

THE
SUNLAND  **TRIBUNE.**

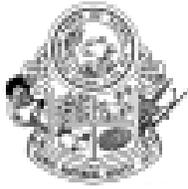
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Journal of the
TAMPA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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“BENNY HAVENS”

From the Tony Pizzo Collection, USF

INSIDE BACK COVER

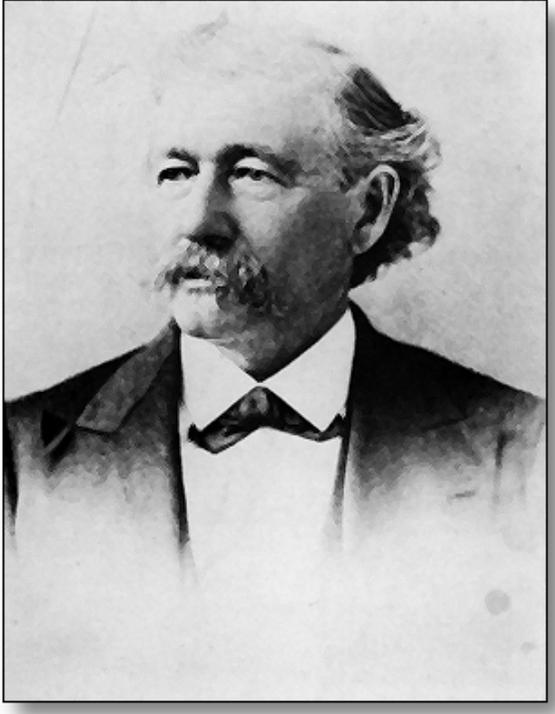
Cover photo. The Tampa Bay Hotel, built by Henry B. Plant opened in 1891. The building, which now houses the University of Tampa, celebrated its centennial in 1991.

The *Sunland Tribune* is the official annual publication of Tampa Historical Society, distributed to members each year. Non-members may receive limited edition issues by contacting the Society at 259-1111.

Individuals interested in contributing manuscripts for consideration should send them to the headquarters no later than August 1 of each calendar year. The *Sunland Tribune* Committee will review, accept or reject articles and will return all photographs and materials not selected for publication. All manuscripts should be no more than twelve double-spaced typed pages in length and should include footnotes, lists of sources as well as captions for all photographs submitted.

TAMPA AND THE COMING OF THE RAILROAD, 1853-1884

By CANTER BROWN, JR.



Henry Bradley Plant

Henry B. Plant gave Tampa its first railroad 107 years ago.¹ For thirty years previously the town had sought such a connection; in part, to overcome the stranglehold of its physical isolation and, in part, to give the community a much-needed boost toward prosperity. At each and every turn those attempts had been frustrated.

Railroad fever first hit Tampa in 1853.² At the time only 500 or so individuals lived in the tiny town.³ Barely deserving the title village, this was a rough frontier settlement. One unimpressed visitor scornfully noted: "Tampa is a small town - inhabited by the most worthless population in the world.

They seem to be the scum, well, refuse of creation... (There) are three or four lawyers, as many preachers, three stores - half a dozen grog shops, and these live on each other. I do not believe there is a dollar per head among them. They hate the sight of an honest man."⁴

Despite his exaggeration, the visitor properly expressed the town's poverty. Other than by water, Tampa essentially was cut off from the well-settled portions of Florida, which lay 120 miles or more to the north. The few roads were little more than tracks in the wilderness, sand traps in dry weather and mud holes in wet. When bridges were built, they often were swept away by hurricane winds and flooding. In 1862 a traveler noted of a stagecoach ride from Ocala: I arrived in Tampa, after having travelled on and in that old (coach) for thirty-two hours continuously through the most dreary country I ever saw." He added: "You may well imagine I was tired."⁵

Most Tampa residents had little hope of overcoming their poverty until this isolation was broken. At first, it seemed the problem might easily be solved. In January 1853 the Florida legislature approved the building of the Florida Rail Road. Backed by United States Senator David Levy Yulee, the line was to run from the area of Fernandina to "some point, bay, arm, or tributary of the Gulf of Mexico in South Florida."⁶ Local citizens immediately organized to bring the road to Tampa. A great "railroad convention" was held and delegates were



