

2017

A Perspective on Preservation in Tampa: The Anglo Side of Town

L. Glenn Westfall

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Westfall, L. Glenn (2017) "A Perspective on Preservation in Tampa: The Anglo Side of Town," *Sunland Tribune*: Vol. 34 , Article 2.

<https://www.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5038/2575-2472.34.1>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol34/iss1/2>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sunland Tribune by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

A Perspective on Preservation in Tampa: The Anglo Side of Town

L. Glenn Westfall

Today, the only reminders of an 1892 landmark Hillsborough Courthouse are stenciled on the side of County vehicles. Designed and built in 1892 by nationally renowned architect J. A. Wood in a Moorish architectural revival style, it was built simultaneously along with Henry B. Plant's magnificent Tampa Bay Hotel on the other side of the Hillsborough River.

In 1953, a valiant but unsuccessful effort to save the Courthouse from demolition was led by Mrs. William Hunter, member of the Tampa branch of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Unfortunately, this was a time in American history when cities did not fully appreciate the significance of landmark structures. In the following decades, many historic structures were demolished, found today only in archival records.

After moving from San Francisco to Tampa Bay in 1968, I witnessed Tampa's loss of several unique historic buildings. It was apparent there was a need to broadly expand public knowledge of history and architectural preservation. City blocks of cigar casitas, factories or family owned businesses were demolished when Interstates I-4 and I-75 cut through the heart and soul of its Latino communities,

Ybor City and West Tampa. But the city was on the verge of change.

Locals still reminisced about the warehouses demolished along the Hillsborough River in downtown Tampa, sending hundreds of river rats running over the feet of frightened downtowners on lunch break. The city skyline was silhouetted with a water tower on top of the Knight and Wall building, disguised as an "Early Times" whiskey bottle. It too was soon demolished.

Just between Tampa and the new University of South Florida, opened in 1960, is a suburb known as Sulphur Springs. The Maves Hotel and Arcade was a focal point, situated at the corners of Nebraska Avenue and Bird Street. With classical white arches on the front façade, it was one of Florida's first indoor shopping centers on the first floor, with 39 rooms and apartments on the second level. The Sulphur Springs Tourist Club on the Hillsborough River had a forty-foot water slide and a gator farm. Constructed in the mid-1920s, these buildings acquired a national reputation as popular tourist attractions. Locals and tourists enjoyed swimming in the mineral water of the springs, but the peculiar combination of sulphur with orange

blossoms in the springtime were often described on postcards.

There was an imposing vista of Tampa on a balcony on top of the white 214-foot Sulphur Springs water tower. Built over an artesian well, it supplied water to local residents who didn't seem to mind the malodorous water. In 1951, the Tower Drive-In Theater was added as yet another attraction.

Sulphur Springs was a unique community unto itself, only a few miles from downtown. But by the early 1970s, in spite of efforts to save the Arcade from demolition for a parking lot, only the water tower, the Springs Theater, and the springs remain. The ambiance of Sulphur Springs was all but forgotten to urban sprawl. Other than the still-imposing tower, Sulphur Springs is now a blighted, neglected corner of town.

The most memorable individual I first met in Tampa was Dr. James Covington, Professor of History at the University of Tampa. After arriving in the 1950s, he was involved in one of Tampa's first historical organizations, the Hillsborough County Historical Commission. But by the 1970s, it was nearly defunct, serving primarily as a repository for a few artifacts stored in the Courthouse.

My first visit with Dr. Covington sparked his interest when I told him about my father's life with the Florida Seminoles in the early 1920s, one of the few white men to witness the sacred Green Corn Dance. Dr. Covington, a noted authority on the Seminoles, was also a wealth of

information on railroad tycoon Henry B. Plant.

Dr. Covington made me an aficionado of Tampa History by introducing me to local "movers and shakers." They included Leland Hawes, Herbert McKay, Hampton Dunn, Theodore Lesley, John D. Ware, Margaret Chapman, E. J. Salcines, Roland Manteiga, Jim and Martha Ferman, and Tony Pizzo.

In 1970, when I was invited to present a lecture discussing my research on Tampa's Latino Communities, Dr. Covington introduced me to a Tampa Historical Society (THS) founder, Nonita Cuesta Henson, whose grandfather Angel L. Cuesta was a legend in Tampa's cigar trade. After the lecture Nonita invited me to her home to view her private collection of cobalt blue, gold lettering Cuesta Rey stock certificates. A cigar band label collection included rare Coca-Cola bands from the late 1920s, originally placed on a limited edition of Cuesta Rey cigars. Nonita was a morale booster and financial supporter in establishing an historical organization, encouraging me to become further involved.

