

# Tequesta:

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## The Tampa Bay Hotel

By JAMES W. COVINGTON

On August 20, 1885, Tampa obtained direct railroad connections with the North for the first time. Due to the excellent business acumen possessed by Connecticut-born Henry Bradley Plant, this heretofore sleepy Gulf Coast village was able to take full advantage of the bounties furnished by Mother Nature and various industries about the bay began to flourish.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Tampa had been a port since the early days of Fort Brooke, established in 1824 but a port without suitable river or railroad connections with markets cannot prosper at all.

As soon as the local and state businessmen realized what an economic boost had been provided by the railroad and bay connection, they took quick advantage of the several opportunities which had been sitting like rows of ripe corn waiting for the harvest. First on the scene were the fish and oyster companies which needed rapid transportation for their products to the markets in the East and Middle West. Next came the ice plants to supply ice for the fifty thousand pounds of fish which were daily shipped to various points. Next came Gavino Gutierrez in search of guava trees which were

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<sup>1</sup> The available accounts concerning Henry Bradley Plant include S. Walter Martin, "Henry Bradley Plant," in *Georgians in Profile* (Athens, 1959) and G. Hutchinson Smyth, *The Life of Henry Bradley Plant*, (New York, 1898). Plant laid the foundation for his fortune with the Southern Express Company business and invested part of his profits in Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida railroads. At the heyday of its power, Plant's transportation empire included thirteen railroad lines, nine steamboat and steamship lines and over twelve thousand persons were employed in this vast Plant enterprise. "Henry Bradley Plant, the King of Florida," *Success* (November, 1898).

not too plentiful but, as a result of his reports concerning Tampa, cigar factories and a town were established by Mr. Ybor. In direct consequence of all these activities the population of Tampa rose from 722 persons in 1880 to 2,375 in 1885 and 5,532 by 1890.

As economic conditions in Tampa became more favorable each year, Henry Plant who was born October 27, 1819, did not miss very many opportunities. He developed Port Tampa, some nine miles from the downtown area, as a deep water harbor. The South Florida Railroad was extended to Port Tampa and a large wharf and warehouses constructed to handle the shipping. By 1886, he had entered the local steamship business and established a line connecting Tampa, Key West and Havana. Two of the vessels in this line were the *Olivette* built by Cramp's of Philadelphia under the supervision of the captain, James McKay, Jr., and the *Mascotte*. Within a short time other lines which connected river traffic with the railroads were established on the Apalachicola, St. Johns, Chattahoochee, Flint and Manatee rivers. Port Tampa Inn, a most unique colonial style hotel, extending two thousand foot from the shoreline and where a lodger could fish from his room, was erected. Other hotels established by Plant were the Bellevue near Clearwater, the Seminole at Winter Park, the Ocala House and Hotel Kissimmee.

Although the Plant Investment Company included among other holdings an express company, a hotel chain, several thousand miles of railroad, control of Port Tampa and associated shipping facilities and steamship lines, Henry Plant was not satisfied. Henry Flagler, Plant's rival on the East Coast of Florida was even more successful in building railroads and hotels. In fact by 1888 he had erected the two million dollar Ponce de Leon at Saint Augustine: a building which when compared with the Port Tampa Inn seemed like a palace. Plant wanted to erect a better hotel than Flagler's — the express and railroad magnate thought he would out-do the Standard Oil tycoon.<sup>2</sup>

Although Plant had made his decision to build the hotel, there were others that had to be convinced that the edifice would be profitable. First obstacle was the officers of the Tampa Bay Hotel Company which included

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<sup>2</sup> The definitive biography of Henry M. Flagler in *Florida's Flagler* (Athens, 1949) by Sidney Walter Martin. Construction of the Ponce de Leon Hotel was begun December 1, 1885 and finished May 30, 1887. The building was estimated to have cost two and one half million dollars.

W. N. Conoley of Tampa, President; Dr. George Benjamin of Tampa, Vice President; and Perry Wall, Jr. of Tampa, Secretary and Treasurer. Despite the fact that all of these men were leading citizens of Tampa they opposed the erection of a costly building but finally gave their reluctant consent when Plant declared that if they did not give their approval, he would personally underwrite all of the costs of construction.<sup>3</sup> Certain members of the Board of Trade (present Chamber of Commerce) wanted the hotel to be built on the eastern side of the river, but Plant, architect James A. Wood and civic leader Thomas Jackson won over the opposition by pointing out that the hotel would look better on the other bank of the Hillsborough River.<sup>4</sup>

The next step was the selection of the site. The entire western side of the Hillsborough was still part of the Florida wilderness—complete with thick undergrowth, large oak trees, deep rooted palmettoes and wildlife of all sorts. It was a wild but not very historic part of the Florida wilderness.<sup>5</sup> A few homesteads and developments were scattered about the area. One was the William S. Spencer farm in present day Palma Ceia. Others included Spanish Town along the present Bayshore Drive, Hyde Park, a subdivision established by G. H. Platt of Chicago in 1885 and the General Jesse Carter tract. General Jesse Carter, a pioneer mail contractor, had been in charge of the state troops during the Third Seminole War in 1855-1858 and had erected a house and several smaller buildings on his holdings. One such building erected by General Carter was a school house to provide education for his daughter Josephine. Miss Louise Porter, a young teacher from Key West, was employed as teacher and other students who joined the class included the two Spencer children and five other guest students.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Tampa *Tribune*, December 19, 1922.

