Tampa Bay Hotel Is 90 Years Old

Hampton Dunn

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune

Recommended Citation
Dunn, Hampton (1981) "Tampa Bay Hotel Is 90 Years Old," Sunland Tribune: Vol. 7 , Article 3. Available at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol7/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sunland Tribune by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
TAMPA BAY HOTEL IS 90 YEARS OLD

CEDAR KEY’S LOSS TRULY WAS TAMPA’S GAIN
EN PLANT BROUGHT RAILROAD TO WEST COAST

By HAMPTON DUNN

Like a boy playing with building blocks, wealthy Henry Bradley Plant put together his $3.5 million Tampa Bay Hotel.

As a rich man, this railroad magnate could easily afford to splurge on a luxury project of this scope in a small village quite remote from large population centers.

Not only that, the visionary Plant foresaw Tampa as a booming metropolis. In fact, it already had grown tenfold from a community of 700 in 1884, when he brought his railroad to serve the area, to a healthy population of 7,000 by 1891 when he flung open the doors to the palatial hotel. The year 1981 marks the 90th anniversary of the opening of the fabulous hostelry.

A FRIENDLY RIVAL
Actually, Plant also was trying to outdo his friendly rival, Henry M. Flagler, another railroad giant who had just built a resort hotel in St. Augustine - the Ponce de Leon - and shouted that it was the world’s most beautiful.

The story goes that the two Henrys flipped a coin to decide which one would develop which coast of the fledgling Sunshine State. Under this pie-slicing arrangement, Flagler thus stretched his operations the full length of the East Coast, all the way to Key West. Plant looked to the West Coast.

His first thought was of Cedar Key, a thriving little village already served by a railroad from Fernandina. At the time, Cedar Key’s population was much greater than Tampa’s.

Plant bumped into local opposition at Cedar Key that caused him to scurry away and to figure another route for his railroad. He decided to link Sanford with Tampa, via Kissimmee. At Cedar Key he had collided head-on with David Levy Yulee, Florida’s first U.S. Senator and a controversial personage of the Civil War days. Yulee and his relatives owned most of the Florida Transit & Peninsular and he wasn’t hankering for any competition from an "outsider." Yulee laid down an ultimatum to Plant: "Stay out of my port!" Simultaneously, owners of local real estate tried to "hold up" the affluent Plant, and he was thwarted in other ways.

Plant impatiently put the curse on Cedar Key and looked elsewhere. "I’ll take my railroad to Tampa," he announced, "and I’ll wipe Cedar Key off the map. Owls will hoot in your attics, bats will live in your houses.

---

**LOCAL POLITICS**

Henry B. Plant strikes a golfing stance for some of his guests in this early photograph. The large woman in black in the center is Mrs. Plant. The man at far left is T. C. Taliaferro, prominent Tampan and founder of the First National Bank of Tampa.

-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
BEAUTIFULLY APPOINTED BEDROOM
... at plush winter resort

-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
Tampa Bay Hotel
Tampa, Florida
Washington's Birthday, 1913

MENÜ

Buffet Russe

Oyster Cocktail

Clear Green Turtle au Madere

Consommé Pondichery

Creme Mousseline aux Croutons Soufflé

Olives

Salted Almonds

Pickled Peaches

Hearts of Celery

Radishes

Medallion of Red Snapper, Uncle Sam

Pommes Gascogne

Larded Fillet de Boeuf Brasse, Martha

Bartlett Pears Confit, Belle Vue

Sweetbreads Glace, Maison Blanche

Punch aux Fraises

Shrimp a la Creme en Croustades

Roast Ribs of Prime Beef au Jus

Imported Venison a l'Anglaise

Young Turkey, Cranberry Sauce

Boiled Potatoes au Cresson

Boiled Native and Mashed Potatoes

French Peas

Steamed Rice

Browned Sweet Potatoes

Asparagus d'Argenteuil au Beurre

Lettuce and Tomatoes Mayonnaise

New Buttered Beets

Apple Pie

Chocolate Pudding au Sabayon

Maccaronis

Charlotte Russe

Boston Cream Pie

Almond Slices

Glace a l'Americaine

Assorted Cakes

Oranges

Bananas

Apples

Tangerines

Kumquats

Mixed Nuts

Cluster Raisins

Date

Crystallized Ginger

Figs

Cheese:

American

Cream

Roquefort

Saltines

Tealess Water Crackers

Café Demi Tasse
and hogs will wallow in your deserted streets!"

**WELCOME MAT OUT**

Cedar Key's maximum population reached 5,000 but it has dwindled to a tiny fishing village, with the 1970 census putting its population at 714. The same census showed Tampa, which in 1880 had only 720 souls, has grown to 277,767. (A 1978 estimate placed Hillsborough County's population at 615,844.)

Before settling in Tampa, however, Plant made a pass at acquiring Snead's Island in Manatee County but there, too, he bumped into local apathy and opposition.

The welcome mat was out in Tampa, though. Local authorities were generous in concessions to get the railroad. The first Plant System train chugged eastward from Tampa on January 22, 1884.

