Alex Browning and the Building of the Tampa Bay Hotel:
Reminiscences

James W. Covington
University of Tampa

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In 1889 Alex Browning came to work as assistant architect to J. A. Wood who was designing the Tampa Bay Hotel for Henry B. Plant. Forty years after he had worked on the project, Browning decided to write an account of what he had done and some of the details concerning the construction of the hotel. Of course, an account written forty years after the event is not as valid as one written just after the incident has taken place, but it is the best available record of the construction of the hotel. So far, letters and plans left by Plant or Wood have not been found.

Alex Browning born in 1866 at Paisley, Scotland had come to Sarasota with his family in 1885. The Brownings had been engaged in lumber mill and wood work operations in Scotland, but John Browning decided to take a chance with the newly organized Florida Mortgage and Investment Company which had purchased 50,000 acres at Sarasota, Florida from Hamilton Disston and needed settlers. In 1885, sixty settlers from Scotland and England came to Sarasota but soon left, finding the place not as it was described to them in Great Britain. Only John Hamilton Gillespie, the John Browning family and several others of the group remained to seek a livelihood in Florida.
The details of Alex Browning’s life between 1885 and 1889 are not clear. At first he worked with his father erecting buildings for the Florida Mortgage and Investment Company. How he and Wood became acquainted is not known. Browning’s account of the work on the Tampa Bay Hotel is good, and his memory for details is much better than the average person. Differences between Browning’s account and facts known to other persons are noted in the footnotes.

* * *

When the people of Tampa first realized that Mr. H. B. Plant was going to build a hotel in their city, it came with the knowledge of the fact, that, most of the Hayden homestead had been bought by Mr. J. A. Wood, an architect, whose office was at 152 Broadway, New York City.

The Hayden orange grove was situated on the west side of the Hillsboro River, where the family lived in a large rambling one-story frame house, with wide verandas all around located amongst the orange trees, about a hundred yards from the river. They had reserved their home and a few acres of land in the deal, but sold all from there to the old ferry road that led down to the river, opposite Lafayette Street in the city.¹ I don't know how many there was [sic] of the Hayden family, but Doc was one of them, a dentist, travelling around the country, pulling teeth, a good mixer with the boys in town. Hayden, south of Sarasota was named after him.
The rest of the Hayden property extended along the river front, to the track of the Jacksonville, Tampa and Key West Railway where the [Railroad] draw bridge was swung in the center. They crossed the river in their own skiff to get to town.

There was no bridge across the river for passengers at this time. At the foot of Lafayette St. there was a ferry, just a decked over barge, large enough to carry a double team, the motive power being long poles on the river bottom. There was also a flat bottom boat rowed by the ferryman, for passengers, for which a small payment was made.

Soon after the land transaction was recorded, a gang of blacks started to grade for a spur line from the main [railroad] line to the newly acquired Tampa Bay Hotel property, as it was now called.

Before this was completed, Mr. Wood and a few mechanics commenced to step off the location of the buildings to be erected, eventually settling in his mind where to place the workshop and store houses.

Jerry Anderson, the proprietor of the H. B. Plant Hotel and a large two-story frame building, with two-story frame verandas, situated on the corner of Tampa and Zack Streets . . . where Maas Brothers Department Store now stands, was put in charge of the black laborers, clearing the land where the temporary buildings were to go. In the meantime an order had been put in to Dorsey’s mill, up the river a short ways, to cut dimension lumber for the erection of office and building, and an open barge was being built at Swift’s boat yard, for the transportation of this material from the mill to the hotel grounds by water.

One of the conditions, made with the City, was that [it] should build a bridge across the river at the foot of Lafayette Street; a promise they fulfilled to the letter, and Jim MacKay was soon busy driving the piling. How this permit was obtained so hastily from the U.S. War Department, and a wooden draw bridge sanctioned, is one of the secrets of S. M. Sparkman, the shrewd lawyer who negotiated for it.

The fat pine blocks were brought by ox teams, and Fred Cooper [was] made foreman of the carpenters. He soon had a gang of men on the job, the lumber being carried up from the temporary wharf, where it was unloaded from the newly built barge [and] rowed from the mill with a black on the end of long sweeps, three on each side, and one to steer by.

