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The Long, Long Journey of the Tampa Bay History Center

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If a sense of history is the mortar that binds one generation to the next, then small wonder that recent generations have little grasp of their past. Oh, it's not that there's no interest in Tampa's history; it simply has not been an overwhelming priority among city officials over the past 100 years or so.

British author H. G. Wells (1866-1946) said it well in *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind*: "In England we have come to rely upon a comfortable time lag of 50 years or a century intervening between the perception that something ought to be done and a serious attempt to do it."

That comfortable time lag has stretched even beyond the century mark for the Tampa Bay History Center. In September the Center, with much fanfare, opened an interim museum, library and education center in the Tampa Convention Center Annex at the corner of Franklin and Platt Streets in downtown Tampa.

Some would say it's about time. More than a century ago, in the early 1880s, some vocal Tampa residents expressed concern that there was no organized effort to preserve and display their artifacts and they subsequently proposed a facility for this purpose. In the January 19, 1882, issue of *The Sunland Tribune*, County Judge J. G. Knapp wrote:

> . . . no time should be lost in snatching the historical artifacts from the waste and death of oblivion. Many are already gone and the balance is fast wasting away. Is there no man or body of men in the county to gather these precious relics? How long will it be before not a vestige of the history of those days will remain unless speedily [rescued] from irretrievable loss by the men and women of the present day? . . . who shall do it?

But alas, more than half a century passed before Judge Knapp's concerns were addressed. In 1933 the Tampa Municipal Museum opened in the Tampa Bay Hotel. What remained of those "precious relics" were housed there. But the museum was closed in the late 1930s.

In 1949 the Florida Legislature authorized Hillsborough County to create an historical commission, appoint a county historian and provide an historical library and museum (Bill 765, *Laws of Florida*, Chapter 25883, and the *Hillsborough County Code*, Chapter 16). The County Commission appointed Grace Branch as the first chairman and newspaperman D. B. McKay as the first county historian. McKay received loans and gifts of artifacts for what was hoped would be a new museum. When a new courthouse was built on Pierce Street in 1952, the Historical Commission Museum and Library was assigned a small corner room, allotted an annual budget of $3,000 and was staffed by volunteers. Thus it remained until late last year.

**Big Plans for Doomed Courthouse**

Civic activists of the day, however, were hoping for much more. A September 19, 1952, letter to the Hillsborough County Commission from the Hillsborough Museum
Association listed the association’s "tentative plans" for the old courthouse, which had been designed by J. A. Wood, architect of the Tampa Bay Hotel. This wish list included a civic center/head quarters for the Archaeological Society, the Historical Commission, the Spanish War Veterans and Auxiliary, a public library, a memorial hall, a museum, a convention hall, a spacious lobby/meeting room, display space for the Pan-American Commission, a children’s reading room/day care center and a community bulletin board. Although the signature on the letter is indiscernible, it is believed one of the writers may have been Mrs. W. Finlay Hunter who lived at 826 S. Willow Ave. in Tampa. She was president of the local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which was lobbying mightily to save the courthouse. She writes:

"We feel that this property converted to such civic and public uses, putting under one roof all of our Museum Collections and other displays of educational and interest value, both for our citizens and for our tourist population which is increasing greatly each year, will provide the solution of a great need for Tourist Attraction. At the same time it will be of great benefit to our downtown shopping centers and we believe that as a result in the years to come its value to the County will be reconed (sic) in the millions."

Again alas! The original classic red brick, silver-domed courthouse, built in 1891, was demolished in 1952. Today a modern skyscraper takes its place, bordered by Franklin St., Florida Ave., Kennedy Blvd. and Madison St.

In 1971, 20 years after the demise of the courthouse, another group of citizens formed the Tampa Historical Society to work toward preserving Tampa’s history and to collect archival material. In 1977 the Society acquired the historic Peter O. Knight honeymoon cottage at 245 Hyde Park Ave., built in the early 1890s, and it remains the Society’s headquarters today.

In 1986 area history became an issue once again when the County Commission directed that a task force be appointed to consider creating a history museum. As recorded in the July 23, 1986, minutes of the Hillsborough County Commission, the task force members were to be the mayor of Tampa or a city representative and members of local historical organizations. In 1988 County Administrator Larry Brown reported to the Commission that a Museum Task Force indeed had been appointed with Wit Ostrenko, director of the Museum of Science and Industry (MOSI), as its coordinator. Meanwhile, another group of concerned private citizens had formed behind the scenes to look into the development of a museum. Ostrenko arranged a meeting between the two groups and Ken Lewis of NCNB (now NationsBank of Florida) was selected as chairman of the merged County Museum Task Force.

