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FROM THE EDITORS

The frontier has figured prominently in the American imagination and the writing of history. Ever since Frederick Jackson Turner suggested "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" in an 1893 address, historians have debated the meaning of "frontier" and its influence. Disagreements have also erupted over which characteristics the frontier most fostered - individualism and self-reliance or racism and violence. In any case, the point of Turner's argument was that the American frontier - and hence its influence - disappeared in 1890, as a result of dramatic population shifts.

Some pundits, including historians, have suggested that a variety of "new frontiers" sprang up. In fact, some have pointed to the city as an urban frontier that Americans had to conquer. Still later, the frontiers of space loomed as a challenge to a new generation of Americans. The continued mystique of the frontier phenomenon confirms its power in the American imagination.

This issue of *Tampa Bay History* features articles about Florida's evolving frontiers. In the opening article, "Odet Philippe at Tampa Bay," J. Allison DeFoor, II, examines the activities of the first settler of European descent to take up permanent residence in what became Pinellas County. Odet Philippe's earlier failures and the reasons for his ultimate success on the shores of Tampa Bay suggest that luck and well-placed friends, in addition to individual initiative, helped people succeed on the frontier.

The two articles that follow deal with urban life during the 1920s. In his article, "Mass Culture Meets Main Street: The Opening of Lakeland's Polk Theatre," Stephen E. Branch emphasizes the larger economic and social forces which first advanced and then retarded Lakeland's growth during the boom and bust years of the 1920s. Another legacy of that era, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, established a chapter in Tampa in 1915. Authors Walter T. Howard and Virginia M. Howard trace its origins in "The Early Years of the NAACP in Tampa, 1915-30."

As bad as conditions seemed at the end of the Roaring Twenties, we know they got worse. The Great Depression provided the opportunity for the New Deal to experiment with new forms of public assistance. "The WPA in Tampa: A Photographic Essay" demonstrates graphically why this work relief program enjoyed widespread support.

Finally, in "Four Days Before Dallas: JFK in Tampa," author Frank DeBenedictis looks at a brief moment in "the New Frontier" of President John F. Kennedy.

In its next issue *Tampa Bay History* will commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. The entire issue will be devoted to life on the homefront in the Tampa Bay area.
Standing atop the Indian mound at Safety Harbor’s Philippe Park in Pinellas County, one can feel the romance of this historic site. Due to the protection of the area as a park and the relatively light development around the fringes of Upper Tampa Bay, the site retains some of the flavor of the time of its settlement in the mid-nineteenth century, when it was dubbed Saint Helena by Odet Philippe, the plantation’s founder. Today residents of Florida’s most densely populated county may pause after a day of recreation to stare at Philippe’s grave, located on the park grounds. The gravestone yields the following inscription, at least half of which is wrong:

DR. ODET PHILLIPPI

BORN LYONS FRANCE

1785 - 1869

Head Surgeon in Napoleon’s Army.
With inaccuracies of date, status, and even in the last name which is misspelled, the gravestone reflects the myth of Odet Philippe as it developed in Tampa Bay in the first half of this century. Previous articles have examined the public records of Charleston, South Carolina, Key West and New River to document Philippe’s life.\(^2\) Evidence found has undermined portions of the historic myth, including Philippe’s alleged royalty, training as a physician and claimed connections to Napoleon Bonaparte. However, the historical record strongly reinforces his status as a primary figure in the development not only of Tampa Bay but also of all of South Florida. Tantalizing suggestions of ties to pirates, slavetraders and Saint Dominigue (today’s Haiti, the richest colony in the world in its day, then belonging to France) have been found but not proven. This article will again look beyond the romance and the myth to the facts of the historical record of Odet Philippe, this time in context of his final home at Tampa Bay.

Undisputed facts place Philippe as a primary figure in the development of South Florida. One early historian referred to him as “Mr. Phillippe” and noted his distinction as the first permanent, non-native settler on the Pinellas peninsula. This account placed him as a storekeeper in Tampa in the early 1830s and beginning improvements at “Phillippe’s Hammock” without title in 1835. His settlement attracted others, one of whom, Richard Booth, married his daughter Melanie. Their son, Odet W. Booth (known as Keeter) was the first settler’s child born in what is now Pinellas County. By 1842 Philippe was acquiring title to the hammock under the Armed Occupation Act of 1842, and he dubbed it Saint Helena. Surviving the great hurricane of 1848, it was prominent enough by the 1850s to be featured on coastal surveys of the area and the state. A prominent local tourist attraction in its day (a Cypress Gardens of its age), Saint Helena introduced the cultivation of grapefruit to Florida and featured the Duncan grapefruit.\(^3\)

Prior to his arrival in the Tampa Bay area, Philippe had a well-documented presence in Key West in the period 1829-38. He engaged in a variety of commercial activities including a billiard hall and the second cigarmaking enterprise on that island. His introduction of cigar making to Tampa marked the first instance of what would later become an industry so pervasive as to make Tampa known as the Cigar City. He apparently continued familial and business ties to Key West from Tampa Bay through the 1840s and 1850s. His involvement at Key West overlapped Philippe’s attempt to homestead at New River from 1830 to 1836. This effort was cut short by the outbreak of the Second Seminole War when Philippe and other local settlers sought safety in Key West.\(^4\)

Prior to South Florida, Philippe had lived in Charleston, South Carolina, at least from 1819. There he also engaged in a mix of mercantile interests and attempted to establish an agricultural plantation at Christ Church Parish, outside of Charleston. His commercial activities included cigarmaking and an active trade in slaves. He left Charleston for Florida under a hail of lawsuits which resulted in the loss of his estate there. Prior to South Carolina his origins are unknown except for his signed declaration under oath that his place of birth was Lyons, France.\(^5\)

As if this colorful and dynamic life were not enough, there arose the myth of Count Odet Philippe, and what a tale it was!\(^6\) According to legend, he was a French count, the nephew of King Louis XIV (or XVI) and a boyhood friend of Napoleon Bonaparte. Trained as a physician, he had been named head surgeon in the French navy by his old friend Napoleon, which led to his capture at the battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Imprisoned in the Bahamas for two years, he was
paroled upon a pledge not to return to his homeland, so he left for Charleston. Establishing a thriving medical practice in that city, his fortunes reversed when he co-signed the note of a friend who could not pay. Thereupon, he moved to homestead in Florida on New River, raising citrus and making salt. He treated the Indians with respect, providing them with medical treatment. Their love for him caused them to warn him to leave before the start of hostilities. Sailing away with his family, slaves and moveable possessions, he encountered and rescued his neighbor, whose wife and baby had been killed by the Seminoles. He transported all to Key West, where he introduced cigarmaking to the island.

The myth of his life included a foray with pirates. On one of his sailing trips on his vessel Ney (named for Napoleon’s marshall) Philippe was allegedly captured by the fearsome pirate Gomez. Upon treating the pirate and his crew, Philippe was given a letter of safe conduct directed to other pirates, a chest of treasure and a map with directions to Tampa Bay, which the pirate described as the most beautiful body of water in the world, with only the Bay of Naples to compare to it. This brought Philippe to Tampa Bay in the 1820s. He immediately planted his groves, residing there until the great hurricane of 1848. Taking shelter with his family and slaves on an Indian mound (which still exists at the site), he watched as his home, groves and the treasure chest were washed away. He rebuilt and resided there (except during the Civil War when he went inland for safety) until his death at the age of 100.

Philippe was said to have had two or perhaps three wives. The first bore him four daughters. One was named Hortense de Medici, and the first was Charlotte Desheries (also known as des Moines). One wife died of a fit when on passage from Saint Helena back to Key West. He lived until his death with the old family retainer Nell.

The origin of the Philippe myth can be traced. First, it may well have its genesis with the old man himself. He clearly did call his estate after the final resting place of Napoleon, the otherwise bleak and barren island located in the South Atlantic. Its attraction for a namesake is otherwise hard to fathom. He may also have named his vessel Ney. In any event, he would not be the first immigrant who, freed from the restraints of the collective memory of neighbors, embellished his past. Transmission down through generations can magnify such tales.

The direct source of the legend in the above form was Mrs. George W. Booth, who was married to Philippe’s grandson, George Booth. She prepared and published a sweeping narrative which appeared as the lead headline and covered most of the front page of the *Tampa Sunday*
Tribune on May 1, 1921. Later other local papers, including the St. Petersburg Times, would advance the same story. The romantic version of the early settling of Tampa Bay came during the 1920s as the area’s boom in real estate exploded. The legend doubtless had much appeal to emerging regional pride. The theme was picked up by Tampa’s D.B. McKay, civic booster, former mayor and popular historian. McKay, grandson of Tampa’s irrepressible Captain John McKay, authored a popular column, “Pioneer Florida,” which ran in the Tampa Tribune for many years. The column evolved into a major book in three volumes on southwest Florida history. Thus, the Philippe myth made its way prominently into newspaper columns and popular history, becoming enshrined in local lore.7

As with many historical legends, this myth contains many points which are simply not supported in the record, but it also has elements of truth. Philippe’s status as a trained physician has been questioned, based on contemporaneous accounts, though they do support the notion of his practicing frontier medicine.8 Any connection to Napoleon must be doubted due to differences of age found in Philippe’s sworn oath of citizenship.9 His alleged nobility is not reflected in any contemporaneous documents or in any accounts prior to Booth’s in 1921. Despite the embellishments, a vein of truth runs through the tale. In previous accounts the author tested the tale against records in Charleston, Key West and New River. In each place the overall parameters of the legend, absent the baggage of puffery, were found to be true. What follows is an analysis of the records of Tampa Bay to discover Philippe the man, as opposed to Philippe the myth.

Prior to his arrival in the Tampa Bay area, it must be remembered that at the outbreak of the Second Seminole War in 1836, Philippe had returned to Key West, abandoning his plantation at New River. Maloney in his definitive Key West History, published in 1876, stated that Philippe opened the second cigarmaking operation on that island city. He worked in partnership with Shubael Brown and with a labor force of six during the period of 1837-38. With the outbreak of hostilities, Tampa’s Fort Brooke became one of the principal forts for the prosecution of the war against the Seminoles. It in turn attracted a large number of hangers-on, looking to conduct both legitimate and not so legitimate business with the army, the fort and its soldiers.10

The troops’ perceptions of Tampa varied. One officer noted, “[W]e all suffer here in Florida, almost eaten up by fleas, ants, cockroaches and almost all manner of vermin. Even the sand is swarming with fleas, and little fleas that bite.”11 Bartholomew Lynch, a literate private, was impressed with the area: “Tampa Bay is too romantic and lovely a place for one to attempt to describe it. I wish some perfumed, cigar smoking, novel writing city man monkey was here. He could not describe it, he would die of a fit of reality. Tampa is a perfect arcadia. It is impossible to form any idea of the climate of Fla. It must be seen and felt. Florida could be made a heaven on earth ... the more I see of T. Bay the more I like it. It is a romantic and truly picturesque place ... Tampa, Tampa, what a beautiful heavenly and luscourious [sic] spot thou are.” Lynch also described his work: “Nothing to do except to parade or retreat and take care to have our carbine bayonets as bright as a new born dollar, no matter about anything else. No scouting, except little parties now and again who accompany the capt. afishing and hunting, mount guard once in three weeks or so ... times are too good to last for long. Never were soldiers happier than we Florida warriers. Who would think it, books to read, newspapers, periodicals, fresh beef to eat, fish in abundance, whiskey at 50¢ a gill, plenty women in the market, absolutely [sic] at the disposal of
Philippe was drawn to opportunity like a file to a magnet, with or without prompting from a pirate. It is possible that Philippe may actually have been alerted to Tampa Bay by an old friend, William Cooley. It is interesting to note the similarity between Cooley’s name and the “Cooper” of the family legend. The family version bears a remarkable resemblance to the accounts of the Cooley massacre, down to the detail of the loss of his baby and wife with a single bullet, matching contemporary accounts of the Cooley massacre. Cooley had been a prominent settler at New River having arrived in 1823. He had developed a coontie plantation and a variety of other commercial activities including wrecking, and he enjoyed an active political affiliation with Richard Fitzpatrick. A lawyer in Key West, Fitzpatrick had acquired land at both New River and at the mouth of the Miami River, raising coontie at both sites. He led the effort, as president of the Florida Territorial Senate, to create a new county out of Monroe. The Dade massacre created final momentum, to honor the fallen soldier, leading to the creation of Dade County with its county seat at Indian Key. Cooley was off salvaging the vessel *Gil Blas* when this same sequence of events creating the new county doomed his family at the outset of the Second Seminole War. Philippe and Cooley were contemporaries at the small colony of New River. They were both appointed justices of the peace in 1833. Cooley performed the marriage of Philippe’s daughter, Octavia, to Key Wester George P. Washington in that same year, at New River. Their names appear four names apart in the census of 1830, suggesting proximity of residence. After the massacre of his family, Cooley ultimately relocated to the west coast of Florida which he had visited in his capacity as appraiser of wrecks at New River. In the period 1836 through 1838, he served as a guide to the army, based upon his experiences in the Everglades. He thus began more extensive excursions up the west coast of Florida, and by 1837 he was at Tampa. He later settled at Homossasa, and by 1850 he was back in Hillsborough County. In 1852 he acquired land at Worth’s Harbor, as Safety Harbor was then known, in very close proximity to old friend Philippe.

Philippe may have also heard of the virtues of Tampa Bay from William R. Hackley. An attorney in Key West in the 1830s, Hackley acted as trustee of Philippe’s property in at least one transaction. Hackley was the son of Richard S. Hackley, formerly the consul for the United States at Madrid. In 1818 Hackley had purchased a part of the land grant of the Duke of Aragon. The so-called “Hackley grant” became the site of the first settlement of Tampa by Americans when it was seized for use as a fort by Colonel George M. Brooke in 1824. This was the subject of considerable litigation between the federal government and the heirs of Hackley into the 1900s.

Whether drawn by opportunity, the advice of Cooley, Hackley, pirate Gomez, or all three, Philippe appeared in Tampa early in 1839. On February 5, 1839, he purchased from Augustus Steele for $100 a lot described as “Number Four (4) and bounded westerly by Tampa Street” in the town of Tampa. On April 25, 1839; Philippe bought a lot on the other side of the Hillsborough River from Coosan E. Cooper for the price of $50. The lot was located in a plat
“near the mouth of the river” and having a “slue or small stream passing through and emptying into said River,” bounded to the west by Lindsey Street and to the north by Julia Street. Earlier that same April Philippe had co-endorsed a substantial bond attendant to Manuel Olivella, an old friend from Key West, upon his becoming a notary public. The bond for $500 was sworn before Judge Steele and among the witnesses was Captain John C. Casey of the U. S. Army at Fort Brooke. Casey would later certify on May 1, 1839, that “three red Cows branded O.P. are the private property of Mr. Odette Phillipe....One of these Cattle is marked U.S., but is nonetheless private property – having been branded by me and subsequently exchanged with Mr. Phillipe.”

Philippe remained low-key in his recorded activities for the next few years. The 1840 census listed him as a resident near Fort Brooke, one of only nineteen heads of households in the county at the time. Living in his busy household were five males, five females, and three female slaves.

The year 1842, with the end of the Second Seminole War in May, brought a flurry of activity by Philippe. First, he purchased a twenty-four-year-old slave named John for $550 from M. M. Hammond in January. Next he bought from Henry H. Steiner, a doctor, doubtless posted at Fort Brooke, a slave named Anthony, thirty years of age, for $500. The deed to Anthony listed
Philippe as “of Ft. Brooke.” Philippe had engaged in extensive slave dealings while in Charleston.

Philippe next turned his attention to land acquisition. On April 29, 1842, Philippe purchased for $250 “Cantonment Brook” which was at the “Mouth of the Hillsborough River.” Philippe bought the lot from two men who were sutlers at Fort Brooke. Philippe was undoubtedly taking advantage of an opportune time to buy as soldiers and related parties abandoned their interests in Florida at the end of the war. It is also interesting to note that he had a high level of interest in the strategic mouth of the Hillsborough River. In 1842, Philippe also purchased the property, known as Welch’s store at “the Village of Tampa,” from a soldier for $150.

