


HOME & DESIGN

The Miami Herald  SUNDAY, APRIL 20, 2008 | EDITOR: TERESA MEARS tmears@MiamiHerald.com | 305-376-3674 or 954-764-7026 ext. 3674

\$22 MILLION WILL BUY A GRAND GABLES HOME USED BY THE CIA — AND AN ISLAND OUTPOST



PHOTOS BY AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

LAVISH DECOR: The breezeway at the Coral Gables house used as a base for CIA operations to overthrow Fidel Castro leads to the carport and one of two boathouses on the property. Below, Wirt Maxey holds a turtle skull in the main house on his family's island, Ragged Key #3, also used as a CIA outpost.

FOR SALE: HOUSE OF SPIES



BY JENNY STALETOVICH
jennystaletovich@bellsouth.net

The house at 6312 Riviera Dr. in Coral Gables is grand by almost any measure. It has a 33-foot long living room with dragons carved into its marble fireplace, vases that once belonged to Umberto I, King of Italy, a dance patio, mini-Olympic pool, an elevator, a tidewater pond, more than a dozen bathrooms, two roomy boathouses and a pedigreed architect. Batista once considered buying it and Billy Graham left behind a signed Bible.

In recent years, passing motorists have pulled through its noble wrought-iron gates, mistaking it for a country club.

Given its extreme curb appeal, it seems incredible that the CIA used the house for secret operations at the height of its covert war against Fidel Castro in the 1960s. Then again, this is Miami — no stranger to the high jinks of history.

CIA operatives would stride across the lush lawn in

broad daylight, past the pink cupola and into the boathouse where they would board a souped-up boat, part of an armada that then amounted to the Caribbean's third largest naval fleet. Once armed, and sometimes hooded, they would motor down the Coral Gables Waterway to launch one of hundreds of missions carried out against Cuba's Communist government.

Now, after almost 50 years in the same family, the house is being sold. Asking price? A cool \$22 million, which includes an island, also a former CIA outpost.

"We used to feel very uncomfortable because of the appearance of ourselves with the house," said Rolando Martinez, 85, a spy who used the house but is more famously known as one of the five Watergate burglars. "When we returned from some operations, I remember we were walking from the house and neighbors walking dogs would call us *insurrectos*."

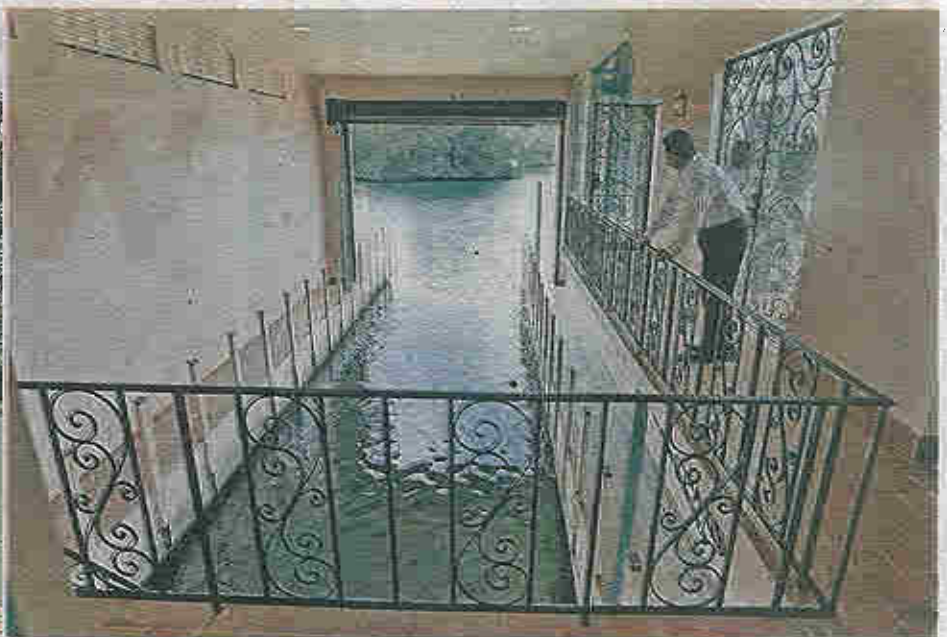


Miami Herald.com
Watch a video and see a slide show of the former spy house and the island for sale.

*TURN TO HOUSE, 4H



BUILT IN 1937: The house at 6312 Riviera Dr. has five bedrooms, 13 bathrooms, a tennis court and a storied history.



EXTRA FEATURES: A tennis court in the courtyard invites players; right, Wirt Maxey in the boathouse that came in handy for the CIA spies.

Property has cloak and dagger history

*HOUSE, FROM 1H

For Wirt Maxey, then a pre-occupied kid of 14 or 15, the house was home. If his father was having company in the boat house, he had no idea it was the Company.