Survey Revealed Craving for History

Anxious to determine what community feeling might be, the task force asked Randy Nimnicht, executive director of the Historical Association of Southern Florida in Miami, to conduct a preliminary marketing survey. He found that respondents consistently felt that a regional historical museum was an important component missing in the area’s cultural life and

. . . the desire for an historical museum clearly exists . . . It will become a reality if leadership in the private sector succeeds in striking a partnership with
leadership in the public sector. Private leadership must demonstrate that it is organized, realistic and committed for the long haul.

Ostrenko recommended that a formal master plan for a history museum be commissioned and financed by county capital improvement project money. But the departure from Tampa of the task force chairman, Ken Lewis, delayed the effort.

In 1989 Tampa businessman J. Thomas Touchton was asked to chair the Museum Task Force by Historical Commission Chairman Herbert McKay, County Historian Tony Pizzo, and task force members Charles L. Knight II, James Ferman Jr. and James Apthorp. He accepted the volunteer position and began work. His enthusiasm for the project was contagious. He and other task force members soon had assembled a board of trustees and an advisory council and began work toward building a charter membership and obtaining much needed private funding. Three years later, the County Commission granted $50,000 and the City of Tampa the same amount so the board could begin planning and operations.

So more than a century after Judge Knapp so eloquently expressed his frustration, the History Museum of Tampa/ Hillsborough County was incorporated as a public/private partnership, with J. Edgar Wall III of the Tampa Historical Society serving as part-time director. It later became the Tampa Bay History Center which, in 1996, is still in its planning stages.

Go to Disney, Turn Right

In February 1993 Byron A. Johnson was brought in from the Albuquerque Museum in New Mexico to assume the post of first full-time executive director. He gradually assembled a small professional staff — an education director, a curator of history and a public relations/membership officer — and hired several consulting firms to conduct surveys and formulate a master plan, the size of which rivals the GTE yellow pages. The History Center's primary mission was education, but Johnson was more of a bricks and mortar man, envisioning a 60,000 square foot first-phase facility that would attract some of the same visitors that stream into Disney World. He injected state-of-the-art dioramas and sound equipment, hands-on displays, simulators and theaters into the master plan. Even virtual reality exhibits wouldn't be out of the question. But he soon grew impatient with the lack of forward movement. While the trustees were doing what they could to encourage government support, budgetary constraints prevented officials from committing to a permanent museum facility. In addition, although negotiations for a site were ongoing with the Port Authority and various downtown landowners, nobody was signing on the dotted line.

"All deliberate speed is not part of the vocabulary around here," he would lament. His frustration mounted as the History Center fought for attention among a laundry list of civic projects. After three years on the job, he was lured from Tampa in February 1996 to become director of the Texas Ranger Museum and Hall of Fame in Waco. Education Director Elizabeth Dunham became acting director for a brief period until Bob Harrell, who had served in a similar position at the Tampa Museum of Art, came on board as interim director for a limited six-month stint. As the process begins to hire Johnson's replacement, it's clear that the next executive director should have some nonprofit development experience, according to Touchton.
Meanwhile the History Center opened its doors to the public in March 1994 in a 2,200 square-foot space provided by Beneficial Corporation in The Shops on Harbour Island. There the small overworked staff operated a preview gallery, conducted educational outreach programs, created a membership base, began a public information program and collaborated on the master plan. The gallery was a hit and visitors and residents alike had their appetites whetted by the "Gateway to Florida" exhibits and displays. Lectures and workshops were offered and over 18 months nearly 500 charter members — private citizens, businesses, corporations and foundations — signed on in support of this quest for a full-fledged history museum. One board member, noting the quality of the exhibits, the positive publicity and extent of community support, remarked, "You're just a preview center, but you're acting like you're a real museum!"

**TECO Takes in the Homeless**

When The Shops were closed in September 1995, the staff stored its exhibits and collections and went searching for a temporary home. Tampa Electric came to the rescue once again and offered office space on the 8th floor of TECO Plaza on Franklin St. (TECO had previously underwritten the cost of original exhibits in the Preview Center.) From there the staff continued its educational outreach, membership management and public information functions. At the same time, the Historical Commission lost its space in the County Courthouse, which was being renovated. The History Center took responsibility for moving the collections and books into storage until some of the items could be displayed in the new Convention Center facility. In August of this year, the Historical Commission collection — among which are the "precious relics" referred to by Judge Knapp so long ago — became the responsibility of the Tampa Bay History Center under an agreement with the county.

