the arrival of the railroad. They acquired, in Mary's name, three square miles of bay front land running from present downtown Miami to Coconut Grove, and later acquired much more land. They were the largest active landowners in the county.
- After William's death, Mary subdivided and platted the original square mile Town of

Fort Lauderdale, and most of its first neighborhoods: the west addition (Sailboat Bend), Colee Hammock and Rio Vista. Although Mary testified that it was not her intention, the manner in which her surveyor drew the plat granted the riverfront to the public in perpetuity.

- In Dade County, Mary joined with Tuttle to negotiate with Flagler for a town to be built on her land and Tuttle's, to be connected by a bridge over the Miami River. Her elderly husband felt cheated by Flagler when he built the town only on the Tuttle side of the river where, in concert with his own interests, Flagler planned a major railroad terminal and a grand resort hotel. He refused to cross the bridge until after Tuttle's death.
- After the Brickell trading post closed, the family built an apartment building on the site. A few years ago, in razing the building, it was discovered that a prehistoric ceremonial circular structure had been located there. (Today known as the Miami Circle, this site is now a historic landmark preserved by Miami-Dade County.)

The Brickells' personalities come alive with many anecdotes from contemporary records. William was a colorful storyteller, but his real life needed no exaggeration. He really did join the California Gold Rush by covered wagon, and the Australian Gold Rush afterwards, where he met Mary. She volunteered as a nurse during the Civil War. Just the list of chance encounters he made on his very irregular path to Florida reads like a Who's Who of South Florida history: including Henry

Perrine, Jr., Henry Flagler, John D. Rockefeller, Harriett English, Ralph Munroe, Ephraim Sturtevant and Julia Tuttle. And that was *before* they came to Florida. If the book were fictionalized, one wouldn't believe that even fictional characters could all be so connected to one another. But the author has proven that they were.

The author follows William and Mary Brickell's trail around the world in the 1850s and 1860s through contemporary diaries, manuscripts, letters, town directories, newspapers, ship records, business records, lawsuits and many other piecemeal accounts. With a deft writing style, she has woven them seamlessly into a biography, the story of pioneering adventurers who eventually sought refuge in remote South Florida, and stayed for 50 years.

Beth Brickell's life of the Brickells is also a history of the South Florida wilds at a time when the few hundred remaining Seminole Indians vastly outnumbered the white settlers. There was no regular mail service and there was not even a dirt road. She paints a vivid picture of life, early industry, Indian relations and the bitter feuds over land and political power on the Florida frontier.

Brickell's book is a highly readable account, profusely illustrated. This volume would be appreciated by anyone interested in the early development of southeast Florida, especially in the centennial of the incorporation of the City of Fort Lauderdale. ■

*Patrick Scott, attorney/historian,
Fort Lauderdale*