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Travis Puterbaugh

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BUCS, RATS, DOWNTOWN, AND THE CROSSTOWN: TAMPA IN 1976

BY TRAVIS PUTERBAUGH

In 1926, De Rhethe Greene moved to Houston, Texas, from Tampa, Florida. Although he recalled Tampa as a charming and magical place, when Greene returned to Tampa fifty years later, he was shocked and appalled at how the city of his youth had changed. Franklin Street had been transformed into an outdoor shopping mall in a “pitiful and futile” attempt to revitalize the downtown core. Just across the Hillsborough River, the once beautiful sanctuary Plant Park had been “desecrated” by the addition of modern buildings. An “ugly, tacky and tasteless” suburban sprawl had all but destroyed the rural pleasures of Hillsborough County. Greene did like one thing, however, about modern Tampa. He called the Tampa International Airport the most beautiful and “functionally efficient” airport he had ever visited. Upon returning to Houston, Greene vowed to erase the Tampa he had just seen from his memory and “keep enshrined in nostalgia” the Tampa he once knew.¹

It’s probable that many people in the mid-1970s would have preferred the Tampa that Greene remembered. An outdated convention center that hemorrhaged money, a costly expressway that nobody seemed to use, a first-year football team that lost all fourteen of its games, and a war against rats on Davis Islands. These were a few of the hallmarks—not exactly worthy of Chamber of Commerce recognition—that defined Tampa in 1976. The still-growing city searched to find an identity amidst the backdrop of a depressed downtown, a fabulous international airport, and a burgeoning state university striving for more than just regional recognition. In a significant development, the first season of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers as an NFL expansion franchise helped put Tampa on the map as a major-league city. Tampa struggled mightily in 1976, however, to keep up with its new status. Growth and

¹ “Fifty Years Changes Things,” *Tampa Tribune*, 10 September 1976, 21-A.

TRAVIS PUTERBAUGH is a graduate of Loyola University of New Orleans and has an M.A. in history from the University of South Florida. He has written extensively on Tampa sports history for *La Gaceta* newspaper and is currently the Collections Manager at the Tampa Bay History Center.

development had already begun, but the city was still a work in progress. Without a single defining incident, the events of 1976 in Tampa would, in many ways, have more of an impact in the years that followed.

On the political front, the battle for the 1976 Democratic presidential nomination began with a local showdown over southern values between Alabama governor George Wallace and former Georgia governor Jimmy Carter. On February 3—a month prior to the Florida primary—Wallace supporters cried foul over Fire Chief Fred Anderson's decision to make Carter an honorary fire chief during the candidate's visit to Tampa. They alleged that Anderson had no right to engage in partisan politics on public property, even though the event was actually held 200 yards from the fire station. Carter pledged, however, that if elected he would have a "fire chief's hat from Tampa in my office." Presumably, since Carter promised he would never to lie to the American public, that very hat hung in the Oval Office between January 1977 and January 1981.²

Carter narrowly captured Hillsborough County over Wallace by 2,280 votes in the primary on March 9, defeating the man who had carried the county in the 1972 Democratic primary. Hillsborough County conformed to much of the rest of the state in voting for Carter, as well as for the incumbent President Gerald Ford over Ronald Reagan. Ford defeated Reagan in Hillsborough County by 2,300 votes. Interestingly, the third-place finisher in the Democratic primary, Henry "Scoop" Jackson, finished with 17,037 votes, almost as many votes as Ford and Reagan received in Hillsborough County combined. The 1976 presidential election would call into question Hillsborough's status as "safe conservative territory." The conservative politicians, Reagan and Wallace, were rejected in favor of the moderate candidates Ford and Carter. And in the presidential election in November, Hillsborough County went to a Democrat, by a 5-4 margin, for the first time since 1964.³

While Carter's election changed the national political landscape, Tampa's sports landscape also changed irrevocably in 1976. Since the 1950s, the exotic sport of jai alai had captured the interest—and disposable income—of local patrons. Its popularity could be seen in the thousands of people who showed up on weekends at the fronton on Dale Mabry Highway just south of Gandy Boulevard. Professional soccer, though never as popular stateside as in other parts of the world, carved a niche locally with the successful Tampa Bay Rowdies of the North American Soccer League. In their first season of play, the Rowdies won the league championship—the Soccer Bowl—on August 24, 1975. Baseball, whether as a spring training hub or the home of the Florida State League Tampa Tarpons, could also count on the consistent support of local sports fans. For years, Tampa enjoyed football at the prep

² "Carter Stops in Tampa, Gets Fire Chief's Hat," *Tampa Tribune*, 4 February 1976, 2-B.

³ "Carter Captures Hillsborough," *Tampa Tribune*, 10 March 1976, 1-B; "County Shakes Safe Conservative Territory Label," *Tampa Tribune*, 11 March 1976, 1-B; "Demos Sweep All Races in Hillsborough County," *Tampa Tribune*, 3 November 1976, 1-B.



