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Jane Smith
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CAPTAIN JOHN MILLER BUILT TAMPA’S FIRST SHIPYARD

By JANE (MRS. STOCKTON) SMITH

Captain John Miller, pioneer Tampa merchant, ship owner and operator, builder of Tampa’s first shipbuilding and repair yard, had a very interesting history. It is related in Governor Francis P. Fleming’s Memoirs of Florida that he was born in Norway, August 4, 1834. At the age of 11 he sailed as a cabin boy to Quebec. On
reaching Quebec he became an apprentice on the American ship Allegheny and served four years learning navigation and seamanship. During this time the vessel visited ports in all parts of the world; but those years, though rich in experience and interest, were not correspondingly lucrative for the young boy, as he received no pay for his services.

During the next three years, Miller was a sailor on a packet boat running between New York and Liverpool, serving as second mate part of the time. Then, after spending a year or so on the New England coast and at Matanzas, Cuba, he went to Cape Cod, where he engaged in the summer time in fishing and in the winter was master of a boat making West Indies ports.

**CIVIL WAR EXPERIENCES**

At the outbreak of the Civil War Captain Miller purchased a brig, which was used by the Federal government during the war as a transport. His life was filled with adventure during the war period.

At the close of the war he bought the schooner *George W. Dill* in New York, loaded it with merchandise and sailed for
Florida to engage in trading. He touched first at Key West, then came to Tampa.

Captain Miller’s name was a prominent one in all the navigation in all the waters about Tampa.

In 1867, Miller bought the largest mercantile establishment in the city and for many years was the leading merchant and banker. In 1874 he took as partner, W. B. Henderson, and the firm Miller and Henderson did a large mercantile and banking business for 20 years.

**CARRIED THE MAIL**

Also during this time Captain Miller owned many vessels which made regular trips to New York, New Orleans, Mobile, Philadelphia, Havana, and Central American ports. These vessels carried the mail for all the west coast of Florida, and the firm maintained an inland mail service by wagons until the railroad came in. Two of the largest steamships were the Lucy P. Miller and the Lizzie Henderson, named for Captain Miller’s daughter and Mrs. Henderson.

The firm developed a great banana plantation in Honduras and were pioneers in the shipment of the fruit to the United States. Miller and Henderson built the first telegraph line into Tampa and were instrumental in bringing the cigar industry to Tampa. One of the last business ventures of Captain Miller was the shipyard on the east bank of the Hillsborough River, which is still in operation.

Captain Miller’s first residence on Ashley Street was used by the South Florida Railroad as its passenger station when the road entered Tampa.

**STORY-TELLING TIME**

Captain Miller is entitled to recognition as an important factor in the early development of Tampa and its port. He was a big man physically, and had great courage and vision. It was my privilege during the latter years of his life, when he had retired from active service and when I was embarking in newspaper work, to spend many pleasant hours with him listening to his tales of exciting experiences at sea. Captain Miller had a wide reputation for honesty and fair dealing.

Captain Miller had two children - John H. and Lucy P. (the wife of R. A. Crowell, Tampa). Lucy P. was my very beloved grandmother who helped raise me after my mother, Berdina Crowell Tarr, died when I was young. She used to thrill me with stories of sailing with her father to and from the ports mentioned above, sometimes at the helm alongside her father. She also told of her father and Mr. Henderson owning all the property from John’s Pass to St. Petersburg, recorded in Tampa archives, as payment for a $46 grocery bill. According to my grandmother, John’s Pass was named for her father, Captain Miller.

All of this means that my grandchildren are 6th generation Tampans, of which I am very proud. The beautiful Melrose Inn in Harwich Port, Massachusetts, still in operation, was the home of Captain Miller and my mother’s birthplace. The center section of the Inn is the original homestead.

**FOOTNOTES**

1From the D. B. McKay column in The Tampa Tribune, and from the History of Hillsborough County by Ernest L. Robinson, copyright 1928.