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GORDON WHO? GORDON KELLER

By Hampton Dunn

The community wept. Indeed, the entire state of Florida cried that day in 1909 that Gordon Keller died.

He was truly "a beloved citizen."

Many years later, in 1953, the late D. B. McKay-historian, publisher, politician-wrote on his "Pioneer Florida" page of the Tampa Tribune that "One of the most magnetic personalities of my entire acquaintance was Gordon Keller." Certainly, McKay, three times Mayor of Tampa and long-time owner of The Tampa Daily Times, knew a multitude of people.

McKay further eulogized Keller: "I am confident that everyone who knew him will agree—it is doubtful if he ever had an enemy. Not that he was a negative character—he was a virile, impulsive, manly man, with an over-supply of the milk of human kindness."

Spontaneous with the spreading of the news of Keller's death on July 10, 1909, a grief-stricken city instantly decided to build "a permanent monument" to honor "the blessed memory" of the City Treasurer, merchant and civic leader. F. Badger Wilder started a fund with a $100 contribution. The Tribune "cheerfully adds $100 to Mr. Wilder's $100," the newspaper reported in the same issue that carried the story of Keller's death.

ENDURING MEMORIAL

"Let an enduring memorial bear testimony to future generations of the esteem in which Gordon Keller was held by the people among whom he lived and moved," The Tribune editorialized on its front page.
The fund flourished and the monument was appropriate and impressive: A hospital called the Gordon Keller Memorial Hospital. It was completed on June 1, 1910, less than a year after Keller’s untimely death (he was only 44). The new two-story, 32-bed facility went up on North Boulevard on the site which later became part of the sprawling Florida State Fair complex. It cost $25,000. The same year, the Gordon Keller School of Nursing was established and the first class was graduated in 1913.

MEMORIAL TO GORDON KELLER

Originally, on the archway over the entrance to the new Tampa Municipal Hospital on Davis Islands, there was the legend, "Memorial to Gordon Keller," since the City institution originally was known as the Gordon Keller Memorial Hospital. The legend is still somewhere in the present building, but concealed by reconstruction. This is a photo of the 1944 graduating class of the Gordon Keller School of Nursing.

-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
A THING OF THE PAST

The Keller Memorial Hospital served the community well for a decade and half. Then, in the mid-1920’s, D. P. Davis created the exclusive Davis Islands residential area and anchored it with a new, modern hospital, which the City proceeded to name the Tampa Municipal Hospital. And the old Gordon Keller Hospital was a thing of the past. Over the archway of the new boom-time facility was the legend:

TAMPA
MUNICIPAL HOSPITAL
MEMORIAL TO GORDON KELLER

The archway is still on the building, but mostly concealed due to additions and alterations of the massive structure. In 1956 the name of the hospital once again was changed to reflect its role-to Tampa General Hospital.

The Gordon Keller School of Nursing moved with the Hospital from North Boulevard to Davis Islands, kept its identity and continued to educate and graduate nurses until 1972. At that time, the old faithful diploma school was phased into a program at Hillsborough Community College—and the school lost its identity of more than six decades.

GORDON KELLER’S DAUGHTER

Sara Lykes Keller Hobbs is the daughter of Gordon Keller. In 1924 she was “Miss Tampa” and participated in ribbon-cutting festivities for the opening of Gandy Bridge. She’s shown with D. P. Davis, (right) who was developing Davis Islands at the time. Still living in Tampa, she is the widow of prominent attorney W. Frank Hobbs.

-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
NOT 'PERMANENT'

So, today, after the passing of nearly 70 years since the passing of Gordon Keller, there is no "permanent monument" such as was envisioned by his fellow citizens back there in 1909. It’s a shame, too, for greatness should be enduring.

But once again, who’s Gordon Keller? He was a native of Georgia, born near a community which now bears the name Keller, in 1866. He came to Tampa in 1883 and soon was a partner with Charles Lee Jones, formerly of Valdosta, in the men’s clothing firm of Jones, Keller & Company. Keller later bought out his partner’s interest and the store, Keller Clothing Company, located in the Hendry & Knight Building on the southeast corner of Franklin and Lafayette (now Kennedy Blvd.) Streets, became a gathering place for the men of that time. The building was demolished recently to make way for the new City Hall annex.

