Spans of Time: The Contributions of George S. Gandy, Ben T. Davis, and Courtney Campbell to the Development of the Tampa Bay Area

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The growth of the communities of the Tampa Bay area into a single metropolitan area depended on bridges. As late as 1920, the waters of Tampa Bay formed a natural barrier separating the city of Tampa from St. Petersburg and Clearwater in Pinellas County. In the absence of any bridges spanning the bay, it took from several hours to travel by boat, automobile, or train from the cities on the Gulf of Mexico to Tampa. The completion of the Gandy Bridge in 1924 and the Davis Causeway (today’s Courtney Campbell Causeway) in 1934 directly linked the three cities into what would eventually become the Tampa Bay metropolitan area, which today has a population of over two million people. These spans serve as umbilical cords for the Tampa Bay area, the main arteries for transporting people, goods, and services between the bay area cities. The history of their construction shows that profit-minded visionaries, notably George S. Gandy and Ben T. Davis, spearheaded the projects, but bridging the bay depended on a variety of other people and forces that were critical to the development of the Tampa Bay area during the 1920s and 1930s.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, transportation between the Pinellas peninsula and the mainland of Hillsborough County was limited to difficult land routes. Despite the arrival of the railroad to the lower Pinellas peninsula in the late nineteenth century, journeys between Pinellas and Hillsborough remained arduous and time-consuming because no direct rail link existed until 1914. The arrival of the automobile cut the travel time, but it took approximately six hours for a model-T to make the trek around the bay on primitive Florida roads. A steamship cruise between the two cities across the bay took about two hours. In 1914, during the pioneering period of aviation, a short-lived airline made travel between St. Petersburg and Tampa a mere twenty-two minutes, but this novelty quickly went out of business.¹

An alternative link was developed by George S. Gandy. On his first visit to St. Petersburg in 1902, Gandy decided that a bridge linking St. Petersburg with Tampa could be built across Tampa Bay at the estuary’s narrowest point. Gandy was firmly committed to completing such an ambitious project once the population of the area had increased to a sufficient amount so he could make large profits from tolls. In 1915, “Dad” Gandy decided that his dream would become a reality, and the man from Philadelphia employed a large crew of surveyors to ascertain the narrowest and shallowest part of the bay. The surveys took two years to finish. Upon completion of the surveys in 1917, Gandy secured the rights-of-way from Pinellas and Hillsborough counties, the state, and the federal government. The volume of permits needed today to perform such a monumental task were not required in Gandy’s day; basically, all one had to possess were the finances and land rights. In the 1920s, ecological concerns were not even considered, except in very rare cases. With no need for environmental studies, Gandy’s project required only approval of the Florida legislature, which retained ownership of submerged land. In addition, Gandy had to acquire permits from the War Department, since the Army Corps of Engineers had
dominion over the navigable waters of the United States. The War Department also retained jurisdiction over bridges for the purpose of deploying troops in time of war or other emergencies.\textsuperscript{2}

In the beginning of 1918, the Gandy Bridge Company finally advanced to the construction phase of the project. However, as a result of the United States’ entry into World War I the previous year, the volume of construction materials needed for such an enormous project was impossible to procure. The War Emergency Board informed Gandy and his partner H. Walter Fuller that they had to postpone the bridge project until the end of the war. “Dad” Gandy was an extremely determined individual, and though the postwar recession further delayed his dream, he did not give up hope. His determination and stubbornness were illustrated in a statement he made at a hearing conducted by the War Department Board of Engineers. Someone accused Gandy of writing all the signatures of support, declaring the endorsements had the old man’s distinctive mark. Gandy arrogantly slammed his fist on the table and reportedly proclaimed: “You bet they do! And I’m that one man! And if the bridge is ever built, by myself or anyone else, it will be by a fellow who gets behind it like I have and never quits!”\textsuperscript{3}

Like his father, young George Gandy had adopted an ethic of hard work. Born in Tuckahoe, New Jersey, in 1851, Gandy received only a grammar school education. At age sixteen, he set out for Philadelphia, where he obtained work as an office boy at the saw works of Henry Disston.
Gandy also served as president of the St. Petersburg and Gulf Railway, and this position brought him to west-central Florida in 1902. The climate and potential for growth in the Tampa Bay region sparked the interest of Gandy, and he thought it an ideal place for retirement. While his energy prevented his retreat to rest and leisure, “Dad” undertook several ambitious construction projects in St. Petersburg, including the Plaza Theater and office complex.  

