

Freedom Tower Timeline

Written by Paul George, BT Contributor
July 2019

A view of our past from the archives of HistoryMiami



As noted in last month's "Picture Story," the *Miami News* moved out of the Freedom Tower and into new quarters in 1957. Thereafter, the iconic tower at 600 Biscayne Blvd. was sold and remained vacant, for the most part, until 1962, when the federal government leased it for the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center for the multitude of Cubans arriving in Miami after fleeing the Castro dictatorship.

On the eve of the building's repurposing as a refugee assistance facility, Walter Etling, its manager, suggested it be renamed "Freedom Tower," which quickly became its moniker. The facility would serve hundreds of thousands of Cubans in the next 12 years.

The Freedom Tower's storied mezzanine hosted the refugees and the charitable agencies there to assist them. Assistance included food, money, clothing, and employment referrals. In the basement below was a medical dispensary with physicians, dentists, and a pharmacy. There refugees also received health screenings.

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In 1974 the federal government closed the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center. In subsequent years, the building's ownership changed hands frequently, with each new owner envisioning an exciting future for the tower. However, it remained vacant and in woeful condition throughout the late 20th century as none of these dreams came to fruition.

Its owners included the wealthy, politically powerful Cuban-American Mas family, who later sold the Tower to Pedro Martin, a prominent developer. In 2005, Martin turned over the keys of the historic building to Miami-Dade College, whose flourishing Wolfson Campus sits across the street from it. The college spent millions of dollars on a top-to-bottom restoration.

Today this magnificent structure is a venue for high-level events, as well as the MDC Museum of Art + Design, the Cuban Exile Experience & Cuban Diaspora Cultural Legacy Gallery, and the nonpareil Kislak Center at MDC Freedom Tower, with its rare books, maps, manuscripts, art, and other objects focusing on the Americas at the time of European contact.

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