<sup>4</sup> Architect James A. Wood of Philadelphia, Pa. created such a favorable impression with the Tampa Bay Hotel that he was commissioned to design the DeSoto Hotel and the Hillsborough County Court House. Both were demolished by wreckers during the 1950's.

<sup>5</sup> According to the three accounts written by persons who took part in the DeSoto Expedition or talked to the survivors, no general council was held with the Indians of the Tampa Bay area.

<sup>6</sup> This school began in 1850 and was the first one to be erected west of Hillsborough River. During the period of the Tampa Bay Hotel's existence, the building served as an apothecary shop and later as a tool shed used by the Tampa Park Department. At present, it has been moved from its original site near the river to a spot near the McKay Auditorium and underwent a considerable amount of restoration and addition of a section. This "Little School Building" is maintained by the DeSoto Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution. Information contributed by Virginia Sloan, Librarian, D.A.R.

In 1866, Jesse Hayden obtained this land in trade with Carter for a white horse and wagon. The fine looking animal had been most useful in pulling the Hayden possessions from Camilla, Georgia to Tampa but the Haydens needed land and Carter was most pleased with the trade.<sup>7</sup> After finding a home, Hayden established business connections in the village across the river. He and his son opened a store and a livery stable and began operating a ferry so that they could cross to their places of business and to supplement their income the ferry was made available for use by the general public. Prices charged for passage on the flatboat included: forty cents for a two horse buggy, twenty-five cents for one horse and buggy and ten cents for man and horse. Single passengers were charged five cents per person and taken in a skiff which together with the flatboat docked at the foot of present day Jackson Street. It is believed that Thomas Piper had operated a ferry from this site as early as 1846.

In 1886 and 1890 Mr. Plant had purchased tracts of land which totaled sixty acres for \$40,000 from Hayden and Mrs. Nattie S. McKay, Hayden's daughter. Hayden's wife wanted him to hold out for more money but the daughter persuaded him to accept the original offer. At the time of the first purchase the Hayden house, a two story frame building with wide verandas, was standing on the site where the lobby of the hotel building was soon to be erected.

Of course, Hayden's ferry was inadequate for the purposes of Plant's projected hotel and Plant's next step was to approach the city and county officials. If a bridge were constructed across the Hillsborough River at public expense, he offered to construct a \$200,000 hotel on the Hayden tract. The city and county officials showed their interest but it was difficult to raise the money.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the City of Tampa acquired sufficient land for the extension of Lafayette (now Kennedy) Street and a toll-free wooden draw bridge was completed by February 28, 1889. Mrs. Jessie Leonardi claimed the honor

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<sup>7</sup> Tampa *Tribune*, December 20, 1959.

<sup>8</sup> Tampa *Tribune*, January 26, 1888. In some fashion Plant acquired a tract of land from George N. Benjamin as an inducement to build the hotel. This land includes the site of present day Fort Homer W. Hesterly. Karl Grismer, *Tampa*, (St. Petersburg, 1950), 273. The two authorities of Tampa's history are D. B. McKay and Karl Grismer. Both state that Plant purchased sixty acres of land from Hayden in 1888. Yet the Tampa *Weekly Journal*, May 10, 1888, states that fifteen acres of the Hayden tract had been purchased by Plant for \$9,800 with \$1,000 down and the rest to be paid in four weeks. Perhaps Plant purchased fifteen acres at first and then found he had need of the entire sixty acres.

of being the first woman to cross it while riding in a vehicle. One third of the cost of the bridge which totaled nearly \$15,000 was borne by Hillsborough County and the City of Tampa assumed the remainder.

By May, 1888, Plant envisioned a hotel costing one million dollars or more but this canny businessman was afraid that the city taxes would be rather high. Consequently on May 10, 1888, he offered to begin construction on the hotel within thirty days if the city council guaranteed that all taxes and licenses would not exceed the sum of two hundred dollars a year.<sup>9</sup> The council agreed to this proposition and construction was begun.

