

1-1-2009

The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of a Modern Florida Landmark: A History of Tampa's Floridan Hotel

Brad Massey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory>

Recommended Citation

Massey, Brad (2009) "The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of a Modern Florida Landmark: A History of Tampa's Floridan Hotel," *Tampa Bay History*. Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol23/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tampa Bay History by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

THE RISE, FALL, AND REBIRTH OF A MODERN FLORIDA LANDMARK: A HISTORY OF TAMPA'S FLORIDAN HOTEL

BY BRAD MASSEY

*T*t is the symbol of the city. Perched majestically along the banks of the Hillsborough River, the Tampa Bay Hotel, with its striking “turrets, domes and minarets towering heavenward and glistening in the sun,” is Tampa’s most recognizable landmark.¹ That the Tampa Bay Hotel deserves such accolades is indisputable. Its unapologetic opulence and exotic qualities—where else in the Deep South is there a colossal Moorish Revival structure complete with Islamic crescents—attracted rich and famous Americans during the Gilded Age. Teddy Roosevelt (minus his famous Rough Riders), Babe Ruth, and Sarah Bernhardt were just some of the influential icons who, after a long steam-engine journey to Tampa, found themselves on the grounds of Henry Plant’s luxurious resort.² Preservationists have not overlooked the historical importance of the hotel. In 1972, the Tampa Bay Hotel was one of the first structures in the Tampa Bay area to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Yet, the Tampa Bay Hotel somehow seems oddly out of place. Truth be told, Tampa was never a popular vacation destination. Cigar factories, Latin immigrants, shipyards, and phosphate mines defined Tampa in the early modern era, not sandy beaches and breathtaking sunsets. Tampa was not an idyllic place one visited to relax and retreat from the world. The Tampa Bay Hotel was not reality. It was Henry Plant’s misplaced dream. In fact, during its first seven years of operation, the Gilded Age landmark “rarely filled more than half of its rooms with guests.”³ By 1933, it was both a museum and home to the University of Tampa. Though an architectural

¹ Henry B. Plant Museum, “1891 Tampa Bay Hotel,” http://www.plantmuseum.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=40.

² Henry B. Plant Museum, “Homepage,” <http://www.plantmuseum.com/>.

³ Susan Braden, *The Architecture of Leisure: The Florida Resort Hotels of Henry Flagler and Henry Plant* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 280.

BRAD MASSEY teaches courses in American and Florida history at Polk State College. The author would like to thank Professor Gary Mormino for his encouragement and assistance. The author also would like to thank Jude Ryan, Eli Crews, Shiloh Hodges, John Lazarz, William Winikus and Marisa Loya for their helpful suggestions.

gem, the Tampa Bay Hotel was a robber baron's mirage, a fantasy never realized and a symbol of what downtown Tampa never was or would be.

If you stand at the northernmost point of where the Hillsborough River borders the grounds of the old Tampa Bay Hotel and gaze eastward, you will see the true symbol of downtown Tampa: the Floridan Hotel. An examination of the Floridan's history reveals the complex and multifaceted evolution of modern downtown Tampa, something a lifetime spent studying Plant's majestic oddity never could. Conceived in 1925 and constructed in 1926, the Floridan has stood witness to the economic booms and busts that transformed Tampa in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The Floridan Hotel has housed and entertained movie stars, the poverty-stricken, professional athletes, college students, GIs, and the mentally ill. It has witnessed the demolition of Tampa's first high-rises and the construction of forty-story skyscrapers. The Floridan is one of the last remaining downtown high-rises built during the 1920s real-estate boom because it successfully evolved and adapted, while others stagnated and met the wrecking ball. The story of the Floridan is the story of modern downtown Tampa.

The Construction of the Floridan Hotel and the Creation of Modern Downtown Tampa

"The Floridan is the truest mark of Tampa's progress...and the forerunner of the Greater Tampa of the future."

—*Tampa Morning Tribune*, January 23, 1927

The story of the Floridan begins not in the Gilded Age, but in the Roaring Twenties. Like other American cities, Tampa enjoyed a period of economic expansion and opportunity during the Jazz Age that forever changed the city. Those who visited Tampa in the early 1880s would likely not even recognize the city if they visited in 1930. Between 1920 and 1930, Tampa underwent a boom in both its population and geographical size. In the 1920s, Tampa's population increased from 51,608 to 101,162 due to annexations of local communities such as West Tampa and northern suburban areas, immigration, and migration. By the time the Roaring Twenties came to a close, Tampa was Florida's third-largest city.⁴ The former small seaport town, which some fifty years earlier had suffered wild swings in its minuscule population thanks to fear-inspiring outbreaks of yellow fever, was fast growing up.

Economic and infrastructural changes accompanied Tampa's growth in the 1920s. Although Tampa's local economy was still largely dependent on the trademark cigar industry in 1930, the percentage of Tampa's workforce laboring in cigar factories

⁴ In 1880, only 720 people lived in Tampa (Robert Kerstein, *Politics and Growth in Twentieth-Century Tampa* [Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001], 17, 52-53).

decreased from 50 percent in 1910 to 25 percent by 1930.⁵ In the 1920s, many Tampans found themselves employed in new industries and many businessmen found themselves overnight guests in the expanding city. These factors led to Tampa's development as a commercial and business center. In an effort to accommodate the hundreds of businessmen and other travelers flocking to Tampa in the 1920s, plans for high-rise buildings in downtown were drawn up and structural foundations were being laid for Tampa's first skyscrapers. On January 17, 1926, the *Tampa Daily Times* reported that Tampa's downtown skyline was to be "enhanced" by new buildings valued at more than \$100 million in the coming year. Tampa boosters declared that 1926 would prove the "greatest construction year in the city's history."⁶ Their words were prophetic. The First National Bank building, the Tampa Terrace Hotel, and a handful of other newly constructed high-rise buildings transformed the Tampa skyline by the time residents celebrated New Year's Eve on December 31, 1926.

The opportunity to cash in on the downtown Tampa building mania did not escape the attention of one enterprising Tampa businessman.⁷ By 1925, Allen Simms had already lived quite an interesting life. At the age of thirteen, Simms ran away from home and attempted to make it on his own in the frigid Canadian hinterlands.⁸ Newly independent, Allen Simms soon found work as a lumberjack; his responsibilities included "driving" fallen timber down the Le Proc River to lumber-processing plants. For his trouble and risking life and limb, Simms was paid thirty-five dollars a month. Later he attended business college for two years, and in 1912, at the age of twenty-three, he arrived in Tampa. Shortly thereafter, Simms embarked on a lifelong career as a Florida real-estate developer, only taking a hiatus in 1917, when, with his business interests suffering, he abandoned his civilian life and enlisted in the Canadian army. After fighting the Germans until World War I ended in November 1918, Simms returned to Tampa. There he picked up where he had left off, a decision that would alter the face of downtown Tampa's north end.⁹

It did not take Simms long to get back on his feet. By 1927, he had successfully built a real-estate empire. According to the *Tampa Morning Tribune*, Allen Simms's story was one of "ups and downs, of fortunes accumulated and fortunes lost, of opposition to be overcome and advantages to be sought, all resulting in his now owning and controlling projects valued at more than \$20,000,000." Simms was not exaggerating when he claimed he "saw the possibilities of the state, its wonderfully fertile soil and its marvelous climate, and knew that it was destined to become great."¹⁰

⁵ Ibid, 53.

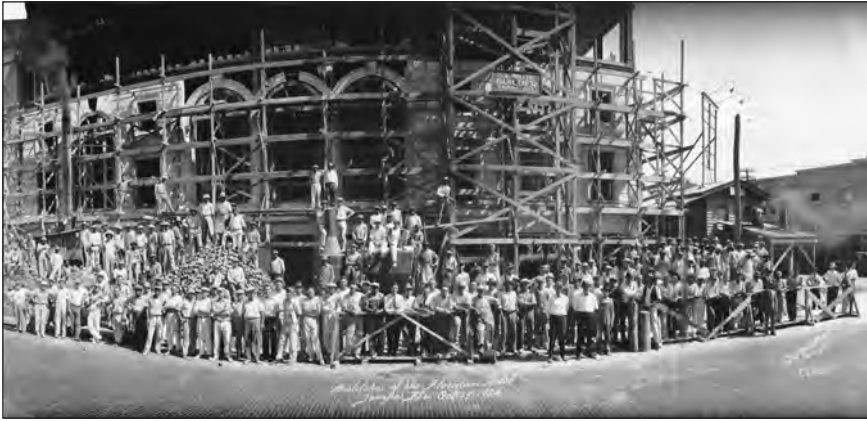
⁶ "Downtown Building Program Will Involve More Than \$100,000,000," *Tampa Daily Times*, January 17, 1926.

⁷ Kerstein, *Politics and Growth*, 53.

⁸ "Life Story of A. J. Simms Shows Vision of Man Who Saw Tampa's Great Future," *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, January 17, 1926.

