

Plant-Sumner House: A Brief Introduction

History of Site before House was Built

- Located near Henry B. Plant's Belleview Hotel (now the Belleview Biltmore).

Construction Information

- Probably built in 1896 with modern amenities for its time (running water, indoor plumbing, electricity). Exact pedigree of the structure still uncertain.
- Similar in construction to the Plumb House, another "Plant" House bought and moved by the Plumb family.
- Modern kitchen and side porches added to the structure by 1930s.

History of Occupants

- By many accounts, the home originally served as a home for the railroad supervisor responsible for trains coming from the Clearwater city depot to the Belleview Hotel.
- Robert Sumner, a minister who came to the area from Maitland, moved into the home with his family in 1912. Sumner served as the postmaster, a dairy farmer, and a minister in the area.
- A member of the Whitehurst family lived in the house from the mid-1950s until the early 1970s.

Significant Events/Activities

- While living in the house, the Sumners kept several cows on their property and sold some of the milk to neighbors. The 1910 census notes that Sumner had owned a dairy farm while living in Maitland.
- By 1920, Sumner served as Belleair's postmaster.

Moving of the House to Heritage Village

- By the early 1970s, the house had suffered from extensive termite damage.
- Fearing that the house's condition might lead to its demolition, the Clearwater Junior League began searching for a suitable location to move the house (within Clearwater city limits). George Mallory donated the structure.
- This house became the first structure brought to Heritage Village.
- Vandalism at the park during its early days (late 1976), led to the erection of the fence around the park's perimeter. There was concern about damage to Plant-Sumner and Seven Gables, the only two structures on the site at that time.
- The house had deteriorated to the point that it required both reconstruction and restoration. Many parts of the house were "built" in the mid-1970s to replace areas where termite damage and other deterioration had required demolition.
- In February 1977, volunteers from the Junior League of Clearwater painted the house. Work on restoring and rebuilding Plant-Sumner was almost finished by the fall of 1977.

Plant-Summer House

Overview

At the time of Henry Bradley Plant's death in 1899, the Plant railroad system controlled 2,100 miles of railroad and possessed large holdings of steamship lines and hotels. The Plant-Summer House, constructed in the late 1800s, symbolized Plant's contributions to central Pinellas, and especially his efforts to expand and develop the City of Clearwater and the Town of Belleair. Located near the site of Plant's Belleview Hotel—now the Belleview Biltmore—the Plant-Summer House and other dwellings provided homes for the construction project supervisors and their families. By the late 1890s, the eastern portion of the property sat alongside a railroad line that included a spur connected to the Belleview property. This house served as the residence for the supervisor of the railroad that ran from the Clearwater depot to the Biltmore Hotel project.

The house possessed very modern facilities for 1896, such as electricity, running water, and indoor plumbing. One may speculate that Plant built these houses with such modern conveniences so he could entice tradesmen to move their families into the area while they worked at the Belleview Hotel. With seven spacious rooms for a growing family, the house also included picture and plate rails, a built-in china cabinet, four fireplaces, a wood cook stove, and icebox, all desirable amenities at the height of the Victorian era. However, in the early twentieth century, these Plant homes became “eyesores” to those managing the exclusive hotel. Belleview officials sold some of the dwellings at low prices with the understanding that the new owners would move the houses away from the Belleview Hotel.

Robert Sumner purchased the Plant-Summer House in 1912. The previous owners, Newman and Brown, probably had some connection with the Plant Investment Company. The Sumners raised their children in the home and kept cows on their property. In the Belleair community, Sumner held a variety of positions: the Belmont Methodist minister, Belleair postmaster, dairy farmer, and occasional veterinarian. In 1934, workers modernized the kitchen and installed a gabled roof and side porches. By

1950, the family added a second bathroom on the west side of the house. For over forty years, the Sumners occupied the “A” street residence.

By the mid-1950s, C. C. Whitehurst moved into the Plant-Sumner House. Native of a pioneer family, Whitehurst lived at the home for approximately eighteen years. During part of that time, he worked at the nearby Kilgore Groves and West Coast Fruit Company. He retired from the citrus industry by the mid-1960s, a time when residential subdivisions started to appear on many of the former citrus groves, and other industrial and commercial facilities replaced many of the old packing houses. As Whitehurst prepared to move to a new home in 1973, members of the Junior League of Clearwater and the Seminole chapter of the Questers learned about the home’s history after meeting with Ralph Reed, then Curator of the county’s historical museum.

The Questers and League members soon discovered that Plant-Sumner’s new owner planned to burn down or demolish the structure. Massive termite damage had destroyed significant portions of the home. Intense lobbying by these women to members of the Pinellas County Historical Commission and the Board of County Commissioners saved Plant-Sumner from the pyre or trash pile. Rather than demolition, the house faced a massive renovation and a much anticipated relocation to the site of the county’s open-air museum along Walsingham Road. Indeed, in 1976 Plant-Sumner became the first house transported to Heritage Village. The Junior League of Clearwater paid \$50,000 for reconstruction costs, and the local chapter of the Questers furnished the dining room and the nursery. Not only did the efforts of Junior League members save this house; their advocacy encouraged the creation of Heritage Village and brought substantial historic preservation grants to Pinellas County during America’s bicentennial.