By June, 1886, fifteen acres were being cleared and some building materials had been purchased. At first Plant did not attempt to erect a building that would match the Ponce de Leon in size or cost but only wanted a building worthy of his name. Of course, the hotel would be a model of efficiency with steel girders, a record number of bathrooms, beautiful landscaping and a credit to the Plant Investment Company. However, after construction was begun and Plant became enamoured with the project, plans were changed so that the Tampa Bay Hotel would equal or perhaps excel the Ponce de Leon. Everyone was pleased with the progress made during the early stages of construction and ground clearing and soon it was time to lay the cornerstone.

On July 26, 1888, the cornerstone for the Tampa Bay Hotel was laid. A holiday was declared for Tampa and more than two hundred persons crossed the river to see Mayor Herman Glogowski perform the ritual which initiates the construction of an important edifice. Music for the occasion was provided by the Tampa Silver Cornet Band. After the ceremony was concluded, some of the party retired to the shade provided by the towering oak trees where a picture was taken by J. C. Field and champagne was enjoyed.<sup>10</sup> Toasts were dedicated to the Plant Hotel Company, Tampa, Henry Plant, South Florida, the Plant Railroad System and even one was given to any person who was overlooked. It was said that some persons drank just a little bit too much and began throwing their hats into the trees, dislodging a few acorns.<sup>11</sup> However, it was good that the citizens enjoyed themselves

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<sup>9</sup> Tampa *Tribune*, May 10, 1888.

<sup>10</sup> Tampa *Tribune*, July 26, 1888. In 1963, University officials instituted a search for the cornerstone but were unable to find it.

<sup>11</sup> Tampa *Tribune*, August 3, 1847.

for a sign of distinction was being erected — a sign that would outshine at least as a symbol of Tampa the landings of De Soto and Menendez, military activities at Fort Brooke and the mounds of the long vanished Timucuan Indians.

With the ceremonies ended, the work on the hotel proceeded with all due haste. Twelve brick layers and thirty-four laborers were hired and immediately began work. Sometimes the men worked at too fast a pace and were given furloughs when they had exhausted the supply of local bricks and those sent from Cincinnati. Another furlough was granted when the steel girders sent from Pittsburgh arrived by mistake in another place five hundred miles distant. Since there was a yellow fever outbreak at Jacksonville, all building supplies coming from the North to Tampa were fumigated.<sup>12</sup> Finally, after a steady stream of materials which included bricks arriving by train from Ohio and by barge from the Hillsborough Brick Company and lime brought by boat poured into Tampa, the supply of skilled bricklayers was exhausted and it became necessary to train young local men in the profession. By January 1889, work had progressed to such an extent that one wing four stories high and five hundred and eight feet long was erected. Delighted by such progress, the builders estimated that the hotel should be open for business in January, 1890.

Plant informed architect Wood that the hotel should be made as fire and hurricane proof as possible. The changing from narrow gauge to standard gauge of the South Florida Railroad provided a rich store of rails to reinforce the concrete walls and ceilings.<sup>13</sup> Marine cable from Key West provided another bountiful supply of solid supports needed for the hotel.

As the work progressed on the stately building, the citizens of Tampa were most eager to show visitors what was taking place. In August, 1889, a group of business leaders from Chicago came to Tampa and were taken to the construction site. They were so impressed that they expressed great interest in returning when the construction was completed. On March 14, 1890, Vice President of the United States Levi Morton, his wife and three daughters visited Ybor City and the site of the hotel.<sup>14</sup> When passengers for

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<sup>12</sup> Tampa *Tribune*, August 30, 1889.

<sup>13</sup> The steel rails can be seen in the ceiling of Room 231. When it was necessary to knock out walls to enlarge a radio studio for the University, workmen found that they had an exceedingly difficult task.

<sup>14</sup> Tampa *Daily Journal*, March 14, 1890.

the Plant Line Steamers crossed the railroad bridge en route to Port Tampa on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday nights, a large bonfire was lighted so that they could see the hotel.

It was most necessary to provide a beautiful setting for the hotel and a Frenchman named Anton Fiche who was an outstanding gardener was employed to supervise all gardening activities. On one occasion Plant sent Fiche to the Bahamas where he secured a boatload of tropical plants and, of course, Plant on his return from his European trips brought many unusual trees and plants.<sup>15</sup> As the first step in preparation of the land on the proposed garden site, an area between the hotel and river was cleared and flowers and trees were transplanted in this area and elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> It was said that thousands of geraniums lined the banks of the small brook which flows into Hillsborough River. In 1892, a catalogue of fruits and flowers growing on the Tampa Bay Grounds listed more than one hundred and fifty different plants. Included in the list were twenty-two kinds of palm trees, thirteen ferns, nine kinds of cacti, three types of bananas, twelve kinds of orchids and various citrus trees including orange, lime, lemon, grapefruit, mandarin and tangerine.<sup>17</sup> It certainly was a lovely spot.

