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Peter O. Knight: Pioneer and Spokesman for Florida

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Peter Oliphant Knight was born in Freeburg, Pennsylvania, on December 16, 1865. He was the son of James W. Knight, a Pennsylvania lawyer, and Sarah Elizabeth (Kantz) Knight.
and a descendant of an early American family—both his great-grandfather and his grandfather, who enlisted as a drummer at the age of 11, having fought in the American Revolution.

His father died when Peter was nine, leaving no estate. His mother took in boarders for whom he washed dishes and waited tables.

His early education was received in Synder County, Pa., principally at Freeburg Academy. Later he studied law at Valparaiso University in Indiana, receiving his Bachelor of Laws Degree in 1884, before attaining his majority. He practiced briefly in the Supreme Court of Indiana.

THE ELOQUENCE OF COLONEL KNIGHT

Col. Peter O. Knight was an eloquent speaker. In October, 1914, he won a silver loving cup as champion speaker at a Rotary Club Southern Division meeting in Jacksonville in a contest limited to five minutes on the subject, "Why My City Is Best."

His closing remarks were:
"... When the sun rises in the morning it first casts its orbs upon Tampa. When it does so a smile of admiration and satisfaction overspreads its countenance. As it slowly wends its way through the heavens towards the west it is reluctant to set, fighting against disappearing, fearful that it will never see that splendid spot again.

"If I had the time and were to go on and give you all the reasons why Tampa is not only the best city in the South but the most superb city in the Universe, I would simply have to bankrupt the English language..."
Cleveland (near present Punta Gorda). They had to remain there overnight and the next day left by steamer for Fort Myers.

**Shoot 'Em Up Days**

Although he remained in Fort Myers only five years, Mr. Knight’s accomplishments there were many and varied. His life in this wild country was filled with stirring events, including hot political campaigns, murders and threats of death and horsewhippings which

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**KNIGHT BROUGHT US THE STREET CARS**

Col. Peter O. Knight, who was president of the Tampa Electric Company, always was proud of the fact TECO provided mass transportation with street cars—and the fare was only W. This photo, made in 1918, shows a trolley on Lafayette St. (now Kennedy Blvd.). The avenue already was double-tracked. The odd-shaped building at right is the First Baptist Church.

-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION

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**IT'S PETER O. KNIGHT IN CAPS AT THE TRIB**

Jerry R. McLeod, former Sheriff of Hillsborough County and before that an executive on both Tampa newspapers, tells this one:

The owner of The Tampa Tribune for many years was Col. W. F. Stovall. Editors and reporters, of course, had to follow his wishes on "style" concerning capitalization, punctuation, etc.

The Colonel liked the "down" style, meaning that few words were capitalized.

"The Tribune uses the lower case—only Jesus Christ and Peter O. Knight are capitalized!" he would shout.
PETER O. KNIGHT STATION

For years, the Peter O. Knight station of Tampa Electric Company was on the west bank of the Hillsborough River about where The Tampa Tribune plant is now. Named in honor of Col. Peter O. Knight, the power plant added one more smokestack after this photo was made.

-Photo from "HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION"
forced the young lawyer to follow the custom of always being armed.

In 1887 he started a movement which led to the separation of the Fort Myers area from Monroe County and became the first County Attorney of Lee County.

In 1888 he was elected the County’s first delegate to the State Democratic Convention and the following year was elected to the legislature in a heated election which swept the Knight’s faction slate into office over the Hendry slate.

**Brilliant Speaker**

Already a clever leader, the young Legislator made his debut in Tallahassee by forming a bloc which put into office its choice for Speaker of the House.

As chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, he became a close friend of Gen. Joseph B. Wall, brilliant Tampa jurist and chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. General Wall was impressed by his colleague’s keen, incisive reasoning, his convincing logic and brilliant forensic eloquence and as soon as the session of the legislature ended asked him to come to Tampa to form a partnership.

This Mr. Knight did on Oct. 22, 1889, entering the second phase of a career that was to stamp him as a man of marked ability and place him high in the esteem and respect of the legal fraternity and business world.

**Held Offices in Tampa**

Although regarded as an important figure in Florida and Hillsborough County politics, the pioneer held only two public offices in Tampa, serving first as County Solicitor and then as State Attorney.

While holding the latter office he decided to seek no further political honors, convinced that he could serve the interests of his nation, state and county better as a private citizen than as a public official.

His belief that he could wield more influence if not connected in any capacity with any political organization or enterprise proved well-founded in later years when he quietly sponsored many successful candidates for municipal, county and state offices.

**An Able Attorney**

Although unknown and virtually penniless when Mr. Knight came to Tampa, he became one of the country’s ablest attorneys. As a business man and executive he was associated with a long and varied list of companies organizing or sponsoring many of them.

Mr. Knight helped organize the Tampa Suburban Company in 1892, which was acquired by Tampa Electric Company, of which he served as president from 1924 to 1946. In 1894 he helped organize the Exchange National Bank of Tampa and the next year, the Tampa Gas Company. Included among the companies he helped organize or sponsor were Tampa Hardware Co., Tampa Phosphate Co., Tribune Publishing Co., Exchange Bank of Winter Haven.

