

1994

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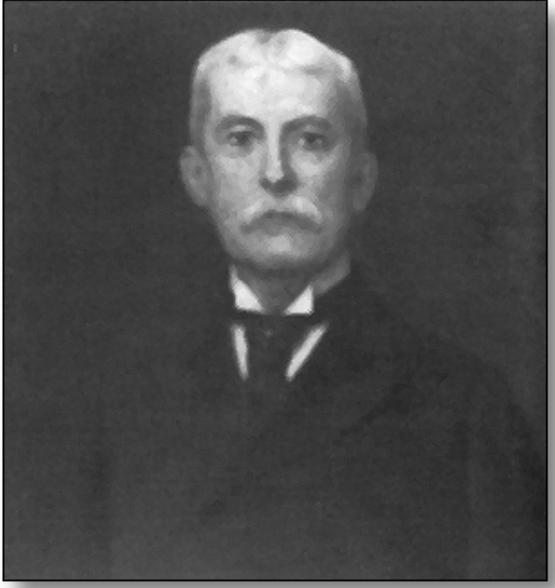
Recommended Citation

Dunn, Hampton (1994) "Florida: Jewel of the Gilded Age," *Sunland Tribune*: Vol. 20 , Article 6.
Available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol20/iss1/6>

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FLORIDA: JEWEL OF THE GILDED AGE

By Hampton Dunn



Henry Morrison Flagler

Florida's first tourist, Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon, discovered the great jewel of the Gilded Age in 1513, and he named it "Florida."¹ Over 370 years were to pass, however, before the peninsula would be rediscovered as a Florida for Tourists, Invalids and Settlers.² This phenomenon coincided with "The Gilded Age," which other areas of the United States were enjoying.³

Florida's development as a tourist haven was retarded for a long time by the lack of inland transportation and suitable tourist accommodations. With the advent of flat-bottomed steamboats, the northern portion of the peninsula was opened to exploration and settlement. Coastal vessels brought visitors from New York and Boston

to Jacksonville, the gateway city, after stopovers in Charleston and Savannah. From Jacksonville, they took riverboats up the St. Johns River to Palatka, and from there, the more adventuresome made their way up the crooked Ocklawaha River to delightful Silver Springs. Silver Springs was Florida's first big tourist attraction, and welcomed such prominent 19th century writers as Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Cullen Bryant, and Sidney Lanier.⁴ Even today, Silver Springs plays host to hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.

Edward A. Mueller, a well-known engineer and nautical historian from Jacksonville, has noted the impact of steamboats on the development of Florida's tourist industry and on its economic evolution as well. Steamboating, he said, "was a prime example of private enterprise, of winner take all, [and] of keen competition." Mueller's description of steamboat operation as a "winner-take-all" competition was appropriate, and, within a few years, could be used to describe the activities of virtually all forms of transportation.⁵

Immediately on the heels of the steamboat came the development of the railroads, and Florida was viewed as prime railroad country by a host of promoters, entrepreneurs, and visionaries. The first all-steam railroad in the state was the Florida Railroad, which extended across the peninsula from Amelia Island on the Atlantic to Cedar Keys on the Gulf. Completed in 1860, the railroad was less than a rip-roaring success because of the



Belleview Biltmore Hotel, Clearwater

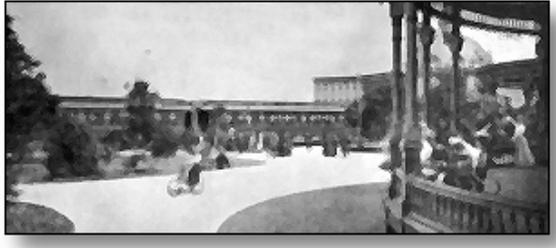
chaos of the Civil War. Within weeks after the end of the conflict, David Levy Yulee, president of the Florida Railroad and a prisoner in a Union fort, was directing his subordinates to move forward with restoring service. Pushed by this dynamic force, the Florida Railroad was soon back in business.