The first building to be built was about seventy-five feet square with a hip roof of shingles, the floor [was] about six feet off the ground, and [the] basement excavated underneath. At the south end the office was located, and opposite this the store room; the rest of the floor was the carpenter shop where Fred Coyne, a Canadian, was made foreman of the shop, and benches built in place, and a band saw installed.
The south half of the main building, as far as the rotunda, was then laid out in the old fashioned way with a carpenter's level and [a] straight edge with lines drawn from a given center. George Cusack was now foreman brickmason, and E. B. Holt, from New York, Superintendent, while Mr. Wood was in the office, figuring on his plans and ordering materials.

Most of local materials were strange to him; [there was] no gravel or broken stone or coarse sand to make concrete with, and Greencove brick [was] too soft to use in the foundations. The idea that oyster shells would make good concrete had him send a barge down to the Alafia River and get a load from a mound there. I was sent to walk along the [railroad] track, taking a black along to carry empty cigar boxes and bring back samples of likely building sand where a switch could be built to go in and get it. This was a long hot walk, but I did get what was wanted. [T]his sand was used to build the entire building of concrete, brick mortar, and plastering, and does not show a crack or blemish to this day, over forty years old. The cement used was the Brooklyn brand, a natural cement, made at Kingston on the Hudson River, N.Y. and brought to Tampa by the Benner Line of sail boats. [T]he first lime used was also brought on the schooners.

The brick, then being supplied from Green Cove Springs, [was] a soft sand burned brick. When samples were brought from Campville, Mr. Wood soon made arrangements and started a
brickfield there, making sand and lime brick, and kept this place making them for the next four years. As one looks at these built in the wall, they are as good today as when they were first laid.\(^8\) The kilns are still burning them, the same texture and color as when they first started making them. Ocala lime was then made and brought in barrels, the black mortar mixers were kept busy slacking this rock lime ahead of time as it had to stand a few days before using.

At this time there [were] not many mechanics in Tampa to draw from. Although Mr. Wood was a driver of men working under him, he was always fair in his dealings with them. [A]ll he wanted was a fair day’s work done, something the natives were not accustomed to yet . . . . Being of an inventive mind, he soon had some of the town boys as apprentices, learning the brick mason trade. Among them were Fred J. James, A.I.A., now President of the State Board of Architecture, the two Webb boys, Ernie and his brother, George Bean, now a Washington politician, and [James] Lenfestey, now in the broom manufacturing business. All of them served their apprenticeship on this job and were full fledged mechanics when it finished three years later.

The plans were followed only as the architect directed. He was on the job from early morning to late at night. Ten hours was a day’s work then, but this did not seem to satisfy him, and it often was my luck for him to get me about the time the gong rang, and talk things over, and plan tomorrow’s work.

John Mahony was accountant and time keeper, and he was well liked by everybody. Dapper and neatly dressed, with a close trimmed beard, he knew all the men by their first names and did much to keep the job running smoothly.

One of the first difficulties on the job was taking care of the water of a small creek that drained the back woods, near the ferry road. A culvert was built, and the foundations built over it. This led to a circular pond down by the river to grow aquatic plants later.\(^9\)

About this time the Yellow Fever broke out in Tampa, and all who could, got away from it as far as they could, but this did not stop the hotel work although the forces were greatly diminished.\(^10\) Mr. Wood kept a supply of medicine for workers who were complaining, both white and black, and bought oat meal for the water boys to put a dipper full in each bucketful of water. This kept the men strong and healthy, and I believe, this was the reason there was so little sickness on the job. The blacks got fat and slick on this oat meal and would dig down to the bottom of the bucket to get the settlings. Mr. Wood would point at them with pride, as if exhibiting a slick looking mule, commenting on their brawny appearance. Although he was a hard task master, he had many good qualities. Old Frank Hardaway, an old slave, was given the house boy’s job. He would go over to town and bring a hot lunch from the hotel, to Mr. Wood, but all the rest of us would carry our dinner pails, half an hour being allowed for lunch.

After the Yellow Fever epidemic, there were only a few missing from the hotel job. Their places were filled by mechanics from the north, and the building activities started again in earnest. Another section was laid out, making the main building 1200 feet long.
Mr. Van Bibber, a carpenter and boat builder, made all the molds for casting the stone lintel courses, sills and skewbacks, and a crew kept busy making artificial stones, laid out in the shade to cure. At this time all the Portland cement was brought from Germany or Belgium, distinguished from the Natural cement by the iron hoop on the barrels. I believe it cost delivered in Tampa, $3.00 a barrel for Portland, and $1.75 a barrel for the Rosendale, Brooklyn Brand, named after the Brooklyn Bridge, where it was used extensively. The only reason why Portland was used in making the stones was that it was lighter in color.

