Will Its Original Name be Restored to "Davis Causeway"?

Hampton Dunn

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WILL ITS ORIGINAL NAME BE RESTORED TO ‘DAVIS CAUSEWAY’?

By HAMPTON DUNN

What in the heck is the name of that span across Old Tampa Bay, linking Tampa and Clearwater?

It was built by the late Capt. Ben T. Davis back in the depression years of the early 1930s and was christened "Davis Causeway." But shortly after his death in 1946, the Florida State Road Department, which had acquired ownership of the facility, used this project as a way to honor its Road Board member from the First District Courtney W. Campbell, later a U.S. Congressman, and now deceased.’

A confused public calls it all combinations. The American Automobile Association (AAA) maps designate the development as "Courtney Campbell Causeway." A marker at the entrance to the bridge-road calls it "Courtney Campbell Parkway." Tampa's municipal beach at the east end is formally named "Ben T. Davis Memorial Beach."

Grandson is Crusader

With a strong movement on to clear up this confusion in the name, one letter writer to the newspaper has suggested that it be called "Davis-Campbell Causeway" to satisfy the heirs of both names that have been honored in the past. (That might lead to a new debate: Which name should come first, Davis or Campbell?).

But George T. Davis, grandson of the courageous builder of the Tampa-Clearwater link, continues to push to have

CAPTAIN BEN T. DAVIS
... Relaxing on a swing.

-Photo from
HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
AERIAL VIEW OF DAVIS CAUSEWAY when it was first opened in the 1930s. The radio tower is that of Radio Station WFLA, and the station’s engineer, Joe Mitchell, lived in one of the homes in the foreground.

-PHOTO FROM “YESTERDAY’S CLEARWATER”- BY HAMPTON DUNN
the causeway known by its original label, i.e., "Davis Causeway." He has no objection to the beautification project along the roadside being designated to honor Campbell. (Apparently the only "legal" action on the name was a resolution adopted by the old State Road Board referring only to the flowers and shrubbery along the way, and naming that "Courtney Campbell Parkway.")

Mrs. Hixon Writes

The grandson has picked up formidable support for his crusade to assure the name of Captain Davis in posterity. Among those who have written letters to the editors of the newspapers are Mrs. Curtis Hixon, widow of Tampa's Mayor Hixon, who wrote: "Countless residents have benefited down through the years from this historical accomplishment and I feel confident that the greatest majority of them would highly endorse the proposed change", and Milton H. Davis, Sr., brother of D. P. Davis, builder of the fantastic Davis Islands in Tampa but no relation to the bridge-building Davises, who wrote: "Both my brother and I were personal friends of Captain Ben Davis. The hours we spent with the Captain listening to his plans about the building of Davis Causeway-a dream that he so decently struggled to achieve under most difficult circumstances."

In 1973, the late June Connor, pioneer citizen and prominent banker, wrote The Tribune: "Thank you for the editorial welcoming back good old Cape Canaveral! "Now if we can give Davis Causeway back to Captain Davis, and have our own Lafayette Street restored, it would be fine. I also hope that people will forget the absurd renaming of good old 7th Avenue, which has been 'La Septima' to thousands for as long as Tampa was laid out. Broadway it
Accurate Map of Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties, Showing Main Highways, Bridges, Towns, Ferries, Beaches, Bays, Airports and Golf Courses. Use Davis Causeway for Safety and Comfort. Save Time, Gas, Money and Avoid Accidents. Built by B. T. Davis and opened to traffic June 28, 1934. Spans beautiful Old Tampa Bay from west shore of Hillsborough County to east shore of Pinellas County. 9 ½ miles long from shore to shore. – Roadway 24 feet wide, smooth, straight and well marked. Connects Tampa and Mainland with Clearwater, St. Petersburg, Indian Rocks, Pass-a-Grille and other Gulf beaches.

**Toll Rates**

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<td>Extra Passenger, each</td>
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**Davis Causeway Promotion Flyer**

This excerpt from an advertising brochure urged motorists to use the fine new Davis Causeway facility connecting Tampa with Clearwater. The toll was 50 cents for a round trip of passenger car and all passengers.

- Photo from YESTERDAY’S CLEARWATER BY HAMPTON DUNN
never was in size, and La Septima is not only poetic, but truly historic here in Tampa.

"At least Dad Gandy’s bridge still has his name!"

Another Voice

A year before that letter was printed, there was one from John M. Coram of Tampa. He wrote:

"... When the late Courtney Campbell, as a member of the State Road Department, used his influence to have the Road Department provide the recreational facilities, the Road Department changed the name of the causeway to Courtney Campbell Causeway, which was not proper, for he contributed nothing to the building of the causeway, only his influence with the Road Department. The Road Department paid for

TOLL GATE ON CLEARWATER SIDE

The Davis family resided in the apartment above the toll house. The man seated at the table was taking a traffic survey when the causeway was first opened.

- PHOTO FROM YESTERDAY’S CLEARWATER BY HAMPTON DUNN

CAPTAIN DAVIS AND GRANDSONS

Capt. Ben T. Davis and grandsons, Ben C. Davis, left, and George T. Davis, seated on running board of famous Davis Causeway car known all over the state because of the Florida State Flag on the door.

- PHOTO FROM YESTERDAY’S CLEARWATER
BY HAMPTON DUNN
the construction of the recreational facilities.

Coram noted that "the bridge properly should carry the name of its builder."