The success of the Florida Railroad attracted the attention of the American business community, while the economic potential of the peninsula provided the perfect opportunity for postwar investors with an eye to the future and an ear to the ground. The "Iron Horse" was the perfect vehicle for these men to ride on, and soon they were at home exploiting the Florida frontier. The Sun Belt, with its promise of huge profits, was calling, and these visionary risk-takers were ready to answer the call!

Just who the "rediscovered" of post-Civil War Florida was is a highly debatable topic, but few historians would disagree with the notion that Henry Morrison Flagler was a prime mover in the revolution that carved a vibrant, appealing, bustling resort state from a jungle infested with, as the title of Judge E. C. May's autobiography suggests, *Gaters, Skeeters & Malary*.⁶

Henry Flagler has been called many names, and some are not so kind, but all recognize his leadership abilities and pioneering spirit. Author David Leon Chandler labeled him "the visionary robber baron who founded Florida" in his biography of Flagler.⁷ Edward N. Akin, another biographer, merely describes him as the "Florida baron,"⁸ while Sidney Walter Martin refers to him as the "promoter of Florida." Robber baron, simple baron, or promoter, Flagler's name remains synonymous with modern Florida.⁹

Born in New York State, Flagler started his business career as a grain dealer in Ohio at an early age. Later he ventured into salt manufacturing in Michigan, lost his shirt, then entered the grain business again in Cleveland.¹⁰ There he met his old friend, John D. Rockefeller, and invested borrowed money in Rockefeller's oil-refining company. This bold venture into the unknown field of petroleum production was known as Rockefeller, Andrew and Flagler. Meeting with almost instant success, Rockefeller, Andrew and Flagler, quickly changed from a limited partnership to a corporation-Standard Oil Company-in 1870. Flagler was a top executive and Rockefeller's closest colleague in Standard



Departure of train, Tampa Bay Hotel

Oil, and, by virtue of his early association with Rockefeller, accumulated a large fortune.

A trip to Florida in 1883 inspired him to realize the vast recreational potential of the state's east coast. Flagler immediately seized on the tremendous appeal the exotic state would have for the nation's wealthy as a diversion from then-popular Europe. Seeing what a good railroad system would do to open up the state, he began buying and improving small railroad lines in the region, eventually combining these into the Florida East Coast Railway.¹¹ Soon he was off on a new venture, extending the rails southward

to Key West, the southernmost city within the continental limits of the United States. It was a dream he realized in 1912, a year before his death.¹²

Hotel accommodations in Florida were inadequate and rather primitive when compared to facilities Flagler's potential customers were used to in Europe. Aware of the need for elegant hotels, with all the amenities and luxuries, Flagler proved to be up to the task of providing them. Beginning with the palatial Ponce de Leon in 1888, he quickly built or purchased hotels to fit the financial status of the tourists he attracted south.¹³ As a less expensive accommodation for the less wealthy, Flagler constructed the Alcazar immediately across the street from the Ponce, and in 1889 purchased the Casa Monica from Franklin Smith. Renamed the Cordova, this third hotel provided resort living for virtually any pocketbook.

Today all three buildings still exist, but none are used as hotels. The Ponce de Leon now



Henry B. Plant strikes a golfing stance for some of his guests. The large woman in black (center) is Mrs. Plant.



Bertha Palmer

houses Flagler College; the Alcazar is home to city offices and the Lightner Museum; and, the Cordova functions as the St. Johns County Courthouse.

