

12-1-1982

The Don Ce-Sar Story by June Hurley

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Recommended Citation

Westfall, L. Glenn (1982) "*The Don Ce-Sar Story* by June Hurley," *Tampa Bay History*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol4/iss2/13>

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William D. Courser

The Don Ce-Sar Story. By June Hurley. St. Petersburg Beach. 1975. Second Edition. Partnership Press. Photographs. P. 69. Paper.

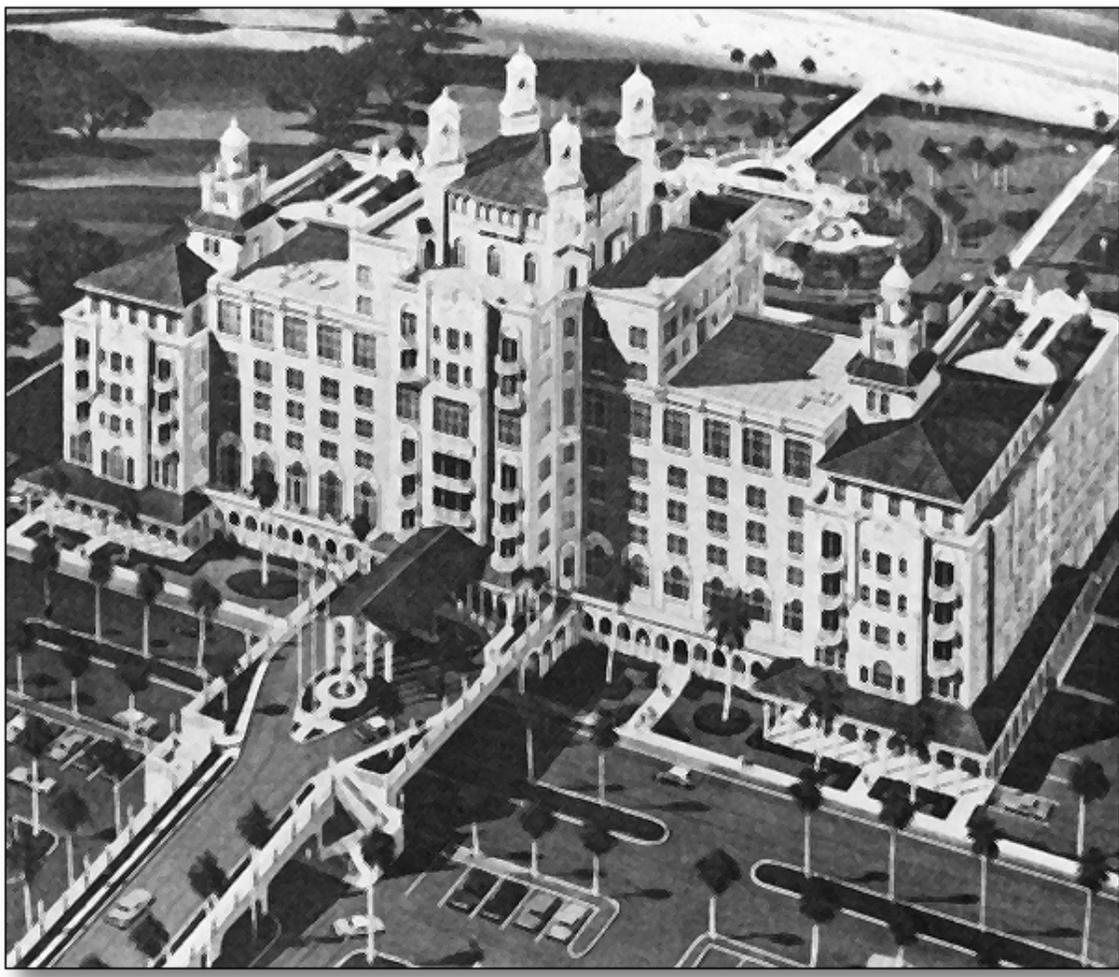
June Hurley's book is one of the first historical and architectural records of a St. Petersburg structure, although it lacks footnoting and sources of information. The author records local history from the perspective of a preservationist.

In the mid-twenties, hotel construction in Pinellas County was rampant. The Soreno, Pheil, Suwanee, Dennis and Jungle Country Club were only a few of the tourist-oriented buildings. Caught in the building fever was a transplanted Bostonian, Thomas J. Rowe. Unlike his competitors, he decided to construct directly on the Gulf of Mexico, a fabulous beach resort, the Don Ce-Sar.

An aficionado of the opera, Rowe named his hotel after Don CeSar De Balzan, legendary hero of Vincent Wallace's opera "Maritana." Rowe, a visionary dreamer, overlooked staggering obstacles to construct on the isolated beach. Building materials were floated on barges since there was only one small bridge connected to the downtown area. The hazard of constructing a large edifice on shifting sand was resolved by laying a base of three-stepped slabs of cement two feet thick. On this firm foundation, construction began on a build-as-you-plan basis. Craftsmen often worked from on-the-spot instructions, making blueprints afterwards. This haphazard construction increased the original building costs of a 110-room, \$450,000-hotel to a \$1,350,000, 220-room resort. Undaunted by costs, Rowe successfully financed construction through wealthy entrepreneurs, and opened the 1928 tourist season in with a party for 1,500 selected guests. It became an immediate landmark, both because of its grandeur and the pink (Rowe called it "rouge") stucco exterior, reminiscent of similar exteriors on homes in Ireland where he spent some time in his youth.

In spite of the stock market crash and the Depression, Rowe's shrewd business mind wisely managed the hotel by offering reduced rates, and won national recognition when F. Scott Fitzgerald vacationed there. Thomas Rowe died in 1940, but his hotel survived in spite of seemingly hopeless odds.

In the opera "Maritana," the hero Don CeSar was sentenced to death by a firing squad. The guns miraculously misfired, and when the smoke cleared, the Don stood unharmed, was pardoned and lived a long and fruitful life. The hotel suffered a similar fate. In 1942, the United States Army condemned the building, converting it into a hospital. After World War II, it was transformed into a regional office for the Veteran's Administration. "Remodeling" destroyed the hotel and the interior was transformed into a sea of offices. Visible exterior deterioration was evident by 1960, and a leaky roof all but placed the hotel on the community firing squad. City fathers determined the structure was a hazard and condemned the Don to a formidable death by demolition and replacement with either a public park or several single family residences. It was then that June Hurley added preservationist-historian to her curricula vitae. She formed the "Save the Don" Committee, making the public aware of the threat to a major beach landmark. Her



Don CeSar, St. Petersburg Beach from *The Don CeSar Story*.

concerted effort won the attention of William Bowman, owner of the St. Petersburg Holiday Inn. Demolition plans, like the bullets threatening the Don's life, were successfully averted. The Don underwent renovation, including replacement of all plumbing, the removal of room partitions constructed by the government, and an exterior facelift. Bowman also removed the hyphen from the hotel's name, calling it the Don CeSar, and saved a significant St. Petersburg landmark from an untimely destruction for future generations to appreciate.

L. Glenn Westfall

The Magic City – Miami. By Arva Moore Parks. Tulsa, Oklahoma. 1981. Continental Heritage Press, Inc. Photographs. Pp. 224. Cloth.

The Magic City – Miami with text by Arva Moore Parks and photography by Steven Brooke, represents a contribution to the literature on the history of southeast Florida. Those who want a scholarly history of the city will have to go elsewhere, for the book has neither footnotes nor