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The Plant Legacy Lives On

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The legacy of Henry B. Plant is known throughout the City of Tampa. Even so, few are aware of the efforts that were made to honor the man in this year of our city’s centennial. Tampa, it seemed, had shuffled aside remembrances of the railway entrepreneur to whom so much of the city’s growth and fortune are credited. Little did its citizens know a group of teens were embarking on a historic project to commemorate his legacy. Little did the teens know their work would remain as part of our city’s heritage. Their effort, so sincere and genuine, will long be remembered, for it was they who helped create a bronze relief statue of their school’s namesake: Henry B. Plant.

The commemoration of H.B. Plant through the creation of a bronze relief statue began as a drive to gain community support. Through civic donations a statue trust fund was opened at the school. Its purpose was clear: to finance the cost of a bronze sculpture replicating the magnate whose handlebar moustache and furrowed brows had been seen by only a few. To summon a sculptor suited to the task was the next assignment. The school turned to the Hillsborough County School Board’s Artist-in-Schools Program which ranked number one in the nation for bringing the arts into public schools. Their master sculptor for the statue of Henry Plant was a fifth generation Tampa resident, Carl H. Norton II. The sculptor was sent to Plant High School in February, 1987, where the students anxiously awaited their historic sculpture project.

INDUSTRIOUS HANDS

Dozens of industrious hands modeled the form of the man for whom their school was named. "Old H.B." was coming to life and
the excitement could be seen on the students’ faces. The Artist-in-Schools sculptor taught the students how to replicate the features and he showed them how to mend the cracks which appeared when the terra cotta clay was drying. From time to time the sculpture was worked on by students in small groups. The boys gently cradled the heavy statue in their arms as they lifted it into an upright position. From this position it was easier to sculpt all the details. When crack lines appeared in the clay, girls mended every reparable flaw with utmost care.

By April, 1987, the statue was complete. The sculpture was sent to the Bronzart Foundry in Sarasota, Florida, where it was cast in bronze. Over their spring vacation, Plant High School students traveled to the foundry to see "Old H.B." whose handlebar moustache and furrowed brows were now made of metal instead of clay. The original terra cotta sculpture was lost in the making of the mold, but for all the loss, much more was gained.
'FATHER' OF PLANT HIGH
The paternal aspect of the Plant statue project will always be with us. For the young people who worked under the Artist-in-Schools sculptor, Henry Plant will long be remembered as the "father" of their school. Likewise, he was a forefather to those who call the city of Tampa "home". The legacy of Henry Plant has taken on a new paternal emphasis with the sculpting of his replica statue. For the students, a closer bond to our heritage now exists as they realize the historic significance of their endeavor. For the young people, it was a privilege to partake in this milestone event.

The statue was installed in the main corridor of Plant High School in a central location. The bronze relief statue in a custom-designed case became a lasting part of the old school which was built in 1927. A golden light spilled down over the strong, stern face of the proud mogul. With hands in the pockets of his jacket, he posed in a gesture of humility. His six-foot structure rose above the admiring crowds who clustered around him. At his feet a plaque was mounted, crediting the individuals, civic organizations and classes of the school’s alumni who contributed toward the statue. Above their names was a synopsis by local historian, Hampton Dunn:

"Not much happened in the pioneer fishing village of Tampa until Henry Bradley Plant brought his railroad here in 1884 and opened his luxurious Tampa Bay Hotel in 1891. Next he extended his railroads down the Gulf Coast, erecting other elegant hotels along the way. These events opened this isolated wilderness, triggered an influx of tourists, attracted commerce and industry - and suddenly there was a population explosion! Growth and development have not stopped in the century since Henry Plant’s arrival. Since then, Tampa has become one of the best places in the United States to start a business. Henry Plant recognized that potential a century ago."

The culmination of the Plant statue project took place on Friday evening, May 15, 1987, at Plant High School - one week following the installation. The Statue Dedication Celebration, which was free and open to the public, included many of the arts: dance, drama, photography, music and public speaking. Two noted historian guest speakers led the presentation: Tony Pizzo and Dr. James W. Covington. Tony Pizzo lauded the enterprise and capsuled Mr. Plant’s impact on Tampa’s growth and development. Dr. Covington spoke on the restoration of Plant Hall, one of the city’s treasured historic landmarks.

The program included entertainment performed by the high school students: Barbershop Boys sang "I've Been Working on the Railroad," the Plant High Danceros performed a tap dance version of the can-can to celebrate the completion of the statue, "Minaret Promenaders" who portrayed international guests of the Tampa Bay Hotel, strolled to the authentic "Tampa Bay Hotel Galop".

A dramatization of "The Plant Life Story" brought to life the authorized biography of Henry Bradley Plant by G. Hutchinson Smyth. In the enactment, personal highlights of Henry Plant’s life were portrayed by the students. In one tender scene, Henry Plant’s mother sang his favorite vesper hymn, "Adeste Fidelis," to him. In another emotional scene with his Grandmother Plant, young Henry expressed his romantic yearnings to voyage: "I want to go where my heart leads me," he exclaimed. Eventually his heart led him to Tampa.
DEDICATED TO COMMUNITY

The Community Dedication speech delivered at the occasion paid tribute to the statue’s donors:

"….Henry Plant, railway entrepreneur one hundred years ago, led the development of our city of Tampa and ultimately the west coast of Florida. Let it be known from this moment forward that the statue of Henry Plant is dedicated to you, the community. The community….unique, proud and traditional - it is you to whom we dedicate our statue this evening."

So it was, two months prior to the day of Tampa's centennial on July 15, 1987, the Plant legacy was rekindled and a symbolic flame was lit. The torch was passed from one generation to another - as it always has and always will. Citizens were united to give homage to one of Tampa's leading forefathers while tomorrow's leaders reveled in creating this historic tribute.