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THE BUILDING OF THE NEW TAMPA BAY HOTEL: 1888-1897 Reminiscences of Alexander Browning

Alexander Browning’s original handwritten manuscript is in the collection of the Henry B. Plant Museum. Browning was born in Paisley, Scotland on June 5, 1866 and began work on the Tampa Bay Hotel when he was 22 years old. These reminiscences were written approximately forty years later shortly before his death in Sarasota on September 14, 1932.

Edited by Frank R. North

When Tampa people first realized that Mr. Henry B. Plant was going to build a Hotel in their City, it came with the fact that Mr. J. A. Wood, Architect, 152 Broadway, New York had already bought up part of the Hayden orange grove - a homestead where the family was living at the time on the west side of the Hillsboro River - the house the Haydens were living in was not bought at that time - only about 10 acres of their land and grove on the South side of their house.

They had received their home and a few acres in the land deal, but sold all from there to the old ferry road that led down to the river opposite the foot of Lafayette street. There was no bridge across the River at this time, just a sand road and a barge big enough to carry a double team across, pushed over with long poles. A flat bottom boat being used for passengers only - a small fee charged. I don’t know exactly how many of a family Mr. and Mrs. Hayden there were, but knew a son call "Doe" was one of them, a dentist travelling around the country pulling teeth - a good mixer with the boys around town.

The Hayden property extended from the railway track of the JT and KW R.R. [railroad] to Lafayette St. along the River front - they crossed the River to go into the Village in their own skiff. Soon after the first real moves in building the Hotel was when a R.R spur line was commenced and surveyed into the newly bought Hayden property -then laid into the grounds of the New Tampa Bay Hotel as it was then called to bring in Building materials. All the other land had been bought up between their newly secured Hayden grove to the R.R. main line.

Mr. Wood took charge of the works as architect. He was on the grounds from early morning till the last man was through at night, truly a busy man - one could always know where he was. His voice was loud and shrill directing the Negroes or white mechanics. He always wore the same style and color of clothing - light gray - with soft felt hat to match and white tie. He was always neat and clean - very painstaking in all details of the work. Some of the foremen he brought from the North with him - E. B. Holt as supt; George Queseek a brick mason foreman from Orange, N[ew] Jersey and Fred Cooper a carpenter foreman. The Negro bossing was given to Jerry Anderson -then proprietor of the H. B. Plant hotel - a large two story frame building with 2 story veranda, the entrance on the corner of Tampa and Zack St where Maas Bros. Dept Store now stands. Mr. Wood had a suite of rooms in this Hotel where he could see across the river to the new building. All these foremen soon learned to submit to the will of Mr. Wood, when laying out the building and getting the foundation in place.

The plans were followed only as the Architect directed and the South Half of the building as far as the rotunda excavated and foundations put in. A culvert underneath this portion ran across the building to take care
of a little creek that guided the drainage of the back country to a circular pond excavated near the bridge and the river, which was later to be used for Aquatic plants and gold fish.

At this time there was not many mechanics in Tampa to draw from. Mr. Wood being of an inventive mind soon had some of the town boys as apprentices as brick masons and plasterers amongst them being Fred J. James, A.I.A., now President of the State Board of Architects; the two Webb boys - Ernie and his brother; Geo. Bean, now in Washington - politician; Lenfesty, now in the broom manufacturing business - all these served their time on the job before it was completed 3 years later.

In the years 1887-1888 the Yellow Fever was epidemic in Tampa and all who could got away as far from it as they could. But, this did not stop the Hotel work, although the forces were greatly diminished. Mr. Wood kept a supply of medicine for workers who were complaining - both white and colored - he used oat meal water for drinking carried around by the water boys in buckets with a dipper full of meal for each bucket - this kept the men strong and healthy and I believe was the reason there was so little sickness on the job. The Negroes got fat and sleek on it. Mr. Wood would point at them with pride as if exhibiting a slick looking mule. Although he was a hard task master, he had many good qualities.

After the Fever was over the building of the hotel commenced in earnest and another section laid out - marking 1200 ft in all the length of the main building. This work going on soon necessitated a bridge being built across the Hillsboro River. How this was accomplished by the city [was] with a wood built draw bridge - having U. S. permits etc. and I believe was put through the War Dept by S. M. Sparkman - our leading attorney at this time. In the meantime the workmen used the R. R. bridge about a mile further up the River and small boats. For those living on the S.[outh] side of town to get to work at the Hotel. One of the first building on the grounds was a large hip roof bldg - one story and basement used as an office, store rm. and Carpenter Shop with the shop and engine in the basement.

