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# CLEARWATER'S HARBOR OAKS: THE "RIVIERA OF THE SUNNY SOUTH"

TOM ADAMICH

As Florida's Land Boom of the 1920s began to take shape, individuals and corporations sought to stake a claim in the perceived profits associated with residential land development progressing at a fever pace. As prominent developers in other regions of the United States became aware of the vast parcels of undeveloped land on Florida's coasts (particularly on Florida's west coast), they worked quickly to acquire land and plan residential developments. Among the first and most prominent residential developments created in the Tampa Bay region was Clearwater's Harbor Oaks. According to the listing in the Florida Division of Historical Resources' Historical Markers Program, Harbor Oaks was Clearwater's first truly planned residential development. Created by New York-based developer Dean Alvord in 1914, Harbor Oaks became widely known in newspaper advertisements and trade journals as the "finest shore development on the west coast of Florida" and "the Riviera of the Sunny South."<sup>1</sup> Michael Sanders, noted Clearwater historian and past president of the Clearwater Historical Society, notes that Harbor Oaks was identified as the "Pearl of the Pinellas Peninsula" situated on an elevation of "About Forty Feet Above Mean High Water."<sup>2</sup> The development offered potential residents features that were considered innovative for the time (and are still notable today, by residential development standards) including underground utilities, paved streets, curbs and

<sup>1</sup> Florida Division of Historical Resources, "Florida Historical Markers Program [Pinellas County]," [www.flheritage.com/preservation/markers/markers.cfm?ID=pinellas](http://www.flheritage.com/preservation/markers/markers.cfm?ID=pinellas).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Sanders, e-mail to author, February 10, 2011.

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*Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

This 1907 photograph shows the sprawling Prospect Park South community in Brooklyn, New York. Note the grand size of most of the homes, as well as the density of homes within each block.

sidewalks, a sewer system, as well as tree-lined parkways that enhanced the appearance of the homes.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of creating an upscale residential community for the wealthy, Alvord incorporated a number of deed and building-related restrictions into the plans. While these details added an additional layer of accountability and complexity to the building process, the end result was the creation of mostly two-story estate-style homes that represented a variety of prominent architectural styles of the period, including Neoclassical, Mediterranean Revival, Tudor Revival, Mission, and Bungalow.<sup>4</sup> The attention to detail for which Alvord was known in similar residential developments he created in Brooklyn, New York (as president of the Dean Alvord Company) quickly became evident in Harbor Oaks. As with the New York projects, Alvord liberally promoted the civic improvement that his development brought to the Clearwater community. It was not uncommon for Alvord to hold “best lawn” contests and other such award opportunities. These efforts became features of sales literature and newspaper articles that were widely distributed in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago. His advertisements attracted a host of wealthy and notable residents, including adventure novelist Rex Beach, Brooklyn Dodgers owner Charles Ebbett, inventor Donald Roebling (who invented the Alligator military

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

landing vehicle),<sup>5</sup> industrialist Robert Ingersoll, and members of the Studebaker and Proctor and Gamble families.<sup>6</sup> This discussion of Dean Alvord as both developer and community leader will serve as a point of reference for the analysis of Harbor Oaks but, more importantly, will provide a glimpse into the rationale and conditions that led Alvord and other developers to create and promote large-scale residential developments—primarily targeted at the wealthy residents of the northern United States—during Florida's 1920s Land Boom.

### **Dean Alvord: Civic Advocate and "Star Salesman"**

Dean Albert Alvord was born December 4, 1856 in Syracuse, New York, the son of James Dwight Alvord and Caroline Louise Edwards.<sup>7</sup> After graduating from Syracuse University in 1882 with a degree in education, Alvord worked as a teacher, book salesman, investment securities salesman, and secretary of the Rochester YMCA (where he help to plan and build a new \$125,000 facility) before becoming a real estate agent and developer in Rochester in 1890.<sup>8</sup> Following the success of his first development (which consisted of forty lots), Alvord moved to Brooklyn in 1892, where he created the iconic Prospect Park South.<sup>9</sup> Cleverly dubbed by Alvord as the "rus in urbe" (country in the city), Prospect Park South, with its substantial homes (most exceeded 3,500 square feet), numerous deed restrictions, and trees planted to create the illusion that each house resided on its own city lot, has often been considered the forerunner of the modern suburb. Prospect Park South also pioneered the concept of a tree-lined median in a street's center—a design that Alvord would later incorporate into Harbor Oaks as well.<sup>10</sup> As a result, many residents of wealthy neighborhoods in Manhattan moved to the Prospect Park South "suburbs" to take advantage of the illusion of rural living with easy access to New York City and adjacent boroughs.

Prospect Park South marked just the beginning of Alvord's success as a prominent real estate developer and builder. Alvord subsequently purchased large parcels in both Brooklyn and Queens County. He simultaneously developed both the Belle Terre community on Long Island's North Shore and Roslyn Heights in the Roslyn area of Long Island. Alvord was also a principal participant in the acquisition of land for what became the Garden City Estates, the Shinnecock Hills development, and Laurelton.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "Landing Vehicle Tracked," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Landing\\_Vehicle\\_Tracked&oldid=408894443](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Landing_Vehicle_Tracked&oldid=408894443).

<sup>6</sup> "Florida Historical Markers Program [Pinellas County]."