Railroad work in Florida
Photo from Tampa; *The Treasure City*, by Gary Mormino and Anthony Pizzo.

sent to Yulee for guarantees. Railroad officials did not disappoint them.⁷

The news threw Tampa into a whirl of growth and development. Scores of new residents arrived, intent upon expected profits. Among them were Lake City planter and railroad investor L. Whit Smith and judge Joseph B. Lancaster, former mayor of Jacksonville and speaker of the Florida House of Representatives.⁸ Smith soon founded the town's first newspaper, the *Herald*, which in 1855 became the *Florida Peninsular*.⁹ Lancaster was elected Tampa's first mayor the following year.¹⁰

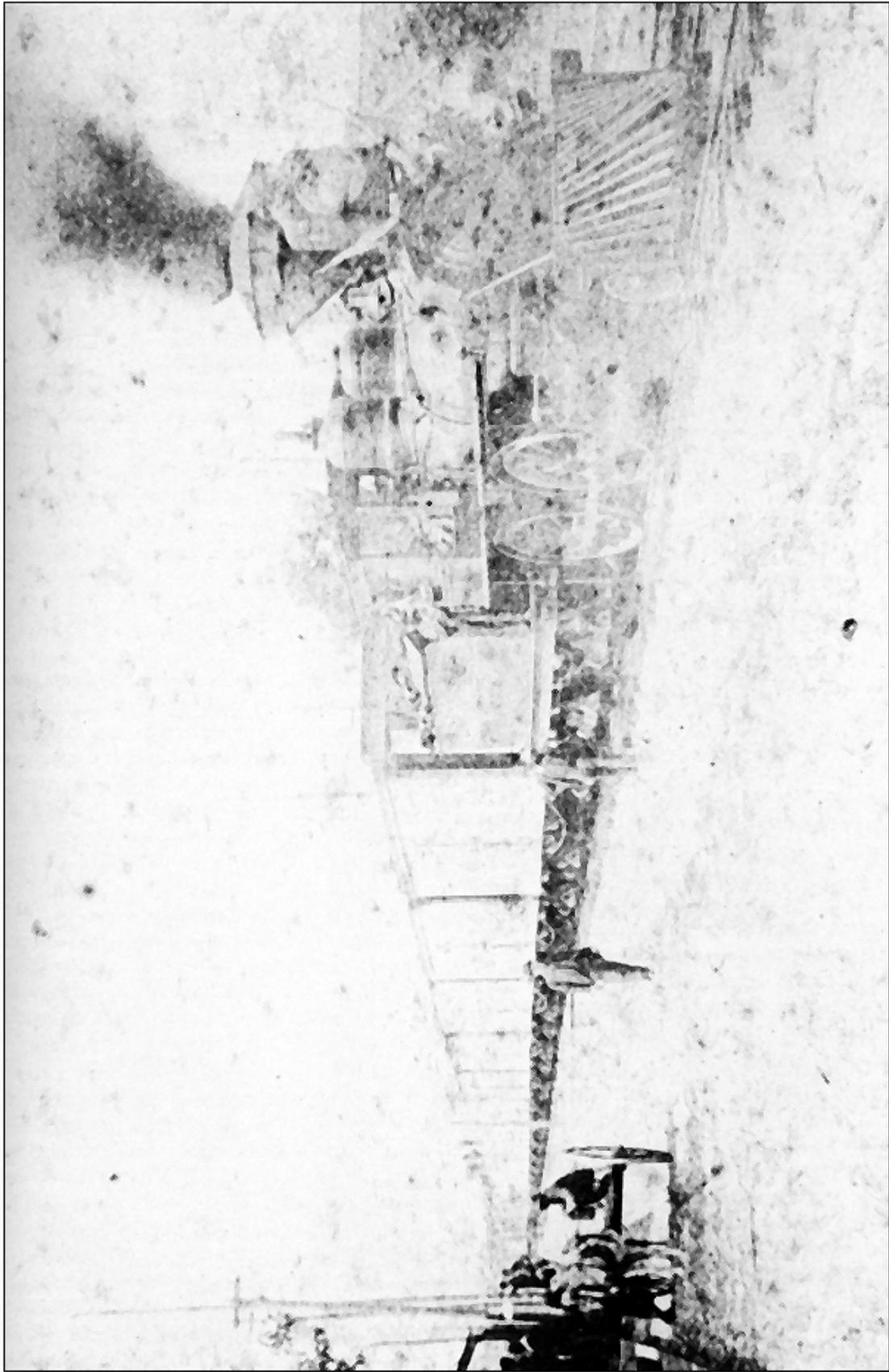
Despite the town's excitement, two years passed, and no construction had begun. All hopes were not dimmed, though, for in January 1855 the legislature enacted a comprehensive program of subsidies for railroad construction. Known as the Internal Improvement Act, it specifically provided

