1980

Davis Causeway Revisited

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Recommended Citation
Davis, George T. (1980) "Davis Causeway Revisited," Sunland Tribune: Vol. 6 , Article 10. Available at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol6/iss1/10

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I hope with this article to leave the future historian a vital personal record of my late grandfather, Capt. Ben T. Davis. He is famous in Florida history for building Davis Causeway between Tampa and Clearwater and this brought about the opening of the West Coast of Florida for further development.

Capt. Ben T. Davis was born on Aug. 28, 1869, at Round Rock, Texas. His grandfather grafted the famous Ben Davis apple in Kentucky. He was a direct blood descendant of President Jefferson Davis and Attorney General George T. Davis of the Confederate States from 1864-1865.

The Davis Causeway was started in 1927 when Kenneth 1. McKay, Howell T. Lykes, and D. B. McKay, Mayor of Tampa 1928-1931, helped Captain Davis raise the money he needed to start the causeway. But, work on it had been halted by the Florida real
estate crash and later by the national depression. Finally, in 1933, Captain Davis obtained a Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) loan and completed its construction.

**GATE OF FLOWERS**

It was opened Thursday, June 28, 1934, with ceremonies sponsored by Corita Davis, daughter of the builder. A gate of flowers was cut by a group of Tampa girls including Mary Fernandez, who later married Ben Davis, the son of Captain Davis. Speeches were made by old family friends, Gov. Doyle E. Carlton and Mayor R.E.L. Chancey, Mayor of Tampa 1931-1943.

I received a personal letter from Fred J. Howard, of the Hendry Corporation, the firm which did the dredging work on the causeway. The dredging company was founded by Capt. F. M. Hendry, a close friend of Captain Davis. In the letter, Mr. Howard said, "On Labor Day 1935, a severe hurricane struck this area and the Davis Causeway was badly eroded from wave action and high water which actually covered the causeway by many inches to a foot or so. About half of the roadway was eroded in many locations on the south side closing the causeway to traffic. As I recall, the causeway was later opened to one way traffic as safety would permit.

**CAPTAIN DAVIS AND FRIENDS**

Captain Ben T. Davis, builder of Davis Causeway, is shown second from left with friends and relatives who helped on the project. His son, George W. Davis is at extreme left and Hugh Davis is fourth from left. The other two in photo are unidentified. The picture was taken on "the long bridge and the draw bridge house is in the background."
"Later in the year, in November or December, 1935, Hendry Corporation commenced work restoring the causeway by hydraulic dredging and filling of the eroded areas at many locations. This work took five or six months and was completed about May or early June, 1936. Searching my memory, I do recall a large wood cutout of a policeman with his right palm extended on the right hand side of the roadway approaching Davis Causeway East toll gate which was Columbus Drive and the sign on his body read 'Stop - Pay Toll.' The causeway toll was 250 each way.

"Your grandfather, Capt. Ben T. Davis, I remember quite well. Captain Davis drove up and down the causeway during the time of our work and seemed to be right on top of things at all times. As I recall, he headquartered himself in the toll gate on the east end south side of the causeway, where the Davises had an office which I presume was headquarters for the entire causeway operation.

"At one time during the course of the work, our Dredge No. I was working quite close up to the toll gate borrowing material from one of the bayous in that area and Captain Davis was on an off the work site many times during the day. I was quite aware of the presence of Captain Davis, with him observing and consulting with our dredge captain and the people on the fill who were doing the work under this contract.

"Also, your father, George W. Davis, and I were students at Plant High School back in the late 1920s. In fact, we opened up the school in September, 1927. Your father, George, played on the first football team at Plant High School, along with his old friend, Sam Davis, who later worked on the causeway. Your father was a very likeable fellow."

WHAT OTHERS SAY

The following persons I talked with and received letters from had this to say about the causeway:

Clarence Holtsinger-"My brother, George, and I did business with Captain Davis when we had the Ford Agency."

Chester Ferguson-"I represented Captain Ben T. Davis in his legal fight to save the causeway from the Federal Government. Also, I helped Captain Davis obtain money for the causeway from the Federal Government."

Ellsworth Simmons-"The Davis Causeway brought families of both counties much closer together for the first time."
Joe Mitchell-"I recall taking long walks with George W. Davis in the very early days of the causeway and we were able to walk down the middle of the highway because the traffic at that time was very light. I was able later to walk a mile in 12 minutes."

Nick B. Albano-"I recall George W. Davis as always being neatly dressed. I recall seeing him many times dressed up in his Davis Causeway uniform, which was worn by the people who worked on the causeway. I recall a red and white patch which said Davis Causeway on the front of his shirt. Also, I had many visits with him over the years at my Tropical Meat Market Store before he died in November, 1973."

Rudy Rodriguez-"I personally can recall in the middle 1930s the unlimited amount of sport fishing that the causeway provided."

Allen C. McKay-"Captain Davis went to see my father, James C. McKay, about the bonds..."
that were needed for the building of the Davis Causeway."

**Sol Fleischman**-"I went to Plant High School with George W. Davis when the school first opened. I used my Tampa Times daily newspaper column several times in coming out in favor of the name being Davis Causeway."

**Sam Bucklew**-"Captain Davis conceived the idea of building a causeway against terrific odds. It is my humble opinion that this tremendous feat accomplished by Captain Davis, should continue to be known as the Davis Causeway."

**Homer J. Rigsby**-"In a big way, Safety Harbor contributed to the building of the causeway. During the building of the causeway, many of the workers would come to Safety Harbor and trade at the business places, which was a great help to them during the depression years. Two favorite business places were the D. D. Barron Drug Store and Dr. Con Barth’s Health Spa."