Prior to the actual incorporation of THS, there were several months of organizational discussions held at Nonita's home to establish an official non-profit organization. In 1970 I gave Nonita and Dr. Covington copies of the Articles of Incorporation for the Florida Historical Society. They copied it verbatim, submitting it to the State of Florida, and on May 26, 1971, Tampa Historical Society was officially registered as a non-profit organization.

In the ensuing years, lectures and events were periodically held in various city locations. Temporary headquarters were established in room 434 at the University of Tampa, compliments of Dr. Covington. Formative meetings were an opportunity to meet board members. Hampton Dunn invited me to join him on a number of his speaking trips throughout Florida. E. J. Salcines and Anthony Pizzo gave me invaluable insights to the Latino communities while Theodore Lesley invited me to go through his file cabinets overflowing with local historical papers and documents regarding the sale of family land to V. M. Ybor.

The need to preserve a disappearing history was evident at the death of Theodore Lesley. After heirs took what they wanted, the remaining historical files were placed in a garage sale. Papers were scattered across the floor as a viable local collection was destroyed. This unfortunate loss further catalyzed the need to preserve Tampa History.

In 1974, Tony Pizzo brought to the Board's attention an 1882 article in the *Sunland Tribune*, reporting: "*Tampa should have a Historical Society without delay.*" Ninety-two years later, the first issue of the new, revived *Sunland Tribune* was published, supported by local businesses and member contributions. Col. George Mercer Brook was portrayed on the front cover of the first edition with an article about his impact on early Tampa. The yearly publication expanded through the 1990s, offering publishing access for local residents as well as scholars. This was the first opportunity for members of the Tampa

community to record personal observations and memories in an official journal. The *Sunland Tribune*, an annual highlight for members, was sent out each fall to their homes. It continued recording significant stories and aspects of Tampa History that otherwise would have otherwise been forgotten to time.

The University of South Florida soon initiated its own historical journal, *Tampa Bay History*, which primarily published articles by USF professors. (It is currently published jointly by the USF Libraries and the Tampa Bay History Center.)

By 1977, I was appointed to the THS Board as an ongoing search was underway to acquire appropriate headquarters. Out of a long list of possible locations, the most affordable and historically relevant was 245 South Hyde Park, the original 1890 honeymoon cottage of Col. Peter O. Knight.

In the late 1880s, the Lafayette Bridge built over the Hillsborough River gave access to a new Hyde Park residential community. By 1890, a honeymoon cottage was constructed at 245 South Hyde Park Avenue for Peter O. Knight and his new bride. The newlyweds lived at this address until a larger, more commodious home was built. Col. Knight soon became a prominent figure in Tampa, serving as a public servant, lawyer, and President of the Tampa Electric Company.

Symbolically, two love birds were carved and placed above the front porch of the honeymoon cottage. It contained 5 rooms with an apartment connected to the back through a hallway in what is now the

Board Room. An outhouse stood along the driveway, functional until an indoor restroom was added. The driveway and sidewalks were multi-colored hexagonal blocks typical of the original Hyde Park neighborhood.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, Hyde Park declined as new suburbs became more attractive. Houses could be purchased for affordable prices. 1977 was the ideal time to acquire the honeymoon cottage at \$25,000. The cottage was accepted by the Board and an additional \$20,000 was collected and donated for renovation by the Junior League of Tampa and anonymous individuals.

Tampa Historical Society now had its long awaited home. The first official meeting at the Knight House to discuss interior renovation was in fall, 1977. The interior was badly in need of repair. Stained wall paper was peeling off the walls, dust was everywhere and an abandoned mattress was the only piece of furniture. Among members present were myself, Martha Ferman, and Lisa Barrow, Junior League representative. Martha, lovingly referred to as “the Godmother of THS” joked that sitting on a mattress in a house with no furniture was an unexpected adventure for a Southern Lady. When I mentioned I was soon planning to move, Martha said, in her charming Southern accent, “Well honey, why don’t you just move into the apartment and make yourself at home?” That’s when Tampa Historical Society became my home for a decade while serving as a volunteer, Board member, President, and Executive Director.