**A Masterwork Builder**

June 28 is the anniversary of the opening of Davis Causeway in, 1934, marking the realization of Captain Ben’s dream and the overcoming of what seemed to be insurmountable obstacles. He had started the project in the halcyon days of 1927, but soon it came to a screeching halt, brought to a standstill by first, the Florida real estate boom collapse, and, then, the mighty national depression. But in 1932, Davis resumed his goal by obtaining a $600,000 loan from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), part of the "New Deal" alphabet. With the money he’d borrowed
from faithful friends, Davis invested $900,000 in the span.
When Davis first started work on the project, many West Coast residents were calling him a "dreamer." When the causeway was completed 31 months later, the doubters were referring to Captain Davis as "a masterwork builder."

**Gets Mike Fright**

Came the big day for the opening, there were ceremonies sponsored by Corita Davis, daughter of the builder. The (I toll gate" for the moment was a garland of flowers strung across the traffic lane and this was cut by a group of Tampa beauties including Elizabeth Sharpe, Mary Fernandez, Becky Price, Mary Catherine Mickler, Robie Webb, Mrs. Sallie G. Bannon and Kathleen Simpson. Speakers for the significant affair were former Gov. Doyle E. Carlton and then Mayor R. E. L. Chancey.

Captain Davis, the intrepid builder, made one of the shortest dedication speeches in history, in two sentences: "I've never faced a mike before. I'd rather get out and build another bridge than make a speech."

Governor Carlton heralded the opening of Davis Causeway as "the writing of another chapter in the development of Florida."

The Davis family turned the toll gate house into a home. A reporter once asked Davis if the cars didn't keep him awake at nights, and he replied: "I would have a lot more trouble sleeping if I didn't hear them." A friend once joked that Davis "wanted to be near the money."

**Toll Was 35¢**

The toll was 35¢ for car and driver and 5¢ per passenger. At the time it was one of the nation's longest over-water fills, stretching for 91/2 miles. The main bridge was 3,510 feet. It shortened the drive to Clearwater from Tampa by 10 miles and gave Tampans a quick way to get to the Gulf beaches.

The causeway had no sooner been opened as a tollway than agitation began to get it free. The 1935 Legislature passed a law (Chapter 17280) which gave the State Road Department the power to purchase, lease or otherwise acquire toll bridges of the type of Gandy Bridge and Davis Causeway (Gandy Bridge had been opened in 1924).

In November, 1938, the Davis firm announced in a letter published in *The Tampa Daily Times*: "It is our disposition to cooperate with the State if it desires to acquire our enterprise. We are at present satisfied with our investment and have no desire to sell it, but if the State wants it we are prepared to negotiate a sale or lease on fair and reasonable terms."

"Model PR Example"
Next day, *The Times* editorially lauded the position of the Davis company as "reasonable and realistic." The agitation to turn Davis Causeway toll free was a follow up to the big fight then going on to make Gandy Bridge toll free, the latter because of "high tolls."

The *Times* editorial concluded: "It is clear that if the operators of Gandy Bridge would take an equally reasonable attitude toward public appeals for lower tolls and eventually a free bridge, this public need could be promptly fulfilled without any hardships being imposed on anyone. The (Davis) Causeway operators have set a model example for public relations."

But it was not until a few years later, during World War II, that both Gandy Bridge and Davis Causeway were to become toll-free. That happened at the height of the war, and at the height of a heated political campaign in which then Senator (now Congressman) Claude Pepper was in the fight for his political life, seeking reelection to the Senate where he was one of the main spokesmen for President Franklin D. Roosevelt. His chief opponent was J. Ollie Edmunds, President of Stetson University. Moving swiftly just days before balloting, the U.S. Navy Department declared that a free bridge would contribute to the war effort. Under the vast powers of the Second War Powers Act, the government moved to seize Gandy Bridge.

**MacDill Airmen**

Ignoring the political effects of the takeover, it was noted that airmen stationed at MacDill Air Force in Tampa needed to go to the Gulf beaches for recreation, while, conversely, many MacDill airmen lived in Pinellas County and commuted to the giant, busy air base.

Just six weeks before, Davis Causeway had been taken over by the State Road Department. The price paid for the long causeway and the 3,510 foot bridge was $1,085,000, of which the Federal Works Administration paid half and the State Road Department paid the remainder. Pepper was reelected Senator, his big margin in Tampa Bay being the Key to victory. He was defeated the next time around, in 1950, by George A. Smathers.

Captain Ben (his title was honorary) moved to Harlingen, Texas, and developed a big ranch there before his death in 1946. He was buried in Harlingen.

"**Great Builder**"

Lamenting his death, *The Tampa Tribune* editorialized: "Captain Davis must be recognized and remembered as one of Florida’s great builders. His name will stand beside that of Gandy as a constructive genius who provided the public with quicker and easier means of communication."

Besides this great achievement, Davis had a remarkable career. He came from a long line of famous men. He was a direct descendent of President Jefferson Davis of the Confederate States and George T. Davis, the Attorney General for the Confederate States. His grandfather grafted the famous Ben Davis apple in Kentucky.

Captain Davis was the first graduate in engineering from the University of New Mexico. In his early days, he built the first railroads in Mexico, and he was one of five men who originated and developed the exclusive Chapultepec Heights subdivision of Mexico City. All wharves in the port of
Tampico were constructed under his supervision.

"Got Money, Left State"

The controversy over the name change boiled during the 1973 Florida Legislature, but nothing was resolved.

The Campbell side of the argument was presented by his former law partner, J. Rex Farrior, Sr., and by the widow of Courtney Campbell, who lives in Clearwater.

A newspaper reporter quoted Farrior as saying, "What Courtney did was for the love of his community and the people of his district. Courtney was able with continual persuasion to get the other four (Road Board) members to let him use the maintenance fund to build the parkway and widen and resurface the road pavement.

By contrast, Farrior was quoted, "Mr. Davis went in purely as a commercial venture for profit. After he got his money, he left Florida."