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Forty Years of the Tampa Port Authority

Thomas J. O'Connor

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The Tampa Port Authority marked its 40th anniversary on Nov. 16, 1985. In the second 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.

The enabling act provided for the Authority to have the power to fix rates and tariffs for the port. Private terminal operators, who cherished their right to raise and lower rates as they chose in order to compete, resisted the Authority’s newly-gained power. By
1962 these operators began to realize that under the prevailing economic conditions this individuality could not continue. Everyone was losing money on his operation.

A group headed by Charles Loe, traffic manager for the Chamber of Commerce and former Authority employee, worked to create a tariff. By June 1963 a uniform tariff had been put in place, but not without a great deal of argument. It was filed with the Federal Maritime Commission as a portwide tariff and, with various revisions, has remained in place ever since. Establishment of the tariff brought peace to the waterfront.

THE PORT OF TAMPA has been a busy one almost since the beginning of the community itself. This view of the waterfront along the Hillsborough River downtown was taken in 1909 during the steamboat era.

-Photograph Courtesy of the Tampa Port Authority
Also during 1963 James Ferman’s term on the Tampa Port Authority’s board of commissioners expired. He had been a member since 1955 and was instrumental in setting the bulkhead lines, establishing the tariff and many other advances in the administration of the port.

**PORT AUTHORITY ACQUIRES CITY DOCKS**

In April 1964, Tampa Mayor Nick Nuccio recognized that the city no longer could administer with efficiency the so-called city docks on 13th Street. The city had run the docks since they were constructed in the early 1920s; by 1964 they were in an advanced state of disrepair. Consequently, Nuccio offered the facility to the Authority which snapped up his offer and renamed the area Metroport.

This acquisition gave additional land area to the Authority, which by then also controlled two wartime shipyards.

Also in 1964 came the first rumbles that the recently completed 34-foot-deep channel was inadequate. The late John Ware, a Tampa Bay pilot, told the board that the larger vessels entering the port could not
safely navigate the channels and warned that substantial phosphate shipments could be lost without further deepening. He suggested deepening the channel to 40 feet.

With that, the board employed the firm of Reynolds, Smith & Hill to make a study of the existing channels and make recommendations as to the benefits which could be expected from increased channel depths. The report which followed recommended additional depth. The problem then was to convince Congress to direct the Corps of Engineers to study the problem. Congress so directed, again with the assistance of Senator Spessard Holland, and the final report issued in 1969 recommended 44 feet. This was later amended to 43 feet.

In the meantime, on May 10, 1965, the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad announced that it intended to relocate its phosphate loading facilities to a newly-created port at Piney Point in Manatee County, Port Manatee. The announcement stated Port Manatee would issue industrial revenue bonds to finance the construction.

For many years the citizens of Tampa had complained bitterly about phosphate trains moving from the mines through the downtown area, down the Interbay Peninsula to the elevator at Port Tampa. Traffic was held up. A growing city could not afford such holdups, especially since phosphate shipments were growing yearly.

Tired of the complaints, the railroad made its decision.

The effect of the announcement was devastating and the Authority, politicians and civic leaders deplored the arrangement. In a counter action the Authority announced
it would construct a public phosphate elevator on the east shore of Hillsborough Bay. Two problems, however, remained to be solved. First, the Authority did not own the land, the railroad did; secondly, where would the Authority obtain financing to buy the land.

In order to accomplish its goal, the railroad would have been forced to construct 35 miles of track from the mines to Port Manatee. It first would have had to have been granted permission by the Interstate Commerce Commission. The railroad made application. The Authority, the Chamber of Commerce and Hillsborough County government vowed to fight the application and, after two years of hearings, stopped it dead in its tracks. Having been successful, the authority then turned to the task of how to provide the railroad with facilities to load phosphate in Tampa.

Some years previously, in 1957, the Authority had engaged a consultant Praeger-Kavanaugh to develop a master plan for the use of Hookers Point. This report stated in part that Hillsborough Bay south of the 22nd Street Causeway should be deepened to the project depth of 34 feet and

THE SHRIMP BOATS ARE A-COMING. No, they’re here, in great numbers in Tampa’s active port.

-Photograph Courtesy of the Tampa Port Authority
James S. Wood had been named Chairman in December, 1966 for the ensuing year. Wood dusted off the Praeger-Kavanaugh report and put forth the idea that the Bay could be dredged and the spoil material placed on both sides of the water. The east side would be for phosphate and the west for general port use.

With that, Wood went to work and on February 2, 1967 he announced to the board that an agreement had been reached with the railroad. The line would erect a phosphate elevator on the east shore if the Port Authority would provide the approximately 450 acres required. Wood told the board steps should be taken immediately to provide finances for the dredging.

