It's Time Hillsborough Established a History Museum

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Spanish explorers called Tampa Bay "La Gran Entrada" - The Great Entrance - because they considered it the gateway to North America.

Hillsborough County historian Tony Pizzo uses the fact to illustrate the richness of the area’s past. Since treasure-seeking conquistadors strode ashore in the early 1500s - nearly a century before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock - Hillsborough County has experienced a remarkable history, one that includes martyrs, Indian battles, Civil War blockade-runners, cowboys, monster hurricanes, Rough Riders, railroad tycoons, vigilantes, and Cuban revolutionaries.

Yet despite its grand past, Hillsborough County has no history museum.

To be sure, there are some wonderful displays to be found at the Plant Museum, the Ybor City State Museum, and the Hillsborough River State Park, which features a replica of a fort from the Seminole War era. The Hillsborough County Courthouse has a small history exhibit.

But there is no museum devoted to the region’s entire history.

Recently a group of Tampa residents interested in a local history museum visited Miami’s Historical Museum of Southern Florida, which demonstrates that history, when it is well presented, can be as entertaining as it is important. A visitor can handle Indian tools, sit at the helm of a salvager’s boat, view explorers’ swords or step aboard an old streetcar.

Hillsborough County’s history merits such a facility. So do its residents, many of whom are newcomers eager to know more about their adopted home.

Beyond offering stimulating displays, an historical museum is needed to house archives and to promote activities that help citizens understand that the story of Hillsborough predates air conditioning and 1-75.

The efforts of a group of area residents to establish a local history museum rate widespread support.

Ideally, the museum would be located near downtown, perhaps in a building of historical consequence, though a new facility can have advantages. The Historical Museum of South Florida is in a Spanish-style courtyard with an art museum and a public library. The complex is a great asset to downtown Miami.
But specifics can be debated later. First, Hillsborough County commissioners must pursue the project in earnest.

The county’s five-year capital outlay budget does include $6 million for a history museum, which is roughly the price of the Miami building. But the figure is for planning purposes only and does not mean any money will be spent. The county should begin the research necessary to see that the museum is established. How big a facility is needed, where it should be built and how money for the project can be raised - all must be investigated.

One idea: Although some leading Tampans pooh-pooh the idea of preserving the old railroad station on Nebraska Avenue, a good argument can be made for refurbishing it. Jacksonville did a brilliant job of bringing its handsome station back to
life and incorporating it in a new convention center. Too, Tampa's old terminal symbolizes what was probably the most important single event in the city’s history - the coming of the railroad.

Whatever site is chosen, private sector donations will be needed, and the city of Tampa would have to participate. And while it is important to be financially sensible about the facility, there should be no scrimping on necessities. The Miami museum, for instance, is seriously handicapped by its lack of space for temporary exhibits, which can draw big crowds.

Thoughtful planning can avoid such pitfalls. But it is time that planning begins. Hillsborough County needs a history museum to serve as The Great Entrance to its past.