1882-1887 - The Five Years

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1882-1887
The Five Years that Changed a Town into a City

By DR. COVINGTON

In 1880 Tampa was a small village. It had a population of approximately 800 persons, a few stores, several doctors, a few more attorneys, many orange trees and groves, unpaved streets, wooden commercial buildings, two churches, several boarding houses, two hotels, more than a hundred family houses and no banks. Large tracts of land sold for $10.00 an acre and one lot at the corner of Madison and Morgan sold for twenty-five dollars. The frame homes with large yards and sides protected by picket fences were supplied with water by wells, barrels or cisterns and sanitary needs served by outhouses located near the stables in the rear of the lot. The more prosperous of the inhabitants made their money in service industries or the cattle trade with Cuba.¹

The town government was simple in nature. The mayor, elected on an annual basis, presided at weekly council meetings and served as a judge in civic court. He was assisted by the following officials: clerk, marshal and five men in the town council.² Business of the town council usually included condition of streets, sale of products in the city market and disorderly conduct on the part of the citizens. With the exception of a short hose owned by a businessman, there was no fire protection and the duties of the town marshal were so light that he was instructed to check upon the condition of wooden sidewalks, inspect brands of cattle sold for meat, inspect outhouses sited along the banks of the river, old buildings, bridges, and impound hogs and goats found in the streets.³

Traffic with other places in Florida and the United States was limited. There were occasional unscheduled ships from Gulf of Mexico ports, monthly mail service and the cattle boats to Cuba.⁴ Because of these contacts it was necessary to maintain a quarantine station at Ballast Point to prevent the spread of yellow fever to the town. A contact by land was the stagecoach line which ran the 137 miles between Gainesville and Tampa originating at the depot on Morgan Street and Florida Avenue. Another way of reaching the North was to travel by boat to Cedar Keys thence by railroad to Fernandina.

One of the first signs that changes were coming was the decommissioning of Fort Brooke and occupation of the available land by homesteaders. In 1877 part of a larger tract was sold and in 1883, the remaining 148 acres were opened to those who wished to file a homestead claim. Within a short time seventeen applicants including Dr. Edmund Carew from Gainesville who moved into the officer’s quarters claimed

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land and squatters erected tents and huts. Some lots in this area sold for eleven dollars an acre. Thus, a town known as Fort Brooke was organized on Tampa’s borders.

The biggest impact upon Tampa, perhaps in its entire history, was the coming of the railroad to Tampa. After Plant had acquired the rights of the Jacksonville, Tampa and Key West Railroad to construct a railroad into Tampa, his line, the South Florida Railroad began construction in Tampa. Grades were made, ties were cut, rails were laid and locomotives brought in by sea from Cedar Keys and were assembled. Finally the first train moved on the tracks from Tampa to Plant City on December 10, 1883, and service to more distant points on February 13, 1884. The first railroad station was in a converted home on the river banks between Twiggs and Zack streets.

The railroad opened up markets in Tampa during the period of construction and afterwards. The railroad construction stimulated the farmers markets with the buying of food for the laborers and the timber industry with cutting of ties for the railroad. In addition the farmers could get a better price for their products such as strawberries by the fast service to cities in the East. The fishermen could pack their catch in ice and ship the fish and oysters to the same cities.

In the five years from 1880 to 1885 the population had quadrupled bringing problems to the town in the form of needs for proper housing, banking, paving of streets and sidewalks, recreation, transportation, police and fire control, sanitation and water supply. Private enterprise solved some of these problems in 1884 with opening of the Bank of Tampa (First National Bank of Tampa) and the construction of three new hotels capable of housing 350 persons, an opera house and a roller skating rink.

The larger population created some problems which the Town Council attempted to solve. "Lewd houses or houses of ill fame" were prohibited with a fine of $50 to $500 being levied for each offense. For the drifters an ordinance stated: "Any loafing person, who likely can become a nuisance, can be tried and if the mayor is satisfied he is a nuisance, can be taken into custody and put to work on the streets of the town." Since the arrival of the trains was a big event, there was established a fine of $5 for those convicted of annoying passengers or shouting at them from hotel windows.