The interior floors of the cottage, constructed with durable termite-proof Dade County pine, were sanded and refinished while extensive shelving was installed in the designated Board Room. Walls were refurbished with Victorian wallpaper donated by interior designer Stapleton Gooch. While interior renovation was taking place I restored the apartment while assisting in the cottage’s interior and exterior renovation.

The exterior badly needed painting: the roof was leaking and the front porch had serious wood rot and termite damage. Front and backyards were frequented by transients as a place to sleep. Soon after I moved into the apartment, one transient attempted to build a fire on the front porch to keep warm in the winter until I drove him off. Garden landscaping was added along with a sprinkling system serving a dual purpose: it watered newly installed plants and went off at night to discourage transients. As an added security, a wrought iron fence was installed in the front yard with a gate in the driveway. An existing chain link fence on three sides of the property offered badly needed privacy and security.

A barren back yard was gradually converted into a lovely Victorian garden with support from the Tampa Garden Club and THS volunteers. Ninety-year-old mango, mulberry and alligator pear trees supplied bonanzas of fruit until a hard frost severely damaged them. The rear flower garden often served as an informal meeting place or for serving refreshments during in-house events.

Thanks again to the Junior League's outreach, Tampans generously donated period furniture to create a Victorian parlor and office in the front rooms with a board room and designated display room. The back room originally served as a dining room with a small kitchen.

The "Golden Years" of THS began with a unique opportunity to promote Tampa's historical and cultural legacies. I met and befriended members and a succession of Presidents, an experience which tapped into the heart and soul of Tampa. THS was filling a void in the community: no other local organization successfully promoted local history by engaging directly with members of the community while offering a sense of pride to Tampa's diverse residents. Our historical reputation was enhanced when I served as a liaison with the University of South Florida and Hillsborough Community College History Departments, who periodically supported and promoted educational lectures presented by THS by offering free lecture space.

By far, our most influential member and early supporter was Betty Phipps, editor for the society page of the *Tampa Tribune*, a contributor to articles in the *Sunland Tribune*, and a lifelong supporter of local history. Betty graduated from Florida State when it was still a school for girls. She loved attending THS events while eloquently describing them to her enthusiastic readers. This free publicity was invaluable, helping increase membership as Tampans with an historical flair avidly read her articles. Betty singlehandedly acquired more new members than anyone else,

creating a camaraderie previously lacking in Tampa. With her continued exposure of THS to the public, we increased membership to over 300--a larger number when you consider most memberships included couples. Her promotional articles were mainstays for THS, expanding its influence, prestige, and awareness throughout the community.

When I gave a lecture in the early 1980s to discuss research on the impact of the cigar industry in Key West and Florida, I used slides of Tampa cigar labels and factories from the archives of the Tobacco Merchants Association in New York City. (I later arranged to have their monumental collection of weekly tobacco newspapers from the 1870s to the 1950s donated to the Special Collections department at the University of South Florida. During my presentation, I described one image on a Tampa label as a "uniquely portrayed buck-toothed woman from a 1890s cigar label for the Emilio Pons cigar factory." After the lecture, a woman with a striking resemblance to the "uniquely portrayed woman" came up to me and said, "You know that woman you showed in that slide, that was my mutha!"

This is when I met Carmen Toney and her brother, Emilio Pons, Jr. They later invited me to their home and complained the historical marker in front of their father's Ybor City cigar factory was incorrect since it claimed their father was a native Tampan. Together we corrected this error by documenting that: "Emilio Sr. moved from Cuba to Key West where he was a

factory owner and officer in the Partido Revolucionario Cubano. He migrated to Tampa in 1887, following his Key West friend and mentor, Vicente Martinez Ybor.” They generously offered to donate a massive hand carved side-table given to their father as a wedding gift from V. M. Ybor, but it was too large to fit in our rooms. It was later donated to the Ybor City State Museum. Carmen and Emilio were among our most supportive members.

As President, I edited a new newsletter, *Tampa Historical Horizons*, with an elongated 1940s photo of downtown Tampa along that top front page. The four-to six-page newsletter contained a monthly President’s Report, announcements of upcoming events, reports on previous lectures or events, and periodic requests for volunteers. THS member Joe B. Clay printed it at cost, allowing our limited budget to increase our impact on the community, while volunteers Kaki Parrish and Lois Latimer were available each month to send it out to members.

In addition to the newsletter and the *Sunland Tribune*, THS periodically offered lectures promoting Tampa’s historic connections to Florida, Cuba, Spain, and Italy. Because of Tampa’s historical ties to fellow cigar city Key West, two tours were arranged to the island city.

