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Plant Responds to Tampa's Welcome

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(Editor’s Note: It was a historic red-letter day for Tampa when Henry B. Plant brought his railroad to the West Coast of Florida and got the city moving. There follows Mr. Plant’s response to a toast to him at a banquet welcoming him to Tampa, as reported in the biography The Life of Henry Bradley Plant by G. Hutchinson Smyth, D. D., published in 1898.)

In March, 1886, the Tampa Board of Trade honored Mr. Plant with a splendid banquet, and warmly welcomed him and his friends to this once sleepy old hamlet, now kept awake by the steam whistles of the South Florida Railroad and those of the steamships sailing to the West Indies. In reply to a toast by General John B. Wall, Mr. Plant said:

"Some two years and a half ago I was escorted here by some of the gentlemen present, upon a wagon-line across the peninsula of Florida from Kissimmee City, with Mr. Haines, Mr. Ingraham, Mr. Elliott, and Mr. Allen. We had a day's journey to reach over the gap in the railway that was then being constructed, connecting Tampa with the St. John’s River. It was an interesting trip. I think to the best of my recollection we passed not more than seven habitations on that journey, certainly not
more than that while daylight lasted, and now we can make the trip from Kissimmee to Tampa in three or four hours and find cities on the way, - cities of enterprise, with a frugal and industrious population. Business has grown, and great progress has been made in this part of Florida, but no place has improved more than this town of Tampa. Tampa, it seems to us, had a chill, although the climate was good. A citizen told me on that visit that they did not value the land at anything, but that the air was worth one thousand dollars an acre. That gave the value of Tampa land at that time. All are aware what is the value of Tampa land at present. Very little I am told is for sale.”

WHAT RR HAS DONE FOR TAMPA
"That is what the railroad has done for Tampa. The gentlemen who are associated with me look with pleasure upon the progress that has been made in Tampa. We go back and look upon the progress that has been made by what is known as the Plant System, which commences at Charleston, reaches out to Chattahoochee, and terminates at Tampa. This system, which you probably know, we call under various names; it is part railway, part express company, part steamboat company, part steamship company, but it all has one object and is known as the Plant System. It has been successful in what it has undertaken so far. I think that success may be attributed to the harmony that prevails in the councils on the part of the officers of the railroads, of the steamships, of the steamboats, and express, that go to make up that system. There is no jealousy, but rather a rivalry to know which will do the most. And to that spirit, in every one connected with the system, to do all that is possible to advance its progress is due the success of the Plant System.

"This is, I think, all that can now be said in direct response to the toast, but I would like to say a few words of Tampa, of its possibilities and its opportunities. You are all aware that Tampa is but one port on the Gulf of Mexico from which a railroad extends to the interior. There are ports north of it and ports south of it; ports where railways extend to deep water. Some of them have the advantage of Tampa. It is useless to mention the names, for you all know them; you are familiar with the advantages of all these ports. I will not give the reason why they have not advanced. It may be because they have not all had the railway backing that Tampa has had; they have not had a united line of railways leading to them and extending from them. Tampa has just started, it seems to me, in its progress towards prosperity, and the prosperity that it must receive if it receives the backing that commerce would dictate to it. The wants of commerce are large; they are exacting, and Tampa has many rivals. There are many cities that aspire to it and to grow as these cities see that Tampa is growing at the present time. They will do it, if it is possible, by putting on steamship lines, by putting on railway lines, by extending them to get some of the business at least, that is now drawing towards Tampa, and it is for the people of Tampa to determine for themselves to what extent they shall share it.

POST OFFICE, WAKE UP

"As I have stated, it is important to Tampa's interests to see that all obstructions to commerce are removed; in other words, that commerce and trade shall be unimpeded both to and through Tampa. You all recollect that last year there was a great Exposition in a neighboring city of the Gulf-New Orleans,—where millions of money were expended to draw the attention of the countries south of us, notably the West Indies and South America. This, that their attention might be drawn to the United States, and especially the southern part of the United States, for trade, and, as I said, millions of money were expended on making that Exposition and maintaining it all the winter for the purpose of showing the people of the West India Islands what could be done. That Exposition was gotten up not for benevolence, but for the purpose of inviting trade. Now we are doing all we can to encourage that trade by opening up mail communication between the United States and those very countries that so much money was spent to encourage the trade from.

“We are running steamships three times each week, and I think that every gentlemen
in this hall should raise his voice to the authorities at Washington and endeavor to persuade them to send the mails of the entire United States (I mean the mails of the entire United States, the South and West as well as the East), by the quickest route whereby they can reach those countries of which I have spoken, By that route the mails can reach the whole of the West India Islands, the whole of the west coast of South America, in better time and more frequently, with the present source of communication than by any other line. And notwithstanding that line was put on on the 1st of January, our postal authorities at Washington hardly seem alive to that fact, and, as I said before, I think that the gentlemen of Tampa should raise a united voice that the Post Office Department may be waked up to know there is a route via Tampa that is the quickest for the entire countries south of us. I do not know that I can say any more. I have responded to the toast 'Our Honored Guests,' and said very little about them. I feel somewhat in the position that Mr. Ward probably felt when he was advertised to deliver a lecture on 'Twins.' He occupied his entire evening on the introduction, and left the speech on the 'Twins' out altogether.