Mr. Van Bibber made all the moulds for casting the stone lintel courses, sills, and skew backs, and a crew were kept at work making the artificial stones. At this time all the Portland Cement came from Germany or Belgium - distinguished from the natural or Brooklyn brand by the Iron hoop on the barrels. I believe it cost delivered in Tampa - 3.00 a barrel for Portland and 1.75 pr Barrel for the Rosendale, made at Kingstone on the Hudson River. This was the same cement the Brooklyn Bridge was built of - was brought from New York by the Bemmer line of schooners. All the foundations were made with a congregate of broke brick, oyster shells and Fl. woods sand. These oyster shells were brought by lighter [A large barge used to deliver or unload goods to or from a cargo ship - ed.] from a mound at the mouth of the Alafia River down the Bay and all the brick bats broken up by hand to mix with it. Some years later I had occasion to cut through some of this concrete to put in some 4” sewer pipes and found it exceedingly tough and hard to cut - these all mixed by hand on the sweat board. The lime came from Ocala in barrels. There was no brick to be had this side of Jacksonville, so Mr. Wood made arrangements with the Camps at Campville and established a brick yard - also another at Green Cove Springs - and for the next 3 years kept them both busy, although the Campville is a salmon colored sand and clay brick. They have stood the test and show no decay after 43 years wear. The
Photograph of the Browning family taken approximately 1890. Alexander Browning is shown standing at top left.

(Photograph courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum.)
Green Cove brick were a darker red and were used to radiate the colors around the horse shoe arches in the openings - the design of the Hotel being Moorish.

In 1889 I came to Tampa after a four months trip from Sarasota round Cape Sable and the Florida Reefs from Sarasota to Daytona and New Smyrna and started soon after with Mr. J. A. Wood, Architect, as his assistant, sometimes helping John Mahoney with the time. He was the time keeper and accountant and pay master - well liked by all. He had an old Circular Saw hung up by his office door. This was used for starting the men to work and at quitting time by banging with an iron rod – primitive but effective. Mr. Holt and myself had a certain number of strikes on this so called gong to call us to the office when wanted there. This saved a lot of time on a building 1200 ft long.

My work was principally keeping track of materials, brick lime, cements, steel, etc. and bringing lumber from Dorseys Saw Mill above the R.R. Bridge. The method of transportation used was an open lighter. Manned by Negro power with long oars or sweeps, I took the tiller sweep as captain and guided against the current empty and with the current loaded from the Mill dock back to our

This drawing depicts the original H.B. Plant Hotel which was located on the east side of the Hillsborough river at the corner of Tampa and Zack Streets. The Maas Brothers department store later occupied this site.

(Drawing circa 1890 courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum.)
hotel dock where the lumber was carried up and stacked carefully in the shed to season.

Some of this cypress seasoned here for over two years before being cut up and made into inside finish. To this day, forty three years later, [it] does not show decay or shrinkage. All the scroll work on the front veranda was made on the job from this cypress - sawn at Dorset’s Mill - from logs floated down the Hillsboro River. When being sawed, the sawyer had to wear a South Wester and Fisherman’s oil skins to keep from getting soaked with the spray from the wet logs - some of them 3 feet in diameter, heavy to handle at this time, but light when seasoned. Mr. Wood took a good deal of interest in this material to see that it was properly stacked straight and true -anticipating all his requirements for this when it came to the finishing of the job.

While at the Mill one day getting the barge loaded, I took a vomiting spell and became quite sick. My old Negro Frank Hardaway, noticing me, said, "Boss you going to be mighty sick soon. Better start back with what load is on." I managed to steer down to the Hotel dock and went in the shed and lay down. Frank went and got John Mahoney and sent me home in a buggy. This developed to a violent attack of Malaria Fever and Bloody __?___. Dr. Weidon attended me and I nearly died. Peter Bruce Stewart, an old friend, called. He was a Pharmacist who came from Glasgow with us.

