

From Swampland to Sophistication: How H. B. Plant's Tampa Bay Hotel Set the Foundation for a Thriving City

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Abstract: *This essay examines the various ways in which the Tampa Bay Hotel and the entrepreneur who built it, Henry B. Plant, initiated the transformation of Tampa, Florida into a global city. Drawing upon primary sources and scholarly research, the paper tracks how the luxury hotel led to improvement of the city's infrastructure and technology, economic development, population growth, and greater notoriety throughout the world. The impact that Plant and his hotel have had on the city can still be seen today through Tampa's diverse cultural identity and ongoing growth and development.*

Across the river from downtown Tampa, six shining silver minarets glisten in the sun's light and effortlessly steal the horizon with their unique Moorish influence. They then draw visitors' eyes to the long and expansive contrasting red-brick base of the massive, grand Tampa Bay Hotel. The magnificent and unique five-story former hotel built in 1891 curves along for a quarter-mile, beautifully highlighting the bank of the Hillsborough River. In its day, the building once offered 511 rooms and catered to the needs of famous visitors such as President Theodore Roosevelt, Red Cross-founder Clara Barton, and baseball-great Babe Ruth.ⁱ The historical landmark continues to serve over 9,000 students today at the University of Tampa, which has been leasing the building since 1933 and now calls it after its namesake, the innovative entrepreneur Henry Bradley Plant.ⁱⁱ What visitors cannot see is the true impact this man has had on the city of Tampa. To truly understand the scope of Henry Plant's impact requires that visitor's first step back into the history of Tampa Bay.

In 1819, the year when Henry Plant was born, Florida was still a colony owned by Spain. In 1864, conflict from the Civil

i See Hewitt 101, Barthel 140.

ii Data taken from the University of Tampa website.

War left Tampa a “devastated land” with a “ruined economy” as the Old South was defeated and the Union went on to win the war (Mormino and Pizzo 33-34). Reconstruction followed but, just as with the rest of the South, did little to help restore the area to its former condition. In the 1880s, change began for this depressed and stagnant town when some important business men began centering their work in Tampa. In 1884, Henry Bradley Plant (Fig. 1), a wealthy, self-made Connecticut-born Yankee, began laying down railroad tracks and routing steamship lines into the city, and Tampa began to see a glimmer of light in its future. The most important of Plant’s ventures came in 1891 when he opened the doors to his famous Tampa Bay Hotel, which transformed and developed Tampa from a backwater town into the globally connected major U.S. city that it still is today by bringing notoriety, masses of people, and modernity to the Bay area. With Plant’s influence, the city of Tampa Bay and its surrounding suburbs have risen to a population of over 4.5 million, making it the eighteenth largest metropolitan area in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, “Annual Estimates”).]



Figure 1: H.B. Plant. Courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum Archives, Tampa, Florida.

The Tampa Bay Hotel took Tampa from being a mostly unknown town in the still-recovering South to a prime tourist destination in just a matter of years. Before the grand structure was built, the land was undeveloped and populated by mostly farmers and their livestock (Long 334). As historians have noticed, the only other real signs of civilization were the Cuban

cigar factories that had only recently sprung up about a decade or so earlier in a nearby industrial town known as Ybor City in the 1880s. When Plant announced plans in 1888 for his exotic new tropical resort, it generated a lot of excitement. With the brutally cold northern winters, it was popular (and still is even today) for many wealthy families and individuals to travel south to escape the harsh climate for the duration of the season. In fact, Plant's first trip to Florida came by recommendation from a doctor for Plant's wife, who had been diagnosed with "congestion of the lung" (Sammons 8). The cold winters of the North were deemed to be detrimental to her health, so the Plants packed up and made the long and complicated trip south in 1853, which required numerous transfers from steamship to steamship. Throughout the trip, Plant saw the natural beauty Florida possessed, but perhaps even more importantly, he saw the state's potential (Sammons 9). Florida grew as a destination for rest and recovery in the eyes of Northerners, yet there was a drastic need for developments in transportation to the South as well as accommodations for places to stay once one got there. This discovery led Plant to build his hotel into what he envisioned as a tropical resort that would be open for service in the winter. The hotel gained so much popularity that a *New York Times* article from 1892 (only a year after the hotel opened) stated, "Last winter the Tampa Bay Hotel, the largest and by many degrees the best in Florida, and probably the largest and finest hotel in the world, was not nearly large enough for the demands upon it..." ("Ready For Winter Travel" 12). By deliberately designing his luxury hotel to have an exotic flavor, installing it with lavish furnishings and decor and using his own expert marketing capabilities, Plant was able to make his hotel the pinnacle of all luxury resorts. This, in turn, made the city a new, popular destination for travelers and put Tampa's name on the map.