In 1922, Gandy bought out his partner H. Walter Fuller and persisted with the project to build a bridge across Tampa Bay. Despite his determination, Gandy refused to put one penny of his money into the project, so he faced difficulties in financing the bridge, which continued to encounter doubts about its profitability. However, prospects brightened during the summer of 1922, when another Philadelphia businessman, Eugene M. Elliott, became aware of the project after meeting Walter Jones, a part-time resident of St. Petersburg and an unofficial representative of the city’s chamber of commerce. The subject of the bridge came up, and according to Elliott, Jones declared:

It has been a hobby of old man Gandy's for ten or fifteen years, but he hasn’t been able to get anywhere with it, and I don’t think he can. You know the people of St. Petersburg and Tampa think old man Gandy is rather fanatical on the subject of Gandy Bridge. He has tried to finance it in both St. Petersburg and Tampa and has not been able to get anywhere. The people down there don’t believe in it, don’t believe it is a feasible possibility. They think it is too big an engineering feat.

Jones asked Elliott what he thought. After asking questions about the width of the bay, the depth of the water, and the population of the area, Elliott replied that the project was not only feasible but would be profitable. Elliott then discussed the project with Congressman Fred S. Purnell of Indiana, a good friend and business associate, who had inside government information about the federal permits required for the Tampa Bay span. Purnell urged Elliott to meet with Gandy, and the Congressman agreed to be the contact man in Washington and provide any information the entrepreneurs would require. When Elliott and Gandy first met, they talked almost continuously for nine days, and Elliott became convinced he could finance Gandy’s plan. According to Elliott, he did not need to earn money because he was already financially secure, but he became captivated with Gandy’s bridge because the seeming impossibility of it challenged the self-acclaimed financier. From that point on, Elliott became a key player in making the Gandy Bridge a reality.

According to historian Raymond Arsenault, Elliott was not what he professed to be during his interviews with the press at the time. Arsenault asserts that Elliott, as a real estate promoter, was completely unrestrained in his sales approach. As Arsenault remarked, “As clever as he was unprincipled, the slick-talking Elliott took the town by storm – and boom-era ethics to a new
By September 1922, after 110 days of Elliott’s hard selling, Gandy was astonished that the salesman and his unscrupulous associates had raised $2 million from the sale of stocks. In their pitches, Elliott and his legion had falsely claimed that Elliott was a well-to-do tycoon who had already financed most of Gandy’s venture. Despite these questionable claims, construction began in earnest on September 26, 1922, when dredging started for the causeways that would approach the bridge from both sides of the bay.

With equipment coming from as far away as St. Paul, Minnesota, and expertise from men who had worked on the Panama Canal, the construction project itself was like nothing that Floridians had ever witnessed. Dredging began on the Pinellas side and was carried out during the entire project by three dredges. For a year and a half, dredging was constant, and it eventually removed roughly 2.5 million cubic yards of sand from the bottom of Old Tampa Bay. The piling and packing of this sand transformed a 400-foot-wide strip of bay into a causeway ten feet above the mean low-water level. The causeway from the Tampa side is three-quarters of a mile long, and the one from the St. Petersburg side is approximately two and a half miles long. According to one estimate, causeway construction is about five times less expensive than bridge construction.