⁹ Karl Grismer, *Tampa: A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg Print Company, 1950), 383.

¹⁰ "Life Story of A. J. Simms Shows Vision of Man Who Saw Tampa's Great Future."



Courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

Construction workers pause for the camera in this October 19, 1926 circuit photograph. The whole city was enjoying a building boom, but the bottom would soon drop out.

By the end of his career, Simms had been involved in more than one thousand real-estate projects in the Tampa Bay region.

Simms was an ambitious visionary. In 1925, he conceived plans to build not only one of the finest hotels in Tampa, but also Florida's tallest structure. The project was huge. The Hotel Floridan was to be an eighteen-story architectural masterpiece adorned with opulent furnishings meant to attract both Tampa's visitors and local businesses. To help get the project off the ground, Simms created the Tampa Commercial Hotel Company. As general manager and secretary of the new company, Simms hired the renowned local architect Francis J. Kennard to design Florida's tallest building.¹¹ Construction of the Floridan began shortly thereafter.¹² Throughout 1926, Tampa residents eagerly watched as Floridan work crews quickly erected a gigantic steel skeleton and began to piece together the record-breaking, awe-inspiring structure.

On January 15, 1927, the Floridan opened for business. According to the *Tampa Tribune*, the cost of building and furnishing the Floridan stood at approximately \$3 million, a colossal sum for 1927. The completion of Florida's tallest building, and Tampa's tallest for forty years, was a marvel, and its owners wanted all to know the tremendous effort, expense, and expertise that was invested. The *Tampa Tribune* reported, "builders, architects and equippers of the hotel unite in the declaration that

¹¹ Francis J. Kennard designed the Hotel Belleview in Belleair, the Tampa Bay Hotel Casino, the Fort Myers Hotel and other Florida architectural gems (Braden, *The Architecture of Leisure*, 276, 281, 304).

¹² Grismer, *A History of the City of Tampa*, 264.

it is one of the most modern and complete commercial dwellings in the South.”¹³ From top to bottom the hotel was 240 feet. The frame was constructed of steel beams, while the veneer was a mixture of limestone, granite, and terra-cotta brick.¹⁴ The structure was so large that more than 500,000 gallons of paint, stain, and varnish reportedly were used during construction.¹⁵ Atop the Floridan reigned a gigantic cutting-edge red neon sign that unashamedly publicized the prominence of the behemoth. With gargantuan six-foot letters illuminated by 660 fifty-watt lamps, the sign could allegedly be seen for miles in every direction.¹⁶

Excesses were not limited to the Floridan's exterior. The hotel's lobby was “furnished in rich luxurious out fittings,” and adorned with marble to give the “spacious room a rich aspect.” Tying the lobby, dining hall, and lounge together were crystal chandeliers, musical entertainment that floated through the air, Hartford Saxony rugs, and “furniture of Spanish design.”¹⁷ Floridan management boasted of the hotel's four hundred well-furnished guest rooms, but the public spaces, namely the dining hall, lounge, and lobby, were what characterized the Floridan's grace and charm. The Floridan had lived up to its billing. Simms's vision for Florida's tallest hotel had become a reality.

Floridan management publicized in the *Tampa Tribune* that the hotel's formal public opening would take place Saturday, January 29, with a reception from 7:00 p.m. to midnight. Entertainment was to be provided by the Blue Steele orchestra.¹⁸ In celebration of the formal opening, nearly an entire section of the January 23 *Tampa Sunday Tribune* was dedicated to showcasing the Floridan's grandeur. Articles and advertisements chronicling the Floridan's elaborate dining hall, lobby, lounge, and “quality construction” were published, along with some more revealing facts about Tampa's goliath and its offerings.¹⁹

In their effort to portray the Floridan as a modern hotel, Floridan management publicized that they happily welcomed and accommodated motorists and their Tin Lizzies. On the day the Floridan Hotel announced its formal opening, readers of the *Tampa Tribune* learned that the “newest and most modern garage” in downtown Tampa, appropriately named the Floridan Garage, had recently opened. Owners

¹³ “18-Story Structure Tallest Commercial Dwelling in Florida,” *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, January 23, 1927.

¹⁴ Teresa Maio and David Rigney, *The Floridan Hotel Designation Report and Analysis to the Tampa City Council*, Historic Tampa/Hillsborough County Preservation Board publication, 5.

¹⁵ “Tampa Paint Concern Does Interior Work Shown in New Hotel,” *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, January 23, 1927.

¹⁶ “Tampan Designs Huge Sign on New Floridan,” *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, January 23, 1927.

¹⁷ “18-Story Structure Tallest Commercial Dwelling in Florida.”

¹⁸ “Formal Opening of the Floridan Hotel,” *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, January 23, 1927.

¹⁹ “Quality Construction Makes Floridan Hotel High Type Structure,” *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, January 23, 1927.

**Floridan Hotel Is Opened
With Heavy Registration**

**Elaborate Reception
on Jan. 29 to Mark
Its Completion.**

The Floridan, Tampa's 400-room skyscraper hotel, was opened today at 7 a. m. with a heavy registration. Initial registrations were those of J. Morris Keely and H. A. I. Boggs, traveling men who have been regular patrons for 15 years of hotels operated by Peter P. Schutt, the Floridan's manager.

The main dining room, which was opened at 11:30 a. m., will be operated continuously. All day service in the main dining room will be maintained until Monday, when the coffee shop will be opened.

The Gyro club of Tampa initiated the banquet room, holding the first luncheon there.

Ten floors of the hotel are available at this time. Others are rapidly being opened. Equipment is arriving by every train, according to Mr. Schutt, and is being installed as rapidly as a force of expert workmen can place it.

The formal opening of the hotel has been set for Saturday, Jan. 29.

**Baby Born at Sea
Is Presented With
Free Trip to Italy**

New York, Jan. 20.—Because Lydia Bellach, 9 days old, was born at sea, she will be permitted to make a round trip to Italy free of charge any time she chooses.

The child was born while her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Bellach, were returning from a visit to Italy. When the vessel on which they traveled docked in Brooklyn yesterday, Giuseppe Cosulich, New York head of the Cosulich line, presented the parents with a certificate entitling the child to free travel because, he said, she was the first baby born on a Cosulich liner in 1927.

**HOPE GIVEN UP
FOR RECOVERY
OF PARMELY**

Courtesy of USF Tampa Special Collections

The January 20, 1927 *Tampa Daily Times* headline shows the eagerness with which the opening of the Floridan Hotel was anticipated by Tampa's residents and visitors.

era in the South. However, what made the Floridan unique was that the segregationist policies would apply to the hotel staff as well as the guests. "All-White Personnel Serves New Floridan" read the *Tampa Tribune* headline. Floridan management reported that during the time between their initial and formal public grand opening, the use of white bellhops and white waitresses, "while an innovation in the south has proved quite popular."²¹ Photos of seven white Floridan employees were published just above the article in an apparent attempt to drive home the point. The Floridan was offering an all-white experience that management believed would appeal to those considering dining, sleeping, meeting, and socializing at the hotel.

²⁰ "New Floridan Garage Opens for Business at Cass and Ashley," *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, January 23, 1927.

²¹ "All-White Personnel Serves New Floridan," *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, January 23, 1927.

of the 150-space garage located just a couple of city blocks from the Hotel Floridan publicly invited Floridan guests to utilize its parking accommodations and service center. Besides parking, the Floridan Garage offered car washing, twenty-four-hour valet attendants, gas, and "one of the most complete and well furnished women's rest rooms" in town.²⁰

Floridan publicists proudly highlighted one last feature of Tampa's new landmark: complete segregation. That the luxurious Floridan was going to be a "white guests only" hotel was never in question, seeing as the 1920s marked the mid-point of the Jim Crow

The formal opening of the Floridan was a success. The hotel was modern, luxurious, and comfortable. In the coming decades, it would provide accommodations and entertainment for a plethora of guests. Movie stars, musicians, professional athletes, and businessmen would funnel through the doors and congregate in the lobby, lounge, and dining hall in the coming years. Simms's vision had come to pass, and the Floridan's future looked bright.

The Golden Era: 1927-1968

"Everyone wanted to be seen here."