This photograph, taken July 26, 1889, shows the New Tampa Bay Hotel under construction. Photographed from the town side of the Hillsborough River looking east, the hotel’s distinctive minerets are not yet visible. In the foreground are steam powered boats and a sailing vessel possibly delivering building materials to the site.

(Photograph courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum.)
on the "Turnessia," and made me a medicine that cured me in about two weeks - was back to work although very weak. This Fever was contracted while on the trip around the coast.

Mr. Wood kept me at the Drawing Board, making details and checking up materials, mostly in the shade, till one day Jerry Anderson let a car loaded with bricks get away from him which ran through the back wall of the Hotel - at this time two stories high. For a punishment, his job was given to me and Jerry made a straw boss for a time cleaning up the mess he made. Nobody was hurt, and the change of occupation only made the job more interesting. This didn't last long, and Jerry soon had his old job back again bossing the Negroes unloading material.

The Carpenter shop foreman, Fred Coyne, was kept busy making window and door frames. All the machinery he had was a band saw driven by Negro power with handles on the fly wheel. Later on there was a small engine and upright boiler installed, and a whistle for time keeping. It was my job to see that this was kept up - with a Negro helper - then a circular saw and planer was installed making a real handy place to work. The tin shop was in the basement under here - in charge [was] "Pete", an octoroon tinker. As the building advanced the South end was roofed first. Then Dan Shea came from New York to take charge of the plumbing. I believe he was
recommended by the Durham fittings people. Consequently, all pipes and fitting was got from them - the whole system of plumbing was screw fittings - soil pipes as well.

Then John Shea, Dan's brother, came and went on as Mahoney's assistant and time keeper while I got an advance to assistant Supt with increase in pay. Then McKeever got my job - Negro bossing most of the time.

As time advances I find there was many things quite remarkable about building this Hotel. We had no level instrument, only hand levels, yet when a survey was taken later, it was found that in 1200 feet there was less than a course of brick out of level.

The method of fireproofing halls were distinctly unique at that time and I was told by Mr. Gus Kahn of the Truscan Steel Co that as far as he knew this was the first job of re-inforced concrete work in the United States. The aggregate of concrete work was broken bricks, oyster shell and white sand and the reinforcing was 1" T -iron laid across from beam to beam and galvanized steel cable wire, with the cable tensile still on it laid across the tees - all buried in the shell concrete. This steel cable was got from Punta Rassa - an old sub-marine cable across to the West Indies brought up by schooner as deck load. Whenever wanted, a piece the length required was sawed off and unwound. The copper cable in the centre almost paid for the freight of bringing it to the job.
The concrete was later plastered underneath and is easily seen in the Halls without a crack to this day. At this time the cars running across the Brooklyn Bridge in N. Y was run by cables and an accumulation of old cables was stowed under the New York end tunnels. Part of this was brought as deck load on the Bemmer line of schooners to Tampa and used as reinforcing steel on the Hotel.

Underneath the Hotel there was large rain water cisterns built of concrete reinforced with cable wire. Although filled with water for years, I never knew them to crack or leak - all built with shell sand concrete. Whenever structural steel came on the job -I-Beams especially - [it] was not fabricated. There was a hydraulic punch where a 20" I-Beam could be punched with a 7/8" hole -a short handle was all the working parts -where a lathe could punch a hole of this size with ease. This was filled with Alcohol and a few drops of sperm oil. There was a small air hole on top to relieve the suction on the plunger. The pump became mysteriously dry, so a watch was put on it - when we discovered a Negro slip up to it with a straw and get a good jag on- After this there was a sign put on that "poison" was put in the Alcohol and there was no more trouble from this source.

There was a well driven for Artesian water but it was not a success. The water came to within 3 ft of the surface, so Tom Smith (later the owner of the White Rose saloon) and myself were given the job to cut a hole thru the 6' casing - below this level and attach a 2" pipe. This water was piped into the basement and formed a steady stream of water where the water boys came to fill their buckets. This was used until such time as the City Water was brought across the river from the water tank on the hill -this developed 60# pressure - in the City.

