

The Miami Herald

July 29, 2010

Circulation: 222,742



BARBARA P. FERNANDEZ/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

AT UNVEILING: Great-great-granddaughter Dorothe Tuttle, left, and state Rep. Julio Robaina.

JULIA TUTTLE STATUE

‘MOTHER OF MIAMI’ STANDS TALL NEAR PORT

■ On Miami’s 114th birthday, the city’s founding mother finally got the recognition community leaders thought she deserved.

BY KELLY HOUSE
khouse@MiamiHerald.com

It’s only fitting that the statue honoring the Mother of Miami would stand adjacent to a children’s playground, overlooking the world-renowned seaport she envisioned when South Florida was nothing more than a vast swamp-

land with a few patches of orange groves.

The 10-foot-tall bronze likeness of Julia Tuttle was unveiled Wednesday at the southern end of Bayfront Park, on the 114th birthday of the city she created.

Tuttle stands proudly, head held high, eyes gazing upward with a look of satisfaction as her right arm clutches a basket of oranges and her left extends a handful of orange blossoms.

•TURN TO TUTTLE, 2B

‘Mother of Miami’ stands tall

“She is at the very moment of ensuring the foundation of the city by offering Henry Flagler proof that orange blossoms grow here and were not destroyed in the freezes,” said sculptor Rob Firmin. “She is looking to the future.”

It is said that Tuttle’s orange blossom gift secured Henry Flagler’s commitment to extend his railroad to Florida’s southernmost territory.

During an 1875 trip to visit her father’s home in present-day Miami Shores, Tuttle began to formulate a grand vision for a metropolis in the South Florida swampland. She moved to Miami in 1890, purchasing 644 acres on the river.

Six years later, her vision became a reality after a pool hall meeting garnered the 300 signatures required to apply for the city’s incorporation.

As a woman, Tuttle couldn’t vote. But Miami historian Arva Moore Parks said it was her 644 acres of land, and her plan, that made Miami a reality.

“It rose as if by magic. Here’s the magician,” Moore Parks said.

On Wednesday, when a black sheet was pulled back to reveal Tuttle’s image, the crowd of 200, including some Tuttle family members, whooped and clapped.

“It’s huge!” said Laurel Hall, Tuttle’s great, great granddaughter. “I had no idea how big it was going to be.”

The project was 112 years in the making.

Various community members had called for a lasting memorial to Tuttle since her 1898 death, but it wasn’t until 1996 that the Miami Commission on the Status of Women officially took up the cause.

It took another 14 years to see the project through. Lack of funding and a temporary dissolution of the organization stalled the plan before the Miami-Dade County Commission for Women got involved, throwing the county’s weight behind it.

The two groups raised more than \$200,000 from government and private donors, then chose California-based sculptors Eugene Daub and Rob Firmin to create the statue. Their vision: a hands-on piece of public art, incorporating images of Tuttle’s Miami.

Tuttle’s skirt is adorned with raised images of local flora and fauna, scenes of Native Americans and African Americans who were among the area’s first settlers, the train that put Miami on the map, and Tuttle herself shaking Flagler’s hand.

“Because of this project, we have created a national awareness that Julia Tuttle is the only woman to found an American city,” said Carmen Elias-Levenson, past Chair of the Miami Commission on the Status of Women.

And if the statue isn’t enough, Miami’s visitors soon will get another reminder: The stretch of Biscayne Boulevard Way between SE 2nd Avenue and Biscayne Boulevard was designated last week as “Julia Tuttle Way,” and new road signs should be in place by September.

The hope is that the statue can be a learning experience for the families who visit the playground and joggers and dog-walkers who pass by. It’s purposely mounted at ground level so children can walk around Tuttle’s skirt and touch the images.

Moore Parks, an expert on Tuttle’s life, made several trips to California to help sculptors make the final touches. She held her breath, hoping the final replica would agree with a recently discovered full-body photo of Tuttle.

It’s the spitting image.

“Flagler had the money, but Julia Tuttle got the push,” said Mariano Cruz, a mail carrier and Miami City Commission candidate who attended the unveiling.

“Had it not been for her, Miami would still be the alligators playing in the swamp.”