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HENRY B. PLANT’S TAMPA
AT THE BEGINNING OF ‘THE GAY 90s’

(Editor’s Note: Early results of the coming of the railroad to Tampa were recited in a New York newspaper in-depth article published in 1891 just prior to the opening of the Tampa Bay Hotel. This is how it was in Tampa at that time. Reprinted from the biography, The Life of Henry Bradley Plant by G. Hutchinson Smyth, D. D., published in 1898.)

"Over on the west coast of Florida in Hillsborough County, or less than two hundred miles north of the southern end of the State, is an old, old town, which, in the territorial days of Florida, when the Government first established a military reservation here, was a small settlement that grew into a village and was called Tampa. Owing to its extreme isolation, its growth was slow, and, in 1884, there were not more than one or two shops, and a population of a little less than seven hundred. A year later he southern terminus of the Plant System of railroads was established at Tampa, and since then the growth of the place has been phenomenal. As Postmaster Cooper, one of Tampa’s wide-awake citizens and a

The following account of the growth of Tampa is taken from the New York Daily Tribune of November 17, 1891. It illustrates the large share which Mr. Plant has had in this growth, and the way in which he has closely identified himself with its history.

PLANT’S PORT TAMPA INN IN 1884
... tourists enjoy "boating" at resort
-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
newspaper editor, says: 'Henry B. Plant may be said to have been the founder of Tampa, and people of enterprise, industry, and capital from every State in the Union, and Cuba, have flocked here and built upon the foundation, until today Tampa rivals the best cities in the State. The South Florida Railroad is one of the best equipped railways in the South, extending from Port Tampa to Sanford, a distance of 124 miles.'

'THE FATHER OF TAMPA'

"The South Florida Road runs through the most fertile and most prosperous part of the State and has done more than any other agency to develop South Florida. And while it is true that the railroad gave to Tampa her first onward impetus, and has done, and is yet doing, much toward the development of the place, yet there are other agencies which have done much to help along the great work. The most prominent of these is the cigar-making industry, which was first established here three years ago. It is second to none as an important factor in Tampa's substantial prosperity and commercial success. Tampa has also profited by the immense deposits of phosphate, which is shipped from here, not only by rail all over the country, but by water direct to Europe. There is a large grinding mill here, and a meeting of representatives of phosphate interests was held recently, and a movement started to put up the necessary tanks and machinery for making the acids and other materials for the manufacture of superphosphate. When factories of this sort are put up it will no longer be necessary to send the phosphate to Europe to be acidulated.

'I went over to the palatial Tampa Bay Hotel, an enterprise of Mr. Plant, and the completion and furnishing of which, preparatory to its opening in two or three weeks, Mr. Plant has been personally supervising. I found him and a portion of his family at breakfast in his private car, in which he was to start north in the afternoon for a brief stay before coming down here for the winter. Mr. Plant is always approachable, genial in his manner, ready to talk about people and their prosperity, but not of himself or his. No one can accuse him of egotism. He said nothing of his massive hotel until I drew him out. I said: 'Mr. Plant, I learn that no one knows better than you of the beginning and the progress of Tampa and its probable future. In fact, they say that you are the father of Tampa; tell me about it, please.'

"I FOUND TAMPA SLUMBERING"

"'Well,' said the genial railroad president, 'when I first drove across the country from Sanford, for we are nearly west of that point, and there was no other way of getting here by land, I found Tampa slumbering as it had been for years. This was eight years ago. It seemed to me that all South Florida needed for a successful future was a little spirit and energy, which could be fostered by transportation facilities. There were one or two small shops and a population of about seven hundred in Tampa. I made a careful survey of the situation, calculated upon its prospects and concluded to take advantage of the opportunity, and we who made early investments have proved the faith in our own judgment. Tampa was really unknown to the commercial world until the South Florida Railroad introduced her there. This was in 1885, and it brought to the town a new life, and breathed into it all the elements of push, progress, and success. Tampa at once began to spread itself, and ever since has been fairly bounding along the road to greatness. It has now a population of about ten thousand, and is rapidly increasing. Hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of dollars have been invested
in business, and instead of a few scattered and unpainted storehouses, there are now many magnificent brick blocks, handsome private residences, cozy cottages, large warehouses, mammoth wholesale establishments, busy workshops, comfortable hotels, two newspapers, a phosphate mill, cigar factories, first-class banking facilities, telegraph and telephone communications, two electric-light establishments, ice factories, a complete system of waterworks, eight lines of steamships and steamboats giving communication to Key West and Havana, Mobile, places on the Manatee River, etc.