support for a line "from Amelia Island, on the Atlantic, to the waters of Tampa bay, in South Florida, with an extension to Cedar Key."¹¹ The language clearly applied to Yulee's road.

Within months, however, suspicions were aroused that Yulee intended to build only the more lucrative northern portion of his line. Under the leadership of Hillsborough County politician and lawyer, James T. Magbee, local citizens held out the possibility of the county investing in the railroad while demanding that the company "undertake to construct the road upon the whole route according to the intent and meaning (of the law)."¹² Before their efforts could show results, though, the Third Seminole or Billy Bowlegs War broke out in December 1855.¹³ For a time, the railroad question took second place in the minds of south Floridians.

While the Indian war raged, the Florida Rail Road slowly was built south and west from Fernandina. In 1857 the Congress authorized land grants to subsidize the construction, and it was believed that the action, as one newspaper put it, "doubtless will operate as a stimulus to effect an immediate practical commencement of that portion of the road (to Tampa)."¹⁴ Rumors circulated, though, that Yulee would divert the line to Cedar Key where he owned extensive properties. When the rumors proved true in 1858, angry Tampanians burned him in effigy on the courthouse square.¹⁵

Faced with what they considered Yulee's treachery, the area's residents decided to build their own line. In the summer of 1858 these men-including future governors Ossian Hart and Henry Mitchell-organized the Florida Peninsula Railroad. Bragged Tampa's newspaper, "This movement is the very thing we needed, and we heartily



Tampa welcomes one of the Plant System's new woodburners, at the Polk Street station, between Ashley and Tampa streets.

Photo from Tampa; The Treasure City, by Gary Mormino and Anthony Pizzo.

rejoice at it.¹⁶ A yellow fever epidemic devastated the community, however, and no progress was made. Another effort was launched in 1859 under the chairmanship of Capt. James McKay.¹⁷ Before financing could be secured, the Civil War extinguished any chance of construction.

The Civil War devastated Tampa. It was blockaded, shelled, and occupied by Union forces. Confederate martial law prevailed, and, at times, the community virtually was deserted. The early years of Reconstruction were little better. By 1867 the local stores were without supplies, and yellow fever again struck. So difficult were circumstances for most that, in 1869, the town abandoned its charter. From a pre-Civil War population high of 885, the total had dwindled by 1870 to 796. When yellow fever reappeared in 1871, Tampa was completely depopulated. Nine years later the census revealed only 720 residents.¹⁸

Throughout the period Tampans continued to long for a railroad as their only chance to stop the town's decline. Shortly after the war, hopes were lifted when construction of a line either to Tampa Bay or Charlotte Harbor was proposed. Warned one newspaper: "If the people of Tampa want this road, they can get it ... if they give it the 'cold shoulder'... they may lose it." Lose it, they did. Although Republican Governor Harrison Reed pledged his support, necessary Congressional assistance was blocked.¹⁹ The town even went without a telegraph. When a line was constructed down the peninsula in 1867, it by-passed Tampa by fifty miles. For the next decade news was received overland from Fort Meade.²⁰

Not all hope was lost, though. In 1870 south Florida's cattle trade with Cuba began to prosper, and local enthusiasm was rekindled.