As the building progressed, large rain water tanks were incorporated as part of the foundation walls. Other walls were spaced off, which later on became the Bar Room, and Billiard Rooms, with toilets and elevator pits. These were covered over with steel beams and joists to support the first floor.11

The window openings were horseshoe arches, the light and dark colored brick used to radiate the colors, and stone skewbacks and key centers were used, the whole design of the hotel being Moorish.12

As the brick work was going on at one end of the building, the footings were being put in at the other end. All the concrete was mixed by hand, on the sweat board. There were no concrete mixers then, and only the stoutest men could do this heavy work. Extra pay was allowed them,
the same pay as the mortar mixers, $1.75 a day, while common labor was paid $1.25 for ten hours.

There was a large circular saw, hung up on a wire, outside the time keeper’s office. This was used for starting the men to work, and at quitting time, by continuous banging with an iron rod; premature [primitive] but effective. Mr. Holt and myself had a certain number of strikes on this so called gong to call us to the office, when wanted there; it saved a lot of time on a building 1200 feet long and was more certain to find us than sending a boy as messenger.

When not at the [drafting] board working on the plans or more often filling in alterations that had been made on the construction as improvements when they came to the notice of Mr. Wood, my work was principally keeping track of materials, brick, lime, cement, steel and etc. and bringing lumber in the barge from the mill, with a gang of blacks, and stacking it carefully in the shed by the river. Mr. Wood took a great interest in this material, cypress mostly, to see that it was . . . straight and true, anticipating all his requirements . . . when it came to finishing the job.

Some of this cypress seasoned here for over two years before being cut up and made into inside finish, and to this day, forty-three years later, does not show decay or shrinkage. All the scroll work on the front veranda was made on the job from this cypress, sawn at Dorsey’s mill from logs floated down to Hillsboro River. When being sawed, it was necessary for the sawyer to wear a south wester and fishermans’ oil skins to keep from getting soaked with the spray from the wet logs, some of them four feet in diameter. [They were] heavy to handle at this time, but light when seasoned.

At the mill, one day, getting the barge loaded, I took a violent vomiting spell and became quite sick. My old black, noticing me, said “Boss you going to be mighty sick soon, better start back with what load is on now.” I managed to steer back to the hotel dock and went in the shed and lay down. Old Frank went and got John Mahony, who got a buggy and sent me home. This developed to a bad attack of malaria fever and bloody flux, and I nearly died. Dr. Weedon attended me, along with Peter Bruce Stewart, an old friend, who came with us on the “S.S. Furnessia” from the old country. Between them they cured me, and I was back on the job in about three weeks time, although very weak.

Mr. Wood kept me at the drawing board, making details, and checking up materials, mostly in the shade, till I got stronger. One day Jerry Anderson let a car get away from him. It was loaded with bricks on a down grade, and went through the back wall of the hotel, at this time, two stories high. For a punishment, his job was given to me. I seemed to be the only intelligent goat, and Jerry was made a straw boss, cleaning up the mess he was blamed for. Nobody was hurt, and the change of occupation only made the job more interesting. This didn't last long, and Jerry soon had his old job back again, bossing the blacks, unloading materials.

The carpenter shop foreman, Fred Coyne, was kept busy making window and door circle head frames. All the machinery he had was a band saw, driven by black power: two men on the handles, fastened on each side of the fly wheel.

Later on there was a small engine and upright boiler installed and a whistle for the time keeper. It was my job to see that [it] was kept with steam pressure, and a black [was] given me to fire [it]
The engine was placed in the basement, with a line of shafting and bolts running to the machines above. Then a circular saw and planer was installed, making a real handy place to work in. The circular saw was no respecter of persons, [and] Haskins lost a finger or two.

The tin shop was also in this basement, in the charge of Pete, an octoroon tinsmith. All this hotel was covered with “Taylors Old Style Pontiminter” and is still on the roof and towers. [It was] a good example of American made tin, newly on the market at that time. Pete is now janitor in charge of the library in Tampa Heights.

As the building advanced, the south end was roofed in first. The carpenters placed the out riggers for the galvanized cornice, keeping me busy making drawings for the brackets going in the angles and circles.