—Floridan bartender Gus Arencibia

Even though it was foreseeable and perhaps inevitable, the bursting of the Florida land bubble in the mid- to late 1920s blindsided many Floridians. Arguably the air began leaking out of the bubble when, nationwide, papers reported the capsizing of the *Prinz Valdemar* in Miami's port, a substantial increase in railroad shipping fees on goods bound for Florida, and successive hurricanes that caused widespread carnage. The national publicity highlighted the perils of Florida land investments. Whatever the causes, the days of rampant land speculation and real-estate binder boys in Florida were over. In fact, between "1926 and 1930, the assessed value of real estate in Florida dropped from \$623 to \$441 million."²²

Tampa was not exempt from the slowdown. Suddenly, construction in downtown Tampa slowed to a crawl as the entire nation sank into the Great Depression. One of the victims of the economic downturn was Simms's Tampa Commercial Hotel Company. Reeling from the economic effects of the bust, the Tampa Commercial Hotel Company relinquished control of the Hotel Floridan to Collier Florida Hotels Inc., which had also purchased the Tampa Terrace Hotel, the Floridan's 1920s upscale counterpart, just down the street. Likely distraught at the loss of his monumental project, Simms may have taken solace in the fact that a capable and well-funded custodian had acquired the Floridan.²³

The Hotel Floridan successfully survived the economic downturn under Collier's management. In fact, from the late 1920s to the 1950s, the Floridan housed and entertained some of Tampa's most influential visitors, corporations, and civic groups. In the fall of 1929, Hollywood star Lupe Vélez enjoyed the splendor of the Floridan's penthouse, lobby, and lounge while filming the early talkie *Hell Harbor* in nearby Rocky Point. The making of the film was a public-relations and economic windfall for both the Floridan and Tampa. The decision to film in Tampa allegedly funneled more than \$250,000 into "Tampa trade channels."²⁴ The filming of *Hell*

²² Teresa Maio and David Rigney, *The Floridan Hotel Designation Report*, 16.

²³ Grismer, *A History of the City of Tampa*, 264.

²⁴ W. Scott Christopher. *Tampa's People with a Purpose* (Tampa: Greater Tampa



Courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

The first guests of the Floridan relax in the hotel lobby on opening day, January 20, 1927, while hotel employees stand at the ready.

Harbor was such a monumental event that Florida governor Doyle Carlton traveled all the way down from Tallahassee to personally greet Vélez as she stepped off the train in downtown Tampa. The event was good for the newspaper business as well, with local gossip columns chronicling every move of the film's star, and subsequently exploding when Vélez's love interest, fellow Hollywood star Gary Cooper, came to town.²⁵

Mary Jim Scott, whose father managed the Floridan for thirty years, was fortunate enough to get an insider's glimpse of the hotel during the 1930s. Mary and her family moved into a top-floor Floridan apartment in 1932, where she spent many of her childhood days gallivanting around the Floridan's rooftop fishpond, playing with children whose parents were staying in the hotel, and eating her meals in the opulent dining room. When interviewed by a *Tampa Tribune* reporter in 1994, Mary

Chamber of Commerce, 1993), 86.

²⁵ Leland Hawes, "When Stars Were the Talk of the Town," *Tampa Tribune*, April 9, 2000 (NewsBank).

recalled seeing Charlton Heston, Cincinnati Reds players, and other famous and distinguished guests while living in the hotel. "All my friends loved...to come spend the night," insisted Scott. And why not? Although many considered the Tampa Terrace Hotel to be the swankiest hotel in town, many famous Tampa visitors found themselves staying, dining, or drinking at the Floridan on at least one occasion.²⁶

Many Tampa teenagers believed the Floridan accommodated its most important guest in 1955: Elvis Presley. Nearly forty-one years after "The King's" death, Wanda Sprung still vividly recalled Elvis's visit to Tampa in 1955. A friend of Sprung's, a Floridan bellhop, told her what room Elvis was staying in at the hotel. The then-thirteen-year-old raced to the hotel and promptly waited outside the room for the King to materialize. When he appeared, he saw her and, during a moment that must have felt like a dream to the awestruck fan, gave her a royal kiss. "I probably didn't wash my face for a month," reminisced Sprung when asked about the fairy-tale moment.²⁷

Although the famous guests that stayed and played at the Floridan at times mesmerized Sprung and other Bay area residents, perhaps the most exciting era in the hotel's history was ushered in when hordes of World War II-era servicemen were ordered to Tampa in the 1940s. In July 1939, the *Tampa Tribune* reported "WE GET THE BIG AIR BASE." "The US Army had acquired 6,400 acres" on Tampa's Catfish Point and "Congress appropriated over \$3 million" to construct a military installation.²⁸ From 1939 to 1941, thousands of servicemen and servicewomen found themselves stationed in Tampa while the war in Europe heated up.

"I got off the bus in civilian clothes and walked into the bar at the Floridan Hotel. I needed a cold drink. This military policeman entered the bar and was going around looking for GIs and telling them to get to the base. Our world had just changed."²⁹ Mark Orr was one of several GIs to learn of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, while inside the Hotel Floridan. The day of "infamy" that forever changed U.S. foreign policy and the lives of all Americans directly led to an explosion in the number of GIs in Tampa. Between 1941 and 1945, thousands more servicemen and servicewomen found themselves stationed in Tampa as the war raged in Europe and the Pacific. Many of these men and women socialized with family members, love interests, and friends in the lobby, dining hall, lounge, and rooms of Tampa's landmark hotel.

The Floridan lounge was the place to be for fun-loving servicemen stationed in Tampa during the war years. The lounge quickly became a center of downtown

²⁶ Kelly Gardner, "Restoration Eludes Tampa's 1st Skyscraper," *Tampa Tribune*, June 20, 1994 (NewsBank).

²⁷ Philip Morgan, "Woman Makes Room in Her Life for Elvis," *Tampa Tribune*, January 8, 1996 (NewsBank).

²⁸ Gary Mormino, *Hillsborough County Goes to War: The Home Front, 1940-1950* (Tampa: Tampa Bay History Center, 2001), 13.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

Tampa's social scene, its dance floors, and bands drawing big crowds.³⁰ Gus Arencibia, Floridan bartender from 1943 to 1959, vividly remembered those days. A wartime beer at the Floridan cost thirty-five cents. While the GIs drank and socialized, Arencibia raked in ten to fifteen dollars per night in tips, saving enough to place a down payment on a house in 1944. Bar business was so heavy on the weekends during periods of Arencibia's tenure as bartender that he had to save seats for the regulars by placing a drink and change in front of stools. Arencibia insisted that "people seldom got drunk...one or two drinks was it. But everyone wanted to be seen here." He did recall, however, driving soldiers home who had missed the bus back to MacDill Air Force Base. Thousands of GIs stationed in Tampa meant a packed bar for Arencibia and Floridan management.³¹

Ruth Ruth also had fond members of the Floridan lounge, but for different, albeit not unique, reasons. It was in February 1945 that the then-twenty-two-year-old Ruth Motz met and shortly thereafter married twenty-one-year-old First Lieutenant John Ruth in Palm Beach, Florida. After they were married, John Ruth was ordered to Phoenix. On the long drive to Phoenix, the couple stayed one night, an abbreviated honeymoon of sorts, at the Floridan Hotel. They welcomed their first son, David, into the world exactly nine months to the day after their one-night Floridan stay. No, Ruth's experience was not unique at all. In fact, during World War II the Floridan bar—officially called the Sapphire Room but unofficially dubbed the "Surefire Room," a name that paid homage to its reputation as a place for meeting friendly, single, female visitors—was a GI mainstay.³² Staff Sgt. Robert Schnurr, while stationed in Tampa during the war, took his future wife on dates to the Floridan. Longtime Tampa resident Ann Thompson, while in the company of "some officers from nearby MacDill and Drew fields," had her first drink at the Floridan lounge. Schnurr and Thompson weren't alone in their experiences. Many other GIs and full-time Tampa residents visited, stayed, and played in the Floridan's dining hall, lounge, and rooms.³³

While awkward to admit, wartime was high time for the Hotel Floridan. From 1939 to 1946, the hotel's lounge, rooms, and dining hall spilled over with locals and servicemen from all over the country. By the summer of 1946, downtown Tampa's north Franklin Street was the Tampa Bay area's most expensive and hopping locale. Downtown Tampa "stood at its zenith" in the summer of 1946.³⁴ People from

³⁰ Harry Crumppacker, "A Plane a Day in Tampa Bay," *Tampa Tribune*, September 25, 1994 (NewsBank).

³¹ Janis Froelich, "Lodged in Memory," *Tampa Tribune*, May 26, 2005 (NewsBank).

³² Daniel Ruth, "John You Gotta Meet This Girl," *Tampa Tribune*, February 15, 1995 (NewsBank).

³³ Leland Hawes, "Life Went on after Crash," *Tampa Tribune*, May 26, 1996 (NewsBank); Gardner, "Restoration Eludes Tampa's 1st Skyscraper."

³⁴ Gary Mormino, "Downtown Ruled '46 Boom Era," *Tampa Tribune*, September 8, 1996 (NewsBank).

around the region traveled to downtown's north end to shop at the Maas Brothers department store, socialize, and be seen—and the towering Floridan was in the center of the action. The twelve principal organizers of the Floridan Hotel Operating Company, who had acquired a majority stake in the hotel in the boom year 1943, must have been very pleased with their acquisition. Downtown Tampa had boomed during the war, but after the surrender of Germany and Japan, Tampa residents began to wonder what the future held for downtown.

