The Story of Davis Islands 1924-1926

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To some inhabitants of Florida the Boom of the 1920s was an absolute disaster for they were forced to pay high taxes on unneeded improvements for many years and, in many cases, when they could not pay, lost their land and homes. Walter Fuller of St. Petersburg who won and lost a million dollars in the Boom warned "if you see another boom coming, grab your pocketbook and run the other way." Yet, there were some developments from the Boom which would prove to be excellent
assets for many years. Included among these would be Coral Gables, Boca Raton Club and other buildings designed by Addison Mizner, the Tamiami Trail, Davis Islands, Gandy Bridge, hotel buildings and real estate developments scattered throughout southern Florida.

Davis Islands located just off downtown Tampa near the juncture of Hillsborough River and Hillsborough Bay was one of the outstanding features of the Boom. As created by Mother Nature two mosquito infested islands covered with marsh grass, small sandy hills, mangroves and growth of trees and bushes lay at the mouth of Hillsborough Bay. The transformation of these two islands, one known as Little Grassy Island and the other as Big Grassy Island or Depot Key by David P. Davis into a fine residential area christened Davis Islands was a virtual miracle created by dredging and filling operations.

David P. Davis was born in northeastern Florida at Green Cove Springs on November 29, 1885. When the father of Davis was employed as an engineman for the Tampa Bay riverboats, young Davis came along to Tampa and was educated in the local schools. During the late afternoons, he obtained spending money by selling newspapers and working in a confectionary. At the age of twentyseven he went to Panama where he was employed as a real estate salesman returning to the United States in 1914. During World War 1, Davis operated canteens and a boat line to Camp Joseph E. Johnston, Auxiliary Remount Depot 333, near Jacksonville on the St.

THIS MARSHY SCENE soon gave way to the bulldozers and carpenters as Davis Islands was dredged up. This view was made in 1924.

-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
John’s River.

Miami Experience

At the conclusion of World War I, Davis moved to Miami where he learned the basic elements of real estate development and sales. Surely Davis must have seen Miami Beach, which Carl Fisher had developed with the aid of dredges from an unsightly coastal island to a most profitable real estate venture. On all sides he saw the Florida real estate Boom beginning its breakaway upward thrust. Noticing that a developer had tried to sell some lots but had been turned down because the subdivision was two and one-half miles from Miami City Hall, (a distance too far, the real estate men decreed) Davis offered to advertise these lots at his own expense if he could raise the price from $165 apiece to $275 and keep the profits. The developer agreed to the proposition with Davis spending one thousand dollars on advertising in the daily newspapers and selling all lots within a short time.

After this successful venture Davis moved into the development and sale of other
DAVIS ISLANDS IN 1929

- Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
subdivisions. Included among these subdivisions were Shadowlawn, Extention, Belleaire and Alta Vista. All were successful, proved to be very profitable to those who resold and Davis realized an estimated five million dollars or more from his Miami ventures.

The Miami technique of real estate sales in which Davis became most skilled was based in three essential principles. First, the planned subdivision was to be heavily advertised in the papers. Next, when the prospect was lured to the sales office he would see a large blueprint with all of the lots, roads and waterfront marked. Thus, the would be buyer could imagine how his waterfront lot would look. Finally he would be told that his lot could be very profitable and he would be making an excellent investment. All of this was done without a single lot being seen or even developed and it worked not only in Miami but all over the state. M. A. Hortt of Fort Lauderdale recalled that people would come in and buy anything that could be resold at a profit. Some even woke him in phone calls in the middle of the night begging to be allowed to make a deposit. According to Walter Fuller at St. Petersburg, a lot was something to sell to an avid speculator and not something on which to build a house.

Plus Four Knickers

Sometimes, the subdivision would be developed and available for would-be purchasers. In those cases, it would be provided with an imposing entranceway and paved streets. Buyers were provided with gratis bus service to the site, entertainment by outstanding speakers and singers, meals and a sales pitch by a salesman clad in

OLYMPIC STAR AND DAVIS
Helen Wainwright inks a $10,000 contract with D. P. Davis in 1925 for a marathon swim around the islands for seven-mile course.

- Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
plus-four knickerbockers who would tell the client that the lot would double in value in ninety days.\(^8\) Wilson Mizner of Boca Raton, one of the best salesmen in the state, claimed "Right up to January, 1926 it was only necessary to point carelessly to a mudhole and tell a prospect that there was his fortune.\(^9\)

The thoughts of D. P. Davis turned to those two mosquito infested islands in Hillsborough Bay where he had hunted rabbits as a boy. It was Burks L. Hamner developer of Temple Terrace and organizer of B. L. Hamner Realty Company who brought the attention of Davis to the Tampa Bay Area where many opportunities were still available.\(^10\) With his Miami sales training Davis could transform these islands into profitable real estate ventures.

