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The Sale Of The Tampa Bay Hotel

Josephine S. King

omen were hysterical, and children were crying for milk," reported hotel guest, M. Berri- man, as Tampa’s Mayor Frederick A. Salomonson, accompanied by two sets of lawyers and four deputies, shut down the Tampa Bay Hotel. On the evening of November 22, 1904, several hundred guests looked forward to dinner after a day spent at the South Florida Fair. Instead, confused, tired and hungry, they crowded into the lobby to hear a writ of replevin evicting them, luggage and all, effective immediately; panic and anger ensued. Only the bar room was kept open, "... because the Mayor himself wanted to go down and get a drink occasionally," commented City Councilman J.P. Hardee.

Although distressing, this closing was but the latest in a succession of "body blows" that Henry Bradley Plant’s "Palace" had suffered since his death in 1899. Opened in 1891, the 511-room Tampa Bay Hotel was considered state of the art with its luxurious decor and limitless creature comforts including an elevator, electricity, hot and cold water, telephones, and heat for cool winter evenings. Plant had expended large sums for upkeep of both buildings and grounds without concerning himself about profitable returns. After his death, Plant’s heirs, unwilling to continue this support, realized the property was deteriorating and turned their "problem" over to a syndicate, Ocean and Gulf Realty of New York City. In 1902, another New York firm, Thomas J. Scott and Sons, obtained an option on the property; their agents traveled to Tampa to oversee Messrs. Proskey and Chase, who were leasing the hotel. What Thomas Scott and Thomas J. Laud Brown found was chaos: the grounds neglected, employees suing for back wages, liquor disappearing, numerous free meals and rooms given to young women, outstanding bills unpaid, and money missing, among numerous discrepancies. On March 4, 1904, Brown reported to the home office, "[Proskey and Chase] spend the major portion of their days and until early hours of the next morning in the bar room."

But the best was yet to come, as Brown wrote, "Tuesday evening in the dining room Mr. Proskey made an attempt to hit the cashier with a water bottle, this caused, as you may imagine, quite some excitement. About half an hour after that they met in the rotunda, and before all the guests had a tongue lashing, and had it not been for intervention, would have had a hand to hand fight."

Mr. Proskey and the cashier were not the only ones to get a "piece of the action," as Brown continued, "... this was followed shortly afterward by a regular stand up fight between two of the bell boys." One hopes that they did not tear their clothing, because, perhaps in anticipation of this behavior, management had made the following decision, which was included in an earlier report from Brown, "The bell boys’ uniforms are to be taken out of their wages when they are paid." Staying at the Tampa Bay Hotel must have been quite an adventure and not for the faint of heart.

Hotel property was in disrepair; Brown estimated that it would take several hundred dollars to restore just the grounds that had been badly neglected. Finally, on April 4, 1904, Brown wrote, "I took charge of the hotel on Tuesday morning last after breakfast and have about got matters straightened out ... I am making strenuous efforts to get the best people of Tampa to make this their headquarters throughout the dull and
monotonous Summer months.”9 Thomas J. Laud Brown was a man with a plan, even going to the extent of organizing a Tampa Bay Rod and Gun Club with headquarters at the hotel.

One guest at this time was none other than Margaret Plant, widow of Henry B. Plant, who had moved to New York after her husband’s death. An undated letter from Mrs. Gaston Scott to the Henry B. Plant Museum explained, “Mr. Taylor Scott managed the interests of the Scott family – and gave Mrs. Plant the privilege of selecting pieces that she wanted – she returned to Tampa and took two solid cars of items back with her, estimated value would be $175,000.”10 Within months of her visit, Ocean and Gulf Realty put the property on the market to be sold quickly at a sacrifice price.

Many real estate firms, syndicates and others tried to make deals as soon as the intentions of the Plant heirs became known. Among those interested parties was the Presbyterian Church of Tampa, that wanted to use the hotel for a Presbyterian University. But one had to be fleet of foot to outflank Tampa’s mayor. Frederick A. Salomonson, a local realtor who had emigrated from Holland in 1884, was serving his third term as mayor.11 Salomonson had made several trips to New York before the Tampa Morning Tribune of November 14, 1904, broke the news: “Mayor F.A. Salomonson Purchased the Magnificent Property Yesterday.”12

What a tempting morsel it must have been: sixty-one acres, the hotel with its furnishings, botanical gardens, Casino, Bachelor’s Quarters, Servants’ building, Exposition Building, race track, park boats, boathouses, piers, power plant, laundry and an additional 22 acres outside the city limits! Sale prices were not publicized, but estimates varied from $3,000,000 to $5,000,000. According to the Tampa Morning Tribune, “Such a colossal bargain was never before known in real estate circles in the South, and a man who was speaking of the ... property last night said that the mere material in the hotel building was worth much more than the price at which it was held for sale.”13