After the war, downtown Tampa and the Floridan enjoyed continued prosperity for more than twenty years. IBM, the Florida Association of Colleges and Universities, the Florida Association of Realtors, and other corporations, clubs and civic associations all held meetings and banquets at the Hotel Floridan from the mid-1940s to the 1960s. Football icon Paul “Bear” Bryant visited the Floridan as the star “principal speaker” at a Tampa Sports Club banquet in 1968.³⁵ The Floridan's elaborate dining hall, lounge, lobby, ample meeting spaces, and convenient location still drew crowds. The 1960s, however, marked a crucial turning point for the Floridan and other businesses in downtown Tampa's north end.

The post-World War II economic boom that fueled downtown Tampa's economic growth and expansion had slowed by 1960. From the 1920s to the mid-1950s, downtown was the social and economic hub of Tampa. By the late 1950s, it was clear that the spokes were beginning to break off. Downtown buildings started to deteriorate as the area's reputation as the social and business center of the region was undermined. The once-bustling businesses on north Franklin Street began losing patrons. By the late 1960s, many of downtown Tampa's north end businesses had folded or fled the area. Exacerbating the problem was the fact that many new Tampa businesses were centering operations in rapidly expanding suburban centers, such as the newly created West Shore business district. The new shopping plazas and office buildings being constructed in South Tampa and other area suburbs were undermining downtown Tampa's north end retail and other businesses.³⁶

During this period, the Floridan and other downtown businesses fought to attract patrons and remain profitable. In 1962, the *St. Petersburg Times* reported that the Hotel Floridan, Tampa Terrace Hotel, Maas Brothers department store building, and other downtown sites would be undergoing renovations. Floridan management hoped to install a fourth-floor swimming pool and a parking garage. Both were attempts to offer the same accommodations as newly built suburban hotels and motels. The estimated price of the renovations was approximately \$1.2 million.³⁷ The plan seemed a sound investment. After all, in the early 1960s, when many other downtown buildings were boarded up, the Floridan was still a linchpin of the Tampa social scene. In fact, the *St. Petersburg Times* listed it “among Tampa's more

³⁵ “Sporty Night in Tampa,” *St. Petersburg Times*, January 22, 1968.

³⁶ Kerstein, *Politics and Growth*, 132.

³⁷ “Tampa Remodels Downtown Areas,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 6, 1962.

active” nightspots in October 1963.³⁸ Its 1963 renovation plan was the spark of a trend. Between 1963 and 1989, the Floridan underwent many alterations in an attempt to keep the hotel marketable and profitable, but ultimately none successfully rejuvenated the Floridan.

Although the Floridan remained an active nightspot and continued to host banquets, luncheons, and meetings, it was struggling financially. The problem was, unlike the dining hall, lobby, and lounge, the Floridan’s rooms failed to continue to attract guests. The 11 x 14 foot rooms, which were once the norm in elegant hotels, were now unfashionable. Out-of-town visitors coming to the Floridan to attend events often chose to stay elsewhere. It was clear the Floridan needed to reinvent itself. Failing to do so could lead to a meeting with the wrecking ball. How real was the prospect of demolition? In 1967, the Tampa Terrace Hotel, the Floridan’s swanky 1920s counterpart and downtown neighbor, was demolished to make room for a parking lot.³⁹

The Heart of Florida Corporation believed the Floridan could be reinvented and made profitable. In 1966, Heart purchased the hotel from Floridan Hotel of Tampa Inc., for a reported \$1.5 million. The plan was to “concentrate on commercial and convention trade,” while “offering special rates to residents in certain age groups.” Heart hoped to fill the Floridan’s small guest rooms with senior citizens while continuing banquet and conference-hall operations.⁴⁰ The plan failed. By late 1968, the Floridan was in foreclosure. Soon thereafter the famous dining hall and lounge were closed, and in June 1969, hotel operations at the Floridan ceased.⁴¹ With demolition crews busy destroying the majority of downtown Tampa’s 1920s boom-era buildings, the Floridan’s future looked dire.

Graceless Aging

“When a TV hits the ground from the 5th floor, you really hear it.”
—Floridan Hotel desk clerk

At the dawn of the 1970s, the fortunes of the Hotel Floridan had set. The hotel that had once proudly reigned as the tallest building in the state and accommodated twentieth-century American cultural icons Elvis Presley, Charlton Heston, Lupe Vélez, Gary Cooper, and Paul “Bear” Bryant was now a college dormitory. The dining hall and lounge were closed. The live music ceased. The party appeared to be

³⁸ “There’s a Hot Time in the Old Town Each Night,” *St. Petersburg Times*, October 15, 1963.

³⁹ Leland Hawes, “From ‘the Terrace,’” *Tampa Tribune*, June 6, 1999 (NewsBank).

⁴⁰ “Floridan Hotel in Downtown Tampa Sold,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 15, 1966.

⁴¹ “Landmark Floridan Will Close Doors,” *Tampa Tribune Saturday*, August 21, 1971.



Courtesy of USF Tampa Special Collections

A group of Floridan employees, including doormen, bellhops and pages, pose in front of the hotel around the time of its opening. Such amenities were a thing of the past by the 1970s.

over. Of course, the demise of the great hotel did not occur overnight. It was clear to most Tampa residents by the early 1960s that the Floridan may have had its best days behind it. The only thing keeping the hotel from closing its doors was the contract the Penn Mutual Life Insurance Company, controller of the hotel after its foreclosure, penned with Patricia Stevens Career College. The college had agreed to lease floors eight through sixteen for student housing.⁴² By 1970, it seemed to many that use as a dormitory facility was all the Floridan's 11 x 14 foot rooms were good for.

In September 1971, Nora Allen became one of the Patricia Stevens Career College students who called the Floridan home. "It was obviously an older building even in 1971...but I wouldn't describe it as dilapidated," recalled Nora when asked about the condition of the Floridan during her residency. To her, the Floridan was more than adequate. "I can tell you that I liked my room a lot," said Allen. Adding to Allen's excitement was the fact that she shared a room with fellow classmate and former Miss Florida 1971, Susan Aileen Deaton.

According to Allen, the downtown streets surrounding the Floridan were teeming with pedestrians during the daytime hours in late 1971 and early 1972. "I can remember the sidewalks being filled with people rushing to get to their destinations. I didn't have a car at the time and so I walked everywhere I went. It was a nice time to

⁴² Ibid.

be living in downtown Tampa,” Allen fondly recalled.⁴³ It seemed to Allen and others that maybe the Hotel Floridan had found its niche and would survive.

The problem, however, was that the tenant agreement between Patricia Stevens College and the Floridan’s management was only temporary, and downtown’s twenty-four-hour foot traffic and businesses continued their decline. In 1971, the college cancelled its lease, and all students were moved out by late 1972.⁴⁴ Upon the cancellation, the few remaining permanent Floridan residents, which Penn and the college had agreed could stay, were given thirty days to vacate the premises. “We will sell to anyone interested,” proclaimed a representative of Penn Mutual Life Insurance Company, which, having owned the hotel since its 1968 foreclosure, now wished to sever its ties with the deteriorating landmark.⁴⁵

Although Penn wanted out, some investors still viewed the Floridan as a viable commodity that just needed some tender loving care. One week after the *Tampa Tribune* reported that the Floridan was available to anyone interested, the paper announced that A.C. Kavli, a businessman who had successfully remodeled and modernized the Orange Court Motor Lodge in downtown Orlando, was interested in purchasing and refurbishing the Tampa icon.⁴⁶ For \$351,000 the hotel was his, and shortly thereafter, Tampa residents saw construction crews making some renovations to the structure.

Kalvi’s plan to revive the landmark appeared sound on paper. During the 1970s and 1980s, Tampa’s downtown skyline soared thanks to the construction of several new high-rises. Whereas a mere “594,183 square feet of new downtown office space was constructed between 1960 and 1969,” between 1970 and 1990 downtown Tampa saw the creation of “over 3 million more square feet.” The twenty-year period witnessed the construction of several downtown buildings of more than thirty stories. Kalvi must have anticipated the coming expansion in 1971 and believed that a renovated and modernized Hotel Floridan could capitalize on it. The new downtown development was problematic, however, for two reasons. First, all of the new buildings were located in downtown’s south end, which was several blocks from the Floridan. Second, instead of increasing the twenty-four-hour foot traffic in downtown and creating a market for a rejuvenated Floridan, the new buildings worked to quicken the rapid evaporation of the residential character of downtown Tampa. “Downtown Tampa is an extreme case of a daytime-only center city,” admitted a municipal official in 1978 when listing the drawbacks of Tampa’s central business district. This was true. In fact, when One Laurel Place was constructed on the outskirts of downtown Tampa’s north end near the Hillsborough River in 1982, it adopted the mantra “The One Place to Live in Downtown.” This was not

⁴³ Nora Allen interview, January 23, 2009.