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Morgan Alvord, *A Genealogy of the Descendants of ALEXANDER ALVORD An Early Settler of Windsor, Conn. and Northampton, Mass.* (Webster, N.Y.: A.D. Andrews, Printer, 1908), 520.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert Foster Gunnison, *Flatbush of Today* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1908), 92.

<sup>9</sup> "Prospect Park South, Brooklyn," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Prospect\\_Park\\_South,\\_Brooklyn&oldid=351865198](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Prospect_Park_South,_Brooklyn&oldid=351865198).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Gunnison, *Flatbush of Today*, 92.

Belle Terre (French for “beautiful land”)—now part of Brookhaven on Long Island’s North Shore—is a picturesque village bordered by Mount Misery Point and Cedar Beach to the north.<sup>12</sup> According to Nancy Orth’s *The History of Belle Terre*, Alvord applied to Belle Terre the principles of what had been dubbed in architectural and community-planning circles as the “City Beautiful” movement, which encouraged building design that was both beautiful and utilitarian.<sup>13</sup> He subsequently purchased what was known as Oakwood from the then-bankrupt Port Jefferson Company, of which he had been a director. Beginning in 1902, Alvord, via the Dean Alvord Company, began to develop the area. He built an estate, which he named Nevalde, for his growing family and spent long hours planning and directing his energy and vast financial resources to creating architecturally significant structures on a grand scale that took advantage of the dramatic natural surroundings of Long Island’s North Shore.<sup>14</sup>

One of the focal points of Belle Terre was the lavish Belle Terre Club. Prominent New Yorkers (including the Vanderbilts and the Belmonts) joined to take advantage of the club’s many amenities, including its one hundred rooms (each with its own fireplace), an 18-hole golf course, tennis courts, horse bridle paths, a private beach, and even a post office. Orth notes that the Belle Terre Club (as well as the Belle Terre development in general) was made more accessible by a limousine service that ran from the Port Jefferson Railroad Station (designed by Alvord’s architectural firm of Kirby, Petit, and Green, which also designed the Belle Terre Club itself) to the club via the picturesque Belle Terre Road. This road was further beautified by Alvord’s donation of large numbers of privet hedge seedlings to Belle Terre owners. Orth claims that in 2006, when her history was written, some of the hedges still existed.<sup>15</sup>

Other prominent features of Belle Terre included the two Neoclassical pergolas (also designed by Kirby, Petit, and Green) that incorporated unique pillars fluted on the upper two-thirds of the structure and smooth on the bottom third. These pillars would not only adorn the pergolas and areas of Alvord’s Nevalde but would also heavily influence many of the Neoclassical homes that eventually were built in Harbor Oaks.<sup>16</sup> The other significant architectural style that would later appear in Harbor Oaks was English Tudor, which Alvord successfully used in several prominent residences in an area of Belle Terre known as the English Section. The homes in this area, designed by the noted British architect Frederick Sterner (whose designs had been well received throughout the boroughs of New York), could be readily identified by their traditional Tudor stucco-and-beam facades and their nomenclature: names

<sup>12</sup> “Belle Terre, New York,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Belle\\_Terre,\\_New\\_York&oldid=411077297](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Belle_Terre,_New_York&oldid=411077297).

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Orth, *The History of Belle Terre* (Belle Terre, N.Y.: Village of Belle Terre, 2006), [www.belleterre.us/History/DeanAlvordandtheGloriousYears/tabid/97/Default.aspx](http://www.belleterre.us/History/DeanAlvordandtheGloriousYears/tabid/97/Default.aspx).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Orth, *The History of Belle Terre*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

like the Dawlish House and the Malmesbury House reflected Sterner's affection for his native England.<sup>17</sup>

In 1913, tight finances (possibly brought on by the enactment of the Sherman Antitrust Act) prompted by the Panic of 1910 and 1911,<sup>18</sup> forced Alvord and Belle Terre into receivership.<sup>19</sup> The timing of this unfortunate turn of events relative to Alvord's Port Jefferson Company coincides with Alvord's subsequent relocation to Florida, reorganization of the Dean Alvord Company, and development of Harbor Oaks in 1914. However, before discussing Alvord's Harbor Oaks in greater detail (as well as the three notable automobile-pioneer residents there—Herbert Harrison, Robert Brown, and James Studebaker—and their Alvord-built Harbor Oaks homes), special mention should be made of Alvord's civic contributions to both the New York borough and the Long Island-based communities which he developed and in which he lived. As noted in Samuel Morgan Alvord's *A Genealogy of the Descendants of ALEXANDER ALVORD*, Dean Alvord promoted his City Beautiful initiatives as a prominent member of the Municipal Art Society, the Municipal Club, the Hardware Club, and the Lawyers Club of New York City.<sup>20</sup> In Belle Terre, Alvord played a major role in the operations of the Belle Terre Club and other philanthropic and beautification efforts that led to the establishment of civic-based garden associations and clubs throughout Long Island. Alvord's City Beautiful initiatives would also find a home in Harbor Oaks, specifically, and the city of Clearwater in general.

### Harbor Oaks, a Signature Alvord Development

Alvord's success in using philanthropic and beautification efforts not only to enhance the housing developments he created in New York but to attract potential residents led him to adopt a similar approach in his Florida housing development projects. However, according to the primary authoritative text on the Harbor Oaks development, *Harbor Oaks: A Historic and Architectural Survey and Presentation Plan*, Harbor Oaks (and Alvord's other housing development efforts in Florida) came about primarily by accident.