"Mr. Plant's hotel, upon which he has spent about $2,000,000 on the building and grounds and $500,000 for the furnishing, and which is nearly ready for the opening, is in the centre of a sixteen-acre plot of ground just north of the city bridge. The architecture is Moorish, patterned after the palaces in Spain, and minarets and domes tower above the great five-story building, each one of which is surmounted with a crescent, which is lighted by electricity at night. The main building is 511 feet in length, and varies in width from 50 to 150 feet. A wide hall, on either side of which are bedrooms, single and in suites, runs the entire length of the building to the dining room at the southern end. The exterior walls are of darkened brick, with buff and red brick arches and stone dressings. The cornices are of stone and iron; the piazza columns are of steel, supported on pieces of cut stone.

BEAUTIFUL AND ANTIQUE THINGS

"The main entrances are through three pairs of double doors, flanked by sixteen polished granite columns, supporting Moorish arches, over which balconies open from the gallery around the rotunda to the second floor. The principal staircase is of stone, and the horseshoe arch and the crescent and the star meet the eye at every turn-the electric lights in the dining-hall, the music-hall, the drawing room, the reception-room, the reading-room, and the office being arranged after these patterns. The drawing-room is a casket of beautiful and antique things, embracing fine contrasts. There are a sofa and two chairs which were once the property of Marie Antoinette; a set of four superb gilt chairs which once belonged to Louis Philippe; two antique Spanish cabinets, and between ten high, wide windows appear Spanish, French, and Japanese cabinets, both old and quaint. Old carved Dutch chairs, rare onyx chairs, and queer seats of other kinds are scattered along the hall. Among the large collection of oil paintings, water-colors, and engravings, are portraits and old pictures of Spanish castles and fortresses.

"A large rustic gate for carriages and two for pedestrians lead into the grounds on the northern side. These gates are made of cabbage-palmetto trunks, the mid-ribs being of the leaves worked into a quaint and rustic design. On either side of the great gate stand giant cabbage-palmettoes, thirty and forty feet high, set in groups of five and seven, the Moorish numbers. A number of large live-oaks, one a tree of great breadth and beauty, remain on the grounds. Near the centre of the lawn a fort has been built of white stone, having two embrasures. In it are mounted two old cannon that were spiked on the reservation of Tampa during the Civil War. The grounds front on the Hillsborough River and overlook the city, Fort Brooke and Tampa Bay, and are filled with fruit-trees, roses and flowers.

ANNUAL CUSTOMS RECEIPTS: $75

"The streets of Tampa are not what they will be, but a great improvement has been
going on in the last year; and when all the thoroughfares are paved, macadamized or otherwise hardened, they will be attractive drives. The roads on the west side of the river are naturally hard and smooth, giving fine drives in various directions. The water supply is obtained from one of the largest springs of water in the State, and is abundant for all purposes, and ample factories provide ice from distilled water. Until the session of Congress of 1889, Tampa was in the Key West customs district, and the customhouse business was looked after by a deputy appointed by the Collector of Customs at Key West. But when Congress passed a bill making Tampa a regular port of entry, a collector and a full corps of assistants were appointed. To give an idea of the growth of Tampa, it is only necessary to compare the customs returns for 1885, when, under a deputy-collector, the receipts were only $75, with the report of last year, which showed receipts considerably above $100,000.

"For a long time builders had suffered great inconvenience and delay because there were no brickmaking works. It was not believed that good brick could be made in Tampa, and all orders for this necessary building material had to be sent away from home. But in 1888, one of the enterprising citizens, who had found a bed of good clay just north of the city, began to manufacture bricks. The result is that builders are now furnished with home-made bricks almost as fast as they need them. It was stated to me that as much as $300,000 had been expended in the erection of brick buildings during the last year. One of the new public buildings is the City Hall and Court House. It is 50 by 100 feet on the sides and is two and a half stories high.

'THE PEER OF ANY IN SOCIAL LIFE'

"Tampa’s population may certainly be called cosmopolitan, comprising people from every quarter of the globe; but three classes preponderate so largely as to warrant distinction, - the American, the Cuban white people, and the African or colored people. There is no difference worthy of note between the first mentioned in Tampa and those of other sections of the United States. They have all the push and enterprise characteristic of the American people, and are the peer of any in social life.