Somehow the hotel was not ready for occupancy in January, 1890. Perhaps Mrs. Plant could be blamed for she was shopping in Europe for statues, paintings, tapestries and furniture for the public rooms of the hotel and shipments did not arrive in time.<sup>18</sup> More likely it was James Wood, the architect, who was responsible for the delay. It was said that time and time again he had walls torn down when they did not suit his fancy, and specifications were repeatedly changed. As late as March 28, 1890, he departed on a trip to New York to make arrangements for the addition of buildings which included a large dining hall seating 650 persons, steam laundry, servant's

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<sup>15</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, June 21, 1959. When the hotel closed for five years after the death of Plant, Fiche developed a celery farm in Ybor City (North of Seventh Avenue and West of Thirtieth Street) and operated it for many years.

<sup>16</sup> Since it would take some time for the trees and scrubs to develop beautiful foliage, photographs taken of the hotel grounds during the first several years show it in an almost bare state.

<sup>17</sup> An original copy of this catalogue is in the Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Grismer expresses this view in his excellent book *Tampa* (Saint Petersburg, 1950), 189.

quarters housing 275 persons, engine house, conservatory and kitchen.<sup>19</sup> In order to provide space for these buildings, additional land to the west was purchased. Since the large steam laundry planned for the hotel could not be operated at a profit if it were entirely dependent upon hotel business, Plant Investment Company officials decided that in addition to the hotel business the laundry should service the dirty linen of the Plant Steamship Line vessels.

Architect Wood observed every detail of the construction but he always was glad to see visitors and guide them about the site noting what changes were taking place. The electrical contract had been given to the Eureka Company of New York and it was planned to have two thousand lights throughout the hotel.<sup>20</sup> Electric lights and telephones were to be placed in each guest room. All window glass in the building had double thick and number one grade specifications and was imported from France. Four large steel tanks were placed on the roof to provide plumbing pressure and a two hundred feet long, fifteen feet wide and eight feet deep cistern was installed beneath the building to provide water for the hotel.<sup>21</sup> Eighty carloads of furniture arrived and were installed in rooms in the south wing.<sup>22</sup>

The people of Tampa saw a unique building arise on the river bank that once had been a wilderness. Architect Wood had planned a five hundred and eleven room structure topped by thirteen minarets, each complete with a crescent, representing the Mohammedan lunar year. It would seem that the style was Moorish but observers have pointed out that the domes and minarets are typical of the Near East rather than Spain. Certainly the building has no claim as being pure Moorish and there is at least one

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<sup>19</sup> Tampa *Tribune*, March 29, 1890. Wood had been sent by Plant to Spain to study the Moorish style of architecture and Wood followed this style in the several buildings that he planned in Tampa and elsewhere in Florida and Georgia. In his initial layout for the Tampa Bay Hotel, Wood planned that a wooden building would be suitable as a dining place for a hotel costing two hundred thousand dollars, but by 1890 he changed his mind and decided to erect a more costly dining hall connected by a long hallway to the main hotel building.

<sup>20</sup> Power for the electricity was supplied by two high speed machines and four "five hundred light dynamos" housed in a brick building some four hundred feet from the main building. Tampa *Tribune*, May 1, 1890.

<sup>21</sup> From available evidence it appears that the Tampa Bay hotel made use of other sources of water supply.

<sup>22</sup> In 1893 Plant visited Chicago and purchased a large supply of furniture. It appeared that he purchased too much and it was necessary to hold a sale to dispose of the surplus. Tampa *Tribune*, December 19, 1922.



building in Saint Augustine erected during this period which is more representative of the Moorish style.

The grounds of the hotel were indeed most impressive. At first, rustic gates made of cabbage palmetto trunks guarded the carriage and foot entrance way path but they were replaced by iron gates and a watchman's house by 1894. Near the center of the spacious lawn was erected a white stone outpost containing as weapons two old cannon taken from Fort Brooke which stood across the river. Rickshaws pulled by young Negroes rather than Chinese coolies were available to carry the guests to the dining room or to the circular Mirror Pool which lay to the front of the hotel or for a spin around the mile long walk which circled the main building. To the west of the hotel was a nine-hole golf course designed by John H. Gillespie of Sarasota and Scotland.<sup>23</sup> During the early days of the hotel, Mr. Gillespie caught the attention of all newcomers with his kilts. Train tracks installed during the construction days to transport building materials were utilized to carry guests directly to the hotel doors. It was said that Mr. and Mrs. Plant (home base of operations, 586 Fifth Avenue, New York City) lived at times in a private railroad car of the Plant System which was known as "Number One Hundred" but when they visited the hotel, they lived in a suite reserved specially for them.

Entering the hotel through the main doors, guests found themselves in a rotunda, with its many chairs, divans and art objects. From the great central hall, corridors led left and right to the interior wings of the building. The northern corridor led into the solarium and a beauty shop which offered hair styling and manicuring service.