Dan Shea came from New York to take charge of the plumbing and steam fitting; he was recommended for the job by the Durham Plumbing Supply Co. Consequently, all pipes and fittings were got from them. The whole system of plumbing was screw fittings and soil pipe as well. There were no State Sanitary Laws in those days, and many present day ordinances were violated. Still this was considered a first class, up-to-date job of plumbing.

When the steamer “H.B. Plant,” running between Jacksonville and Sanford, burned to the water line, it naturally put John Shea out of a job. He was purser on the boat. So he came with the hotel company as John Mahony’s assistant time keeper and was given charge of the store room, while I was advanced to assistant superintendent, with increase of pay.

As time advanced, what was done as routine ways of working, now seem strange. For instance, we had no level instrument, only hand levels. Yet when a survey was made in later years, it was found that in 1200 feet, the length of the building, there was less than a course of brick out of level, a remarkable showing on any building. The method of fireproofing the floors of the halls was distinctly unique and original as designed by Mr. Wood. In the halls, steel beams were spaced at regular centers, the the form was supported on the lower flanges, and the spaces against the beams filled in with concrete. One inch tee irons were placed across from beam to beam, and galvanized iron wire cable, with the twist still in it, laid across the tees. This was then filled over with concrete and the beams covered in. The aggregate of concrete was broken bricks, oyster shell and white sand, mixed eight to one, with Rosendale Cement.

This steel cable was got from Punta Rassa, Florida, an old submarine telegraph cable, that formerly carried messages to Key West and then to the West Indies. It was brought up from Punta Rassa by schooner as deck load, and unloaded on the hotel embankment.

Whenever wanted, a piece the length required was sawn off and unwound. The copper cable in the center was saved, and almost paid for the freight of bringing it on the job. When this cable was all used up, the Benner Line of schooners would bring as deck load all the old cable they could carry from the N.Y. terminal of the Brooklyn Bridge. At that time the cars were all cable cars, and this old cable was bought for a mere trifle, all good for reinforcing concrete. The rope center was later cut up and used as hair in the inside plastering. This concrete was finished underneath with white coat, and is easily seen without a crack to this day. I was told by Mr. Gus
Kahn, of the Truscon Steel Company, that as far as he knew this was the first reinforced concrete work in the United States.

Underneath the hotel, there were large rain water cisterns built of concrete reinforced with cable wire. Although filled with water for years, I never knew them to leak.

The structural steel came on the job, in lengths as ordered, but not fabricated. Somehow, it fell to my lot to have the holes punched in their proper places, to fit to the angles or stays. There was a hydraulic punch for this purpose . . . worked with a short handle, as a pump. It’s a fact, a lady could punch a hole in a twenty inch iron beam, seven eighths of an inch in diameter with ease. This pump was filled with alcohol and a few drops of sperm oil. There was a small air hole on top to relieve the suction on the plunger.

There was an artesian well driven, but it was not a success as a flowing well. The water came to within three feet of the surface. Tom Smith and I were given the job to cut a hole in the six inch casing below this level and attach a two inch pipe to carry the water to the basement, where the water boys came to fill their buckets. This was used until such time as the city water was brought across the river.

The Solarium.
When the main building was finished on the outside and the roof was on, the dining room and solarium [were] laid out on the north end. Connected to this [were] the kitchen and pantry and cold storage plant refrigeration rooms.

The annex joined the dining room. The second story was on the same level as the gallery of the dining room around the dome, which formed a hemispherical roof, ninety feet high, from floor to apex. As I said before, the style of architecture was Moorish, and the gallery above the dining tables, while used by the orchestra later on, was following out the idea that the women of the harem should look down on their lords while eating without being seen themselves. [This was] a little far-fetched for Tampa, but quite effective architecturally.
Editor’s Note: The next portion of the narrative, which is omitted here, related to building of the dome, the sickness of Wood and W. T. Cotter serving in his stead, the drafting office, Eureka Electric Company with the electric contract and Otis Elevator Company with the elevator contract and construction of the servants’ quarters and power house.

Most of this time Mr. and Mrs. H. B. Plant were travelling in Japan buying all sorts of bric-a-brac and sending it to the hotel. Some of it was most appropriate and some of it altogether out of place. This resulted in the trimmings of the bar room, the billiard room, and writing room finish being changed to Teak wood and mother of pearl. The furniture and rugs were in accordance with the spirit, and altogether the effect was wonderful. The Ladies’ Parlor mantle piece came from the Vanderbilt Mansion, being wrecked at this time. This necessitated a lot of extra work in the [drafting] room, making other parts to correspond and harmonize.