In November 1842, Philippe realized his dream, lost before at Charleston and New River, of an agricultural plantation to complement his mercantile interests. On August 4, 1842, the U. S. Congress had passed an act entitled, “An Act to provide for the armed occupation settlement of the unsettled part of the Peninsula of Florida.” The law, designed to forestall any future Indian uprisings, provided that 160 acres would be given to any head of household over eighteen who would “bear arms and live upon the land in a fit habitation” for five years and cultivate at least five acres. The land could not be within two miles of a military post or north of a line from Palatka to Newnansville. A total of 210,720 acres was ultimately available for occupation during a one-year period. Over 1,000 patents were issued under the provisions of this forbearer of the Homestead Act which followed it twenty years later. On November 1, 1842, Philippe filed a claim for 160 acres, using a printed form, for land “commencing at the Northeast corner of the hammock at the N. W. side of Tampa Bay...on the West side of the little bay called Worth’s Harbour.” The printed form stated that the intended settlement was not within two miles of a permanent military post nor was it previously claimed land. The handwritten portion solves a long standing mystery about Philippe’s arrival in Florida, which had been variously estimated as early as 1823 and as late as 1842. It states, in what appears to be Philippe’s own handwriting, that he became a resident of Florida in January of the year “one thousand eight hundred and twenty eight.” A sketch of the site accompanied the application and shows the property, labelled “Hammock of St. Helena,” adjacent to “Worth’s Harbour” and includes the lagoon. It is thus unclear whether St. Helena was a name given by Philippe or whether it had been previously attached to the site. Finally, Philippe swore that he was a resident of Florida on August 4, 1842. By gaining ownership of these 160 acres of land, Philippe had finally found the surcease denied him in Charleston and New River, and it was here that he made his stand.

The year 1843 found Philippe still established at Tampa Bay. A July 12, 1843, list of persons residing at Fort Brooke “Reserve who do not belong to the Army proper” included “Mr. Phillippe and his family outside.” The same source reflected that Philippe’s friend Olivella had become postmaster. Correspondence in 1844 from William J. Worth to William G. Belknap at St. Augustine showed the success of Philippe’s enterprise: “Mrs. Worth requests you to have put up for her by some of the Phillippi family four (4) jars of newly pickled oysters of the best quality to be carefully packed and come over with your wagon.”

The extent of Philippe’s holding is revealed in a 1844 document wherein Philippe again placed his property in trust, as he had at Charleston and New River. The document, describing Philippe as “late of Charleston,” purported to have been executed on December 26, 1842, with no
explanation for the delay or reason for filing, but it listed him as owning four houses (including one which was his actual dwelling at Fort Brooke), numerous slaves, cattle, hogs, and hunting dogs, as well as a wagon and his plantation at St. Helena. According to the document, he also operated a billiard hall, ten-pin alley and oyster shop. It is interesting to note that Philippe’s commercial activities in Tampa comport with his maintenance of an oyster shop, billiard hall and ten-pin alley in Key West. Philippe was also engaged in cigar making in Tampa, as he had at Key West and Charleston.26

The censuses of 1850 and 1860 continued to list Philippe as a resident of Hillsborough County, and in 1860 he declared himself as an “Orchardist.”27 The slave holding records of 1860 show him owning a total of five slaves.28

A surviving second hand-reference to Philippe from a traveler in the 1850s hints at an entirely different background for Philippe than previously supposed. Clement Claiborne Clay (1816-1886) was the son of Governor Clement Comer Clay of Alabama. A lawyer, he was serving in 1850 as a county judge. He would later be elected to the United States Senate and the Senate of the Confederate States. Suffering from a bronchial condition, he toured Florida in 1851 to recover his health, and he kept an active correspondence concerning what he found. At one point he referred to an attempt to cross Tampa Bay which was prevented by bad weather. Clay then wrote: “So, I was disappointed in not seeing the head bluffs of Olde Tampa and the orange
groves of Mons Philippi, a Frenchman and native of St. Dominigo about the color of Alfred—who was anxious to extend to us his hospitality.” Alfred was Clay’s house slave in Alabama.29

Philippe’s astonishing burst of entrepreneurial activity subsided in the 1860s, and no other records exist of him until his death in 1869 and the filing of his will for probate. Doubtless Philippe's attention had turned to developing his plantation and to his family. The stories of his survival of the hurricane of 1848 and the Civil War by vertical and horizontal evacuation respectively were not found to have support anywhere in the records, though they have a ring of truth. Both events had major repercussions in Tampa Bay, however, and the stories at their essence are probably accurate. Ultimately, Philippe's family and descendants were his true legacy.

The records regarding Philippe’s wives and children are clearer than the legend, but still a bit perplexing. Philippe’s first known wife and mother of his children was Dorothee de Desmottes. She and Odet presented three daughters for baptism in January 1822 at St. Mary’s Roman Catholic Church in Charleston, according to baptismal records there. The daughters by name and date of baptism were: Louise Poleanne (August 7, 1814), Elizabeth Octavia (January 27, 1816) and Septima Marie (February 17, 1820). Interestingly, Jean Moisson is listed as godfather of Séptima. Moisson was trustee in a Charleston transaction wherein Philippe placed his assets in trust for his wife, and later Moisson’s widow unsuccessfully sued Philippe, then in Florida, for an allegedly fraudulent and unpaid loan.31 More intriguing is the presence in the records of Septima’s godmother, Marie Charlotte Florance Fontaine, who would become the next Mrs. Odet Philippe.

Family records, faithfully kept, tell the rest. The place of death and burial of Dorothee remain to be discovered, but the location of Charlotte’s grave in Key West is known and consistent with the family legend of a death on a return from Havana.32 A fourth daughter, Melanie, was born on December 17, 1825 to Odet and probably Dorothee, and she is buried at Sylvan Abbey. Still later, a daughter named Henrietta Florance and born in 1841 in Georgia, was adopted. According to a 1847 deed found in Key West, Philippe purchased two acres from L. Windsor Smith at what is now the intersection of Windsor and Passover Lanes. Philippe took title and trust for “his adopted daughter Henrietta Florance Phillippe.”33

Louise Poleanna married one Bicaire, which allegedly led to her exclusion from the will of Odet Philippe, and she does not appear in family records afterwards.34 Octavia had three marriages. The first in 1833 was to George P. Washington of Key West and took place at New River. The second was to Charles Papy (an early settler on Weedon Island for whom Papy’s Bayou is named) and the third in 1865 to John Alvarez.35 Septima Marie was also marriage prone, taking the step four times. Her husbands were Ramon Moreno (1837), John Grillon (1843), Joseph (Jobe) Andrews (1856), and finally James H. Loughridge (1866). The marriage of Melanie to Richard Booth lasted. An Englishman, Booth married Melanie in 1847, and their son Odet W. (Keeter), born in 1853, was the first European settler’s child born on the Pinellas peninsula. Henrietta also had only one husband, John Henry Duke, whom she married in 1858.36

Philippe’s sense of family and friendship drew others to him. Booth and John Grillon, as well as his old friend from New River, Cooley, and even Gomez, joined him on the Pinellas frontier.37
His descendants married into many of the pioneer families of southwest Florida, such as McMullen, Youngblood, and Stephens, forming much of the familial foundation for early southwest Florida. Many descendants have become prominent in the history of the region and the state.

Two final ties to Philippe remain in the records. The first is Philippe’s last will and testament. It is, in the words of D. B. McKay, an “interesting document,” and he printed it in its entirety both in his column and in his book. The will reflects Philippe’s estrangement from his first daughter, Louise, and also an attempt to provide for his grandchildren by her. His adopted daughter Henrietta was also not provided for, but this may be explained by two acres acquired in trust for her in 1847 which, by its terms, passed directly to her upon Philippe’s death. Otherwise, the documents reflect the disposition of a lifetime of achievement.

An intriguing document has been unearthed in the public records of Key West. Dated 1847, it is another, previously unknown, will and testament of Philippe. In this document he devoted particular concern and attention to his adopted daughter Henrietta. Philippe divided his estate of St. Helena, depicted by a map, into six parts. Two parcels totalling forty-two acres went to Henrietta, along with four slaves, his jewelry and that of his late wife. In addition, Philippe created a trust for Henrietta with proceeds of the sale of cattle and other assets of his estate. The
will named Stephen C. Mallory, a Key West attorney who later served as U.S. Senator and then Confederate Secretary of Navy, as its trustee. The document stated that Mallory’s wife, Angela, was the godmother of Henrietta, something never before known. The document asked that Henrietta be educated Catholic and that the remainder of the property be given to Philippe’s grandsons, John and Odette Grillon, and his granddaughter Marie Charlotte Grillon. To Melanie he gave his furniture, the “oyster shop at Ft. Brooke” and some land. To daughter Marie Elizabeth (with an unusual and previously unknown middle name), he left land and cattle. Son-in-law John Grillon was appointed as executor.  

The core of the story of Odet Philippe remains constant, both in the myth of Odet Philippe and in the facts as found in the record. Even when stripped of its romanticism, the tale of Philippe’s trials and tribulations in Charleston, New River, Key West and Tampa Bay contained in the two versions of his life are remarkably consistent. They tell a tale of an indomitable entrepreneur who again and again stared total failure in the face, and again and again arose to try and create his dream of a commercial-mercantile base mixed with a pastoral plantation, all built on a solid foundation of family. Failing to establish such in Charleston and Christ Church Parish in the 1820s, and Key West and New River in the 1830s, he finally succeeded at Tampa Bay in the 1840s. In doing so, he laid the foundation for the Tampa Bay of today not only historically, but also as an archetype for others who would follow that same formula. He also displayed a consistency of vision and spirit.

Such a pivotal figure in the establishment of Tampa Bay should not be remembered by a gravestone that is inaccurate in its history, mistaken in his date of birth, and wrong in the spelling of his name. To truly honor this pioneer the stone should be resurfaced or removed. In its place the author, who is also directly descended from Philippe, respectfully suggests the following inscription

Odet Philippe

Born Lyon, France, 1787, died at this site 1869: Introduced cigarmaking to Tampa and became first non-native settler of the Pinellas Peninsula. At his plantation of St. Helena, now this park, he introduced grapefruit cultivation to Florida. His descendants peopled this frontier. He was said to be a doctor and of noble birth.

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1 The author gratefully acknowledges the research assistance of Jonathin Estrin and Peter Horvath, students of history at the University of South Florida. All of the documents referred to as being in the possession of the author in this article are on file at the University of South Florida Library, Department of Special Collections.


5 DeFoor, “Charleston,” 22-27. According to records of the United States District Court in Charleston, South Carolina, “Odet Phillippe” declared his intention to become an American citizen on December 3, 1822, when he was thirty-four years old. The clerk of the court acted upon the request on January 7, 1829, presumably after a required waiting period. Philippe's 1829 declaration stated: “I Odet Phillippe [sic] a native of France born in Lyon now aged Forty one years Do solemnly swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States and I do absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to every foheran [sic] Prince Potentate State or Sovereignty whatsoever and particularly Charles the tenth the King of France-so help me God-[signed]Odet Philippe.” Given the controversy over the years regarding the spelling of his name, it is interesting to note that the body of the declaration appears to be in different writing than the signature and, indeed, spells the name differently. An original copy of this document was filed in the federal courts in Key West in 1829. It was surrendered, along with other such documents, by the courts to the Monroe County Library for safekeeping, and it remains there today. Packet 1829, Sheet #1, Document from United States Circuit Court (Charleston), Citizenship Oath of Odet Philippe.


8 The recollections of a Charleston physician who was a resident of Key West from 1829 to 1833 include a dialogue between the physician and a “French quack” who was a “segar maker” by trade and who appears to have been Philippe. The recollection, published under the title “Florida Sketches” in the Charleston Mercury of July 12, 1833, also relates that the French doctor, in addition to practicing medicine, kept a coffee room and billiard table. C. A. Hammond, “Dr. Stroebel Reports on Southeast Florida, 1836,” *Tequesta* 21(1961): 65. See also William M. Straight, “Odet Philippe: Friend of Napoleon, Naval Surgeon and Pinellas Pioneer,” *Journal of Florida Medical Association*, 53 (1966): 705.

9 In his affidavit of citizenship, Philippe declared that he was thirty-four years of age at the time of his declaration of intention to become an American citizen in 1822. This would fix the date of his birth as 1788, and if true, it would cast grave doubt on the legendary affiliation between Philippe and Napoleon. It is doubtful that he could have studied with Napoleon Bonaparte who had gone to France from Corsica in 1778 to attend military school and who was commissioned into the artillery in 1785, at the age of sixteen.


“Horrible Intelligence From the Seat of War,” Key West Enquirer, January 16, 1836. The Tampa Tribune article by Mrs. George W. Booth contains the detail of the single shot killing both Mrs. “Cooper” and her child. A similar account was also contained in a contemporaneous letter from the then 12-year old Edmund Kirby Smith (later general of the Confederate Army) to his mother. Smith was passing along the south Florida coast where he picked up and passed on this detail of the massacre. Edmund Kirby Smith to Francis K. Smith, January 31, 1836, copy on file in Broward Historical Society.


16 Official Records of Hillsborough County, Tampa Bay, East Florida, Territory of Florida 1837-46 (hereafter Day Book) I, 109-111 [Work Progress Administration (hereafter WPA) compilation I, 132-34]. The deed was witnessed by Philippe’s old friend from Key West, Manuel Olivella, who had joined Philippe in moving to Tampa. Olivella had been a witness to the wedding of Philippe’s daughter, Septima, to Ramon Moreno in 1837 in Key West. Official Records of Monroe County, Book B, 399. Olivella would later become postmaster and was elected clerk of court of Hillsborough County on February 17, 1842. Day Book II, 294; Day Book II, 293. He later served as Deputy U.S. Marshall for the Eastern District of Florida. Day Book II, 327-329. It should be noted that the Historical Records Survey of Hillsborough County Records prepared in 1938 contain, for unknown reasons, different pagination from the handwritten originals. Alternative citation to this volume is provided where possible on all Day Book cites. The original citation is to Record Book of Hillsborough County. While the latter is to Territory of Florida 1838-46, Jacksonville, FL: Historical Records Survey WPA State Office, 1938.4 Vols. Augustus Steele was the acknowledged “founder” of Hillsborough County, due to his lobbying for its creation in 1839. A Connecticut Yankee who migrated to north Florida in 1825, he was appointed deputy collector of customs at Fort Brooke, and postmaster at Tampa Bay in 1842. He was the first county judge and also served the county in the legislature. He later moved on to similar activities at Cedar Key. Karl H. Grismer, Tampa: A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida, edited by D.B. McKay (St. Petersburg: The St. Petersburg Printing Co., 1950), 313.

17 Day Book, I, 124-125 [WPA I, 149-150] and 173 [WPA I, 156-57].

18 Day Book I, 179 [WPA, II, 209].

19 1840 Census, Hillsborough County, p. 133.

20 Day Book II, 290 [WPA, III, 337] and 292 [WPA, III, 340].


25 William J. Worth to William G. Belknap, 1844, William W. Belknap Papers, Princeton University, to a copy of which was provided by Canter Brown, Jr.


27 The 1850 census reflects two Philippe households. House #233 consists of Philippe and his daughter:

   Odet Philippe (sic) 63 M-Gentleman-$1,000 (estate) France S.C. Octavia Pappa (sic) 2? F House #234 is listed with the same family number as the above, but contains the following:

   Melanie Booth-22-F SC

   Richard Booth-30-M Mariner NY George Washington-9-M-FL

   Charles P. Washington-9-M-FL Patrocinia Papi-6-F-FL

   Octavia Booth-4-F-FL

   Richard Booth-6/12-M-FL.

Melanie and husband, Richard Booth, were apparently keeping Octavia’s children while she tended her father, then in advancing years. The dwellings were doubtless close-by. The census category is to “The River Settlement” which is probably Tampa. Whether this means he still lived in Tampa, or at St. Helena with the reference to the nearest town is unclear. The 1860 Census for Hillsborough County (p. 64) intriguingly has Philippe being “married within the year” (perhaps scrivenor’s error) at line 22.