Plant faced serious problems in 1887 when just three years after his train tracks reached Tampa, the city was hit with a pervasive outbreak of yellow fever due to an especially hot and humid summer season (Sammons 31). At the time, no cure had been developed for the virus, and it was not known that mos-

quitos were the cause for how it spread, leading many living in Tampa to panic and leave the city that had only just started growing (Sammons 31). Plant had just spent the past several years of his life investing copious amounts of time and money into building his railroad to reach Tampa, which was now being deserted. It was up to him to take action in order to save it, which led him to make two audacious moves. First of all, he decided to modify Port Tampa (which he'd built) to be better equipped to take in bigger ships closer to the shore. Secondly, he announced his plans to start construction on the luxurious and unprecedented Tampa Bay Hotel just across the river from the rest of downtown Tampa as it is known today (Fig. 2) (Sammons 32). By declaring his intentions to pursue these ventures in a city that was facing an epidemic crisis, Plant was making it clear that he had faith in Tampa's future which gave others the confidence to return as well.



Figure 2: View of Downtown Tampa. Picture taken from the Tampa Bay Hotel, late 19th century. Courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum Archives, Tampa, Florida.

Plant, as a natural salesperson, possessed incredible abilities when it came to putting his hotel in the spotlight once it was built. For one thing, he was charming and had a way with reporters. On one occasion in 1892, after being invited by “President Plant” to go on a short tour around part of southwest Florida, one reporter from *The New York Times* wrote, “An invitation to go sightseeing with Mr. Plant is one that no newspaper correspondent can afford to decline” (“A Jaunt in South Florida” 10).

The diction that this reporter uses to refer to Plant throughout the article is almost reverent, and he presents a clear bias in favor of the railroad tycoon. This is apparent in how he treats an invitation from Plant and how he marvels at Plant's character and work ethic, noting that Plant seemed "compelled to work fifteen or sixteen hours a day to support his family" ("A Jaunt in South Florida" 10). Plant brought the reporter to all of the area's visual and economic attractions including "pretty little lakes" and phosphate mines via his railroad and even used one of his own private cars to really put on a show for the man ("A Jaunt in South Florida" 10). These scenic and commercial features of the land that the New York Times journalist reports on no doubt looked very attractive to tourists and businessmen and most likely created a buzz about the greater Tampa region and all it had to offer.

Plant brought notoriety to the city in more ways than simply with his hotel. By vastly improving the transportation capability of the city of Tampa with his railroad in 1884 and his steamship line only a year later, he enticed other businessmen to set up shop in the area. Most notable of these was Vicente Martinez-Ybor who in 1885 transferred his cigar factories from Key West to an area just outside of Tampa known as Ybor City (Sammons 30-31). In her article "Cuba Connections: Key West-Tampa-Miami, 1870 to 1945," feminist art historian Paula Harper makes claims as to the extensive change that Ybor brought to Tampa. She heavily stresses Ybor's contribution with his very lucrative and famous Cuban cigars which brought a thriving industry to the city. Cuban cigars became a highly demanded commodity and were very popular across the country. While discussing cigar box label art as an important marketing tool for the industry, Harper acknowledges, "[The image of Plant's Tampa Bay Hotel] appears in the label for Tampa Life (similar to that which is shown in Fig. 3) [and] includes scenes of golf, tennis, and swimming and seems as much an advertisement for tourism as it is for cigars" (285). This brief discussion of the hotel signifies that, although short lived, the Tampa Bay Hotel was a very well publicized attraction that even back then was a symbol for the city. Ybor helped build Tampa's reputation into

a more notable place where goods were exported, while Plant's Tampa Bay Hotel made the city famous for becoming a destination. The cigar industry was indeed a large one and brought many Cuban factory workers to Tampa where they made the hugely popular cigars. U.S. and Latin American historian Durward Long goes so far as to assert that "it was not until the cigar industry began operations in 1885 that a solid industrial and population base provided the catalyst for Tampa to become a city. Literally thousands of workers followed the factories over the next few decades" (336). Thanks to Plant's development of Tampa, Ybor City attracted many people, creating a more diverse population for the area as well as a thriving industry.