Situated in the south corridor of the first floor were rooms used for various general purposes. These included a waiting room for male and female visitors, several waiting rooms reserved for feminine visitors and writing rooms. At the entrance way to this part of the building was the ever popular ballroom where dances were held at nights and tea served at four in the afternoon.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Tampa *Tribune*, November 22, 1959.

<sup>24</sup> The south corridor leads into what is now known as the Tampa Municipal Museum, maintained by the City of Tampa. The office of the Director of the Museum may have served as Mr. Plant's residence when he and his wife stayed in Tampa. One photograph of the hotel orchestra directed by Henry Stubbleline shows the orchestra performing in the room known to-day as the Dome Theatre. Tampa *Tribune*, July 20, 1952. Until the season's business warranted moving to the Tampa Bay Hotel, Stubbleline's group gave concerts at the Port Tampa Inn. Tampa *Tribune*, December 8, 1893 and August 26, 1894.

On the level below the ground floor were located various services for the guests. In this area the gentlemen could visit a cafe, billiard room, barber shop and a drug store. The ladies could enjoy segregated shuffleboard, billiards and cafe facilities in the same floor. In addition to these services listed above, there were available in this subterranean level, needle and mineral water baths, massages and a physician.<sup>25</sup>

Mr. and Mrs. Plant made a tour of Europe in 1889 to visit the Paris Exposition and to secure suitable furniture and art objects for the public rooms in the Tampa Bay Hotel. On this European trip Plant carried the Florida exhibit for the exposition at a personal cost of \$15,000. Since Henry Plant was in his seventies, it was the younger, second wife, Mrs. Margaret Plant, who had the energy to visit the numerous antique shops that are available for those who possess wealth. Perhaps of all the objects obtained at this time, the most impressive was the 30,000 yards of red carpeting with blue dragons which had been purchased from Christie's in London. The carpet had been ordered by English royalty but rejected because of their refusal to walk on the emblematic lion figure and Plant purchased the entire consignment. It had taken eleven men with block and tackle to place in the lobby another gem imported from Europe—a lifesize bronze of Victor Hugo's Esmeralda playing with her little goat.<sup>26</sup> Some other items included: One hundred and ten carved mirrors from Florence and Venice, solid brass candelabra, a Marie Antoinette parlor from the palace at Versailles, a large majolica vase, two Indian jewel vases and various possessions owned and loved by Marie Antoinette, Louis XIV, Louis Phillippe, Napoleon, Isabella

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<sup>25</sup> Tampa *Tribune*, February 15, 1955. Prior to the opening of the Student Center in 1964 the University of Tampa utilized these billiard and shuffleboard rooms, as a cafeteria and club room area. During the early days of the hotel no lady, worthy of the title could be seen partaking of an alcoholic drink but one daring woman invaded the bar room during an odd moment and enjoyed herself and the same daring damsel ordered a drink to be sent to her room.

<sup>26</sup> This carpet may be seen on the floors of several rooms in the Tampa Municipal Museum. Probably most of the articles that were of European origin were purchased on the 1889 trip to Europe. Another trip was taken to Japan in 1897 and articles of oriental origin were purchased and placed in the Tampa Bay Hotel. After the death of Plant, his widow removed many of the art objects and throughout the years various pieces of the hotel furnishings were taken to other places which included homes in Tampa. According to D. B. McKay one lease holder removed a railroad car load of pianos and the Tampa City Hall was supplied with office furniture removed from the hotel attic. Tampa *Tribune*, November 22, 1959. The bulk of these art objects have been placed in the Tampa Municipal Museum (part of the Tampa Bay Hotel Building) and is available for inspection on Tuesdays through Saturdays during the day hours. Many of the objects have greatly increased in value since 1890 and the entire collection is a worthy credit to the City of Tampa.

and Ferdinand of Spain, Queen Elizabeth, Queen Victoria and Mary, Queen of Scots.

As a visitor entered through the main entrance way into the circular two story rotunda, he came into contact with various treasures imported from Europe. Thirteen polished marble columns supported the base of the rotunda and bronze figures were placed by each column. Life size bronze Indian maidens, in groups, served as light fixtures for illumination needed on the steps leading to the second floor.

Occupying a place of prominence in the drawing room (known to-day as the Ballroom) were a sofa and two chairs which had belonged to Marie Antoinette, four gilt chairs that had been possessed by Louis Phillippe and assorted antique and modern Spanish, French and Japanese cabinets. Along the hallways could be found antique carved Dutch and rare onyx chairs. The beautiful art collection which decorated the walls included oil paintings, water colors, and steel engravings.

In evaluating these art treasures it must be remembered that during the 1880's and 1890's many wealthy Americans visited Europe in search of paintings and tapestries to fill their houses in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia and elsewhere. Certainly a great deal of worthwhile art objects were obtained but it must be admitted that some of the so-called treasures were greatly overpriced and even of doubtful origin. Perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Plant were as fortunate as John Ringling who visited Europe sometime later and returned to Florida with numerous items of great value.