28 Census 1860, Schedule 2, Slave Inhabitants in Hillsborough County, Florida.


30 Rev. John A. Simonin, Pastor of St. Mary’s, to author, November 17, 1989. A copy is on file with the author, together with a photocopy of the page of the parish’s baptismal record. The record is in French, but signed by Father Zenwick.


32 Dorthee’s gravestone was relocated to the side of, after being discovered beneath, the Old Stone Church in Key West, which is Methodist. The stone’s inscription in French reads in English: “Rest in Peace Marie Charlotte Florance Phillipe Born in Paris Dec. 25, 1801 Deceased in Key West, Dec. 20, 1846, at the age of 45 Friend of the unhappy Supporter of the orphans She spent her life relieving the pains of her peers She leaves behind her husband Ot. Phillipe and a great number of friends attracted to her by her generous heart and soul.” The author gratefully acknowledges the above translation by Joan Schwartz of Montreal, Canada.

33 Monroe County Deed Book D-544. Interestingly, the deed was witnessed by Justice of the Peace Walter C. Maloney, which underscores his reference to Philippe in his book, Maloney, Key West (see note 10).

34 McKay, Pioneer Florida, II, 302.

35 Official Records of Monroe County, Book B,11-12; McKay, Pioneer Florida, II, 305, III, 78-79; Straub, Pinellas, 35; Family records on file with the author. The date of the third marriage is reflected as April 12, 1865. Octavia died in 1885 and is buried at Hopewell Cemetery, located at Kennedy and Dale Mabry Boulevard in Tampa.

36 Official Records of Monroe County, Book B, 299, and Book E, 697; Family records, on file with the author.

38 McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 302. The original will, which is located in Hillsborough County Deed Book C-597, reads as follows:

“To begin the Mountain [the large ceremonial mound] and lime grove shall belong to nobody in particular. [I]t shall be the common property of my three daughters, to say Octavia Alvarez, Charlotte Septima Laughridge and Melanie Booth. The orange grove shall be divided into three (3) parts between my fore#named three daughters [T]here shall be a road between the foot or base of the Mountain and Lot (No. 6) from the row of the lime grove to edge of the water fronting on the Bay and the said road shall continue from the last row of the Lime grove over the back part of the orange Grove to the common Road of entrance in the Hammock and said Road shall be for the access of the family to the mountain and Lime Grove. the produce of the Mountain and Lime Grove shall be Divided in equal shares between my three daughters Octavia Charlotte and Melanie.

“There shall be a Line drawn from the last row of the grove in strait direction to the opposite line or last row of the Orange Grove which line shall form the squares of the orange grove[,] The Lot number one (no 1) shall belong to Melanie Booth containing seven (7) Rows of Orange trees and others.

“Lot number two shall belong to Octavia Alvarez containing nine (9) rows of orange trees and others.

“The lot number three shall belong to Charlotte.

“On the front of the Bay will be three lots from the foot of the mountain beginning from the point which divided the Bay and the harbor. Lot number one shall to Octavia running toward the road of the Orange Grove.

“Lot number two (2) to Charlotte and lot number three to Melanie. [A]ll these lots running in this direction. “[O]n the front of the there shall be also three lots beginning at the point number one (1) shall belong to Octavia running toward the head of the Harbor, Lot number shall belong to Clarlotte, Lot number to Melanie.

“The salt pan shall be divided into three lots to be drawn by number between them.

“I give to Charles and his brother Phillippe Bicaire a Lot of sixteen acres of land (16) to be divided between them [T]he Lot shall be on the northwest corner of my [sic] in a square of four (4) acres each side.

“The remainder of my land shall be divided into equal parts between my three daughters before named.

“I give my gold spectacles to Octavia. I give my gold watch to Melanie. I give to Alice Kelly four cows (4). I give one cow to each of my children from Octavia Melanie and Charlotte[. ] I give one calf to PhilLippe Whanton and to Sidney and one to the Bishop. [Philippe was a Catholic.] I give two calves to John Booth, The balance of my cattle shall be divided between my two daughters Octavia and Melanie.

“My horse and buggy shall be sold and the money divided between Octavia and Melanie.

“If Mr. Lawrance Mitchell shall recover a debt of one hundred and fifty dollars (150) due me by a certain Morey that money shall be divided between all my grandchildren from Octavia and Melanie, and also a debt due by Capt Cook of Hernando of which Mr. Mitchell has the account to collect[,] I name for my executors my three daughters and beg Capt Richard and Mr. John Enderson [no doubt meaning Attorney John A. Henderson] to assist them with their advice. I beg Mr. Enderson, as more acquainted with the laws to have their property recorded in order that their husbands may have no right upon it to them[,] Now I swear before my God that I do not owe a cent to a living soul in this world and I intend to keep myself free of debt, and if any demand shall be made upon my estate the claimant shall show my handwriting for his claim.
“I give my trunk and clothing to Richard Booth [Jr] I give my gun to Odet Booth. I give my Saddle to George Booth. I give my desk to the prince de Joinville Booth. I give two (2) heffer calves to Maria Kelly.

“This is my Last will and Testament [(T)]his instrument shall destroy and annul all other wills testaments or codicils made by me previous to this document.

“Done at Tampa Bay this twenty second day of May 1868.

“Signed and sealed by me in person.

“Signed Odet Phillippi.”

39 This will is appended to Estate of James Pent (died 1864, probated 1874) Monroe County Probate Records 1-P-1. Found by Mark H. Kelly and forwarded to the author June 7, 1990. The full text is as follows:

“Be it known unto all whom it may concern that I, Odet Philippe, being in good health and of sound mind, impressed with a sense of the uncertainty of life, and of the propriety or propriety of my present [?], do make this my last will and testament hereby revoking all others previously made and particularly the will lately at Tampa Bay.

“For the future happiness of my adopted child, Henrietta Florance Philipi, I am particularly anxious. To her, I do give and bequeath so much of my lands at Tampa Bay where I lately relocated as will make a square containing forty-two acres which square must have the small stream or crest on my said land as its base line and one of its sides or lines must run from ‘Philippi point’ (as dedicated on the late Army Map of Tampa Bay) North Northeast and the back line of my ‘place’ will be the boundary of another side these lines must be so run as to give to her a square of forty-two acres and my Executors herein after named is charged particularly with the duty of designating and setting off this land by suitable marks to the end that my design of giving to my child the square of forty-two acres may be carried fully into effect. I also give and bequeath unto my said adopted daughter my negro man, Anthony, my mulatto boy William and my two black boys Tom and Brutus, all the promised ornaments, jewelry and personal effects of her late mother by adoption, Marie Charlotte Florence Philippe, together with my own watch and all my jewels of every description whatsoever. For the further benefit of my said child, I do direct that within three months after my death my executor aforesaid shall cause to be sold at public outcry, in Key West to the highest bidder for cash my (?) Margiarina [?], twenty-five of my cows with six calves which are on my place at Tampa Bay, (?) of my calves which [are?] [at?] Key West (?) any with a colt and that the proceeds thereof shall be invested by my executors for the benefit of my said child in such a manner as may be directed by Stephen C. Mallory of Key West, she being the Godmother of my said child - I further direct that my said Executors shall take charge of and manage the property herein given and bequeathed to my child to the best advantage for her interest and that annually from my death, she shall accrue with interest under the direction aforesaid, the yearly profit which may result from the (?) prosperity. My Executor is charged with the management of the property; and with investing it in such manner as the persons aforesaid may direct, to the end that a fund may be created for the education and general welfare of the child, and the said Stephen (?) Mallory and his wife as aforesaid are surely charged with seeing the profits and funds aforesaid suitably invested - Neither (?) nor (?) be sold or alienated from My Child. When my said child shall have reached the age of eleven years, I direct that she may be placed at a Catholic institution for the education of young ladies, which institution must be selected by the said Mallory or his wife, and that she must be kept there until she shall be sixteen years of age, unless her health should require her removal, and of this the said Mallory or wife shall be the judge. My said executor is charged with the placing and maintaining the child at such an institution as they shall [?]. I desire that she may be [?] in the [?] Catholic [?] as taught by the Roman Church in the United States and that she be particularly instructed in the French and Spanish languages and in music and that her education shall be designed to make her a good Christian and a useful and agreeable woman. Of her education, the said Mallory and wife shall have control.
“To my grandsons John and Odet Grillon I do give and bequeath to be divided equally between them a lot of land containing about [? ] acres [? ] which is on the South part of the land bequeathed to my daughter Herretie [sic]. The next square of land at Tampa Bay adjoining the one already given to my adopted child I direct to be divided into six square lots or parcels to be divided and numbered from one to six; and for a better understanding of this my (will?) I hereby annex a sketch of all the said lands divided and numbered; and to my daughter Marie Charlotte Grillon I do give and bequeath the two lots or parcels which are marked on this sketch Number one and six, being the one third of the square aforesaid to her, heirs and assigns, executors and administrators and I also give to her, her heirs, executors and administrators my negro woman [Julie?].

“To Melanie Booth I do give and bequeath and to her heirs executors and administrators, my negro girl Daeline, twelve cows with their calves, not at Tampa Bay, all my household furniture at Tampa Bay and my [?] known as Philippe’ Oyster Shop at Fort Brooke, and also the lots or parcels of land numbered in the sketch aforesaid as two and five, - being the third part of the square last aforesaid.

“To Maria [Marie?] Elizabeth [Quebas?] I do give and bequeath my negro woman Nelly in the house which the said Maria [Marie?] now occupies at Ft. Brooke, the lots or parcels of land numbered in said sketch [sic] three and four and the one half of all my Estate which may remain at my death undisposed of the other half of which I bequeath to Marie Charlotte Grillon aforesaid.

“All the property of eny [sic] description and nature whatsoever which is not herein before disposed of and of which I may be possessed I give and bequeath to my adopted daughter. First herein before mentioned and I do direct my executor to sell and dispose of the same at public outcry in the same manner and to invest the proceeds thereof as I have heretofore required of him to [? list] under the directions of the said St. Mallory and his wife.

“Should my dear daughter herewith die before she [?] marries at the age of sixteen years the property which I have left to her by the Will and which may then [to? wit (?)] at her death aforesaid [?] to her must be divided and distributed as follows:

“The real estate herein bequeathed to her [?] be [?] to [?] Philippi and of these [?] to John [B?] Grillon and Odet Grillon their heirs and assign equally.

“The other half or equal part shall be divided into three equal parts and [?] Washington, George Philippi Washington and Charles Washington shall each have one of the said square parts to be determined as [?] into [?] my Executor or by lot.

“I direct and request and enjoin that my Executor shall [defrey?] all and every expenses of my funeral, last [?] Interment[?] if this [?] property [?] are the [?] if which shall go [?] my [?] adopted daughter Henrietta. [?] of Stephen C. Mallory [?] I do give and bequeath a lot or parcel of land fronting [?] in Safety Harbo[u?]r I my [?] on Tampa Bay[?], on which it has on front of [?] and feet and a depth bank of two hundred. feet which is in the land [?] to my daughter Henrietta aforesaid and the last bequest in front of Margaret Mallory shall be in [?] [tear] is not be affected by the death of Henrietta. I [?] annex as a map, [here the document is torn] map is to accompany this will which only as somewhat explanatory of it. It is innocently drawn but will afford a general idea of the lands.

“On [finding?] [no?] fault in [?] discretion of Angela [?] Mallory the Godmother of my child and in her desire to promote the happiness of my child I [do?] [at?] that [torn document] not marry without the affirmation and consent of the said Godmother and I further direct that if my said daughter shall marry without the consent and approval of aforesaid Godmother unless the said Godmother [?] the death or other [?] be legally incapacitated [document is burned] obtained the end in such [burned] all the property [burned] upon [burned] [?] thereupon be divided as [?] before directed in the event of here death and that is shall [?] to be hers and go to the other children and grandchildren aforesaid.
“And now as the executor herein before alluded to I do appoint my son-in-law John Grillon and direct him immediately upon my death to prove the will and proceed at will in the [burned] [?] of his appointment.”

[here is a signature which appears to be Philippe’s deformed or burned]

“Signed, Sealed and delivered to Charles [Nave?] by Odet Philippe at Key West this 19 July 1847 the said Philippi declaring [it?] as that [burned] it [?] his last will and testament as signed, sealed and delivered in presence of us.

“Signed: St. C. Mallory

W. F. English”
An outgrowth of the expansionist goals of the American film industry and the related movie palace construction surge during the 1920s, Lakeland’s Polk Theatre serves as an example of how mass cultural developments were manifested in one, small central Florida town. Part of the phenomenon hailed by many as architectural evidence of rising popular tastes, yet derided by others as an over-blown tribute to “middle-class seriousness and bourgeois beauty,” Lakeland’s movie palace offers valuable insights into national, regional, and local cultural history. In many respects, the Polk Theatre stands as a reminder of the meeting of mass culture and main street.

Any exploration of the direct link between the expansionist studio system and the Polk Theatre must also incorporate a consideration of the state and local setting into which the Polk was introduced. Much like the American film industry, the state of Florida and the city of Lakeland were confronted with new social and cultural challenges during the 1920s. Perhaps the first truly modern decade in Florida’s history, the 1920s ushered in a period of unprecedented growth and change. Hailed as the “metropolis of Imperial Polk County,” Lakeland was both literally and figuratively a central, representative city during the turbulent twenties.

The 1920s featured a faith in the material growth of the nation. This, combined with Florida’s natural allure, caused much of the state to seemingly mushroom overnight. “Tin can tourists” suddenly streamed into the state. Real estate speculation was rampant and furious. In the Tampa Bay area, men such as D. P. “Doc” Davis parlayed their vision and salesmanship into millions of dollars of profit. Indeed, on the west coast, the newly opened Gandy Bridge symbolized the era of prosperity and development that had engulfed the region. On Florida’s Gold Coast the land boom was even more explosive. Between 1921 and 1925 the payroll of the city of Miami grew 2,449 per cent. The assessed value of property in the city jumped 560 per cent in that same time span. The value of issued building permits skyrocketed from $4.48 million to $58.65 million.