Near the end of 1922, a temporary town was organized on the eastern side of the bay as a base of operations for the project. Dubbed “Ganbridge,” the base camp had dormitories and showers for the workers, a warehouse, offices, a machine shop, a blacksmith’s shop, and a wood shop. In addition, Ganbridge had a concrete plant, a water plant, a sewage system, and telephone lines.
Existing roads were repaired and upgraded and temporary roads were established to provide a route for materials between Tampa and the bridge site. To accommodate delivery of materials by boat from the Gulf the Mexico, a pier 1,100 feet in length was built.¹⁰

In July 1923, pile driving commenced for the bridge span that covered two-and-a-half miles. Some piles were driven as much as forty-five feet through the sand into the bedrock. The sixteen-inch-square, reinforced-concrete piles were manufactured at the Ganbridge plant, and they ranged in length from twenty to sixty feet. By utilizing water jets and steam hammers, the pile drivers drove in four piles at a time. This was convenient since the piles were placed in groups of four, which were five feet apart across the width of the bridge. Each group of piles or “bents” was spaced twenty-four feet from an adjacent bent. The pile driving concluded within a year.¹¹

The facts and figures associated with the bridge are remarkable. At Ganbridge, the materials arrived by truck, barge, and more than 1,600 railroad cars. A total work crew of 1,500 men labored for two years on the highway over the bay, using 170,000 bags of cement, 30,000 tons of gravel, and 15,000 tons of sand. In addition, they used 1,500,000 boardfeet of timber, 1,250,000 bricks, 7,000 tons of rock, 75,000 feet of electrical cable, and 50,000 feet of water pipe. Heavy equipment required 40,000 gallons of gasoline, 30,000 gallons of fuel oil, 2,500 tons of coal, and 9,000 gallons of lubricant.¹²
The bridge formally opened to the public on November 20, 1924, and four days later Tampa and St. Petersburg held a massive celebration. According to the official program for the festivities, the Gandy Bridge had become “the longest over-water highway in the world . . . attracting attention throughout the nation.” Taking inflation into consideration, the tolls were quite expensive by today’s standards. The official program publicized the following tolls: “Motorcycles - 25 cents; bicycles - 10 cents; double team - 75 cents; single team - 50 cents; saddle horse - 25 cents; in addition there is a charge of 10 cents per passenger; loose driven cattle or horses 20 cents a head.” The rate for an automobile with no passengers, which interestingly was not in the program, was the same as a double team, with an additional ten cents per passenger. Judging from the 30,000 people and 7,500 cars that steadily crossed the bridge on the Sunday after the grand opening, these rates did not hinder the success of Gandy’s enterprise. On November 24, 1924, Governor Cary A. Hardee untied a rope of flowers across the width of the bridge, symbolically uniting the cities of Tampa and St. Petersburg. The bridge attracted worldwide attention and many dignitaries, including the governors of seventeen states and politicians from as far away as Alaska and Maine, attended the festivities. Thirty-thousand spectators jammed the bridge, and awards and praise were given to Gandy by everyone, including many who years before had ridiculed “Dad” for his crackpot idea. Area merchants had Gandy Bridge sales, and songs were written, including “Gandy Bridge,” by Flora Overly. That day, thanks largely to the foresight of “Dad” Gandy the twin cities were united into a community, and the Tampa Bay “area” was born. However, the ever humble Gandy insisted on sharing the credit. In a well received speech, he concluded:
People give me too much credit. Two thousand men were employed in the construction of the bridge. During the cold weather of last winter those men worked in the chilly water stripped to the skin, for eight hours a day. A doctor was engaged and kept at the bridge continually. He treated an average of 10 injuries a day – smashed fingers, sprained wrists and the thousand other casualties that follow in the train of a big construction job. Thank the Lord it’s finished!!

In addition to cutting the driving distance between St. Petersburg and Tampa from forty-three to nineteen miles, the Gandy Bridge had a lasting impact on the Tampa Bay area. Even before the span opened, the huge construction project attracted migrant labor. Many of the hundreds of men who traveled to the Tampa-St. Petersburg area to work on the Gandy Bridge remained after the project was completed. Some came from the Cayman Islands, a British-owned island group in the Caribbean, located between Cuba and Honduras. These men from the Caymans included James Nathaniel Tibbets, a carpenter, and his cousin Clarence Tibbets, a rigger. In addition to the Tibbets, the Ryan family also contributed the labor of carpenters Isaac C. and James S. Ryan. The workers from the Caymans labored from March until December and went home for Christmas aboard two sailing ships. According to James Nathaniel Tibbets’ son, Linton, the bridge work in the colder climate of Tampa Bay was difficult for the Caymanians, who came to the region because of poor economic conditions in the islands. James Nathaniel Tibbets, a shipbuilder in the Caymans, and the approximately dozen or so other Caymanians who worked on the span, were part of a long-standing Cayman connection with Tampa Bay that still exists today. The Tibbets family eventually established roots in St. Petersburg, and today, two sons of James Nathaniel Tibbets live in St. Petersburg.