The Railroad Opens the Belleair Region for Development

Before the arrival of the Orange Belt Railway in 1888, most settlements along the west central Pinellas Peninsula sat along or very close to the water. Settlers at early outposts such as Dunedin, Clear Water Harbor, Anona, Indian Rocks Beach, Bay Pines, and Johns Pass conducted much of their commerce and travel along the intracoastal waterways and the Gulf of Mexico. Supplies often arrived by boat from Cedar Keys or Key West. Due to the primitive network of paths and roadways, even shipments from

Tampa often came either by schooner around the Pinellas Peninsula, or by boat to Bay View. Homesteaders of interior parcels—pioneers such as Daniel McMullen, Andrew M. O’Quinn, John J. McMullen, Samuel H. Kilgore, and Albert N. Duncan, to name a few—often used part of their land to cultivate citrus, grow crops, or herd livestock.

In 1870, Captain Charles Wharton Johnson regularly sailed his ship, *The Evening Star*, along the Gulf coast between Cedar Keys and Fort Myers to deliver mail, supplies, and occasional travelers. According to a published history of Largo, he encountered bad weather while traveling near Clear Water Harbor during one of his trips. Some residents along the bluff witnessed Captain Johnson in distress, and brought him and his son, Levin William Johnson, to shore. Other narratives claim that Johnson happened upon the ridge where the Belleview Biltmore Hotel currently sits and explored the area. However he arrived, he soon applied for a homestead on the land now occupied by the hotel and brought his family from Cedar Keys. He built a small home on his parcel in Belleair by 1872. After awhile, he purchased other lands around the intersection of Bay Drive and Seminole/Missouri where he built a three-story dwelling near the present-day Largo Library and Largo Cultural Center. This impressive residence included five fireplaces, a cistern that provided running water, mahogany paneling and banisters crafted from wood Johnson had obtained in Honduras, and a flush toilet on the second floor by 1908, certainly a rarity in this region at that time.¹

The Kilgore family also homesteaded in the area in the mid-1800s. James Summers Kilgore acquired a 100-acre homestead near Anona and became one of the earliest pastors at Anona Methodist Church. His son, Samuel Henry Kilgore, homesteaded on 160 acres of land west of present-day downtown Largo (generally south of West Bay Drive and Indian Rocks Road). An 1845 native of South Carolina, Samuel Henry Kilgore came to Florida with his family in 1852. He fought in the Ninth Florida Regiment during the Civil War, and ended his military service when Robert E. Lee surrendered Confederate forces at Appomattox. According to a published history of Largo, Samuel married Elpenice “Mittie” Hart, the sister of Clear Water Harbor’s fourth mayor, Will Hart, and the niece of Reconstruction-era Governor Ossian Bingley Hart.

Born in March 1850 on her father's homestead, Mittie told others during her life that she believed she was the first white female child born and raised on the Pinellas Peninsula. Samuel had four sons from an earlier marriage or marriages: James E., Henry Alvin, Jessie Barnard, and Reginald. These men became expert cultivators of citrus who built close ties with other pioneer families. For example, Henry Kilgore tied the knot with Mary Belcher, while his brother, Jessie Barnard Kilgore, exchanged vows with Gussie Belcher. Rev. James Summers Kilgore officiated unions between members of the Hart, McMullen, Meares, Summerlin, and Whitehurst families, to name a few. Even as late as the 1930s, many pioneer families went to a site in Anona known as the "Kilgore oyster camp" for picnics and church gatherings. Kathleen Plumb, then a Sunday school teacher at Clearwater's First Methodist Church, brought her pupils to that site for a "steak fry party" in December 1933. Later generations of the Kilgore family became important growers in and around Largo, a community commonly known as "Citrus City."²

The construction of the Orange Belt and an eventual change in the line's ownership accelerated development in the areas of Belleair, Largo, and southern Clearwater. In the early 1880s, Hamilton Disston had purchased substantial acreage throughout Western Hillsborough. Soon, Disston brought in associates and agents to parcel, sell, and develop his holdings from Tarpon Springs to Disston City (now Gulfport). Meanwhile, Henry Bradley Plant had acquired a charter to bring a railroad line to Tampa. A native of Connecticut, Plant first came to Florida in the spring of 1853. After the Civil War, he expanded his interests in the shipping and transportation businesses. Plant's trains pulled into Tampa Town by early 1884, and over the next decade he expanded his network to include steamships and an extension of the railroad lines to Port Tampa, along the Interbay Peninsula. He soon began to design an opulent resort—the Tampa Bay Hotel—along the western banks of the Hillsborough River. This structure, presently the campus of the University of Tampa, dominated the skyline of the growing community by the early 1890s. Also, the recent arrival of cigar workers to Ybor

¹ *Largo, Florida, Then Til . . .* (Largo: Largo Bicentennial Committee, 1979), 15; Prudy Taylor Board and Esther B. Colcord, *The Belleview Mido Resort Hotel: A Century of Hospitality* (Virginia Beach: Donning, 1996), 14.