Figure 3: "Tampa Life" Cigar Box Label. Courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum Archives, Tampa, Florida.

Plant did everything he could to make his hotel's name well-known, including going beyond individual journalists and straight to the War Department. In 1898, he convinced the agency to use Tampa as an embarkation point for the Spanish-American War (Mormino and Pizzo 121). He even offered his hotel and its grounds as a place to quarter troops who were waiting on orders to depart for Cuba (Mormino and Pizzo 121). In doing so, the city saw masses of journalists make their way down to write about the war. In addition to the reporters, the war brought some famous names to the city, with the most notorious of these being future president Theodore Roosevelt and his band of Rough Riders. With so many journalists having a field day snapping pictures of the war hero, the Tampa Bay Hotel found its name and picture in newspaper after newspaper,

gathering interest and fame from the folks back home. Even the elusive Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, made her way down to Tampa and was caught in a photograph for America to witness (Dunn 39). Plant's ability to secure the Tampa Bay Hotel as a sort of base for the war that catapulted America into a global power generated publicity for the hotel in numerous effective ways.

Attaining notoriety is essential, yet it means little without a growing, thriving population. Therefore it is necessary to understand the sheer population changes that Plant's luxury hotel was able to bring to the area, in addition to creating its prominence. Tampa was not only a stagnant town of less than 1,000 residents before Plant arrived with his railroad in 1884 and a steamship line in 1885 (Fig. 4), but was actually experiencing a slight decline in its population from roughly 1860 to 1880 (Department of Commerce 41). From 1880 to 1890, however, there was a population increase of 4,812 people (720 to 5,532). This substantial increase can naturally be explained by Plant's transportation lines and Ybor's factories combined, though the real boost to Tampa's population came in the next decade. In the time span of 1890 to 1900 there was a population increase of 10,307 people (5,532 to 15,839), more than doubling the increase that the last decade saw (Department of Commerce 41). This immense growth can most likely be attributed to none other than the Tampa Bay Hotel, which opened in 1891 and attracted thousands of people from all walks of life to southwest Florida.



Figure 4: Plant's Industries Intersect in Port Tampa. From left to right: a Plant System steamship line, railroad track, and one of Plant's hotels (The Port Tampa Inn), second from foreground. Courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum Archives, Tampa, Florida.

Following the thousands of upper-class members of society traveling down on holiday and stimulating the Tampa economy throughout the 1890s, were even more middle- and lower-class workers hoping to share in the wealth. As *The New York Times* stated, “the Northerner finds himself there surrounded by his own people, fed by Northern cooks, housed by Northern landlords, and clothed by tailors and dressmakers from Saratoga and Newport” (“Ready For Winter Travel” 12). With the introduction of tourism into Tampa via the Tampa Bay Hotel, the demand for labor, both skilled and unskilled, skyrocketed. A working class population beyond the farmers and fishermen grew as people with a plethora of various trades made their way down to get work readily available in Tampa, unlike the crowded and competitive North.

With so many new individuals ready to provide labor, and all of the industries that the land had to offer, economic opportunists were drawn to the area like bees to honey. The Florida climate could support orchards that could grow citrus and other types of fruit, vegetable gardens, pine trees for timber, and even very profitable phosphate mines (“A Jaunt In South Florida” 10). All these industries meant healthy economic diversity for the state and a wide array of positions available for workers to fill. Even if one industry were to decline, such as the timber industry eventually did, there were other trades in which workers could prosper. This was a very powerful force with which the Tampa Bay Hotel served as a catalyst, bringing workers to the area and attracting them to the South.