The Gandy Bridge significantly contributed to the land boom of the 1920s, especially in St. Petersburg. In 1922, upon his first visit to St. Petersburg, Eugene Elliott observed: “The Streets were deserted, the day was hot, the movement of the people was slow, automobiles in evidence were few. The city had a lackadaisical appearance.” The 1920 census showed that St. Petersburg had 14,237 residents. During the following decade, the city’s population increased by 184 percent to a total of 40,425 people in 1930. Although the Gandy Bridge was not the sole cause of this growth, it did spark increased construction in the northern sections of St. Petersburg, where real estate prices soared. Fourth Street North, built as the link between downtown St. Petersburg and the Gandy Bridge, became a new commercial corridor. The city increased in area from just over eleven square miles in 1921 to over fifty-three square miles in 1926, and the residential areas of Allendale, Snell Isle, Coffee Pot Bayou, and many others were developed during this era. The city relied heavily on the labor of African Americans in the boom era, and the black population of St. Petersburg increased from 2,444 to 7,416 during the 1920s. Labor recruiters traveled throughout the southeastern United States in an effort to attract black workers to the bay area.

Although dredge and fill operations had occurred prior to the building of the Gandy Bridge, they were small compared to the landfill projects that drastically altered the shoreline of the bay in St. Petersburg during the 1920s. Most notable were the Snell Isle and Shore Acres projects. From the time of the first cutting of mangroves with machetes that began the Gandy Bridge project until the end of the 1920s, five miles of St. Petersburg’s bayshore were completely changed. Workers destroyed natural vegetation and replaced the pristine shore with a concrete seawall. Synthetic peninsulas allowed many more people to have a house on the water.
The route of the Gandy Bridge has been the site of three additional bridge projects since construction of “Dad” Gandy’s original venture. In 1956, the 1924 bridge became the eastbound span when a second bridge was added for westbound traffic. The original bridge was demolished in 1975 when the third project produced a new eastbound span. In the 1990s, another Gandy renovation significantly improved the crossing. The only tangible part of the old bridge remaining is a tower that was part of the toll plaza, and in an effort to save it, the structure was recently moved to the St. Petersburg campus of the University of South Florida.¹⁸

After the opening of the Gandy Bridge in 1924, the next span built across Tampa Bay was the Davis Causeway, known today as the Courtney Campbell Causeway. The construction process began in 1927, and it owed its success to one man – Captain Ben T. Davis. Like George Gandy, Ben Davis also dreamed of linking Pinellas and Hillsborough counties by a long causeway and bridge. Davis envisioned joining Tampa and Clearwater, located in Pinellas County to the north and west of St. Petersburg, by spanning Old Tampa Bay at the estuary’s northernmost portion. This would connect Rocky Point on the Hillsborough side to the eastern end of Gulf-to-Bay Boulevard in Clearwater, a citrus center and resort community that possessed a pristine Gulf beach, but had a population of only 7,607 in 1930, whereas Tampa had grown to over 100,000 people. The Great Depression, like World War I in Gandy’s struggle, caused Davis’s project to cease operations temporarily; however, like the Yankee Gandy, the Southerner Davis was an
extremely determined individual. His fortitude, in combination with Depression-era economic programs, finally ensured the project’s completion. The story of how Davis’s span subsequently became named the Courtney Campbell Causeway also deserves re-telling.\(^{19}\)