Writing of this dynamic growth during 1920s, historians Raymond Arsenault and Gary R. Mormino have pronounced the decade a “great watershed for Florida’s cities.” And though central Florida’s towns experienced less spectacular growth during the boom than many of the state’s coastal cities, they still participated in the economic upsurge. In Winter Haven, new boom-oriented structures, such as the Haven Hotel and the Lake Region Country Club, were built. Also among Winter Haven companies hoping to cash in on the real estate bonanza was the Haven-Villa Bond and Mortgage Company. Formed in 1926, the company proudly listed its loan reserves at $1.5 million. The same year, the half-million-dollar Hotel Plant opened in Plant City, Lakeland’s neighbor to the west. With more than one hundred rooms, the huge project was viewed as another example of what local newspapers proclaimed “convincing testimony on the utter soundness of Florida.” It “prove[d] conditions in the state are good and that the future of Florida is assured.” Sounding similarly sanguine, local civic leaders throughout central Florida trumpeted their communities’ eagerness to participate in the state’s exceptional growth.
The same was true of Lakeland. After several decades as a small, relatively sleepy southern town, Lakeland had by 1920 surpassed the county seat, Bartow, as Polk County’s most populous city. Moreover, as the twenties progressed, Lakeland lived up to many of its leaders’ expectations and became one of central Florida’s most important municipalities. Fundamental to Lakeland’s expansion and participation in the Florida boom were two significant developments: the city’s increased role as a regional rail center and the county’s enhancement of its road system. Already an important stop on the Seaboard Air Line’s Lake Wales to Tampa route, Lakeland added a second service in 1914, when the Atlantic Coast Line invested nearly half-a-million dollars in its Lakeland yards and facilities. Naturally by the 1920s, as the largest town between Orlando and Tampa, Lakeland was also a prominent stop on the railroads’ passenger runs.7

Despite the continuing importance of rail service, Lakeland’s growth during the 1920s was most indelibly marked by its relationship to the automobile. By 1923, Polk County had invested over $2.5 million in road construction resulting in 340 miles of serviceable thoroughfares. Opening much of the county to development, the expanded road system was soon dotted with motels and trailer parks built to accommodate the steady flow of “tin can tourists.” Similarly, throughout the twenties Lakeland sought ways to finance new street construction programs
within the city limits. In point of fact, the building of paved roads and the broadened accessibility of the automobile opened much of Florida during the 1920s. Henry Ford’s great emancipator – the Model T – permanently transformed Florida travel into a mass phenomenon associated with middle-class mobility and personal freedom. For Lakeland, this meant that Polk’s largest town was within two hours’ driving distance of all county points.\(^8\)

An increasingly popular destination of choice, Lakeland rode the crest – and eventual collapse – of Florida’s economic wave during the 1920s. During, the 1923-24 season alone, in excess of 20,000 tourists visited Lakeland. Moreover, between 1920 and 1924 the city’s population increased from 7,062 to more that 16,500 permanent residents. By decade’s end Lakeland was the state’s second most populous inland city – trailing only Orlando. To accommodate this growth, city officials – as early as 1924 – attempted to effectively manage Lakeland’s boom-town status. The inclusive city limits were extended from four miles to thirty square miles. Bonds totaling several million dollars were issued for road paving, hospitals, fire and police protection, new municipal buildings, sewage disposal, and other public improvements.\(^9\)

Even when the first signs of economic downturn began to surface in late 1925, Lakeland continued its public and private expansion programs at a rapid clip. The new home to Florida Southern College, the Cleveland Indians’ spring training camp, and Polk County’s first “skyscraper” (the Lakeland Terrace Hotel), at mid-decade Lakeland appeared well positioned for a still brighter economic future.\(^10\) On the same day in 1926 that the *Lakeland Star-Telegram* heralded the opening of downtown’s ten-story Marble Arcade building, the local Chamber of Commerce listed a “plan of accomplishments” for the year that included national advertising, industrial expansion, another railroad, an Interlake canal system, better street lighting, street widening, and city beautification.\(^11\) Clearly, even when accounting for the chamber’s self-interested motives behind such a “wish list,” it is evident that most Lakelanders did not anticipate the economic difficulties that lay ahead.

Tales of Florida’s seemingly inevitable bust have long served as recycled, cautionary, economic parables. And certainly, the heady days of wild speculation and exponential growth were short lived. Land fraud, shortages of adequate housing, and in many areas still underdeveloped transportation services all contributed to Florida’s downward economic spiral. It was not long before the northern press began to leak word that Florida no longer offered what the brochures promised. Hence, a state economy heavily dependent upon image was severely damaged when that amorphous commodity was tarnished. By the end of 1926, the boom had collapsed. Property values plummeted. Banks stood on shaky ground. Housing starts took a precipitous dive. In Lakeland, for example, new home construction dropped by nearly forty per cent between 1925 and 1926.\(^12\)

Across the state, cities fell into debt. Moreover, these problems were compounded by a series of natural disasters that occurred in the late 1920s. Two hurricanes (one in September 1926 and the other in September 1928) killed a combined total of over 2,000 people and caused millions of dollars in property damage along the state’s south Atlantic coast area. In addition, in 1929 the Mediterranean fruit fly was discovered in a citrus grove near Orlando; within a year citrus production dropped by approximately forty per cent.\(^13\)
And yet, while clearly affected by the state’s economic woes, Lakeland’s downturn was less pronounced than that experienced in other – particularly South Florida – cities. Phosphate and citrus provided a base which, though fissured, still offered ongoing economic support. Nor did the graying economic climate signal the cessation of all significant construction in Lakeland. Rather, it served as a retardant for several of the city’s more ambitious undertakings. For example, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America’s national home for retired and disabled members did not open until 1928 five years after construction began. Analogously, one of the city’s most important public structures, the Civic Center by Lake Mirror, was begun during the boom but was not completed until July 1928. Across the lake and rising majestically near its western shore, the Lake Mirror Promenade was completed the same year. Longer still was the time it took to complete the New Florida Hotel. Construction on the imposing building began during the boom, but its completion was delayed until 1935! As for the Polk Theatre, it too suffered setbacks as a result of economic pressures. For although construction on the theatre began in November 1926, and was completed in the spring of 1927, the theatre remained closed until December 1928.¹⁴

The history of motion picture exhibition in Lakeland, however, began a full fifteen years before construction started on the Polk. Billed as “The Pioneer Picture House in Lakeland,” the
Edisonia Theatre showed silent films as early as 1911. By 1914, the Edisonia was replaced by three, competing downtown movie houses – the Majestic Theatre, the Auditorium Theatre, and the Palms Theatre. Over the course of the next decade-and-a-half, though marked by various openings and closings, Lakeland’s motion picture theatres remained an important part of the city's business district.

As the 1920s progressed and the film industry solidified its position within American mass culture, Lakelanders, like residents of countless other cities and towns, increasingly looked to the movies as their first choice for entertainment. When considering the then small town of Lakeland, one need only consult contemporary newspapers to gain an appreciation of the cultural prominence afforded motion pictures. During the mid-twenties, the Lakeland Evening Ledger not only ran daily box advertisements for local theatres, but also devoted a full Sunday page to articles on upcoming film attractions, movie star gossip, and other industry news. The local paper offered frequently detailed, always enthusiastic, plot summaries of new movies. Transparent in its promotional tone and liberal in its dispersal of critical praise, the Lakeland press touted movie-going as something just short of a civic duty. People were actively encouraged to patronize local theatres. For instance, when “reviewing” the Tom Mix silent vehicle, “The Canyon of Light,” the Ledger characteristically gushed: “Hard boiled critics who have seen previews of the latest Mix thriller say it contains some of the most daring and spectacular riding shown, together with scenes of wild beauty in the Yellowstone Park sequences that are a delight to the eye. Suspense, too, of a superlative kind with a real story packed with romance will make ‘The Canyon of Light’ a picture that is sure to enthuse any audience.” When it came to movie-going, all Lakeland lacked was a theatre worthy of its infatuation with motion pictures.

The Polk Theatre officially opened its doors to an eagerly awaiting public on December 22, 1928. With great civic pride the Lakeland Evening Ledger and Star-Telegram proclaimed the new facility “the finest in the world for a city the size of Lakeland.” Indeed, the Polk was an impressive addition to Lakeland’s downtown business district. Technically a thoroughly modern theatre, the Polk – while far less ostentatious than many other late twenties movie palaces – also offered the requisite amount of whimsy and romanticism associated with the movie palace phenomenon. A seemingly flawless embodiment of function and fantasy, the theatre at the corner of Lemon Street and South Florida Avenue was set for a two-decade engagement as the leading light on Lakeland's entertainment scene.

Looking back at the Polk Theatre’s opening day provides a particularly revealing glimpse into the cultural significance that the movie palace possessed for Americans during this time period. The hometown press reported that 2,000 of the 2,200 tickets available for the one o’clock matinee were sold within one hour of the box office’s noon opening. Another movie theatre, the Strand was temporarily closed due to the Polk’s opening day draw. And prior to the evening screening, there were pre-show parties thrown across town. Moreover, once the patrons arrived at the Polk, they walked through a front lobby filled with “many beautiful flower bouquets,” sent to the management from local merchants and prominent citizens. The film that first day was “On Trial,” advertised as “a Warner Brothers’ all-talking special ... declared the outstanding achievement of the world's greatest dramatic era.” However, it was not the now forgotten film
that ultimately was of importance – it was Polk Theatre. Former Polk projectionist, Arthur Bowden, remembered the excitement that greeted the opening:

I had worked at the Palace and the Rex theatres before I moved over to Polk. It was the showplace of the county. It was for the whole county, and people drove from all over the county to see it. The Polk was the place to go in those days. You have to remember that in those days we didn’ t have T.V., and even radio was pretty new. The Polk was an important place.²¹

Bowden’s reminiscence supports contemporary accounts in the Ledger which summarized the Polk’s first week of operation as a “grand success in every way.”²²

“Grand” was an appropriate adjective for many aspects of the Polk Theatre. Although a local businessman, John E. Melton, conceived and developed the idea, the two people most responsible for the primary design and physical completion of the Polk were architect James E. Casale and builder George A. Miller. Both based in Tampa at the time of construction, Casale and Miller joined in a collaborative effort that historically ranks high among all of central Florida’s architectural projects during the 1920s.

For architect Casale, the Polk Theatre building represented the professional apex of his brief Florida career. Born in Villarosa, Italy, in 1890, Casale immigrated with his family to the United States in 1900. Later studying architecture at Cooper Union College and Columbia University, he eventually found his professional way to Tampa, where in 1925 he opened an office in the newly constructed Tampa Theatre and Office Building. Although the Polk edifice stands as the only significant Florida building attributable to Casale, his brief stay and relationship with Melton, the Famous Players-Lasky Company, and the theatre project ultimately served him well. After returning to New York in 1928, Casale established himself as a leading architect and eventually worked on several high profile “adaptive use projects,” including the Villard House (originally designed by McKim, Mead & White in 1883) and the city mansions of Joseph Pulitzer and Kermit Roosevelt.²³

For George Miller, however, the Polk Theatre was but one of dozens of large-scale construction projects associated with his Tampa-based business. Aside from building the theatre and office complex in which Casale rented professional space, the Philadelphia-born Miller oversaw construction of such diverse Tampa projects as the downtown Maas Brothers department store, Floridian Hotel, and ten-story Citrus Exchange building. In Pinellas County, Miller built St. Peters burg’s Vinoy Park and Bellaire’s Belleview Hotel. He also supervised the construction of over twenty S & H Kress stores, ranging from those located in such Florida cities as Tampa, Orlando, and Daytona Beach to Kress projects in Billings, Montana, and Spokane, Washington. In Polk County, along with his Lakeland theatre and neighboring Marble Arcade building, Miller’s professional legacy remains best preserved in the work he oversaw at Lake Wales’ exclusive Mountain Lake residential/resort community.²⁴

As noted in Joyce M. Davis’s study, Lakeland’s Unique Architectural Heritage, the brick exterior of the Polk Theatre closely follows the Palladian form common in Renaissance inspired theatre design. Presenting a modest, yet stately outward appearance, such theatres deceptively encase the “fantasy world” interior elements of the structure. Rising in a two-tiered fashion to four stories and measuring 142 by 120 feet, the Polk Theatre building is fronted (facing east) by
a two-story facade with cast concrete embellishments that frame its red brick walls. Housing store fronts, offices, and the Polk’s main entrance, these two levels feature a graceful Palladian window suspended above the theatre’s entry portal, and they are also accented by arches over other windows and doors, as well as ornamental pilasters and rosettes. Adding emphasis to the “classical horizontal axis” of this business-like facade block is a prominent, contrasting concrete cornice that visually stabilized the building’s South Florida Avenue frontage.²⁵

Rising somewhat ominously behind the two-story commercial block is the four-story, brick-covered shell that houses the main theatre portion of the building. Topped by a flat roof framed by a thin concrete cornice, the exposed exterior walls of the auditorium section are symmetrically divided (with the exception of the unadorned north wall) into vertical bays, which are denoted by segmental columns. Also helping to offset the horizontal emphasis of the lower, commercial level, are rectangular brick panels that mark each vertical bay section.²⁶ Nevertheless, this towering, theatre portion of Casale’s building constitutes a rather austere backdrop when compared to the quietly elegant design features employed on the store front and office levels.

Of course, the central feature of this downtown structure was the Polk Theatre and its Italian Renaissance inspired interior. Originally, when entering the theatre portion of the building,
patrons were greeted by an outer lobby decorated with murals featuring pastoral garden scenes, fountains, and exotic birds. There was a free-standing box-office (kiosk) which sat on a marble base that supported carved, wooden panels rising up to a copper roof. Bronze light fixtures lined the walls. The gently sloping (upward) outer lobby ended at two sets of large, wooden doors. The first set led to an elaborately decorated inner lobby; the pair on the left, however, directed patrons past the long, waist-high partition wall that separated the inner lobby from the main seating area.

Once inside the main auditorium, patrons were engulfed by the full effect of Casale’s reverie inducing design. Indeed, Casale, the Italian-born immigrant, had re-created a Mediterranean village in the heart of central Florida. Flanked by Italianate walls distinguished by niches, sconces, and faux balconies and windows, the patron’s eye was aesthetically drawn toward the stage and the full-scale Italian Renaissance “townhouse” setting that dominated the Polk’s interior. The Venetian-style walls that surrounded the stage were adorned with balconies, rounded dual “windows,” highly embellished cornices, arched niches, frescoes of flora and fauna, and a red tile “roof” that completed the fantasy scene.

Accessible by two ornate staircases rising from the inner lobby area, the mezzanine level lobby was no less stylized. Featuring several twisted columns, delicate cornice and molding work,
awnings, and brass banded terrazzo floor, the mezzanine was further enhanced by red velvet drapes and leaded glass light fixtures.28

All of this interior splendor sat under the watchful eye of the Polk's “dream” ceiling. Painted a deep, royal blue, the ceiling fascinated patrons with its twinkling stars and sunrise/sunset effect. This was accomplished by a special “star machine” that in conjunction with a similar “cloud machine,” delighted theatre-goers who gladly craned their necks in order to obtain a better view of the Polk's elaborate ceiling show.

Simulating a natural setting (open-sky, stars, and cloud effects) and labeled “atmospheric,” this type of movie palace design was developed by architect John Eberson.29 Unlike many earlier movie palaces (perhaps best typified by Thomas Lamb’s designs), such theatres were according to David Naylor, “not so forbiddingly solid and formal, displaying their own playful, fantastic eclecticism, a dreamlike quality appropriate for the world of the movies.”30 In point of fact, the Tampa Theatre, above which J.E. Casale rented office space, has long been held aloft as representing the quintessential Eberson, “atmospheric” style.31 Upon the opening of the Tampa Theatre in October 1926, Eberson discussed the origins of his architectural inspiration:

I have been wintering in Florida for the past several years, and it is from this state that I got the atmospheric idea. I was impressed with the colorful scenes which greeted me at Miami, Palm
Beach, and Tampa, where I say happy, gaily-dressed people living constantly under azure skies and amongst tropical splendor. Visions of Italian gardens, Spanish patios, Persian shrines and French formal garden laws flashed through my mind, and at once I directed my energies to carrying out these ideas.

Undoubtedly, Casale’s stay in Eberson’s “Hispano-Italian” Tampa Theatre building influenced his aesthetic visions for Lakeland’s own “atmospheric” theatre.32

Aside from its many impressive aesthetic features, the Polk also boasted an exceptional array of equipment. The primary state switchboard was state-of-the-art: approximately 500 independent switches operated the strip lights, footlights, balcony floodlights, and the star and cloud machines. The board also was hooked-up to a telephone and page system which allowed its operator to communicate with other areas of the theatre. The 34-by-16 foot movie screen hovered just behind the 36-by-12 orchestra pit. Behind the suspended screen, which could be removed, was a complete “hemp-house” stage rigging system. Unfortunately, the stage area was without one important item -a theatre organ. The Polk was built to accommodate one, but the Florida economic crunch that occurred prior to the theatre's opening halted the plans from being brought to fruition.33

Even the Polk’s chairs and overall seating scheme were touted in the opening-day press coverage as another example of the “scientific standpoint” from which the theatre’s design
emanated. Rhetorically juxtaposing the restlessness of “modern” audiences with those in the
days of “Sarah Bernhardt and her ilk,” Lakeland’s newspaper asked: “what play, or what player
of today could hold the audience spellbound through the devious windings of a tragedy, if the
consciousness of cramped limbs and lack of ordinary creature comfort were ever present?”34

The two most impressive technological features of the Polk were, however, the facility’s
air-conditioning unit and, of course, the theatre’s capability for sound motion pictures. Offering
new-found, cool respite to central Floridians, the Polk’s 100 ton, German-made Air Wash Carrier
system was soon put to good use in the hot, humid months that followed the theatre’s winter
opening. Although equipped with its own deep well for water, the huge air-conditioning system
was reportedly such a drain on the city’s power supply that during its early years of operation it
caused downtown lights to dim when switched on.35 Moreover, since the system was built in an
era before the air-conditioning thermostat, the theatre was forced to employ an operator to turn it
on and off. For instance, when it was pronounced too cold in the theatre, an usher would have to
run down to the basement and inform the operator that it was time to shut the system down.36

The introduction of sound motion pictures to Lakeland audiences came just as “talkie”
technology was entering a new phase. The Polk Theatre’s opening day film offerings reflected
that change. First developed by Western Electric and Warner Brothers in the mid-twenties,
Lakeland’s Polk Theatre in 1930.