The Cuban cigar industry in Ybor City gradually began to decline when researchers found smoking to be unhealthy. Luckily, the attention directed at the luxury hotel turned to Tampa Bay’s coastal oasis, attracting a wide assortment of people from all different classes, races, and experiences, making it a lasting metropolis with the ability to support all sorts of industries. This is further exemplified in the way the Tampa Bay Hotel is currently being used today. Even though it no longer serves as a hotel, it has provided valuable infrastructure for the University of Tampa since 1933 (housing classrooms, offices, multiple presentation halls, and events), an entity that is attracting and pro-

viding educated individuals, money, and jobs for the city today.

The Tampa Bay Hotel didn't just bring numbers and jobs to Tampa, but it also brought the latest technology, fashions of the age, and culture that was very important for attracting higher-income citizens, businesspeople, and tourists. Historian and luxury hotel expert Molly Berger is a strong proponent for the extensive ways in which luxury hotels have touched the country. In the introduction to her book, *Hotel Dreams*, Berger states, "[Luxury hotels] reinforced and guided a particular vision of American society for the community, the nation, and the world that celebrated commerce, technological creativity, and the promise of wide-open access to a rich American life" (4). By this Berger suggests that hotels were vastly influential to the cities they were located in, and this holds especially true for the Tampa Bay Hotel's impact on Tampa. By bringing innovative new technology and modern trends to the city, the area was able to evolve into a major city that could stand on its own.

The hotel offered revolutionary inventions of the time period like electric lights, telephones, plumbing, water closets, and even Florida's first elevator (which is still functioning today). A *New York Times* reporter refers to these items as "Things that are not to be found elsewhere" ("The Shores of Tampa Bay" 20), doting on his fascination with the objects. According to historians Mormino and Pizzo in their history of Tampa, "A new breed of worker, the electrician, found ample work in Tampa, since all rooms at the hotel included this modern feature" (88). The effect that all of these mechanisms within the hotel had on Tampa overall was vastly important. Plant's enormous construction project attracted high volumes of workers, especially in the fields involved in construction such as carpenters, masons, plumbers, and electricians (Mormino and Pizzo 88). These skilled workers brought important proficiencies that were much needed to develop the infrastructure of the city. With Henry Plant's hotel acting as a magnet for workers, there was an abundance of talent available after completion of the hotel to work on the development of the rest of Tampa.

Plant also improved the infrastructure of the city directly. For one, Plant refused to bring his hotel to Tampa unless the

city agreed to fund the building of a bridge across the Hillsborough River “at public expense” (Mormino and Pizzo 87). This bridge (the Lafayette St. Bridge) (Fig. 5) was very important for connecting the land included within Tampa. Plant understood it would hurt his business and would be cumbersome for his guests if transportation across the river was only available via boats and ferries. The addition of the bridge facilitated movement in Tampa, furthered the development of the city’s infrastructure, and made the area even more attractive to outsiders so that they would not only return in the next season but perhaps go so far as to make Tampa their permanent home.



Figure 5: The Lafayette St. Bridge and the Tampa Bay Hotel. Today, the Lafayette St. bridge has since been replaced and the street renamed as Kennedy Blvd. Courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum Archives, Tampa, Florida.

In addition to introducing new technology to the Southwest, Plant introduced a whole new culture which made the area more attractive to northern tourists. The idea of completely reshaping the culture of a city was not new to Florida. Another hotel building Henry with the last name of Flagler had already done this extensively in the city of St. Augustine in the north-eastern part of Florida just a few years earlier in 1888. Similar to Tampa, St. Augustine was a washed-out city embedded in the ways of the Old South and had actively been a proponent of the Confederacy for the duration of the Civil War. Henry Flagler, a native New Yorker who had worked closely with Rockefeller himself, saw great potential in the city. Like a true Yankee, Flagler found the culture of the Old South that was engrained in

St. Augustine distasteful, and he knew the northern tourists he was hoping to attract would as well. Historian of the South, Reiko Hillyer, explores this subject arguing that after the Reconstruction period, Florida Southerners and northern travelers deliberately “forgot” about the trouble and tensions of the Civil War so that they could work together to benefit economically and reimagine themselves as being the old Spanish city that St. Augustine was in the 16th century (106). Hillyer goes so far as to state that “by ignoring St. Augustine’s Confederate past ... [opportunists] expunged the history that was politically contentious, portrayed white Floridians as the descendants of nation-builders, and, by casting St. Augustine as the birthplace of the United States, claimed a heritage of patriotism rather than one of treason” (107). This clearly highlights the drastic change that Flagler worked to embed into the city so that it would be a more attractive place to his target audience of Northerners.

