Henry Plant, J. Lott Brown, and the South Florida State Fair

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On February 6, 1991, the Florida State Fair opened its gates for a twelve-day run which generated an eight-million-dollar business for the Tampa Bay area. The fair, which has been in existence on two different sites for eighty-seven years, owes its location in Tampa to the belief of Henry Plant and J. Lott Brown that fairs and expositions were conducive to the growth and prosperity of a city. As early as 1873, when an Industrial Association Fair was held in Savannah, Georgia, Henry Plant promoted his Southern Express Company by providing horses and a wagon to carry fair visitors to and from the fairgrounds and railroad station.

After Plant had acquired many railroads in Georgia and Florida and extended a line to Tampa, he and his wife visited a foreign exposition to learn more about the operation of fairs and expositions. The State of Florida, possessing much land but little money, subsidized railroads with grants of land for completed tracks, but it provided no money for promoting such events as fairs. When ten states from the U.S. were invited by the Republic of France to send people and exhibits to the Paris Universal Exposition of 1889, the governor of Florida requested the legislature to provide adequate funds for a Florida exhibit, but the legislature took no action. Realizing that this invitation represented a great opportunity to display Florida products, the Plant Investment Company gave $15,000 to finance an exhibit of southern resources. Since the exposition was open during the summer when the citrus season had ended, only pictures of the fruit could be shown. Nevertheless, Plant returned to the United States with the medals that his exhibits had won. Mrs. Plant did not spend much time at the exposition for she was busy purchasing art treasures for her husband’s Tampa Bay Hotel, which was under construction on the banks of the Hillsborough River, opposite Tampa.

On October 28, 1895, the Cotton States and International Exposition was held in Atlanta, Georgia, and Henry Plant and his railroad system played an important role in the event. Since it was also the day set aside for his seventy-sixth birthday celebration, two thousand employees travelled in three special trains to the Atlanta Exposition, where Plant shook hands with every employee in an afternoon reception. Prominent in the exposition’s attractions was a building designed in the form of a pyramid which contained articles and exhibits from all parts of the South that were served by Plant’s railroads.

After the Cotton States and International Exposition had concluded its stay at the Atlanta Fairgrounds, Plant made plans to place his exhibits in an exhibition hall to be erected on the grounds of the Tampa Bay Hotel. By the fall of 1896 a frame colonial revival style building measuring 80 by 110 feet had been constructed on the western side of the hotel. Exhibits of southern products that had been available at the Atlanta Exposition were placed within the building and included such items as boulders of phosphate rock placed at the entrance, pyramids of hard rock, a miniature phosphate mine, pine trees, citrus fruits, corn, oats, sweet potatoes, cotton, industrial products, and a map of the Plant Railroad and Steamship Systems. Additional space for other projects was provided during the fall of 1897 when a crew of fifty workmen, under the direction of J.W. Williams, cleared away pine trees and other vegetation to the north.
and west of the hotel. A half-mile race track for horses and an inner one-fourth-mile bicycle track with an adjacent stand for spectators was constructed and available for use in December 1897. Other projects completed on the site included a baseball field and eighteen-hole golf course. When all of these facilities were opened to hotel guests and the general public, the *Tampa Weekly Tribune* recommended as early as March 1897 that the community should plan for a South Florida Fair. Thus, when Plant enlarged the scope of activities available to hotel guests with his own funds, he also provided the basis for a fair.
Henry Plant playing golf on the grounds of his Tampa Bay Hotel.

Photograph from *Plant's Palace* by James W. Covington.

The race track at the "Tampa Agricultural and Fair Association" as shown in a drawing from an 1899 brochure advertising the Tampa Bay Hotel, which can be seen in the right background.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
After Plant died in June 1899, activities at the race track and exhibition hall stalled, but four years later a new hotel manager, J. Lott Brown, arrived and began to make changes. A Spring Carnival was planned for May 1900 by a predecessor of Brown, but the sum of $5,000 needed for expenses could not be raised by local businessmen, and the plan was dropped. When Brown arrived in 1903 or early 1904, he found the hotel to be a losing proposition, but he was given a chance to make the venture profitable by two owners, Morton Plant (son of Henry) who owned 82 percent of the hotel stock and Margaret Plant (widow of Henry) who owned the remaining 18 percent, and T. J. Scott and Sons who held an option to purchase the property. Morton Plant and his mother furnished Brown with sufficient funds so that he could experiment with some fresh ideas.