Obtaining title to the two islands was not an easy task. The City of Tampa had purchased the 16.3 acres of Little Grassy Island from Mrs. Mary Brown for $25,000. Big Grassy Island or Depot Key which included 104.55 acres was owned by the estates of three Southwestern Florida pioneers: Micajay C. Brown, William B. Henderson and William Whitaker.\(^11\) The first acquisition by Davis was of the Brown and Henderson lands for which he paid $100,000 on a time payment basis. Next, $50,000 was paid for the Whitaker portion of land. Giddings E. Mabry of the Tampa firm of Mabry, Carlton and Reaves, retained by Davis and Hamner, made an offer to purchase Little Grassy Island and the adjacent submerged lands.\(^12\) The city officials at first were reluctant to take such a big step for they wanted to know the extent of the proposed dredged islands. Public pressure in support of the deal soon arose. The Tampa Board of Realtors
endorsed the contract for they knew it would bring many new residents to the area. In addition, a committee of the Board of Trade gave its approval to the plan.

Residents Oppose

A threat to the deal appeared when a group of Bayshore Drive residents opposed the project when it seemed that their view of Hillsborough Bay would be restricted. Dr. Louis Bize, head of Citizens American Bank and chairman of the group, was willing to allow five hundred feet extension of the islands but Davis would not settle for less than twelve hundred feet, and threatened to withdraw his offer. If Davis conceded this point to the opposition he could lose as many as six hundred acres of his proposed development. Finally flags were placed on stakes to mark the extent of the islands to be dredged on February 9, 1924 but city council officials delayed their decision for over a month. The residents of the Bayshore withdrew their protest on February 19, when they were assured by Davis that the islands were to be placed at least seven hundred feet from the mainland. Finally after many conferences were held between Mabry and City Attorney H. S. Hampton on March 4, 1924, the City of Tampa accepted Davis’ offer to purchase Little Grassy Island and adjacent submerged land for $200,000.

The essential features of the contract included the posting of a performance bond of $200,000 by Davis, the completion of a dredging and development project costing not less than $5,000,000, construction of a concrete bridge leading to the mainland and a park all within four years time and, when the seawall and fill were fifty percent completed, the city would accept title to the park and return $100,000 to Davis. In an election held on April 22, the voters approved of the project 1128 to 59 against and, in the same election, bonds were approved for the construction of several bridges, wharves and a new hospital. Tampa had lost the status of a large town.
DAVIS ISLANDS TENNIS CLUB

- Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION

DIXIE TENNIS TOURNAMENT, DAVIS ISLANDS, 1940

-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
and was rapidly becoming a city.

**Battle In Court**

Next step in the development of Davis Islands was the initiation of a court case deemed necessary to determine the legality of the land contract between the City of Tampa and Davis. In the first hearing before County Court Judge Francis M. Robles, Attorney O. K. Reaves presented Davis as a witness who included in his testimony two landscape sketches by engineers showing what would be done to the islands and promising to spend at least one half million dollars by June of 1924.  

Although Summer usually brought a lull in Tampa business, Davis could not take advantage of such a lull for he had to prepare for the rush of events scheduled in the coming Fall. D. P. Davis Properties, Inc. was to be incorporated and $3,500,000 worth of stock either sold or held by Davis and associates. In addition, he had to wait during the Summer months for the approval by the Army Corps of Engineers of his bridge project which was to be constructed over Federally controlled waters. Finally on August 7, 1924 Davis received approval of his project.

Davis had learned in Miami that the most important place in which to make real estate sales was the office. It was there that the prospective buyer could visualize from blueprints and scale models his investment and possibilities. The Davis Properties, Inc. sales office site was selected at the northwest corner of Franklin and Madison Streets. It had been occupied by the Drawdy Grocery Store for thirty-seven years but, given a good price, Drawdy was pleased to move the grocery store to a new location at Swann and Delaware. Davis planned to spend nearly ten thousand dollars changing the former grocery store into the finest real estate office in the South complete with large plate glass windows facing Franklin Street.

**Good News**

OLYMPIC STAR AND DAVIS
Helen Wainwright inks a $10,000 contract with D. P. Davis in 1925 for a marathon swim around the islands for seven-mile course-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION

Contracts for the island site development were negotiated during the Summer of 1924. On August 25, the contract for the dredging of nine million yards of cubic fill for $2,000,000 was awarded to Northern Dredge and Dock Company of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Lucien Merritt, president of the dredging company had been in Tampa for several weeks negotiating with Davis. The Tampa Sand and Shell Company was awarded the $5,000 contract for construction of a temporary bridge, twenty foot wide roadway and five foot sidewalk leading from De Leon Street to the first island. Besides signing contracts Davis found time to visit his two children in California, to go to New York to secure the services of two large dredges and to sign two golf professionals Bobby Cruickshank and Johnny Farrell who would give golfing lessons in Tampa.