⁴⁴ “Landmark Floridan Will Close Doors.”

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ben Blackman, “Floridan May be Reopened,” *Tampa Times*, August 28, 1971.

true. There was one other place to live downtown: the fallen Floridan. After Kavli's acquisition of the Floridan, only minor renovations were completed. Thus instead of undergoing a rebirth, the hotel became a low-rent downtown dwelling for Tampa's transients, drifters, and social misfits.⁴⁷

By the late 1970s, the Floridan gained a reputation as a violent and dangerous flophouse, thanks to a series of bizarre and criminal events. In February 1978, a man was savagely beaten during a mugging in a Floridan elevator. The robber was allegedly so enraged upon discovering his victim had no cash, he brutally beat his victim, who later was forced to literally crawl out of the elevator when it stopped at the fourteenth floor.⁴⁸ The assailant escaped through the lobby and onto the desolate nighttime streets of downtown's north end. He was never apprehended.

Later that same year, the Floridan endured one of two fires that solidified its reputation as a dangerous place. A hotel resident, Ramona Refour, was responsible for the first blaze according to Tampa firefighters. The official report stated that a lit cigarette carelessly placed next to a Floridan mattress sparked the blaze. Fortunately, Refour awoke in time to escape the blaze and all other guests were safely evacuated. Unfortunately for the Floridan, the fire was reported by local news outlets and provided further evidence of the hotel's sad state. Officials estimated the damage at nearly ten thousand dollars.⁴⁹ Although Floridan management declined to release any official vacancy statistics, a resident of the hotel reported that three weeks ago the hotel was fully occupied, the evidence being the posting of a "no vacancy" sign. Despite its condition and reputation, the Floridan was staying afloat.

The second fire to mar the Floridan began the morning of June 20, 1980. The fire, which was of "suspicious origins," according to the fire department, began in a first-floor linen room. Several emergency vehicles responded to the "three-alarm" alert and were able to get the fire under control in minutes. Three of the hotels occupants were treated for smoke inhalation at Tampa General Hospital and released.⁵⁰ After the fire, a hotel spokesman stated that 179 of the 400 rooms were occupied. A survey of the hotel following the fire estimated the damages at twenty thousand dollars.⁵¹

With the Floridan seemingly coming, or burning, apart at the seams, all eyes were focused on the hotel's management. Many Tampa residents believed that only management officials had the ability to save the Tampa landmark. The Floridan's management, however, seemed content with the status quo. In 1980, the Tampa fire

⁴⁷ *Centennial 1960 to 1994*, "City on the Move," *Tampa Tribune-Times*, September 25, 1994.

⁴⁸ "Man Beaten in Elevator in Robbery Attempt," *Tampa Times*, February 20, 1978.

⁴⁹ Charles Hendrick, "Small Fire Evacuates Floridan," *Tampa Tribune*, June 16, 1978.

⁵⁰ August Stoebler, "Smoke Victim," *Tampa Times*, June 19, 1980.

⁵¹ Donna Newsome, "Hotel Fire's Origin 'Suspicious,'" *Tampa Tribune*, June 20, 1980.

marshal ordered “the Floridan Hotel to correct 20 odd fire hazards found there in each of the last six inspections.” Management refused. “None of this s--- is really serious,” exclaimed James Britton, the Floridan’s manager. The violations that appeared on the Tampa fire marshal’s reports revealed not just the dangers of staying at the once-majestic hotel, but also how far it had fallen. If management officials were unwilling to install fire doors, exit and emergency lights, as well as repair holes in the walls to stop the potential spread of smoke and fire, then clearly they would not, for the foreseeable future, be rehabbing the hotel.⁵²

The Floridan was in a tailspin. While fires broke out, safety hazards were ignored, more rooms sat vacant, and no renovation plans were publicized, new stories of strange and criminal occurrences further damaged the icon’s reputation. On September 12, 1980, a fifty-one-year-old man “jumped or fell” to his death “from his 10th floor room at the Floridan,” according to Tampa police.⁵³ The man, who carried identification from Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, and Schenectady, New York, had checked into the Floridan earlier and was found dead on the sidewalk below around midnight. No witnesses came forward, and details of the man’s death plunge remained a mystery.

In 1981, several amenities of one Floridan room were flung out of a window and onto the downtown sidewalks below. On March 20, Tampa police were called to the hotel at 7:00 a.m., when a man began shouting at hotel employees and, apparently wishing to do some renovating of his own, started throwing his fifth-floor room’s furniture and other items out of the window. By the time the seventy-nine-year-old, four foot, three inch Chicagoan was through redecorating, a TV set, mattress, Bible, and other items had smashed into the downtown sidewalk. The hotel desk clerk reported the man “opened the window—he was nice enough to do that—and then just started throwing everything out.... When a TV hits the ground from the 5th floor, you really hear it.” Upon arriving and ascending to the man’s Floridan abode, the police requested the man open the door and when he failed to do so, kicked it in and beheld the diminutive old man standing in the room brandishing a knife. The man, however, wisely avoided a struggle and was willingly taken into police custody “as a mentally ill person.”⁵⁴

The Chicagoan was not the only interesting and disturbed character to spend time in the Floridan. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a host of colorful characters stayed in the decaying old structure. A few local reporters made pilgrimages to the hotel to chronicle the residents’ stories and lives, and to see what had become of the once-luxurious hotel.

⁵² Richard Bockman, “Hotel Manager: Hazards Don’t Warrant Correction,” *Tampa Times*, December 1, 1980.

⁵³ “Man Dies Following 10-Story Hotel Fall,” *Tampa Times*, September 12, 1980.

⁵⁴ “Man Throws Furniture from Hotel Window,” *Tampa Times*, March 20, 1981.

In 1978, Karen Lachenauer, a freelance writer, decided to spend thirteen April days and nights in the hotel, during which time she kept a diary. In it, she chronicled the state of the hotel and its “varied clientele, from transients to entrenched old-timers.”⁵⁵ For the miniscule sum of thirty-five dollars a week, the reporter was able live in a room on the fourteenth floor and soak in the unique charm of the 1920s boom-era hotel and its clientele. Floridan charms reported by Lachenauer included a ban on nonpaying guests, a policy made clear via a sign stating, “No visitors above the lobby level,” required advance payments for both renters and overnight guests, vending machines that produced moon pies and “tepid machine coffee,” and elevators with expired inspection notices that bit down on slow-moving elderly visitors. During her stay, Lachenauer encountered a confused and malnourished elderly woman, a pimp, gamblers, and prostitutes who checked into the hotel and knocked on doors all night long looking for potential clients.⁵⁶ The days of refined modernity and opulence were clearly over at the Hotel Floridan.

Tampa Tribune reporter Vanessa Orlando found some of the characters staying in the Floridan in 1981 to be just as colorful as those Lachenauer had encountered in 1978. Orlando found old men telling World War II stories in the lobby, a woman who had lived in the hotel for eight years and who refused to socialize, staying “behind her locked door at night,” and a friendly fifteen-year-old named Allen who, living in the hotel with his mother, subsisted on fast-food and vending-machine fare. Despite the diversity, all the Floridan residents she encountered did have one thing in common: they were paying customers. Their patronage, and the patronage of the overnight guests, was keeping the Floridan’s doors open. The hotel was still profitable. James Britton, the hotel’s manager, stated, “although the hotel has gone through a kind of graceless aging, it’s still a successful, money-making business.” When asked whether it bothered him to witness the deterioration of the old icon, Britton stated, “Well as someone once said, I cry all the way to the bank.”⁵⁷

Delusions of Grandeur and Final Checkout

“You get roaches, like mobile mints waiting on your pillow.”

—*Tampa Tribune* reporter Paul Wilborn

It was an inspiring and ambitious plan. Scott Fetterhoff, a University of South Florida architecture student, must have experienced an epiphany when he created his architectural master’s thesis project in 1983. His vision: create the “Floridan Square.” The Floridan Square project proposed linking the Hotel Floridan to a newly

⁵⁵ Karen Lachenauer, “Inside the Floridan Hotel: Excerpts from a Resident’s Diary,” *Tampa Tribune* edition: “Florida Accent,” May 28, 1978.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Vanessa Orlando, “Floridan Hotel: Variety of Characters Register at Historic Downtown Landmark,” *Tampa Tribune-Times*, August 2, 1981.



Tampa Bay History Center Collection

Postcard view of the Floridan Hotel, with an inset image of the famed Sapphire Room, dating from the 1940s.

constructed downtown office building and retail space. Fetterhoff argued that the key to the project was restoring the Floridan to its former greatness and ensuring that it not be converted into office space. "You couldn't appreciate the grandness of it as an office structure," argued Fetterhoff.⁵⁸ The architectural models were built, the plan was publicized, but the Floridan did not change. Instead, it continued for the next six years to provide shelter for low-income transients and outcasts.

