

The Port Of Palm Beach: The Breakers Pier

By SUE POPE BURKHARDT*

Everyone knows about the Overseas Railway which connected Key West to the Florida mainland. But scarcely anyone ever knew that this railway was not the first of Henry M. Flagler's ventures with "a railway that went to sea." No one, well scarcely anyone, remembers that Palm Beach was first established as a port back in 1896, ships sailing from the Breakers Pier to Nassau.

It does seem strange that this bit of the history of the fabulous Flagler era has been overlooked. The news never made big headlines and can be found only in short paragraphs tucked away in crumbling newspapers written in the style of that day.

One such paper, *The Gazeteer*, published by C. M. Gardner and C. F. Kennedy, traces in brief items the history of the Breakers Pier and its use as the port of Palm Beach. These items were re-printed in their "Business Directory and Guide and History of Dade County, Fla. for 1896-97."

Palm Beach County's present port dates back only to 1915 at which time the legislature granted a charter for its establishment as a port in Riviera Beach. That earlier first port, the Breakers Pier, extended 1,000 feet into the Atlantic Ocean.

In extending his railway and its chain of hotels from St. Augustine to Palm Beach Mr. Flagler had acquired the Royal Victoria and the Colonial hotels in Nassau and it no doubt seemed the logical step to provide easy access to them. As is the case with most of his hotels Mr. Flagler had built the Colonial.

Perhaps the idea for this Palm Beach-Nassau steamship line originated as far back as 1888 when Mr. Flagler acquired the Jacksonville, Tampa and Key West Railway. This line connected at Tocoli with steamers plying the St. Johns River. Here passengers were met by a horse drawn railway car for the trip to St. Augustine, and claimed it to have been a more pleasant trip than to attempt to reach St. Augustine over land from Jacksonville.

When Mr. Flagler announced his plan for building The Inn on the

*Sue Pope (Mrs. Henry J.) Burkhardt, former newspaper writer, has resided in West Palm Beach since February 1921, having moved there to head the bureau of the *Miami Metropolis*.

ocean shore east of the Hotel Royal Poinciana, already stretching its length along the eastern shore of Lake Worth, he also announced his plan for the building of the pier. It was from that structure, reaching out into the ocean, that passengers alighting from the railway cars on the pier, boarded vessels docked at its end.

The Tropical Sun of May 23, 1895, describes the railway extension as first used to haul building supplies to The Inn. This trestle across Lake Worth not having been completed, a large lighter, capable of ferrying five or six loaded cars, was brought into the lake and used to ferry loaded cars from West Palm Beach to the Poinciana Hotel docks where they were shunted onto the short but standard guage track.

The Flagler Museum, repository of much of the history of the Flagler era, reports that "We do not know what happened to the St. Augustine records." The supposition is that they may have been lost in the destruction of one of the warehouses in use when all records were kept in New York City. Consequently items taken originally from the *Gazeteer* and listed in The Guide in chronological order are the only presently available source of the history of the pier. The Guide tells it this way:

April 18, 1895—Mr. Flagler announces his decision to build The Inn, also a large club house. In March lumber is ferried across Lake Worth to start building.

September 25, 1895—Contract is let to Capt. J. D. Ross for the ocean pier. Plans include a bulkhead filled with rock at the far end of the pier, which will also carry a railroad track.

October 19, 1895—Announcement is made of the establishment of the Palm Beach-Nassau Steamship Line.

January 4, 1896—The steamer *Northumberland* to run between Palm Beach and Nassau arrived in Jacksonville.

January 18, 1896—The Hon. Jefferson B. Browne, Collector of Customs at Key West, arrived to open the port of Palm Beach.

The exact date of the first sailing from the Pier has not been uncovered but early in 1896 the steamer *Northumberland*, taking passengers at Palm Beach, continued down to Miami and thence to Nassau. This information comes from notes kept by Mr. Grant Bedford, Director Emeritus of the Flagler Museum, notes made from conversations with Mr. Flagler's personal physician, Col. Owen Kenan.

A call upon Mr. Tom Kenan, head of the Flagler System offices in Palm Beach, brought out the statement that he had never heard of the pier used as a port. He volunteered to write to Mr. Warren Smith, Mr. Flagler's private secretary. Mr. Smith not only verified the fact but stated that Mr. Kenan's family had made the trip frequently. This letter, written in September of 1969, just a few days before Mr. Smith's sudden death, also suggested sources of possible information.

But even Mr. Smith had never heard of a call made at the port in 1898 by the *Three Friends*. This was the famous ocean going tug used by Napoleon B. Broward, that intrepid runner of guns to Cuba during the Spanish-American war.¹

According to reminiscences of local pioneer residents, who have since passed on, each householder in the Palm Beaches very mysteriously became the owner of a Springfield rifle to be used against the possible invasion by a Spanish war fleet perhaps?

Research in the files of the *Lake Worth Daily News* reveals the disappointing fact that no files exist back of the year 1899. However, search of the files of that year show that the pier did see service connected with that war and its aftermath.

One such item from the issue of January 24, 1899 reports that "The signal tower near The Inn is being painted. This tower belongs to the Flagler property but it was used last spring by the government as a signal tower when there was thought to be a possibility of a Spanish descent on the American coast."

"The U.S. Navy converted yacht *Yankton* anchored off the pier for three hours (January 20, 1899) on the way from Newport to Santiago, Cuba. Paymaster and boat's crew came ashore to get newspapers and notify the Department. Besides Capt. Dyer the yacht carried 100 men and seven guns. The party had dinner at the Poinciana."