Photograph courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center Collection

Jimmy Carter, seen here with Hillsborough County campaign manager Elvin Martinez and volunteer Joe Cruz, attended a fundraiser at the American Legion Post 248 in West Tampa during the early stages of the 1976 presidential campaign.

and collegiate levels. Tampa Stadium played host to several National Football League exhibitions beginning in August 1968, but the city longed for a professional team to call its own. In 1974, the NFL awarded Tampa the league's twenty-seventh franchise, to begin play in 1976.

The inaugural season of Tampa Bay Buccaneer football proved worse than anyone could have imagined. Despite a wise first-ever draft choice—eventual Pro Football Hall of Famer Lee Roy Selmon—the Buccaneers were forced to stock their rosters with young, unproven players or injured, washed-up veterans from the twenty-six other teams. In a decision that had as much to do with public relations as football, the Buccaneers traded a draft choice to the San Francisco 49ers to acquire former University of Florida quarterback Steve Spurrier. On the sidelines, the Buccaneers would be led by John McKay, a winner of four national championships as head coach at the University of Southern California. With McKay calling the shots and a former Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback taking the snaps, Buccaneers fans had every reason to expect at least a few wins. Then reality struck.

In a season in which the Buccaneers would be shut out five times, the team failed to score a single point in three of its first five contests, losing its first two games by a combined 43–0 mark. Although Tampa Bay racked up three field goals in its third

game—a heartbreaking 14–9 loss at home to Buffalo—it took four games before the team registered a touchdown, and even that came on a 44-yard fumble recovery in a 42–17 loss at Baltimore. With a 0–5 record heading into a grudge match at Tampa Stadium against their expansion brethren, the winless Seattle Seahawks, the Buccaneers had the perfect opportunity to win its first game. Instead, beset by penalties and in inept offensive attack, Tampa Bay fell to Seattle 13–10 in the most winnable game they would play all season. The following week at home, the Buccaneers lost to the Miami Dolphins, 23–20. The Dolphins, who won the Super Bowl in 1972 and 1973, nearly suffered the most ignominious loss in team history, a game that linebacker Nick Bouniconti called “a disgrace to everyone wearing a Dolphins uniform.”⁴

The season got progressively worse following the Miami game, as Tampa Bay would come no closer than within 10 points of winning a game the rest of the year. Overall, Tampa Bay gave up 40 points or more on four different occasions, and was outscored over the season by an unfathomable 287 points (412–125). Fans could take little consolation in the fact that three of the losses came by a combined 11 points, or that one additional score in any of those games would have provided a chance for a win. In fairness, the record should reflect that the Buccaneers suffered more injuries than any expansion franchise could possibly overcome. More than 70 percent of the players placed on injured reserve suffered knee injuries, ten of whom were starters or enjoyed significant playing time. Amidst the carnage, defensive end Pat Toomay said that the team’s sideline resembled a “Civil War infirmary.”⁵ Out of the twenty-six Buccaneers who missed at least one game because of an injury, a combined total of 183 man-games were missed over a fourteen-game season. Also, of the forty-two players who dressed for the final game, twenty were not on the squad when training camp started in July. Is it any wonder a team that cut seventy-two players between the first day of camp and the last game of the season finished with a 0–14 record?

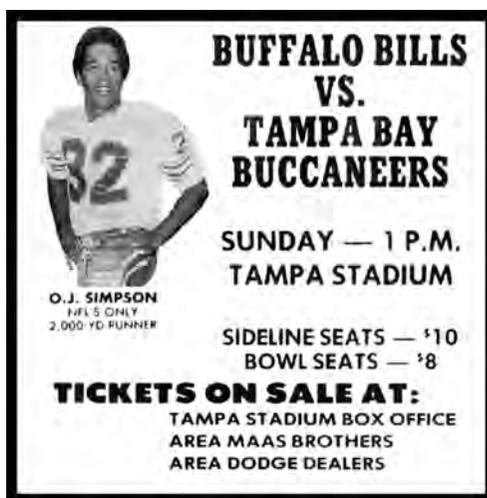


Image courtesy of the Tampa Tribune

It’s easy to forget now, but in 1976 O.J. Simpson was one of the NFL’s marquee stars. His one-and-only visit to Tampa Stadium as a player would be the second-highest attended game of the season behind only the Miami Dolphins.

⁴ “A Disgrace to All Dolphins,” *Tampa Tribune*, 25 October 1976, 4-C.

⁵ “A Debilitating Case of Bucs Fever,” December 2001, ESPN.com.