GORDON KELLER SCHOOL OF NURSING

For six decades, the three-year diploma school of nursing affiliated with the City hospital was known as the Gordon Keller School of Nursing. This is the last building occupied by the school before it was closed in 1972 and the program phased into the Hillsborough Community College. The building is now used by HCC as an administrative building.

-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
McKay recollected that the men folks gathered here for the discussion of civic and political questions-and "almost daily fights, so that it was facetiously given the name of 'San Juan Hill.'"

McKay went on: "One afternoon I saw two irate brothers chase a political opponent from the Henry Giddens store, on the opposite corner, entirely through the Keller store, then across the street to the courthouse, where he found refuge in the Sheriff's office. And that, by the way, was an outburst of Republican, not Democrat, politics."

MARRIED FLORIDIAN

Keller was married in 1897 to Mary Elizabeth Knight, daughter of pioneers of Charlotte County, Florida.

Keller particularly loved young people and animals. At his home on Eagle Street, then one of the few houses on the west side of the Hillsborough River, he kept a deer park on two large back lots, and children and grownups, too, used to flock there. He also kept a large collection of hound dogs, for fox-hunting on horseback was one of the popular sports of that time and Keller was an ardent enthusiast.

NO CAUSE TOO SMALL

A biographer has noted that "No cause was too small nor too great for him to champion and he was a friend of everyone."

Many young boys of the 1890s and early 1900s remember their visits to Keller's store and the buying of their first long pants. If the fathers' circumstances were such that they could not pay, it was all the same to the proprietor, for "he was too generous for his own good and his hand always was in his pocket for a 'hard luck' story."

Two daughters were born to the Kellers-Susie, now Mrs. J. E. Harris, and Sara Lykes-named for Keller's close friend, Dr. Howell Tyson Lykes-now Mrs. W. Frank Hobbs.

Keller served as City Treasurer of the City of Tampa for the 15 years prior to his death. He was succeeded by two of his brothers, Robert and Thomas.

LARGEST CORTEGE

News of the deaths of prominent residents rated conspicuous coverage in the Tribune in the early days. Keller's death was the top news story of the day and the headlines read, "GORDON KELLER, LOVABLE AND LEADING CITIZEN IS DEAD." But that wasn't all; there were long headlines in several "decks." They noted that "City Shocked by Announcement of End of Man Who Has Befriended Thousands in This City;" "Cortege Will be Largest Ever Seen In Tampa," and "City Flags at Half Mast and Thousands Lower Their Heads in Sorrow at Death's Visit."

Editorial writers poured out their sorrow and sentiment in mourning Keller's death. Excerpts from one of the local papers:

"Gordon Keller is dead. No four words that could have been uttered in this community would have seemed so unbelievably harsh and cruel, or occasioned such a shock of amazed sorrow to thousands of hearts all over the state, and far beyond its borders. To every soul who knew him, and few men had wider acquaintance, has come a sense of personal loss-as if death had stalked into his own family and seized a loved kinsman..."
LOVED FELLOW MAN

"Write him down, O, angel, as 'one who loved his fellow man.'

"Not only did he bear out the scriptural injunction: 'Love thy neighbor as thyself,' but, in the simplicity of his grand nature, exceeded the command, for all others came first in his consideration - himself last.

"Many men has he saved from financial ruin by his timely aid and counsel...

"Many men owe their start in life to the help and backing he gave them-and gave as if it was a favor that they offered him the opportunity.

"Hundreds of colored men and women will bewail the death of one who never turned a deaf ear to their troubles, and it is a saying among them that 'it must be a poor specimen of a "nigger" that Gordon Keller would not trust. . .""

THE PRESS MOURNS

All across the peninsula of Florida, the Tampan's death was mourned by editorial writers.

The Plant City Courier observed, "... Gordon Keller passed away without ever knowing just how much he was appreciated and beloved by those with whom his life had come in contact. . ."

The Kissimmee Gazette wrote that Keller "was a prince among men."

The Wauchula Advocate agreed that "a public hospital open to all suffering humanity" would be a fitting memorial to Keller.

The Bartow Courier Informant editorialized: "The death of Gordon Keller has brought forth a deep and general expression of sorrow which is rare in the rush and hurry of our modern business life. Everybody who knew Gordon Keller loved him. . ."

And, the Clearwater Press noted, "In the death of Gordon Keller, Tampa loses a citizen for whom such universal sorrow was never before felt in that city. . ."

What an impact this unusual man, who died in the prime of life, had on his hometown and his home state!