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"JUDGE" JAMES JOSEPH LUNSFORD: Tampa Attorney, Farmer and First Hillsborough County Law Librarian

Sydney K. Potter

During some research for an article about the historic old Hillsborough County Courthouse, torn down in 1953, there was no overlooking the quiet presence of an attorney so long a respected figure in the legal world of that era. Although he never actually occupied the judicial bench, to his fellow lawyers, especially those many, young and old, who came to him for gracious advice and counsel, he was always "Judge" Lunsford.

James Joseph Lunsford was born in Coffee County, Alabama, February 2, 1870, the eldest of five children born to George Champion Lunsford, a Confederate veteran, and his wife, Mary Hudson Lunsford.

When he was a small boy, his father, a farmer, moved the family, on foot and by wagon, to Florida. As the eldest son, he walked alongside his father while the wagon carried his mother and the smaller children, along with their household goods. Apparently the move was not a success, or not to their liking, and they returned to either Alabama or Georgia.

Actually, Coffee County in Alabama is in close proximity to both Florida and Georgia, and it appears that there was quite a bit of travel back and forth across state lines. The census of 1880 shows the family living in Hamilton County, Florida.

The South was still in the midst of reconstruction, following the devastations of the Civil War, and this state of affairs probably contributed to the young

Lunsford's formal education not going beyond the fourth grade.

At a time when his family may have moved to Thomasville, Georgia, he went there to live in the home of a high school principal, who undertook to help him further his education. After some years the principal advised his pupil that there was no more that he could teach him.

So it was time to move on again, walking again, and working at whatever jobs he could to sustain his journey. This included splitting ties for a railroad, long hours in the fields, and also working as a roofer in 1890 helping to build the Opera House in Monticello, Florida. This is a remarkable building, once the grandest opera house in north Florida, with its stained glass windows and marvelous acoustics, and it still stands. Originally known as the Perkins Opera House, it became the Monticello Opera House when a non-profit group bearing the name Monticello Opera Company was formed in 1971 to save the old building from demolition. Now restored, it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Somehow, somewhere during this period, in Georgia and working his way down through Florida, apparently restless and ambitious, he found time to, in the vernacular of the day, "read the law." There is not much information about this period in his life, although there is evidence that he spent time in Thomasville and Monticello, also with a firm in Tallahassee, where it is reported that he lived in a one-bedroom apartment above the offices where he worked.



Attorney James Joseph Lunsford in 1907.
(Photograph courtesy of the author.)

After some additional schooling - he once mentioned "three months" - he took the examination and was admitted to the bar. One is reminded of Abraham Lincoln in his early years.

At age 29, apparently seeking broader horizons, Lunsford elected to move south to Tampa.

He arrived in Tampa in 1899, just eight years after Henry B. Plant had completed and opened the Tampa Bay Hotel, his Moorish palace alongside the Hillsborough River, and one year after Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders had arrived

and departed on their way to Cuba and San Juan Hill.

In 1900, Lunsford formed a general law practice in partnership with Thomas Palmer, a well known criminal lawyer, and he was on his way. Although leaning toward corporate law, records indicate that he also participated in the firm's sometimes tumultuous criminal law practice.

A story in the *St. Petersburg Times*, May 1901, relates that, "While engaged in trying a criminal case at Tampa last week, lawyers George F. Raney, Jr. and J. J. Lunsford were only prevented from engaging in a fight by deputy sheriffs. Both showed their teeth."

While this may or may not have been a contributing factor, it does appear that young Lunsford made an early impression upon the community. In 1901 he was helping to found the Peninsular Telephone Company, and in 1903 he was engaged in drawing Company, Tampa's City Charter, which was approved by the next session of the Florida Legislature.

For the telephone company, working with founder W. G. Brorein and law partner Thomas Palmer, he drew up the organization papers for the fledgling corporation, bringing a more modern telephone service to Tampa. At that time, as noted in the 1971 book, *The People Machine*, written by Dennis R. Cooper for The General Telephone Company of Florida, Tampa was being served by equipment mostly obsolete and poorly maintained, sometimes so full of static that callers had to shout to be heard. There was no long distance service.

