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Finding Relics in the Burgert Brothers Photographs

Bill Harris

The Burgert Brothers Photographic Collection presents a pictorial record of the commercial, residential, and social growth of Tampa Bay and Florida's West coast from the mid-1800s to the mid-1960s. The photographs came from Burgert Brothers Inc., a commercial photography studio founded in 1917 after Al and Jean Burgert purchased William A. Fishbaugh's commercial photography studio.¹ The Burgert Brothers' studio took approximately 80,000 photos during its operation up to the mid-1960s. After the Burgert Brothers Studio closed, the photographs and negatives were stored in a tin-roofed garage in South Tampa. Many negatives were destroyed by heat, humidity, and rain.

In 1974, the Friends of the Library for the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public

Library recognized the historic significance of the photographic images and purchased the collection for the community so the Burgerts' photographs would be accessible to the public.² The Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library has over 15,000 Burgert Brothers photos in its collection and houses the collection at the Florida History & Genealogy Library located at the John F. Germany Public Library. The library also has 14 ledgers that were utilized by the studio to record the details of the photos. In book 14, there is a section titled "Relics." There are many parts to this collection that can be researched and discussed, but we are going to concentrate on the content, time period, and photographers of the Relic sub-collection for this article.

¹ Robert E. Snyder and Jack B. Moore, *Pioneer Commercial Photography - The Burgert Brothers Tampa, Florida* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1992), 12.

² "Collection History & Preservation," *Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative*, August 8th, 2017, http://hcplc.org/hcplc/research/burgert/history_burgert.html.



Burgert Brothers Photography Studio at 407 East Lafayette Street, front facade with entrance and porch: Tampa, Fla.
Negative number. R179 (BB10) | Print number 470 – Taken July 20, 1922
Courtesy, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

In their ledgers, the Burgert Brothers did not define what classified a photo as a Relic. In their book about the Burgert Brothers, Robert E. Snyder and Jack Moore state that older negatives from the Fishbaugh collection, including glass-plate negatives, were marked with an R, apparently for Relic.³ However, since we have an inventory of the glass-plate negatives the Friends of the Library purchased in 1974, we know that only some of the glass-plate negatives were signified as Relics. We also know that the negatives included more than just photos from William A. Fishbaugh, since a vast majority of the Relic photos are after 1917, which is

the date the Burgerts purchased the studio from Fishbaugh.

The earliest subject matter shown in the ledger as a Relic photo is from 1846. However, the photograph was likely taken much later. The photo is of an engraving of Fort Brooke. The caption at the bottom of the photo says “Scene at Tampa Bay, Florida 1846.” In *Yesterday’s Tampa*, Hampton Dunn states that the photo is of the Old Carew Homestead at Franklin and Platt streets in the year 1846. Dr. Edmund S. Carew was a pioneer Tampan who acquired a huge tract of land for homesteading.⁴ Karl Grismer, in his book on the history of this

³ Robert E. Snyder and Jack B. Moore, *Pioneer Commercial Photography - The Burgert Brothers Tampa, Florida* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1992), 78.

⁴ Hampton Dunn, *Yesterday’s Tampa* (Miami, FL: E. A. Seemann Publishing, Inc., 1972), 16.

area, contends that Dr. Carew arrived in Tampa on April 13th, 1883 and moved into the officers' quarters.⁵ This would suggest

that this photo depicts the officers' quarters in 1846, where Franklin and Platt streets are located today in downtown Tampa.



City Hall on southwest corner of Florida Avenue and Lafayette Street, with Police Department: Tampa, Fla.

Negative number. R156| Print number 307 – Taken July 20, 1922

Courtesy, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

⁵ Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa – A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St.

Petersburg, Fl.: The St. Petersburg Printing Company, Inc., 1950), 169.



Copy of engraving showing activity at Fort Brooke: Tampa, Fla.
Negative number. R289 | Print number 559 – Engraving from 1846
Courtesy, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

The second-oldest subject matter is a copy of a photo of Seminole chief Billy Bowlegs posed in Indian attire. The caption below the photo says 1852. Billy Bowlegs was the Seminole leader during the Third Seminole War and ended up leaving the state at the end of the war in 1858.⁶ Tony Pizzo states in *Tampa Town* that the original

daguerreotype for this photo was owned by Theodore Lesley, who was a Hillsborough County historian when the book was written.⁷ These two photos demonstrate that the Burgerts were more than willing to obtain photos taken by others and add them to their Relic Collection.

⁶ Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa – A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St. Petersburg, Fl.: The St. Petersburg Printing Company, Inc., 1950), 126.