At Governor Reed's urging, the legislature approved several lines into south Florida. One concern, backed by area residents such as cattleman Francis A. Hendry and lawyer John A. Henderson planned to build from near Gainesville directly to Tampa. Hillsborough and Polk County investors similarly organized the Upper St. John's, Mellonville, Tampa & South Florida Rail Road to tie the town to the St. Johns River.²¹

Excitement again was in the air, and the town's prospects were boasted. An 1871 "Commercial Convention" attempted to organize local efforts, and its members prepared to notify the country of the area's "many natural advantages."²² Within months, though, the hopes came crashing down. An investor in Florida bonds, Francis Vose, obtained a federal injunction barring the state from granting land to support railroads. Construction plans came to an immediate halt.²³

Occasionally during the 1870s rumors circulated that the Vose Injunction would be lifted. In 1877 the possibility seemed so likely that area men met again in Tampa to organize a line. Called the Tampa, Peace Creek and St. Johns Railroad, it was intended to connect Tampa and Jacksonville. The road was chartered, and surveys were conducted. Soon its name was changed to the Jacksonville, Tampa & Key West Railway, and William Van Fleet was named as its president. For the moment, though, no construction was undertaken. Meanwhile, 1879 two rival lines were chartered. One eventually was known as the Florida Southern Railroad, and it also enjoyed the support of south Florida's increasingly wealthy cattle interests. The second was the South Florida Railroad Company, which proposed a line from the St. Johns River to Tampa or Charlotte Harbor.²⁴

In December 1880 the South Florida Railroad completed its track from Sanford to Orlando. At the same time, state railroad construction soared as the Vose Injunction finally was lifted. Funds necessary to satisfy the Vose claim came from the sale of 4,000,000 acres of state lands, located primarily in central and south Florida, to Philadelphia businessman Hamilton Disston. The price was twenty-five cents an acre. Disston and his associates immediately undertook a massive development -effort aimed principally at the Kissimmee and Caloosahatchee river areas. Francis A. Hendry's town of Fort Myers boomed, as did the towns of Orlando and Kissimmee with which Disston was more directly involved.²⁵ By March 1882 the South Florida Railroad, in line with Disston's plans, had extended its track to Kissimmee. There, however, its money ran out.

As investors, developers, speculators, and immigrants poured into south Florida in the wake of the Disston Purchase, Tampa remained locked in its tropical isolation and economic depression. Numerous lines were authorized to construct into the town, but the steel rails reached no closer than Kissimmee. It was upon this stage that Henry Bradley Plant stepped in the spring of 1883.

Plant was no newcomer to Florida or to the worlds of big business and railroad operation. Born in Connecticut in 1819, he had visited Florida for his wife's health as early as 1853. Not long thereafter his employer, the Adams Express Company, was reorganized, and Plant was placed in charge of its southern division, with headquarters at Augusta, Georgia. Faced with the threat of civil war, the company's management created a new entity, the Southern Express Company, to protect its

southern assets. Plant, of course, remained in charge.

So successful were Plant's efforts during the Civil War that the Southern Express Company not only remained in business, it also prospered with a contract to transport Confederate funds. With the peace Plant retained control, reorganized the concern, and expanded its operations. By the late 1870s he had extended his interests into railroading and soon controlled traffic from Georgia south into Florida.²⁶

Key to completion of Plant's railroad system, however, was an anchor for his lines at some port on the Gulf of Mexico. Karl Grismer, in his book *Tampa*, reported that Plant first considered locating in David Levy Yulee's port of Cedar Key. As Grismer told the story: "Old timers say that Plant wanted to extend his railroad to the keys but when he tried to buy the necessary land, the Yulee crowd refused to sell. This made Plant so irate, the old timers say, that he angrily declared: 'I'll wipe Cedar Key off the map! Owls will hoot in your attics and hogs will wallow in your deserted streets!'"

Other stories of Plant's decision to build to Tampa have suggested that he considered Manatee County's Sned's Island, as well as Charlotte Harbor.²⁷ Perhaps central to his ultimate decision was the fact that Tampa Bay offered a protected anchorage for ships and that it lay far closer to Kissimmee than did any of the alternatives. A small community already existed at Tampa, of course, and, after thirty years of disappointment, its residents were willing to accommodate themselves to whatever Mr. Plant needed.