Ben T. Davis had gained experience from dredging and construction operations in Texas and Mexico, and he led a colorful life prior to coming to Florida. Jefferson Davis and George T. Davis, the Confederate Attorney General, were among Captain Davis’s famous ancestors. In Kentucky, the state of Captain Ben Davis’s birth, the Ben Davis apple was grafted by the famous dredger's grandfather. Before reaching adulthood, young Ben and his family migrated to Texas, where he participated in several cattle drives along the Chisholm Trail, and traveled as far away as Oregon. Davis attended the University of New Mexico and received that university’s first degree in engineering. After graduation, Davis went to Mexico in the 1890s, and as a member of a government engineering team, he worked on the construction of one of that country’s first railways. He helped develop an exclusive subdivision in Mexico City, and at the port of Tampico, Davis constructed all the wharves. In addition, Davis built a viaduct, a steel bridge, and various types of buildings south of the border. According to George Davis, the engineer’s grandson, Ben Davis had acquired an elaborate list of friends over the years, including Charles Lindbergh and Walter Chrysler, and the bridge builder had made the acquaintance of such men as Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller. While in Mexico during the Revolution of 1911, the six-gun-toting Davis also made friends with Pancho Villa.\(^{20}\)
Davis spent thirty-five years in Mexico (where he earned the honorary title of Captain) before moving to Florida in 1925. In the Tampa Bay region, Davis managed the Standard Dredging Company, which built the Mandalay portion of Clearwater Beach. He also worked on Tampa’s Twenty-Second Street Causeway.21 His main claim to fame, the causeway that would bear his name, was not originally his idea. The movement for a Clearwater-to-Tampa span had been discussed as early as 1924 when the Gandy Bridge opened, but concerted efforts actually began in 1927. After organizers in Tampa agreed on a plan to construct the upper bay span, the proposition was turned over to the Tampa Board of Trade, the Clearwater Chamber of Commerce, and similar entities in other south Florida cities, which added their endorsement. The original plan called for a free causeway with the state picking up the tab at a cost of $2.5 million. When state financing did not pan out, local officials looked to private individuals for funding, thus creating a venture for a toll bridge.22

Captain Davis became sold on the causeway idea and, like Gandy, believed a toll bridge would prove profitable. In 1927, the War Department granted a permit for construction, and the chambers of commerce of Tampa and Clearwater obtained a franchise from the legislature, which lawmakers assigned to Davis. According to the late Ralph Richards, a Clearwater attorney, “All you had to do in those days to get a franchise was apply for it – it was automatic.” (Richards failed to mention that “it was automatic” only for people in positions of power.) After two years of delay due to further engineering studies, financial “wheeling and dealing,” and the bust of the Florida land boom, the first shovel broke ground to begin construction of the causeway in 1929.23

That same year, with Davis's United Dredging Company on the job, dredging began on the Hillsborough side of the bay, but the Great Depression put a quick end to this period of construction. Approximately two-and-a-half miles of causeway had been built from the Tampa shore when funds ran out, mostly money that Captain Davis had earned in Mexico. For over two years, Davis again worked to raise capital. During the Hoover administration, a new possibility opened up with the creation of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC). Assistance from the RFC allowed local authorities to complete the span, but getting the government loan was not as easy as getting the original state franchise and War Department permit. While the federal loan was pending, chamber of commerce officials from bay area cities wrote a number of letters supporting the project. Mayors and other politicians also rallied in support. Davis even spent a number of weeks in Washington arguing his case. Despite these frantic efforts, the RFC demanded certain requirements before it would even consider the application. RFC officials required that the original cost of the span be reduced by shortening the length of the bridge and increasing the amount of dredged causeway, which would later show to have significantly altered the ecology of the northern section of the bay. The government also made Captain Davis buy an insurance policy on the bridge-causeway. With these alterations in the project, a loan of $600,000 was granted in November 1932.24