It was determined that the Authority’s revenues could support a bond issue of $7,070,000 over a period of 30 years at an interest rate of 3.8 percent. Lawyers, investment bankers and engineers were engaged and the project was on its way.

In May 1976 the authority advertised for bids for dredging 18 million cubic yards of material. The bonds were validated in June and Great Lakes Dredge and Drydock Company of Chicago, low bidder, was awarded the contract.

By 1970 two phosphate terminals were in place on what was now called East Bay. The railroad’s terminal was named Rockport. The second was built and operated by Eastern Associated Terminals.

Thus the Authority was victorious in the great battle over phosphate movements and where the terminals were to be located. The City of Tampa was pleased that phosphate trains no longer blocked traffic in the downtown and Interbay areas.

**CHANNEL DREDGED TO 43 FEET**

The dredging to create East Bay had left the southern end of Hookers Point a moonscape. Dikes had been constructed to hold the dredged material, but there was not enough material removed from East Bay to
completely fill behind the dikes. The newly defined east perimeter of Hooker’s Point was useable, however, and the area was designated Holland Terminal in recognition of the contribution Senator Holland had made to port development.

The Omnibus River and Harbor Act of 1970 contained the Congressional authorization to deepen the harbor channels to 44 feet. It seemed at this point that all that remained was to convince Congress to appropriate the funds to begin the dredging. But there were many pitfalls on the road between authorization and the start of the project.

The environmental community opposed the dredging from the beginning. It saw the project as the ruination of Tampa Bay. It argued for years over the plans of the Corps of Engineers, fearing the water quality would be ruined forever. Spoil disposal was another controversial issue. From 1970 to 1976 the harbor deepening project was on hold.

The problem was solved when the Authority entered into a joint contract with the U.S. Geological Survey to make a complete hydrological study of Tampa Bay with computer models to show circulation patterns and what effect the dredging might have on the Bay’s regime. The Geological Survey scientists gained the respect of the environmental groups and ways and means were established so the dredging could go forward.

In September 1976 the first dredge went to work; the project was completed in October 1985.

NEW FACILITIES SPRING UP

In the Fall 1971 it was decided that facilities could be located on the newly-dredged
perimeter at Holland Terminal on Hookers Point. The engineering firm of Frederic R. Harris of New York was selected to design general cargo wharves. This, in effect, would create an entirely new inner harbor for the Port of Tampa.

Impetus for this major step in development was provided when Jan C. Uiterwyk, a ship owner and operator, made the decision in August 1972 to construct a cold storage facility for the shipment of fresh citrus and the reception of frozen meat from Australia. The new installation was located at Holland Terminal.

By March 1973 a $10-million revenue bond issue was inplace, and the order to proceed with construction was given on June 1. At the end of 1974, a modern 1800-linear-foot wharf with 100-foot aprons was complete. The following year the Authority issued a $2-million special purpose bond to construct a transit warehouse next to Uiterwyk. The Port of Tampa was well on its way to a new beginning.

The Hookers Point moonscape began to change as new terminals were built. C F Industries, a large farmers’ cooperative engaged in the manufacture and distribution of phosphate fertilizer, constructed a terminal. Royster Company constructed a cryogenic anhydrous ammonia terminal. A roll-on/roll-off facility was constructed on the east side of the point, and a liquid bulk berth on the west side.

While all this development was taking place, American Ship Building Company announced plans to expand its shipyard by building a new graving dock yard on the west side of Hookers Point. In order to finance this improvement, the Authority issued $23 million in special purpose bonds, the debt service to be paid by the tenant. The new drydock was constructed to 900 feet in length, 150 feet in width and 26 feet in depth. This gave the dock the capability of handling 90 percent of the world’s oceangoing carriers.

The new facility was dedicated on July 21, 1978. Governor Reuben Askew, the principal speaker, commended Tampa, the Port Authority and the shipyard, stating, "Do not stop here. I want to challenge you to go further."

Tampa Shipyards, a subsidiary of American Ship Building, and the Port Authority accepted the challenge. Plans to expand the yard with new wet slips were announced and early in the 1980s the yard was awarded a $300-million contract to construct five tankers for the Military Sealift Command.

**GENERAL CARGO IS PURSUED**

In 1980 cargo moving through the port reached a record 51 million tons. While this tonnage has not been equalled in recent years due to recessive economic conditions, cargo still remains more than 45 million tons. A study completed in 1978 by the transportation consulting division of Booz, Allan and Hamilton revealed the Port of Tampa produces in excess of $1 billion a year in economic impact. More than 36,000 jobs were found to be dependent on the port, with 6,000 directly related to cargo handling. The report advised the Authority to actively pursue general cargo as contrasted to bulk, such as phosphate and petroleum.

