Brandon, Florida, 1890-1990: A Photographic Essay

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The year 1990 marks the celebration of Brandon’s centennial, but the rich history of this Hillsborough County community dates back to the mid-nineteenth century. On January 20, 1857, John Brandon and his wife Martha Carson, a cousin of the famous Kit Carson, arrived in Tampa with six of their children and all their earthly possessions. Originally from Tishomingo County, Mississippi, they had traveled over 700 miles on a two-year journey through the wilderness.

The Brandon family did not stay long in Tampa. Shortly after arriving, they moved to the Seffner area, about twelve miles east of Tampa, and settled there for approximately one year. Then, in August 1858, John Brandon purchased forty acres of land, just south of Seffner, in what later became the community of Brandon. He and his family built a log cabin and farmed the land until tragedy struck with the death of his wife Martha in 1867. Once more, John gathered his belongings and moved his family to Bartow, where he met Victoria Seward Varn, a Civil War widow with two children. Married on September 17, 1868, John and Victoria made their home in Fort Meade and had three children of their own. Six years later John moved his enlarged family back to Brandon, which was then known as New Hope, where he homesteaded 160 acres and fathered two more children.

The origins of the name “New Hope” remain unclear, but John Brandon quickly became a leading citizen and benefactor of the community that now bears his name. In 1878 he donated five acres to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, for a church building and the New Hope Cemetery. John Brandon died in 1886 and was buried in the Brandon Family Cemetery, located today at Brandon Boulevard (State Road 60) and Pinewood Avenue.

During the late nineteenth century, the small settlement of New Hope became Brandon and grew along with the surrounding communities of Limona, Mango, Seffner, Valrico, Durant, Knowles and Bloomingdale. With the completion of the Florida Central & Peninsular Railroad in 1890, the community began to concentrate near the railroad tracks. Victoria Brandon asked civil engineer C.S. Noble to survey about forty acres and lay out streets for a townsite which was named “Brandon” in memory of her husband John. (The right-of-way to the streets was deeded to Hillsborough County.) The center of town was located at Victoria Street and Moon Avenue, where settlers built a train depot on the north side of the tracks. On September 15, 1890, the Brandon Post Office was established with Victoria serving as the first postmaster.

Residents in and around Brandon largely depended on the land to earn their living. In addition to raising cattle, pioneering families grew citrus, rice and sugar cane for market. They also farmed, fished and hunted to sustain themselves. The abundance of yellow longleaf pine trees brought sawmills and turpentine stills into the area. Early settlers often relied on their own skills as carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, and cobblers. Women labored in and around the home, preparing meals, sewing clothing and furnishings, canning fruits and vegetables and making lye soap and candles of beeswax and tallow. By the end of the century, local businesses included Galvin’s General Store and Varn’s Packing House, which handled citrus.
Like much of rural Florida, the Brandon area progressed slowly. At the turn of the century Brandon Boulevard was still a dirt road, known as Hopewell Road. The community boasted several one-room schoolhouses, which stressed the three R’s but also taught history, botany, physiology and geography. During World War I, the Brandon School (now McLane Junior High School) was built to consolidate the one-room schools. The new school’s auditorium provided a place for town meetings and social gatherings, such as plays, movies and dances. Activities also centered around the community’s many churches which commonly held Sunday afternoon picnics. Other festivities that brought people together included sugar cane grindings, watermelon parties and overnight outings to the beach at the mouth of the Alafia River on Tampa Bay.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Brandon changed little. According to a 1910 census, only 573 people lived in the immediate area. With the paving of Hopewell Road, a few new businesses sprang up. However, as late as the 1940s, the hub of Brandon was still in the vicinity of Victoria Street and Moon Avenue, and the community had fewer than fifteen businesses.

All of this has changed dramatically in the last thirty years. In the mid-1950s Hopewell Road, today’s Brandon Boulevard, was connected to Adamo Drive, which gave direct and easy access to Tampa – and vice versa. With the flood of new residents into Florida, the Brandon area became a desirable suburb for people working in Tampa. By the mid-1970s Brandon ranked among the fastest growing communities in the state. Although still unincorporated, Brandon today has a population in excess of 109,000.
James Henry Brandon, son of early settler John Brandon and his wife Martha, became a prosperous citrus grove owner. In 1876 James built this large, two-story frame home for his wife Johanna Cavacevich Brandon and their seven children.

Photograph courtesy of Dick and Raymeta Stowers.

A present-day view of the old Brandon house which still stands on Brandon Boulevard (State Road 60). In 1960 Dick Stowers purchased the residence and converted it into a funeral home, preserving the original facade and basic floor plan.

Photograph courtesy of Dick and Raymeta Stowers.
Pioneer settler Joseph Brooker came to Brandon from Georgia. He is shown here in 1880 at the age of twenty-one in a new buggy on what is believed to be Hopewell Road, today’s Brandon Boulevard.