⁷ Anthony P. Pizzo, *Tampa Town 1824 – 1886 The Cracker Village With A Latin Accent* (Miami, Fl.: Hurricane House Publishers, Inc., 1968),



Seminole leader Billy Bowlegs posed in Indian attire: Florida
Negative number. R290 | Print number 560 – Taken 1852
Courtesy, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

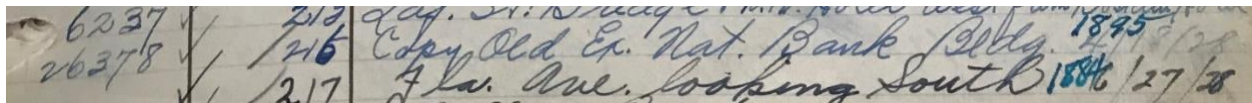
Most of the Relic entries in the ledger are for photos taken from the 1880s to the 1920s. There are a few scattered photo entries from the 1930s and one photo from 1940.



Airplane on the tarmac of Peter O. Knight Airport on Davis Islands
Negative number R474 (v2219) | Print number 560 – Taken December 20, 1940
Courtesy, University of South Florida Special Collections

There are 481 photo entries for the Relic section in the ledger. Three of the entries are duplicates and have two distinct Relic negative numbers. Therefore, the 478 unique Relic photos in the collection are less than 1% of the entire Burgert Brothers Photographic Collection. Many of the photos listed in the Relic section that were taken after 1917 also have entries in the other 13 ledgers. It is likely that they have two negative numbers because these photos were originally taken by the Burgerts and logged at that time. It was a later decision to add these photos to the Relic Collection. We may never know the whole reason for creating new entries for these photos, but it suggests that the Burgerts wanted to give added significance to these entries. It is also very possible that

different employees, photographers, or even owners during this time period had varying opinions on what made a relic, especially considering the date range of the entries. We do not know how long the Burgerts were adding to this particular ledger or when they started the ledger, but it is safe to assume that it was being modified over decades. For example, you can see in the sample below that Relic 217 was taken in 1884, but was copied into the ledger in 1928. This demonstrates that it is likely the photos before Relic 217 were copied into the Relic ledger before the year 1928. This is also a good example of the different colored inks you will see on the ledger pages. The varied inks likely shows that the photographers made modifications over time.

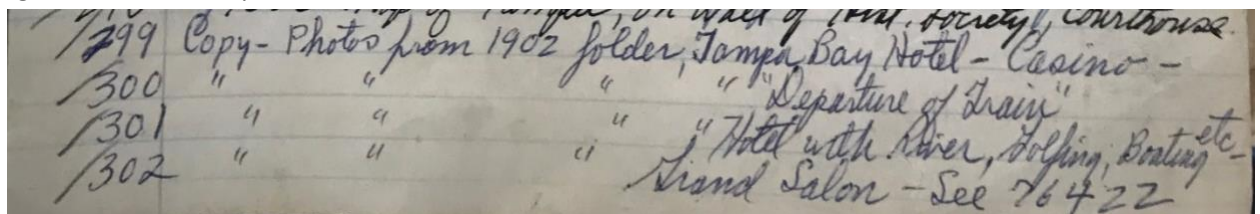


Ledger Sample from Ledger 14 – 3rd Page in Relics Section - Courtesy, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

The second example shown below gives another snapshot of when a particular entry was written. In the relic entry for #302, the ledger refers to 76422. The entry for 76422 shows that the copy of a 1902 photo of the Grand Salon in the Tampa Bay Hotel was taken in 1958. This entry was after Al Severson and Thiel Burgert, who was a nephew to the

brothers, purchased the studio and the Burgert brothers left the photography business in the 40s.⁸

The firm recorded the first half of the records in the late teens or 1920s, and the last half toward the end of the Burgert Brothers Inc. corporate life span from 1958 to the mid-1960s.



Ledger Sample from Ledger 14 – 5th Page in Relics Section - Courtesy, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

⁸ Robert E. Snyder and Jack B. Moore, *Pioneer Commercial Photography - The Burgert Brothers*

Tampa, Florida (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1992), 14.

The Burgert family came to Tampa in the mid-1890s. The father and all of the sons were involved at some time during their lives in the photographic industry. One of the first newspaper articles in the Tampa Bay area that includes a Burgert photograph is from January 1896. It mentions that Willy Burgert will be delayed from returning from Key West. The article also mentions that he is an Ybor City photographer and a volunteer fireman.⁹ The Burgert family's studio first appeared in 1897.¹⁰

We know some of the photos included in the collection were not created by the Burgerts. One example is Relic 103, which was taken by pioneer photographer James Cooley Field.¹¹ Mr. Field was a member of the Tampa City Council and one of the first commercial photographers in this area.¹² It was taken at the county courthouse and shows the intersection of what is today called Florida Avenue and Kennedy Boulevard, but at that time was known as Monroe and Lafayette streets.