With the hotel nearing completion in 1890, the construction foremen totaled the amount of materials they had used to fashion the building. In erecting the main section alone, 7,576 barrels of shell were used, 452 carloads of brick laid and 4,041 barrels of lime used, along with 2,949 barrels of cement, 2,224 tons of steel and 69½ tons of iron. Other construction materials included 242 kegs of nails, 5,050 feet of iron cornices, 689,500 feet of lumber, 27,000 square feet of stone dressing, 30 polished granite columns and numerous tons of other miscellaneous materials.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> A picture of a 1892 construction crew may be seen in the *Tampa Tribune*, October 12, 1952. It was taken by J. C. Field who performed the same task during the cornerstone ceremonies. The total cost of the hotel probably was in the neighborhood of two million dollars. This estimate does not include half a million dollars spent on furnishings.

An employe list of three hundred persons which included leading chefs, managers and other key personnel from outstanding hotels of the country was hired and made ready the establishment for its formal opening on February 5, 1891. Some fifteen thousand invitations which bore the legend: "Tampa Bay Hotel will be open for guests, Saturday 31, 1891, and the opening ball will take place Thursday, February 5, 1891, to which you are respectfully invited," were sent to various persons including Henry Flagler. By 8:30 P.M. guests began arriving in carriages, launches and train and, in honor of the occasion, the ladies were presented with fans and brass crumb trays and shaving mugs and ash trays were given to the men.

The events of the evening were given in excellent detail by one eyewitness:

"Mayor Glogowski officiated with Mr. and Mrs. Plant, hundreds of guests passed by them. Chinese lanterns and candles lighted the grounds. Two thousand people viewed the grand opening. The Albert Opera Company, the H. P. Stubbleline orchestra, played selections from Faust and other operas for an hour and a half. In the dining room with its huge dome, its arches on fitted pillars, its tapestries on pure white walls, were flags of all nations.<sup>28</sup> Silk damask of various hues draped the alcoves above. Food was served on Wedgewood, French porcelain, and Vienna plates. Giovanni Curreta, for fifteen years in Delmonico's and the Union Club, New York, made the pastry. Rossi, from the Manhattan Club, was baker.

Afterwards it was like a fabulous house party. With the 300 bedrooms and royal suites filled, guests slept in the turrets, in the drawing room, parlor rotunda, bunking on the tapestried couches near marble statues and French and Japanese cabinets — near the jeweled shrine that Mary, Queen of Scots, bowed her small white neck before, as she prayed for delay of execution. Ebony and rosewood chairs were moved together to accommodate a man's sleeping length. Old carved Dutch chairs, onyx chairs, were similarly coupled."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The wood carving in the stairways, ballroom and probably the beautiful work about the rotunda of the dining room was done by Ernest Augustus Oakes. *Tampa Tribune*, December 13, 1959.

<sup>29</sup> One of the tunes played on the opening night was the "Tampa Bay Hotel Gallup." A copy of this tune may be seen in the Hillsborough County Historical Commission's room in the County Courthouse. As late as 1916 one guest noted that all of the hotel employees had come from the North. Mildred McDowell *Old Seaport Towns of the South* (New York, 1917), 193-209.

As part of the opening ceremonies, a tennis tournament was arranged in which English, Canadian and American tennis stars were invited to participate. Included in the players were Grinstead and Garrett from England and Dr. Dwight Davis, the father of American lawn tennis. According to one young Englishman who took part, the tournament was not taken too seriously by him but he enjoyed dancing until midnight and then playing pool or poker and enjoying the best sherry cobbler, gin fizzes and whiskey sours that he had ever tasted.<sup>30</sup>

In April, 1891, the Tampa Bay Hotel closed its doors terminating the first season of operations. A grand total of 4,287 guests had registered during this first year. To emphasize the value of the hotel to Tampa, it became known that eighty-five hundred dollars had been expended in the local market to purchase fruit and vegetables and eighteen hundred dollars had been spent for fire wood.

By the season of 1893-94 the Tampa Bay Hotel schedule had settled to a steady routine. In order to promote more business, it was decided that the hotel should open some six weeks ahead of the previous date and the place was made ready for guests on December 4, 1893. General Manager J. H. King of the Plant Hotel System arrived from New York November 7, 1893, with his staff of waiters, clerks and twenty-seven maids to prepare the hotel for the opening date.<sup>31</sup> After much work by all concerned, the signal was given that the hotel was open — a flag was raised to the top of the staff near the engine house.