² "Soldier's Pension Claim: Samuel H. Kilgore," Florida Confederate Pension Application Files, Record Group 137, Series 587, State Archives of Florida, Tallahassee [Available electronically at:

City and West Tampa fueled Hillsborough County's land boom at a time when much of the Pinellas Peninsula remained "off the beaten path." Disston hoped to secure a railroad along Pinellas to serve as a catalyst for his interests, but animosity between him and Plant forced him to look for another locomotive company. By late 1886, Disston decided to visit Peter Demens, a Russian immigrant who had recently taken control of the Orange Belt Investment Company's line from Sanford to Oakland, near Lake Apopka. Throughout 1887 and early 1888, workers extended the Orange Belt from Lake Apopka to southern Pinellas, though not to Disston City. A disagreement between Disston and Demens led to a new agreement between the Orange Belt Investment Company and "General" John Constantine Williams that brought the iron horse to the future site of Demen's Landing.³

The railroad's arrival in St. Petersburg promoted settlement and commerce, as well as a regional rift. Demens and his partners had borrowed funds from a Philadelphia syndicate. In 1889, Demens could not make interest payments on the loan. Soon, the Russian sold his interest in the project and left Florida. The narrow gauge line, though poorly constructed, brought settlers to the communities along the Pinellas Peninsula's backbone. By the 1890s, Tarpon eclipsed Anclote, Largo absorbed Anona, and St. Petersburg overshadowed Disston City. Although the arrival of the railroad promoted urbanization, regularly scheduled train service also fostered agricultural pursuits as large landowners expanded their groves, cultivated bountiful and diverse crop yields, and continued to raise livestock. Plant certainly viewed the development of hotels and resorts on the nearby Pinellas Peninsula as unwelcome competition; his quarrels with Disston and early demands for the secession of Pinellas from Hillsborough by some settlers also bothered him. The notable growth of St. Petersburg by the early 1890s concerned Plant, who by that time considered lower Pinellas and its growing legion of boosters a detriment to his commercial ventures. Always hoping to expand his operations, Plant often dispatched his agents to search for sites for future resorts and hotels. His overtures to civic leaders in St. Petersburg to construct a signature hotel fell on deaf ears as property owners refused to accept Plant's offer on his terms. During a visit along the bluff in

<http://fmp.dlis.state.fl.us/fpr/A02690/011.pdf>]; *Largo, Then Til*, 10-11; *St. Petersburg Times*, 29 December 1933.

Belleair, Plant decided to purchase some of the Captain Charles Johnson's real estate. His acquisition of this property and the former Orange Belt Railway expanded his empire and sent a strong message to St. Petersburg's business community.⁴

Henry Plant, the Belleview, and Houses in Belleair

Henry Plant hired workers to improve the railroad and commissioned architects to design a new hotel and subdivision. Laborers converted the narrow gauge rails of the Orange Belt into a standard gauge line. A new depot soon opened on Cleveland Street in Clearwater. The former Orange Belt soon became part of a larger railroad network in the Plant System that connected shorter roads in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina under a standard gauge. Meanwhile, Plant commissioned J. W. Newman to conduct a survey of the region and design plans for a community he named "Belleair" by 1896. Plant also hired Tampa architects Francis J. Kennard and Michael J. Miller to draw up plans for his hotel. By the summer of 1895, over three hundred workers came to the area to clear the land and begin construction of the hotel. Some also built homes near the rail lines and in Belleair for early guests and project managers.⁵ The Plant-Sumner House may have had its beginnings as one of these structures.

The Plant-Sumner House's exact age and original design remain a mystery. Early clippings describing the opening of Heritage Village included statements that placed the date of construction as early as 1875. They also inferred that the original structure may have resembled a smaller cottage or "cabin" rather than a two-story edifice. Though purely conjecture, workers may have moved this smaller home to its location on "A" Street in Clearwater and expanded it during the mid-1890s. A brochure published the Junior League of Clearwater to commemorate the reconstruction of the house at Heritage Village places its year of origin at 1886, with Plant acquiring the home as part of his Belleair development a decade later. Later research by Cathy MacKinnon places the probable period of construction as the spring of 1896, after Plant had acquired the property and the Orange Belt Railway. In redesigning the rail lines, Plant's crew planned to make the area northeast of the home and west of the former Kilgore family citrus-

³ Board and Colcord, *Belleview Mido Resort*, 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*

packing facility a switching area between track lines. Under this assumption, Plant's interests built the Plant-Sumner House and other nearby dwellings as residences for those erecting the Belleview Hotel or supervising railroad operations. MacKinnon's conversations with those familiar with the house pointed out that the installation of wires and plumbing probably took place at the time of construction, leading one to assume that construction did occur in the mid-1890s, not earlier. While additional research of early property records may establish a better understanding of the house's early occupants and date of construction, one can assume that the house resembled its present form by 1896 or 1897, the period when workers built the hotel and other homes in the new Belleair subdivision.⁶

The Belleview's opening on 15 January 1897 attracted much attention in the region. The original hotel possessed 145 rooms, large verandas, electric lights, telephones, and telegraph and newsstand facilities that allowed guests to keep in touch with events back home. Nearby structures benefited from their close proximity to this hotel: Although Clearwater did not have a municipal water works at the time, the Plant-Sumner House possessed plumbing and received running water from the Belleview's system by the late 1890s. Some of the water came from a deep well pump and Lake Belleview located on the eastern side of the railway tracks at the end of "D" Street. From there, water passed through ten- and twelve-inch pipes, first to a large water tower (with a capacity of 85,000 gallons) at the eastern end of "D" Street, then by underground pipe to the Belleview. Whatever direct ties Henry B. Plant had with this home came to an end on 23 June 1899, when he passed away at his Fifth Avenue residence in New York. Henry's son, Morton Plant, took over his father's investment operations. Over time, however, Morton sold or transferred some of the holdings. If the Plant-Sumner House belonged to the Plant Investment Company outright in 1899, Morton had sold or relinquished claim on the "A" Street property by 1912. Morton F. Plant, a name associated with Clearwater's early development, also provided an endowment of \$100,000 to establish an