Photograph from *Yesterday’s Lakeland* by Hampton Dunn.
Vitaphone, a sound-on-disc process, was installed in the Polk Theatre. The first successfully mass-produced “talkie” system, Vitaphone effectively established sound motion picture exhibition in the United States. However, film/disc synchronization problems often plagued the Vitaphone process, and the film industry began to explore new technology even as Vitaphone was hailed as the latest in motion picture entertainment. Along with the ever-present disc system threat that “a screw might jump a groove,” Vitaphone sound exhibition was a highly labor intensive affair. Recalling that in those early years four projectionists were often required to effectively handle the multi-reel/disc Vitaphone system, Arthur Bowden noted, “At first, sound was recorded on discs, and the reels would run only ten minutes. I remember all one reel had was All Jolson singing ‘Sonny Boy.’ Eventually sound-on-film came in and we were cut down to one man per shift.”

Although Warner Brothers had temporarily gained an advantage through its ties to Vitaphone, the other major Hollywood studios quickly joined the sound revolution. Led by William Fox’s studio, the film industry soon moved on and embraced the sound-on-film process known as Movietone. Reportedly paying New York’s Case Research Laboratories one million dollars for patent rights, Fox’s Movietone system was initially employed in newsreels produced to accompany feature sound films using Vitaphone. Unlike Vitaphone, the recording of Movietone sound films utilized a microphone system that was mobile and did not require studio bound equipment. Indeed, Movietone was well suited to the newsreel production that marked sound-on-film’s ascendancy. The process’s first major triumph occurred in 1927, when only one day after the historic event, a Movietone newsreel thrilled the crowds at New York City’s Roxy with sound footage of Charles Lindbergh’s Long Island takeoff for his trans-Atlantic flight. And while the complete industry transition to sound-on-film (in feature films) took a few years, Vitaphone was ultimately a short-lived phenomenon.

Similarly, the Polk’s opening day program highlighted the technological flux that marked the film industry during the late 1920s. Not fully sensing the coming changing-of-the-guard in sound motion picture techniques, the Lakeland Evening Ledger and Star-Telegram reported that the town’s new movie palace was thoroughly modern, boasting “both Vitaphone and the more recent Movietone.” Nevertheless, though the feature “On Trial” was prominently billed as “a full Vitaphone program,” the newspaper conceded that Movietone offered “a premiere . . . everyone is waiting to witness.”

The industry’s move to sound motion pictures was particularly important for America’s recently constructed movie palaces. In Movie-Made America, Robert Sklar contends that “the talkies provided in an instant the solution to the crisis of the picture palace.” Stressing economic ramifications, Sklar maintains that movie-goers “who had disdained the average first-run silents flocked to see any kind of talking film, even at jacked-up prices.” This was especially true in the ornate palaces scattered across the country. Analogously, industry historian Douglas Gomery stresses that the American cinema’s conversion to sound was “not only rapid, but also smooth, orderly, and extremely profitable.” This transition ensured “maximum profits and growth for . . . Hollywood monopolists.”

In Lakeland, the opening of the Polk and the coming of sound pictures perhaps took on deeper, certainly more localized resonance. Not only was mass culture’s most effective medium regally
showcased in a facility worthy of a much larger city, but the presence, and finally, the opening of that facility in late twenties’ Lakeland took on symbolic proportions. Commenting on the opening of such a movie palace in Polk County, the Tampa Tribune proclaimed the theatre a “big city achievement” that “will act upon the community as an invigorating tonic, doing much to eliminate the pessimism and lethargy of post-boom depression.”

For those who longed to believe in make-believe, the Polk’s light never shown brighter than it did in its early years. For whether it presented films, travelling stage acts, or hometown contests and pageants, the Polk effectively symbolized the town’s ties to both mass culture and its specific, localized identity within that culture. The entertainment center for thousands of central Floridians, the Polk Theatre maintained its status through the upcoming years of national depression and world war.

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2 Lakeland Ledger, November 28, 1926, p. 3.
3 Charlton W. Tebeau and Ruby Leach Carson, Florida: From Indian Trail to Space Age (Delray Beach, Fla.: The Southern Publishing Company, 1965), 57-59.
6 Lakeland Evening Ledger, November 11, 1926, p. 4.
9 Hampton Dunn, Yesterday’s Lakeland (Tampa: Bay Center Corporation, 1976), 43; Johnson and Bennett, “Historical Summary,” 6; Hetherington, History of Polk County, 37-40.
10 See Dunn, Yesterday’s Lakeland, 46; and Johnston and Bennett, “Historical Summary,” 6.
11 Lakeland Star-Telegram, April 18, 1926, p. 3.
14 Johnston and Bennett, “Historical Summary,” 6-7; Polk County Landmarks, “Polk Theatre Fact Sheet,” Polk Theatre Collection, Lakeland.
15 The Evening Telegram, November 2, 1911, p. 5; Lakeland Evening Telegram, September 22, 1914, p. 5.

16 Lakeland Star-Telegram, April 25, 1926, p. 8; Lakeland Evening Ledger, November 21, 1926, p. 13, and February 27, 1927, p. 5-B.

17 Lakeland Evening Ledger and Star-Telegram, December 21, 1928, p. 8-B.


19 Ibid., December 28, 1928, p. 3.

20 Ibid., December 21, 1928, p. 8-B.

21 Interview with Arthur Bowden, Lakeland, Florida, October 23, 1989, p. 3.

22 Lakeland Evening Ledger and Star-Telegram, December 28, 1928, p. 3.


24 Johnston and Bennett, “Historical Summary,” 9; Tampa Times October 12, 1929, p. 8-B; Tampa Tribune, October 10, 1926, p. 10-C.

25 Joyce M. Davis, Lakeland’s Unique Architectural Heritage (Lakeland: Polk Museum of Art, 1987), 17, 18, mimeographed reprint, Special Collections Lakeland Public Library, Lakeland; Polk County Landmarks, “Heavenly Daze,” 6, Polk Theatre Collection. “Heavenly Daze” was the title of the program distributed at the Polk’s reopening celebration.

26 Johnston and Bennett, “Historical Summary,” 1, 2; interview with Tisha Sheldon, vice president of Polk Theatre, October 23, 1989 (in possession of the author). The Johnston and Bennett study of the Polk goes into considerable architectural detail regarding both the exterior and interior of the theatre. Their work has been very helpful in the compilation of this article.

27 Johnston and Bennett, “Historical Summary,” 1, 2; “Heavenly Daze,” 6; Polk County Landmarks, “Polk Theatre Fact Sheet” (mimeographed), Polk Theatre Collection. Much of the original outer lobby of the Polk was altered as the decades passed to achieve a more “modern” appearance. Recent efforts to restore the theatre have uncovered several long forgotten pastel murals that once distinguished the main entrance.

28 Johnston and Bennett, “Historical Summary,” 1-3; “Heavenly Daze,” 6, 7; “Polk Theatre Fact Sheet;” Davis, Lakeland’s Heritage, 18; interview with Tisha Sheldon. One recurrent motif found throughout the theatre is that of the “Venetian rose.” Perhaps Casale’s decorative theme was employed as a nostalgic homage to his birthplace, Villarosa, Italy.


30 Naylor, “Ticket to the World of Movies,” 34.

31 Naylor, Movie Theaters, 100; Joseph M. Valerio and Daniel Friedman, Movie Palaces: Renaissance and Reuse (New York: Educational Facilities Laboratories Division, Academy for Educational Development, 1982), 79-81. When discussing the Tampa Theatre, Valerio and Friedman refer to it as “one of the only two atmospherics in the state.” Undoubtedly citing Eberson’s well-know Olympia (now the Gusman Center) in Miami as the other, the authors overlook Lakeland’s Polk.
C. Eberson said that his design for the Tampa was “not of the mission style found in California, nor the jazz architecture used in Miami.” It was “of the true Hispano-Italian style – that which came into vogue during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, lovers of art, who invited Italian architects, sculptors and painters to participate in some of the architectural wonders built during this period. Thus the effects of the Italian Renaissance were introduced into Spain and had a very wonderful, softening and refining effect on the comparatively speaking crude and coarse Spanish motif.” Ibid.

In the late 1980s, as part of an on-going restoration process, the Polk acquired a Robert-Morton Company pipe organ that had been placed in a Canton, Ohio, movie palace in the late twenties.

The theatre originally contained approximately 1,800 seats (1,100 in the main auditorium and 700 in the balcony). Contemporary press reports that 2,000 tickets were sold for the opening day's afternoon show are probably misleading. However, there may have been a “standing-room” policy in effect due to the heavy local interest in the theatre's sound motion picture premiere.

Polk Theatre Fact Sheet”; The Ledger, September 12, 1984, p. 3-C; Interview with Tisha Sheldon; Raymond Arsenault, “The End of the Long Hot Summer: The Air Conditioner and Southern Culture,” Journal of Southern History 50 (November 1984), 597-628. Ledger history columnist Martha F. Sawyer reported that the Polk was one of only six air-conditioned theatres in Florida during the late 1920s.

Interview with Arthus Bowden.


Interview with Arthus Bowden.
The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was created in 1909 with the merger of W.E.B. Du Bois’s Niagara Movement and a group of white liberals for the purpose of ending racial segregation and discrimination in housing, education, employment, voting, and transportation. It also sought to oppose racism and ensure African Americans their constitutional rights under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments. From its beginning the NAACP worked not only through the National Office in New York City, but also by way of the branches and local associations in cities and towns scattered through the country. The NAACP branch established in Tampa in the early twentieth century is one of the oldest in the association’s history. Moreover, its early life in Tampa makes for more than an interesting story, as it reveals much about the character of the community’s African Americans and about race relations in this southern city.

Although the early twentieth century was a period of significant reform in most areas of American life, historians have long recognized that “race,” the “blind spot” of the Progressive movement, constituted the major exception to this generalization. This was certainly true of southern cities like Tampa. In Progressive-era Tampa, for example, the “White Municipal Party” carried out a successful campaign to exclude blacks from any political participation in the city's life. In the 1903 lynching of Lewis Jackson, a black man accused of an attack on a white child, white Tampans showed that they would maintain traditional caste arrangements and white supremacy with violence when they felt the use of deadly force was necessary. Recently, one historian has traced white attitudes and behavior toward Tampa’s African Americans through the antebellum, Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow periods. What he and other scholars found was that little significant response was forthcoming from the turn-of-the-century generation of municipal reformers and social workers in Tampa to the problems created by rapid black urbanization. Furthermore, the Florida legislature, between 1905 and 1909, passed a series of measures that outlawed cohabitation and miscegenation, as well as racial integration in higher education, in jail accommodations, on common carriers, on electric cars, in public waiting rooms, and at public ticket windows.

Living under these harsh conditions the African-American community saw Tampa explode in growth after the turn of the century. As a boom town, Tampa’s expansion was nothing short of phenomenal: its overall population jumped from 15,839 in 1900, to 37,782 in 1910, to 51,608 in 1920, and finally to 101,161 in 1930. The black population also multiplied: from 4,382 in 1900, to 8,951 in 1910, to 11,531 in 1920, and 21,172 in 1930. Nonetheless, it grew at a slower rate than the white population, declining from about 28 percent of the total in 1900 to some 21 percent in 1930. Additionally, census records clearly show that Tampa’s black community in those years was of diverse origins: in 1920, 39.8 percent of the city’s blacks were born outside of Florida, and in 1930 it was up to 43.7 percent. Tampa appears to have attracted many of its new black residents, not only from the Florida countryside, but from other nearby southern states such as Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia, as well as from Cuba and the West Indies.
As their numbers grew, Tampa blacks organized themselves in a variety of ways to promote self-help and advancement. They created the Clara Frye Hospital for blacks (1910), the Afro-American Civic League (1912), the Afro-American Monthly (1912), the City Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs (1915), and the weekly *Tampa Bulletin* (1915). By the 1920s black businesses, newspapers, schools, fraternal orders, clubs, and professional organizations had become permanent fixtures of African-American life in Tampa. And, finally, one of the most important organizational achievements of this period was the establishment of the Tampa NAACP in 1915.  

The roots of the local NAACP lay in West Tampa, a rapidly expanding black residential district largely populated by the overflow from older black neighborhoods. In April 1915 Charles S. Sturgis, a black minister and businessman, contacted the national office in New York City and asked how he could convert the organization which he headed up locally, the American Benevolent Association, into the West Tampa branch of the NAACP. In response to this request NAACP Secretary May Childs Nerney explained to Sturgis the conditions under which a group such as his could become a branch of the association. At this point, however, Sturgis apparently passed the initiative on to another activist, H.E. Lester, an African-American mail carrier. On June 25, 1915 Lester corresponded directly with W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the
high-level black officials in the NAACP, declaring “we want to organize a branch of your Association here in West Tampa. We would be very glad if you would send us some literature on the manner and mode of organization.” Du Bois referred the request to Secretary Nerney who instructed Lester: “As it is very difficult, however, to carry on this work in the South we think it would be better for you to consider organizing a local instead of a branch.” She added, “I am forwarding under a separate cover two copies of the form of constitution we use for locals.... If locals are successful we organize them into branches at the end of the year.”

This counsel gave direction to local efforts. Speaking for many Tampa blacks, Lester answered Nerney: “We have been trying to look at the conditions as they really are in the South and especially in our locality. After due deliberations we have decided that we will try to organize a local.” He also noted that “After we have worked for a year no doubt we shall be in a position to know whether we are strong enough to apply for [a] charter for a branch of your Association.”

The local was promptly set up, and Lester sent two copies of the constitution and by-laws to the national office. Founders named the local after Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, the ardent black nationalist.

During the course of the following year African-American interest in establishing a branch in Tampa grew. Indeed, this growing interest was clearly encouraged by a visit from the NAACP’s new full-time field secretary and national organizer, James Weldon Johnson, who orchestrated a concerted effort to organize southern branches. Furthermore, by early 1917 Tampa blacks had found a strong, energetic leader D.W. Perkins, an African-American attorney, who lived and practiced in Tampa. Under his dynamic leadership some 107 African Americans joined the association as formal dues-paying members. In March of 1917 Perkins proudly informed the national office: “This as you doubtless know is the organization which Mr. Jas [James] W. Johnson reported to you as the result of his efforts here.” He also enthusiastically proclaimed that "The report would have been sent several days ago but for the ambition of the membership to send no less than one hundred members...and our motto is to increase the membership to five hundred within the next few days.” He concluded, “We are creating enthusiasm all over the state and have invitations to organize branches in several Florida towns.”

The Tampa branch was plainly off to a strong start. James Weldon Johnson and the national office eagerly recognized and praised this noteworthy achievement. Johnson himself dashed off a telegram exclaiming “Congratulations to Tampa on holding the record for the South.” And Secretary Roy Nash (who replaced Nerney) wired that the “Application and check for one hundred nineteen dollars received. Heartiest Congratulations. You’ve broken the record for new branches.” Subsequently, executive authorization was officially conferred on the Tampa branch on April 11, 1917, in a document signed by Joel E. Spingarn, chairman of the board of directors in New York City. This action routinely preceded the granting of a permanent charter.

The “Application for Charter” listed the officers and members of the Tampa NAACP: D.W. Perkins, President; Dr. Jacob White (a black physician), Vice-President; Mrs. Christine Meacham (black principal of Harlem Academy), Secretary; and Joseph Clinton (black businessman), Treasurer. Although most of the rank-and-file membership consisted of middle-class blacks (prominent among these were ministers, teachers, dentists, insurance agents,
undertakers, dressmakers, nurses, grocers, and tailors), many working people joined, including janitors, porters, clerks, messengers, cigar makers, and machinists.  