Wherever Flagler pushed his railroad down the East Coast, tourists followed. When the road reached Daytona Beach, Flagler immediately purchased the Ormond Hotel, across the street from friend Rockefeller's winter home, the "Casements." In 1894, he opened the Poinciana, the world's largest hotel and wooden structure at the time.¹⁴

Southward the Flagler juggernaut rolled, adding more and more domains to the Flagler empire. In Palm Beach, he built the majestic Royal Poinciana and The Breakers. Palm Beach also became the site for "Whitehall," the residence Flagler built for his third wife, Mary Lily Kenan. He married

Miss Kenan in 1901 after his divorce from Ida Alice Shourds, who had been judged insane.¹⁵ Scandal arose over reports that Flagler had used his political influence and a considerable amount of his fortune to get the Florida legislature to pass a law making insanity a legal ground for divorce. Despite rumors circulating that Flagler had bribed members of the legislature, Governor William Sherman Jennings signed the law, and the developer got his divorce and quickly married Mary Lily.¹⁶

Flagler's ambitions pushed him ever southward to Fort Lauderdale and Miami. He arrived at the latter in 1896, heeding a plea from pioneer Julia Tuttle to help her develop the city.¹⁷ Not content with the length of the Florida peninsula, Flagler pulled off one of the greatest engineering feats of all times when he extended his railroad across 1-50 miles of treacherous waters to Key West.¹⁸

Flagler also established steamship lines from Key West to Nassau. In the Bahamas, he erected the Royal Victorian and Colonial hotels to house his passengers.¹⁹

After working and "doing" all his life, this entrepreneur *par excellence* died at the age of 83, in the Florida that he had brought to life. He is entombed in a crypt in the magnificent Flagler Memorial Church in St. Augustine, an edifice, he constructed many years before as a memorial to his daughter, Jennie Louise Flagler Benedict, and which was so elaborate it was described as being "so beautiful it would make an atheist pray."²⁰

On the other side of the state, another Henry was doing for the West Coast what Flagler had done for the East Coast. Henry Bradley Plant, who was described by writer Charles E. Harner as "the worst kind of

Yankee-Connecticut born and bred," was an entrepreneur who could match Flagler's accomplishments.²¹ Before the Civil War, Plant had been an officer of the Adams Express Company and tended to its southern routes. With the outbreak of war, the Adams company had sold their southern operations to Plant, who consolidated them into a new company, The Southern Express Company. Although a Yankee, Plant was entrusted by Confederate President Jefferson Davis with transporting the express shipments of the Confederacy, including Army payrolls and confidential dispatches.²²

Smart enough to see a bright future for the South after the war, Plant invested his money in bankrupt railroads and consolidated their operations into a single company, which eventually became the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad. Like his colleague, Flagler, Plant looked southward and directed his operations toward the Gulf of Mexico. He first looked at Cedar Key as a possible terminus, but there he ran into opposition-town leaders didn't want any competition for a fellow townsman. Former U.S. Senator David Yulee had built a railroad from Fernandina to Cedar Key just prior to the Civil War. When Cedar Key real estate people tried to gouge Plant, he put a curse on the little community, predicting the hogs would wallow in their streets and owls would roost in their attic. Plant then turned his attention to Tampa Bay.

Plant was heartily welcomed when he brought his railroad to Tampa in 1884. His decision to build a hotel that would "out-Flagler Flagler" in opulence and grandeur created a magnet to the wealthy tourist trade. Later he constructed the elegant Belleview Biltmore at Belleair, near Clearwater, as well as other hostelryes. The Belleview has continuously operated since 1897. It is now owned by Japanese interests

who changed the name to the Belleview Mido and built a pagoda type entrance to the grand Victorian structure.

A real monument of the Gilded Age was Plant's magnificent Tampa Bay Hotel in frontier Tampa, which opened in 1891. Legend has it that when Plant planned his grand opening, he sent his friendly rival, Henry Flagler, an invitation to come. Flagler, smug over the success of his Plush Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine, sent this response: "Where's Tampa?" The unflappable Plant shot back, "Follow the crowds!" And indeed the crowds did come.²³ It became the Mecca for presidents, cabinet members, legislators, European royalty, millionaires, multi-millionaires, and many others from the international set.