When J. Lott Brown became manager of the Tampa Bay Hotel, he implemented several plans to improve business. He opened the hotel for the first time during the entire year, advertised a different full-course daily evening meal in the hotel’s dining room for one dollar, and scheduled a May Festival for the hotel grounds and race track on May 4, 1904. The May Festival sponsored a band concert on May 2 at the fountain in front of the hotel, speeches by Mayor James McKay Sr. and W. F. Fuller, president of the Board of Trade. The festival also included a parade held two days later, featuring the newly organized Krewe of Gasparilla, that moved from the hotel grounds to the Hillsborough County Courthouse Square. That afternoon horse and mule races were held on the race track, and the First Gasparilla Ball was held on May 6 in the hotel dining room.6

Next came a special July 4 celebration on the hotel grounds. This event included speeches by the governor and the mayor, a street parade with floats, a baseball game between teams from Tampa and Bradenton, swimming races for children in the casino pool, horse races at the hotel’s race track, a dinner and reception for the governor, and a fireworks display at night from the banks of
the Hillsborough River. Most of these events planned by Brown attracted a good following with seventy-five attending the reception and 4,000 watching the fireworks display.

Pleased with the success of the May Festival, J. Lott Brown began to survey the twenty-seven acres adjacent to the hotel and plan a state fair for the site. The natural vegetation had already been cleared to provide room for a nine-hole golf course and a race track. With the exception of the frame exhibition hall, there were no buildings near the planned site of the fair. However, the land was flat with few drainage problems and was bordered on the north by the tracks of the railroad which led to Port Tampa. Yet, due to the Hillsborough River bordering one side and railroad tracks and hotel grounds on the others, rapid entrances and exits would be hindered. This problem was compounded when the first city auditorium was constructed on the property adjacent to the fairgrounds.

As early as June 1904 Brown was making plans for a South Florida State Fair to be held on the grounds of the Tampa Bay Hotel in November. On June 23, in a talk before the Board of Trade, the forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce, he discussed his negotiations with the Atlantic Coast Line and Seaboard Railroad for lower fares and excursions to the proposed event, and he described activities planned for the fair. Exhibits would include products, animals, and industries from all counties, horse races featuring the best horses available, Jai Alai players from Cuba displaying their skills, and other festivities that would rival Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Brown made such a stimulating presentation that when he left Tampa to visit the railroad executives in Portsmouth, Virginia, and New York, the Second Regimental Band gave a concert at the depot to mark his departure.

Brown’s next step in stirring interest in the proposed South Florida Fair was to contact officials of the various counties that could provide exhibits and possible funds and groups that would support the fair by attendance and presentation of shows. The first organization to offer support was the Confederate Veterans who proposed to present a drill and build two camps for resident veterans of the Civil War (in conjunction with the Grand Army of the Republic). Next, the real estate dealers of Tampa offered vocal support. The first county to offer an exhibit and endorse the fair was DeSoto County, whose commissioners voted their approval.

By July 1904, with the help of a committee that had met at the hotel, Brown was able to announce a list of exhibits for the fair. Included in agricultural products would be citrus fruits, truck gardens, cereals, preserves and tobacco, while other exhibits would feature honey, wines, a stock show, and kitchen products. C. Benedict Rodgers, who had arranged fairs in Florida and New York, joined the committee and offered valuable advice.

By this time Brown had written numerous letters but received limited support from the community. It became necessary to organize formally one steering committee to direct the event and another one to raise necessary funds to meet expenses. In a meeting held in the music room of the Tampa Bay Hotel on July 27, 1904, the group officially adopted the name of the South Florida Fair Association. Members elected J. Lott Brown president of the organization and Frank B. Bowyer and A. C. Clewis vice-presidents. Hugh Macfarlane, who had helped develop West Tampa, was selected chairman of the all-important finance committee which set a goal of $10,000. Interest in the fair was growing, with Brown receiving eighty-three letters of
inquiry in one day. Both the finance and exhibits committees began to move into the principal portions of their work.

According to one report, the finance committee had no problem in securing funds, and nearly $3,500 of the $10,000 goal had been received by August 3.