Davis received good news from Tallahassee when the Florida Supreme Court sitting in the first special hearing in its history, ruled in a three to two decision that Tampa could give title to Davis of certain bay bottom lands lying near Big and Little Grassy Islands. A petition for rehearing of the case was denied on November 5, 1924. Following news of this decision, J. P. White of Chicago was hired to handle sales and F. W. Montayne of Connecticut to handle advertising for the Davis firm. On
DAVIS ISLANDS COLISEUM
-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION

DR. E. F. CARTER BOUGHT COLISEUM BOND, 1925
-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
September 24, 1924, Davis announced that the islands to be created would be known as Davis Islands and the fifty-five acre city park, Marjorie Park, would be named in honor of his wife who died in 1922.

The Buyers Appear

Now, it was time to start selling lots. J. P. White, in a sales session held at the Hillsboro Hotel, announced the sales procedure. First come, first served for sales of the first three hundred residential lots to be sold. There would be no favoritism and only two lots per purchaser would be allowed. In response to large newspaper advertisements and the grapevine, lines began to form at the sales office on Friday night and soon the crowd numbered thousands of people. Rumors had it that the first in line had chained himself to the door. After three hours of frantic activity on sales day Saturday, October 4 all three hundred lots were sold at a total selling price of $1,683,000. It was a sales record that even Miami could not surpass for every lot was still under waters inhabited by mullet and catfish. Since most purchasers were buying only to make a profit, stories concerning such possible profits were quickly spread around. Penn Dawson of Dawson-Thornton Dry Goods, purchased his limit of two lots and, before he had left the office, sold them to E. W. Cloughton of Atlanta for a profit of one thousand dollars.

Davis had rushed his sales promotion for the sales office was not scheduled for official opening until Monday, October 6th and dredging of the project for October 10th. A second group of one thousand lots in the area known as Bay Circle were placed on sale October 13th. Once again large crowds formed lines to purchase the lots and by nightfall only forty-one were left unsold. Lots selling for a total of $1,028,200 were sold on the first day of activity.

Those who had waited in line had stories to tell. Sam Hearn had waited for forty-two hours from Saturday afternoon to Monday morning. Some unemployed persons waited in line and sold their spots to others. R. M. McNeill of Miami and Marietta, Georgia, believing that he had an opportunity to invest in a potential Miami Beach purchased twelve lots at a cost of $75,000.

Day and Night

Operations by five dredges began on October 10th and proceeded night and day piling sand on the mud flats. Since the road had not been completed, construction of buildings could not take place. Nevertheless construction materials were being stockpiled in the Hyde Park section and contracts awarded. In October negotiations were completed and contracts signed with Wynne-Claughton Realty Company of Atlanta, Georgia, for the construction of a million dollar apartment hotel on the islands. On December 4th, a contract was awarded to G. H. Cooper to build six homes of Spanish and Italian design at a cost of $10,000 apiece. An advertisement appeared in the Tampa papers telling about a business section being planned on Davis Islands with a sketch showing an Old Spanish Restaurant, a florist and a candy store.

First in the changes on the islands came the construction of Davis Boulevard and the building of the temporary bridge leading from De Leon Street. By the end of October, 1924, the Davis Boulevard roadbed was almost finished but the bridge was not ready. The road and bridge were top priority in all plans for construction materials could not be taken on the island without their readiness. A contract was signed in the City of Tampa...
for the supplying of water to the islands with the Davis firm paying the cost of extending the mains but water rates would be the same as for other Tampa residents.

Finally on November 8th, the temporary bridge was finished and automobiles could be driven to the first island. A. Y. Millam, who had been the representative from Duval County in the Florida legislature and current secretary-treasurer of the Davis Company, was the first one to drive on the island.28

Now that they could cross to the island, hundreds of motorists and pedestrians travelled to the island. Still, all they could do was watch for twenty teams of horses and a virtual army of white and black men employed by Davis, Miller and Cobb, were busy surfacing Davis Boulevard. In the neighborhood the dredge Burlington was busy pumping sand through seventeen hundred feet of twenty inch pipe to a level of seven feet above low tide and held in position by concrete bulkheads placed by A. M. Grain Company.

‘Nothing Like It’

During this dredging stage Davis kept the public’s attention on his development by various devices in newspaper advertisements and spot announcements. In the middle of November, a picture of the swimming pool designed by Martin L. Hampton was shown.29 The caption claimed that there would be nothing like it in the rest of the United States.30 An advertisement in the November 30th, paper pointed out the profits to be made in real estate (i.e., a corner lot on Grand Central, now Kennedy Boulevard, sold at a profit of $20,000).31 Following this lead line the advertisement stated that Davis planned to spend $30,000,000 on the island, that 15,000 people could live there and there would be eleven miles of waterfront.

A subsequent notice told about four planned apartment houses, twelve homes and the Davis Island Tennis Club.

The sales office at Franklin and Madison was the center of much activity. It was here that Davis maintained his office and where the public were able to see what Davis had planned. Mounted on a wall was a large blueprint of the entire project showing residential lots, hotel and apartment sites, a commercial area, canals, lagoons, parks and all thoroughfares. Available by November was a scale model reproduction twenty-two feet long and seventeen and onehalf feet wide which had been made in sixty days by Harry Bierce a local artist.32 Thus, the prospective buyer could visualize his lot in two dimensions.