When not being “entertained” by the city’s new football team, Tampa played host to a steady stream of other celebrated events. A crowd of more than forty thousand packed Tampa Stadium in near 100-degree heat on the Fourth of July for a concert featuring the Eagles, Kenny Loggins and Jim Messina, and Fleetwood Mac. On September 2, Elvis Presley brought his “Bicentennial Tour” to the Tampa Bay area and made what turned out to be his final visit to Curtis Hixon Hall in front of a crowd of 7,398. Well past his heartthrob prime at this point, “The King” purportedly cut the show short due to the older, “less enthusiastic crowd.” International soccer legend Pele made his first appearance in Tampa Stadium before a nationally televised audience on CBS for a June 6 game between the Tampa Bay Rowdies and New York Cosmos. The crowd of 42,611 set the highest attendance mark for a regular-season soccer game in Tampa history. The Florida State Fair—long a source of entertainment and amusement for citizens of Tampa—finally celebrated the completion of its new home in November on land located just east of Tampa at the junction of Interstate 4 and Highway 301.⁶

While elephant rides might be associated with the State Fair, the words “white elephant” were associated with only one thing in 1976: the South Crosstown Expressway. Officially opened to motorists on February 21, the expressway took two years to build at a cost of \$54 million, including an additional \$21 million in “cost overruns.” Trumpeted as the most efficient means of traveling from Gandy Boulevard to downtown—“it’s clean, it’s safe and it’s fast,” said Hillsborough County Expressway Authority executive director John Dobbins—the expressway quickly became the target of criticism. The first stage of the expressway, from Gandy to Willow Avenue, opened in February, while the next phase—a 1.2-mile stretch from Willow to Morgan Street—did not open until April. Officials noted that unless an eastern extension were built, the 5.2-mile stretch from Gandy to downtown would not be able to pay for itself. In July, Expressway Authority member H. L. Culbreath criticized a proposal to offer free rides on the expressway as a means to increase traffic. In November, however, the commission approved a plan for four ride-for-free days per week to begin in January 1977. This desperate idea came as a result of the obvious: the road did not generate immediate revenue sufficient to pay off the debt incurred in its construction. The solution, which would ultimately come to fruition, depended on the extension of the expressway to Interstate 75, connecting downtown Tampa with eastern Hillsborough County and the growing community of Brandon.⁷

The South Crosstown Expressway generated as much controversy for what it

⁶ “40,000 Excited Fans See Rock Concert,” *Tampa Tribune*, 5 July 1976, 4-B; “Elvis the Pelvis Knocks ‘Em Dead,” *Tampa Tribune*, 3 September 1976, 1-B; “Pele Who!,” *Tampa Tribune*, 7 June 1976, 1-A; “State Fair’s New Home Nears Finish,” *Tampa Tribune*, 29 August 1976, 1-H.

⁷ “Fog, Few Cars Greet Opening of X-Way,” *Tampa Tribune*, 22 February 1976, 1-B; “X-Way’s Future a Concern As Last Leg Opens,” *Tampa Tribune*, 2 April 1976, 1-B; “Problem: Feeding a White Elephant,” *Tampa Tribune*, 26 July 1976, 4-A; “Free Days on X-Way Approved,” *Tampa Tribune*, 25 November 1976, 1-B.

did to Hyde Park and surrounding neighborhoods as it did for its financial troubles. The initial 5.2-mile stretch of the expressway required the destruction or relocation of hundreds of businesses and homes. The Hyde Park of 1976 bore little resemblance to the thriving neighborhood it is in the twenty-first century. Drug activity, seedy buildings, and rundown homes dominated the landscape. Still, construction of the toll road galvanized denizens of the neighborhood, who fought to preserve what remained. Jan Platt, who served on the Tampa City Council in 1976, believed a side effect of the expressway would be revitalization of Hyde Park through preserved schools, homes, and historical character. Now, thirty-five years later, property values in Hyde Park have skyrocketed, though the expressway is still criticized for not linking to the Gandy Bridge. In the words of J. Michael Shea, an original planner of the road, to many it remains “an expressway to nowhere.”⁸

An unintended consequence of the expressway’s construction was felt by residents of Davis Islands as well. Rats whose nests were disturbed by construction of the road sought refuge in the fashionable residential neighborhood. Their presence created such a stir that Hillsborough County commissioner Bob Bondi declared war on the rats of Davis Islands, calling for a federal grant that would ultimately provide funds for their extermination. Bondi deemed that a “blitz” on Davis Islands was the only way to deal with this emergency after State Representative Helen Gordon Davis appeared before the commission to complain about an infestation of rats on the islands. After a survey of fifty blocks of the islands, health department inspectors deemed that nearly 5 percent of the area had rat infestation. They also determined that the offending rodents were fruit rats, which run along power lines and live in palm trees. Civic-minded residents inundated Bondi’s office with suggestions on how to deal with the problem, including placing bounties on the rats or using federal dollars to buy cats for the island to control the rat population.⁹

Unlike the much-maligned South Crosstown Expressway, Tampa International Airport (TIA) continued to bask in praise as it marked five years since the opening of its \$81 million terminal in 1971. In a February *Esquire* magazine article that named TIA as “The Best Airport in America,” writer Calvin Trillin praised the airport for its outdoor shuttles, people-oriented design, and convenient parking garages. In November, the Civil Aeronautics Board awarded Tampa new nonstop routes to Denver, Tulsa, and Oklahoma City, bringing Continental airlines into the market and increasing the number of Braniff landings per day. Earlier in the year, National Airlines began offering direct service from Tampa to London, signaling the area’s growth and rising importance as a tourist and business destination.¹⁰

⁸ “Destruction Actually Improves Hyde Park,” *Tampa Tribune*, 1 April 2001, 17-A.