In 1910, Alvord decided to establish a permanent winter residence in Florida (having been introduced to the Florida East Coast by Henry Flagler, who had been looking for advice on creating Flagler-backed housing developments in the Miami area). In early 1911, Alvord decided to make his winter home in Clearwater.<sup>21</sup> He identified a plot of land that had been recently purchased by E. H. Coachman from the Fort Harrison Orange Grove Company (which was established by the heirs of

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> "Panic of 1910–1911," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Panic\\_of\\_1910%E2%80%9C1911&oldid=390189780](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Panic_of_1910%E2%80%9C1911&oldid=390189780).

<sup>19</sup> Orth, *The History of Belle Terre*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> S. Alvord, *A Genealogy of the Descendants of ALEXANDER ALVORD*, 645.

<sup>21</sup> Florida Preservation Services, *Harbor Oaks: A Historic and Architectural Survey and Presentation Plan* (Tallahassee, Fla.: The Agency, 1987), 17.



*Courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System*

Applying what he learned in New York, Dean Alvord moved to Clearwater, Florida and created Harbor Oaks. The new community had many of the hallmarks of Alvord's earlier work, including large homes, wide streets and a system to fund the community's upkeep.

Augustus B. Ewing and David B. Gould of St. Louis in 1904,<sup>22</sup> Coachmen had divested of the Grove Company's orange crop prior to offering the land for sale). Apparently, Alvord wanted a small portion of the property to build his estate. Because Coachman would not sell the land in parcels, Alvord purchased the entire property—setting the stage for the project that became Harbor Oaks.<sup>23</sup> Alvord proceeded to build a Colonial Revival-style stucco home at 802 Druid Road to serve both his speculative and short-term residential needs.<sup>24</sup>

Drawing from his experience in establishing Belle Terre on Long Island's North Shore, Alvord set out to create an "exclusive" neighborhood featuring neighborhood amenities not typically associated with Florida developments in the 1910s. Thus, what became the Harbor Oaks neighborhood featured graded and paved roads, curbs, gutters, concrete sidewalks, and decorative brick pillars placed strategically at various entrances of the project. A comprehensive sewer system was also featured, as was a community tennis court (placed at the corner of Bay Street and Magnolia Drive). In 1915, underground utilities were installed, in cooperation with J. G. McClung's Clearwater Ice Plant (which, incidentally, also provided all electric power to the city

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



of Clearwater). Any above-ground electrical infrastructure was strategically located at the rear of Harbor Oaks lots and painted green to blend in with the surrounding vegetation.<sup>25</sup>

When Harbor Oaks opened initially in January 1914, the Alvord development was only partially completed. Efforts were made to preserve the natural beauty of the coastal landscape by creating a small lake and marsh in addition to planting numerous swamp oaks and palm trees along the parkways (similar to what Alvord had done in Brooklyn's Prospect Park South). Tragically, one of E. H. Coachman's sons drowned in the vicinity of the small lake and marsh area. Subsequent efforts to promote residential safety and protect the exclusivity of the Harbor Oaks neighborhood through the use of deed restrictions were the positive by-product of the tragedy and served as precursors to municipal zoning and land use controls.<sup>26</sup>

### **Deed Restrictions: An Alvord Innovation and Marketing Strategy**

In order to protect residential safety and property values, Alvord once again gleaned from his past developmental experience to establish deed restrictions for Harbor Oaks. These restrictions prevented commercial development, preserved structural compatibility (with respect to structure size, style, and types of materials used), and regulated land use/structural positioning/structural cost. As a result, homes built in Harbor Oaks were located on lots measuring 60 feet wide by 130 feet deep (with the exception of larger lots on the western edge of Druid Road, which had 400-foot setbacks, water access, and elevation drops to water level of nearly 25 feet).<sup>27</sup> Structure size averaged more than 3,000 square feet—partly the result of the promise that the restrictions imposed would allow owners to maintain “fully one-third the value of residence property” because the dwelling-size restrictions had been established and were being enforced on a regular basis.<sup>28</sup>

Ultimately Alvord's deed restrictions could be viewed as a double-edged sword. While they maintained the residential exclusivity that wealthy Harbor Oaks homeowners (and prospective homeowners) desired, the deed restrictions also slowed the neighborhood's growth during the first ten years of its existence. It wasn't until the peak of the Florida Land Boom in 1925 that many of the remaining lots were sold and populated by prominent residents. Of the twenty lots that were unsold in the spring of 1925, only nine remained unsold in the fall of 1925; Harbor Oaks was completely sold out by 1927. Most of those initial Florida Land Boom residents were prominent industrialists from the Northeast and Midwest, several of whom had ties to the automobile industry.<sup>29</sup>

The positive side of the double-edged sword of deed restrictions was the fact

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 26–27.



that maintaining governance of the restrictions (both legally and financially) became the mission of the newly formed Harbor Oaks Association. Created on February 17, 1920, the association required homeowners to contribute annual assessments to pay for maintaining streets, curbs, plants, etc. Composed of a nine-member board (with one representative from each of Harbor Oaks' nine streets), the Harbor Oaks Association operated standing committees for finance, police and fire protection, streets and sidewalks, taxation, public utilities, and law. Yearly assessment values were also set by the appropriate subcommittee and submitted to the full board for approval.