That same month on the 31st *The News* reported "The U.S. Transport *Chester* stopped at Palm Beach several hours on Sunday and some of her officers came ashore to send dispatches. The *Chester* was bound for Havana and had on board a Michigan regiment of volunteers and a few other soldiers making 1100 in all."

Frequent items name winter guests as having returned to The Inn after visits to Nassau. Capt. Ross of Jacksonville was reported at The Inn and described as "the man who built the pier" and "he calls at Palm Beach

occasionally to see that the old ocean has not gotten the best of his handiwork."

One item announced that "Mr. Flagler is making arrangements for the British warship, now at Nassau, to come to Palm Beach for a short stay. What a burst of social life there will be if they come," declared the *News* on January 22, 1899.

In February Sir Gilbert T. Carter, governor of the Bahamas, was invited to be a guest at the Washington birthday ball, and expected, said the *News* writer, to come "in one of His Majesty's cruisers now in Nassau." The U.S. cruiser *Brooklyn* was also expected, the *News* predicting "The occasion will be socially the most notable in the history of Palm Beach."

Governor Carter did come but not in one of His Majesty's cruisers. Instead "Mr. Flagler, accompanied by Mrs. Ashley, Miss Pomroy and Miss Kenan" went down in his private car to Miami to meet him and his daughter. No doubt a courtesy due to the governor, who perhaps did come in one of His Majesty's cruisers to Miami, that being the first port of call from Nassau.

The Washington birthday ball, held at the Royal Poinciana, was considered the height and practically the closing date for that hotel. But as late as March 11 the Inn was still open and the steam yacht *Barracuda*, owned by Edward Kelly of New York, was anchored at the pier awaiting orders from the owner, who with his wife and daughter had already registered at The Inn in anticipation of the yacht's arrival.

Exactly how long the pier served as the port of Palm Beach is not easy to verify, but it is common knowledge that The Inn was enlarged and the pier improved and even extended in 1900. It was also in 1900 that Mr. Flagler, in a letter dated July 1, announced the combining of the Plant Steamship line with the Florida East Coast Steamship line, the two becoming the property by purchase, of the Peninsular and Occidental Steamship Line operating between Miami, Port Tampa, Nassau and Key West.²

The Flagler fleet consisted of 25 ships, the *St. Lucie* being the first purchased and considered his flagship. According to Mr. Bedford "The *St. Lucie* was the first of Flagler's steamers to reach Palm Beach, the first to reach Miami, and the first to take Mr. Flagler and his party to the Florida Keys." It was wrecked in the hurricane of 1906 with the loss of 21 lives. Mr. Bedford considers it important to correct a confusion between the *St. Lucie* and an earlier boat called the *Santa Lucia*. The latter came

into Lake Worth from the Indian River in the summer of 1894, the *St. Lucie* being acquired much later.

Some speculation concerning the pier sets the date for its termination as a port as 1901 at which time Whitehall, the home which Mr. Flagler built for his bride, Mary Lily Kenan, was constructed. The site chosen for the mansion lay to the south of the original tracks which carried guests to the two hotels and to the pier. The noise and cinders of the trains of that day were objectionable.

Consequently the tracks were moved to the north of the Royal Poinciana, a move which also necessitated the moving of the railroad trestle itself. From the new location the trains still carried guests to the two hotels and in addition sidings were added to accommodate private cars of the guests. But no more trains went onto the pier.

Another suggested date for the end of the pier's use as a port is 1904, the time when actual building of the railway to Key West was begun. The railroad was already in operation as far south as Homestead, having reached there in 1903 to tap the rich farming section below Miami.³

But Mr. Bedford's notes show that even then some of that fleet of 25 ships carried guests to Nassau and others men and supplies to the Keys. Perhaps the actual sailings were from Miami however as items gleaned from *The News* of 1903 tell of guests going down to Miami for a trip to Nassau.

Other items of the 1903 hotel season tell of private yachts anchoring opposite the "new steel pier" and guests coming ashore in launches. The steel referred to being the steel pilings used to repair the pier following destruction by hurricane of the original bulkhead.

One such visitor on January 18 was Admiral Dewey's flagship, the *Mayflower*, recognized first by its blue and white flags and the ship's signals in which the Admiral asked: "Report my ship off the southeast coast of Florida." Capt. George E. Andrews, in charge of the Breakers pool, being familiar with the flag code, relayed the message to the hotel. In a letter of thanks sent to Mr. Leland Sperry, manager of the Breakers, Admiral Dewey apologized explaining "the sea too heavy to make a landing."

An article on Mr. Flagler appearing in the 1903 Souvenir Edition of the *News* merely says: "In 1896 the railway was extended to Miami. Next the steamship line from Florida to Nassau was removed from Palm Beach to Miami, and lines established to Key West and Havana." From that item

it could be presumed that by 1903 sailings from the pier had been discontinued.

This writer opts for the year 1902 for its discontinuance. That was the year in which the Flaglers moved into their new home. Any mention of the pier in *The News* was devoted to the kind and size of the fish being caught with special emphasis on sharks; and in the January 31st edition there appears a photograph labelled "Miami harbor and elegant ships of the P. and O. Steamship Co. at anchor in Miami harbor."

The railway to Key West is now a motor road, but the Breakers pier is history only. Having been partially destroyed in the hurricane of 1928 which centered over the Palm Beaches, it was demolished a year or two later.

¹Verified by Henry J. Burkhardt, a small boy at that time.

²Letter on display in the Railroad Room of the Museum.

³*The Story of a Pioneer*, booklet published by the Florida East Coast Railway.