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Forty Years of the Tampa Port Authority

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The Tampa Port Authority marked its 40th anniversary on Nov. 16, 1985. In the first part of a two-part story, veteran Tampa writer and longtime Tampa Port Authority staff member Thomas J. O’Connor recounts the port authority’s first 40 years.

Forty years ago World War II finally had come to an end. The relatively small city of Tampa, Florida, had experienced a degree of prosperity during the war years. Two principal U.S. Army Air Corps bases and shipyards had been located in Tampa.
Anyone who wanted to work could find a job. This was in profound contrast to the years between 1927 and 1941 when Tampa languished in the depths of economic depression, an almost forgotten city struggling to stay alive.

The influx of money provided by the war effort gave Tampa a new lease on life. Civic leaders, on the verge of discouragement for many years, regained their optimism and were determined the momentum of prosperity, though brought on by war, should not be lost.

The city’s Chamber of Commerce recognized the opportunities available and moved on several fronts. Among these was a determination to take advantage of physical assets left over from the war, including the port and the aviation facilities abandoned by the military.

AN OVERVIEW of the busy Tampa port looking southeastward from the old Tampa Electric Company power plant toward the Platt Street Bridge, newly filled-in Davis Islands, Seddon Island (now Harbour Island), east bank of Hillsborough River between Platt St. and Lafayette Street (now Kennedy Blvd.). Photo probably taken in the late 1920s.

-BURGERT BROS. Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION.
PORT AUTHORITY IS CREATED

During the state legislative session in the spring of 1945, two laws were passed, one establishing the Hillsborough County Port Authority and the other, the Hillsborough County Aviation Authority.

Given the political environment of the times, the legislators were reluctant simply to enact the creating legislation. Attached to the bills was a provision calling for a referendum to ratify the decisions of the lawmakers. The referendum was held October 16, 1945 and passed overwhelmingly.

One month later, on November 16, 1945, the Hillsborough County Port Authority held its organizational meeting in the old Chamber of Commerce building located at the corner of Morgan and Lafayette Streets (now Kennedy Boulevard).

The five civic leaders appointed by Governor Millard Caldwell had a wealth of experience in various spectra of business and politics. They knew what they had to do. Their mission was to develop a Port to create jobs and continue the momentum which had been established by the war.

SPESSARD L. HOLLAND, then Governor of Florida and later U.S. Senator, was speaker at ceremonies at which Tampa Shipbuilding Company, Inc., received the coveted Army-Navy “E” Award on July 7, 1944.
The five men who gathered in that old red brick building, long since torn down, were Morris White, attorney and veteran of World War 1; Richard E. Knight, real estate broker and appraiser; Bruce Robbins, lumber company executive; Captain F.M. Hendry, a former mariner and operator of a dredging company; and Byron Bushnell, a steel company executive.

**MORRIS WHITE CHAIRS**

White was elected chairman; Hendry, vice chairman; Knight, secretary treasurer, a post he held for 14 years until he resigned in June 1959. Knight was a driving force behind the authority for these formative years and devoted endless hours to the authority’s progress.

Also present were Chamber of Commerce executives, a representative of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Jim Quinn, a certified public accountant who, until a few weeks before, had been the governor-appointed harbor master for the port. His job had been abolished by the new act.

For many years the port had been administered by the harbor master. Before that it was administered by the city commission and previous to that, by a board of port commissioners. These entities had performed very well over the years. They had sponsored several harbor improvement projects with the Federal government. The basis for a modern port was in place.

Only one of these first commissioners, Morris White with the law firm Fowler, White, Gillen, Boggs, Villareal and Banker, remains alive today. The other four would be proud of what has been accomplished in 40 years. The Port of Tampa has risen from virtual obscurity to one of the top ten in the United States.

Tampa had not always been a backwater port. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries there was heavy activity. Coastwise U.S. flagships called regularly with goods from the industrial north and returned with Florida agricultural products. There also was limited commerce with the outside world. Trade was heavy with Cuba and products of Florida forests found their way to world markets through the port. Since the war had disrupted much of this trade, a new start had to be made.

The five new port authority commissioners knew that a new era in shipping was at hand. They sensed the nation and the world would change profoundly following the devastation of war. Thus, one of the first items they tackled was obtaining authorization from Congress to deepen the harbor channels from 28 feet to 34 feet.

**FIRST PRIORITIES**

Such details as employing a port manager, H. Barton Lewis at a salary of $3,400 a year, were disposed of quickly. There was little money. The law provided that the authority could receive one-eighth mill in ad valorem taxes. It also provided for a harbor master fee of $10 for ships in domestic trade and $20 for ships flying foreign flags. On April 1, 1946, after taxes had been received and harbor master fees paid, Lewis reported the authority had $769.50 in the bank and $269.45 in bills payable.

The second most important item addressed by the board was the acquisition of the McCloskey Shipyards at the southern tip of Hooker’s Point. This yard, which had produced a limited number of concrete ships during the war, had been declared war
surplus. Although it was a hodgepodge of derelict lumber, it contained shipways in which ships had been constructed and it was seen as a location for a new port complex.