**J. Arlos Ogg**-"I made many trips over the Davis Causeway and I recall George W. Davis taking up the toll charge at the toll house. Also, I recall that the Davis family lived in the toll house, which was built over the causeway road."

**NAILING UP SIGNS**

Now, I can remember taking trips with my father, George W. Davis, in the famous Davis Causeway car. My father was the public relations man for the causeway. He would visit with persons in public office all over the state, representing the political interest of the causeway. I can recall my father nailing up signs on trees all over the West Coast of Florida, which read Davis Causeway. Also, I can recall my father putting Davis Causeway post cards in all the drug stores around the state of Florida.

My father would drive up to Ocala many times and he would visit with C. C. Frasier, Mayor of Ocala from 1941-1945; Gordon Moorehead, Sheriff of Marion County from 1937-1945; Charles A. Savage, Florida State Senator 1935-1939, and Wallace E. Sturgis, Florida State Senator 1943-1953.

Next, he would leave Ocala and drive up to Tallahassee and visit with Sam A. Wahnish, Mayor of Tallahassee from 1940- Frank Stoutamier, Sheriff of Leon County from 1923-1953, William C. Hodges, Florida State Senator 1923-1939, and Leroy Collins, Florida State Senator 1941-1943 and later Governor of Florida.

**GATHERING PLACE**

During the years the Davis family owned the causeway, it was the gathering place for many friends of the Davis family. The Davis Causeway played a very large important part in the history of the state of Florida. Among those who visited the causeway during these growth years for Florida were the following:

Sheriff of Pinellas County 1933-1940; **Todd Tucker**, Sheriff of Pinellas County 1940-1952.


**LANE FILES BILL**

The campaign to restore the causeway name to Davis Causeway began with an article in *The Tampa Times* for December 14, 1971, and within two weeks after this article appeared, Courtney Campbell died.

On March 5, 1972, the *Tampa Tribune* did a detailed article in the "Florida Accent" magazine, making it public for the first time that only the park on the causeway had been named for Courtney Campbell, and that the causeway had never had a name change and was at that time still Davis Causeway.

Later on, Julian Lane, Mayor of Tampa from 1959-1963, who had named the City beach in honor of Capt. Ben T. Davis, was elected State Senator. He filed a bill in the Florida State Senate to name Davis Causeway, Davis Causeway. Those who worked hard for the passage of the bill to give the people of Florida their history back deserve to be remembered. They were Louis de la Parte, Jr., President Pro Tempore of the Florida Senate 1973-1974; Richard J. Deeb, Florida State Senator 1966-1975; Doyle E. Carlton Jr., Florida State Senator 1953-1965; Ed Blackburn, Jr. Florida State Rep. Hillsborough County 1968-1975, and Farris Bryant, Governor of Florida 1961-1965.

**A FILM MADE ON SPAN**

I recall driving in from the Davis Causeway one day during the war years and they were making the movie, "Air Force", with John Garfield and Arthur Kennedy, which was released in 1943. Of course at that time, Drew Field was a U.S. Army Air Force Base.

I recall that the favorite eating place of the Davis family in Tampa was Valencia Garden Restaurant, owned by old family friend Manuel Beiro. In Clearwater, it was the Pelican Restaurant, owned by old family friend Henry Henriquez.

I recall many times stopping at the Henry Gonzalez Plumbing Co., on Columbus Drive, to visit on the way back to Davis Causeway. Also, we would stop and visit Nick and Sons Banana Place on Columbus Drive and buy a lot of fruit on the way back to the causeway. Also, I recall that W. H. Armstrong did the road work on the causeway and Capt. Howard C. Van Hyning lived on the Clearwater side of the causeway.
FUTURE BIG DREAMS

My grandfather would often talk over future big dreams he had for Florida with his close friends Peter O. Knight, D. P. Davis, and George S. Gandy, who built Gandy Bridge. Also, I was able to have a very interesting talk with the late Sandy Gandy, the grandson of George S. Gandy.

The Davis Causeway was my grandfather’s dream. He looked upon the causeway as private property and the home of the Davis family. He would have been more than happy to operate the causeway free for the public if he would have been able to pay those employed on the causeway, along with paying back his loan. It broke his heart when he was forced to sell the causeway. In addition, he did not receive a fair price based on future earnings of the causeway.

After the sale of the causeway, the Davis family moved to St. Petersburg and later Captain Davis decided to buy an 8,000 acre ranch in Texas. During the years the Davis family owned the ranch, a close personal family friend was the late Col. Homes Garrison, Jr., Chief of the Texas Rangers from 1938-1968.

JIM FOSTER’S IDEA

In November, 1979, Hampton Dunn did an article in the Sunland Tribune on Captain Davis. Later on, Tony Pizzo did a television show in which he talked about Captain Davis.

Now, State Rep. Jim Foster, from Tampa, would like to have a bill which would put two signs at both ends of the causeway. One sign would read Davis Causeway and the other would read Courtney Campbell Park. In addition, the two names Davis Causeway and Courtney Campbell Park would be placed on all official Florida road maps.

Last, of the big three in Florida history, being Flagler, Plant, and Davis, I can’t help but feel that those many people over the years, who have carried Captain Davis in their heart with a very deep respect, shall be heard by those in public office, to give Captain Davis justice. As I have often said, ”He belongs to the people and history of Florida.” Yes, all the people of Florida can be very proud of what Captain Davis did for the state of Florida and its people.