Plant took a page from Flagler’s book in this regard and did many of the same things in his own hotel. He designed the hotel in an exotic style that has been described as Byzantine or Moorish. He toured Europe and Asia with his wife and brought sophisticated furniture from these locations back by the trainload and shaped the social culture of the hotel in order to draw in a northern audience who would be fascinated by its worldly appearance. The amount of Northerners who made their way down to Florida was so immense that one reporter of *The New York Times* writes in 1892, “the Northerner finds himself there surrounded by his own people” (“Ready For Winter Travel” 12). This passage reinforces that through all of these factors that Plant implemented, the culture of the Old South that was once extremely influential within Tampa began to diminish as the northern culture started to take over, inviting the generally more affluent Northerners to make their way down and let their majority reshape the culture of the region.

Plant’s influence on the culture of Tampa was so powerful, that even today his impact can be seen in the city. Currently, about eighteen museums, several universities (such as the University of Tampa and the University of South Florida), and three professional sports teams call Tampa their home (“Visit

Tampa Bay"). The city is also a supporter of theatre, music, and dance which are showcased at the David A. Straz, Jr. Center for the Performing Arts. Additionally, the U.S. Census Bureau named the Tampa Bay area "one of the top five most culturally diverse and integrated urban areas in the country." ("Visit Tampa Bay"). By championing diversity in the structure of his hotel as well as the artifacts he carted back for the design of the hotel's interior following his extensive travels abroad, Plant encouraged growth of the city beyond economic development, also including the arts and humanities.

Certainly, H. B. Plant and the Tampa Bay Hotel's impact on Tampa still resounds throughout the city and county which encompasses it. From surrounding towns like Plant City, buildings like Plant Hall, and institutions such as the H.B. Plant Museum, Plant High School, and Plant City High School, the transportation and vacation tycoon's name can be found plastered throughout the county of Hillsborough. However, Henry Plant does not receive the full credit he deserves for making the once isolated and dilapidated town of Tampa a nationwide destination. The involvement of northern investors was vital to the economic health of the state, especially in regard to how they helped Tampa recover after the Civil War and the disappointment of the Reconstruction period, a problem that many southern cities could not overcome. Instead of stagnating like many of Florida's Confederate counterparts, the state evolved into one of the economic powerhouses of the United States, due to a bustling tourism industry and multi-faceted, stable market economy.

Today when visitors see the gleaming minarets of the Tampa Bay Hotel that came to be a symbol of the growing city, they may not understand the influence of Henry B. Plant in transforming and developing Tampa from a backwater town into the globally connected major U.S. city of over 4.5 million (U.S. Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates"). This once depressed southern town progressed by tremendous lengths thanks to Plant bringing notoriety, a boost in population of a variety of people and classes, and modern technology and current trends to the area. Tampa's rapid growth during the time span in which it

housed the Tampa Bay Hotel set the stage for it to develop into the bustling, flourishing, and influential city it is today. The nationwide attention Plant brought to Tampa Bay through his hotel and the people who interacted with it were instrumental in transforming Tampa into a major U.S. city. By attracting so many people of all different walks of life, the whole of South-west Florida had the population it needed to allow it to develop economically. Lastly, thanks to the modern elements that Plant incorporated into his hotel, the city garnered the infrastructure to become a thriving city. The long-lasting influence of what Plant has accomplished in the city of Tampa is seen throughout Tampa's physical appearance today, yet the man behind the name has diminished in significance. Few seem to be familiar with the story of the wealthy innovative Northerner with a true entrepreneurial spirit who did not back down from countless challenges to make the once inaccessible Tampa into a thriving global destination.

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