Benefits of such well-supported neighborhood governance were evident in the following excerpt from the Harbor Oaks Association Bylaws:

The charm of Harbor Oaks...lies in the uniformity of planting and the continued upkeep of the plants, palms, trees, and parks. General municipal and state taxation has never been sufficient to properly plant, much less continually upkeep the street parkway in front of each home [in most neighborhoods of the era]. Harbor Oaks funds are expended entirely upon the street parkways in front of the building line of each plot, and the entire time of a gardener employed early by the Association is necessary for this work.<sup>30</sup>

Today, the forward-thinking efforts of the original architects of the Harbor Oaks Association and its bylaws are clearly evident to the average citizen. Harbor Oaks continues to be a well-maintained neighborhood, with the association acting as a partial governance agent (although most of the mandatory assessments were eliminated decades ago). As a result, Harbor Oaks' original street lamps, parkways, and public areas still exist in much the same condition as they did between 1914 and 1930. Still extant, too, are most of the significant homes whose plans and architectural styles were approved by past Harbor Oaks Association board members.

### **A Marriage of Structural Details and Marketing: Community and Residential Architecture in Harbor Oaks**

As noted, Harbor Oaks was designed to consist of lots that were generally 60 feet wide and 130 feet deep. Many homeowners purchased two parcels to double their land footprint and obtain frontages ranging from 80 to 130 feet (achieved by obtaining either paired lots or creating a new lot using a full lot and portions of adjacent lots). With some exceptions, this allowed the homes to be constructed with what is known as a "wide facade" so that the widest portion of the home's profile was parallel to the street. Most structural setbacks in Harbor Oaks average 25 feet from the edge of the sidewalk.<sup>31</sup>

One of the primary reasons that the lot sizes and configurations became so successful was Dean Alvord's insistence that significant residential streetscapes be

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 33.

created and joined with cohesive, visually appealing architecture to create a special character for Harbor Oaks. Just as Alvord had done in Belle Terre and Prospect Park South, he designed broad streets with wide parkways and sidewalks in Harbor Oaks. One street, Bay Avenue, contains an expansive esplanade, creating what amounts to an east-west division of the neighborhood. Streets are lined with swamp oak and palm trees dating back to 1915 and 1916 with ground-level streetlights from the same era. These prominent streetscape features are accentuated by sizable brick pillars placed at each of the entrances to the neighborhood.<sup>32</sup> Not only did these pillars serve to define the boundaries of the Harbor Oaks neighborhood, but they contributed to the overall "exclusive" character of the area that Dean Alvord wished to achieve.

Working in combination with the exclusive streetscape elements of the Harbor Oaks neighborhood are the architectural styles that grew out of Dean Alvord's developmental vision but also from the contributions of Dean's son Donald Alvord, who was responsible for many of the home designs in Harbor Oaks, particularly those modeled on the Prairie School.

Donald Alvord was born February 27, 1892. He was Dean and Nellie Alvord's second child, the first being son Harry, who was born June 12, 1886, and died in infancy on December 9, 1886.<sup>33</sup> As the eldest Alvord child, Donald became Dean's protégé and entered into the housing development business with his father. It was Donald who brought an eclectic mix of familiar architectural styles into the Harbor Oaks neighborhood, giving the area the ambiance of quality that would attract the wealthy industrialists who would ultimately settle there. Following in Dean's footsteps, Donald was involved in the design and construction of several speculative homes to whose provenance both he and Dean contributed by living in them for a short time.

### **The Mediterranean Revival Homes of Dean Alvord and Herbert Harrison**

Since both Dean and Donald Alvord chose to design and build homes in Harbor Oaks that reflected the successful, well-known architectural styles of the late Victorian period, they were able to sell these homes to wealthy buyers from America's East and Midwest. Not only did the architectural styles selected (as profiled in *Harbor Oaks: A Historic and Architectural Survey and Presentation Plan*) reflect current tastes, but they also reflected unique adaptations to Florida's sunny, semi-tropical climate. For example, it appears that wide eaves, supported by heavy modillions, were incorporated into a majority of the designs. This directed the sun's powerful rays away from the primary structure, but it also created a signature "Alvord" design feature of Harbor Oaks.<sup>34</sup> Primarily a feature of the Prairie School of architecture, the wide eaves and modillion supports were indicative of the attempts made by both Alvords to brand Harbor Oaks as an Alvord "labor of love, rather than a real estate

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> S. Alvord, *A Genealogy of the Descendants of ALEXANDER ALVORD*, 521.

<sup>34</sup> *Harbor Oaks: A Historic and Architectural Survey and Presentation Plan*, 33.

speculation,” as expressed in an ad in the December 14, 1914, *St. Petersburg Daily Times*. In the same ad, Harbor Oaks is portrayed thematically as “The Pearl of the Pinellas Peninsula.”<sup>35</sup>

Architectural styles featured in Harbor Oaks included the following:

Mediterranean Revival

Prairie School

Colonial Revival (including Dutch and French Eclectic derivatives)

Classical School

Bungalows (California and variations)

Mission Style (California)

Tudor Revival<sup>36</sup>

Several of the notable homes in Harbor Oaks incorporated the Mediterranean Revival style. It is to the homes in this style and to the history of their owners, the automobile industrialists Herbert Harrison, Robert Brown, and John Mohler Studebaker III, that we now turn.