The NAACP worked through the national office which determined the policy of the organization and supervised the work of the branches. Moreover, the successful activity of the association depended largely upon the effective organization and conduct of its affiliates. They provided it with membership and much of its financial support as well as information from the field. In the words of one scholar, “The branches are the lifeline of the association, and the national office is constantly struggling to maintain them in vigor and to found new branches.”

As soon as the Tampa branch began to flourish, it suffered the first major setback. It lost the leadership of Perkins who, with the United States’ entry into World War I in 1917, joined the military. From his training camp at Des Moines, Iowa, Perkins penned a revealing letter to James Weldon Johnson. He asked if it would be possible to have the *New York Age*, a widely read black newspaper, sent to Iowa for the benefit of the black troops. Johnson replied, “I was a bit surprised to know that you are a soldier. I know that the loss to the Tampa branch is great, but of course, the gain to the country is greater.” He added, “I hope that someone has taken up the work of the organization in Tampa who will not let it lag, and I hope also that you will as far as possible keep in touch with the officers and members and encourage them in their efforts.” And he concluded, “I shall speak to the publisher of the *New York Age* concerning your request.”

Johnson naturally worried that the loss of Perkins might adversely affect the budding branch in Tampa. Thus, he took steps to keep it going. The day after he corresponded with Perkins, Johnson contacted Christina A. Heacham, the branch’s secretary, and informed her that the Board of Directors in New York City had granted a permanent charter for the Tampa organization. He also offered encouragement by stating, “I trust that the receipt of this charter will provide the occasion for stimulating interest in the work of the branch. It should be framed and carefully preserved in order that it may be handed down to newly elected branch officers from year to year.” Johnson then suggested that a special meeting might be called for the purpose of making known to all the members that the charter had been granted and received. Then he declared, “Never in the history of the organization has there been greater need for determined and tireless effort on the part of the branches.”

While Perkins served in the Army, the mantle of leadership passed to Dr. J.A. White and Christina Meacham. They made decisions for the branch and enrolled new members. For example, in August 1917 Meacham wrote to Johnson that “I am authorized by the acting president of the Tampa branch of the NAACP to ask you to send to us all the matter that will assist us in getting up a Silent Protest Parade [following the example of the national office’s famous parade protesting an anti-black riot in East St Louis]. We are trying in a small way to bring about some needed reforms.” Johnson answered that the national office had indeed forwarded all pertinent information to all the branches.

In 1917 the Tampa NAACP also solicited some support from the white community. On August 19, the Tampa group held its regular monthly meeting at which Judge E.J. Binford, a white man, addressed the assembly. He was reportedly enthusiastic in his demonstration of goodwill, paying his membership fee and pledging his support for the association goal of interracial cooperation.
The July 1917 cover of the NAACP’s magazine, *The Crisis*, depicted African American troops in battle.
At this same meeting Professor George A. Towns from Atlanta University delivered an inspirational speech and “made a strong appeal to his hearers to stand by the organization because it is doing something.” According to Meacham’s report to Johnson, “Twenty five new names were added to the branch... The branch is taking on new life.” Then she added: “We are pleased to state that the ‘Red Light District’ has been wiped out of the city.... We see nothing but success.”

In reply, Johnson stated, “I certainly must congratulate the Tampa branch upon the splendid membership it is making. Tampa is one of the smallest cities in the country, but the Tampa branch has become one of the largest and livest [sic] members of the association.” He concluded with a pat on the back: “I sincerely hope that the officers and members will keep up the good work.”

In October Johnson heard from Perkins who was still stationed in Iowa. Like many other young, aspiring African Americans in the Army, the Tampa attorney was refused a commission as an officer. After expressing his disappointment, Perkins asked Johnson to help him determine “whether we are to be mistreated simply because of the Houston affair [referring to the incident in Texas where black troops took up arms to defend themselves against the local white community] for which we are in no wise responsible.”

Johnson promptly answered that “I share with you your disappointment in not having received a commission.... If I can gain any information that will be to your advantage, I shall immediately let you have it.” He then changed the subject and urged Perkins not to forget about the Tampa NAACP and to “take hold of the branch and help shove it forward.” He also praised the Tampa chapter as “one of the most wonderful of the new branches which we have.... [I]t stands among the largest in the country so far as National Association membership goes, being only a few members short of the branch at Atlanta.” He next instructed Perkins to “try and outline a plan of constructive work for organization.”

Johnson’s concern about the health and vigor of the Tampa group was well-founded. He watched uncomfortably through the winter of 1917 and the spring of 1918 as the Tampa organization languished. Secretary Meacham admitted as much in the summer of 1918, stating that “Our branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has been inactive because of the absence of the President [Perkins].” In an attempt to reinvigorate the Tampa affiliate, Johnson visited Tampa on June 23, 1918, and suggested a drive for new members. This stirred local activists who conducted the drive and recruited fifty-six new members. This effort, however, was the last major spurt of activity for some time as the Tampa NAACP carried on through the early 1920s at a low level of operation.

The Tampa organization did not contact the national office again until April 2, 1922, when a white man, John Logan, murdered a local black woman. Authorities arrested and incarcerated the white suspect who showed no remorse. In fact, the local press widely publicized Logan’s racial slurs regarding the victim, he falsely claimed had tried to rob him. The branch president, R.R. Williams, a black physician, wrote to the national office informing them that he had investigated the incident and “immediately employed a lawyer to fight the case.” Referring to the accused, Williams added, “so far we have been able to have him placed under a $5,000.00 bond and locked in the County Jail awaiting trial in the Circuit Court before the Grand Jury.” He closed his letter by declaring, “We trust that this action on the part of the local branch here will meet your hearty approval.” The reply came back: “It is the opinion of the national office that you have
indeed acted wisely and we sincerely trust that your efforts in having this man punished will meet with success.”

At this point the historical record regarding the Tampa NAACP falls silent until 1929. Even though the national association fared well in the 1920s, it declined in Tampa and eventually disappeared altogether. There are several reasons that might explain why this happened. For instance, the Tampa branch had to compete with numerous other black organizations, especially churches and fraternal lodges, for followers and financial support. Additionally, no strong, active leader stepped forward during the decade to lead the local chapter. However, the most important cause for the apparent demise of the Tampa NAACP in the twenties was the stunning success of its major rival, the Tampa Urban League. This latter organization, with its goal of economic uplift for blacks, apparently proved more appealing for a time to the local African-American community than the NAACP’s non-economic aims of achieving full civil and political rights.

Although the National Urban League came into being in the early decades of the century to assist new black migrants to northern cities, it soon spread to the urban South where growing cities like Tampa also attracted large numbers of rural blacks. The Urban League in Tampa, more interracial in its local makeup than the NAACP, was led at first by Blanche Armwood, a prominent woman in the African-American community, and by former mayor and Tampa Daily Times owner-editor, D.B. McKay, who became the first president of the interracial board. McKay’s involvement in this organization undoubtedly reflected the desire of some whites to foster harmony and cooperation between the races in the larger interest of developing and modernizing Tampa.

Perhaps the local Urban League’s most distinguished leader in these days was Dr. Benjamin Mays who served as executive secretary in 1927. This nationally recognized black figure came to Tampa in the 1920s to lead the Urban League, but he later recalled that “Tampa was not the city of our dreams.” He came to know intimately the racial situation in the city and played a major role in writing about it. His welfare organization proclaimed that it was “interested in anything that touches Negro life from the highest and most dignified type of social life to the jails and stockades.” Indeed, it provided needed services not offered by the NAACP, including two day-care nurseries for working mothers, alternative home placements for juvenile delinquents, family case work, the organization of clubs and recreation for black youth, and employment placement. In the twenties, the Tampa office was staffed by a trained secretary, the executive secretary, a specialized social worker, an office employee who handled the bookkeeping, and a stenographer who performed clerical duties such as filing and typing. For much of its work the Tampa Urban League successfully solicited volunteer services from ministers, teachers, doctors, and other public-spirited citizens of the local African-American community. Nonetheless, it functioned in an overall environment of indifference and even hostility from most white people in the larger community. Still, the Urban League meant a great deal to blacks as they struggled to adjust to life in Tampa. It filled a dire need by helping poor blacks in this rapidly industrializing New South city in the 1920s as it also tried to moderate social and economic discrimination.

The Tampa NAACP also had another competitor in the 1920s. The continuation of discrimination and anti-black feeling during this decade accompanied a sharp increase in the black population. The Tampa Tribune said as much at the beginning of the decade when it
proudly proclaimed in 1921 that “white supremacy will be maintained in the South.” Some African Americans concluded that the oppressive racial caste system under which they lived was so deeply racist that it might never change. They reacted to this situation by embracing the militant black nationalist views of Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey. Tampa’s black community supported two chapters of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Even though it is difficult to determine how widespread the support for the UNIA was among the city’s African Americans, the mere existence of these chapters suggests the development of a level of black consciousness that contemplated an ideology of separatism and self-determination and that conflicted with the goals of the NAACP.

In spite of the successes of the Urban League and the UNIA, by the end of the decade Tampa blacks were ready to begin again with the NAACP. On February 6, 1929 Reverend C.S. Sutton, a field worker for the association, wrote the national office on behalf of interested black Tampans: “I have been asked what was [sic] the possibilities of opening a branch office (in this city) of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.” And he added, “I have been unable to give an answer to the question. Will you please inform me if such is possible, and give me all information and authority to open such a branch.”

Robert Bagnell, director of branches, informed Sutton that “We are...sending you our organization handbook, ‘How to Form a
Branch.’ You will note that at least fifty members who may pay one dollar a year or above, are required for a chartered branch.” As his organizing proceeded, Sutton kept the national office informed about his activities: “So far we have been able to secure quite a few members who have paid their annual fee of one dollar and we are expecting more later. I hope to be able to form the branch not later than March 19th.” Bagnell wrote back, “I am glad that you are making progress towards the organization of a branch in Tampa. I trust that your hope of having the branch fully organized by the 19th will be realized.” Sutton apparently met his deadline, and the new organization then picked its officers: Professor E.J. Wright, President; Gilbery Chisholm (elevator operator), Vice-President; Sarah Howard (cook), Secretary; and Mary Potter (manager of the Tampa Bulletin, Treasurer. Further, the Executive Committee consisted of Reverend Moses Edmond, Robert Williams (clerk), and G.E. Chisholm.

At the moment of rebirth, a potential lynching incident provided the newly constituted NAACP with its first major challenge. According to Sutton’s account, Charley Durham, a black Tampan, was arrested on February 17, 1929, and charged with raping a white woman. Knowing that such an explosive allegation stirred lynch fever in the white community, local authorities reportedly moved the black suspect out of Tampa to another facility in a nearby town. This development, however, worried the national office which was understandably concerned about Durham’s safety. “I judge that Charley Durham has been located.... Will you let us know as we have heard

The Helping Hand Day Nursery, shown here in 1925, has long been one of Tampa’s leading African-American institutions.

Photograph courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
of several cases in which the person has been spirited away?” asked Bagnell. In response, Sutton informed the national leaders that as of April 1929 Durham was securely lodged in the Hillsborough County jail.47

In April the Tampa NAACP and Sutton came to Durham’s rescue. After conducting their own investigation, they found the black suspect innocent of the charge. Further, they watched developments closely, and in the spring of 1929 a judge continued the rape trial of Durham in order for the prosecution to locate and assure the appearance of its chief witness, the fourteen-year-old son of the alleged victim. The youth, for unknown reasons, had failed to show for the first trial. “We are prepared to fight the case,” reported Sutton, and he continued, “We have put on a drive to raise the money to fight the case. So far we have $118.65.” He also announced: “We hope to win Charley Durham’s freedom although the state attorney said at the hearing that he wanted the man convicted.”48 Ultimately, the NAACP campaign to save the black suspect was successful when the court acquitted him at the second trial.

Sutton’s leadership so impressed the local African-American community that its spokesmen asked the national office to station him in Tampa permanently. In May 1929, Mary Potter, NAACP officer and editor of the *Tampa Bulletin*, praised the capable man who helped organize the Tampa branch. She declared, “Rev. C.S. Sutton spent several months in our city and moved among our group in a beneficial way. He made such an impression on the thinking people, that I am compelled to write.” Potter stated that Sutton had “succeeded in getting a number of people interested in the NAACP.” She then cited Sutton’s specific achievements: “He was successful in cleaning up the following cases: Laopazier [white] was fined fifty dollars and [court] costs by Judge Cornelius, for assault on James R. Sutton, colored; Joe Farley [white] was fined $62.28, the cost of repair of car and cost of court. It was proven that he willfully ran into Falsom Jones [black] on 21st St. and 17th Ave.” Finally, Potter referred to the Durham victory and requested national leaders to maintain Sutton in Tampa.49

This string of successes gave needed encouragement to the Tampa NAACP which helped to sustain its legal work through the decade of the 1930s and beyond. In regard to Potter’s letter about Sutton, Bagnell wrote:

> Mr. Sutton was in the National Office a few days ago and told us some of the things he had accomplished for the benefit of the colored people of Tampa.

> I note that you ask that we station Mr. Sutton in Tampa, it is not within the means of the National Office to do this.... [N]ot only did he demonstrate that the Negro in Tampa could secure justice if he fought for it, but he gave practical evidence that it is within the power of every colored man and woman to help in the fight for justice by giving support and co-operation [to the NAACP].50

Now on its own, the Tampa branch confronted its next big case in 1930. In February of that year a group of white people in nearby Brooksville descended upon the house of a black family and pulled Leroy Huggins, his wife, and his seventeen-year-old son out on to the street and “whipped them shamefully.” The enraged mob had acted on the unproven claim that the son stole $114 from the cash register at the garage where he worked. When law officers arrived, they arrested and incarcerated the father and the son rather than the vigilantes. Huggins’s wife, in fear for her life, went into hiding.51
This episode shows how difficult and frustrating it was for the NAACP to handle cases of antiblack violence. The *Tampa Bulletin*’s Mart Potter outlined the details of this crime to Walter White, now executive secretary of the NAACP, who in turn referred the matter to William T. Andrews, special legal assistant to the national office. Andrews wrote Potter, “We have no field investigator whom we can send to your community to investigate this case,” and he added, “I am this day writing to the President of our Tampa branch with reference to the above matter.” In fact, Andrews asked President Wright: “Will you, as President of the branch, have the matter investigated and send us all information which you have about the case.” In conclusion, he requested, “Send me all of the facts you can possibly gather concerning the circumstances under which the whipping took place.” Wright wrote back and asked the national office to send a detective to Brooksville in order to ascertain the facts of the case.

At this point, Andrews promptly informed Wright, “We have no one on our staff now available to go to Florida.” Further, Bagnell corresponded with Wright about matters other than the Leroy Huggins incident: “I am indeed glad to know that the Tampa branch is planning a mass meeting .... I trust that the branch will organize and conduct a most successful Moorfield Storey-Louis Marshall Memorial Campaign, to do honor to these two great leaders who did so much for the race.” The membership drive added new members to the roll of the branch, but because of the overall lack of funds and resources, little could be done about the Huggins case. Although the whites who beat this family were not brought to justice, the NAACP investigated the affair and registered its opposition both on the local and national level.

The year 1930 ended the same way it started, with the Tampa NAACP responding to an outbreak of antiblack violence. On Monday, December 1, 1930, white vigilantes took the law into their own hands by kidnapping a young black man (known only in the record as “Timothy”) from jail, carrying him to an isolated spot outside of town, and then castrating him. According to a newsclipping from the *Tampa Bulletin*, “The young man was arrested Monday morning [December 1] at the municipal hospital where he had been working a year or more. The accusation was that he had been flirting with a (white, female) nurse.” Someone in Tampa penned an unsigned note to Walter White about this incident: “We are taking the liberty of reporting this case which we feel should be investigated.” White dashed off a letter to Wright in which he asked him to look into the incident and report back his “opinion as to whether or not you think it is a case in which the Association should participate.”