Construction did not resume until the following year because of technical difficulties and weather conditions. Among other problems, a storm caused the loss of a barge carrying a dredge, further delaying construction. Finally, in June 1933, construction of Davis’s toll bridge resumed with three dredges working twenty-four hours a day. Nearly a year later, the Davis Causeway was completed at a cost of $1.5 million, 60 percent of which came from Davis and his friends.
With its nine-mile causeway and 3,510-foot bridge, the span became the longest such structure over open water in the nation. 25

The fact that the bridge planning and implementation process took place after the collapse of the Florida land boom and the beginning of the Great Depression makes the Davis Causeway even more significant to twentieth-century American history. The Davis Causeway exemplifies the importance of Depression-era economic programs such as the RFC in developing infrastructure in the Sunshine State, as well as the rest of the nation. As attorney Ralph Richards pointed out, the RFC officials “made [Davis] take out insurance on his bridge, and he was lucky they did. It was just a skinny, little two-lane bridge. The causeway wasn’t much, either. Well, a hurricane came along and blew the thing away. Davis collected the federally inspired insurance money and rebuilt his bridge.” 26 According to his grandson George, Ben T. Davis and his causeway had an even greater meaning to the common people of the Tampa Bay region during tough economic times. “The reason so many people for so long have wanted to see Granddaddy’s name restored to the causeway is that, during the Depression, he gave jobs to thousands of people, which meant the difference between eating and starving to death.” 27

The gratitude of the people of the Tampa Bay region was fully expressed one week in June 1934. As the grand opening of the bridge approached, advertisements and messages filled the pages of the Clearwater Sun, praising the efforts of Captain Davis. In a typical advertisement,
one general contractor from Dunedin proclaimed his pride in having worked on the project, and he congratulated “Capt. Ben Davis and his ever-working Organization for their continued effort and determination to complete this magnificent causeway.” Addressing its message directly to Davis, a St. Petersburg company called the causeway an “everlasting monument to your never ceasing efforts and determination. It is the realization of a dream and we extend our hand of congratulation to a man who refused to be licked.”

The original Davis Causeway viewed from the Clearwater side of the bay.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
The formal ceremonies to open the Davis Causeway began at two in the afternoon on June 28, 1934, at the Tampa end of the span. The whole event and the persons involved in the festivities hint at the influence of politics and the Great Depression. Unlike the ceremonies opening the Gandy Bridge, this occasion – in the midst of the depression – attracted dignitaries only from the West Coast of Florida, possibly indicating the difficulty of obtaining funds for travel. The motorcade of notables departed the Hillsborough shore for the west end of the bridge, where the bulk of the “pomp and circumstance” took place. With thousands of people congregated on the western terminus of the causeway, Corita Davis, daughter of Captain Davis, opened a gate fabricated from flowers to allow the mayors of Tampa and Clearwater to pass and meet at the Pinellas toll gate. Former Governor Doyle Carlton, the man who headed the Sunshine State from 1929 to 1933, gave the dedication address, praising the fortitude of Davis and the progression of Florida’s highway system, “a system that is already the pride of our people, the envy of our neighbors, the joy of the traveling public.” Carlton went on to compare Davis with Gandy, and Florida railroad builders Henry Plant, and Henry Flagler. Other speeches were given by the mayors of Tampa, St. Petersburg, and Clearwater, as well as by various chamber of commerce officials, who, earlier in the day, had a meeting in Tampa to devise better plans for cooperation among bay area communities. Captain Davis spoke only briefly, saying: “I’ve never faced a mike before. I’d rather get out and build another bridge than make a speech.” In its tribute to the occasion, the *St. Petersburg Times* neatly summarized the benefits of the causeway, which cut almost ten miles off the land route between Tampa and Clearwater:

- To Clearwater the completion of the causeway meant bringing its fine beach resorts nine miles closer to Tampa citizens seeking week-end and holiday pleasure.
- To Tampa it meant the opening of a new avenue of trade and better opportunity for its citizens to indulge in beach sports they cannot find in the Cigar City area.
- To St. Petersburg and other west coast cities it meant another attraction for their tourists and a strong physical tie linking them together in a common community spirit.

Motorists from the entire bay area enjoyed free tolls during opening day, but this convenience of cross-bay travel was short lived. The schedule of tolls announced in local papers took an accountant and engineer to comprehend, but the cost was considerable for depression-era Americans.