Speculation about the deal ran rampant in Tampa. How much had the mayor paid? Was he acting for himself or for a syndicate? What were the intentions of the purchaser? What would be done with the hotel
A veranda view of the Tampa Bay Hotel. This side faces east and fronts Henry B. Plant's original "botanical gardens," now known as Plant Park, and the Hillsborough River. The photograph below shows the Tampa Bay Hotel Bar Room, where it was reported in a letter of March 4, 1904, from Thomas J. Laud Brown to his New York office, that the two men leasing the hotel, Proskey and Chase, spent a "major portion of their days and until early hours of the next morning." The bar remained open after the closing of the hotel on November 22, 1904, because Tampa's mayor, Frederick Salomonson, "wanted to go down and get a drink occasionally." (Courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum Archives.)
Letter received by Capt. Charles H. Scott from Thomas J. Laud Brown on February 29, 1904. Scott's company, Thomas J. Scott and Sons of New York City, obtained an option on the hotel property in 1902, and sent Brown to Tampa to examine it and report his findings (Courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum Archives.)

building itself? And more ominously, “Just what effect [will] the sale have upon the present regime [T.J. Scott and Sons] in charge of the property?” The answer to the last question came on the fateful November 22nd when Mayor Salomonson appeared at the Tampa Bay Hotel with two pairs of lawyers (Macfarlane and Glen and Sparkman and Carter) and four “deputies” in tow.

Not to be outdone by a small-town mayor, New Yorkers Scott and Brown summoned their own “legal eagles” (M.B. Macfarlane and John B. Wall), posted a $50,000 bond and reopened the hotel.

Tom Scott made his own report of the event to New York, “This paper [writ of replevin] was served just as the guests were getting to go to dinner, stopped all the cooking and spoiled our dinner entirely...They took this mean advantage to make us give up possession...They scored Salomonson good last night in the Council as you will see by the clipping from the paper which I will enclose.” Score him they did because for good or ill, Tampa had a city council as feisty as the mayor, and it wasted no time condemning Salomonson for impressing into service Tampa police officers as “deputies” to further his own private interests in the Tampa Bay Hotel.

Heated discussion ensued at the City Council meeting that night when J.P. Hardee, leading the attack, excitedly declared that it was their duty to demand the mayor's resignation, and if he refused, to impeach him. Councilman E.W. Monrose employed more colorful language, denouncing the closing as a damnable outrage and cursing Salomonson, “for everything from an ass to a ______, the last epithet being one that would not look well in print.” Businessmen all, predictably they were incensed because the mayor's actions had inconvenienced South Florida Fair-goers who had brought dollars to Tampa.

Located on the grounds of the Tampa Bay Hotel, the South Florida Fair, in progress from November 15 through November 28, was exceeding all expectations and breaking attendance records daily. While crowds flocked to enjoy carnival rides, food, horse racing and the many exhibits, judges labored tirelessly to select winning entries from every category including even “Best jackass, any age. First Prize, $5 - J.M. Branch, Branchton.”

In light of this success, is it any wonder that city councilmen were furious? “I thought when Mayor Salomonson promised to do ‘all in his power for the success of the Fair,’ said Mr. Hardee in closing, ‘that perhaps for once he was going to keep his word, but now I do not believe that he will even do what he says.’” He wound up with a complimentary comparison of this Chief Executive to a donkey. After considerably more invective, a committee was appointed to prefer formal charges against Mayor Salomonson for his unauthorized and illegal use of Tampa police. Insight into the municipal power struggle was evident in J.C. Hardee’s warning that, “…the city of Tampa had grown too large to be run by one man.”

Meanwhile, both Mayor Salomonson and Scott & Sons had decided to seek justice in the courts, and the Tampa Tribune reported, “The suit now hinges upon the writ of
The main lobby of the Tampa Bay Hotel is shown in the photograph above. The large, framed oil painting, which is shown hanging on the far wall to the left, was one of two excluded in an option to purchase the property obtained by the Ocean and Gulf Realty Company in 1904. The language in the option listed the various buildings and property and closed by stating "...in fact everything appertaining to the hotel property except two oil paintings, one of Henry B. Plant and one entitled 'After the Ball' which hangs in the lobby of the hotel, for the sum of $125,000." The painting is shown below. (Courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum Archives.)

replevin secured by Mayor Salomonson, the service of which upon the hotel property created such a hubbub at the hotel last week...will be tried by Judge Robles – or by a jury in his court, in case either side should so elect..."21 So Tampa found itself embroiled on two fronts: impeachment and litigation, which gave citizens plenty of fodder for speculation.