Responding to this request the branch immediately inquired into the gruesome crime and submitted its findings to the national office. The report specifically noted the feelings of fear and intimidation that existed in the local black community: “Many of the people who know about the current events are afraid to even ask for aid. The mother of the boy and also his devoted wife are alone, they have no one to speak for them. The boy is about 25 years of age.” The account filed with the national office was largely in the words of the victim himself who stated:

> They drove the car down North Armenia Avenue and Platt Street, on North Armenia Ave. they blindfolded me.... They took me in a frame building tied my hands and feet also my legs and laid me on the floor, I was put to sleep with Ether. Then they removed my fluid glands [castration]. They brought me to town I woke up in the Negro Hospital commonly known as Clara Frye.... Mr. Wright please don’t forget the secrecy of this matter.
This grisly act of extralegal violence against a black man was investigated and recorded by the NAACP, perhaps the most they could do given the harsh caste system under which they lived. And although white authorities never apprehended the vigilantes, local blacks did not passively accept the violent act that was aimed at them. In fact, looking back over the early history of the Tampa NAACP, its efforts to oppose antiblack violence highlight its activities. In several cases in these years the NAACP involved itself in attempts to protect the lives and safety of individual blacks and to bring to justice whites guilty of violence against them.61

This survey of the Tampa NAACP’s early activities over a fifteen-year period reveals significant information about the attributes of the local African-American community and the nature of race relations in this southern city. During the first thirty years of the twentieth century, Tampa was a city in which the racial caste system of segregation, disfranchisement, and occasional resort to antiblack violence was the rule in race relations. Not surprisingly, then, Tampa blacks in those years endured continuous racial discrimination in almost all areas of life including exclusion from schools, churches, parks, hotels, movie houses, restaurants, and the like. This was also the time that whites drew a tight color line in the area of employment as custom relegated most blacks to service occupations where large numbers of them were concentrated in low-paid and menial jobs.62

In the face of these disadvantages Tampa’s African Americans organized the NAACP in 1915. The organization experienced an inconsistent history of ups and downs as it fluctuated between energetic and dormant periods. This occurred in large part because many factors limited the effectiveness of the Tampa branch in these years. One serious difficulty was its inability to maintain consistent leadership because of the high demands made upon the time, intent, intelligence, and energy of local leaders. Officers who led the NAACP were not paid a salary, but worked on a voluntary basis in their free time. Another problem was that few whites in Tampa were prepared to give assistance or even sympathy to the NAACP’s work. The competition of the Urban League and other black organizations was still another difficulty that hampered the branch’s effectiveness. And perhaps most damaging of all was the general poverty and discouraged state of mind of many African Americans oppressed by racial conditions. Considering all the impediments which the Tampa NAACP encountered, it is no wonder that it ran through irregular cycles in the years between 1915 and 1930. Still, except for the long spell in the 1920s when it remained completely dormant, the branch was active enough to maintain a basic membership roll and fairly regular meetings. It not only stressed the general goals of the association, but also worked on specific problems of Tampa.

In retrospect, it is remarkable that the Tampa NAACP worked with the vigor it did in those years, showing positive aspects of Tampa’s African-American community. A number of local blacks had the courage and resolve to organize a branch of the NAACP and then support it over the years. Such activities involved a certain risk since black teachers who joined may have endangered their jobs, black ministers who signed up risked offending white landlords who may have held the mortgages on their churches, and black businessmen may have chanced arousing the ire of their powerful white colleagues. Furthermore, many working class blacks, who were promised no immediate economic benefits from membership, joined the Tampa NAACP. And while the fight for standard NAACP goals such as voter registration as well as adequate schools, housing, jobs, parks, and the struggle for the hiring of black policemen and firemen lay in the
future, these early years boasted some successes. They included the challenge to white mob violence and legal mistreatment of African Americans, as well as a few court victories. In the final analysis, that so many black Tampans either became formal members or otherwise backed the NAACP program of racial fair play was the major strength of the organization.


2 This distinction is part of the oral tradition of Tampa’s African-American community. Walter Howard’s interview with Robert Saunders, field secretary of the Florida NAACP during the modern civil rights era, December 1, 1993.


9 Florida’s black population grew rapidly between 1920 and 1930, registering a 31.1 percent increase which was the largest of any southern state. It is also true that many of Florida’s African Americans moved North in these same years. In 1920, for example, 1,275 blacks born in Florida lived in Harlem. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negroes in the United States, 1920-1932*, 7.


12 May Childs Nerney to Charles S. Sturgis, May 7, 1915, ibid.

14 May Child, Nerney to H.E. Lester, July 1, 1915, ibid.

15 H.E. Lester to May Childs Nerney, September 20, 1915, ibid.

16 The two copies of this constitution can be found in the Records of the NAACP, 1909-1939, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Group I, Series G. Container #42, file titled, “West Tampa.”


19 Telegram from James Weldon Johnson to D.W. Perkins, April 3, 1917, ibid.

20 Telegram from Roy Nash to D.W. Perkins, April 3, 1917, ibid.


22 “Application Charter,” ibid.


26 James Weldon Johnson to C.A. Meacham, June 26, 1917, ibid.

27 C.A. Meacham to James Weldon Johnson, August 13, 1917; James Weldon Johnson to C.A. Meacham, August 17, 1917, ibid.

28 C.A. Meacham to James Weldon Johnson, September 1, 1917, ibid.

29 James Weldon Johnson to C.A. Meacham, September 6, 1917, ibid.

30 D.W. Perkins to James Weldon Johnson, October 16, 1917, ibid.

31 James Weldon Johnson to D.W. Perkins, October 23, 1917, ibid.


33 R.R. Williams to Secretary of NAACP, April 12, 1922, ibid.

34 Assistant Secretary to Dr. R.R. Williams, April 17, 1922, ibid.

35 For an insightful account of the rivalry between the NAACP and Urban League, see B. Joyce Ross, J. E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP, 1911-1939 (New York, 1972), 19, 24.

Walter Howard’s interview with Joann Tokely, Executive Director of the Tampa Urban League, July 13, 1993.


C. S. Sutton to National Office, February 6, 1929, NAACP, Branch Files, 1118-1930.

Robert Bagnell to C.S. Sutton, February 13, 1929, ibid.

C.S. Sutton to National Office, March 9, 1929, ibid.


C.S. Sutton to Robert Bagnell, March 26, 1929; Robert Bagnell to C.S. Sutton, April 2, 1929, ibid.

C.S. Sutton to Robert Bagnell, April 5, 1929, ibid.

Ibid.

M.E. Potter to NACCP National Office, May 10, 1929, ibid.

Robert Bagnell to Prof. E.J. Wright, May 14, 1929, ibid.

M.E. Potter to Walter White, February 25, 1930, ibid.; see also *Brooksville Journal*, February 12, 1930.


William T. Andrews to M.E. Potter, March 1, 1930, ibid.

William T. Andrews to Prof. E.J. Wright, March 1, 1930, ibid.


William T. Andrews to E.J. Wright, March 21, 1930; Robert Bagnell to E.J. Wright, March 28, 1930, ibid.

This newscutting was filed in the National Office, December 17, 1930, ibid.

Ibid.

Walter White to E.J. Wright, December 19, 1930, ibid.

Amos Butler (new branch secretary) to National Office, December 22, 1930, ibid.

The Tampa NAACP continued this effort in the 1930s when a black Tampan named Robert Johnson was lynched, see Walter T. Howard, ‘A Blot on Tampa’s History’: The 1934 Lynching of Johnson,” *Tampa Bay History* 6 (Fall/Winter 1984), 12.

FOUR DAYS BEFORE DALLAS: 
JFK IN TAMPA 
by Frank DeBenedictis

President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the thirty-fifth president of the United States, visited the Tampa Bay area on the eighteenth of November in 1963, just four days before his assassination in Dallas. When medical officials announced Kennedy’s death at 1:00 p.m. central standard time on November 22, a feeling of shock, disbelief and mourning engulfed the American public. This was, of course, true for the Tampa Bay area, perhaps even more so because of the President’s recent visit. Sunshine state residents had seen this handsome, charismatic president only four days earlier. The suddenness of Kennedy’s death by assassination became, for Tampa Bay, a harbinger for turbulent times in the Sixties, the defining moment for the decade to follow.

On November 18, 1963, a sunny Florida day, there was no indication of what was to follow four days later. The visit to Tampa went smoothly, as reported in the November 18 and 19 editions of the major newspapers. Locally, optimism and boosterism prevailed, as Suncoast citizens prepared to welcome the President. Both public and parochial schools granted excused absences for students anxious to get a glimpse of JFK. Presidential watchers in St. Petersburg boarded “bus motorcades” destined for Al Lopez Field for a Presidential rendezvous. St. Petersburg Times reporter Don Meikeljohn wrote, “The best spot will be at Al Lopez Field, located at Dale Mabry Boulevard and Tampa Bay Boulevard in Tampa.”

While Suncoast residents moved into their stadium and motorcade viewing spots, the Presidential party was landing at MacDill Air Force Base for a military welcome. On hand to greet Kennedy were General Paul D. Adams, Commander in Chief U.S. Strike Command; Lieutenant General Bruce K. Holloway, Adams’ deputy; General Walter Sweeney, Commander of TAC and headquartered at Langley A.F.B., Virginia; and General John K. Waters, Commander in Chief Continental Army Command, Ft. Monroe, Virginia. Congressmen and other dignitaries on hand included U.S. Senator George Smathers, Congressman Sam Gibbons of Tampa, Congressman Dante Fascell of Monroe County, Congressman Claude Pepper of Dade County, and Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce President and General Manager of the Tribune Company James H. Covey, Jr. Tanned and healthy, the President greeted the MacDill crowd at 11:45 a.m. The Commander in Chief, accompanied by Strike Command Chief Paul D. Abrams, proceeded to inspect the Army and Air Force honor guards. The rest of the day would be spent politicking in visits to selected locations and riding in a motorcade through Tampa.

Ask any contemporary Democratic politician why Kennedy went to Tampa, and he will respond that it was because the President’s reelection campaign needed desperately to carry Florida, a state he had lost to Richard Nixon in 1960 by only 46,776 votes out of 1,544,180 total ballots. Thus, Kennedy’s visit was meant to strengthen his position in politically conservative Florida. His position in the South concerned party officials, which explains why his November schedule included trips to both Texas and Florida. The South’s two most populous states were crucial to the President’s 1964 re-election chances.
President Kennedy’s proposed itinerary for November 18, 1963.
The President’s first and only speaking appearance open to the general public in Tampa was at Al Lopez Field. His entourage flew there from MacDill by helicopter. Kennedy touched on several topics, but in a style true to his New Frontier image, the President emphasized that the day was the fiftieth anniversary of commercial flight in the United States. He praised pioneering Tampa Bay pilot Tony Jannus. Ten thousand people in attendance cheered as he commemorated that day in 1913 when a hydroplane loaded with a passenger and groceries flew from St. Petersburg to Tampa. Reiterating his New Frontier theme, the President noted that, “in the 1970s giant supersonic airlines will be speeding across country at three times the speed of sound.” After another round of cheers, he continued speaking and focused on some serious national – and local – issues.

One topic of particular importance to Tampa Bay was the omnipresent Communist regime in Cuba just ninety miles from Key West. Tampa’s large, long established Cuban-American community and its recently settled Cuban exile population eagerly awaited Kennedy's next confrontation with Castro. Kennedy’s awareness of Florida and Tampa connections to Latin American affairs can be traced back to the fifties. While running for President in 1960, he changed the place of his Alliance for Progress speech from San Antonio, Texas, to Tampa, Florida, and he strengthened his image as a cold warrior in a campaign speech at the Hillsborough County courthouse.
Three years later, JFK complimented the Cuban exiles at his Al Lopez Field speech, remarking that they “had borne a heavy burden during last year's Cuban Missile crisis.” He also gave special thanks and recognition to the 3,000 cigar workers in Tampa put out of work when the U.S. began its embargo against Cuban tobacco as part of a policy to isolate Fidel Castro. The President candidly assessed American military actions against the Castro regime, underscoring the Communist regime’s stubborn resistance. “But,” the President added, “a measure of success has been achieved in isolating the island.”

Following the Al Lopez Field address, the Presidential entourage headed toward the Fort Homer Hesterly Armory on Howard Avenue. A crowd of four thousand businessmen, invitees of the Florida Chamber of Commerce, listened to the President discuss economic policy. Kennedy defended Democratic programs against critics. “With the new figures on corporate profits after taxes having reached an all time high – running some 43 per cent higher than they were 3 years ago – they still suspect us of being opposed to private profit. With the most stable price level of any comparable economic recovery in our history they still fear we are promoting inflation.” Kennedy’s speech did not go over very well with the conservative business community. They praised the President for his frankness, but most left unimpressed with his economic policy.

Although the reception of the conservative Armory crowd differed markedly from the greeting JFK had received at Al Lopez Field, both gatherings approved his comments about Communist
Cuba. Kennedy returned to this theme at the Armory, admitting to the business gathering that “the efforts of the United States have not been too successful so far.” But he added, “The United States has drawn together with other nations of the hemisphere to isolate the virus of Communism in Cuba.” The President continued his Cold War rhetoric, pointing out that “In 1959 the trade of the Free World with Cuba was about $1.3 billion; now it is only one-third of that.” The business gathering received a stern presidential warning about irresponsible foreign policy acts. Although Kennedy lamented that Castro had not been removed, he warned of the Cuban dictator’s close ties to the Soviet Union. Any action leading to Soviet involvement, the President warned, could “involve the possibility of war.”

Following his speech at the armory, the Presidential convoy headed to the International Inn on Grand Central Boulevard for a handshaking and speaking engagement with the United Steelworkers of America. Ironically, Grand Central Boulevard would soon become Kennedy Boulevard. John Kennedy has been both eulogized and criticized for his public openness with large crowds. After his assassination, this point was brought home more frequently than in the past. The crowd at the International Inn deeply appreciated the warmth of the President. When the motorcade arrived, the President stepped out, walked into the hotel, and was immediately spotted by a bell boy who yelled, “This way Mr. President.” Kennedy immediately went over and shook hands with several bell boys and clerks at the desk. After this typical friendly encounter with the hotel staff, he proceeded with another speech. His talk to the membership of the United Steelworkers of America focused on enemies of the labor movement’s bygone days, and the history of progressive labor legislation. The enthusiastic steelworkers listened as Kennedy praised organized labor and its tradition of progress. He reminded them that “the same people who fought against the progressive legislation of the 1930s are now fighting new legislation such as Medicare, aid to higher education and Civil Rights.” Estimates of attendance at the union meeting were about 1,000 persons. The labor gathering also listened to the tax-cut theme heard earlier in the day by businessmen.

Following the union address, the President enjoyed a motorcade ride. Tampa streets bustled as residents and visiting Floridians expressed their adulation for the young handsome leader. It was a fast moving, hand waving motorcade highlighted by the Kennedy smile. The motorcade lasted forty-five minutes and marked the end of the Tampa visit. His entourage proceeded from MacDill Air Force Base to Miami for an evening visit.

The Kennedy visit engendered extensive commentary from the local newspapers. The local editors saw the event as a milestone, the first Presidential visit to the area. On the morning of his arrival, the Tribune in its banner editorial had stated, “His visit reported as it will be by newspaper, television and radio correspondents will help millions throughout the country learn something about Tampa.” The Tribune continued, “With the nation’s eyes upon us, let us do honor both to the nation’s highest office and to Tampa’s long tradition of hospitality by saying: Welcome, Mr. President.”

The day after the visit, the St. Petersburg Times reiterated the Tribune’s hospitality theme. “If for no other reason than the rarity of the occasion – the first time an incumbent Chief Executive visited this area – the warmth of the overflow crowd greeting President Kennedy at Al Lopez Field yesterday was not unexpected.” In the same editorial, Florida Governor Farris Bryant
reinforced the local commentary. As proof of the administration’s support for Florida, he cited the location of the Strike Command at MacDill Air Force Base, the giant space age complex at Cape Canaveral, the federal program of aid for Cuban refugees in the state, and the President’s leadership in resurrecting the long dormant Cross-State Barge Canal.