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *St. Petersburg Times*, 8 March 1976; *Clearwater Sun*, 1 April 1976; "Remembering When . . .," included in Minutes of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo, 11 March 1976; Cathy MacKinnon, "The Story of the Plant-Sumner House," undated manuscript located in Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; Cathie MacKinnon, "Henry Plant House: Facts Gathered Up

early hospital for the growing city. The present-day Morton Plant Hospital originally opened in the mid-1910s; it often appeared on early city maps as the “Plant Endowed Hospital.” The younger Plant remained an important civic leader until his death in 1918. A year later, John McEntee Bowman acquired the hotel as part of his Biltmore chain and renamed the structure the Belleview Biltmore. By 1924, workers completed an expansion of the structure to 425 rooms.⁷

The Sumner Family Arrives in Clearwater

The Sumners acquired the house on “A” Street in 1912, the year Pinellas celebrated its independence from Hillsborough County. Earlier occupants remain unknown, though research by MacKinnon notes that Sumner acquired the property from two owners named Newman and Brown. Additional examination of pre-1912 deed records in Hillsborough County may reveal a connection between that Newman and J. W. Newman, the original surveyor of the Belleair community. If a connection exists, Newman may have received the house (and other associated properties) from a trust conferred by the Plant estate, or Newman may have merely acted as an agent assigned with the task of selling former Plant properties. In the latter case, records may still point towards the Plant Investment Company as primary owner of the property. In any case, Robert and Louise Sumner brought their family to the area from Maitland, a farming community near Orlando. The Sumners moved into the house in 1912.⁸

Robert L. Sumner came from a large family. His parents, Robert and Martha J. Sumner, hailed from Georgia and entered the world in the late 1820s. According to census records, the couple had at least ten children, with five of them born before the Civil War: John R. (born circa 1851), Jesse K. (born circa 1853), James A. (born circa 1855), Joseph D. (born circa 1857), and William J. (born circa 1860). Robert and Martha worked as farmers in or near Swainsboro, Georgia, in 1860. This town—the seat of Emanuel County—sat approximately midway between Macon and Savannah. At the

to This Time from Old Residents of House,” 18 February 1976 manuscript, located in Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

⁷ Board and Colcord, *Belleview Mido Resort*, 14-25, 34; MacKinnon, “Story of Plant-Sumner” manuscript; Sanborn Map Company, *Fire Insurance Maps: Florida* (Teaneck, N.J.: Chadwyck-Healey, 1983), February 1917 and June 1923 maps, microfilm reel 1.

⁸ MacKinnon, “Story of Plant-Sumner” manuscript.

time, other members of the family apparently lived in Worth County, Georgia, between Tifton and Albany. The parents welcomed two children during the war years—Aminia M. (born circa 1862) and Benjamin L. (born circa 1864)—and one as the South began its earliest phase of Reconstruction, Eliza M. (born circa 1866). By 1867 or 1868, the Sumners decided to move their family to Hernando County, Florida, the birthplace of the couple's youngest children, Sarah C. (born circa 1868) and Robert L. (born circa 1872). Robert, Martha, and their nine oldest children lived in the Fort Dade area of Hernando County by the time census-takers arrived in 1870. They occupied land near the Withlacoochee River and an old trail that connected Fort King (Ocala) to Fort Brooke (Tampa). Robert claimed to work as a blacksmith, though he probably also continued to farm. Other members of the Sumner family also came to Hernando County by 1870, possibly to start anew after the devastation of many Georgia farms and that region's economy during the Civil War.⁹

Young Robert L. Sumner became the couple's youngest child. A native of Hernando County, Robert no doubt assisted his parents on their farm in the late 1870s and 1880s. He courted and married Julia M., a native of Alabama, in about 1894. At some point by 1910, Robert L. and Julia M. Sumner moved to Maitland in Orange County, nearly due east from his childhood home. It is possible—though not confirmed—that the Sumners may have traveled between his childhood home in Hernando and his property in Maitland along the Orange Belt Railway and its successor lines, as the early roads and paths between those settlements followed a similar path around Lake Apopka. By 1910, the younger Robert and his wife lived at the intersection of Maitland and Howell Road. The family had four children by the end of the first decade: Luther, Mildred Agnes (born about 1902), and infants Louise “Oween” (born about 1908) and Ralph Marion (born about 1909). During this time, Robert owned a dairy farm.