Consequently, in 1980 the Authority moved vigorously into general cargo promotion. The task remains enormous, made so by such factors as geography, which makes Tampa a difficult choice for attracting liner services on major trade routes, the weakness
of the Latin American economy, and the continuing diversion of cargo from the Gulf to mini-bridge operations. There have been some notable achievements as well as setbacks along the route; however, Tampa is growing at a rate never dreamed of 30 years ago and this growth can be expected to influence port activity. Improvement of the business climate in Latin America, especially if the Caribbean Basin Initiative maintains momentum, will favorably influence the growth of general cargo as well.

TAMPA’S CRUISE INDUSTRY IS BORN

For many years Tampa’s leaders were discouraged in their efforts to bring cruise ships to Tampa. The Ports of Miami and Everglades became cruise capitals, but the lines avoided Tampa, believing there were no suitable destinations for cruise passengers from Tampa.

All of this began to change in 1981 when Bahama Cruise Line made the decision to make regularly-scheduled seven-day cruises to Mexico out of the port. To the gratification of all, the cruises were an enormous success. Holiday seekers were looking for a new place to go.

Bahama Cruise Line was followed quickly by Holland America Line and it became incumbent upon the authority to provide suitable facilities for the arrival and departure of cruise passengers. A crash program ensued and a modern terminal was dedicated in November 1982, in time for a 26-voyage schedule by one of Holland America Line’s luxury ships, the SS Veendam. Two years later the Veendam was replaced by the MS Nieuw Amsterdam, a new luxury liner capable of carrying more than 1200 passengers.

With the success of the two cruise lines, the Port of Tampa began to attract the attention of other lines and the authority took one of the most significant steps in its history. In the Summer of 1983 an agreement was reached with Garrison Terminals, Inc., to purchase its property at the junction of Garrison and Ybor Channels. Simultaneously, the Sun Oil Company agreed to sell the Authority an oil terminal adjoining this property. Collectively the properties afforded over 2,000 feet of waterfront in downtown Tampa. The land is especially attractive because it is centrally located and its development could complement many other planned waterfront improvements, including Harbour Island and a planned city convention center.

The authority engaged the services of Williams, Kuebelbeck & Associates of California to prepare physical and financial plans for a mixed-use development, including three cruise ship berths, passenger facilities, hotels, office buildings and other waterfront amenities.

The authority’s action in obtaining the Garrison Terminal land adhered to a long-established policy which called for public ownership and administration of all commercial waterfront.

AUTHORITY PURCHASES PORT SUTTON

In this regard the Authority in 1984 purchased Port Sutton on the east side of Hillsborough Bay. Port Sutton had been developed privately over the years and contained terminals for the handling of bulk cargo, including phosphate, petroleum, sulfur, potash and cement.
Chapter 23338, Laws of Florida, 1945 was the special enabling act creating the Hillsborough County Port Authority. This act established a port district which included the City of Tampa, and the northwestern part of the county. It excluded the eastern and southern parts of the county. This arrangement was deemed practical at the time. The citizens of Plant City and Wimauma did not feel the port was of any particular benefit to them. There also was a political concern since there was doubt the 1945 referendum would pass if the entire county were included, simply because the bill provided for one-eighth mill in additional ad valorem taxation and citizens are always reluctant to tax themselves.

For some years the authority attempted to amend its act so that the entire county was included. It was seen that this would broaden the tax receipt base. The moves were opposed vigorously by residents outside the district. Finally, however, in 1969, the Legislature amended the act to include all of Hillsborough County within the Port District.

Over the years the act has been amended more than 30 times in order to meet certain contingencies as the port and the responsibilities of the Authority grew.

The 1984 session of the Florida Legislature passed a codification of the law which embodied the original act and all amendatory acts. The authority now operates under Chapter 84-447, Laws of Florida, a streamlined version of the original act, which is responsive to the conditions of modern port administration.

This brief history relates the highlights of the accomplishments of the Tampa Port Authority. Although it reflects the accomplishments of dedicated men over a period of 40 years, it does not fully portray the anguish, heartache and hard work put forth to forge a modern port. The anguish and heartaches are far from over. There is much to be done and new generations will strive for greater heights.

The writer of this history observed 40 years of Port Authority activity, both as a young newspaper reporter covering the first meetings and subsequently as an employee of the Authority for nearly 20 years. The future of the Port of Tampa and the Tampa Port Authority will continue in good hands and many can look forward to the next 40 years.