Design of Davis Islands which embraced sixty streets making twenty miles of broad and winding streets and boulevards and several miles of winding canals was good. With the exception of Davis Boulevard, streets were named for islands, bodies of water straits, and points along the coast. Since plans called for residential lots not to be more than five hundred yards from water, the islands provided eleven miles of waterfront locations. After fifty years of trial, some errors in the design have appeared. Such errors include the narrowness of the canals which caused them to silt and the winding streets which made it difficult for a stranger to find the home of a friend but nevertheless Davis Islands won the First Prize, American Association of City Planners in 1927.

The Highpoint

By December, Davis had reached a highpoint in his sales campaign. A branch sales office was opened at 305 East Main
Street, Lakeland, featuring corsages for the ladies, an orchestra in the office and a bus trip to the island. Hundreds of people visited the office purchasing over one hundred thousand dollars worth of lots. Advertisements appeared in the papers telling about construction of the tennis clubhouse, administration building and auditorium.

Temporary dining rooms were erected on the island to serve noon meals to the hundreds of visitors daily arriving by bus from downtown Tampa and Lakeland.

Soon sales offices were opened in St. Petersburg and Clearwater. Free buses carried would-be buyers to the island from the Davis offices in those cities for a brief tour and free lunch. The Indiana Society of St. Petersburg assembled at the City Hall in St. Petersburg where Davis Company buses carried them to the docks and a waiting boat, The Pokanoket, for a voyage to Davis Islands. There, they received a free lunch, lecture given by Jimmie Gheen, a noted speaker, tour and return by boat. Plans were made to open branch offices in Tallahassee, Pensacola, Orlando, Jacksonville and Sarasota.

Sales in the Yacht Club Section which was placed on the market for two weeks totaled $1,250,000 or a total of 264 lots sold. An advertisement placed in February, 1925 paper by the Davis Properties told about one purchaser who received a profit of three thousand dollars in four days and another one, eighteen hundred dollars in one hour. Further on it mentioned the fact that the island was one half mile from Tampa’s Court House and five million dollars in construction was planned for 1925. the message continued to say that Davis Company motor coaches called at all major hotels for prospective buyers but, if the reader desired, a private car would call for him at his home: "Just call 4534 and ask for the sales director." 33

There were some smaller pots on the Davis stove. Since a purchaser of waterfront property would be interested in sailing, a Davis Island Yacht Club was organized and held its first meeting at the Hillsboro Hotel. Plans were made for races, dances and dinners—all plans made prior to the construction of docks or clubhouse. A class in real estate salesmanship with Charles Davis, brother of D. P., and O. Sam Cummings as instructors was offered by Davis Properties on Tuesday and Friday nights 7-9 p.m. at Eagle Cafeteria Banquet Hall. In addition, Davis donated the sum of several thousand dollars to the City of Tampa for advertising in the Saturday Evening Post.

**The Coliseum**

After disposing of most of the residential lots, Davis turned to the lucrative commercial ventures. First planned was the Davis Island Coliseum Corporation to finance the building of a coliseum, scheduled to be one of the largest in the South, and designed by T. H. Eslick, architect of ballrooms in Melbourne, Australia and Bombay, India. Four hundred and fifty thousand dollars in stock was to be issued and sold at one hundred dollars a share. Judging from the profits of the St. Petersburg Coliseum which paid 8% dividend after forty days of operation, the Davis Island building would be a profitable operation. Later, under the direction of C. F. Cullen, the sales offices for the Coliseum were opened at 102 Lafayette Street and many persons reserved shares of stock by making long distance calls which resulted in sales of one-third of the stock on the first day of sales. 34 W. L. McNevin, one of Florida’s leading real estate operators,
purchased a substantial block of stock saying "It is a good thing." Colonel Wallace Fisher Stovall, owner of the Tampa Tribune, tried to buy fifty-one percent of the stock but Davis refused the offer.

When city councilmen decided not to enlarge the outmoded thirty-two bed Gordon Keller Hospital, located on North Boulevard opposite the Florida State Fairgrounds, they decided to place approval of bonds for construction of a new facility called Tampa Municipal Hospital on the ballot in a general bond issue in April, 1924. After approval by the voters the councilmen, after some study, decided to site the hospital in Marjorie Park. Still, by May, 1925 the park had not been yet dredged from the bay but Davis promised the fifty-five acres would be available in three months. A committee of the Tampa Federation of Civic Clubs protested the location saying it was too remote and exposed to hurricanes. Actually the site with access by only one low bridge for many years was very vulnerable and early residents fled to the mainland whenever a hurricane approached. Dr. Sumter Lowry did his best to have the University of Florida Medical School established in conjunction with the hospital but failed. Construction of the hospital was started in March, 1926 by Stevens and Lee, a hospital construction firm from Boston.