The first joined the annual Key West tour of historic homes. A year later a second Key West tour joined the “La Verbena,” celebration and lecture at the San Carlos Club. It included a visit to the Porter Mansion and tea party in the tropical backyard adjacent to a cottage where Robert

Frost spent 15 winters. Many participating members were descendants of Key Westers and shared their family connections to Florida’s first major cigar city.

One of the most memorable events was the visit of the tall ship *The Western Union* to Tampa. Originally built in 1939, it was a “cable tender” connecting Florida cities, the Caribbean islands, and South America. The magnificent sailing ship is the only surviving authentic working tall ship in Florida. *The Western Union* was permanently docked in Key West where I befriended the Captain. He was easily convinced to stop by Tampa en route to the annual ship inspection in Tarpon Springs. It was a break for the crew and an experience for our members.

An on-ship celebration ensued upon arrival to Davis Islands. THS members were given a detailed explanation of *The Western Union’s* history. The following morning as the ship left Tampa Bay, the crew witnessed the rare St. Elmo’s fire. Under rare and proper conditions, this weather phenomenon creates a bright glowing blue light enveloping a ship and is considered a good omen to sailors.

Another successful yearly event was the revival of the Old Timer’s Reunion. With the support of Junior League volunteer Nancy Skemp (later THS President) a gala celebration was held at the grand ballroom of the Tampa Bay Hotel at the University of Tampa. Harpsichordists offered delightful background music while an elegant dinner was served. The oldest of the Old Timers were recognized. Interviews recorded their histories and memories of the past. There

was an amusing response to the event from supporters Lester and Yette Olsen who jokingly said, "The event was terrific, but we will hear enough harp music in heaven, no need to play it now!"

The Oaklawn Cemetery Ramble was revitalized under the presidency of Betty Nelson. Betty devoted attention to reviving the event with a request in the *Tampa Historical Horizons* for members with family at Oaklawn to record stories for the tour. What at first sounded like a rather macabre event was an annual highlight. In preparation, a concerted effort to clean up the abandoned cemetery grounds was undertaken by THS members, the City of Tampa, and Charlie Spicola's community involved Rough Riders. Overturned grave stones were up-righted, ankle high grass and weeds were cut, and broken gates were repaired. The Oaklawn Cemetery Ramble helped restore and preserve a previously abandoned Tampa landmark. After every tour, participants enjoyed refreshments and favorite dessert recipes of Tampa families. As "The Ramble" continued over the years, it collected new in-depth stories about Oaklawn residents.

Betty Nelson also promoted the unveiling of the soon- to- be-opened Ybor City State Museum, formerly the Ferlita Bakery, selected as the new home for a local historical museum. The State of Florida hired me as a consultant to develop the themes and collection of artifacts for display. We arranged a THS kick-off "before" event held in the bakery prior to renovation. Guests were seated amidst a large dough mixer, cake pans, and piles of scattered bakery records for a lecture on

the history of the bakery. Rats periodically skittered across the floor as occasional screams interrupted the lecture. This "before" experience was later followed by a tour of the completed museum a year later.

Another project of THS was to support and expand the Hillsborough County Historic Marker program, a favorite project promoted by Tony Pizzo. One of the more memorable Marker events was when Billy Graham visited Tampa, honored with an historical marker on Franklin Street where he began his lifelong crusade.

A progressive dinner held in cooperation with Tampa Preservation Inc. began with cocktails and appetizers at the Knight House, followed by a stroll across the street to the Hutchinson House for an elegant dinner, (headquarters of Tampa Preservation, Inc.,) followed with dessert and entertainment on the third floor ballroom of a nearby mansion.

As THS matured, the annual D. B. McKay awards dinner was held at the Tampa Yacht and Country Club. Each year, a person contributing to Florida History was honored, the most colorful being Mel Fisher who discovered the *Atocha* and *Santa Anna Maria* galleons filled with silver, gold, and emeralds. He surprised the audience by wearing his famous "money chain," a gold looped necklace flowing to his knees. A notorious drinker, Mel downed quite a few drinks before offering a gold link to any "interested" ladies.

By the time I left THS in 1989, there were several problems limiting its growth. The organization did not have a large meeting place, there were no computer

capabilities, and no parking facilities. THS wanted to grow but it was unable to meet City building codes in order to expand facilities. As the Tampa Bay History Center evolved and grew, THS membership dwindled.