The Sumners moved to Clearwater and acquired the Plant-Sumner House in 1912. Shortly after their arrival, Julia M. Sumner gave birth to the couple's youngest child, Maurice Orien “Bill” Sumner, in one of the upstairs bedrooms. In her research, MacKinnon claimed that the child's aunt, a woman named America Sellers, delivered

⁹ Genealogical research on the Sumner family appears in building files located at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

Maurice in or about 1913. As family members changed Maurice's diapers, they could also look out the east window and watch workers add a spur line of the Tampa and Gulf Coast Railroad (T&GC, commonly called the "Tug-and-Grunt") alongside the Atlantic Coast Line tracks on their property's eastern border. Sanborn maps from 1917 show a two-story residence due west and adjacent to the Plant-Sumner House, and two one-story homes at the southeast corner of Fort Harrison Avenue and "A" Street as the only buildings on that block. An ell-shaped, one-story dwelling sat across "A" Street. A small outbuilding, perhaps an outhouse (for the growing family) or a shed, sat just south of the Plant-Sumner House. Robert Sumner began working as Belleair's postmaster by April 1915, and the *Largo Sentinel* occasionally mentioned his visits to that city in that newspaper's "Happenings In and Round About Largo" column. By 1920, Robert Sumner shared the home with his wife and their four youngest children (Mildred, Louise, Ralph, and Maurice Orien). At the time, the post office occupied space in a general store near where the former railroad tracks (and present-day Pinellas Trail) cross Fort Harrison. The Sumner family's neighbors may have had earlier ties with their home. The 1920 census lists Nathan Brown and Nadine Newman as those living closest to Sumner. Nathan Brown and wife Jeanette lived on their property with six children and a son-in-law, Carl O'Quin. Nathan worked as a foreman in a citrus packinghouse. Meanwhile, Nadine Newman lived with her twenty-two year old sister and two tenants. Once again, additional genealogical and property records research may discover ties between these individuals and the Brown and Newman families that sold Sumner the house in 1912.¹⁰

In addition to his duties as postmaster, Sumner served as a pastor and veterinarian. Rev. Sumner delivered sermons at the Belmont Methodist Church, located near the intersection of Greenwood and Belleair streets. He probably filled in for other preachers on the local Methodist circuit, and certainly visited other central Pinellas churches. With a large backyard and the eastern portion of the property ending at the right-of-way for the Atlantic Coast Line (ACL) Railroad, the Sumners had sufficient land to raise cattle on their "A" Street property. Although they consumed most of the milk, they often sold some to their neighbors. Dr. Garfield Evans, one of Rev. Sumner's

¹⁰ Ibid.; Sanborn Map Company, *Fire Insurance Maps*, February 1917 map, microfilm reel 1; MacKinnon, "Story of Plant-Sumner" manuscript; *Largo Sentinel*, 15 April 1915.

nephews, recalled that his uncle often helped other cattle owners in the southern Clearwater area tend to their animals. His previous ownership of a dairy in Maitland allowed him to serve as an amateur veterinarian for other cow farmers.¹¹

Rev. Sumner's children became friends with children in the Plumb family. According to a family genealogy recorded by Mary Emma Plumb, her father Ralph Reynolds Plumb came to Western Hillsborough from Huron, New York, in 1873. He came with his mother, Jennie Reynolds Plumb, who brought Ralph and his brother, Robert, to Clear Water Harbor by way of Jacksonville, Cedar Keys, and Tampa. At the time of this journey, Robert had just turned five years of age. The Plumbs had family in the area, most notably Jennie's brother and Robert's uncle, Reverend C. Sumner Reynolds, who owned a store in the area. Jennie taught at a log church on the site of Clearwater Cemetery (on Myrtle Avenue) in 1874, a very short distance from the Plant-Sumner House. Jennie took possession of lands that became the Largo Cemetery. Robert later recalled in an interview that the family fertilized its groves by penning in the cattle, but branded them so that they could roam the open range and graze during the summer. The Plumbs of the Clearwater-Largo area ate turkey, deer, and occasionally bear during the late 1800s. Ralph married Florence Levincy Hammock, a 15 May 1874 native of the Anona area and daughter of George Wesson Hammock and the former Mary Levincy Whitehurst. The Hammocks—like the Kilgore, Lowe, and Meares families—were early settlers of the Anona area and one of the families that helped to establish a Methodist church in that area. Ralph and Florence started a family and raised many children in the Belleair community, including Elsie Vivien, Kathleen Grace, Newlan Claude, George Leslie, Myrtle Maxine, Mary Emma, Lester Daniel, Jennie Lillian, and Robert Bertram. The Plumbs also lived in a house associated with Henry B. Plant that Ralph later had moved from Fort Harrison to Myrtle Avenue. Additional genealogical research may uncover new links between that Plumb and Sumner families as later generations continued to live on the Pinellas Peninsula.¹²

¹¹ MacKinnon, "Story of Plant-Sumner" manuscript;

¹² Genealogical research on the Plumb family appears in building files located at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; Transcript of interview with Robert Plumb, located at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; *Largo, Then Til*, 12, 106; *St. Petersburg Times*, 8 September 1980. One of the Plumb children, Myrtle Maxine, married Otterbein C. Howell on 1 August 1934. Howell, who organized the first bible school at Anona Methodist Church in 1934, went on the following year to become the pastor at Safety