Proud of Contributions

Mr. Knight was most proud, however, of his contributions to Tampa at two periods which he considered critical. He persuaded the Seaboard Air Line Railway to purchase Seddon Island, thereby establishing Tampa's first harbor terminal. And through his efforts the great engineering and financial firm of Stone and Webster finished the development of Davis Islands, transforming unsightly mud flats into an exclusive residential section.

He became a director of Davis Islands, Inc. and because he was instrumental in carrying negotiations for a municipal airport site on the southeastern tip of the islands to a successful conclusion the City named the airport in his honor. A land and seaplane base, it is now known as Peter O. Knight field.

Ran Hog Island Shipyard

Governmental recognition of his abilities came to Mr. Knight during World War I when he was selected as vice president and general counsel of the American International Shipbuilding Corp., the principal project of which was the operation of Philadelphia's Hog Island shipyard.

But when, after two years, his service no longer was needed he returned to Tampa rather than remain in the circles of big business.

During the Harding Administration, an official of that administration revealed years later, Mr. Knight was offered a place on the bench of the United States Supreme Court but, adhering to his early resolution, refused this great honor.

"A Private Citizen"

He was urged often by friends to become a candidate for Governor, United States Senator and other offices but consistently declined, expressing a preference to remain in the background "to do what I can as a private citizen."

Highly regarded as an authority on Florida industrial, financial and civic development, Mr. Knight brought Tampa nationwide publicity through interviews published in large publications. An astute observer of affairs, he was long outspoken on big issues of the day, national as well as local.

He spoke to many organizations and was very active in the Chamber of Commerce on both the local, state, and national level. Always Peter O. Knight was the spokesman for Florida. He was widely quoted in such newspapers as the Wall Street Journal, New York Evening Post, Philadelphia Enquirer, Christian Science Monitor, etc.

To many, Peter O. Knight was Florida's leading and perhaps most useful citizen, certainly the state's most consistent booster.

Bibliography


"Peter O. Knight Services Friday" Tampa Daily Times. November 27, 1946.

1906 PUBLICATION PRAISED KNIGHT

Following is an excerpt from the chapter on "The Lawyers of Tampa" from the book, Twenty-Four Years in the Woods, On the Waters and In the Cities of Florida by Henry A. Peeples, published in 1906 by Tribune Printing Company, Tampa, in the Hampton Dunn Collection:

PETER O. KNIGHT

"And still they gazed and yet the wonder grew, that one small head held all that Peter knew."

Peter O. Knight, who is a comparatively young man today, was born in 1865. His father died when he was nine years old. He was the only child, living with his widowed mother in Indiana.

At an early age he graduated from the Valparaiso Law School.

He moved from Indiana to Fort Myers, Fla., which was then in Monroe County, Key West being the county seat.

Soon after moving there, and before he was of age, he was instrumental in having the county divided, and Fort Myers incorporated. He was immediately elected the city's first Mayor.

That year the Democrats nominated him, without his knowledge, for the Legislature, but he had to decline on account of his not being of age.

He married a daughter of one of South Carolina's bravest and most highly esteemed veteran gentlemen, Captain T. D. Frierson, of Sumpter, S.C.

Peter now enjoys life with his wife and two little sons at his elegant mansion in Hyde Park, where many friends are often royally entertained and made happy by Peter's smile and hearty hand-shake and the unfeigned welcome of the wife that always follows under all conditions the aristocracy of her State.

Peter O. Knight came to Tampa in 1889 and was the first Prosecuting Attorney of the Criminal Court. He resigned that position to accept the position of State's Attorney for the Sixth Circuit, and later resigning that on account of his immense law practice.

I will mention a few of his duties, legally, fraternally and socially:

President of the Tampa Investment and Securities Company; Vice-president of the following companies: Tampa Steam Ways Company, Tampa Tribune Publishing Company, Ybor City Land and Improvement Company, Street Railroad Company, and Electric Light Company. Also director and attorney of all the above companies.
Director and attorney for the following companies:


Attorney for the following: Seaboard Air Line Railway, Tampa Water-Works Company, Havana-American Cigar Company, Southern Bell Telephone Company, Ybor City Building and Loan Association, and a number of other institutions.

A member of the Knights of Pythias, Woodmen of the World, Elks, Thirty-Third Degree Mason, Knights Temple.

PETER O. KNIGHT AIRPORT
Tampa got a modern airport as a WPA project in the late 1930s. It was named Peter O. Knight Airport in honor of the city's outstanding citizen. This photo of the Administration Building was made in July, 1938. The city was proud of this facility. Plane passengers could get a five minute ride into downtown Tampa for $.25 cab fare.

-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
Member of Cherokee Club, Crescent Club, Spanish Casino, German Club, Sons of American Revolution, and Military Order of Foreign Wars. This last membership he has by reason of the fact that his grandfather, Richard Knight, was in the war of 1812 as a captain.