"I remember people coming and going at rather odd hours and I was basically told that these people were renting the boathouse and had a right to come and go and leave them alone," he said.

In his quasi-factual novel *Harlot's Ghost*, Norman Mailer called the mansion "a nice, cool, handsome house when all is said."

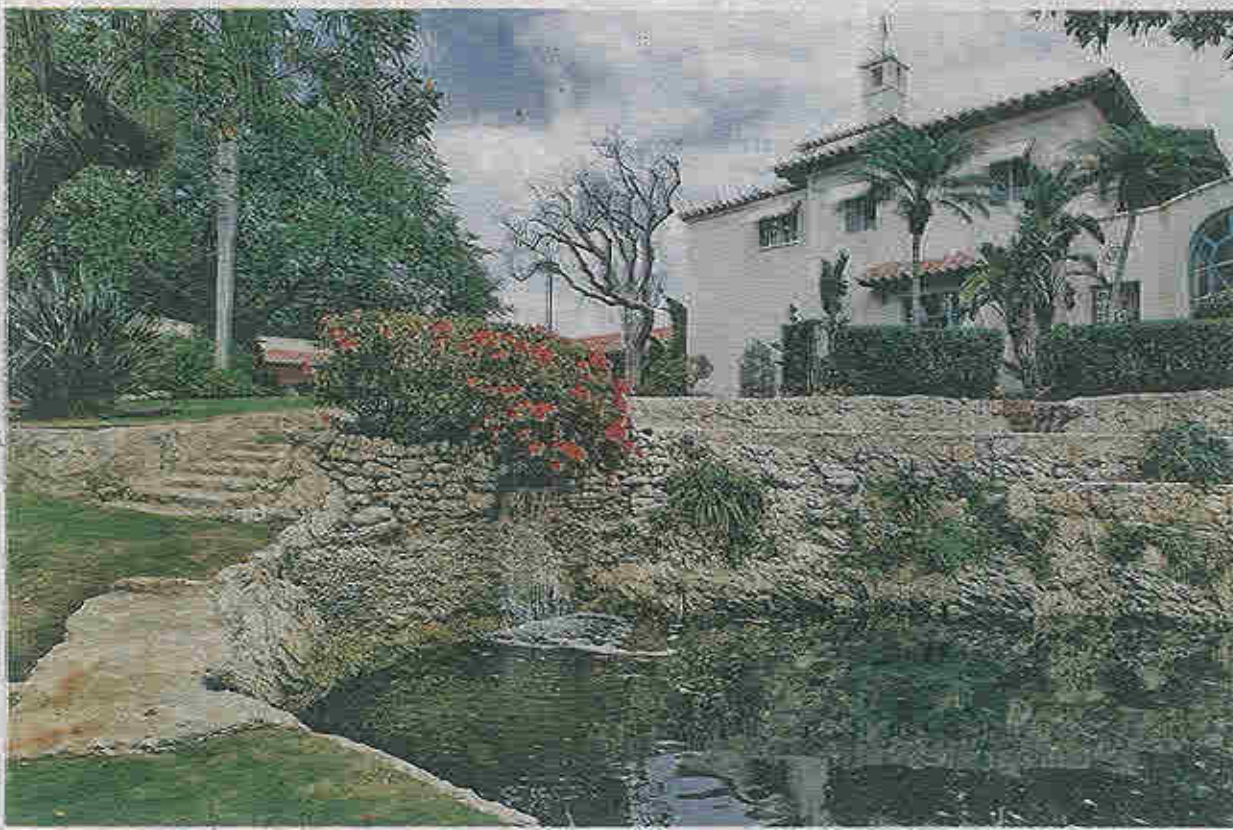
For most of the last half century, Maxey's father, Tom, an attorney, maintained the house meticulously, keeping it much the same as when Martinez and the spooks who directed him hatched their missions. The boathouse locker room, where the men showered after missions, remains a cradle of polished yellow tile, a sign with carved iron sea horses distinguishing the men's from the women's locker room.

DECISION TO SELL

After Tom Maxey died nearly two years ago, Wirt, who had moved back in with his family to care for his ailing father, and his two younger sisters decided to sell the house, along with the island, a 45-minute boat ride away, which the CIA also leased.

Situated in the middle of a chain known as the Ragged Keys, it is officially Ragged Key #3, although Ragged Key #2 is just an outcropping of coral rock. Ragged Key #3, the one with the CIA past, is the only Ragged Key that's inhabited. It includes a two-story home, caretaker's cottage, mini-power plant, pool and dock house and resident dogs who for years have noisily announced the presence of any nearby boaters. The stark white buildings, visible to anyone who has ever tried to navigate the channels and flats of Biscayne Bay, reflect the sun like beacons. Except for the lighthouse on nearby Boca Chita, the island's towering flag pole is the tallest thing in sight.