The same year that Fetterhoff's vision was publicized, Jude Ryan, a child-abuse investigator for Florida's Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, visited the Floridan twice. Someone had reported an incidence of child neglect on the part of a Hotel Floridan resident, and Ryan was sent to investigate the allegation. His personal account of his 1983 visits to the downtown icon revealed that things at the Floridan had not changed. When asked who he had seen in the Floridan in 1983, Ryan said, "People who would otherwise be homeless...and who had nothing to do." After his uncertain ascent up a "scary elevator" and his passage through "dimly lit" narrow hallways, Ryan approached the room that his clients called home. Upon entering the room, Ryan beheld a family of four living in a cramped room whose "mattress was standing on its side." The room was "not filthy," stated Ryan, but he got the impression that the "place had not been renovated in a long long time." Although the parents were exonerated of the neglect charges, the Floridan was clearly not the ideal place to raise a family.⁵⁹

Ryan's experiences, and those of other Floridan visitors illustrated that by the early 1980s the Floridan had hit rock bottom. However, behind-the-scenes events were taking place that would forever alter the Floridan's destiny. In December 1985, A.C. Kavli, the hotel's owner since 1971, died. Upon his death, the Floridan was placed in the hands of a Minneapolis trust, which immediately put the hotel up for sale.⁶⁰ Would the hotel be sold to someone or some entity interested in restoration? Would Fetterhoff's vision become a reality? As it stood, the Floridan was a place where you could book a room for fourteen dollars per night. The Floridan's patrons, admirers, and detractors were all eagerly anticipating and pondering what the future would hold for the historic landmark.

On February 27, 1987, the *Tampa Tribune* reported that a small group of investors was seriously considering purchasing the Floridan. By March 20, 1987, a deal was struck. For a reported \$2.75 million, the Amerivest Corp., headquartered in Tampa, purchased the hotel. In a *Tampa Tribune* story, Amerivest publicly announced its plan to spend \$15 million to restore the Tampa icon to its former glory. "We want to make it the same type of hotel it was at one time," exclaimed Marilyn Proctor, vice president and operations manager for Amerivest Corp. Amerivest estimated

⁵⁸ Leland Hawes, "The Floridan Hotel: Filled with the Faded Beauty of Tampa History," *Tampa Tribune*, May 7, 1983.

⁵⁹ Jude Ryan interview, December 2, 2008.

⁶⁰ Stephanie Tripp, "Investor Group Checking out Floridan Hotel," *Tampa Tribune*, February 27, 1987.

renovations would take approximately two years, would be done “one floor at a time,” and that hotel operations would continue throughout the process. When asked about the hotel’s location in the fast deteriorating and desolate north end of Tampa’s downtown district, Proctor stated that it was in a “viable area” that Amerivest believed would be undergoing “a lot of renovation” in the future.⁶¹

The future seemed bright for those hoping for a Floridan return to glory. The new owners of the Floridan proposed to refurbish the Floridan and construct a new space for the Maas Brothers department store, which had been a downtown Tampa mainstay since the late 1800s, but was facing infrastructural and financial hardships thanks to the post–World War II exodus of downtown businesses, patrons, and residents. Amerivest desired to purchase nearby land in order to build a parking garage and a potential 100,000 square feet of retail space, and wanted Maas Brothers to move into approximately 45,000 square feet of the new space. A meeting was set up between Amerivest representative Wally Knight and Maas Brothers president Frank Harvey to “discuss the proposal.” The plan did not end with the Maas Brothers building; it also called for a four-story convention center, “40,000 square feet of meeting space, a health club and a swimming pool.” Although talks with property owners and historic preservationists were still ongoing, it seemed as though a version of Fetterhoff’s vision might materialize.⁶²

Sadly for champions of the Floridan, it was not to be. The plans for the hotel and downtown Tampa’s north end remained mere mirages. On January 5, 1988, the *Tampa Tribune* reported that the relationship between the Hotel Floridan’s principal owners had soured. With several lawsuits pending “concerning the Floridan and together properties owned by Comer and Weis,” Amerivest’s plans to renovate the Floridan and transform downtown’s north end halted.⁶³

Nevertheless, the Floridan’s doors remained propped open, and a peculiar cast of characters continued to call the relic home. In 1989, the Floridan’s guest list included Gene Lewis, a retired Army vet who spent his days smoking “nonfilter cigarettes and reading paperback adventure novels.” Lewis told a reporter the story of how he had wandered to the Floridan from the Tampa Amtrak station more than five years ago and that he did not plan on leaving. Frank Slattery, an Irishman who had seen the Floridan in its glory days, was another full-time resident. I have “lost a life-long battle with the bottle,” said the man who called the Floridan home. There was also Ted Robinson, who, while “caressing a can of malt liquor” in the Floridan’s bar, told *Tampa Tribune* reporter Paul Wilborn the story of how he ended up at the Floridan. On Thanksgiving Day in 1976, his wife “asked the sheriff’s office to help

⁶¹ Stephanie Tripp, “Investors Purchase Floridan,” *Tampa Tribune*, March 20, 1987.

⁶² Stephanie Tripp, “Floridan Developer Hopes to Lure Maas to New Spot,” *Tampa Tribune*, May 1, 1987.

⁶³ Stephanie Tripp, “Floridan Partner Forces Group into Bankruptcy,” *Tampa Tribune*, January 5, 1988.

[him] relocate." After officers drew their guns and persuaded him to get in a taxi, he was dropped off at the entrance of the hotel where he would become a permanent resident. What kept them at the Floridan? Perhaps the Floridan's motto, "The price is right," said it all. In 1989, you could get a room at the Floridan for "\$19 a night or \$75 a week—payable in advance."⁶⁴

While Gene Lewis, Ted Robinson, and Frank Slattery were living in the Floridan, the hotel found itself on the auction block. In December 1988, the grandiose plans of the Amerivest Corp. were officially laid to rest. Hillsborough County notified the operators of the hotel that they had until Christmas Eve to find a buyer. Stephen Weis, who was then running the hotel under a bankruptcy agreement, told the *Tampa Tribune* he was "not optimistic about finding a buyer." One of the problems, according to some onlookers and prospective buyers, was the obvious fact that the Floridan was simply in an unfavorable location. Because the Floridan was several blocks north of downtown Tampa's newer buildings and convention center, potential investors were wary. Many feared that this disinterest would lead to the destruction of one of Florida's most historic, yet still unprotected, buildings.⁶⁵

On December 14, 1988, a hotel that had once accommodated Elvis Presley, Paul "Bear" Bryant, and Gary Cooper was sold at auction for ten thousand dollars to Sity International Inc., which had purchased the \$2.5 million mortgage from Amerivest two months prior to the auction.⁶⁶ The Floridan had indisputably lost not only its polish, but its paint as well. It was a shell of its former self. Upon selling the hotel, the Amerivest Corp. had racked up \$3.3 million "in outstanding loans, interest and fees." Sity International Inc. was tightlipped when asked by a reporter about its plans for the old hotel. They did, however, assure residents and employees of the Floridan that they had no immediate plans to close it. This was good news for Floridan residents with no other place to go. Sity certainly had financial reasons for keeping the hotel open in the short term. According to a Floridan employee, about 80 percent of the hotel's rooms were occupied. Obviously, the Floridan was still a potentially profitable entity, but with competition from newer hotels in the West Shore district and the south end of downtown, whether or not the Floridan could or would be redeemed remained unknown.⁶⁷

On September 1, 1989, guests and permanent residents of the Floridan strode, ran, walked, or stumbled into the hotel's lobby to be greeted with the following message:

⁶⁴ Paul Wilborn, "Final Checkout Nears at the Floridan," *Tampa Tribune*, September 14, 1989.

⁶⁵ Stephanie Tripp, "Auction to Decide Floridan Hotel's future—If Any," *Tampa Tribune*, December 12, 1988;

Stephanie Tripp, "Floridan Hotel's Future Uncertain after Sale," *Tampa Tribune*, December 15, 1988.

⁶⁶ Bernice Stengle, "Japanese Developers Are Buyers of Tampa Hotel," *St. Petersburg Times*, April 26, 1989 (NewsBank).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

“ATTENTION: HOTEL GUESTS. WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT AS OF OCTOBER 1, 1989, THE FLORIDAN HOTEL WILL CLOSE ITS DOORS TO ALL OCCUPANTS, DUE TO FUTURE HOTEL RENOVATION... TO OUR WEEKLY GUESTS, WE WISH TO EXPRESS OUR THANKS FOR YOUR EXTENSIVE PATRONAGE AND HOPE THAT THIS WILL PROVIDE SUFFICIENT TIME TO RELOCATE.”