Tennis Club Opens

On February 24, 1925 there appeared an advertisement in the Tampa paper telling about the last section of land to be sold at development prices. The advertisement stated that once this section was sold, the developer would devote full-time to the building and development of commercial areas, paving of streets and planting of flowers and trees. The reader was advised to make his immediate selection from four hundred to five hundred lots and sixty apartment house sites. Such an appeal worked for an average of $250,000 worth of lots were sold each day.

By March 1, 1925 there was evidence of several complete structures in Davis Island. The fifty thousand dollar Administration Building was already in operation and the Tennis Club Building would be open on March 2nd to accommodate the Dixie Cup Championship Matches starring Francis T. Hunter, Bob Kinsey and other leading players. Construction work had begun on several apartment houses and homes.

One of the best salesmen for Davis was Fred Dalton. He sold one half million dollars of lots in six months. Fred had come to Tampa in 1898 as a cigar salesman for Garcia and Vega then transferred to Eli Witt but finally entered real estate sales for Davis. Soon Dalton would leave on a three month vacation which he richly deserved. Residence sales on the first island increased when it became known that Charles Freed of Miami purchased four houses for $54,000. Freed, a successful real estate dealer in Miami, had known Davis in Miami and had seen how profitable his ventures had been. Lots that Davis had sold in Miami for $3,000 were now worth $25,000 to $30,000 apiece. The Apartment Trust planned to erect five story apartments in the Country Club section on Columbia Drive. Sales of the apartments would be in the cooperative or condominium fashion by which the purchaser would pay $1,000 down and sixty-five dollars a month for a total price of $6,500. Included with the apartments were elevator service, modern kitchens and vacuum cleaner outlets.

All home and apartment construction and design plans had to be approved by the Davis Island Properties.
Offers From Sky

On May 28, 1925 advertisements in the Tampa paper announced the start of another drive for purchasers of lots to Davis Island and told about offers dropped from a plane flying over Florida to a waiting real estate salesman would make a profit on any offer but the best deal in the whole state was Davis Islands. It was the best development within the city limits of any Florida city.

In comparison to prices for Star, Hibiscus and Palm Islands in Biscayne Bay, prices at the Davis development were 100% less. Most people could make a quick profit on a resale.41

Since virtually all of the vegetation native to the site had been displaced by the dredging operations it was necessary to operate a nursery to provide trees and bushes for the development. A twenty acre nursery was started on Lincoln Avenue near Macfarlane Park with Frank Button, a landscape architect and director of landscaping at Coral Gables and Miami Beach who was placed in charge of the entire operation and D. D. Horvels, the superintendent.42

Thousands of palms, scrubs and flowers were grown for the project. Coconut palms were planted at the tennis club, oleander bushes near the roadways, Australian pines near the water as windbreaks and palms in the center of road dividers and along sidewalks. In the beautification program, palms were placed every fifty feet and scrubs every ten feet. However, for many years when the wind blew, the whole place resembled a desert with the wide areas of sand and no grass to anchor the shifting sand. Finally in order to have a suitable lawn the home owner found it necessary to carry in soil from the mainland.

During June, 1925 Davis went to Europe to get some ideas concerning construction of hotels and city planning at Deauville, Nice, Naples, and other places. During his absence, sales and construction moved ahead. Installation of sewers, sidewalks, street lighting and all utilities were completed in the developed hotel area and construction started on the seawalls. Westinghouse had received the street lighting contract for installing fifteen hundred standards and fifty-five miles of cable for $250,000.43 Eleven and one-half miles of seawall enclosing 825 acres of land were to be constructed and installed under the direction of William M. McDonald foremost seawall authority in the country.

More Buildings

Buildings which Davis pushed for completion first and help sell the project were those grouped about the entranceway to Davis Islands. Included in these prime targets were the Administration Building (now Sea Born School), Davis Islands Tennis Club, Utility Building, Marjorie Park Gatehouse, Shopping Arcade, several apartment buildings including Mirasol Apartments, Venetian Apartments, Ponce de Leon Apartments and the Palmarin Hotel. Some residences were completed during the first year of the island’s existence. Even before the dredges had completed their work, C. O. Carson was able to live in his newly constructed home. Among the sixty homes constructed usually in the Mediterranean Style, were those erected by Davis, Millam and others at a cost ranging from $10,000 to $50,000.

One of the features of the man-made islands was the Davis Island Country Club erected at a cost of $150,000. Designated as one of the best in the South, the Country Club was designed by Martin Hampton of Miami with
a large dance floor, dining rooms and a sliding roof over the dance floor to permit dancing under the stars. It had a prominent position on the islands sited beyond a long winding driveway in the midst of a beautiful golf course.