**WEST SIDE OF RIVER**

Plant's next step was to realize his dream of the world's most magnificent hotel, one that would outsparkle any of the glittering...
Flagler establishments on the East Coast. He selected a site on the west bank of the Hillsborough River and bought 60 acres from a man who 20 years before had acquired it for a white horse and a wagon. Plant's local partners frowned on the project and the Tampa Board of Trade was hopeful the hotel would be built on the east side of the river near town. But Plant prevailed and the City agreed to build a bridge across at Lafayette Street (now J. F. Kennedy Blvd.).

As the Gay Nineties period was inaugurated, contractors rushed to erect the mammoth building which became the most authentic example of Moorish architecture on the North American continent, and also featured fine Turkish architecture. The sprawling hotel, whose roof area spans six acres, was modeled in part after the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain.

The building, which has more than 500 rooms, is about 1200 feet long, with hallways stretching so far the guests were transported from one end to the other by rickshaw. The fireproof structure has walls more than a foot thick which required 452 freight carloads of brick. At the time they were in transit, a fierce yellow fever epidemic raged in Jacksonville and when the freight cars arrived there they were fumigated as suspected carriers of the dread disease. About this time, much of Plant's railroad system in the state was being switched from narrow gauge to standard gauge, and much of the steel used in constructing the Tampa Bay was the old narrow gauge rails.

**NOCTURNAL SIGHTSEERS**

Trademark of the unusual showplace are the 13 silver minarets, representing the 13 months of the Moslem calendar. A movement was carried out by the present
occupant of the building, the University of Tampa, to light the minarets as an attraction for nocturnal sightseers.

In 1981, during the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the University of Tampa, the traditional silver minarets suddenly turned to gold. This brought on some public criticism.

During construction, Mrs. Henry Plant and a corps of secretaries went to Europe on a mission. Armed with an unlimited drawing account, this lady of exquisite and expensive tastes in antiques and elegant furnishings accumulated the finest for the Tampa Bay Hotel. Later, Plant himself joined his wife on trips to roam the Orient for additional treasures.

World history had swirled around some of the objets d’art selected during this famous shopping spree. The beautiful cabinet of fine inlaid wood and stones and the work of a noted European artist had once been the prized possession of Mary, Queen of Scots. It is recalled that she was a religious person and her beliefs brought about her execution. She worshipped before this cabinet and spies discovered her in the practice.
TAMPA U. STUDENTS TAKE OVER HOTEL
... campus scene in 1939
Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
THE QUEEN’S CARPET

The red carpeting used was purchased from Queen Victoria of England. She had refused to accept delivery because the dragon in the design resembled the emblematic British lion which they refused to walk upon.

Antiques came from the palace of King Louis XIV of France, including a black and gold table on top of which rested “The Sleeping Beauty” marble carving. The fabulous list swelled. Mrs. Plant had carried out her unusual assignment with dispatch and efficiency. Cost of the furnishings has been estimated from $500,000 to one million dollars.

An old-time Tampan, who recalls the colorful life at the Tampa Bay during its hey-day, recently observed that the hotel was furnished lavishly but in good taste. "Some good folks have the mistaken idea that the period known as 'The Gay 90s' was a time of vulgar display but that is very far from the truth and with people of means it was a time of gracious living," according to the late Francis M. Jones, a retired oil distributor.

DE SOTO TREATY OAK

The spacious hotel grounds likewise were carefully planned and developed with exotic plants and shrubbery and trees from many lands. To top it all, there stands a massive oak tree under which Hernando de Soto is said to have negotiated a peace treaty with the Indians.

Finally, everything was in order and the first guests registered on January 31, 1891, with the grand opening ball set for February 5. Plant, of course, laid out a party befitting the historic occasion. He sent out some 15,000 invitations, including one to Henry Flagler. Flagler chided his old pal by sending a telegram inquiring, "Where’s the Tampa Bay?" To which Plant retorted, "Follow the crowds!"

Indeed the crowds did beat a path to the Tampa Bay. Millionaires, European royalty, American Presidents, writers, soldiers, people of high rank from all over the world came by special car and train, the final lap over the Plant System railroad, to indulge in the tropical splendor and to share its glamour with others in the international blue book. At a single table in the chandelier-lighted dining room, a party of 20 multi-millionaires feasted on the beauty, service, fine food and liquors. Giovanni Caretta, formerly of Delmonico’s, was the Tampa Bay’s pastry cook, and Rossi from the Manhattan Club of New York was baker.

The hotel became a center of winter social activities, attracting the great and near-great of American society. One of the early
special events was a gala birthday party for Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant. It was here in 1904 that Tampa's unique Gasparilla Carnival was launched. And the Tampa Rotary began a series of famous Press Breakfasts featuring such big names as Henry Watterson, James Whitcomb Riley, George Ade and Samuel Gompers.

Everybody who was anybody sooner or later showed up at the Tampa Bay: to name a few, Anna Pavlova, John Drew, Minnie Maddern Fiske.