Intersection of Monroe and Lafayette streets, viewed west from Court House: Tampa, Fla.
Negative number. R102 | Print number 77 – Taken 1882
Courtesy, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

The Relic Collection also includes many of W.A. Fishbaugh's work from his studio. One example is Relic 369, which shows Main

Street in West Tampa with a view east from the Howard Avenue intersection. This photo was taken in 1911, which is likely the start

⁹ "No headline," *Tampa Tribune* (Tampa, Fl.), Jan. 28, 1896.

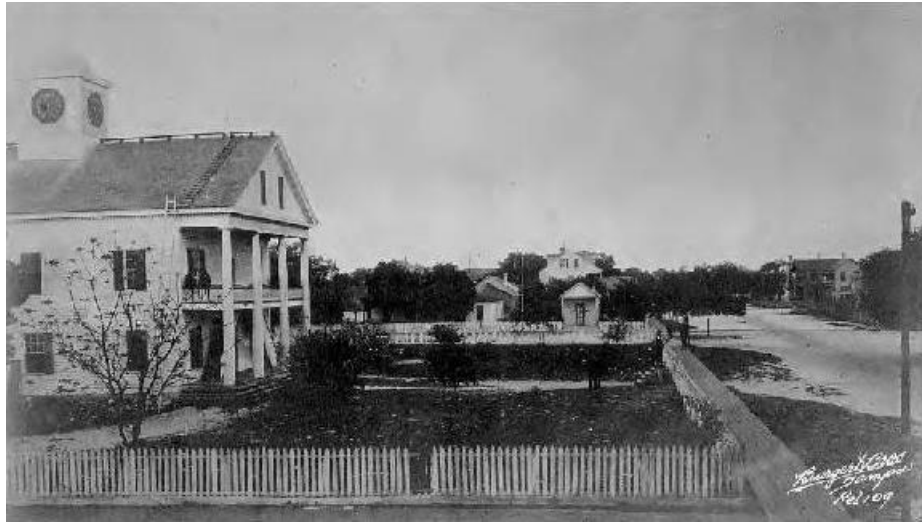
¹⁰ "As Quick As a Wink," *Tampa Tribune* (Tampa, Fl.), Aug. 4, 1897.

¹¹ Anthony P. Pizzo, *Tampa Town 1824 – 1886 - The Cracker Village With A Latin Accent* (Miami, Fl.: Hurricane House Publishers, Inc., 1968), 40.

¹² Leland Hawes, "Photographer snapped up business," *Tampa Tribune* (Tampa, Fl.), Aug. 15, 1993.

of Fishbaugh's studio in Tampa. On the bottom of the photo you can note his signature. West Tampa was incorporated on

May 18th, 1895 and became part of Tampa on January 1st, 1925.¹³ This is one of the few photos available of West Tampa's center.



Hillsborough County Courthouse, Lafayette Street entrance, looking east from intersection with Franklin Street: Tampa, Fla.
Negative number. R109 (V555) | Print number 83 – Taken 1885
Courtesy, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System



Main Street, view east from intersection of Howard Avenue: Tampa, Fla.
Negative number R369 (V13) | Print number 617 – Taken 1911

¹³ Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa – A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St.

Petersburg, Fl.: The St. Petersburg Printing Company, Inc., 1950), 302.

Courtesy, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

Note: The signature is in the bottom right, which has been enlarged in the second image.

The vast majority of the relics were taken by the Burgert Brothers studio after 1917. Relic 381 is one of the more popular photos in this collection. It shows passengers on a sidewalk in front of the Tampa Union Station. The contract for building the train station was for \$100,000 and was awarded in 1911 by the Tampa Union Station

Company, headed by Peter O' Knight. Tampa Union Station was completed on May 15th, 1912.¹⁴ This photo was taken ten years later in 1922; it is another example of a Burgert photo with multiple negative numbers. It is included in another ledger under the negative number V350.



Passengers on sidewalk in front of the Tampa Union Station: Tampa, Fla.
Negative number R381(V350)| Print number 623 – Taken May 12, 1922
Courtesy, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

The Burgert Brothers Photographic Collection is an important resource for any researcher interested in learning more about the Tampa Bay area. We are very fortunate that the Friends of the Library

were able to purchase this collection in 1974 so that future generations can see these photographs of our past. The Relics

¹⁴ Karl H. Grismer, Tampa – A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida (St.

Petersburg, Fl.: The St. Petersburg Printing Company, Inc., 1950), 237.

are just a sample of the fascinating photos included in this collection.



Parade on Zack Street (400-600 blocks) honoring World War I draftees, with uniformed troops: Tampa, Fla.
Negative number R348 (V137) | Print number 600 – Taken September 19, 1917
Courtesy, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

In September 2017, the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library celebrated the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Burgert Brothers studio with a series of events. The collection is housed at the Florida History and Genealogy Library located at the John F. Germany Public Library in downtown

Tampa. The Burgert Brothers Photographic Collection is also a part of the library's digital collections which can be found on our website: <http://www.hcplc.org>. We hope that after reading this article you will stop by the library or go online to enjoy this important collection.