Security for the Presidential trip went well. The Tampa police alone supplied 200 of the department’s approximately 270 uniformed force. Law enforcement officers from the state, six counties, and the cities of St. Petersburg and Clearwater assisted. Four hundred men from federal law enforcement agencies, such as the U.S. Air Force, also saw duty during this Presidential Visit. Since the visit seemed to go over so well, there appeared to be no need to report that arrests were made of persons making threats to the President’s life. These arrests surfaced later.

Kennedy’s strategy to use the Florida trip as a future political dividend appeared successful as the Presidential motorcade wove its way through city streets. Receptions at all three Tampa stopovers proved warm. The majority did like their President. Their warm reception attested to this. But the extremists also had their day.

One negative political ad appeared in the Tampa Tribune on November 18. In bold one-half inch high letters appeared an exclamation addressed, “TO THE PEOPLE OF TAMPA.” Signed “TAMPA’S CUBAN EXILES,” the advertisement declared: “Today, The President of the
United States visits the city of Tampa. We Cubans, that have lost our liberty crushed under the Military boot of International Communism would like to take this opportunity to remind the people of the United States and its President that Cuba is fighting again for her independence ...and again with the indifference of all the great nations of the free world.” The end of the ad urged people to listen to the echoes of the voice of Cuban hero José Martí in the streets of Tampa and called for war on communism.13

Two important lessons may be learned from JFK’s Tampa visit. One involves the importance and diversity of the Cuban community in the reaction to JFK. The other suggests widespread dissension toward the President by Cuban exiles – in Tampa, Miami, and along the way to and including Dallas, where the President ultimately met his death. The authors of the ad did not address the President directly, but it remained one of two large prominently displayed ads that greeted the President on his stops in the South. The other appeared in the Dallas Morning News on November 22. It took up an entire page and was sponsored by a radical right wing organization called the American Fact Finding Committee. A large heading read “WELCOME MR. KENNEDY.” The contents were very negative and vehemently criticized his administration. This ad became famous because it appeared in the Warren Commission Report.14

While the ad from “Tampa’s Cuban Exiles” was negative, it was hardly representative of Tampa’s Cuban-American feelings toward President Kennedy. In 1960, when then Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts had paid a visit to Tampa, he fully understood the importance of Latin American affairs to this city, as he entered a community that had a Cuban tradition dating back to the 1880s. Up until the Cuban diaspora of the 1960s, Tampa, not Miami, was the Florida city most often associated with people of Cuban heritage. Tampa’s oldest Cuban community had a heightened sense of class consciousness and a radical political tradition, which sparked strikes in several different decades. Prominent Tampeños, such as Victoriano Manteiga, editor and publisher of the influential La Gaceta, offered early support for Fidel Castro, who raised money for the 26th of July movement in Tampa in addition to some larger American cities.15 And finally there was the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

In the Warren Commission report on the assassination of President Kennedy, the name V.T. Lee appears on numerous occasions. He had received letters from accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald in the summer of 1963 asking for a New Orleans charter for the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC). Lee at the time was the national director for the FPCC. What the Warren Report did not say was the V.T. Lee had been Tampa director of the FPCC before he took the national director position. The Tampa chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee was very active in the early 1960s. It was roundly criticized by a Tampa Tribune editorial, and V.T. Lee wrote a letter to the editor, which was published in the paper on April 12, 1961. Lee defended his organization, while telling the Tampa daily and the United States government to keep out of Cuban affairs. Three days later came the CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion. The ill-fated strike against Fidel Castro proved to be one of the low points of the Kennedy administration.16

Tampa’s Cuban community was composed by and large of third-and fourth-generation Americans, and many considered themselves more American than Cuban. Yet Tampa’s ethnic enclaves still maintained strong ties to Cuba. When Kennedy paid his final visit to Tampa, Cuban Americans were among the many faces at Al Lopez Field and in the motorcade crowds
who cheered the President. They were also present at both Fort Homer Hesterly Armory and the International Inn. The extremists of both the left (Fair Play for Cuba Committee) and the right (the anti-Castro faction) constituted the minority, albeit a highly vocal minority. This minority, especially the right wing, was not an isolated Tampa phenomenon, but rather indicative of the disenchantment with Kennedy’s policies.

While some hostility existed among members of the Cuban community toward President John F. Kennedy, it proved to be a very small and disconsolate minority. Kennedy’s support in the Tampa Cuban community was strong. *La Gaceta*, a local Tampa weekly based in Ybor City, showed this in its reportage on the Kennedy visit. Ybor City was a Democratic and Kennedy stronghold. While Kennedy had lost the state of Florida in the 1960 election, he carried Hillsborough County by nearly 14,000 votes. He beat Nixon in Ybor City and West Tampa precincts by margins of up to ten to one.\(^{17}\)

In 1963 the Cuban community in Tampa again expressed its adulation for the President. Kennedy became an honorary prime minister of Ybor City during his final visit. The President accepted the award with gratitude. Kennedy added his wit and humor as he accepted the honorary position, citing additional gratitude for the fact that there was no Congress involved.

*La Gaceta’s* favorable account of Kennedy’s visit appeared on November 22 the day of the assassination. But *La Gaceta* had anticipated the visit of the head of the state and ran articles in the November 15 issue. The paper noted, “This humble weekly was the only newspaper in this city to endorse Mr. Kennedy in 1960. While we have not been in accord with a number of his administration policies, we believe that his administration, in the long run will prove to be beneficial to the majority of Americans.” *La Gaceta* showed an unbridled loyalty to JFK when it added, “*La Gaceta*, which has always supported the Democratic Party and its presidential nominees will do so again in 1964.” So it could easily be said that not only did the majority of Cuban-Americans in fact support their President, but outside of local Democratic Party loyalists, they were probably Kennedy’s strongest supporters in Tampa. As *La Gaceta* remarked in its November 22 edition, “Tampa Bay’s Latins forgot their Spanish long enough to express a ‘Shurr and ’tis glad we are to have ye’ in the good old Irish way.” This endorsement probably was reassuring to a President with the Bay of Pigs still fresh in the memory of many and as he continued making fence-mending trips in an area with a strong Latin constituency.\(^{18}\)

President Kennedy boarded the plane at MacDill Air Force Base for Miami at approximately 4:20 p.m. on November 18. The plane arrived at Miami International Airport at 5:00 p.m., where a thirty-minute rally took place. The President then departed for the Americana Hotel in Miami Beach where he spoke at an important Latin-American gathering – the dinner of the Inter-American Press Association. In Miami the President reiterated the themes that had dominated his trip to Tampa. He talked of Latin American, and particularly Cuban affairs, in Miami’s glitzy Americana Hotel just as he had done at his Tampa stops. President Kennedy pledged at Miami Beach that the United States will fight for “any Western Hemisphere nation the Russians or other Communists take over.” The President went on in his appeal to assure the Latin-American editors that the “U.S. will not permit establishment of another Cuba in the Western Hemisphere.”\(^{19}\)
His speech charmed the Latin American editors, but a few rough moments interrupted the festivities at the Americana. Seventeen Cuban women appealed to President John F. Kennedy to allow the large Miami based Cuban-exile constituency to combat communism without the harassment of the U.S. government. This appeal was circulated at the Inter-American Press Association meeting at the Americana Hotel. The petition went on to chastise the government for “drastically stopping the exiles’ anti-Communist activities in the U.S., thus closing the only avenue open to us to fight communism and assist our countrymen.” The Bay of Pigs operation and many subsequent operations had been based out of the Miami area. Many of the military excursions against Cuba after the Bay of Pigs were shut down under the Kennedy administration. Along with the women attending and who had circulated the petition, other groups of editors were interviewed and expressed the opinion that Kennedy’s image had been tarnished. Editors pointed to the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Many felt the U.S. should have initiated a total blockade of Cuba which they felt would have brought Fidel Castro to his knees. The print media’s reaction to the Florida trip thus started with a strong November 15 endorsement by La Gaceta and finished with an appearance in Miami where Latin American editors criticized the President for not taking a strong enough stand against Fidel Castro.20

After the assassination on November 22, a proliferation of news stories followed in daily newspapers. For Tampa and Miami there were, in addition, several articles detailing arrests made in Tampa during the President’s visit. On November 23, the Tampa Tribune noted that security had been tight for the President’s Tampa visit. The story told of fastidious preparations taken by the Secret Service, the Tampa police, the Air Police at MacDill, and the other area supportive forces. The Secret Service sent an advance party one week ahead of the President. The motorcade route through Tampa was reviewed by the Secret Service at 3 a.m. one morning.

Edward Stern, one of the owners of the International Inn where Steelworkers welcomed Kennedy, said the Secret Service had left no stone unturned. At MacDill, Lieutenant Glen Hudson, law enforcement officer said, “More than half of the 150 Air Police were detailed to the President's visit here.” Guards were posted for all-night watches at Al Lopez Field and at the Fort Homer Hesterly Armory. Tampa police prepared for the visit and took extra security precautions. They were also joined by officers from the St. Petersburg and Clearwater police.21
When a President travels, it is normal procedure to take extra precautions, including the investigation of threatening calls. The *Tampa Tribune* mentioned several threats on the President’s life and subsequent arrests made in the past, in December 1960, May 1963, and October 1963. Some of these persons had been committed for mental observation. But something special happened in Tampa on the Monday Kennedy visited the Cigar City. Undisclosed on the day of the visit was the fact that Tampa police and the Secret Service had scanned the crowd for an unidentified man who had vowed to assassinate the President on his visit that Monday. Both the police and the government agency whose main function was to protect the nation’s chief executive scanned the Tampa crowds for this man. In addition to the unidentified man, Police Chief J.P. Mullins reported other threats against the President’s life. When Kennedy came to Tampa, there had been threats made by three other individuals. According to the *Miami Herald*, Mullins had been quoted as saying that he had advised his men that there were three other persons making threats against the President, including the man held in custody. Mullins could not be reached for comment about this, and the FBI and Secret Service would not comment either. One thing certain about these reports is that they would have had little meaning if the President had not been assassinated, or if there had not been an assassination attempt against him.22

After the assassination, much of this changed. Starting with the articles appearing in the *Tampa Tribune* and the *Miami Herald*, questions relating to Presidential security became more common. An American public which had grown accustomed to Presidential visits characterized by the routine motorcade, speeches, luncheons, and dedications, now experienced something unprecedented in modern American society – the assassination of a President. What started out as political fence-mending trip for John Fitzgerald Kennedy ended in the President’s untimely and unnatural death and a subsequent change in power. For the residents and observers in the Tampa Bay area, the event proved to be especially shocking since they had experienced a very traditional Presidential visit by JFK just four days earlier.

Kennedy’s visit to Tampa was a milestone for an area which to that point in time had never been visited by a U.S. President. John Kennedy valued his Tampa Bay constituents as much as they valued his visit. He entered social and geographical areas with a spirit of rapprochement. These geographical areas were later shown to have hostile elements toward his administration’s practices. Just as the local newspapers reported the earlier death threats – some of which had seemed inconsequential – after the assassination occurred, the historian’s discourse should include those who disliked the President as well as the majority who adored him. America’s role in the Cold War created divisiveness at home and evidence of this emerged in Kennedy’s visit to Tampa four days before Dallas.


8 Tampa Tribune, November 19, 1963, p. 12-A.

9 Ibid.

10 Tampa Tribune, November 18, 1963, p. 12-A.


13 Advertisement in the Tampa Tribune, November 18, 1963.


17 “Why Camelot Came to Tampa,” p. 46.

18 La Gaceta, November 15, 22, 1963.


20 Ibid., p. 2-AW

21 Tampa Tribune, November 23, 1963, p. 1-B.

THE WPA IN TAMPA:
A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

The depression of the 1930s stirred Americans to re-think many long cherished beliefs. Chief among these was the idea of self-help, which had generally precluded government assistance to the needy. With the exception of some groups like veterans and widows, Americans were expected to take care of themselves or rely on private charity if available. In 1933 the reality of 12 million unemployed, including many middle-class professionals, changed a lot of minds, and under the leadership of President Franklin D. Roosevelt the federal government opened its coffers to the newly needy who were widely perceived as the “worthy” poor.

Initially the New Deal provided cash relief for the unemployed. However, as the economic crisis persisted, administrators worried that recipients would lose the work ethic or – even worse – come to consider government assistance a right. Work relief thus became a popular alternative because it gave the able-bodied in need an opportunity to earn their government checks. Even though it was significantly more expensive than cash payments, work relief was seen as a way to preserve initiative among the unemployed and materially improve the physical and cultural environment of America.

In 1935 Congress created the Works Progress (later Projects) Administration as part of a $5 billion investment in relief for the next fiscal year. WPA relied on local administration to put needy Americans temporarily back to work. The genius of the WPA, that it attempted to employ the skills of the needy, meant that it included everything from construction projects to arts programs. Although designed to provide “temporary” relief, the WPA lasted until 1943, when it was finally dissolved. During its life, the WPA established a remarkable record of public construction, which included 125,000 buildings, 78,000 bridges, and 651,000 miles of roads.

Like other communities around the country, Tampa took advantage of the WPA to put people back to work and undertake much needed improvements. The scope of this effort was impressive, and its benefits are still visible. At its peak in 1938, WPA put 9,000 people to work in Tampa and Hillsborough County. During eight years of operation, WPA poured an estimated $20 million in the community. Notable projects included the construction of Peter O. Knight Airfield on Davis Islands, the creation of a sea wall and improvements along Bayshore Boulevard, the building of Clara Frye Hospital which became the city’s hospital for African Americans, the paving of 680 miles of new roads, and the installation of the first sidewalks on many local streets. For women, who were excluded from construction projects, the WPA set up sewing rooms that produced articles of clothing for distribution by private charities. The WPA also established white-collar projects that employed, for example, teachers who gave lessons in English and public speaking.

In addition, WPA programs employed a variety of local artists. The Federal Music Program provided Tampa with an orchestra of over one hundred musicians who gave open-air concerts. The Federal Theatre Program featured a Spanish-language ensemble that employed 120 people and presented dozens of paid and free performances. Although segregated on WPA projects,
blacks found employment on construction projects and in arts programs, including two small bands – one for African-American women and the other for men.

This essay draws on photographs long buried in the papers of Stetson Kennedy, who helped administer the WPA in Florida. Now housed in the South Labor Archives at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Kennedy’s papers contain photographs which provide a remarkably candid view of WPA projects in Tampa. They are reproduced here for the first time.
Riveting sections for a hangar at Peter O. Knight Airfield on Davis Island (May 7, 1936).
Making pipe connections at the Davis Island Ramp (May 20, 1936).

Digging muck as part of the construction of Columbus Drive (October 3, 1936).
Hand grading of Nebraska Avenue (June 27, 1936).

Removing surface asphalt on Nebraska Avenue (July 1, 1936).
Laying bricks on Magnolia Avenue (January 29, 1936).

Paving Magnolia Avenue (February 27, 1936). The sign behind the steamroller to the right says "Hair Cut 35¢" and Shave 20¢." (The six-story apartment building in the background is now a University of Tampa dormitory.)
Peeling poles to be used in construction of the Bayshore sea wall (January 29, 1936).

Black workers excavating in preparation for laying forms for the Bayshore sea wall (February 26, 1936).
Pouring concrete as part of the sea wall along Bayshore Boulevard (March 11, 1936). This photograph clearly shows black and white workers side-by-side, although there were undoubtedly hierarchies by job classification.

Black workers pouring concrete for the balustrade along Bayshore Boulevard (October 27, 1936).
Laying forms for the county detention home (January 8, 1936). This is an all-black crew, apparently under the supervision of the white man to the right.

Black laborers assisting white brick layers at the county detention home (March 4, 1936).
Preparing forms for the foundation of the county hospital (December 7, 1936).

The former "Flor de Cuba" cigar factory in Ybor City which housed a WPA sewing room for unemployed women.
A sewing room installed in an empty cigar factory (October 26, 1936).

Another view of a sewing room (March 10, 1936).
Bibliography

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COVER: WPA workers pouring concrete along Tampa’s Bayshore Boulevard in 1936. See page 68.
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