The Hotel Floridan, whose continuous sixty-two-year hotel operations had outlasted the continuous operations streaks of local landmark hotels the Don CeSar, the Tampa Terrace, the Vinoy, and Plant's Tampa Bay Hotel, was closing its doors. Final checkout for Gene Lewis, Frank Slattery, Ted Robinson, and other Floridan residents had arrived. Robinson was one resident who said he would miss the old hotel. Peter Saunders, a house painter and USF student who was living at the Floridan, also lamented the loss of his digs. “It's strange. This place is more than bricks and mortar. . . . If Ernest Hemingway was around, he would write a book on it.” Other residents likely didn't hold the Floridan in the same high regard. Paul Wilborn, the *Tribune* reporter, said that for nineteen dollars a night, Floridan guests got roaches on their pillows, a “plastic trash can in the corner that says ‘Hilton’ and a 15-inch color television set with an antenna made from a coat hanger.” Floridan amenities also included toilets with brown water and faulty air-conditioning. Even in the face of such uninviting accommodations, many Floridan residents were in no hurry to relocate. But now they had to, and they only had thirty days to do so, a difficult proposition for those who lacked the means to pay apartment security deposits, as well as first and last month's rent.⁶⁸

Sity's failure to publicize a future plan for the Floridan likely intensified longtime residents' exasperation. Although the sign in the lobby stated that the hotel would be closing for renovations, work crews were not seen in or around the hotel. Steve Anderson, the attorney representing Sity, stated that the group decided to close the hotel and expel the residents rather than bring the hotel up to specs. “There were some changes in the fire safety laws a couple of years ago that had some pretty tough deadlines to meet in terms of sprinkler systems, fire-alarm systems, [and] fire partitions...[these] changes in the law really were cost-prohibitive for a facility that was being kept open temporarily.” Anderson argued that the owners of the Floridan decided that closing the icon down was the only economically viable option. The Floridan was no longer profitable in its current state. The closure of the Floridan marked the end of an era and led to the exodus of a large portion of Tampa's downtown residents. The nighttime streets of downtown's north end, which were close to desolate after five with the Floridan open, would soon mirror a black hole.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Wilborn, “Final Checkout Nears at the Floridan”.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Resurrection?

"It's just a matter of time before the right person with the right formula comes along."

—Casey Ellison, assistant manager, The Beck Group, April 9, 2004

The block sign erected in 1994 said it all. A sign that had once proudly displayed the name of the once-luxurious hotel in big, bold letters now had another phrase affixed: "FOR SALE." The years from 1989 to 1994 were not kind to the Hotel Floridan. Like many other buildings in downtown Tampa's north end, the Floridan remained boarded up and mothballed. The only visible residents of the Floridan were the vultures that circled above and perched themselves upon the 1920s relic day and night. The demise of the Floridan was now obvious to all who drove past, and its abandonment and desolation paralleled that of downtown Tampa's north end. Developers, city politicians, and business leaders, for all their good intentions, were unsuccessful in their attempts to rejuvenate downtown's north end and secure renovation for the Floridan. Under the ownership of Sity International Corporation, the Floridan sat neglected, and downtown's north end, including the once-booming north Franklin Street, was a virtual ghost town.

Sity's hopes of resurrecting the hotel had been dashed by 1994, and the company wanted out. It was simply a question of cost. In 1994, the *Tampa Tribune* reported that preservation experts estimated that it would "cost between \$14 million and \$17 million" to renovate the Floridan. Unfortunately, this figure did not include the cost of purchasing the hotel, which Sity International was attempting to unload for \$4 million. Approximately \$20 million to purchase and renovate the old hotel appeared on the surface to be a princely sum to many potential buyers. Yet, there were rumblings in 1994 that some parties were expressing an interest in acquiring and resurrecting the Floridan. If this were true, the 1994 prediction of former Floridan patron Hampton Dunn that the Floridan "may be too far gone... I don't know if it will ever come back as the elegant thing it was," may not have been prophetic after all.⁷⁰

Those who for years had kept their fingers crossed in hope that one day someone would buy the now-vacant and infested Floridan must have had irrepressible smiles when they read the November 30, 1995, *Tampa Tribune* headline: "Hotel Developer to Renovate 1927 Landmark." Grand Heritage Hotels Inc. announced on November 30 its plans to restore the boarded-up and mothballed Hotel Floridan. City leaders were optimistic. Tampa Downtown Partnership chairwoman Marsha Rydberg told reporters: "We've got a company that's got a track record. These are people that are professionals."⁷¹ Grand Heritage had specialized in renovating and refurbishing old

⁷⁰ Gardner, "Restoration Eludes Tampa's 1st Skyscraper".

⁷¹ Jean Gruss, "Hotel Developer Plans to Renovate 1927 Landmark," *Tampa Tri-*



Tampa Bay History Center Collection

Lewis Ellsworth snapped this photo of downtown Tampa's north end in the late 1950s. Business owners were already "modernizing" their buildings with neon signs and stucco.

hotels in order to transform them into "thriving, high-profile destinations in their communities."⁷² They successfully owned and operated fifty-two hotels located in both the United States and Europe.⁷³

In December 1995, *Tampa Tribune* reporters called Floridan boosters, former patrons and well-wishers, to solicit memories about the hotel's golden era for a story anticipating its resurgence. The usual suspects were interviewed: Mary Jim Scott, who had lived in the Floridan while her father served as manager; Hampton Dunn, and other longtime Tampa residents with fond memories. Grand Heritage used the *Tampa Tribune* story to publicize its Floridan plans. The company, who had purchased the hotel for \$3 million, planned to redesign the hotel's layout. The new specs called for 225 rooms, approximately half as many as before, and an average daily room rate of ninety-two dollars, a substantial increase from the nineteen-dollar stays of six years prior. Grand Heritage also hoped to lease space on the ground floor to outside businesses in hopes of attracting an "upscale restaurant" and a coffee shop. An exclusive club, dubbed the Heritage Club, boasting "private elevator access, luxurious suites, a floor concierge, fluffy towels and linens, hair dryers, complimentary beverages and international newspapers" was to adorn the Floridan's top floor. Grand

bune, November 30, 1995 (NewsBank).

⁷² Grand Heritage Hotel Group, "About," <http://www.grandheritage.com/about.htm>.

⁷³ Gruss, "Hotel Developer Plans to Renovate 1927 Landmark".

Heritage expected to hire two hundred full-time employees. The company also planned to apply for a local landmark historic designation and have the hotel placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Officially designating the hotel would give Grand Heritage the opportunity to “take advantage of about \$6 million in local and federal incentives.”⁷⁴

The two pivotal pieces were now in place: an established, motivated owner and a spectacular \$16 million plan. All that was left to do was finalize the deal. The deal was scheduled to be closed within weeks of the November 30, 1995, *Tampa Tribune* article. Once the papers had been signed and the renovation completed, the newly reinvented Floridan would both increase foot traffic in northern downtown and be the first step to rejuvenating the district.⁷⁵

Hammering, sawing, catcalling, and swearing were just some of the things Tampa's downtown employees probably expected to hear from construction crews in 1996 when walking past the Floridan. Instead, they heard nothing. By April 1996, the deal that was allegedly within weeks of being closed on November 30, 1995, had yet to be finalized. By May 1996, it had officially fallen through. What went wrong? The *Tampa Tribune* reported that delays in getting a \$9.9 million federal loan, and the city's unwillingness to give a cash advance on the loan, led to the deal's demise. Grand Heritage never purchased the hotel. Other suitors followed. Bayshore Property Corporation and MHI Hotels Inc. each penned prospective deals to renovate the Floridan in 1996, with MHI wishing to make the Floridan a four-star hotel.⁷⁶ Neither came to fruition. While the Don CeSar and the Vinoy enjoyed their resurgence, the Hotel Floridan remained shuttered.⁷⁷

The Floridan did manage to achieve one important milestone in 1996. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. This was a momentous event for local preservationists and Floridan admirers. Designation, however, did not guarantee that the Floridan would be preserved, much less renovated and reopened. No legal action could be taken by the government to force Sity to commence renovations. This was problematic because the longer the Floridan remained shuttered, the more likely it was to be condemned and ordered demolished by code-enforcement officers concerned that it posed a threat to public safety.

In August 1997, Sity finally unloaded the hotel. The Floridan's new suitor was Capital LLC, which announced to the *St. Petersburg Times* on August 13, 1997, its plan to renovate the hotel and have it reopened in a mere sixteen months. Like previous potential renovators, Capital hoped to reopen the Floridan as a full-

⁷⁴ Jean Gruss, “Empty Old Hotel Houses Many Fond Memories,” *Tampa Tribune*, November 1, 1995 (NewsBank).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Jean Gruss, “Floridan Registers Another Developer,” *Tampa Tribune*, September 14, 1996 (NewsBank).