Plant's first step toward Tampa came in May 1883 when his Plant Investment Company purchased a three-fifths interest in the South

Florida Railroad. The quick negotiations and purchase illustrated the strength and flexibility of Plant's financial position, something not enjoyed by many of his undercapitalized competitors. His general superintendent later explained: "We speak of the Plant Investment Company-do you know what the Plant Investment Company is? It is Mr. Plant and his friends who have money, cash, to invest. When it is decided to do a certain thing, build a piece of road for instance, they figure out what each is to pay and send in their checks for the amount. They have no bonds, no indebtedness, no interest to pay; they build railroads to operate them and not for bond and stock speculations."²⁸

Despite his financial resources and his desire to run, not speculate in, railroads, Plant nonetheless was a demanding businessman intent upon making the best bargain he could. With the South Florida Railroad within his control, he had a charter to build from Kissimmee to Tampa. But in granting that charter the state had offered a subsidy of only 3,840 acres of land for each mile of rail constructed.

Casting his eye about, Plant noticed that the Jacksonville, Tampa & Key West Railroad, originally founded at Tampa in 1877, also had a charter to build from Kissimmee to Tampa. The concern, however, had run out of money after grading fifteen miles of roadbed. What was most interesting, though, was that the road's charter called for a state subsidy of 10,000 acres of land for each mile of track, as well as the grant of alternate sections of land within six miles of each side of the road. The total commitment came to 13,840 acres per mile of track.

The huge subsidy proved irresistible to Plant. There was a problem, though. The subsidy was due to expire in January 1884

unless construction was completed before then. Other railroad men told Plant it simply could not be done, but Henry Bradley Plant decided to prove them wrong. First, he struck a bargain with the Jacksonville, Tampa & Key West's management. He provided them funds for construction of the line's northern end and received, in return, all rights to the subsidy for the route from Kissimmee to Tampa. Within a matter of weeks Tampa's town council had extended all necessary accommodations to Plant and had leased the lower ends of Polk, Zack, and Twiggs streets-with all rights to the adjacent riverfront-to the railroad for \$30 a year. Excitement at once was in the air.

As Karl Grismer explained: "On June 16, a crew of 168 track laborers came into town and began grading operations. More men quickly followed. Other crews started grading westward from Kissimmee. Orders were given for hundreds of thousands of crossties; workers in logging camps worked from dawn to dusk, and new mills were brought in to cut the timber. Construction men bought or leased every mule and ox within a hundred miles, and every vehicle in which earth could be moved. Farmers quickly sold every bit of produce they could grow; cattlemen reaped a harvest selling beef to the construction crews. Hillsborough County seethed with activity, and so did Tampa. Overnight it became a boom town."²⁹

As the roadbed pierced the countryside, improvements continued in Tampa. A wharf was constructed at the foot of Polk Street, and schooners from around the country unloaded their huge quantities of supplies and equipment. Settlers streamed into the community, and the sounds of construction everywhere were to be heard.³⁰

Through the heat of summer and fall two parties of twelve to fifteen hundred men worked toward each other from both ends of the line.³¹ Many of the workers were black. The Plant System had used leased convict labor on other projects, and some of the men likely were prisoners. The heat, humidity, pests, and other working conditions were terrible. Nonetheless labor contractors drove the men mercilessly.

An incident that occurred during the construction of a spur line illustrates just how bad conditions could get. In August 1885 a "crowd" of black laborers at Bartow, fed up with their working conditions, attempted to escape their labor contracts or, as it was put at the time, "jump their obligations by running away." The men made it only twenty miles before being overtaken "by a party of indignant and excited contractors" who "in a most energetic manner" forced them to return to work.³²

Week by week the line was extended. On September first, two locomotives arrived. Soon they were fired up, and the engine whistles were blown. Tampa's *Sunland Tribune* reported: "The echoes had hardly died away when from every street and alley, every doorway and window, and from the four winds came a mass of humanity to gaze at the monsters of the rails. It was an impromptu celebration such as Tampa had never seen before."³³

As the rails were laid, new communities-such as Lakeland, Auburndale, Lake Alfred, and Winter Haven-sprang up along the line.³⁴ In Hillsborough County a town was laid out near the old Indian settlement of Itchepuckesassa and the Seminole War post, Fort Sullivan. For a time it was known simply as "End of Track." Soon, it was called Plant City.³⁵

On December 1 Henry Plant, himself, first visited Tampa. He had ridden his cars from Kissimmee, although an eighteen-mile gap in the track had to be overcome by horse and buggy. His arrival was celebrated grandly at Tampa's finest hostelry, the modest Orange Grove Hotel, built in 1859 as the home of cattleman William B. Hooker.³⁶ Perhaps that evening-if not before-Plant conceived of the need for grander accommodations in his new city.