Tampa Attorney Ray Brown, one of the authors of the Port Authority Act, and the late State Senator Raymond Sheldon were engaged to work out the details for the purchase of the yard which would become part of the public domain of Hillsborough County.

In 1948 Brown and the board worked out a complex arrangement for obtaining the McCloskey Shipyard. They convinced the legislative delegation to increase the tax millage to a half mill and then convinced the city to advance $340,000, the purchase price, to the War Assets Board with the promise the authority would repay the city. The yard was purchased on March 25, 1948.

From the very beginning the shipyard began to produce revenue as eager tenants moved in. The debt to the city was paid over a period of years.

The largest tenant was Tampa Ship Repair and Drydock Company, founded by Sam Davis. Davis saw the possibilities of using the graving dry dock which was still operable for dry-docking ships. After 30 years of operation the company later was sold to The American Ship Building Company of Cleveland, Ohio, whose chairman is George Steinbrenner. The facility became Tampa Shipyards, Inc. and was improved vastly as a ship repair and building enterprise.

**HARBOR DEEPENING NEEDED**

By this time, 1949, another knotty problem had arisen. It was discovered that the Port of Tampa was at a distinct disadvantage from...
other Gulf and South Atlantic ports to the north in that import-export rail freight rates were higher to and from Tampa.

The authority entered into protracted litigation before the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC). This litigation dragged on for more than 11 years, and finally in the early 1960s the ICC ruled that Tampa was entitled to equalized rates in certain areas of the Midwest. While this was considered extremely important at the time, actual tangible results were negligible.

On May 17, 1950 Congress authorized the deepening of the Tampa Harbor channels to 34 feet. The only problem remaining was to obtain the necessary funding to accomplish the project. The late U.S. Senator Spessard L. Holland was asked to push for the appropriations, which he did, and by 1960 the work was completed at a total cost of $15 million.

No sooner was the project completed, however, than the authority realized 34 feet was not deep enough. Phosphate shipments were increasing along with vessel drafts and sights already were being set on 40-foot deep channel.

### SHRIMPING INDUSTRY FLOURISHES

During the late 1940s and early 1950s a discovery was made which had a profound effect on the next few years of authority operation. Shrimp in great abundance were found in the Gulf of Mexico off Key West and in the Gulf of Campeche off Mexico. To shrimpers the discovery was a bonanza because the development of freezing would make it possible to market the product nationwide.

Tampa was the logical port to house the huge fleet of boats that appeared in the Gulf. Shrimpers moved their operations from the northeast Florida coast and Georgia seeking dock space in Tampa. The authority had the space. Three long slips bulkheaded and lined with concrete were available. Dockside operations were set up to receive the product. Ancillary facilities including boat and engine repair and fishing supply houses sprouted up.

Chief among the shrimpers was a man named Henry Singleton. Singleton was a small-scale St. Augustine shrimper when he moved to Tampa. He saw possibilities beyond merely producing a product; he ventured into packing and processing. Others followed and Tampa soon had, and still has, the largest shrimp processing industry in the nation, employing thousands of persons.

In the mid-1970s Tampa Shipyards, Inc., the subsidiary of American Ship Building, needed room to expand. The only room to do so was where the shrimpers were located. With the aid of grants from the U.S. government and the State of Florida plus some ad valorem tax funds, the authority constructed a shrimp port, a model of a modern facility on the 22nd Street Causeway, where the shrimpers were relocated.

In the early years of the 1950s the authority realized that in order to develop the port, it needed to provide financial assistance to private industry. The port authority act was amended by the Florida Legislature to give the Tampa Port Authority the ability to issue special purpose bonds. The idea was to lease land and finance improvements with a tax-free bond issue with the tenant assuming the debt service. Through the years many important projects were completed through
the use of these bonds, providing the community with an enormous economic impact in the form of new jobs and new business opportunities. By 1980 the economic benefits provided by port activities were estimated at over $1 billion annually, and employment of over 36,000 directly and indirectly.

Barton Lewis resigned as port manager in November 1952 after six years and Jack P. Fitzgerald was named manager, a post he held until 1968. Guy N. Verger, a retired Air Force colonel, took over the post which he held until 1978.

**PORT AUTHORITY BUYS SHIPYARD**

During the early years 1950s the Korean War was intensifying, but it had little impact on port development. Funds for harbor deepening were appropriated annually despite the war effort. Also during this period the U.S. Navy took possession of another shipyard, Tampa Shipbuilding on Hooker’s Point, and held it as a Navy Reserve Shipyard. Although dozens of ships had been built in the yard during World War II, none were built during the Korean conflict.

In 1955 the Navy offered to sell the yard to the authority. The authority demurred, stating it would cost a tremendous amount to money to rehabilitate the yard to provide for industrial development. It also objected to a provision that the Navy could "recapture" the yard in the event of a national emergency. At the same time the authority stated publicly it would keep its options open.