- Automobile and driver, 25 cents, plus five cents per passenger. Motorbus and driver, 30 cents, plus 5 cents per passenger. Motor truck and driver (any number of axles, but with wheelbase not exceeding 18 feet), 30 cents; plus five cents per 1000 pounds or fraction thereof, in excess of 6000 pounds gross weight; plus five cents per passenger. Trailer and one passenger (if total wheelbase of vehicle and trailer exceeds 18 feet), 30 cents; plus 5 cents per 1000 pounds or fraction thereof, in excess of 6000 pounds gross weight; plus 5 cents per passenger. Motorcycle and driver, 10 cents; plus 5 cents per passenger. Bicycle and rider, 5 cents; plus 5 cents per passenger. Double team and driver, 25 cents; plus 5 cents per passenger. Single team and driver, 25 cents; plus five cents per passenger. Horse and rider, 10 cents; plus 5 cents per passenger. Loose driven cattle, horses, 10 cents per head.

These rates reflected the fact that the Davises owned and operated the span as a private toll road. The second floor of the tollhouse at the western end of the causeway served as home for the Davis family after the bridge opened. A journalist once asked Ben Davis if the cars kept him awake at night, and the Captain said that not hearing the vehicles would be more detrimental to
his slumber. A friend of the Davises joked that Ben “wanted to be near the money.” Ben Davis’s grandson George remembers the playroom his “granddaddy” built next to the toll gate on the ground level, having a chicken wire front so the small children could play without the risk of their wandering off and getting hit by a car. The tollhouse had public restrooms where the Davises kept their pet snake, which on occasion would cause quite a fright for Tampa-bound motorists. All of Captain Ben Davis’s four grown children were involved in the construction and operation of the Davis Causeway.  

The Davis Causeway had no sooner opened than a movement began to remove the tolls from Tampa Bay's two spans. A law passed by the 1935 session of the Florida legislature gave authority to the State Road Department to “purchase, lease or otherwise acquire toll bridges of the type of Gandy Bridge and Davis Causeway.” In a 1938 letter to the Tampa Daily Times the Davises expressed a disposition to “cooperate with the state if it desires to acquire our enterprise. We are at present satisfied with our investment and have no desire to sell it, but if the state wants it we are prepared to negotiate a sale or lease on fair and reasonable terms.” Despite this public stance, Davis hoped to hang onto his beloved causeway, according to George Davis who recalls that his grandfather “used to hitch a ride with motorists and talk for the whole 9 – mile trip about how badly he wanted to keep the bridge.” At the time of the Davises’ announcement of a willingness to work with the state in 1938, a struggle was ensuing to lift the Gandy Bridge’s “high tolls,” but Gandy was not as cooperative as Davis.
An advertisement for the Davis Causeway.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
During World War II, because of the federal government’s war powers and the political clout of Senator Claude Pepper, both the Gandy Bridge and the Davis Causeway were turned into public thoroughfares. First, in 1944 the federal government used its war powers to seize control of both spans and eliminate tolls. This allowed military personnel to commute easily between housing and recreational facilities in Pinellas County and MacDill Field in Hillsborough County. As a final step in its transformation into a toll-free public road, the Gandy Bridge was purchased by the government for a price of $2,382,642, which was determined by a jury. With the Davis Causeway no longer producing revenue, its owner sold the span for $1,085,000, the cost of which was split by the state and federal governments. The transfer of the two spans occurred in the midst of the heated 1944 election campaign, when Senator Pepper used his influence in Washington to secure public acquisition of these life lines, thus ensuring his reelection. Ben T. Davis – adventurer, engineer, and bridge builder – retired to a ranch in Harlingen, Texas, where he died in 1946.34