When the Main Building was finished on the outside and the roof was on, the Dining Room and Solarium was laid out on the North end. This was a very elaborate and imposing place with Pantrys and Kitchen and cold storage refrigerator rooms. The Annex joined the Dining Room, the second story being about the same level of the Gallery around the Bomb [dome] which formed the Roof of the Dining Room - 90 ft. from the floor to the apex. As I said before the style of Architecture was Moorish and this gallery above the dining tables, while used by the orchestra, was following out the idea that the Women of the Harem should look upon their Lords while eating without being seen themselves - a little far fetched for Tampa but quite effective Architecturally all finished with Mahogany carved pillars and carved fret work - horse shoe arches.

While building this a near accident happened. One of the main supporting columns, built of brick, was nearly up. It began to settle and lean over. On investigation, we found the foundation was not setting and [was] still soft. Nobody could account for this till it was discovered that the Mortar Mixer had got some fire clay barrels mixed with the Rosendale cement barrels, and this had been used as cement - necessitating taking down this column to the foundation. My brother Hugh had charge of the carpenter work gang erecting the dome - the structural ribs are all built of wood put together on the ground then hoisted in place by Negro power, and sheathed over. The turret above was built on the dome and all covered over with standing seam - Taylors Old Style Pointiminter tin -the same roof is on today - forty two years later - and good for many more years wear.

Mr. Woods health was not so good at this time and the job had been seemingly
slowing up. I believe this was mostly due to the fact that the budget of weekly allowance was not sufficient to employ more expensive mechanics in finishing up. This and the chills and fever soon broke down Mr. Wood who was confined to bed at the H. B. Plant Hotel and ordered north by Dr. Wall his Physician.

This necessitated a change of management - when Mr. T. Cotter from Sanford, Fla. was appointed General Manager in full charge to finish the Hotel in a year - so that the Plant System could advertise the Grand Opening at a certain time. Cotter came he brought all his force with him. This consisted of an old draughtsman, a foreman brickmason named Dan Bailey, and foreman painter Dan Wiggens, also a carpenter foreman named Nungassar. Each of these brought some of their following - straw bosses and mechanics, Doyle as foreman Brick Mason. Mr. T. Cotter was a catholic -and lived with John Savarese so was Dan and John Shea, as also was John Mahoney and Parslow and a good sprinkling of the workmen and J. Gordan Sullivan.

Things were soon humming. There seemed to be no stint of money now. While some of the old hands got canned, there was good judgement used in retaining the others.

The office force was increased and a telephone put in - John Mahoney as head time keeper with 3 clerks under him, while J. Cordon Sullivan was private secretary helping Mr. Cotter in the buying of materials - Willie Beam [was] office boy.
The draughting room now had four draughtsmen - the old draughtsman (I forget his name - Smith), Alfred H. Parslow, myself and Miller (who died while the job was running.) Mr. E. B. Holt quit and started contracting in Tampa. Before long there were 500 mechanics on the job working day and night.

The Servants quarters was built a frame building, then the Power House was started as soon as we could get the plans ready. This was followed by the foundation of the Smoke Stack - quite a job down by the side of the river where piling[s] had to be driven by Jim McKay, uncle of the present mayor of Tampa to carry 600 tons. Sheet piling was used to keep the mud from caving in when the concrete and cross sills were being placed. In the dirt taken out, we found plenty of flint Indian arrow heads and pieces of pottery. The smoke stack was built of brick and capped with stone -140 ft. high.

The Power House was two stories high with rooms for the engineers and firemen to live in up stairs. The Boiler Room contained 3 Babcock and Willcox boilers and the Engine room had 3 Westinghouse engines driving large armatures by belts. There was also a Pump room to take care of the returns from the heating system. The electric wiring was contracted for by the Eureka Electrical Co, 19 Broadway, New York City -Mr. Caezer, manager, and Billie Kelting and Keating as foremen on the job. The Otis Elevator Co. put in the hydraulic elevators.

Most of this time Mr. H. B. Plant and his wife were travelling through Japan buying up all sorts of Bric-a-Brac and sending it to the hotel. Some of the teak wood trimmings in the Writing Room and the Bar was used there, while the mantles and the ladies parlor was set up then. All this necessitated a lot of work in the draughting room to make parts to correspond. With five hundred workmen on the job each day saw a lot of work done and everybody was busy -overtime being paid time and a half. A good plumber made $200.00 a week with overtime at this price. Some of the mahogany finish such as the Staircase and Rotunda Railings were made outside by contract and erected by our carpenters. The plastering was done, day work, with Jim Brown of the firm of Brown and Frazier as foreman. The plaster cornices was mostly run by Dave Cowden - a Scotchman. The plaster used being the Windsor Brand. Metal lath was still unknown so wood lath was use throughout made by Carter of Cartersville, Fla.