⁹ “War is Declared on Davis Islands Rats,” *Tampa Tribune*, 19 June 1976, 1-B; “Wanted Dead or Alive; Rodents on the Run,” *Tampa Tribune*, 1 July 1976, 1-B; “Critters Hide Out during Bondi’s Blitz,” *Tampa Tribune*, 1 July 1976, 1-B.

¹⁰ “Magazine Says Airport Is Best,” *Tampa Tribune*, 19 June 1976, 1-B; “Growth in the Air,” *Tampa Tribune*, 11 November 1976, 18-A.



Photograph courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center Collection

Completed in 1971, the new Landside/Airside terminal at Tampa International Airport earned immediate raves from travelers around the world. Along with professional sports, the modernization of TIA is credited with helping put Tampa “on the map.”

Another thriving transportation outlet—the Port of Tampa—saw “unprecedented” growth in 1975. Still, revitalization and expansion were two of the challenges facing the port in 1976. While the city sought more cruise ship activity for the port, the eight cruise ship departures from Tampa that year were considered a move in the right direction. Today, the port anticipates more than four hundred cruise ship departures alone during the upcoming fiscal year. One of the largest public works projects in Tampa’s history began in 1976 as well: the deepening of the harbor. At a cost of \$120 million, deepening the harbor from 34 to 43 feet allowed for super ocean liner traffic to enter Tampa’s port. Over \$2 million in tax-free bonds were made available to the Tampa Port Authority to go toward construction of a new cargo terminal that would serve as a passenger terminal and U.S. customs depot.¹¹

Just as the Port of Tampa continued to grow, the Tampa Bay area grew in size and population. Between 1970 and 1975, the Tampa Bay area had already surpassed its growth rate for the entire 1960s. In a November 1975 survey, *Sales Management* magazine ranked the Tampa–St. Petersburg area as the ninth-best growth market in the country. Major population shifts were seen in Town n’ Country, the neighborhoods surrounding the University of South Florida, and the bedroom community of Brandon. According to county planning statistics, the USF area experienced the

¹¹ “The Port Big and Busy,” *Tampa Tribune*, 10 February 1976, 3-F.

largest growth factor from 1970 to 1975. One study predicted that the Tampa–St. Petersburg area would soon eclipse Miami in residents, and by 1980, would be the hub of new business activity in central Florida stretching from Tampa to Daytona Beach. The I-4 corridor, or “Golden Girdle,” according to Phillip Moore of the First Research Consultants, was where the “action is and is going to be.”

Although Tampa had yet to develop into the city envisioned by Moore, the diversity of the city’s economy—a combination of shipping and transportation, distribution and manufacturing, data processing and financial services—enabled Tampa to avoid devastating effects from the national recession that occurred during the mid-1970s. Nevertheless, the Tampa–St. Petersburg metro area suffered the dubious distinction of being one of eight urban centers in the country to experience unemployment at 10 percent or more, with fifty-three thousand people out of work.

The construction industry in particular was at the root of the employment slump. In 1974, there were just over twenty thousand construction jobs in the Tampa Bay area. The residential construction business suffered locally, with a decrease in nearly eight thousand jobs by 1976. “This area consistently ranks among the highest in unemployment,” said Bob Byington, a labor analyst for the Florida State Employment Service in Tampa, “and we’ve held that position for some time.”¹²

The presence, however, of MacDill Air Force Base as a reliable contributor to Tampa’s economy cannot be underestimated. More than 6,000 uniformed soldiers and 1,200 civilians served at the U.S. Readiness Command Center in 1976. One notable civilian, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, visited MacDill on May 18 to attend a closed meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. During a press conference at the Tampa Chamber of Commerce, Rumsfeld warned that the United States could become a second-rate military power if Congress continued to cut the defense budget. He predicted that would not happen, however, as “the American people are not foolish, and they are not going to allow this country to cut corners on defense to the point where we have injected a fundamental instability into the world.”¹³

Like the rest of America in the 1970s, Tampa suffered because of instability in the Middle East and the consequences of the Arab oil embargo. In March 1976, Tampa endured the “worst gasoline price war” in the city’s history, according to Jim Miller, the former president of Florida’s Allied Gasoline Retailers Association. While it proved advantageous to consumers, with prices several cents below levels from the previous fall, dealers were forced into selling regular gasoline for 47.9 cents to 59.9 cents per gallon (\$1.83 and \$2.21 in today’s dollars). Miller blamed the price war on “an excess of gasoline” as well as voluntary conservation methods that reduced

¹² “Tampa’s an Economic Champ,” *Tampa Tribune*, 10 February 1976, 8-F; “Tampa–St. Pete Predicted Larger Than Miami,” *Tampa Tribune*, 3 February 1976, 1-B; “Tampa’s Industry: Many, Varied,” *Tampa Tribune*, 10 February 1976, 2-F.