The first train rolled out of Tampa nine days later, when service was begun to Plant City. The trip took an hour and a half. Troubling, however, was the gap remaining from Plant City to Auburndale. And time was running out. The state subsidy was set to expire on January 25.

Through December, the Christmas holidays, and New Years the workers toiled seemingly without relief. Day by day the track inched forward, but each day brought Plant's company closer to the deadline. The first week of January passed away, then the second and the third. Finally, with only forty-eight hours to spare, the two ends of the line met at Carter's Mill, five miles east of Lakeland. There, on the morning of January 23, 1884, the last spike was driven and the stranglehold of Tampa's isolation finally was broken.

Tampans went wild. The celebration commenced that evening at the Orange Grove Hotel and lasted until daybreak.³⁷ Townspeople were delirious at Henry Plant's boast that he would turn the "sand heap" of Tampa's main street "into the Champs-Elysees (and) the Hillsborough into the Seine."³⁸ The first through train left Tampa for Sanford that next morning, and regularly scheduled service began on February 13. It took six and one half hours to make the trip. Two weeks later con-

nections were available to points throughout the country. The editor of the Ocala *Banner*, though writing two years later, summed up the sentiments of the time: "How this railroad service kills time and space! Only a little while ago it took two days to go from Ocala to Tampa and four days to reach Jacksonville. Now we can speed over the route in a few hours in comfort. Because of the railroads, this entire country is being magically transformed."³⁹

And so, Henry Bradley Plant magically transformed Tampa. Two years before it had been a village, and a decade before that it had for a while been a ghost town, deserted in fear of yellow fever. With the railroad, the town's 1880 population of 720 doubled and redoubled so that, by 1890, Tampan numbered well over five thousand. That figure again tripled by the turn of the century.

Plant's accomplishments, however, should not overshadow the efforts of decades to bring a railroad to Tampa. His ability to lay track so quickly was dependent, for instance, on the work of the local organizers of the Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West Railway. Those men had explored all practicable routes across the peninsula and had identified the one ultimately followed. They additionally had graded fifteen miles of roadbed and had secured necessary permissions from the local governments involved. Those preliminary efforts allowed Plant to meet his deadline-though just barely. Otherwise, the history of Tampa and south Florida might have turned out quite differently.

In closing, please let me share with you the words of the engineer who surveyed those routes. "It is unquestionably true," commented H. P. Hepburn in April 1878, "that a road connecting our magnificent bay

with the St. Johns River would do more towards settling up and developing South Florida than any other like enterprise that could be projected." Prophetically, he continued: "The road would undoubtedly make Tampa the chief business place of South Florida, and the whole of this section of the State would be benefitted thereby."⁴⁰

Henry Plant recognized the genius in other men's work and capitalized on it with his own relentless energy and financial resources. Truly he transformed Tampa, but it was the vision of others- developed over three decades of struggle-that led the way.

ENDNOTES

¹ Gary R. Mormino and Anthony P. Pizzo, *Tampa: The Treasure City* (Tulsa, OK, 1983), 77.

² Jacksonville *Florida Republican*, May 5, 1853.

³ Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa: A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St. Petersburg, FL, 1950), 119.

⁴ "Notes, 1849-1850," entry of March 1, 1849, Francis Collins Papers, Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

⁵ Charleston (SC) *Southern Christian Advocate*, February 13, 1862.

⁶ Jacksonville *Florida Republican*, May 19, 1853.

⁷ *Ibid.*, May 5, 26, July 21, 1853.

⁸ Edward F. Keuchel, *A History of Columbia County, Florida* (Tallahassee, 1981) 71-72; Julius J. Gordon, *Biographical Census of Hillsborough County, Florida 1850* (Tampa, 1989), 328-29.

⁹ Jacksonville *Florida Republican*, October 27, December 8, 1853, March 15, 1855.

¹⁰ Mormino and Pizzo, *Tampa*, 46.

¹¹ *Laws of Florida* (1854), 9-19.

¹² Jacksonville *Florida Republican*, April 19, 1855.