In 1960, when Tom Maxey acquired the house from Edward Christiansen in exchange for legal work, he



EXTENSIVE GROUNDS: A waterfall splashes under a flowering bush into a limestone pond at the Maxey house at 6312 Riviera Dr., Coral Gables.

also got the island. He later told his son the CIA used it to monitor Castro.

Originally, the island had a small house. Christiansen built a more modern house with an upstairs that served as a bunk room, said his daughter, Karen Davis, who now lives in Miami Shores.

"He put the pool in, too, and my brother says he had to get an act of Congress to dredge so we could get our boat into the island," she said.

Wirt Maxey only learned of the CIA deals years later.

He can't remember now how it came up, but one day his father told him that the men he'd seen coming and going from the boat house had indeed been running covert operations to Cuba. And the television company that leased the island was a CIA cover.

"It was pretty cool to me," he said. "I remember a boat. Not a fancy boat at all, but kind of a crappy looking boat from the outside. I learned later on from my father that that crappy-looking boat would go 70 mph."

Other than the crappy boat and men traipsing across the lawn at strange hours, Maxey doesn't remember much. The rest of the tale falls to the countless books and articles inspired by the era. And of course the spy, Martinez, now retired on Miami Beach and spending his time caring for his wife, 82, who suffers from Alzheimer's.

Martinez said he came to Florida in 1941 and enrolled at Florida Southern College in Lakeland. At the time, Miami "was nothing. Later

on, I came back. I came in the '50s," he said.

Officially, he was recruited by the CIA in 1960. All these years later, he remains vague about details, sometimes recounting only what has been officially declassified. He says Watergate — for which he received a presidential pardon and praise for a distinguished record — left him wary. Later, he was prosecuted for lying about his involvement with the CIA, even though the agency had sworn him to secrecy.



SPLASHES OF COLOR: Original ceramic tile decks the stairs.

Altogether, Martinez says he ran 354 operations from the house and other bases throughout South Florida.

In a 1975 article for Harper's magazine, he described one tense episode to historians Taylor Branch and George Crile III:

"Once a Castro gunboat came after my boat on a mission on the north coast of Cuba and I radioed for help. Before we could even decode the return message, there were two Phantom jets and a Neptune flying over us. It's a trademark of the American forces in general. You have seen how in Vietnam if a helicopter goes down, ten other helicopters will fly in to get the pilot out. That was the same spirit that prevailed in our operations."

SPIES EVERYWHERE

At the time, the CIA was everywhere in Miami: recruiting spies at the Sears on Douglas Road and Coral Way and tossing back drinks at 27 Birds, their name for the Big Daddy's at Southwest 27th Avenue and Bird Road, reports a 2004 study commissioned by the National Park Service.

"Only in a city like Miami could the clandestine empire of (the CIA operations) escape public attention. In the early years of the secret war, Miami already resembled wartime Casablanca," Branch and Crile wrote in the Harper's story, which included a photo of the Riviera Drive house.

A year after Castro's takeover in 1959, CIA director Allen Dulles had already introduced a plan to President Dwight Eisenhower to overthrow Castro, the Park Service study reported. Eisenhower, in turn, autho-



STUFF OF HISTORY: Left to right, a lizard perches on a fountain; a sales brochure from 1961, the last time the house was on the market; CIA spy and Watergate burglar Rolando Martinez, who used the house in the '60s.

13 bathrooms, tennis court, boathouse — and an island

BY JENNY STALETOVICH
jennystaletovich@bellsouth.net

What would a spy story be without a snazzy lair?

At 6312 Riviera Dr., the spooks working secretly to overthrow Fidel Castro found not only a secluded boathouse to carry out undercover operations, but a lavish, 11,000-square-foot house with five bedrooms, 13 bathrooms and three staircases.

There are also three fireplaces, four patios, an outdoor grill, a tennis court, enclosed pool, a guest house with full kitchen, a third-story cupola with 360-degree views, servant quarters and a game room with a cork floor. Every closet is lined with cedar and the original ceramic tiles are nearly flawless.

One of the two boathouses comes with men's and women's locker rooms. The other features an original two-story mural by the artist John St. John.



FROM THE WATER: A view of the Maxey home from the Coral Gables Waterway. The boathouse on the right was used by the CIA.

The best view of the house, as Norman Mailer noted in his book *Harlot's Ghost*, is from the water.

The house sits on the Coral Gables waterway at the

widest point of the canal's turning basin. Sweeping steps lead to a wide patio facing the tennis court. A small pond is carved into the limestone, with narrow channels allowing tidal water in and out.