Construction of wooden sidewalks along Water, Whiting and Marion streets continued with the owners of adjacent lots paying 2/3 of the cost of construction. It would not be until the turn of the century that hard surfaced walks would be constructed at Lafayette (Kennedy) and Tampa. Since there was a need for street cars and a public water system, contracts were awarded but both companies given the contracts initially could not fulfill their obligation and withdrew.

Stimulated by the growth of business and a demand for better services, the Town Council made a few improvements. An attorney at the rate of $200 a year was added to the list of elected officials, a port inspector at $50 a month added to the payroll and assigned
to the Quarantine Station, and membership of the Town Council increased from five to nine members. The Sanitary Committee of the Council reported that a considerable amount of trash had accumulated in the streets and that cisterns should be used instead of shallow wells. Within a short time persons convicted of violating town ordinances were put to work on the streets instead of paying fines and owners of lots were advised to clear debris from them. Oil street lamps were installed at alternate corners in the downtown area and the marshal instructed to check them and keep them in repair. With this additional duty, he was allowed to hire an assistant at the rate of $25 a month.

Three improvements were still needed to meet the needs of the growing towns. The aroused citizens of Tampa held a meeting at the opera house on April 13, 1886 in which they petitioned the council to provide a proper supply of water for fire protection. In a compromise the council decided to provide the volunteer fire company which had been organized in 1884 with a pumper. Finally the machine was purchased in 1886 at a cost of less than $600 but could be used only against fires which started near the river or a lake. It was stipulated that privies could not be erected closer than three feet from a property line and a town scavenger hired to empty privies at a rate of 250 per cleaning. Both human and solid waste were taken to the town dump. Finally the Tampa Police Force was started with the hiring of two men, Jim Roach and Frank Jackson, at the rate of $30 a month.

Next, the progressive members of the business community organized in order to lure more firms to Tampa. On May 7, 1885 the town’s leaders met at Branch’s Opera House and elected Dr. John T. Wall as the first President of the Board of Trade or Chamber of Commerce. It was this organization that helped raise the money so that Vicente M. Ybor could locate his cigar business in Ybor City. In addition, the Board of Trade guaranteed the daily sale of five tons of ice so that an ice plant could be established in Tampa. Due to the actions of the Board of Trade within a year 1885-1886, the cigar industry came to Tampa and the fishing industry flourished.

With these gains, the citizens, mayor and town council began to press for incorporation as a city. Needed at this time were sewer and water systems, electric lights, paving of the streets, better public transportation, police and fire protection, expansion across the western bank of the Hillsborough River and annexation of some subdivisions. The start of this would come in 1887.

These five years from 1882 to 1887 had seen the growth of a town into a city. The coming of the railroad and location of the community upon Tampa Bay made this growth possible. Getting the industries such as the railroad, shipping of fish and phosphate, cigar and ice manufacturing were important and the citizen groups achieved their goal. Other services such as police and fire protection, parks, schools, public transportation, water and sanitary sewers lagged behind.

NOTES

1 As of this date the best published book on the history of Tampa is the one by Karl H. Grismer
Tampa: A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida (St. Petersburg, 1950) but the forthcoming book on Tampa by Pizzo and Mormino may supersede it. A photographic record of Tampa's past was compiled by Hampton Dunn Yesterday's Tampa (Miami, 1972).

2 This town charter had been authorized for Florida towns in acts passed by the legislature in 1868, 1869 and 1872. The Tampa government was legalized by the legislature in a special act passed in 1877. Acts and Resolutions Adopted by the Legislature of Florida at its Ninth Session Under the Constitution of 1868 (Tallahassee, 1877), 118-119.

3 Minutes Mayor's Court, August 21, 1857-May, 1882, City Clerk's Office, August 17, 1876. Hereafter cited as Minutes.


6 The Jacksonville, Tampa and Key West Railroad had been granted right to lay and use a single track of railroad along Whiting and other streets in August, 1881 and fifteen miles of grade completed but work soon stopped due to lack of funds. Tampa wanted a railroad so much that no taxes were to be levied upon the railroad. Minutes, August 4, 1881.

7 Grismer Tampa, 173-174.

8 Minutes, February 9, 1886.

9 Minutes, February 3, 1886.

10 Minutes of July 1, 1885 and October 8, 1885.

11 Minutes of February 3, 1886.

12 Minutes of August 16, 1886.