Since Martin Hampton had designed so many of the Davis Island structures, he moved his offices from Miami to Tampa. Temporary offices were established in the Administration Building. Other buildings designed by Hampton and his co-worker Franklin O. Adams, included the Tennis Clubhouse, Spanish Apartments, Venetian Apartments and the Mirasol Apartment Hotel. Tampa architect M. Leo Elliott designed a $300,000 office building at Biscayne and East Davis which would house ten shops on the ground floor and three hundred offices on the upper floors. One reason there were so many apartments scheduled for Davis Island was that there were restrictions upon building along Bayshore. Gasparilla Apartments had been planned for the Bayshore but due to restrictions, the $1,750,000 building was to be built by Apartment Building Trust on Biscayne Boulevard.

Many of the apartment sites began moving up in price. Two lots were sold by Frank Mulford of Van Nuys, California and W. R. Gignilliant to M. A. McLoughlin, a retired banker from Denver for $50,000. Daily resales of Davis Island property showed a 100% profit at this time.

A list of some of the buying and selling prices of lots went this way:

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<th>Lot</th>
<th>Block</th>
<th>Orig. Price</th>
<th>Selling Price</th>
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<td>6,000</td>
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14-15 110 10,900 20,000
13 10 6,500 12,000

### Palace of Florence

Elaborate plans were made for the Palace of Florence (Palazzo Firenze) Apartments. Designed by Athos Menebun, a native Italian on request by Philip Licata, Tampa Investment Company, the building was covered with old Italian white stucco in the 14th Century style. A coat of arms in terracotta, wrought iron fixtures in the Florentine style, a high square tower grand stairway and embattlement roof lines, were features of the design adapted from the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence.45

In October, 1925 orders were taken for the last section of lots on Davis Islands and again a record sale took place. All units were sold out in thirty-one hours of sale by mail. $26,000,000 in checks were received and it became necessary to return $8,000,000 because all lots were sold.46

Now, that all lots were sold, it was time to tool up the resale division. Advertisements in the paper told about a steady growth of profits and how each change of hands brought profits. One advertisement claimed "John Farrell made $1,000 driving a golf ball from the Bayshore to Davis Island but one owner made $36,000."47 Since the buses were not needed for prospective new buyers, Davis ordered the buses to be used to take children from the Children's Home on a tour of Tampa and, after that task was completed, to carry about the city senior citizens from the Old Folks Home.

At this time everything seemed in excellent shape with a complete sale of all lots, construction going full speed on many buildings and brisk resales but soon some dark clouds were seen. There were so much
a demand upon building materials for the construction boom that transportation services broke under the heavy pressure.\textsuperscript{48} First enforced in Miami, a statewide embargo upon carload shipments of everything except fuel, petroleum, livestock and perishable materials was proclaimed on October 29, 1925.\textsuperscript{49} It was possible to move the perishable fruit and vegetables from the groves and fields to the North but as many as 7,000 freight cars were backed up at Jacksonville and could go no place at all. The embargo cost Tampa merchants thousands of dollars for few Christmas gifts got through to the stores.\textsuperscript{50} Few bricks, bags of cement, plaster of lathes were to be seen in Tampa and construction suffered a blow from which it never fully recovered.

**'Blue Sky' Laws**

Banks in other states, stressing real estate frauds in Florida, would not transfer funds to Florida accounts for real estate sales. When the Massachusetts Savings Bank League noted huge withdrawals, it cautioned depositors against withdrawals for speculative purposes. The State of Ohio passed "blue sky" laws that forbade certain firms to sell Florida real estate in Ohio. Walter J. Greenbaum, Chicago investment banker, said that other states should follow Ohio's lead for "this Southern land boom is a fertile field for pirates of promotion."\textsuperscript{51} Oscar H. Smith, Commissioner of Immigration in Ohio, predicted that the Florida Boom would burst with a bang.\textsuperscript{52}

Adding to the dismay, several fraudulent schemes began to surface at this time. A scheme by the British-American Improvement Association to sell 2,000 lots at $2,000 apiece in Broward county went into bankruptcy. Officials of the Arcadia Gardens Projects of Arcadia, Florida which used a sales device of "fabulous profits in real estate" for the sale of $2,500,000 in land to Northerners were indicted on charges of using the United States mails to defraud investors.

Despite these storm warnings, Davis was ready to move to new fields. In October, 1925 he announced the acquisition of St. Augustine Beach or soon to be named Davis Shores on Anatasia Island just across from St. Augustine. It would be a fifty million dollar project with dredge and fill of swamp land creating 1,500 acres of prime waterfront property, building of fifty miles of streets, a Yacht Clubhouse, two golf-courses, casino, swimming pool and hotels.\textsuperscript{53} Branch sales offices were established in northern, 1935 cities and most of the successful Davis Islands sales force including J. A. Ductey, from Bridgeport, Connecticut and V. A. Sweeney of Savannah, Georgia, were assigned to these offices. J. A. Gross of Savannah, Georgia, the general auditor for Davis Shores, had formerly been associated with Nash Packard Company.\textsuperscript{54} Sales on Davis Shores opened on November 14, 1925 and, within a few hours, all $16,268,000 in lots were sold.\textsuperscript{55} Dredges started to fill in the marshes bordering the Matanzas River on October 31.