With five hundred workmen on the job, each day saw a lot of work done. Everybody was busy. Overtime was being paid time and a half. A good plumber [was] paid as much as two hundred
dollars . . . for one week’s work. Some of the mahogany finish such as the stair case, and rotunda railings, were made outside by contract and erected by our carpenters.

The grounds were laid out and put in charge of Anton Feigh, a German gardner, and palms and palmettos were transplanted, some of them over fifty feet high. The gate entrance and walks around the rose gardens were planned in the office, and afterwards staked out by me. Curbs and walks were paved, all on the front of the hotel. Then a conservatory [was] contracted for and built by northern people. Wharfs and boat houses [were] installed on the lawn. Soon the place was a perfect paradise of roses and tropical plants.

As the hotel construction got finished, the carpets were laid. It had been my job to measure the rooms, make drawings and number them to correspond, then send them to New York and have the carpets made to fit. Mr. Cotter congratulated me later [and said] that all the carpets fitted exactly [with] no mistakes in the sizes.

When the furniture was all in place, Mr. Hayes came as hotel manager, bringing with him a staff of cooks, and Mrs. Trowbridge as housekeeper. [She] had her assistants and chamber maids who soon had the place all nice and clean, giving the whole place a homelike atmosphere.

1 So far as can be ascertained, Plant purchased tracts of land which totaled sixty acres in 1886 and 1890 from Jesse Hayden and Mrs. Nattie S. McKay. The Hayden house was standing on the site where the lobby of the hotel building

2 A marker commemorating the ferry and erected by the Hillsborough County Historical Commission stands at the foot of the east side of the bridge.

3 The word “black” had been substituted for other terms throughout this narrative.

4 In addition, James A. Wood of Philadelphia designed the DeSoto Hotel and Hillsborough County Court House.

5 The forty room “H. B. Plant,” located on the east side of Ashley between Lafayette (Kennedy) and Madison, was opened on December 14, 1884, Grismer *Tampa*, p. 179.

6 The earliest available City of Tampa Directory is for the year 1900 and it does not list either Swift’s boat yard or Dorsey’s mill.

7 John A. McKay had built the railroad bridge across the Hillsborough River. Grismer, *Tampa*, p. 186. Simeon Sparkman served as attorney for the Plant System. His office was at 511 1/2 Franklin Street.

8 Some bricks were brought from Ohio and others were supplied by barge from the Hillsborough Brick Company, *Tampa Tribune*, August 30, 1889.

9 This small creek, now known as Biology Creek, empties into the Hillsborough on the campus of the University of Tampa. The circular pond is still in existence.

10 Seventy-nine persons died in the yellow fever epidemic which lasted from September 22, 1887 to January 11, 1888. Grismer, *Tampa*, pp. 185-186.

11 These rooms have been converted into a rathskeller, kitchen, and men’s room.

12 Actually the two large domes reflect a Byzantine influence in combination with the Moorish theme.

13 Between 1930 and 1935 Madison Barber salvaged nearly 3000 pine and cypress logs that had sunk in the Hillsborough River during the logging days. *Tampa Tribune*, December 12, 1954.

14 The change from narrow to standard gauge on the South Florida Railroad provided rails which were used to reinforce the walls and ceilings. Some rails can be seen at present in the ceiling of one classroom.

15 The International Ocean Telegraph Company line from the North entered the Gulf at Punta Rassa or Fort Dulaney and extended to Key West then to Cuba.

16 At present the dining room is known as the Fletcher Lounge.

17 This section has been converted to the Science area.

18 A trip to Europe for the purchase of items there took place in 1889, but the Japanese trip occurred in 1897. Some of these items purchased were overpriced and were of doubtful origin.

19 Anton Fiche, a Frenchman, was in charge of the gardening activities, *Tampa Tribune*, June 21, 1959.

20 A catalogue of fruit and flowers lists twenty-two kinds of palm trees, thirteen kinds of ferns, nine kinds of cacti, eleven kinds of orchids and numerous citrus trees. One mango still bears fruit. The original catalogue is at the P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.
Red carpeting with woven emblematic dragon and lion figures are still on the floor of the Plant Museum lodged in the former hotel building.