Brown devoted a great deal of time to fundraising, soliciting exhibitors, and generating interest in the fair. On a visit to Jacksonville, Brown made a deal in which Tampa would support the annual fair held in Jacksonville in exchange for including a "Jacksonville Day" at the South Florida Fair. The Levy County commissioners and those from Marion County offered support for the fair, and the railroads and Southern Express Company volunteered to transport all exhibits free of charge. A major breakthrough came when the Confederate Veterans offered to work on behalf of the fair, march in the opening parade, and hold a drill in uniform on a special day set aside for them. In addition, Company H of the 7th Cavalry agreed to present a drill at the fair and take part in the parade. Additional funds came from Hernando County which offered $500, Hillsborough County which pledged $500 for exhibits and $500 to the general fund, and the City of Tampa which promised $500 to the general fund. These commitments came as a result of visits by Brown to meetings of the county commissioners.
By late August the South Florida Fair Association had drawn plans for the erection of buildings on the west side of the race track. Initially only one building, a frame structure 600 feet long and 100 feet wide, was projected, but plans soon included stock stalls on the north side of the track, a stadium to hold 4,000 persons, and a coliseum to house the circus acts at the northern end of a midway lined by carnival rides such as ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds. Construction of these facilities was delayed due to the slow arrival of lumber. As a result, the fair opened with only part of the planned facilities available for exhibits.15

With a month to spare before the opening of the fair, Brown was busy arousing interest, obtaining exhibits and adjusting his earlier plans of a Mardi Gras festival to the reality of the situation in Tampa. To assist his work Brown had organized a fair committee which in turn hired professionals who had arranged previous successful fairs. Thomas Weir was in charge of the opening parade committee, Ira Toube handled carnival arrangements, George W. Hardee headed the amusement committee, and P. W. Corr was placed in charge of press relations. At the height of his work, Brown had one full-time writer to produce articles and three secretaries to transcribe letters sent by Brown to officials in various counties and to heads of business firms. In October Brown was assisted by Judge H. H. Peebles who soon found that he needed a secretary to answer correspondence. Colonel H. A. Bailey visited Volusia County, where the county commissioners
allotted $500 to $1,000 for the fair, and Osceola County, where $500 was voted to finance an exhibit.

By October 9 the list of firm exhibits was printed in the *Tampa Tribune*. The exhibits ranged from agriculture to industrial products to horticultural to children's work to exhibits by women. However, despite the hard work by Brown, only sixteen counties sent exhibits.

In addition to the exhibits in the fair, a racing card, including a total of eleven races with $2,400 in prizes, was scheduled at the track for the dates of November 16, 21, 23, and 24. The finest horses were available for exhibits and racing, including several carloads of horses sent by R. W. Thomson of Lebanon, Tennessee.

The schedule for the wooden stadium, under construction in the center of the race track, was nearly complete. Included in the acts to be presented there were drills by Company H of the 7th Cavalry, ladder performers, jugglers, bicycle acts, "Life in Bombay, India," Professor Carlyle's Wild West Show, Mount Pelee's Volcanic Eruption, the Myer diving children, and the horse Ben Hur who could tell people's ages. Fees to the show were twenty-five cents.

In order for a fair to be successful, transportation companies had to agree to reduced fares for those who would travel to the site. Round trip tickets by train from Ohio to Tampa were available for twenty dollars, and special fares were set for those who wished to travel by steamer from Savannah and New York ($34.45 round trip) to Tampa. Lower rates were established from other southern cities for visitors to the fair. In addition to the reduced rail rates and free transportation of exhibits by the railroads and Southern Express Company, there were no charges levied for electrical and telephone service at the fair.

Brown finalized his plans for the fair in a public meeting on October 27, which was held in the Hillsborough County Court House. Additions to Brown's original plans included thirteen events in a track meet for men, an art show and special days at the fair to be sponsored by various clubs including the Elks, Pythians, Eagles, and Woodmen of America. In addition, stores along Franklin Street were to be decorated with the fair's colors of yellow and white. A list of visitors and their addresses in Tampa was available to those who wished to contact the fair patrons from outside Tampa.

The first sign that planners had overlooked some important details came when it was discovered that persons wanting to purchase reduced fare tickets in Atlanta and St. Louis could not obtain the tickets. Within a short time fair officials discovered that emphasis had been put on the Jacksonville Fair's reduced rate in ticket offices and no mention made of a reduced rate to Tampa. But as soon as that fair had concluded its run, the South Florida rate would be advertised and distributed to the local ticket offices.