For a fee which ranged from thirty to fifty dollars a day and included food, transportation, guns and ammunition, Arthur Schleman, chief guide and John Gallie, associate, took guests to the nearby forests in Hillsborough and Manatee counties where a bountiful supply of game abounded. During the season of 1893-94 some 5,084 quail and snipe, 11 deer, 14 turkeys and 7 alligators were killed.<sup>32</sup> H. Lee Borden of the Borden Milk Company was able to bring back 73 quail and 2 doves. Since the guests were afraid of rattlesnakes, much of the shooting was done from horseback or from a buggy.

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<sup>30</sup> T. C. Bridges, *Florida to Fleet Street* (London, no date), *passim*.

<sup>31</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, December 8, 1893.

<sup>32</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, March 24, 1894. Arthur Schleman, a native of England, had been a guide in New York State and came to Tampa with Chester Chaffin of the Plant Railroad System.

In addition to the hunts in the field, the hotel sponsored a snipe shooting contest.

The earlier opening date seemed to have been a success for the following season opened one day earlier than the previous year. Much work was done in preparation for this season. The first floor was carpeted with a Juno carpet imported from Europe. The walks about the building were paved with concrete blocks instead of the clay previously used and a thirty by forty foot conservatory was erected. A Japanese pavilion was constructed near the river and its first floor contained a drugstore operated by S. B. Leonardi and Company and the upper floor served as a sitting room for the guests. Many tapestries, Persian rugs and four hundred paintings had been purchased to decorate the hotel. Most unique of the changes had been the erection of a frame building which served as Bachelors Quarters for those desiring the quiet life. Each room possessed a bath, hot and cold running water, electric lights and a call bell. Despite all of these improvements only a page and one half of guests were registered on the first day and most of them represented the Plant Investment Company.<sup>33</sup>

The Tampa Bay Casino which was constructed near the banks of the river was not ready for use until 1894. In this large auditorium guests heard top opera companies from New York City. These companies, with world recognized stars, while on their way to Cuba for winter tours, were able to stop-over for Tampa engagements. Included in the list of great artists who performed at the Tampa Bay Casino were John Drew, Ignace Paderewski, Anna Pavlova, Mrs. Fiske and Sarah Bernhardt. The "divine Sarah" came to Tampa on one of her numerous farewell tours but would not stay at the hotel because she claimed it was too drafty and used a private railway car. When movies came to the casino, a one hundred piece orchestra played during the performance of the silent "Birth of a Nation." This building served as an American Legion Hall during its final days and was destroyed by a fire on July 20, 1941. Since the hotel owned, among other vessels, a fleet of electric launches, there was located on the grounds, a boathouse for private and hotel owned craft. Recent excavations have disclosed the existence of a brick lined tunnel leading from the river banks to the hotel.

As the fame of the Tampa Bay Hotel was spread throughout the United States, many outstanding visitors came to the place and a growing number

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<sup>33</sup> Tampa *Tribune*, December 7, 1894.

of national meetings were scheduled there. In April, 1891, a naval squadron anchored in Tampa Bay and Admiral Walker and his staff were given a reception, ball and banquet by Henry Plant on Easter Monday. In 1895 Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant came to the hotel and she was honored by the U.C.V. and G.A.R. in a reception attended by a thousand persons. A reception for former Confederate general J. B. Gordon was held in the casino in December, 1896. In the season of 1897-98 a national trade association and the National Fish Congress held conventions at the hotel.<sup>34</sup>

Despite all of the attractions and beauty of the Tampa Bay Hotel, it was never more than half filled during the pre-Spanish-American War period. Soon the hotel became known as "Plant's Folly," but the old gentleman was not disturbed. He replied to all critics that he loved the place and that his special enjoyments were listening to the pipe organ and following the gardeners about on their duties.<sup>35</sup>

The Spanish-American War period saw the hotel reach a most notable place in American history and become one of the most famous hotels in the world. Henry Plant had succeeded in getting Egmont Key fortified one month before the outbreak of war by using his influence with Secretary of War Alger. On April 11, 1898, McKinley sent his war message to Congress, and the extent of Plant's power was seen when on April 13, Tampa was selected to serve as embarkation point and base of supplies for the Army. The Tampa Bay Hotel, which had closed at the end of the winter tourist season, reopened on April 21 in order to serve prospective military and civilian guests.

The Tampa Bay Hotel saw its most glorious days during this pre-embarkation period. It served as staff headquarters or as a temporary home for various dignitaries, including Clara Barton, General Joseph Wheeler, Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, General Nelson A. Miles, Colonel Leonard Wood, General Fitzhugh Lee, General William R. Shafter, Richard Harding Davis, and various newspaper correspondents and military attaches from all parts of the world.

In 1899, Henry Bradley Plant died and for some time it appeared that the Tampa Bay Hotel would be forced to close its doors permanently. The

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<sup>34</sup> Tampa *Tribune*, November 22, 1959.