After moving to Santa Fe, I was invited to the History Department of the University of New Mexico (UNM) to discuss my experiences in helping establish a local historical organization, how it successfully served the community, and its relationship to the broader scope of history. As a result of this symposium, UNM offers a course referred to as the "Microcosm-Macrocosm" approach to history. One example I offered of this local to international historical approach included my research on Tampa's Latino enclave Ybor City, exemplified by studying local records then expanding to researching the name Ybor while researching for my Doctoral degree at the University of Florida. I discovered the Ybor name dates back to an Eighth-century Moorish "Ibor" family. The Ibor's controlled an Iberian caliphate in what is now Eastern Portugal and Southwestern Spain, where the towns, river and plains called "Ibor" still exist. Researching Ybor City was like collecting pieces of a jig saw puzzle, eventually placing them into a larger picture. (The family name "Ibor" was changed to Ybor when Don Vicente Martinez Ibor fled a revolution in Cuba in 1868 to Key West. The Spanish "I" (pronounced in Spanish as an "E") was changed since the letter "Y" in English allowed the correct sound "E" in the family name. Few individuals in Tampa today are aware of this significant fact.)

Another example of the microcosm-macrocosm approach to Tampa History was when I discovered water-stained cigar labels found on the floors of deserted, soon-to-be demolished cigar factories. This resulted in studying stone lithographic printing of cigar labels. In New York City I spent three summers de-assessing hundreds of thousands of pre-1900 to post 1930s cigar labels once belonging to over thirty nineteenth century New York lithographic firms. Rare Tampa labels, previously unknown, were discovered in Master Reference Books and in one-of-a-kind proof books. I arranged to have a section of the collection, referred to as the Kane Greenberg Collection, donated to the University of South Florida Special Collections Department.

As I began researching Florida labels printed in Europe, I contacted Klingenberg Printers in Detmold, Germany and was appointed Archivist to Europe's second oldest printers. On my first visit I was taken to an old horse barn to see a massive collection of cigar labels and proof books stored there since World War 2. For the next six summers I organized and established the Klingenberg Archives. In the collection were undiscovered one-of-a-kind pre-1900 lithographic cigar label treasures printed for Florida's cigar centers Key West, Marti City, West Tampa, and Ybor City.

Today, the UNM History Department's ongoing microcosm-macrocosm program promotes history based on stories and events of local residents, connecting local history with national and international events, and

works with local historical organizations in a cooperative manner.

After moving to Santa Fe, I kept in touch with Tampa friends and colleagues who told me of the gradual demise of THS. By 2016, there were only three THS members, while the honeymoon cottage and landscaping were in deplorable condition. The City of Tampa threatened condemnation of the building and grounds if they were not properly repaired, restored, and maintained.

A new generation of historical aficionados responded. Once again, Charlie Spicola and his Rough Riders came the rescue of THS. A new board seeks to restore the once viable organization. The Rough Riders and volunteers spent weeks trimming and cutting bushes and trees in the once beautiful back yard. They replaced rotted wood on the front porch while repainting the exterior. With the leadership

and inspiration of newly-elected President Angela Morgan Spicola, a new page was turned in Tampa History. This new generation of leadership hopes to combine the best of THS's past while developing innovative, interactive programs for the future.

Fortunately, I was accidently in Tampa to attend an April 27, 2017 event reminiscent of the heydays at the Peter O. Knight cottage. Fifty-six years later, the Knight House was again filled with history enthusiasts and stimulating conversations. It was an inspiration to participate in this renaissance to restore what was once a viable organization for the community. I applaud the efforts of President Angela Morgan Spicola, the Board, the Rough Riders, and new members. Their new groundbreaking historical perspectives and leadership will renew THS for the benefit of local residents and the city of Tampa.

Dr. Loy Glenn Westfall lives in Santa Fe New Mexico where he is active in The Wheelwright Museum of Native American Arts, The Ralph. T. Coe Foundation for the Arts, The New Mexico History Museum, The International Folk Arts Museum and promotes authentic Native American art projects in Gallup, New Mexico for the annual Navajo Ceremonial. In October 2016 he opened an exhibit at the New Mexico History Museum entitled OUT OF THE BOX: THE ART OF THE CIGAR. It was recently promoted by U.S.A. TODAY as one of the top eleven "Must-See" museum exhibits in the United States. It will be on display until March, 2018. He is currently documenting his past preservation efforts in Ybor City and Key West.