Photograph courtesy of Albert Brooker.

A view of Kings Avenue in the 1930s shows how little Brandon changed during the early twentieth century.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.
John Weeks and his son Levy leading a logging team of oxen in 1896. The Weeks family engaged in logging in the Limona-Brandon area.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.

The Weeks’ home in 1896 had a cabin with a clay and stick chimney. Other structures included sheds and a well with a roof over it. Bed linen is airing on the wooden fence.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.
The Coe-Draper House, built in 1882-83, is one of the few remaining Brandon examples of a spacious vernacular home, which is largely unaltered. Originally from Elgin, Illinois, Joel Lymon Coe and his family were involved in the lumber business and citrus groves. Located at the west end of Victoria Street, the Coe house was later sold to H. C. Draper.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.

Percy Coe, son of Joel Lymon Coe, established this Brandon sawmill, which was a local landmark. Eight yoke of oxen were needed to draw the heavy logging wagon loaded with large virgin pine.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.
Buckhorn Springs, located south of Bloomingdale Avenue between Kings Avenue and Providence Road, as it looked in 1907. Shown from left to right: Melly Browne, a visitor from Connecticut, Anna Elizabeth Coe and Percy Coe.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.

The Galvin-Jaudon House was built in 1898 by Dan Galvin who moved to the Brandon area from nearby Bloomingdale. He opened Brandon’s first general store, which was located on the corner of Moon Avenue and Victoria Street, and he also operated a sawmill. The Galvin home was sold to Fondus Murrell and later to the Roy Jaudon family, its present owners.

Photograph courtesy of the Jaudon family.
A citrus grove owner in the 1890s posed with his seedlings on newly cleared land which had a wooden fence, shown in the background, to keep out cattle.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.

Arthur Scranton (left) and Walter Graves (right) in a grove near Telfair Road in Limona. Scranton was a Connecticut selectman who spent summers in Florida. The two men are sorting fruit gathered in the baskets in front of the homemade table.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.
The Thomas Lake home, shown at the turn of the century, stood on the corner of Bates and Mead Roads in Limona. Lake, an influential businessman, dealt in real estate, handling a good deal of orange grove property. The Lake family was from Connecticut, and the Limona area was their summer home.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.

The Limona Packing House, built by Thomas Lake, was the first of several packing houses which processed citrus in the area.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.
Henry Marion Knowles came from Alabama with his family in 1865, at the age of nine. He later homesteaded and had a post office in his home from 1902 to 1911. The area’s name was originally Oaklawn, but it became Knowles due to all the residents with that name. Shown here are Henry’s sons (from left to right), Ed, Allen and Tom.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.

A typical funeral scene in the Limona-Brandon area shows the dress common during the early twentieth century.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.
A turn-of-the-century road with ruts made in the sand by wagons and carts. Taken in the Durant area in 1909, this photograph shows Mrs. Maude S. Pierce, daughter of Arthur and Rose Scranton.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.
The general store at Limona also served as a post office. Shown here in 1915 is Robert Delbridge, storekeeper and postmaster.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.

Bud Gameling and other cowmen on a cattle drive, about 1917, when local cattle were rounded up either for Lykes Brothers packing plant or for the drive to Punta Rassa (near Fort Myers) and shipment to Cuba.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.
The Limona Civic Building was built in 1915, but this original structure burned down. A second building, constructed in 1926 and known as the Limona Improvement Association, is still in use today.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.

The Brandon Grade School was built during World War I and was expanded to the twelfth grade in 1923, when four seniors graduated. The north building on the right had an auditorium on the second floor which was used for school and community events.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.
Shown here on opening day in 1928, the Brandon Woman’s Club was built in 1927 and has served many purposes. It was Brandon’s first library, staffed by club members from 1960 until 1968. Located at 129 Moon Avenue, it is still in use.

Photograph courtesy of Joanne Kearney.

The Brandon Masonic Lodge No. 114, F. & A. M., as it looked in the 1920s. Chartered on January 22, 1890, the lodge was first organized in Seffner, but it moved in 1924 to the Brandon site on land donated by Mrs. E. B. Linsley at the corner of Morgan and Moon Avenue. This two-story structure served as a center for community activities until 1974 when the present building replaced it at the same location.

Photograph courtesy of Brandon Masonic Lodge.
A memorable 1931 train crash in Brandon wrecked several boxcars loaded with canned goods. The Brandon depot, shown in the upper center, was located north of the tracks on Moon Avenue and Victoria Street.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.

Weber’s Tavern in Valrico, shown in the 1930s, was originally built in 1915 as the first garage between Tampa and Plant City.

Photograph courtesy of Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.
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