Eight years of off-and-on negotiations took place before the authority finally purchased the yard for $1,555,000 in 1963. By this time the Federal Grant Services Administration had taken over the yard and the recaptive provision was dropped. The yard was renamed the George B. Howell Maritime Center, and the authority took possession in June 1963, relocating its headquarters to the former administration building where they have remained to the present day.

George B. Howell was president of Tampa Shipbuilding during the war and his management brought it to peak efficiency. Howell later founded the Marine Bank and Trust Company. To name the industrial facility for the man seemed a fitting tribute.

The yard contained 50 acres, 60 buildings, five concrete shipbuilding ways and a great deal of machinery which had been abandoned when the yard closed after World War II.

The authority did not have the funds to purchase the yard, so the Marine Bank advanced the purchase price, which was eventually repaid with the proceeds of a port authority revenue bond issue.

Another significant event occurred in 1963. At the request of the authority, the enabling act was amended to change the name from Hillsborough County Port Authority to Tampa Port Authority. It was felt the name would gain the, port and the authority better recognition.

In 1956, ten years after the authority's first organizational meeting, the board decided its revenues were sufficient to operate the authority and informed the Board of County Commissioners it no longer needed to ask for ad valorem tax money. For ten years thereafter no county funds were sought.
ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES SURFACE

Since the act which created the port authority conveyed the bottom lands in the port district to the authority, it fell upon the agency to administer those lands. In the early years after the war, Tampa began to grow and waterfront land was highly valued. As a result, many developers purchased uplands adjacent to bottom lands and sought to extend land seaward by dredging and filling. This was particularly common in Old Tampa Bay.

At the time, development appeared to be desirable and the authority often conveyed bottom lands to developers with little or no problem. It soon became apparent to the authority, however, that the bay bottoms, the nursery grounds for many species of marine life, were being destroyed and could never be replaced.

With this in mind, the board established a lands committee which took upon itself the job of setting so-called bulkhead lines beyond which dredging and filling would no longer be allowed.

Understandably, this action was not met with complete approval by the development community; however, the emerging environmental community backed it to the fullest extent. The rules adopted had some flexibility and the lines could be changed under certain conditions.

All dredge and fill was effectively halted in December 1970, however, when the lines were put at the mean high water lines.

The recognition that random dredge and fill was detrimental and that the natural environment was a paramount concern to the authority brought about the adoption of a board resolution in March 1970, which read in part:

"... The Tampa Port Authority in order to emphasize the importance to environmental considerations in the development of Tampa Harbor hereby reiterates its policy to continue to work to create the best possible environmental conditions in Tampa Harbor and to work in close cooperation with all responsible agencies, governments and parties . . ."

This important step led to several developments. Under the auspices of the authority, the Tampa Oil Spill Committee was formed with members from all of the petroleum terminals in the port. Each terminal contributed to a common fund which was used to purchase containment and oil spill cleanup gear. Since then petroleum spills in Tampa Harbor have been rare.

The authority, one of the first ports in the nation to do so, took the step of employing a professional environmentalist for its permanent staff. During his 10 years with the authority, William K. Fehring, Ph.D. was instrumental in writing a law which protected the environment and established rules and regulations regarding dredge and fill and the construction of docks and wharves in the port district.

These important advances in the environmental area were fostered by the late Delmar B. Drawdy, a port authority commissioner, who was among the first to recognize the important issue.

COLORFUL TIMES

Politics in the traditional sense were extremely unusual throughout this history of the authority. As members of an
autonomous body, the commissioners resisted political pressure.

One anecdote, however, bears repeating.

In 1961 Farris Bryant was the recently-elected governor of Florida. During the regular June meeting of the board, Chairman James Ferman expressed indignation at reports that the local patronage committee (which makes recommendations for political appointments to the governor) was insisting upon replacing three commissioners whose terms had run out. No new appointments yet had been made.

Ferman stated that he had learned the patronage committee would agree to the reappointment of three members, Paul LeBlanc, R.F. Agee and W.A. McLean, if the board would fire Norman Brown as authority attorney. (Brown had replaced his father, Ray Brown, when the elder Brown died.)

Ferman said he had no part in the negotiations and stated: "I will leave the room now and ask Mr. Brown to join me so that you may carry out any, and I trust all, commitments you have made."

With that he and Brown left the room.

W.J. Barritt took the chair and McLean moved that Brown be asked to resign. The motion was carried with Barritt, McLean and LeBlanc voting yes and Agee voting no.

Brown sent a message from the outside that he refused to resign and Ferman refused to reenter the room until the matter was resolved. The three then voted to dismiss Brown. Ferman returned to the room and declared he was not a candidate for reelection and left again.

Barritt was then elected chairman and Ferman returned, commenting as he sat down, "A man has to do what he had to do."

What the flap was about is vague, but there were rumors Brown worked for a candidate for governor other than the newly-elected Bryant.