"There are between three and four thousand Cubans in Tampa, and some Spaniards, too, but there is an intense prejudice on the part of the Spaniards against the Cubans, and as the latter feel the same dislike for the Spaniards, conflicts between the two sometimes occur, and if it were not for the good police administration might prove serious in some instances. The Cubans are many of them property holders and are identified closely with the city’s growth. They are reported as moral, temperate, energetic and quite desirable citizens; and, are almost without exception, engaged in cigar-making and kindred industries. They are also an amusement-loving people, have several clubs and societies, an opera-house, a band and a newspaper. The Cuban settlement is in the Fourth Ward, called Ybor City, after Martinez Ybor, the pioneer cigar manufacturer in Tampa. Only four years ago this part of the city was an unimproved and uncultivated forest; now it is an active, bustling, wealthy town within itself, and, to add to its interest, Postmaster Cooper recently established a branch station, as he has also in the settlement of the colored people, for the accommodation of those who live far from the general post-office.

"Twelve cigar factories are located in Ybor City, and there nearly all of the cigar-makers
The largest factories are those of Ybor & Co., Sanchez, Haya & Co., Lozano, Pendas & Co., R. Monne & Bro., and E. Pons & Co. These five factories manufactured 33,950,575 cigars last year, the output of the Ybors alone being 15,030,700. The total number manufactured in the thirty factories in Key West was 77,251,374. More than $30,000 is paid out to the 1500 or 2000 cigar-makers in Ybor City every Saturday night, one-fourth of which is paid out at Ybor's factory; and about $150,000 has been expended here in the past six years upon improvements. This cigar-making industry has contributed materially to the development and growth of Tampa during the last five years, and it promises much greater benefit in the future. It was in October, 1885, that Martinez Ybor & Co., who began manufacturing in Havana in 1854, and afterward put up a large factory in Key West, came to Tampa to investigate the resources and advantages offered for cigar-making. They soon afterward purchased forty acres of land in the Fourth Ward, cleared it of the pines, wild-oats and gophers, and built a factory, a large boarding-house or hotel, and several small cottages for the workmen whom they brought from Key West and Havana. The venture proved a success from the start and improvements were added. The original factory, a wooden structure, is now the opera house, and a large brick factory has succeeded the first one, where the daily output of the 450 cigar makers employed is 40,000 to 50,000 cigars. Then came Sanchez & Haya, Emilio Pons, and others, and all declare that they are doing an excellent business.

"The required condition of the climate of Tampa for good cigars is said to be fully equal to that of Key West or Havana," said one of the manufacturers who has had factories in both places. This has been proven by an actual and thorough test. Another advantage comes from the superior transportation facilities of the South Florida Railroad, which gets freight quickly to New York.'

QUIET, INOFFENSIVE CLASS

"The colored people of Tampa are declared to be in a better general condition than they are in any other part of the South. They are also represented to be a generous, quiet and inoffensive class of citizens. They are also far more industrious than those in some other sections of the South, working almost every day, and the 2000 negro population have a settlement of their own, midway between Tampa proper and Ybor City, which would be a credit to any community. Many of the houses, like the streets, run in irregular lines, but the homes and the shops have a tidy and orderly appearance as though not neglected, and at night everything about them is quiet and peaceful, only the songs and the moderate conversations and the musical laughter being heard. Very few of these people live in rented apartments, but nearly all own their little cottage homes. They have many excellent churches, schools taught by colored teachers, and nearly every home has a small library. Then, too, or with very few exceptions, the colored people command the respect of the whites.

"Port Tampa, which is the port from which the Plant Steamship Line sails for Havana and other places, is about ten miles below here. One of its attractions is 'The Inn,' a great hotel built in colonial style, beside the South Florida Railroad, over the water and about 2000 feet from the shore. It is both a summer and winter resort for tourists and Floridians. Another attraction is the fishing, either for bass from the wharf or boats, or for the tarpon, or, 'Silver King,' at Pine
Island. The third attraction is Picnic Island, the name itself telling its purpose.

"Not withstanding the general depression of the country during the last five years, the growth of Tampa has gone forward with a rapidity unsurpassed in any five years of its history. The entire city has increased in population from seven thousand to twenty-eight thousand during the past decade and is still growing steadily. Property is as valuable on the main business street of Tampa as it is in New York City above Central Park. The city has a Board of Trade, a Board of Health, schools, academy and churches of all Christian denominations. Few, if any, cities in Florida have a more promising future before them than Tampa.”