**More Profits**

Once again first purchasers made good profits. Lot 1, Block 51, was purchased for $11,000 and sold two hours later for $14,000. Thomas Palmer, an attorney of 504 Franklin Street, Tampa bought lots 41-44, Block 25 for $33,000 and sold for $37,000. Mrs. Maylene S. Turtle, wife of a St. Augustine jeweler, bought Lot 18, Block 50 for $7,600 and sold it for $12,750.\textsuperscript{56} Davis pleased with the opening sale and forecasting that the value of Davis Shores would double by the end of the winter,
established a loan fund for the construction of homes on Davis Shores.

The Spring of 1926 was a period of slow sales for Davis. Towards the beginning of Summer, people who should have made their second payments on Davis Islands lots did not show. Instead of an expected $4,000,000, Davis received less than $30,000. He was in deep trouble for his available cash had been invested at Davis Shores. First sign of trouble came when Davis labelled a story in the Tampa Telegram as irresponsible which told about a sale of Davis Islands. He did, however, admit that Stone and Webster, a Boston financial concern, might lend financial support. Being one of the largest corporations in the United States, Stone and Webster controlled seventy public utilities including Tampa Electric Company. On a preliminary survey for Stone and Webster, Robert S. Raine, a CPA from Stagg, Mather and Co. of New York conducted a thorough investigation of the Davis organization and found the Davis organization to be sound.

On August 2, 1926 an announcement was made that Stone and Webster of Boston and other Eastern cities had formed a syndicate, the Island Investment Company, $2,500,000 subscribed, for the purchase of stock and the syndicate would join with Davis for the financing and development of Davis Islands. Before sailing for Europe, Peter 0. Knight, President of Tampa Electric Company and general counsel for Stone and Webster in the Southeast, made the acquisition announcement at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. As settlement for his share, Davis received forty-nine percent of the stock in the Island Investment Company which he posted as collateral for a loan of $250,000 to be expended on Davis Shores.

Stone and Webster

The front office operations at Davis Islands underwent a radical change. Howard G. Philbrook of Stone and Webster became President of Island Investment Company and soon made a complete revision in the real estate division. Many people having a high regard for Stone and Webster refused to list their Davis Island property for sale but those who did so found sales profitable. Still by September, 1926 M. A. Glott of Chicago, Illinois advertised in the Tampa Tribune that he was willing to sell lots 5 and 6, Block 66 at a loss of $3,000 and, in addition, would allow the buyer to set his terms.

Davis en route for a vacation in Europe set sail from New York on the Cunard Liner Majestic. On October 13, 1926 news appeared in the Tampa papers that he had accidentally fallen overboard from a porthole at five o'clock in the morning. Cunard Line steward testified that he had been outside the door of Davis when one occupant rushed out saying Davis "had gone overboard." The steward could not find Davis in the cabin and although a search was made in the area, he could not be found in the water. When the news reached Tampa all construction was stopped on Davis Islands to pay respects to the deceased promoter. Plans were announced that Davis Shores would be completed as scheduled but drawings of the beautiful buildings planned there constitute the highpoint of the project.

Would Davis commit suicide? His background may indicate some clue. He had loved his first wife Marjorie who died in 1922 and named the Davis Island Park in honor of her. While drinking champagne he boasted that he would marry the next Queen of Gasparilla. Davis courted and married Gasparilla Queen Elizabeth Nelson, one of the most popular girls in Tampa but it was a
stormy marriage. She was twenty-two, he was forty-one. They separated and were remarried in a Presbyterian ceremony held at a private home, in December 1925. According to one report, Davis was going to Europe to join his wife who was on a tour but another rumor has it that he was friendly with one female passenger aboard the Majestic. Since Davis held an insurance policy valued at $300,000 issued by Sumter L. Lowry, Jr., President of Victory National Life Insurance Company of Tampa, there was an investigation of the details of the death but the policy was paid to the estate.64 In his will drawn before the marriage, Davis left no money to his wife, Elizabeth Davis and it became necessary for her to sue for her portion of the estate and she won the case.65 Judging from both his personal life and the desperate financial condition he was in, Davis may have lost his "cool," and invited death.

Davis had left Stone and Webster holding a somewhat empty bag. Some construction continued on the island but few persons wanted to purchase more lots or even hold on to those already held. Davis Islands went into a long dormant period which began to ebb with the opening of the Peter O. Knight Airport in 1936 and completely ended with the cessation of World War II. Had there not been a David P. Davis, Big and Little Grassy Islands would probably look like Seddon Island today—excellent location but lacking a promoter with a dream and money.

1 Walter P. Fuller, This Was Florida’s Boom, (St. Petersburg, 1954), Walter P. Fuller, This Was Florida’s Boom, (St. Petersburg, 1954), 64.