### **A Mystery of Provenance: The Harrison/Plunkett House (205 Magnolia Drive) and the Dean Alvord House (208 Magnolia Drive)**

One of the Harbor Oaks homes with the most interesting provenance is identified in *Harbor Oaks: A Historic and Architectural Survey and Presentation Plan* as the Harrison/Plunkett House, located at 205 Magnolia Drive. This Mediterranean Revival home features several examples of elegant detailing, including the use of quoins, ornate entrance architraves, and the incorporation of large terraces into the design.<sup>37</sup> The name of the home would seem to suggest that these details were the result of Donald Alvord’s interpretation of the desires of Herbert Champion Harrison, founder of the Harrison Radiator Company (later Delphi Thermal Systems, a unit of the original General Motors). Research reveals, however, that Harrison and his wife, Florence, never lived in 205 Magnolia Drive but instead became associated with the house at 208 Magnolia Drive, which the *Harbor Oaks: A Historic and Architectural Survey and Presentation Plan* identifies as the Dean Alvord House.

### **Herbert Champion Harrison: Inventor and Global Industrialist**

Credited with developing what came to be known as the modern automotive radiator (which features a hexagon-shaped “honeycomb” core to absorb heat produced by the engine’s combustion over a wide surface area), Herbert C. Harrison was born on October 4, 1876, in Calcutta, India, as a British subject. Herbert’s father served as the controller general of the Indian Civil Service, which operated under British

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 34–50.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 34.

rule.<sup>38</sup> As a child, Harrison returned to England to study at the Rugby School, and he graduated from Oxford University in 1900.<sup>39</sup>

After accepting a position as vice president of the Susquehanna Smelting Company, Harrison and his wife, Florence (whom he had met in London and married in 1900), moved to Lockport, New York. It was here that Harrison founded the Harrison Radiator Company in 1910. As mentioned, the Harrison Radiator Company later became a part of the original General Motors when GM founder Willam Durant created the company United Motors (headed by Alfred P. Sloan) and purchased the Harrison Radiator Company in 1916. (United Motors, comprised of several automobile parts companies, became, along with Harrison Radiator, a division of GM of in 1917.)<sup>40</sup> Harrison continued as president of the Harrison Radiator Company until his untimely death in London on March 6, 1927.

### 208 Magnolia Drive: The Real Harrison House?

According to noted Clearwater historian Michael Sanders, the Harrison/Plunkett House at 205 Magnolia Drive was originally designed to house Herbert and Florence Harrison. Harrison had commissioned Donald Alvord to design the home in early 1926. Construction of 205 Magnolia Drive began in early 1927.<sup>41</sup>

Significant architectural features of 205 Magnolia Drive include ornate detailing affixed to the front and side facades of the home (i.e., the use of quoins, entrance architraves, and large terraces).<sup>42</sup> Additional details on 205 Magnolia Drive—typical of the Florida adaptation of the Mediterranean Revival architectural style that began development in the late 1910s—include the use of Spanish barrel clay gable roof, a stucco exterior adorned with terra-cotta decorative elements, use of a loggia and arcade on the multistory footprint of the home, additional cartouches and tile on the east, north, and south facades, an ornate entrance door, and augmented window surroundings.<sup>43</sup> In addition, Tiffany Metzgi, Clearwater-area realtor and longtime Harbor Oaks historian, has identified the symmetrical nature of the north/south/east facades, and the fact that the augmented window surroundings are accentuated by the large first-story windows, with a similar appearance mimicked on the smaller second-story windows.<sup>44</sup>

However, due to Harrison's unexpected death, Florence Harrison was charged with the decision to either finish the project intended for her and Herbert or proceed

<sup>38</sup> E. F. Harrison, "Family notes, showing the descendants of the great-grandfathers of the Revd. Thomas Harrison and Jemima Elizabeth Branfill (1897).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Josh Davidson, "United Motors Division" (part of the "Generations of American History") (Detroit: General Motors Heritage Center, 2007), [http://history.gmheritagecenter.com/wiki/index.php/United\\_Motors\\_Division](http://history.gmheritagecenter.com/wiki/index.php/United_Motors_Division).

<sup>41</sup> Michael Sanders, e-mail to the author, January 8, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> *Harbor Oaks: A Historic and Architectural Survey and Presentation Plan*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Sanders, e-mail to the author, April 23, 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Tiffany Metzgi, e-mail to the author, May 1, 2011.



*Courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System*

This view of Magnolia Drive is facing west toward Clearwater Harbor and the Gulf of Mexico. Though not reflected in the architecture, the waterfront location of Harbor Oaks gave the development an element of the Florida lifestyle.

in a different direction. Her choice to take a different direction showed Florence Harrison acting as a decision maker and manager, a role uncharacteristic for a woman of that time.

Donald Alvord had designed a smaller speculation home at 208 Magnolia Drive that incorporated several of the same grand Mediterranean Revival features designed for the 205 Magnolia Drive residence. Construction of this home began around early 1928 and was probably completed in early 1929. Subsequently, Dean Alvord became the owner of this speculation property.

According to Dr. Mohinder S. Bhatti—a noted industrial engineer (who worked for Delphi Thermal Systems from 1971 until the mid-1990s), holder of several thermo cooling system patents, and a well-respected historian on Herbert C. Harrison—Florence Harrison decided not to proceed with the 205 Magnolia Drive construction project and purchased the 208 Magnolia Drive speculation home from Dean Alvord. Bhatti provides the following provenance for 208 Magnolia Drive, often known as the Dean Alvord House:

The Harrison Harbor Oaks Home [208 Magnolia Drive] in Clearwater, FL was bought by Florence Maria Harrison—the widow of Herbert Champion Harrison—sometime after 1927, the year her husband passed away while on a business trip in England. Based on the letters that were exchanged between Florence and the seller of

the Harbor Oaks Home [Dean Alvord], it appears that the seller was at first reluctant to deal with a woman in the real estate transaction. However, he soon realized that Florence was an exceedingly competent and resourceful woman. By the time the transaction was completed, he [Dean Alvord] was highly complimentary of her dealings with him.