¹³ “Tampa Area Unemployment Still above 10 Percent,” *Tampa Tribune*, 14 December 1976, 1-B; “Rumsfeld: People Don’t Want Defense Cuts,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 19 May 1976, 10-A.

the demand for gasoline in Florida. The popularity of self-service stations in favor of more expensive full-service stations, as well as independent gas stations being pitted against franchised dealers, also led to the war. This ultimately led to a protest in front of the Highway Oil Co. at Cypress Street and Lois Avenue on March 18. Feeling undercut by the independent proprietor of Highway Oil, who sold his gas several cents lower per gallon than the franchises, eight competing dealers used their trucks to block the station's pumps. The protest lasted only a few hours and amounted to nothing more than great publicity for Highway Oil.¹⁴

Even if jobs and money were scarce commodities during 1976, two new indoor shopping malls opened in Tampa with the hope that those with jobs were willing to spend their money. The East Lake Square Mall, in East Tampa, and the Tampa Bay Center, across from Tampa Stadium, opened on consecutive days in early August. The shopping malls boasted a combined 2 million square feet, five department stores, and more than two hundred specialty stores. Despite the optimism and excitement that accompanied the opening of both shopping centers, neither would last longer than twenty-five years, as both were eventually driven out of business by a proliferation of suburban malls and a change in consumer shopping habits.¹⁵

With two new major retail centers, shoppers had more options to choose from and, fortunately, fewer reasons to fear for their safety while out on the town. A report issued in April showed that crime in Tampa between January and February dropped 13 percent compared to the same two-month span in 1975. The greatest decreases were reported in rape, auto theft, and burglary, although the citizen band (CB) radio fad accounted for an increase in auto burglaries. Statistics released by the Tampa Police Department touted a decrease in murders from January to March as compared to the same three months in 1975. Despite the promising numbers early in the year, two major criminal events shocked Tampa in 1976.¹⁶

The single-largest cocaine bust in U.S. Customs history happened at the banana docks in Tampa on June 17. Officials seized \$39 million worth of the drug—more than 166 pounds stuffed into seven garbage bags—as it was being taken off a Liberian freighter called the *M.S. Ea*. The ship's track record for smuggling drugs caused customs agents to keep a two-day watch over the vessel. The drugs, possibly intended for delivery to New York, were described by customs officials as being "of very pure quality—perhaps more than 90 per cent pure." In July, customs agents confiscated 13.9 pounds of cocaine from *Ea's* sister-ship, the *Sirara*. The two ships were virtually identical and, according to Edward M. Ellis, director of Customs in Tampa, were put under surveillance as known carriers of contraband.¹⁷

¹⁴ "Gas Dealers Report Price War in Tampa," *Tampa Tribune*, 11 March 1976, 1-A; "Gasoline Protest," *Tampa Tribune*, 19 March 1976, 1-B.

¹⁵ "Two New Tampa Malls Opening," *Tampa Tribune*, 1 August 1976, 1-E.

¹⁶ "City Crime Rate Down 13 Per Cent," *Tampa Tribune*, 19 March 1976, 1-B; "Tampa Police Report Decline in Murder Rate," *Tampa Tribune*, 16 April 1976, 2-B.

¹⁷ "Huge Cocaine Haul Made," *Tampa Tribune*, 18 June 1976, 1-A; "Agents Seize Cocaine on Banana Boat," *Tampa Tribune*, 17 July 1976, 1-B.

While the cocaine busts provided positive publicity, one of the largest mass jailbreaks in Florida's history embarrassed Tampa in early April. Using homemade tools, thirty-three inmates escaped from the Hillsborough County stockade on Spruce Street (between Lois Avenue and Dale Mabry Highway) by prying open a door and climbing over barbed wire fences. Within two days of the break, twenty-five of the inmates had been recaptured. In February, the stockade earned the poorest overall rating of the county's three prisons. Originally designed to be a drunk tank, the stockade suffered from the effects of overcrowding. The east wing housed the county's entire female prisoner population, a situation described as a serious security hazard. The sheriff of Hillsborough County, Malcolm Beard, admitted that the stockade was "not the Waldorf-Astoria" but disputed the women's claims of poor treatment and substandard living conditions. A letter sent to the *Tampa Tribune* from the "girls of the county stockade" disputed Beard's position and highlighted the lack of sympathy from matrons, bugs in the food, and denial of proper medical care. "We are not expected to live in a mansion, but a pig pen, and that's what this place is," the letter said.¹⁸

Quite the opposite of a pig pen, the University of South Florida celebrated its twentieth anniversary in January. The university in many ways mirrored the city of Tampa and endured its own share of growing pains in 1976. This had nothing to do with the announced intention of four-year-old Ian Locklear, a student in a USF enrichment program for exceptional children, to run for president of the student government. Rather, Cecil M. Mackey, USF's second president, resigned his post on July 16 to take the presidency of Texas Tech University after just over five years on the job. Under Mackey's tenure, the university expanded with a school of medicine, a school of nursing, and regional campuses in Sarasota, Ft. Myers, and St. Petersburg. Many felt Mackey left USF because at Texas Tech he could focus on the educational, rather than administrative, side of running a university. Mackey allegedly complained about having to attend to budget details after the fiscal year had already begun. The Florida Board of Regents acted quickly to replace Mackey, appointing Tampa lawyer William Reece Smith Jr. as interim president on August 20. When Mackey left Tampa for Lubbock, he was honored by the Regents with a plaque and a resolution from chairman Marshall Criser saying that "there has never been a finer man associated with the Florida university system."¹⁹

Several months after Mackey's departure, the Board of Regents authorized a \$7 million, 10,000-seat "special events center" to be built on campus. In addition, the Regents applied for \$2.1 million in federal money to build a fine arts center and

¹⁸ "Stockade Rating Poorest of Three in Hillsborough," *Tampa Tribune*, 15 April 1976, 1-B; "Grand Jury to Probe Stockade Escape," *Tampa Tribune*, 17 April 1976, 1-B.