The Sumners watched Clearwater transform into a city through the windows of the Plant-Sumner House. To the northeast of their house, beyond the end of “A” Street and the ACL and T&GC tracks, the family could watch citrus packers work during the harvesting season at the West Coast Fruit Company. This large rectangular building came to life as truck farmers brought their citrus crops by road or rail for cleaning, sorting, packing, and shipping. Platforms on the building sat alongside the T&GC spur line and tracks on the east side of the building accommodated trains from the Seaboard Air Line (SAL) Railroad. South of the house, beyond the trees, the family could see a fourteen-foot high railroad water tower that sat between “B” and “C” streets. A short walk to the end of “D” Street brought them to a much larger water tower (that approached ninety feet in height) near an abandoned railroad station, as well as the sophisticated power plant and waterworks for the Belleview Biltmore. The hotel obtained a steady stream of fresh water from Lake Belleview, located just south of Lakeview Road. Before 1929, the West Coast Fruit Company’s building added condensers and a canning factory. By that time, buildings sat on the north side of “A” Street. To the southeast, the Biltmore had attached a large greenhouse building to the hotel’s original power plant. By the mid-1920s, developers touted the nearby Belleair Estates subdivision as a neighborhood with “ten miles of roads and twenty miles of sidewalks” connecting homes built with “every modern utility,” including gas, water, electricity, and telephone service. Nine holes of the eighteen-hole Donald Ross golf course awaited golfers by December 1926. While the city grew around them, the Sumners also celebrated their growing family. On 17 April 1922, Mildred Agnes Sumner—then about twenty years of age—married Sidney (or Sydney) B. Barger in a Clearwater ceremony. The Bargers soon moved to a house on Lotus Street and raised at least two children, Sydney S. and Myron L. Barger.¹³

Robert and Julia Sumner occupied the Plant-Sumner House from 1912 through the early 1950s. According to the 1930 census, Ralph (then twenty-one) and Maurice Orien (then seventeen) still lived with their parents. Nathan Brown and Chester Kilgore were neighbors along “A” Street, sometimes referred to as Corbett Street by this time.

Harbor’s Methodist Church, a building also preserved at Heritage Village. A graduate of Clearwater High School and the Florida State College for Women (now Florida State University), Myrtle Plumb Howell served as a teacher and principal in Florida schools for forty-two years.

Rev. Sumner continued to serve as a Methodist minister. Between 1934 and 1936, he led morning and evening worship services at the Anona Methodist Church. By about 1934, the family remodeled the kitchen. This area of the home originally had a wood stove at the southeast corner with a single window along the south wall. Workers replaced the shed roof with a gabled roof, improved the layout of the kitchen, and added a side porch to the structure. Although their children had moved away from home by the late 1930s, the Sumners maintained an active life in the community. Ralph graduated from Florida Southern College in 1931 and became a reporter and district manager with the *Tampa Morning Tribune*, while Louise “Oween” earned her degree at Florida Southern in 1929 and later became a librarian at that institution in Lakeland. Maurice Orien “Bill” moved to Largo, sold electrical supplies, and became a charter member of that city’s St. Paul United Methodist Church. Grandchildren remembered visiting the house during the 1940s and early 1950s. By that time, the Sumners owned a large upright piano, kept a telephone on the wall closet under the stairway, and used heavy drapes to separate the living and dining rooms. Meanwhile, through the 1930s, the Belleview Biltmore operated as a self-sufficient entity that shared its postal, police, and fire department facilities with the Town of Belleair. According to a published history of the hotel, town officials assumed control of these departments and moved them from the Belleview campus by 1942. The hotel continued to maintain its own power plant for another year, until government authorities required them to connect the hotel to the Florida Power electrical grid. The power plant and greenhouse once located along the railroad tracks disappeared by 1949. Directories from the Peninsular Telephone Company indicate that the Sumners had a telephone by January 1946. An examination of telephone directories available in the special collections area of the Largo Library placed Robert as the head-of-household through the January 1954 edition. An examination of official city records for the Town of Belleair, as well as the microfilm archives of the *Clearwater Sun*, may allow future researchers to trace Rev. Sumner’s many contributions to the community.¹⁴

¹³ Sanborn Map Company, *Fire Insurance Maps*, June 1923 and April 1929 maps, microfilm reel 1; *Tampa Daily Times*, 4 December 1926.

¹⁴ Genealogical research on the Sumner family appears in building files located at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; *Largo, Then Til*, 106; MacKinnon, “Story of Plant-Sumner” manuscript; MacKinnon, “Facts Gathered Up” manuscript; Board and Colcord, *Belleview Mido Resort*, 42; Undated note to Ellen Babb, located in building files, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; Sanborn Map Company,

Members of the Sumner family continued to live in the area after moving out of the house. The 1954 R. L. Polk city directory listed Julia M. Sumner as a widow living at 513 “A” Street. Maurice Orien, her youngest son, lived with her for part of the year, possibly to help her settle the estate. Orien also worked as terminal manager for the Central Truck Lines Company. Meanwhile, Louise and Ralph M. Sumner resided at 1229 Seminole in Clearwater, and Ralph worked for the *Tampa Morning Tribune*. At that time, Kilgore Groves carried an address of 524 “A” Street, across the street from the Sumners. Clark Concrete Products occupied land to the east of the house at 525 “A” Street, between the Plant-Sumner House and the railroad tracks. By 1957, Julia stayed at the Weimer Convalescent Home on 825 Wyatt, a retirement facility operated by Glen C. and Bernice Weimer. The 1958 and 1959 directories also placed the reverend’s widow at that rest home; however, she does not appear in 1960 or subsequent directories.¹⁵