Until 1942, the house was used as the winter home by the Harrison family. Florence died in 1942 and at that point her oldest son Arthur acquired the house and the Harrison family continued to use it as the winter home until 1948 when Arthur and his wife Joan moved from Western New York to Florida and the Harbor Oaks home became their principal residence. They continued to reside there until 1990 when both Arthur and Joan passed away. The house was sold sometime after 1990.<sup>45</sup>

Since the mystery surrounding the provenance of both the Harrison/Plunkett House at 205 Magnolia Drive and the Dean Alvord House at 208 Magnolia Drive (which, for all technical purposes, could be identified as the Florence Harrison House) appears to have been solved, some information as to the provenance of what was originally intended to be the Harrison House (and eventually became known as the Harrison/Plunkett House) is in order.

According to Michael Sanders, the following describes the provenance of the Harrison/Plunkett House:

1927	Herbert Harrison started construction
1932	Plunkett acquired house
1940s	Donald Alvord bought it as "Spec" house
1953	Linders bought it
1990s	The Cousins acquired house <sup>46</sup>

### **A Colonial Revival Transformation: The Alvord/Brown House (802 Druid Road)**

In true Colonial Revival tradition, Dean Alvord built the original home at 802 Druid Road in the same vein that he constructed the homes in which he lived in Prospect Park South and Belle Terre. He built the homes to serve two purposes—as residences in which to live for a time and as speculative homes meant to attract prospective buyers (and illustrating the overall building design and project execution capabilities of Dean and Donald Alvord, respectively). In the case of what would become Century Oaks, Robert S. Brown—the paint industrialist credited with developing one of the primary paint processes used in manufacturing the Model T—Alvord's original Colonial Revival design was adapted (some say with less-than-favorable results) to reflect the tastes and accommodation needs of the new owner, Robert S. Brown.

<sup>45</sup> Mohinder S. Bhatti, e-mail to the author, December 18, 2010.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Sanders, e-mail to the author, February 10, 2011.

**Robert S. Brown and Japan Black Paint**

According to McCalley and Boggess's *The Evolution of the Model T*, Ford began producing black-only Model Ts from late 1914 to 1925. During this period, nearly 11.5 million black Model Ts were produced.<sup>47</sup>

Automotive historians originally speculated that the decision to paint only one color was primarily based on the fact that the painting process (actually considered a varnishing process whereby parts were dipped in several paint solutions and used by Ford from 1914 to 1922) required time to dry, and black paint dried the most quickly. However, McCalley and Boggess refute that claim, instead drawing the following conclusions:

Black paints used on Model Ts from 1914 to 1925 were actually color varnishes that bear little resemblance to modern automotive finishes.

More than thirty different types of black paint were used between 1914 and 1925 depending on their drying capabilities (i.e., air-drying versus oven-drying) and were also formulated to enable the paint to be applied to different parts of the Model T vehicle.

Model Ts manufactured during the "black paint era" of 1914-25 were painted using techniques that included brushing, dipping, and flowing the paint onto the metal surface. Ford didn't adopt the modern technique of spraying paint until 1926.

Black was chosen because it was cheap and durable. Black paints (especially those that contained the chemical asphaltum) exhibited better damp-proofing properties than other colors during the 1914-25 period.<sup>48</sup>

One of the developers of the more than thirty types of black paint used on Model Ts was a man named Robert S. Brown. Brown was the founder of the Acme Quality Paint Company in Detroit, Michigan. This company supplied paints to the automotive companies including Ford and was later purchased in 1920 by Sherwin-Williams, Inc. of Cleveland, Ohio.<sup>49</sup>

It is speculated that Brown was principally involved in formulating one of the two formulas of the black paint used during the Model Ts' 1914-25 manufacturing period. The processes, code-named F-101 and F-102, were based on what is known in the paint industry as "Japan Black" paint-formulation processes. Japan Black is a lacquer or varnish with a high bitumen content. It combines an asphalt base dissolved in turpentine or naphtha. Japan Black's identified durability and rapid drying capabilities made it popular for use in vehicle manufacturing during the Model T era. In fact, the term "Japan Black" became so widely used that industry professionals

<sup>47</sup> Bruce W. McCalley and Trent E. Boggess. *The Evolution of the Model T*. [Dearborn, Mich. : Benson Ford Research Center, ca. 1997], 35.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>49</sup> Sherwin Williams [company profile], in Hoover's Company Profiles, via Answers.com [www.answers.com/topic/sherwin-williams-company](http://www.answers.com/topic/sherwin-williams-company).



referred frequently to the paint in the verb form; thus to have a surface *japanned* means "to finish it in Japan Black."<sup>50</sup>

While Brown's association with one of Ford's Japan Black paint processes is sketchy, the timeline that led him to purchase one of Dean Alvord's speculation homes appears logical. According to O'Burke's "Charm and Elegance—Watchwords for Century Oaks," Brown acquired Alvord's Colonial Revival home located at 802 Druid Road and renamed it "Century Oaks" in honor of the century-old live oaks that shade the estate.<sup>51</sup> Brown proceeded to adapt and modify the structure and the Colonial Revival elements of the property by building a multistory music room in which to place a five-thousand pipe organ.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to the music room, the Robert S. Brown House features other additions and changes that deviate from the original Alvord Colonial Revival style. According to current owners Constantine and Elaine Chambers, Brown also added a morning room (with coffered ceiling), beamed ceilings to the living areas, and a billiard room that features terra-cotta inlays similar to those described in Florence Harrison's Mediterranean Revival home. Later, a sizable Greek pergola, carillon tower, bronze statuary and pool/tennis complex were added in the rear of the property, which overlooks Clearwater Bay<sup>53</sup>.