The Tampa Bay Hotel became the "In" place for rich fun seekers from the Eastern seaboard. It received rave reviews from the Northern press. The Boston Saturday *Evening Gazette* praised Plant for "erecting in tropical Florida the most attractive, most original, and most beautiful hotel in the south, if not the whole country . . ."²⁴ New York's *Journal of Commerce* declared: "It is not to be denied that this Tampa Bay Hotel is one of the modern wonders of the world. It is a product of the times. It illustrates the age, the demands of the people, what they enjoy, and what they are willing to pay for."²⁵

The advent of electricity added bright light and glitter to the Gilded Age. Plant's luxury trains brought guests right to the door of the hotel and to the glamour of the brightly lit gardens. The *Journal* reporter described it: "The scene suddenly changed. The train emerged into a blaze of electric light. By this blaze of light, you could see, high in the air and stretching a thousand feet to the right and left, bright domes and minarets,

appearing and disappearing with all the swiftness of magic. It was bewildering. A few steps lead into the blinding light of the grand hall of the new hotel, a wilderness of all that is gorgeous in works of modern art."²⁶

The Tampa Bay Hotel was Plant's hobby and expensive toy. He spent \$3 million building it and nearly another half million on its lavish furnishings. The red brick structure, modeled somewhat after the Alhambra in Granada, Spain, is of Moorish design and is two blocks long, four stories high, has 500 rooms, and spread over an area of six acres. It is now designated a National Landmark.²⁷

So well known was the hotel among the nation's elites, it became the headquarters of the U. S. Army in the Spanish-American War of 1898. Teddy Roosevelt camped nearby with his Rough Riders, while Mrs. Roosevelt enjoyed the niceties of the hotel. With Plant's death in 1899, however, the fortunes of the Tampa Bay Hotel began to wane. Though it continued to function as a hotel, the new operators had neither Plant's money nor his marketing abilities. In 1929, all hotel operations were suspended.²⁸

In 1933, the Tampa Bay Hotel became the home of the new University of Tampa. Leased from the City of Tampa for a mere \$1 a year, the hotel building is now called Plant Hall. Since 1933, the University has added a number of buildings on the campus. The interior of Plant Hall has been upgraded from time to time. When Bob Martinez, a University alumnus, was governor of Florida, he was influential in getting grants to reconstruct and shine up the silver minarets and domes.

Henry Plant, with his ambitious entrepreneurial designs and conspicuous

consumption, truly reflected the spirit and enterprise of the Gilded Age in Florida.

In the opinion of this writer, the real heroes of Florida history are the two Henrys, Flagler and Plant. Not much had happened in the development of this frontier state until the railroads came, opened tip the southern and central parts of the state to settlement, and brought tourism to the forefront as a major industry. While the riverboat excursions before and after the Civil War had had some impact in publicizing the Sun Belt as a playground and health resort for the wealthy and not-so-wealthy, it took the visions and energies of the two Henrys to make Florida the tourist haven it has become.

As the Gilded Age began to decline, Florida continued its fast-paced march into the 20th century. Flagler's march down the East Coast, mirrored by Plant's forays down the West Coast, opened new ports and stimulated commerce and industry. Florida's rich soil and mild climate encouraged the development of citrus and vegetable farming, and although the "Big Freeze" of 1894-95 temporarily hurt the citrus industry, it quickly recovered. The "freeze line" established by this catastrophic event pushed citrus further southward, and now big groves of the "golden apples" thrive as far south as Alligator Alley between Fort Lauderdale and Naples.

Women, however, were not excluded from involvement in the "rediscovery" of Florida in the Gilded Age, and the two Henrys had female rivals like Julia Tuttle of Miami and Bertha Palmer of Chicago and Sarasota. While Tuttle worked closely with Flagler in the development of Miami, Bertha Palmer led the movement to open up the Florida Peninsula south of Tampa Bay.