4 Tampa Tribune, November 22, 1925

5 Walter Fuller compared newspaper advertising of 1925 with that of 1953. In 1925 the St. Petersburg Times had 89 pages of advertising – 74% of it for real estate and most of the real estate advertising was for vacant lots. In 1953, the St. Petersburg Times had fifty-four pages of advertising – 81/2% for real estate and 71% of the real estate advertising was for houses for sale, Fuller, This was Florida’s Boom, 25.


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8 Virtually all of the salesmen, binder boys and real estate executives dressed in knickers for with such dress a coat was not required and thus suitable for the Florida temperature.

10 Besides Hamner, others had seen the possibilities of the islands. In 1923 Bill Blocks had taken the Tampa Kiwanis Club on a barge to the big island where the group ate fish chowder and Cuban sandwiches. Consequently, the members of the club did their best to influence others in development of the islands. Evanell Klintworth Powell, *Tampa That Was: History and Chronology Through 1946*, (Boynton Beach, 1973), 101.


12 Giddings Mabry was an excellent choice for he had practiced law in Tampa since 1901 and had been City Attorney when the land had been secured for estuary development. James W. Covington, "History of Carlton, Fields, Ward, Emmanuel, Smith and Cutler, P.A.,” manuscript in possession of author; Tampa Times, February 2, 1924.

13 These residents did not realize that a greater danger would arise when the natural flushing of the bay would be ended by the dredging and terrible odors and peeling of house paint would develop to plague the home owners for many years.

14 *Tampa Tribune*, March 4, 1924.

15 *Tampa Tribune*, April 23, 1924.

16 *Tampa Tribune*, May 4, 1924; O. K. Reaves was a partner in the same firm as Giddings Mabry

17 *Tampa Tribune*, August 7, 1924.

18 *Tampa Tribune*, June 13, June 29, and July 27, 1924: Davis claimed to have peered through a window at the "goodies" in Drawdy's store when he was young, poor and hungry and because of that unfulfilled desire for the good life had selected the grocery as his real estate office site.

19 *Tampa Tribune*, August 26, 1924.

20 Mrs. Thomas Dyer recalled that one houseowner would not sell his property and consequently this temporary road ran on either side of his house. Interview with Mrs. Thomas Dyer, May 22, 1978.

21 *Tampa Tribune*, September 3, 1924.

22 88* Florida Reports*, 196-211; *Tampa Times*, September 10, 1924.

23 *Tampa Tribune*, September 19, 1924.

24 *Tampa Tribune*, October 5, 1924. Sales personnel has prepared themselves for the deluge by numbering the lots and asking each prospect for the number he desired as soon as he entered the office. Telephone interview with Mrs. Pearl Culbreath Brewer, July 23, 1978.
25 Rex Beach, Miracle of Coral Gables, (Coral Gables, 1926) 45.

26 *Tampa Tribune*, October 5, 1924. Tampa

27 *Tampa Tribune*, October 14, 1924

28 *Tampa Tribune*, November 9, 1924.

29 *Tampa Tribune*, November 16, 1924; Davis had learned of Martin L. Hampton’s work in Miami and used him for the Davis Islands project.

30 Advertisements began to appear in newspapers and magazines advising the readers to close their eyes and visualize wide boulevards, golf course, large hotels, a yacht basin on Davis Islands in the Tampa to-morrow. Suniland: *The Magazine of Florida*, 1, (October, 1924), 42.

31 *Tampa Tribune*, November 30, 1924. Olympic champion Helen Wainwright was hired by Davis to swim around the islands. Several Boy Scouts including the future radio and television sports announcer Sol Fleischman accompanied her on the swim. Hampton Dunn, 'Old Tampa,' *The Hub of the Tampa Rotary Club*, June 8, 1975.

32 *Tampa Tribune*, November 2, 1924. Wall murals by Bierce may be seen in the Valencia Garden Restaurant on Kennedy Blvd.

33 *Tampa Tribune*, February 4, 1925.

34 *Tampa Tribune*, February 8 and 13, 1925.

35 *Tampa Tribune*, February 16, 1925

36 *Tampa Tribune*, April 25, 1925. The original hospital was established in 1905 on Kennedy Blvd. but was moved to North Boulevard in 1910.

37 *Tampa Tribune*, February 24, 1925.

38 Robert Kinsey from California won the First Dixie Cup Matches beating Douglas Waters of Florida 6-4, 7-5, 6-2. *Tampa Tribune*, March 9, 1925.

39 *Tampa Tribune*, April 12, 1925.

40 Ibid.

41 *Tampa Tribune*, May 28, 1925.

42 *Tampa Tribune*, November 3, 1924.

43 Original lamp posts were concrete with eight sided opaque globes with wrought iron detailing. Davis Island Plan: Tampa Urban Case Study: Hillsborough County Planning Commission, (Tampa, no date); hereafter cited as Davis Island Plan, 20.
Kenneth Ballinger estimated that the Boom reached its peak in August, 1925 and then began to lose ground. Ballinger, *Miami Millions*, (Miami, 1936), 114


These sketches are available in the Hillsborough County Historical Commission Library, Hillsborough County Courthouse.


97 *Florida Reports*, 915