A Citrus Connection with the Whitehurst Family

A member of the Whitehurst family occupied the Plant-Sumner House from circa 1957 until the early 1970s. Calvert Clifford “C. C.” Whitehurst, a native of Sutherlin (Palm Harbor) born 25 July 1902, descended from a pioneer family. By 1930, he lived with his wife, Pauline E. Whitehurst, at 421 West Grand Central Street, just a few blocks away from the Plant-Sumner House. Steven Whitehurst, Calvert’s brother, lived next to him at 423 West Grand Central with his family. In the 1950s, C. C. Whitehurst worked as a foreman at Kilgore Groves. He moved into the Plant-Sumner Home by 1957 and shared this residence with his wife, Maggie Mae Whitehurst.¹⁶

During his tenure at Kilgore Groves, Whitehurst drew a paycheck from one of the largest citrus operations in Pinellas County. About 1913, Jessie Barnard Kilgore

Fire Insurance Maps, 1949 map, microfilm reel 1; See available issues of: R.L. Polk’s *Clearwater/ Dunedin/Largo (Pinellas County, Fla.) City Directory*; For a list of early graduates of Florida Southern, including many Pinellas families from the school’s earlier years, see: snoopy.tbcl.lib.fl.us/fsc/archives/grads1890to1934.html. Researchers interested in activities at the Belleview Biltmore during the tourist season may want to consult columns that appeared in early issues of the *Clearwater Evening Sun* by the mid-1920s. For example, in January 1925, that newspaper ran a regular column entitled “News of the Belleview Hotel” that announced arrivals and departures and listed activities at the resort.

¹⁵ Genealogical research on the Sumner family appears in building files located at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; See available issues of: R.L. Polk’s *Clearwater/ Dunedin/Largo (Pinellas County, Fla.) City Directory*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

established the West Coast Fruit Company with loans from forty stockholders. Son of Samuel and Mittie Kilgore and a native of Largo, Barnard became familiar with the citrus industry as a child raised in the area's groves. His company, located across the railroad tracks from the Plant-Sumner House, became an important processing and packing point for citrus shipped from the Clearwater-Largo area. By the late 1920s, the West Coast Fruit Company operated a grapefruit canning facility in addition to its regular shipments of boxed fruit. The physical plant of West Coast Fruit expanded by the 1940s to include an office building at the end of "A" Street, as well as other smaller structures on the west side of the tracks. The original fruit packing structure included extensions to the grapefruit canning factory and a large cooling room at the north end of the building to store processed fruits before shipping. Whitehurst, a member of a family with long ties to the citrus and agricultural history of Pinellas, worked at West Coast Fruit Company for many years. He had an easy commute: To walk from home to work, he merely had to cross the railroad tracks at the end of "A" Street.¹⁷

Whitehurst lived at the Plant-Sumner House after he retired from Kilgore Groves. During his tenure at the West Coast Fruit Company operated by the Kilgore family, C. C. Whitehurst held positions as a grove worker, maintenance staff member, foreman, and mechanic at the packing plant. He worked at Kilgore Groves until either 1966 or 1967, when that company ceased operations. Genealogical records indicate that his wife, Mae, died in July 1966. Calvert continued to live at Plant-Sumner after he retired, until at least the spring of 1973. By 1974, city directories placed C. C. Whitehurst at 1143 Howard Street, his home until he passed away on 17 January 1982 at the age of seventy-nine.¹⁸

The Questers and Junior League Lead Efforts to Preserve the House

Members of the Questers have long embraced efforts to preserve and promote local history. Margaret Roy, president of the Seminole chapter of the Questers, joined some of her colleagues to meet with Ralph Reed, County Historian and Curator at the Pinellas County Historical Museum's old offices in the basement of the courthouse.

¹⁷ William L. Straub, *History of Pinellas County, Florida: Narrative and Biographical* (St. Augustine: The Record Company, 1929), 356; Sanborn Map Company, *Fire Insurance Maps*, 1949 map, microfilm reel 1.

During this visit, Reed talked with the Questers about older homes in Clearwater that faced possible demolition. Reed showed pictures of some of these structures, including the “former H. B. Plant home” on “A” Street. The Questers became interested in the Plant-Sumner House, and decided to contact C. C. Whitehurst, owner of the home, during the spring of 1973. By May of that year, Whitehurst prepared to sell the Plant-Sumner House and land to his eastern neighbor, the Clark Concrete Property. The owner of that company told representatives of the Questers that he only had interest in the land and “plans to either burn the house or have it demolished.” The Questers hoped to move the home, a building Roy considered to be in “very good, movable condition.” Roy estimated that the move to a nearby, vacant property would cost \$2,000, and that the home required about \$500 in additional expenses for termite treatment. During a presentation at the 16 May 1973 Pinellas County Historical Commission (PCHC) meeting, Roy hoped for assistance and support from the Commission. She envisioned a plan to move the Plant-Sumner House to an empty parcel somewhere in Clearwater, renovate and furnish the building with period furniture, and hold chapter meetings at the structure. At this time, the PCHC lacked funds to assist in this endeavor, though the Commission did encourage the Questers to contact the Belleview Biltmore Hotel and the Town of Belleview about possible support or information that might allow them to preserve the house. These conversations occurred before the Board of County Commissioners had established a plan for the creation of Heritage Village.¹⁹

The plan to save the Plant-Sumner House led members of the Junior League of Clearwater to push for the creation of Heritage Village. The Junior League received permission to move the Plant-Sumner House by late 1974 from then-owner George Mallory, but needed a new location for the building. Officials in Clearwater notified the Junior League that the city could not provide money or land in support of this effort. In a retrospective interview, park Director Kendrick Ford recalled that many people held the common assumption “if it’s old, tear it down” during the early 1970s. After failing to obtain support from Clearwater, the Junior League approached the Pinellas County

¹⁸ Genealogical research on the Sumner family appears in building files located at Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; See available issues of: R.L. Polk’s *Clearwater/ Dunedin/Largo (Pinellas County, Fla.) City Directory*; *St. Petersburg Times*, 19 January 1982.