Lunsford went on to serve as a director of General Telephone, at one point, vice-president, and remained the company's chief counsel until his retirement in 1926. picture



Executives with the Peninsular Telephone Company. Attorney James Lunsford, in white suit, is seated in the center; company founder W. (I. Brorein is seated at left. *(Photograph courtesy of Dennis R. Cooper, author of The People Machine.)*

shows him seated with other executives of the company, made easily recognizable by his baldness. W. G. Brorein is seated to his right.

Concerning his baldness, he would tell the story that when he was a young man, working as a laborer, he had worn a black felt hat, and his hair would remain wet with sweat for days at a time, for "forty days and forty nights." It was his belief that this caused his hair to fall out, leaving only the fringe around the sides and back. He claimed that this actually helped him, making him appear older than he really was when he began to take on new and important responsibilities early in his law career.

Later on he met young Pat Whitaker, just arrived in Tampa. According to family

legend, they met in a "blind tiger," slang for a drinking establishment of that era. They took a liking to each other and began practicing criminal law together.

It was a highly successful venture, and they both prospered, becoming particularly well-known for the eloquence of their pleadings.

Despite the success, Lunsford found himself becoming uncomfortable in this area, and his wife, Geraldine, whom he had married in July 1910, urged him to withdraw from criminal law, which he did. For the most part he then devoted himself to his growing and very lucrative corporate law practice. However, Whitaker and Lunsford remained friends, and each Christmas Whitaker would send his former associate a bottle, perhaps

reminiscent of their first "blind tiger" meeting. It is interesting that, like his earlier law partner, Thomas Palmer, Pat Whitaker went on to become a member of the Florida Legislature and president of the Senate.

In addition to Palmer and Whitaker, at various times Lunsford also was associated with several others well known in Tampa's legal fraternity, among them Edwin R. Dickenson, Thomas M. Shackelford, Jr., Dozier A. DeVane, and C. F. Blake.

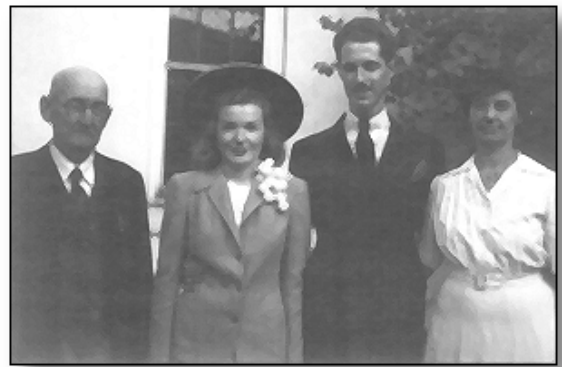
During his early years in Tampa Lunsford lived in the Hyde Park area, first at 201 Beach Place, close by the Bayshore, then later at 111 South Brevard Avenue. It is believed that he built the home at 201 Beach Place, his residence with his first wife, May, and daughter Dorothy. The single-family house was later converted into an apartment building, then acquired by the county in 1975 for use as a shelter for runaway children.

There was a movement in the 1980s, sparked by the local historic preservation board, to preserve and put the old home, along with several others in the area built between 1897 and 1907, on the National Register of Historic Places. But, the old building, in bad condition and considered a fire hazard after years of neglect and deterioration, was finally demolished, along with 205 Beach Place, to make room for a new facility for runaways.

The 111 South Brevard location is now a vacant lot. In 1918 Lunsford bought a house in what was then a fashionable neighborhood on Nebraska Avenue. He and his second wife, Geraldine, and his growing family, lived in this house for a number of years. Known as Belvedere, a picture, with two of his children on the front porch, shows it to be a spacious and imposing residence. It burned shortly after he sold it in 1926 and



The Lunsford home at 201 Beach Place in Tampa. (Photograph circa 1905 courtesy of the author.)



James Lunsford (left) attended the marriage of his daughter, Thalia, to Sydney Potter, the author, and son of Margaret Potter (right.) (Photograph courtesy of the author)



James Lunsford's wife Geraldine with their children at Veltmere Farms in 1929. From left: Eileen, Mortimer, Terry, Thalia (Potter), and Colleen. (Photograph courtesy of the author.)

arson was suspected. The block where it once stood, at 3203 Nebraska Avenue, across the street from what was then the First United Brethren Church, is now zoned commercial and occupied by businesses.

The church, a red brick building in the 3300 block, still stands. Lunsford's eldest son, James Jr., known as Jay, attended Boy Scout meetings there, in the basement, along with Ed Blackburn, Jr., whose father was a member of the Tampa City Council. Ed Blackburn, Jr. was destined to become Hillsborough County's sheriff, and later a member of the Florida Legislature.