¹³ James W. Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War, 1855-1858: The Final Stand of the Seminoles Against the Whites* (Chuluota, FL, 1982), 1.

¹⁴ Tallahassee *Floridian & Journal*, March 14, 1857.

¹⁵ Grismer, *Tampa*, 128.

¹⁶ Tampa *Florida Peninsular* quoted in Tallahassee *Floridian & Journal*, July 3, 1858.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, November 27, 1858; Tampa *Florida Peninsular*, July 16, 1859.

¹⁸ Grismer, *Tampa*, 131-69, 178.

¹⁹ Vernon E. Peeples, "Charlotte Harbor Division of the Florida Southern Railroad," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 58 (January 1980), 291.

²⁰ Canter Brown, Jr., "The International Ocean Telegraph," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 68 (October 1989) 151n.

²¹ Canter Brown Jr., *Florida's Peace River Frontier* (Orlando, 1991), 256-57.

²² Tampa *Florida Peninsular*, June 24, July 8, 1871.

²³ Jerrell H. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet: Florida in the Era of Reconstruction 1863-1877* (Gainesville, 1974), 251.

²⁴ Brown, *Florida's Peace River Frontier*, 257, 266-69.

²⁵ James W. Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida*, 2 vols. (New York, 1957), 1, 171-72; Karl H. Grismer, *The Story of Fort Myers: The History of the Land of the Caloosabatchee and Southwest Florida* (Fort Myers, 1949; facsimile ed., Fort Myers Beach, 1982), 103-07; Edward C. Williamson, *Florida Politics in the Gilded Age 1877-1893* (Gainesville, 1976), 73-78.

²⁶ Dudley S. Johnson, "Henry Bradley Plant and Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 45 (October 1966), 118-23.

²⁷ Grismer, *Tampa*, 171-72.

²⁸ Johnson, "Henry Bradley Plant," 120, 122-23.

²⁹ Grismer, *Tampa*, 172-73.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

³¹ George W. Pettengill, Jr., *The Story of the Florida Railroads 1834-1903* (Boston, 1952), 76.

³² Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, July 30, 1885.

³³ Tampa *Sunland Tribune* quoted in Grismer, *Tampa*, 174.

³⁴ Brown, *Florida's Peace River Frontier*, 275.

³⁵ Johnson, "Henry Bradley Plant," 123.

³⁶ Grismer, *Tampa*, 174; Kyle S. VanLandingham, "William Brinton Hooker 1800-1871," *South Florida Pioneers* 5 (July 1975), 6-12; Gary Mormino, "Tampa's Social Center Once Was A Hotel," *Tampa Tribune*, August 26, 1990; Leland Hawes, "Cattle Owner Hooker Was A Civil, Military Leader," *Tampa Tribune*, August 26, 1990.

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³⁸ Mormino and Pizzo, *Tampa*, 78.

³⁹ Grismer, *Tampa*, 175.

⁴⁰ Tampa *Sunland Tribune*, April 6, 1878.

This paper was presented at the Tampa Bay Hotel Centennial Celebration, University of Tampa, Apr. 13, 1991. ¹ Gary R. Mormino and Anthony P. Pizzo, *Tampa: The Treasure City* (Tulsa, OK, 1983), 77.

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¹⁶ Tampa *Florida Peninsular* quoted in Tallahassee *Floridian & Journal*, July 3, 1858.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, November 27, 1858; Tampa *Florida Peninsular*, July 16, 1859.

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³⁴ Brown, *Florida's Peace River Frontier*, 275.

³⁵ Johnson, "Henry Bradley Plant," 123.

³⁶ Grismer, *Tampa*, 174; Kyle S. VanLandingham, "William Brinton Hooker 1800-1871," *South Florida Pioneers* 5 (July 1975), 6-12; Gary Mormino, "Tampa's Social Center Once Was A Hotel," *Tampa Tribune*, August 26, 1990; Leland Hawes, "Cattle Owner Hooker Was A Civil, Military Leader," *Tampa Tribune*, August 26, 1990.

³⁷ Grismer, *Tampa*, 174-75.

³⁸ Mormino and Pizzo, *Tampa*, 78.

³⁹ Grismer, *Tampa*, 175.

⁴⁰ Tampa *Sunland Tribune*, April 6, 1878.

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