Historical Commission. Junior League members played an important role in the creation of Heritage Village by lobbying the Board of County Commissioners to create and fund an open-air historical park, and by encouraging their husbands—many of whom occupied positions of authority in Clearwater or county politics—to support this initiative. When early discussions took place about the possibility of establishing a historical preserve along Walsingham Road, some donors to the county’s historical museum balked at the proposal because they assumed that the treasures collected by Ralph Reed and others over the years would always remain in Clearwater. When county leaders failed to reach an agreement with the Junior League of Clearwater about providing a site for the Plant-Sumner House, the women of that organization made an appeal to the PCHC and the county administrator. After finally winning the Board’s approval, the PCHC commissioned Don Williams to develop a site plan for the original ten acres of the park. This plan included Plant-Sumner and Seven Gables, two buildings slated to move to the new park before Pinellas County had even hired a director. Ford began his tenure as director in April 1976, after PCHC members had approved the move of Plant-Sumner to the park; the house arrived by June 1976.²⁰

The Plant-Sumner House arrived at Heritage Village as Pinellas residents planned to celebrate the nation’s bicentennial. To commemorate this structure’s journey to Heritage Village, the PCHC planned to hire a “Bicentennial bus” to transport guests from the county courthouse to the Plant-Sumner House at Heritage Village on June 22. Advocacy by the Junior League of Clearwater to preserve this house created other opportunities for historic preservation: The work of Junior League members helped Pinellas County qualify for a \$25,000 grant from the Florida State Bicentennial Commission. G. L. Pucci, PCHC chair, reminded the Board of County Commissioners of this fact when some members discussed merging all budgetary and administrative

¹⁹ Records of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo, 16 May 1973.

²⁰ Interview of Ken Ford, former director of Heritage Village, by Stephanie Ferrell and Jim Schnur, 3 May 2003, Heritage Village, Largo; *St. Petersburg Times*, 8 March 1976, 13 April 1980; “Plant-Sumner House Background,” undated manuscript, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

operations of the new open-air museum under the auspices of the Park Department in 1977-1978.²¹

By the time movers visited the structure on “A” Street, termite damage and wear-and-tear left the Plant-Sumner House in very poor condition. Workers had to discard substantial portions of the structure before moving the best parts of the dwelling to Heritage Village. John Logan led efforts to restore and reconstruct the house. Wall studs and frames, floors, porches, the toilet on the second floor, and most of the wood around the windows replaced original materials that workers could not save. Original portions of the home include the sink, fireplace mantle, door and window cases, cupboard and drawers, corner closets in the bedrooms, and the large bathtub.²²

The Junior League of Clearwater remained involved with the Plant-Sumner House after it became the first building located at the new historic preserve. At this time, Heritage Village lacked a fence around its perimeter, and security became an issue because park employees stored many artifacts in Plant-Sumner before the completion of the library and archives. Despite regular monitoring by the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office, by the fall of 1976 PCHC members thought it wise to encourage the installation of a fence to protect Plant-Sumner, Seven Gables, and the grounds during the evening and weekends. On Wednesday mornings during the spring of 1977, Junior League volunteers came to Heritage Village to paint Plant-Sumner. They brought their own equipment and hoped to complete their work before the summer rains and heat arrived. After they finished painting the house, League members planned to collect furniture stored at various homes. Though located at Heritage Village, the structure still belonged to the Junior League. That organization continued to pay for insurance coverage on the house. By some estimates, the Junior League spent between \$45,000 and \$50,000 to restore the house. During the summer of 1977, League members met with park and county officials to develop a formal transfer agreement to turn the “Henry Plant house” over to the county historical museum. Workers had completed approximately ninety-five

²¹ Records of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo, 16 June 1976; G. L. Pucci, chair, Pinellas County Historical Commission, to Jeanne Malchon, chair, Pinellas County Historical Commission, 2 May 1977.

²² Ken Ford interview.

percent of their restoration efforts by September 1977; at that time, they only needed to add accessories, such as curtains and carpeting.²³

Many visitors to Heritage Village enjoy tours of the Plant-Sumner House and its neighbor, the House of Seven Gables. While a number of sources document the home's early history as part of Plant's Pinellas empire and its forty-plus years of ownership by the Sumners, the later use of the house by a member of the Whitehurst family merits further investigation. As an employee at the nearby Kilgore Groves packing house, C. C. Whitehurst provides a connection between this structure and the citrus industry during its mid-twentieth century heyday and early stages of decline. While it may be too early to rename the building the "Plant-Sumner-Whitehurst House," this chapter of the dwelling's life may reveal new connections between residents, business, and industry in the communities of Belleair, Clearwater, and Largo.

²³ Records of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo, 17 November 1976, 16 February 1977, 29 March 1977, 20 July 1977, 19 September 1977; "Plant-Sumner House Background" manuscript.