¹⁹ "Candidate Locklear Thinks He'll Be a Great President," *Tampa Tribune*, 6 December 1976, 1-B; "USF's Cecil Mackey Goes to Texas Tech," *Tampa Tribune*, 17 July 1976, 1-A; "USF Interruption Is Regrettable," *Tampa Tribune*, 20 July 1976, 6-A; "Tampa Lawyer to Head USF," *Tampa Tribune*, 21 August 1976, 1-A.

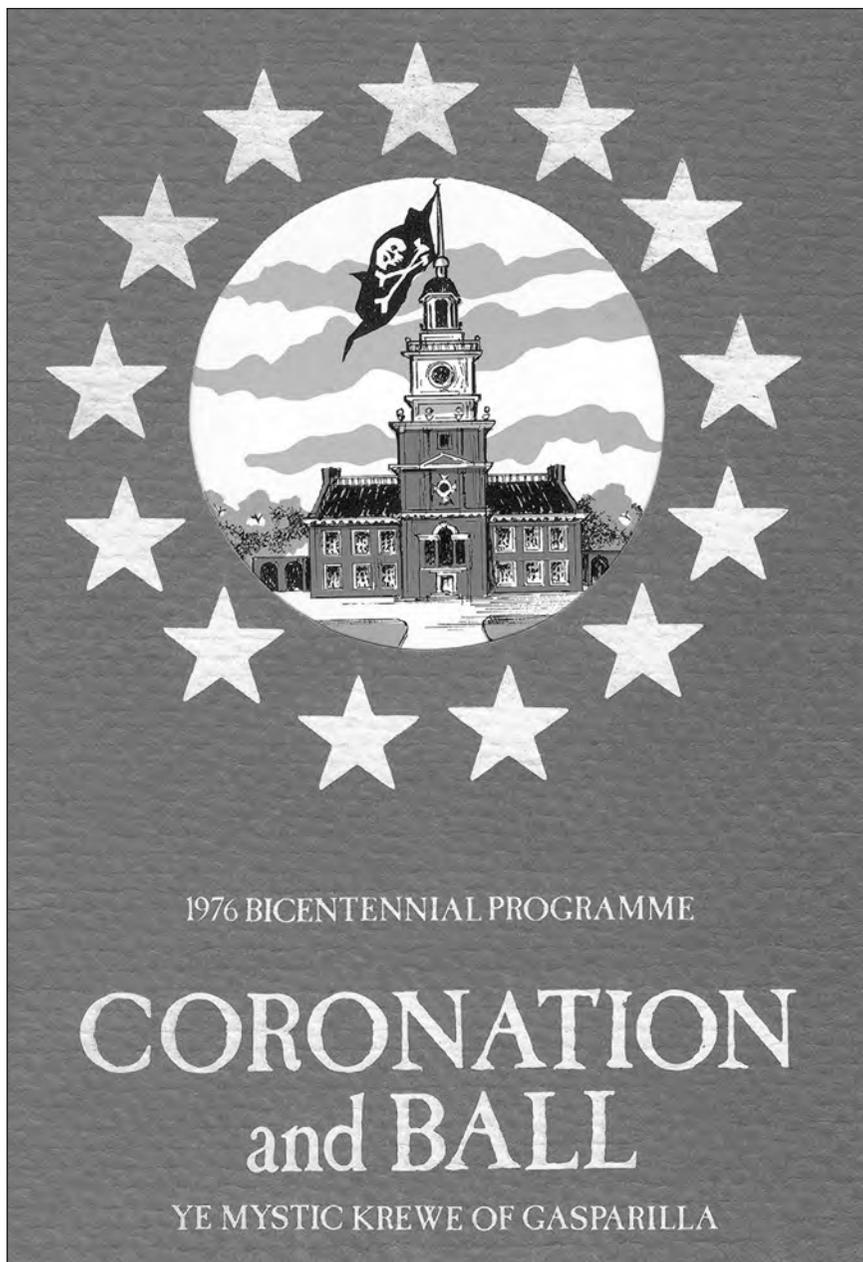


Image courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center Collection

Like many civic events throughout 1976, Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla chose to incorporate the celebration of the nation's bicentennial anniversary into their festivities.

rehearsal hall. This came after months of speculation that USF and the City of Tampa would work together to build a concert hall downtown. Tampa mayor William F. Poe lobbied hard most of the year for USF to consider building its arts center downtown as a replacement for Curtis Hixon Hall. An agreement had been reached on June 24 between USF and the city in which both parties would split costs of construction. Excitement prevailed with thoughts of a revitalized downtown: a new concert hall, museums, a convention center, a renovated Tampa Theatre, and an expanded public library. These hopes were dashed, however, when USF decided to build on campus, leaving a cultural void in downtown for many years to come.²⁰