After World War II, Courtney Campbell, a Clearwater citizen and a member of the State Road Board, obtained funding to improve the Davis Causeway. Born in 1895, this lawyer, politician, fruit grower, and businessman served on the State Road Board from 1945 to 1949 as an appointee of Governor Millard Caldwell. Campbell had come to Florida during the 1920s land boom and has the distinction of creating Florida’s system of roadside parks. After the economic lift world War II gave the Sunshine State, Caldwell’s administration marketed the benefits of Florida to tourists, retirees, and businesses in the North. Campbell played a leading role in the administration’s plan because Caldwell’s project included provisions for the modernization of state roads in preparation for increased tourist and business activity.35

After the war, the state made a number of improvements on the Davis Causeway from 1945 to 1947, and as a member of the State Road Board, Courtney Campbell was very influential in implementing these changes. At a cost of one million dollars, the State Road Department bulkheaded the south shore of the causeway and elevated the level of the road several feet. As part of the improvements, Campbell also pushed a proposal to decorate the causeway, which became known as the Courtney Campbell beautification project. The beautification project decorated the barren white span with oleanders, Australian pines, red hibiscus, cabbage palms, and other plants and trees. Seventy picnic shelters with barbecue pits were constructed, each seating between twelve and fifty persons. Areas for access to the bay, including boat launching, were also added. These improvements of Ben Davis’s causeway are the roots of controversy and one of the longest family legal feuds in the state’s history.36

On January 9, 1948, the improved Davis Causeway was renamed the Courtney Campbell Parkway. Over the years, road maps of the Tampa Bay region, have often shown the bridge as the Courtney Campbell Causeway, but it is officially a parkway. According to a Clearwater Sun article from 1948, the ceremony changing the name gave no recognition to Ben Davis, who had been dead for nearly two years. However, since then, the controversy over the renaming of the causeway has reemerged time and time again. The effort to change the name of the span back to Davis Causeway has been led by Ben Davis’s grandson, George T. Davis, and supported by a host of backers, primarily from Tampa. After Courtney Campbell died in 1971, two state legislators from Tampa filed a 1973 legislative resolution that sought to name the span after Davis, but the lawmakers failed to act on the proposal. Since then, George Davis has offered a
compromise which involved naming the parks along the causeway as Courtney Campbell Park and renaming the bridge Davis Causeway. In this way, each man would receive the proper recognition for his efforts. However, with no official response, the span remains the Courtney Campbell Parkway, and the controversy continues. The only evidence of Davis’s contribution is the Ben T. Davis Beach, which is operated on the eastern end of the causeway by the city of Tampa.\textsuperscript{37}

The automobile, facilitated by road and bridge building, changed the face of the Sunshine State during the 1920s and 1930s. As historian George B. Tindall pointed out, Florida in the 1920s, was “an American Riviera [that] sprang from the mangrove swamps and sand dunes” through a combination of road construction, “Coolidge prosperity,” and the prolific production of automobiles. During the boom years, Americans had surplus money and “tin lizzies,” and Florida sites became more accessible because of roads such as the famous “Dixie Highway” and bridges such as the one built by George Gandy. Then the Great Depression sparked federal programs that made possible the completion of the span started by Ben T. Davis in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{38} The entrepreneurial spirit of Gandy and Davis forever changed the landscape of the Tampa Bay area and provided crucial links that helped tie St. Petersburg, Tampa, and Clearwater into a single metropolitan area.

2 Lee M. Feder, *Florida Master Site File for Gandy Bridge* (Tallahassee: Florida Department of State, Division of Archives, History and Records Management, 1970); Telephone interview with Dr. Heywood Mathews, Professor of Oceanography at St. Petersburg Junior College, May 13, 1996.

3 Rhyder McClure, “Monument Near Gandy Bridge is Link to Area’s Past,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 12, 1979, 1, 3; Feder, Master Site File for Gandy Bridge; E. Murphy Foley, “‘Dad’ Gandy’s Folly?” *Sunset Gazette*, June 1, 1995, 6 (quote).

4 *St. Petersburg Times*, November 20, 1924.

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11 Ibid.

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30 *St. Petersburg Times*, June 29, 1934.

31 *Clearwater Sun*, June 26, 1934.


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36 *Clearwater Sun*, January 5, 1948; Bower, “How to Get Justice.”