In addition to his work for the telephone company, Lunsford continued an extensive private law practice. One of his more interesting clients was the Belgian Princess de Montys-Lyon, Countess do Mercy Argenteau, the subject of an article in D.B. McKay's *Pioneer Florida*, and in an article by him in the *Tampa Tribune*, April 13, 1952.

Lunsford is mentioned as her attorney, and his older children recall that he would never call upon her alone in her home, in Belmont Heights, but would always recruit at least one of them to go along. To them she was Madame Argenteau, and they remember being impressed by her beauty and the magnificence of her jewelry and the fine furnishings and paintings in her home. By all accounts she was an intriguing, even flamboyant, personality, and her sudden and unexpected death in 1921, followed by the mysterious disappearance of her many valuables, raised suspicions of foul play, perhaps poison. Her body was laid to rest in Myrtle Hill Cemetery.

Altogether attorney Lunsford was carrying a very heavy load, and it was beginning to affect his health. He frequently traveled to

the spa at Hot Springs, Arkansas for treatment, and he was warned by his doctor that lie was facing severe health problems if he didn't ease off and reduce the stress. In fact the doctor recommended that he quit his law practice altogether, rather than just cut back.

Accordingly, in 1923, he bought a 94 acre farm in the Brandon-Valrico area, bordering the west side of Lake Valrico. In 1926 he resigned from his law practice, sold the home on Nebraska Avenue, and moved with his family to *Veltmere Farms*, the name given the farm by his wife.

Full of enthusiasm for this new project he had built a fine, two-story red barn. He bought 120 dairy cattle, a pair of matched bay saddle horses, four mules, and a tractor and wagons necessary for farm and dairy work, and to take care of the three orange groves already on the property. He also installed an irrigation system, an innovation for those times.

in addition, with his usual thoroughness, he studied horticulture and the weather, knowledge necessary to becoming a successful farmer. He became such an expert on the weather that, according to a 1946 article by Frank Klein, Jr., of the *Tampa Tribune*, he was often consulted by his farmer friends in Valrico for advice.

He also became an outstanding horticulturist, developing hybrid strains that enhanced both the quality and the yield of his crops. He amassed a store of medical knowledge that he used to keep both his family and his livestock healthy. He would also use that knowledge to act as a veterinarian for farmer friends with sick livestock, and who often could not afford a regular vet. Such services were always, of course, performed for free.

He had a great ability to absorb knowledge, always generous in sharing it with those in need, and it was during this period of helpfulness to his neighbors that he first began being referred to as "Judge" Lunsford.

There was a house on the farm into which he and his family moved, but he had plans for a finer home to be built down by the lake. Unfortunately it was not to be.

Although his dedication and methods were making *Veltmere Farms* into a model operation, and for a while an undoubted success, Lunsford found his future and the future of his farm being shaped by events quite beyond his control.

The first setback was the loss of a field of fine cantaloupes, probably hybrid, that he had developed and carefully nurtured into early maturity. He had planted early, gambling, or perhaps having reason to believe, weatherwise, that there would be no frost. There was no frost, and the crop was ready for market when prices were sky-high. He had driven into Tampa to pick up shipping crates when a massive thunderstorm struck. Hailstones - reported by some as big as "grapefruit" - pummeled the field. The size was perhaps an exaggeration, but of course grapefruit were not as large then as they are today. Nevertheless, the crop of cantaloupes was totally destroyed.

It was a devastating blow, both financially and otherwise. He lost not only the revenue that the cantaloupes would have produced, but also the considerable investment spent in getting them ready for early marketing.

There was more to follow. The "boom" in Florida was winding down. Banks failed and the Great Depression set in. Lunsford continued to grow fine crops, but the bank

failures had cost him his savings, the people had no money and there was no market. He was forced to sell off his livestock, and finally was reduced to selling his produce on the streets of Tampa. He also supplemented the family income by working for the New Deal's Works Progress Administration, supervising laborers doing road work.

The farm, heavily mortgaged, eventually became too much of a burden and he was forced to give it up. In 1936 he moved his family to a home at 5801 2nd Street, in the Ballast Point area of Tampa. This home, built in the 1920s and recently refurbished, still stands.