And in an effort to raise the level of interest in the area's history and expand its educational mission, the Center brought noted author, historian and scholar Canter Brown Jr. on staff in July to conduct local historical research, write articles and speak to community groups.

After a year of virtual invisibility, the Center came to life once again in September in the Convention Center Annex. The Annex was built by the city to service the Convention Center. The History Center occupies 6,000 of the total 10,000 square feet of retail space adjacent to a parking garage. The agreement between the city, the county and the Center allows the museum to occupy the space for up to four years. Under the agreement, the Center built out the unfinished space with $200,000 allocated by the county from tourist development tax revenue plus private sector funding, including a grant from the Frank E. Duckwall Foundation for revising, refurbishing and building new exhibitry.

In addition to the 2,400 square foot exhibit gallery, the Annex also houses the Historical Commission library, a meeting area for community groups and staff offices. The gallery exhibits show the geographical, historical and multicultural influences that have shaped Hillsborough County and the region through the centuries. Approximately 40 panels of exhibits are nearly twice the number on display at the Center's earlier home on Harbour Island.

**Discover the Past**

Stepping into the Center Gallery, visitors experience the environment of the early
Paleoindian period — a world of lush grasses, estuaries and birds. Next, Native American heritage is explored, from the region's earliest human residents — the Paleoindian hunter-gatherers of 12,000 years ago — to modern-day Seminoles. Hands-on Discovery Boxes allow children to become acquainted with the customs of these ancient people.

Spanish exploration greatly changed the character of the region between the early 1500s and the mid 1700s. Graphics and astronomy instruments show how these early settlers navigated rough waters to finally arrive at Tampa Bay. The area's rich maritime history is further illuminated by the Three Friends ship's wheel and other artifacts from the Historical Commission collection. The tug ran arms and munitions for Cuban revolutionaries in and out of Tampa Bay in 1898.

Before northern visitors and residents flocked into the area in search of sun, surf and the Florida laid-back lifestyle, the Tampa Bay region was largely defined by wars. Its military history began with the founding in 1824 of Fort Brooke, which became downtown Tampa and was established to provide protection to pioneer settlers and to monitor the newly created Seminole reserve. It continues through the region's involvement in the Seminole Wars, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War and both World Wars. Artifacts — flint, ammunition and military items — uncovered on the site of Fort Brooke are on display. Photo exhibits, aircraft models, ration cards and other military artifacts illustrate wartime life on the homefront and show early scenes of MacDill Air Force Base.

A photograph montage illuminates the large multicultural flavor of the area. Other exhibits show how H.B. Plant's railroad, streetcars and the Cracker cattle trade influenced life in early Tampa Bay.

Finally, visitors can walk onto a tin-roofed bungalow's front porch and right into the past to learn how Florida's homes and communities have evolved since 1845, when Florida became a state. The History Center is the first stop for the large temporary exhibit, Making Florida Home, from the University of South Florida School of Architecture and Community Design.

But the Convention Center Annex is not intended to be the permanent home of the Tampa Bay History Center. The trustees and staff continue to search for a suitable location and funding to build an innovative, modern facility to serve the Tampa Bay area and surrounding counties.

The Long Road Ahead

The mission of the Tampa Bay History Center is ambitious:

To preserve the history and multicultural heritage of Hillsborough County and the Tampa Bay region and convey it through exhibits and educational programs; to serve diverse audiences of school children, long-term residents, newcomers, tourists, collectors and many more; to educate through exciting programs both in the History Center and the schools for the more than 400,000 school children in Hillsborough and adjacent Tampa Bay counties; to host outstanding traveling exhibits on history, antiques, archaeology, popular collectibles and folk arts; to collect, safeguard and exhibit artifacts of importance, to Hillsborough County, and to provide professional assistance to historical societies and heritage
organizations throughout Hillsborough County.

The large majority of Tampa Bay residents can trace their roots to other climes. Their ancestors influenced the course of history somewhere else. But these newcomers are Floridians now. They will make their mark here and become part of the history of this place. Their names, their struggles and disappointments, their accomplishments and victories will be written in tomorrow’s history books, recorded on tomorrow’s microfilm and computer disks. The Tampa Bay History Center is here to provide the mortar that binds the generations and to ensure these new historic wills be preserved for their children and grandchildren.