Just across the river from downtown, the Tampa Bay Hotel, although long since converted into the University of Tampa, finally earned recognition as a national historic landmark in September. It turned out to be a difficult year for other Tampa landmarks, however. The Chapin-Logan House, built on south Bayshore Boulevard during the 1890s, burned down on July 10. The two-story wooden-framed house had been unoccupied for six years but was slated for full restoration. The ninety-year-old Almeria Hotel, once a proud and stately downtown fixture on North Franklin Street, fell victim to progress in April to make room for the much-anticipated “Quad Block” development bordering Tampa Street, Kennedy Boulevard, Franklin Street, and Jackson Street. The historic building, once owned by Tampa pioneer Dr. Howell Tyson Lykes, held no special significance for Mayor Poe, who noted that the land would be readily available for additional city parking. Also that month, the landmark Sulphur Springs Arcade faced posterity’s greatest enemy: the wrecking ball. The arcade, a fixture in north Tampa since the 1920s, had once served as a shopping and entertainment destination. The Nebraska Avenue site had also served as a terminus for the streetcar line, which by the mid-1970s had long since become a footnote in Tampa history. The demolition of the arcade paved the way for additional parking for the Tampa Greyhound Track.²¹

One local landmark that managed to endure, the Tampa Theatre, could have suffered a fate similar to the Sulphur Springs Arcade. In April, at the behest of Mayor Poe, the Tampa City Council agreed to accept the Tampa Theatre as a gift from the Smyrna Halifax Theater Corp., despite a fierce debate over the cost to the city. As early as January, the city council began hearing arguments over what to do with the fifty-year-old theater. Charles Miller, an MIT planner under contract with the city, said that a restored theater would “start a turnaround” in Tampa’s declining downtown. In taking over the theater, the city would assume a \$28,000 annual lease, maintenance costs of \$70,000, and repairs ranging from \$300,000 to \$500,000. Members of the

²⁰ “Regents Clear Way for Events Center,” *Tampa Tribune*, 2 November 1976, 1-B; “Cooperation Will Make Sweet Music,” *Tampa Tribune*, 25 June 1976, 18-A.

²¹ “Sulphur Springs Arcade Comes Tumblin’ Down,” *Tampa Tribune*, 6 April 1976, 2-B; “Chapin-Logan House Destroyed by Fire,” *Tampa Tribune*, 11 July 1976, 1-B; “Tampa Landmark Surrenders to Progress—and Dozer,” *Tampa Tribune*, 6 June 1976, 1-B; “Old Hotel Designated Landmark,” *Tampa Tribune*, 27 September 1976, 2-B.

city council opposed the project for different reasons: Jan Platt opposed the project based on cost to the city; Sandy Freedman doubted that many people would travel downtown after dark for theater events because of safety issues; Lloyd Copeland did not think that \$70,000 could adequately cover maintenance as outlined in the budget; In addition, he ridiculed the notion that downtown would improve with a renovated Tampa Theatre, calling that “purely daydreaming.”

By the time of the council’s vote in April, Platt and Freedman still objected, but for new reasons. They did not want to use money designated for the Art Council’s proposed new facility planned near Curtis Hixon Hall. Mayor Poe, on the other hand, wanted \$150,000 allocated from the \$4 million set aside for the Arts Council, to be replaced in the following year’s budget if available. Ultimately, it was the Arts Council that would come to operate the theater. The budget for the project, however, limited the council’s actions. Renovation subcommittee chairman Joan Jennewein pointed to 1,500 newly upholstered seats and the cleaning of the structure and artifacts as the only immediate improvements as the theater prepared for reopening in January 1977.²²

North of the Tampa Theatre in the Skid Row section of Franklin Street, the Saratoga Bar faced demolition in March to make way for a new office complex. The land would be developed into a state regional office center, which reports estimated would employ two thousand people by the year 2000. Situated near the interstate, it would serve as another “Quad Block” development to anchor the north end of Franklin Street. The destruction of the Saratoga, along with other buildings throughout downtown, was part of Mayor Poe’s ongoing effort to revitalize downtown Tampa. Poe made the revival of the city’s economy one of the primary goals of his administration. Several projects were aimed at improving the standard of living in Tampa, though they would be a year behind schedule. Tampanans could look hopefully to 1977 for completion of the city’s \$85 million sewage treatment plant, as well as a large-scale water system expansion project.²³ In downtown Tampa alone, \$150 million worth of city-related construction aimed at turning around the moribund section of town. By December, plans were already under way for the “Quad Block” redevelopment—which would feature modern office buildings, a hotel, and a retail center—on land south of Kennedy Boulevard between Tampa Street, Whiting Street, and Florida Avenue. New buildings would replace old, dilapidated structures. The already outdated Curtis Hixon Hall no longer suited purposes beyond conventions and banquets. The city desperately wanted a new performing arts center to host concerts and other events unsuitable for Curtis Hixon. In short, Poe wanted to make

²² “Council to Decide on City Takeover of Tampa Theatre,” *Tampa Tribune*, 6 January 1976, 3-B; “City Council Turns Down Ticket to Old Tampa Theatre,” *Tampa Tribune*, 7 January 1976, 2-B; “Tampa to Restore Theatre,” *Tampa Tribune*, 30 April 1976, 1-B; “City Gives Face-Lift to Theatre,” *Tampa Tribune*, 19 September 1976, 1-B.