Today the area alongside Lake Valrico once occupied by *Veltmere Farms* is a scene of winding roads and attractive homes. There is no vestige of the farm remaining other than some fine old oak trees, the same trees once so joyously climbed by the children of farmer Lunsford.

Although no longer a practicing attorney, Lunsford was nevertheless still held in high regard by the community, particularly amongst the legal fraternity. In 1937 he was asked by the city attorney to come out of retirement to revise and bring up to date the City Charter that he had first written in 1903. At age 67 this was a new challenge and one that he welcomed.

Shortly after, a committee of prominent attorneys, Frank T. Phillips, Edmund Worth and William T. Thompson, organized to establish a County Law Library. They offered him the position as Hillsborough County's first Law Librarian.

There was probably nothing during his long and lucrative law career that pleased him more than this opportunity "to renew my friendships among the older lawyers and to get to know the young ones coming up," as

quoted in the aforementioned article by Frank Klein, Jr. "This library is a great thing. You can't know the law without the books."

In addition to donating his own law library, Lunsford prevailed upon others to loan or contribute volumes to be available to young lawyers who were in no position to set up libraries of their own.

Beyond the books, Lunsford made himself and his legal expertise available, and quite often, as noted in Frank Klein's article, a lawyer who had called would arrive at the library to find the appropriate volume on the table opened to the subject in question. Over the years it naturally followed that he became "Judge" Lunsford, a mark of the affection and esteem in which he was held by his colleagues.

Devoted to his work, for many years he would not even take a vacation, although failing health finally forced him to curtail his hours. His office was located on the second floor in the northeast wing of the old courthouse. There was no elevator, and after transporting him downtown, his son-in-law, Wayne Bevis, would help him up the stairs. Even if for only a few hours, Lunsford continued to show up for work every day.

Over many objections, the old courthouse building, designed by architect J. A. Wood, who also designed the Tampa Bay Hotel (now a part of the University of Tampa,) was slated to be torn down. The block where it once stood, bordered on the west by Franklin Street, and on the south by Lafayette Street (now Kennedy Boulevard,) is now occupied by the Tampa Police headquarters in what was formerly The Marine Bank & Trust Company building.

The Law Library, along with other county offices, was scheduled to be moved to the new courthouse under construction on Pierce Street.

Although Judge Lunsford had worked with the architect in designing the new facilities for the Law Library, and had readied the books to be moved, he was not fated to move to the new location. According to an October 22 story in the *Tampa Tribune*, on Monday, October 20 he was on the job at the old building, with the prospect that the books would be moved. However, rain interfered and delayed the transfer.

But Judge Lunsford's work was complete. On the very day of the opening of the new courthouse, October 21, 1952, he died in his sleep.

Certainly his was a most interesting life, intertwined with and having an impact upon the history of Tampa, then emerging from a settlement into a modern city. As a fitting honor and tribute, the Hillsborough Board of County Commissioners voted unanimously on October 18, 2000 to name the County Law Library for James Joseph Lunsford.

ENDNOTES

Sidney K. Potter is a Tampa native, and graduated from Brandon High School. It was while attending Brandon High that he first met two of James Lunsford's daughters. Mr. Potter was employed by Swift & Company, Meat Packers, in Miami, St. Petersburg and Tampa. It was after his transfer to Tampa in 1942 that he met Judge Lunsford's daughter, Thalia, and became reacquainted with her family. Mr. Potter was employed by National Airlines, Eastern Airlines in Tallahassee, I.W. Phillips & Company, Wholesale Hardware and Building Materials in Tampa, and, after

Phillips was acquired by Ace Hardware Corporation in 1975, remained with that corporation until, after 35 years with the two companies, he retired in 1984. He and his wife are the parents of three children.

James Joseph Lunsford, the "Judge," had lost his wife of 30 years, Geraldine, in 1940 after having moved from the farm back to Tampa. Some measure of the devotion that they must have felt for each other comes forth in the eulogy that he wrote, speaking of her as "My beloved sweetheart, bride and wife."

Judge Lunsford is survived by his daughter Thalia, Mr. Potter's wife of 55 years, four other daughters, and two sons. The author is much indebted to them for delving into their recollections and their files and making available much of the material contained in this article. An older son, Jay, died in 1977.

Numerous grandchildren and great grandchildren of "Judge" Lunsford can be found, not only in this area, but also in England, New York, California and points in between.