November 15, 1904, opening day of the fair, brought good weather with somewhat overcast skies and a temperature of sixty-five degrees. After a luncheon at Garcia's Gran Oriente Restaurant, a parade which consisted of local and state dignitaries, the Tampa City Band clad in new green uniforms, the Tampa Light Infantry, twelve mounted patrolmen, a unit of the Tampa Fire Department with engines and horses, all proceeded to the Tampa Bay Hotel, where
Governor William S. Jennings and others delivered speeches. A large crowd followed the governor and his group to the fairgrounds where the gates were opened for the first time to receive the visitors who had been lured there by three months of incessant publicity.19

Once within the gates the crowd discovered that the fair was not ready for them. Only one-third of the midway, which should have contained ferris wheels, merry-go-rounds, swings, and games of chance, was finished, and the rest stood virtually empty. Many of the exhibits were still unfinished, and as late as two days later, many exhibits were still not ready for public display.20

Despite the uncompleted state of the midway and some displays, people seemed pleased with the shows and moved into the fairgrounds in large numbers. The patrons liked the horse races and crew races on the Hillsborough River performed by two crews from Rollins College, and some claimed that the fair was better than the one presented in Georgia. Five thousand persons had pushed their way into the stadium where the 7th Cavalry performed drills, and there was a recreation of the explosion of Mount Pelee which had destroyed a city in the French West Indies.21
Military Day, which attracted more than 7,000 people, started with a parade from Lafayette and Florida at 9:00 a.m. and proceeded to the Tampa Bay Casino. According to three visitors, the event was a rousing success. Colonel H. W. Long of Marion County called the fair the greatest success in Florida history. M. P. Porter, county commissioner from Osceola County, called it the most successful fair that he had ever seen, and C. H. Hoffer, commissioner of Orange County, claimed that everything at the fair was exemplary.

In retrospect, the fair was heavily subsidized by the owners of the Tampa Bay Hotel. J. Lott Brown spent virtually all of five months in promoting the fair, leaving little time for management of the hotel and hotel grounds. Public rooms in the hotel were used without remuneration by the fair officials. Brown probably used hotel funds for the three secretaries, postage, and trips to other cities. The significance of subsidies from the Tampa Bay Hotel became apparent two years later at the 1906 fair. When David Lauber leased the hotel from the new owner, the City of Tampa, the South Florida Fair was such a financial failure without funding from the hotel that no fairs were held for at least the next nine years. Yet the idea of a South Florida fair was revived during the summer of 1915, and a fair opened in February 1916, continuing as a feature of Florida's winter season during the subsequent years except during World War I and World War II. In 1976 the fair was moved from its location near Plant Park to the intersection of Highway 301 and Interstate 4, and the first fair held there one year later. The old coliseum site is now a soccer field, the race track is a running track, and exhibit stalls serve as classrooms and an art gallery at the University of Tampa, which occupies the grounds of the former Tampa Bay Hotel and fair grounds.

NOTES

1 Savannah Morning News, November 22, 1871.
3 G. Hutchinson Smythe, The Life of Henry Bradley Plant (New York, 1898), 157-73; Richard Prince, Atlanta Coast Line: Steam Locomotives, Ships and History (Salt Lake City, 1966), 22.
4 Tampa Tribune, December 29, 1896.
5 Ibid., March 3, 1898.
6 George W. Hardee, a federal employee, and Louise Frances Dodge, society editor of the Tampa Tribune, planned the Spring Festival with an emphasis upon Mardi Gras and Gasparilla. Edwin D. Lambright, The Life and Exploits of Gasparilla: Last of the Buccaneers With the History of Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla (Tampa, 1936), 43.
7 Tampa Tribune, June 28, 1904.
8 Ibid., July 5, 1904.
9 Ibid., July 21, 1904.
10 Ibid., July 28, 1904.
Frank C. Bowyer was elected mayor in June 1898 and served for two years. A. C. Clewis served as president of the Exchange National Bank from 1903 to 1922.

Hugh Macfarlane, a native of Scotland, had come to Tampa in 1883 to practice law and to organize the Macfarlane Investment Company, which developed West Tampa in 1892. West Tampa was only a few blocks from the Tampa Bay Hotel.

*Tampa Tribune*, August 3, 1904.

Ibid., September 8, 1904.

Ibid., September 13, 1904.

Ibid., October 9, 1904.

Ibid., October 16, 1904.

Ibid., October 30, 1904.

Ibid., November 16, 1904.

The Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla held its own parade on November 15 with assembly at the Tampa Bay Hotel and marched with floats, horsemen, and three horseless carriages to the fair grounds. Lambright, *Mystic Krewe*, 51-52.

*Tampa Tribune*, November 18, 1904.

Ibid., November 25, 1904.

Ibid., November 26, 1904.