The wife of Potter Palmer, one of the largest property owners in Chicago and proprietor of the world famous Palmer House hotel, Bertha Palmer was a socialite whose interests in public causes made her a national and international personality. In 1893, she served as president of the Board of Lady Managers of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, and through this position, she gained experience in advertising and promoting. In 1900, Mrs. Palmer was appointed by President William McKinley as the only woman member of the national commission which represented the United States at the Paris Exposition. Her involvement brought her a number of important contacts. Indeed, she became a friend of the King of England who was a frequent guest at her London home.²⁹

"Mrs. Palmer was noted not only for her unusual grace of manner and social attainments," wrote a biographer, "but as a business woman of the highest order."³⁰ And, it was her abilities in both of these areas that made her an important addition to the ranks of Florida promoters.

Real estate developers in Florida believed in the liberal use of newspaper advertisements as a means of luring potential investors to the state. And so it was, on a bitter cold Sunday in 1910, Mrs. Palmer sat reading the *Chicago Tribune* and spied an ad promoting the wonders of the Florida West Coast town of Sarasota. Her husband, who had died in 1902, had left her a fortune of around \$8,000,000 in cash, bonds, stocks, and real estate holdings (a fortune she would increase to \$20,000,000 by her death in 1918),³¹ and the Sarasota ad piqued her interest enough to make her want to venture south.³²

It was love at first sight when the "Queen of Chicago" arrived in the little coastal village. A person with less vision might have been

appalled by the run-down, jungle-like area, populated by poor fishermen and struggling farmers. Bertha Palmer saw it and fell in love. A Chicago newspaperman interviewed her after her first visit to Sarasota and reported, "Her heart is in tropical Sarasota Bay."³³

What tugged at Mrs. Palmer's heart was not the Sarasota she saw but the Sarasota she thought could be. To this lady of culture, social standing, and worldwide travel, Sarasota Bay was even more beautiful than the Bay of Naples.³⁴ She saw rich lands that could be developed into vast agricultural empires--a veritable paradise, a land of milk and honey, far lovelier than the French Riviera, up until then the ultimate playground for the rich and famous.

Mrs. Palmer made a decision to move to Sarasota. She selected a home site on Little Sarasota Bay in the community of Osprey. There she built her dream mansion, the "Oaks," under the shady trees on the property, and furnished it lavishly. Soon, the Palmer residence in Sarasota became a center for transplanted socialites as the social world beat a path to her door.

Bertha Palmer did not intend to recreate Chicago society in Sarasota, however, and she immediately became involved in farming and ranching activities, particularly around the Myakka Lake area. She started a 1,000 acre hog farm, which she later expanded to include cattle and poultry. She named her ranch "Meadow Sweet Pasture."³⁵ She soon purchased a 6,000 acre ranch and 3,000 head of cattle. She embarked on an experiment to improve Florida cattle stock and imported 17 Brahma bulls to breed with the local scrub cattle. This innovative practice was quickly adopted by other ranchers and continues today.³⁶ She also showed old-time

"Cracker" ranchers how to fight the scourge of the cattle business, the pesky tick, by dipping her animals in vats of chemicals.

Not content with her livestock operations, this energetic lady moved into citrus farming, acquiring a large grapefruit grove of 1,300 acres. And it was she who demonstrated to local farmers that celery could be raised as a profitable commercial cash crop. She continued her land purchases, eventually buying up 80,000 acres in the Sarasota area and added additional large tracts in Hillsborough County to her holdings.³⁷

Her non-stop activities were suddenly brought to a halt when she developed cancer.³⁸ Even so, she continued to work until a few weeks before her death on May 15, 1918, at "The Oaks." She was 69.

Gilded Age Florida had benefited from the interest and investments of three prominent northern entrepreneurs during the late 1800s and early 1900s. In addition, the state had received tremendous notoriety as the staging area for the American invasion of Cuba in 1898. Florida had changed rapidly from a raw frontier state of the 1860s to a cosmopolitan tourist destination by 1900. Plant, Flagler, and Palmer led the march of rediscovery that placed Florida on the path to greatness. The momentum created by these visionaries continues today as Florida marches steadily toward its destiny as the third largest state in the Union.

ENDNOTES

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