The grounds were laid out, and put in charge of Anton Feigh, a German gardener and palms and palmettos were transplanted.

The Gate Entrance and walks built and paved, then a Conservatory contracted for and built by northerners. Wharfs and boat houses being added along the river and water pipe sprinklers installed all over the grounds. Soon the place was a perfect paradise of roses and tropical plants.

As the hotel construction got finished, the carpets were laid. It had been my job to measure up and make drawings of each individual room and hall to send to New York. The carpets then came and were numbered to correspond to the Bed Rooms, etc. Mr. Cotter congratulated me later to say that they all fitted, no mistakes in the sizes. When the furniture was all in place Mr. Hayes came as Hotel Manager bringing with him a staff of cooks and Mr. Trowbridge as House Keeper who had here assistants as chamber maids who soon had the place all nice and clean.
John Shea was appointed Night clerk, Arthur Schlerman, Guide, Dan Shea, chief engineer and electrician.

The laundry building was built and the Troy Laundry Machinery installed. This building was placed at the R.R.Y[ard] so as to take care of the R. R. laundry as well as the Hotel and the Inn at Port Tampa.

At this time I had a chance to make Plans for the Catholic Convent over town and quit the Hotel to make them. While working on them, Mr. Hayes sent for me to come and see him. He wanted me to make plans of the grounds showing all the water outlets, also plans of the electric wiring throughout the Hotel and establish an office over the Power House. Then he gave me an order signed by Mr. H. B. Plant to go and get anything I wanted from Cotter's office, at that time in the servants quarters. There was evidently some feeling between Cotter and the Hotel Co. which I found out afterwards had been caused by reports made to them by J. Cordon Sullivan acting as Private Secretary to Cotter - he being a Pinkerton detective spying all the time the job was running. Soon after Cotter quit and started contracting, but his first job, a heavy building for the Phosphate Works on the Alafia river about broke him - when he went back to Sanford.

The Grand Opening of the Tampa Bay Hotel was in Dec. 1892 when many R.R. and express notables and New York[er]s were present including John Jacob Astor, [and] the Vanderbilts. I danced with Mrs. Margaret Plant while Mr. H. B. Plant shook hands and called me Alex. I had often met him on the job.

After a successful season the Hotel shut down. Then John Shea became Purser on the "Margaret." Mr. Wood, in the meantime, had written me to come to N. Y with him as the "Margaret" was making the trip to Bar Harbour. I went with them in 2 weeks -made N. Y - where I stayed 20 months. Mr. Wood went south and started to build the annex addition to the Hotel and had got this partly done when he sent for me to come from New York as he had to go to Matanzas, Cuba about a large Hotel to be built there. These plans I had been working on in New York. He left me in charge of the job along with John Mahoney as time keeper and accountant. When Mr. Woods came back the job was about finished. In the meantime, I got married and did not see Mr. Woods for seven or eight years when I met him again in Havana, Cuba. Mr. Henry B. Plant died in 1899 leaving his wife Margaret and only son Morton F. Plant his heirs.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:**
The original handwritten manuscript of Alexander Browning's reminiscences is in the collection of the Henry B. Plant Museum in Tampa, Florida. I wish to thank Susan Garter, Curator, and Cynthia Gandee, Executive Director of the Henry B. Plant Museum for the opportunity to work with this remarkable first-person account of the hotel's construction. Browning used very few periods, commas or conjunctions. Incomplete and run-on sentences abound and are separated by dashes in the original manuscript. His unique style of capitalization of proper names, job titles, places, companies and building materials has been reproduced as faithfully as possible. I corrected typographical errors and misspellings only if the author's meaning would otherwise be unclear. Infrequently, punctuation has been added to ease readability. Brackets have been added within the text to clarify certain sentences (e.g. S. youth). A word substitution has been made in every instance for the use of a particular racial epithet. Every effort has been made to faithfully reproduce Browning's original manuscript. Any deviation from the author's original meaning or errors in the spelling of proper names are the fault of the editor. - Frank R. North