The place attracted distinguished writers who found the delightful spot inspirational. Sidney Lanier wrote about the Robins in Plant Park. Hezekiah Butterworth wrote some of his best loved poems here. Stephen Crane drafted his "The Price of the Harness" while a guest at the hotel. Other writers who visited included Richard Harding Davis, famed war correspondent of the Spanish American War, Irwin S. Cobb, Clarence Buddington Kelland, Edward Bok and others.

**BILLY SUNDAY SLEPT HERE**

Famed evangelist Billy Sunday stayed here during his Tampa revival, and was described by a reporter as being "the most contagious individual that ever pounded the carpets of the halls of the Tampa Bay Hotel."

Politicos made a point of being seen at this important castle. The silver-tongued orator, William Jennings Bryan, thrice Democratic nominee for President of the United States, addressed a well-heeled rally here in 1900. He was accompanied by his cousin, William S. Jennings, of Brooksville, who later became Governor of Florida. One other famous visitor was President Grover Cleveland.

An event of historical significance took place in the dining room when the mighty Babe Ruth signed his first baseball contract with the Boston Red Sox.

**OTHER 'NAME’ GUESTS**

Not all persons were "sold" on & Tampa Bay. Sarah Bernhardt, for instance, performed at the Tampa Bay Casino on the grounds, but she preferred to stay in her private railroad car because she felt the rambling hotel was "too drafty".

The Tampa Bay became headquarters for the top brass of the U.S. Army during the Spanish American War in 1898, as Tampa was the debarkation point for troops going to Cuba. A young unknown officer named Theodore Roosevelt camped nearby with his "Rough Riders" but his wife lived at the "big hotel". Generals Joe Wheeler, John B. Gordon, Fitzhugh Lee and Nelson A. Miles were some of the brass who mapped strategy from the verandahs of the Tampa Bay. Clara Barton of Red Cross fame, the "Angel of the Battlefield" in the Civil War, stopped briefly at the hotel then moved to a private residence nearby.

Regimental bands played at night in the hotel, and every night people danced in the rotunda and the brilliant ballroom. But among those watching from the mahogany-railed balconies were pretty Cuban maidens, vowing "We'll not dance again until Havana is free."

**"WORTH EVERY PENNY"**

The imaginative Plant always had something going for the enjoyment of guests and townspeople. He ran a train to Port Tampa where he had a pavilion for dancing, and he also had little launches with Naptha engines to cruise up the river to Sulphur Springs.
Death came suddenly to the railroad king who had done so much to open up the Florida West Coast. He passed away on June 23, 1899, at his northern home at 586 Fifth Avenue, New York, at the age of 80. Just a short time before this he had been strolling through the enchanting gardens of the Tampa Bay, admiring the flowers and flirting with the gailycolored peacocks. Friends had called this costly building and grounds "Plant's Folly" but the old gent laughed with them and said it was worth every penny it had cost him, because he could listen to the splendid music of the German pipe organ.

Following Plant's death, the holding company couldn't get out of the hotel business quickly enough. The showplace had been profitless for some time, so it was put up for sale. An early mayor of Tampa, F. A. Salomonson, made a ridiculous offer of $125,000 and it was snapped up. His first callers turned out to be City tax collectors who presented a large bill for delinquent and current taxes. Salomonson, claiming the property was sold to him free of encumbrances, backed out of the deal. So for $90,000 and the cancellation of tax bills, the City of Tampa in 1906 became the owner of a world-famous hotel.

As the years passed, the City tried to find some use besides running a hotel at a loss. Noting that in five years the deficit was $35,000, someone suggested in 1910 the hotel be made into a City Hall. Editors of the local newspapers fumed and snorted: "This would convert the beautiful Tampa Bay Park into a stamping ground for political rallies and a haven for super-annuated loafers, like the Court House Square." In 1915, promoters for dividing Florida into two states seized on the idea of turning the Tampa Bay Hotel into the State Capitol for the proposed State of South Florida.

In 1920, W. F. Adams picked up the lease, spent a quarter million dollars refurbishing the place and did very well during the Florida boom. But the collapse brought on bankruptcy and in 1932, the doors on Plant's Folly closed.

A short time later during the depression, townspeople formed a new University of Tampa and it turned out that the old hotel building would provide comfortable and adequate quarters. The University moved in in 1933. It continues today as the campus and home, although Tampa U. is bursting at the seams even with many other buildings added to the campus. It's on the National Register of Historic places and is a National Landmark.

In recent times, there have been some derogatory remarks about the Tampa Bay, which has now been formally designated as "The Henry B. Plant Building". Some critics have called it an "architectural monstrosity". And Holiday Magazine a few years ago described the red brick building as an "eyesore". Former State Representative Robert T. Mann of Tampa, had a few unkind remarks about the esthetic quality of the Tampa U. complex charging that the dormitories and other buildings jammed on the campus present "an ugly view" from across the river at the new convention center.

Be that as it may, the kids who live like millionaires while going to college "just love" the unique structure, and Tampa generally promotes the historic site at every opportunity.
Meanwhile, Plant’s vision of 90 years ago that Tampa would become a metropolis has come to pass.

WHERE HERNANDO DE SOTO AND INDIANS PARLEYED
...still stands in front of Tampa U.

-Photo from AMPTON DUNN COLLECTION