Critics of the additions and changes to Century Oaks assert that the modifications to the structure and the grounds detract from the effect of Alvord's original use of classic architectural designs in a tropical setting. They also note that the combining of multiple architectural elements imparts a "flea market" feel to the Brown House. While such comments are subjective, they highlight the challenges Alvord often faced in maintaining the overall architectural integrity and character of the communities he created as the areas became established and attempts to adapt and modify homes challenged the deed restrictions and other homeowners' association regulations he helped to establish.

### **Another Alvord Mediterranean Revival Adaptation: The John Mohler Studebaker III Home (415 Magnolia Avenue)**

While it is true that the use of deed restrictions in Harbor Oaks (to preserve the integrity of Dean Alvord's vision for the community) were often challenged (as in the case of the Century Oaks/Michael S. Brown House), the same deed restrictions also enabled notable homes in the Harbor Oaks subdivision to maintain their architectural integrity within the neighborhood over time, evolving into graceful examples of the Alvord style.

<sup>50</sup> "Japan black," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Japan\\_black&oldid=424036142](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Japan_black&oldid=424036142).

<sup>51</sup> John O'Burke and Michael Laurance, "Charm and Elegance—Watchwords for Century Oaks," *Tampa Bay Magazine*, May/June, 1988, 104–7.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

One such residence is the John Mohler (“Jack”) Studebaker III Home at 415 Magnolia Avenue. According to Michael Sanders’s 1998 history of the residence, Studebaker commissioned Alvord to build the Mediterranean Revival home on a lot purchased from Alvord’s Harbor Oaks land inventory. The home was completed in 1925 and reflected the owner’s prominence as a well-known member of the longtime vehicle manufacturer Studebaker family, with the firm’s involvement in vehicle manufacturing (carriages, automobiles, trucks) dating back to the early 1800s.<sup>54</sup>

### **Studebaker and the Vehicles of an Industrial Nation**

The Studebaker name is synonymous with a number of vehicles that played an important role in the industrialization of the United States. The involvement of Jack Studebaker in the operations of this vehicle-manufacturing dynasty began with his grandfather, John Mohler Studebaker—one of the five original Studebaker brothers who founded the original Studebaker corporation.

According to the “Brief History” presented by the Studebaker Family National Association, members of the “Staudenbecher” family (brothers Clement and Peter and a cousin Heimlich) emigrated from Hagen, Germany, to Philadelphia in the late 1700s, where the immigration officials used a number of spellings of their family name, including “Studebaker.” When the family farm near Welsh Run Creek in south Pennsylvania began to be raided by American Indians, the rest of the family emigrated in the early 1800s to what is now southwest Ohio. There the brothers operated a blacksmith business and began to build wagons, in addition to farming.<sup>55</sup>

One of the brothers’ sons, John Mohler, left Ohio and traveled to California to participate in the Gold Rush of 1849. John Mohler later returned to Ohio with nearly eight thousand dollars in Gold Rush profits in hand and joined his brothers in expanding the wagon-building business on a large scale. It was this step that led Studebaker to develop into the corporate giant that it became for nearly a century, building wagons, automobiles, trucks, and other types of vehicles for both civilian and military use.<sup>56</sup>

According to Beatty, Furlong, and Pennington’s *Studebaker: Less Than They Promised*, John Mohler Studebaker served as president of what became the Studebaker Corporation until 1911. He retired in 1915, transferring the presidency to his son-in-law, Frederick S. Fish.<sup>57</sup> John Mohler Studebaker’s son, John Mohler Jr., served on the company’s Board of Directors but did not take an active role in the operations of

<sup>54</sup> Michael Sanders, “The History of the J. M. Studebaker III Home—415 Magnolia Avenue,” typescript, 1998.

<sup>55</sup> Studebaker Family National Association, “A Brief History [of the Studebaker Family],” 2008, [www.studebakerfamily.org/History/ABriefHistory/tabid/56/Default.aspx](http://www.studebakerfamily.org/History/ABriefHistory/tabid/56/Default.aspx).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Beatty, Patrick Furlong, and Loren Pennington. *Studebaker: Less Than They Promised* (South Bend, Ind.: And Books, 1984), 14–15.



*Courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System*

Dean Alvord's stately Harbor Oaks home, as photographed in 1945. Alvord's development has withstood the test of time, which is fairly unique among Florida's 1920s boom-era subdivisions.

the business,<sup>58</sup> and neither did his son, John Mohler "Jack" Studebaker III, who was born on December 17, 1898.<sup>59</sup>

### **Transformation and Preservation: The Studebaker House and the Maturing Harbor Oaks Neighborhood**

It was twenty-eight-year-old Jack Studebaker III who, along with his wife, Lillian Bartlett, commissioned Donald Alvord to design and build a Mediterranean Revival-style home on the 415 Magnolia Avenue property in 1924. Like the Florence Harrison House at 208 Magnolia Avenue and what was to have been the Herbert Harrison House at 205 Magnolia Avenue, the Studebaker House features numerous Mediterranean Revival architectural details (as noted by Sanders in "The History

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>59</sup> Studebaker Family National Association, "Descendants of John Clement Studebaker and Rebecca Mohler," [John Mohler Studebaker III entry], 2008, <http://studebakerfamily.org/genealogypage/b225.htm#P225>.

of the J. M. Studebaker III Home”) including a custom Cuban barrel-tile roof, use of a U-shaped courtyard, basketweave imported tile floors, and a large fireplace in the living room (which served as a focal point of the home).<sup>60</sup> In addition, Donald Alvord chose to use stucco over hollow tile (which in later years was covered with vines, giving the outer walls of the home a unique, three-dimensional appearance). The use of stucco was accompanied by pairing matching arched window sets with wrought-iron balconies on the second level for balance as well as using a French front door flanked by an entry area covered in imported tile.<sup>61</sup>

The Studebaker House also incorporated the aforementioned wide-facade structural profile that had become a signature Donald Alvord design element for Harbor Oaks and that included strategic placement of the large fireplace’s chimney. An additional detached garage with integrated carriage house was positioned at the rear of the property, as was an adjoining garden area.<sup>62</sup>

A look at the initial provenance of the Studebaker House illustrates the perceived cachet of the Harbor Oaks community as well as the attractiveness of the Clearwater area’s amenities to wealthy and prominent residents. Jack and Lillian Bartlett Studebaker owned the home until 1935. Mrs. Ellen J. Law owned the property from 1935 to 1955 and maintained it to the high standards established by the Studebakers. Jerome F. Tone then acquired the property and owned it until 1963. Jerome Tone was the brother of silent-film star Franchot Tone, who was married to Joan Crawford for a time. Franchot Tone is said to have stayed at the home frequently while his brother lived there.<sup>63</sup>

Later provenance of the Studebaker House indicates changes in both the demographic composition of Harbor Oaks and its status as a community for wealthy residents and industrialists. An equally impressive group of professionals and families began to inhabit the area, including Dr. Morris and Betty Chrisler, who owned the Studebaker House from 1966 to 1983. According to Sanders, the Chrislers raised four children within the confines of the two-bedroom, four-bathroom home and added a large plexiglass dome over the U-shaped courtyard, which had continued to be “open and grassy, featuring a rock pond with a bridge and fountain that Studebaker had commissioned initially.”<sup>64</sup> Another feature the Chrisler family retained from the original Studebaker House was the basketweave tile floors.

After the Chrisler family sold the Studebaker House to Don and Karen Walker (who lived in the home until 1992), the original Alvord design features—particularly the outside ones—began to fade, as the Walkers made extensive renovations to the courtyard area by enclosing it with a large atrium and remodeling the interior extensively. Nevertheless, the Walkers did make an attempt to preserve the original

<sup>60</sup> Michael Sanders, “The J. M. Studebaker III Home,” typescript, 1998, 1.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Alvord vision for the Studebaker House by retrieving and using the French front door (which was found in the garage), replacing a custom door the Chrislers had acquired.<sup>65</sup> However, it was the current owners, Dr. Gary and Mary Dworkin, who, using the designs of Clearwater architect Alex Plisko, have made the greatest structural changes to the Studebaker House. They have constructed a Mediterranean Revival-style addition to the home that includes an octagonal dining room cantilevered over a swimming pool, a large two-story garage addition with integrated balustrade, and a guest apartment upstairs coupled with a paneled pool room and sunken bar downstairs.<sup>66</sup> Outdoors, the Dworkins added a large island to the area south of the courtyard large enough for "the kids to camp on." The owners and visitors alike are able to access the island via a bridge over a koi-populated moat surrounding the island. To complete the effect of both the outdoors and indoor structural transformation of the Studebaker House, the Dworkins purchased an adjoining property on the western side of 415 Magnolia, which creates a dramatic footprint for the home and reinforces the "estate ambiance" that Dean Alvord originally envisioned for all of his developments—including Harbor Oaks.

### **Harbor Oaks and Estate Housing Developments in the Twenty-First Century**

While it can be said that Dean Alvord's Harbor Oaks remains one of the most notable and well-preserved estate housing developments on Florida's west coast, the significance of Alvord's community design and maintenance initiatives nationwide (i.e., plot configurations, street layout, community amenities, use of deed restrictions to maintain community structural integrity and continuity) continue to impact current housing development design, construction, and maintenance. The greatest challenges for individuals and firms that attempt to replicate Alvord's successful recipe for housing development design, both on Florida's west coast and nationwide, will be economics and sustainability factors.

Is there still a significant pool of people like Herbert C. Harrison, Robert S. Brown, and John Mohler Studebaker III with the financial resources needed to maintain homes like the Florence Harrison House, Century Oaks, and the Studebaker House in the condition demanded by the initial developers? Are there still developers like Dean Alvord in business today who play as important a role as he did in community governance and advocacy (both within their developments and at the local/state government levels)? How will the estate housing developments created on Florida's west coast since 1960 appear in contrast to Harbor Oaks when analyzed on the eve of their one-hundredth anniversary of existence? That final question may serve as the basis for a future study of Harbor Oaks in 2014, the development's one-hundredth anniversary year.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