The sale of the house,

packaged with an island in Biscayne Bay, is being handled by EWM's Audrey Ross, realty agent for some of Miami's most extravagant properties.

Ragged Key #3, which the Maxey family said was leased by the CIA during its anti-Castro operations, is a 45-minute boat ride away. It might as well be a world away. Far out in the shifting blue of Biscayne Bay, Miami fades to a postcard skyline. Treacherous shoals that have duped countless boaters keep it isolated despite its strategic position in the chain of tiny islands between Elliott Key and Cape Florida.

A two-story house is more camp than resort with utilitarian accessories. It includes a simple kitchen, dining room, living area, downstairs

bedroom and upstairs bunk room. The caretaker's cottage next door is more lavishly outfitted for its residents with vaulted ceilings and a large master bedroom. Then there's a pool. Of course.

Other than its location in the middle of Biscayne National Park, what makes it remarkable is its self-sufficiency. It has a 30,000-gallon cistern, a desalinization system and a mini-power plant for generators. One caretaker claimed he rode out Hurricane Andrew on the island, surviving a storm surge that washed through the second-story window.

With the exception of the ashes of two caretakers buried near the base of a flagpole, the island remains largely unchanged from Cold War times.



ON THE ISLAND: Plaque under the flagpole reads: 'CORAL KEY, Edward S. Christiansen, Dec. 1954'.

rized \$13 million — which eventually rose to \$50 million a year — to train and recruit an army of about 1,500 exiles.

The study included a list of locations inside and out of National Park boundaries that serves as a kind of tour map. The boathouse, the report says, "offered a location where infiltration vessels could be hidden from plain view, thus shielding their extensive modifications and true nature from prying eyes."

Eventually, the CIA's station in Miami, housed on the south campus of the University of Miami (and now Miami MetroZoo), grew to be the largest outside its headquarters in Langley, Va., Don Bohning wrote in his book, *The Castro Obsession*. About 400 agents oversaw "thousands of Cuban exiles added to the payroll for everything from propaganda to sabotage," and created between 300 and 400 front companies to cover its tracks.

With so many exiles and the Communist threat fueling patriotism, recruiting was not difficult, even among private citizens like Tom Maxey, who ran his own law practice along with a real estate investment firm.

"They would openly go up to someone, like at The Herald, (managing editor) George Beebe, and say we need your help. That was not uncommon. I'm sure there were dozens of legitimate companies in Miami that were cooperating. Here you

have a major academic institution (UM) cooperating with them, so you can imagine," said Bohning, a former Herald reporter and editor. "The atmosphere was completely different."

And most would readily agree to help.

"So long as Cuba was a target for intelligence gathering, Miami was the natural starting point for those operations," said historian Timothy Naftali, author of *One Hell of a Gamble* and curator of the Nixon Library. "Miami has played a key role in the secret history of the United States. In Cold War Miami, the CIA would not have had a hard time recruiting."

Wirt Maxey does not know how the CIA contacted his father. However, his uncle, Jackson Maxey, worked for the agency in Washington, he said. Years later, Maxey's father told Wirt he informed his brother, Jackson, that he'd been leasing the house and island to Jackson's employer. And his brother never knew.

That doesn't surprise Martinez.

"There is something they call compartmentation and they have a good cover," he said. "I'm sure the people who bought the house at the time were well-connected with the government because they had to have national security clearance."

Back to the house. Built in 1937, it was designed by the architectural firm of Paist and Steward, whose founding partner, Phineas Paist, was



PHOTOS BY AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

OFF THE GRID: Coconut palms surround the house on Ragged Key #3, which has a cistern, desalinization system and power plant. Below, caretaker Sandee Patterson painted the artwork on the walls of her cottage.



supervising architect for Coral Gables at its incorporation in 1925. Initially hired by George Merrick as a colorist, Paist gained fame for his monumental buildings, said

historian Arva Moore Parks. His work includes the Colonnade Building, Coral Gables City Hall, the city's old police and fire station and its original Arts Center, now the

sales office for the upscale Old Spanish Village project.

The house was built for Roy Page, said Gables' Preservation Officer Kara Noelle Kautz. In 1945, owner Larry

Hughy was given permission to add the dock, records show, and in 1952, Christiansen added the side wings that include, among other things, the guest house, game room and servant quarters. A year later, he added the pool and boathouses.

In the 1950s, Fulgencio Batista, who had a home in Daytona Beach, visited when he was considering buying it as a retreat, said Davis, Christiansen's daughter.

Having a house from the era largely intact and in such good shape is rare, Parks said. "It's a gift."

Despite its grand scale, Martinez said it worked remarkably well for the spies.

"You could go through the channel to the open seas and return and keep it very silent. No one would suspect that house was used in the operations against the Communist regime of Cuba," he said. "It was a very good house. It was beautiful. And we behaved very according to the house."