⁷⁷ Jean Gruss, “Floridan Hotel Developer Lets Deadline Pass,” *Tampa Tribune*, May 14, 1996 (NewsBank).

service hotel, not a condo or office building. Capital LLC planned \$23 million in renovations, which was to be financed in part by the long-promised \$9.9 million loan from “the US Department of Housing and Urban Development in exchange for a mortgage on the [planned] parking lot and the land beneath, along with the lien on all the furniture, fixtures and equipment in the hotel itself.” Like his political predecessors, Mayor Dick Greco was optimistic about the future of the Floridan and downtown Tampa’s barren north end: “I expect to see that end of town changing considerably. This is good news for the city as far as I am concerned.”⁷⁸ His optimism was misplaced.

Unlike Grand Heritage, Bayshore Property, and MHI Hotels, the Capital LLC did purchase the Floridan, after the city agreed to guarantee the \$9.9 million federal loan; with the stipulation that ownership of the proposed parking garage would pass to the city if the project fell into bankruptcy.⁷⁹ Capital soon hired two New York architecture firms, the Hillier Group and Diana Agrest Architects, to create plans for the hotel. The design plans called for a 350-space parking garage, “225 spacious guest rooms, restaurants, meeting rooms and a rooftop health spa with a lap pool.” The goal was to make the Floridan a “business-class” hotel.⁸⁰ New developments in downtown made Capital’s plans for a modernized Floridan appear feasible. A Marriott was under construction on Ashley Drive, just a few blocks away in north downtown, and a Radisson along the Hillsborough River was being renovated. It appeared the resuscitation of downtown Tampa’s north end had finally begun. The demand was seemingly in place, and the environment was welcoming for hotel and business construction. The following year, the city agreed to loan Capital \$10 million dollars to renovate the hotel.⁸¹ Tampa residents and city leaders waited anxiously for hammering to commence.⁸²

In 2001, more than three years after Capital had purchased the hotel, the Floridan reached another major milestone. It was condemned. Capital did not even begin rudimentary renovations during their first three years of ownership. During this period, the building began to literally crumble before the eyes of Tampa’s residents. The Tampa code-enforcement office condemned the building when small fragments of its façade came crashing down in 2001. The public demolition order resulting from the hotel’s neglect prompted Capital to hire a local contractor to repair portions of the building, but the repairs, which included patching the leaky roof, removing the neon rooftop sign, and securing “windows and other items on

⁷⁸ Charles Hoskinson, “Derelict Hotel Gets Another Shot at Restoration,” *St. Petersburg Times* August 1, 1997 (NewsBank).

⁷⁹ Joe Henderson, “Fund Request May Rekindle Dropped Floridan Project,” *Tampa Tribune*, April 11, 1997, (NewsBank).

⁸⁰ Jean Gruss, “Floridan Project Heats Up,” *Tampa Tribune*, October 22, 1997.

⁸¹ David Pedreira, “Council OKs Renovations, Ybor Garage,” *Tampa Tribune*, May 15, 1998 (NewsBank).

⁸² Gruss, “Floridan Project Heats Up.”

the building's facade, so that items attached to the building don't end up on the sidewalk or street," were mere band-aids on a building that needed major surgery. Capital made the necessary repairs and the building appeared to be stabilized, thereby avoiding forced demolition.⁸³ The Floridan, however, remained mothballed and Tampa's vultures continued to use its rooftop as a perch. It also remained on Tampa's code-enforcement department's condemned list. Capital would not prove to be the savior of the Floridan.

In April 2004, the *Tampa Tribune* reported that Capital was looking to sell the Floridan. The announcement was unsurprising. Since purchasing the building in 1997, all Capital had done was structurally secure the building to avoid forced demolition. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which undermined America's tourist and hospitality industries, undercut Capital's business operations. The Beck Group, a Tampa contractor hired by Capital to begin the renovation process in 2001, never started the daunting, expansive, and expensive endeavor of restoring the Floridan to its past glory. The good news was that there were a few interested buyers. "We are showing it to prospective buyers at least once a month," said a Beck employee affiliated with the Floridan. The building was reportedly still structurally sound, "savable" in the words of one person involved in the project, and could be reincarnated as a grand hotel, office building, or condo.⁸⁴

In April 2006, after twenty-eight days of demolition, the construction crew was done. They had successfully demolished one of the oldest and most recognizable buildings in downtown Tampa.⁸⁵ Was it a surprise that the old Maas Brothers building, which sat just a few blocks away from the Hotel Floridan, was demolished? Certainly not—the building had never been designated a historic landmark by either local or national preservationists, and it had been shuttered since 1991. Nevertheless, when the structure was torn down to make way for a condo development, the historic character and distinctiveness of Tampa's downtown was altered forever.⁸⁶

For years, politicians and developers had been predicting that in the near future the citizens of Tampa would witness the rejuvenation of downtown Tampa's north end. By 2007, it appeared the resurrection was at hand and could be summed up in a single word: condos. The condo-building craze that defined Florida's urban development in the 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century struck downtown Tampa with a vengeance. New condos in Channelside, south downtown, and even downtown's north end, sprang up between 2000 and 2008. By 2007, the Floridan

⁸³ David Simanoff, "Rooms for Improvement," *Tampa Tribune*, March 27, 2001 (NewsBank).

⁸⁴ Cal Cronan, "Floridan Hotel Owners Wait for the Right Buyer to Come Along," *Tampa Bay Business Journal*, April 9, 2004, Special Report, 15.

⁸⁵ David Simanoff, "Maas Bros. Store Once Was Tampa," *Tampa Tribune*, April 11, 2006 (NewsBank).

⁸⁶ "Old Maas Brothers site being cleared for condos," *Tampa Bay Business Journal*, February 13, 2006 (<http://www.bizjournals.com/tampabay/stories/2006/02/13/daily15.html>).

had new neighbors. The Residences of Franklin Street, Skypoint, and the Art Center Lofts, all residential projects, were open by 2007. Two other condo projects, the Arlington and the Element, were also in the works. Even though many of the new condo units remained unoccupied after construction was completed, new businesses were slow to move in, and sidewalk traffic only slightly increased, Tampa's north end was undergoing a residential transformation.

In 2005, Antonios Markopoulos got in on the action when he purchased the iconic Hotel Floridan for \$6 million. Like his many predecessors, he wanted to transform the dilapidated Floridan into a luxurious business hotel. City officials, like their many predecessors, said this time was different. They were right. One advantage that Markopoulos had over his Floridan forefathers was capital. In 2004, Markopoulos sold four hotels he owned, including one on nearby Clearwater Beach, for \$40 million.⁸⁷ He was looking for a new project and had cash to spend. The Floridan reportedly caught Markopoulos's eye when he was driving around downtown Tampa in early 2005. Within a month of touring the Floridan, Markopoulos outbid six other interested parties to secure the right to revive the fallen icon.⁸⁸ It seemed to outsiders that the two essential elements—excess capital and a motivated owner—were in place. The only question was whether or not the Floridan's new savior had the will and the patience to make the Tampa landmark his Lazarus.

"UNSHUTTERED," exclaimed a *Tampa Tribune* headline on August 6, 2005. Markopoulos wasted no time. Just a matter of months after purchasing the Floridan, work crews began "cleaning and patching up the downtown building." Lisa Shasteen, a Markopoulos representative affiliated with the project, told the *Tampa Tribune*, "unlike the others, Markopoulos won't need to seek" or wait for financing. The days of patiently waiting for a \$9.9 million federal loan to materialize were over. It was estimated that the renovations would take between eighteen and twenty-four months after the initial cleanup, and would cost an estimated \$16 to \$20 million. The good news was that workers found the building to be in "remarkably good shape."⁸⁹

The ambitious but slow-moving Floridan renovation project has continued from 2005 through the present. Paperwork had to be filed, plans had to be approved by city commissioners, and discoveries had to be made, but work had commenced, and the Floridan's renaissance had begun. "I can't say exactly, but you wouldn't believe how much this renovation is costing—millions, millions," stated Shasteen, who added that a year alone was spent working on the ceiling of the hotel lobby.⁹⁰ The Floridan's new owner was sparing no expense.

In March 2005, Lisa Shasteen and Antonios Markopoulos stumbled upon

⁸⁷ Randy Diamond, "Developer Proposes Comeback for Floridan," *Tampa Tribune*, April 21, 2005.

⁸⁸ Steve Huettel, "Unshuttered," *Tampa Tribune*, August 6, 2005.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Richard Mullins, "Floridan Being Pieced Together," *Tampa Tribune*, October 19, 2008 (NewsBank).

the Floridan's original neon rooftop sign while touring the hotel. It had been stowed away in a storage space on the hotel's top floor and forgotten. In October 2008, it was returned to its original location atop the hotel. Tampa eagerly holds its breath in the hope that the red neon glow will soon illuminate the downtown sky the night of the Floridan's official reopening, symbolizing the hotel's and the neighborhood's return to prominence.⁹¹

⁹¹ Janis Froelich, "Floridan Hotel's Sign to Shine Again," *Tampa Tribune*, December 3, 2005 (NewsBank).