²³ “Poe Lists Efforts on Economy,” *Tampa Tribune*, 23 April 1976, 1-B; “Sewage Plant Construction is Delayed,” *Tampa Tribune*, 8 January 1976, 2-B.



Image courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center Collection

Although bumper stickers touting the Bicentennial Riverwalk could be seen on cars all over town, the Riverwalk remains a work-in-progress 35 years later.

downtown Tampa a better place for businesses while upgrading its cultural offering as well.²⁴

The city's ill-fated dance with USF in trying to plan a cultural arts center for downtown seemed to complicate matters for the mayor. Originally, Poe wanted to convert Curtis Hixon Hall into a cultural center. A feasibility study by Charles Miller explored the possibility of converting Curtis Hixon's facilities into a multipurpose building for \$4 million, which would house a music hall, dance theater, visual arts center, and children's museum. Eliminating the convention facilities, however, would have caused serious damage to the downtown economy, affecting primarily hotels and restaurants, to the tune of \$1 million annually. Poe ultimately favored keeping Hixon as a convention-entertainment entity, despite its operating at an annual deficit of \$437,000. Given the quality of the hall, it's easy to see why the city sought new ways to make it profitable.

Curtis Hixon Hall was designed to be a convention center, but unfortunately, it also served as a center for performing arts. The lack of a traditional arts center in Tampa made Curtis Hixon the default site for such events, despite having its acoustical quality compared to "a cement barn." Because of high overhead and maintenance costs, the hall lost money every day it hosted an event. While conventions brought money into Tampa and breathed life into downtown, the city could not actually make any money from conventions held at Curtis Hixon. As for cultural events not held at the hall, the aged McKay Auditorium on the University of Tampa campus or Fort Homer Hesterly Auditorium in West Tampa were the only alternative sites in the city. Is it any wonder the city tried so desperately to work with USF in building its performance hall downtown instead of on its own campus?²⁵

The Riverwalk proposal was another idea conceived to revitalize downtown. Proposed by the Greater Tampa Bicentennial Council, Riverwalk would have

²⁴ "Few Tears Shed as Skid Row Remnants Fall," *Tampa Tribune*, 26 March 1976, 1-B; "Report on 'Quad Block'," *Tampa Tribune*, 29 December 1976, 1-A.

²⁵ "Hixon Hall Eyed for Arts Center," *Tampa Tribune*, 31 January 1976, 1-B; "Hixon Hall Isn't Arts Center Answer," *Tampa Tribune*, 10 February 1976, 16-A; "Mayor Favors Curtis Hixon for Meetings," *Tampa Tribune*, 25 February 1976, 1-B; "Designed for Conventions, Hall Serves 2nd Role," *Tampa Tribune*, 13 August 1976, 1-B.

connected both the east and west banks of the Hillsborough River, as well as serving as Tampa's lasting memorial to the Bicentennial of 1976. Costs were estimated at anywhere from \$500,000 to \$900,000. Riverwalk was intended to link "new and proposed activity centers" in a pedestrian-friendly manner while at the same time giving people a sense of involvement in the project by encouraging them to purchase wooden planks for twenty-five dollars apiece. Advertisements of the day suggested that people "get aboard . . . buy a plank." Tampa Bay Buccaneers' defensive back Ricky Davis got on board and purchased a plank, noting that he hoped his contribution would "cover part of my 'civic rent' to a fine community."²⁶

The city of Tampa ended 1976 pointed in the right direction. Clearly, community leaders had identified aspects of city life that needed to be improved. Efforts to revitalize downtown had both begun and continued in 1976. By the early 1980s, downtown Tampa would begin to see benefits from the planning that occurred in the mid-1970s. Residents of Tampa can point to 1976, for instance, as one of the turning points in the survival of the Tampa Theatre. Progress continues to be made on the downtown Riverwalk project, now entering its fifth decade of planning and construction. Today, museums on the former site of the Curtis Hixon Hall—in the aptly named Curtis Hixon Park—bring visitors into downtown on a daily basis. A boom in restaurants and high-rise residential towers has once again made downtown an after-dark destination, something the denizens of Tampa thirty-five years ago, and maybe even De Rhetta Greene, would have called progress.

²⁶ "River Walk Proposed as Project," *Tampa Tribune*, 7 January 1976, 1-B; "A People's Project: The River Walk," *Tampa Tribune*, 12 January 1976, 12-A; "To Get Aboard," *Tampa Tribune*, 9 August 1976, 6-A; "Proper Spirit in 'Civic Rent,'" *Tampa Tribune*, 26 August 1976, 16-A.