Undoubtedly, fortune was smiling upon Frederick Salomonson because the committee that had been appointed to prefer charges for impeachment returned, instead, a resolution for censure of the mayor. However, before hearing the committee report, the City Council had received a letter from Salomonson, himself, "Couched in brief and Courteous terms" that had not only defended his actions, but actually chastised the Council stating that, "...if the honorable body had seen fit to investigate the facts before arriving at a conclusion, they would have been spared the necessity of passing such a resolution, and he would have been spared the necessity of replying to it."22 Score one for the City Council and one for the mayor: a classic Mexican standoff.

Seemingly at the eleventh hour, Salomonson and Scott & Sons settled their dispute out of court, helped along by Frank Q. Brown representing the Ocean and Gulf Realty Company that had control of the remaining Plant assets. Ocean and Gulf Realty not only reimbursed Scott & Sons the unconfirmed amount of $25,000 to
relinquish their claims, but promised to close the Tampa Bay Hotel, all its buildings and its grounds immediately and never to operate it as a hotel again. Although the Tribune reported a renewed movement by the Presbyterian Church to obtain the property, “...the sale to the city seems to be the most likely event.”

True to prediction, only one day later Mayor Salomonson relinquished his claims to the Tampa Bay Hotel for the reported sum of $110,000 in cash from the Ocean and Gulf Realty Company. However, that was not the end of the matter as the Tampa Morning Tribune revealed in the next installment of this saga that Frank Q. Brown had given to a special committee appointed by the City Council “...an option on the property, including the hotel proper with all its furnishings, the Casino, the power plant, all buildings and their contents, the park the Fair grounds and 22 acres of land outside the city limits, the laundry – in fact everything appertaining to the hotel property except two oil paintings, one of Henry B. Plant and one entitled ‘After the Ball’ which hangs in the lobby of the hotel, for the sum of $125,000.” One can imagine the collective sigh of relief from all of Tampa at this news.

Only one piece of business remained; the City Council reviewed and accepted a formal proposition to buy the Tampa Bay Hotel property by issuing bonds in the amount of $140,000. Included in the proposal was a suggestion that the hotel and the casino as well as the laundry could be leased, thereby providing Tampa with a source of revenue. Also proposed was that, “The annex to the Hotel, known as the Bachelors Quarters and Exposition building, could, at very little expense, be made one building for the purpose of a hospital, which would give this city a hospital second to none in the South. The Bachelors Quarters we find being already equipped to such an extent that it alone could be used for a hospital without any alteration.”

In addition, Frank Q. Brown made one more stipulation, besides reserving the two oil paintings which were not to be included in the sale, and this concerned the “Transportation” fountain commissioned by Margaret Plant to honor her husband after his death. Terms of the proposal stated, “It being understood...that the little
monument in front of the Hotel can remain where it is as long as the city owns the property. Should the city sell the property at any time, Mr. Brown reserves the right to remove this little monument."26

As the *Tampa Tribune* stated in 1904, "If there is anything in Tampa that has come near monopolizing the City Council lately, it is the Tampa Bay Hotel. It has appeared in every guise and shape, and like the ghost in Shakespeare, would not down."27 In 2003, citizens of Tampa may only hope that as Shakespeare's indestructible ghost, the Tampa Bay Hotel's history from construction to resurrection by the City of Tampa will never be forgotten.
An article headlined “COUNCIL CONDEMS MAYOR FOR ACTION IN TAMPA BAY MATTER,” from the Tampa Morning Tribune of November 23, 1904, reported the Tampa City Council took action in “RESOLUTIONS PASSED DENOUNCING HIS [Mayor Frederick Salomonson's] PROCEDURE AND HIS USING OF POLICE DEPARTMENT FOR HIS PRIVATE INTERESTS — SEVERE CRITICISMS WERE MADE.” Note the articles reporting that lightning struck the Fair Grounds and the Tampa Harness and Wagon Company exhibited. (Courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum Archives.)

ENDNOTES

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2. “To Impeach the Mayor,” Tampa Morning Tribune, November 24, 1904.
10. Letter received from Mrs. Gaston Scott, undated.
11. "... Frederick Salomonson, an immigrant from Holland who had entered the real estate business in Tampa after arriving in 1884, served as mayor for two one-year terms and for a two-year term from 1904 to 1906." Robert Kerstein, Politics and Growth in Twentieth-Century Tampa (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2001), 29.
13. Tampa Morning Tribune, November 14, 1904.
14. Tampa Morning Tribune, November 14, 1904.
16. Letter received by T.J. Scott & Sons from Tom Scott, November 2, 1904. Henry B. Plant Museum Archives.
22. “Mayor Censured; No Impeachment,” Tampa Morning Tribune, November 30, 1904.
24. “City Secures Option on Tampa Bay Hotel Property from Brown,” Tampa Morning Tribune, December 13, 1904.
27. Tampa Morning Tribune, December 14, 1904.