<sup>35</sup> Tampa *Tribune*, February 15, 1955.

erection of other luxury hotels for tourists in Florida had caused the Tampa Bay Hotel to operate at a loss and only Plant's desire to compete with Flagler had kept the place open. During the several years that the heirs argued about the property,<sup>36</sup> the hotel remained closed most of the time, but finally in 1904 it and one hundred and fifty acres of surrounding property was sold to the City of Tampa for \$125,000.36. After the City of Tampa acquired the property, it was leased to David Lauber for \$10,000 a year and he opened the Tampa Bay Hotel for guests in January, 1906.

In order to attract visitors to the hotel, Henry Plant had erected a large exposition hall and race track in an area northeast of the main hotel building. Such an undertaking attracted good crowds and well-planned exhibits to the annual South Florida Fair held in the Exposition Hall. After the death of Plant, the fair ceased operations in the period from 1899 to 1905 and had sporadic revivals until 1916 when were initiated the annual fairs which have been very successful. After the death of Plant the fair grounds and hotel buildings have been operated as separate tracts of land.

During the period from 1906 to 1920 the Tampa Bay Hotel became the center of Tampa's social life and attracted a fair share of tourists in the December to April season. The hotel was advertised as being the only fire-proof hotel in the state and golf tournaments, fishing excursions, transportation by boat to picnics at Sulphur Springs and Ballast Point and hunts featuring duck, alligator and quail shooting were stressed as principal attractions. The list of prominent guests included such personalities as John L. Sullivan, Belmont Tiffany, Stuyvesant Fish, William Jennings Bryan, officers from Cuban, Italian, Spanish and American naval vessels, the German, Italian and Spanish ambassadors, Father Sherman, Governor Charles Magoon of Cuba and Irwin Cobb, European nobility and various state officials and

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<sup>36</sup> Although Morton Plant had accompanied his father and the second wife on a honeymoon trip to Europe, the friendship had cooled by 1899 and there was a bitter fight between step-son Morton Plant and Margaret Plant concerning the Tampa Bay Hotel.

In 1902 the Plant Estate sold the Tampa Bay Hotel to a syndicate composed of W. S. Harney, Charles Scott, Thomas Scott, and Gaston Scott for \$300,000. This group kept the hotel open for two years and in 1904 returned it. Prior to the change of ownership Mrs. Plant had been given the privilege of selecting items from the hotel and she selected various articles which were valued at \$175,000 at that time. Before returning the hotel to the Plant Estate, the Scott family selected many items which were taken to Montgomery, Alabama, Valdosta, Georgia and Mobile, Alabama. Statement written by Gaston Scott (no date) and letter of June 16, 1948, written by Grace R. Scott. Both items in files of Tampa Municipal Museum.



industrial leaders. The first Gasperilla Carnival Ball was held there in 1904. During the Plant era the Tampa Bay Hotel had been regarded as a resort for the tourists and the local citizens frequented other nearby hotels for their social activities but now the holders of the yearly leases eagerly sought local patronage. Many of the older generation in Tampa recall attending their first formal dance which took place, of course, at the hotel.

Besides Tampa social life and normal tourist activities, other events were scheduled at the hotel. During the Spring practice season, one or more major league baseball teams had their headquarters at the Tampa Bay and played their games on a pole field or race track which is the present site of the Florida State Fairgrounds. It was claimed that Babe Ruth signed his first baseball contract in the hotel lobby when he appeared as a prospective pitcher for the Boston Red Sox.

The 1920's saw the Tampa Bay Hotel rise to glory and fall to retirement. The leaseholders did not do too well during the 1910-1920 period and various persons held the contract for short intervals. After 1920, however, there was a shortage of available hotel rooms in Tampa and the Tampa Bay became a veritable "gold mine". Nearly one quarter of a million dollars was spent by leaseholder W. F. Adams and the City of Tampa to renovate the building so that it could accommodate the large number of guests. After 1926 the interest in Florida dropped rapidly and many rooms were unoccupied. By 1932 Adams was declared bankrupt and the lease reverted to the City of Tampa.

In the winter and spring of 1933 the Trustees of the University of Tampa decided to change from a two year Junior College to a four year one and to move from the Hillsborough High School Building. It appeared that the Davis Island Biscayne Apartment location would be chosen until the city officials of Tampa, realizing that this would be a good opportunity to help a worthy cause, offered the University a lease with such favorable terms that it could not be rejected. The entire building, with the exception of the south wing of the first floor which was made into a city museum for some of

the Tampa Bay Hotel furnishings, was leased to the school for ten years at a rate of a dollar a year. The Tampa Bay Hotel Building entered into an entirely new phase of activities as the main administration and classroom building of the University of Tampa.

The Tampa Bay Hotel was not destined to be just a hotel building serving good food and drinks and providing rest and relaxation for its guests. As a direct result of the Spanish-American War it acquired a place in history as one of the great American hotels. The fame acquired from the dispatches and books written by famous guests who came to the hotel at that time caused Tampa to become known throughout the world.