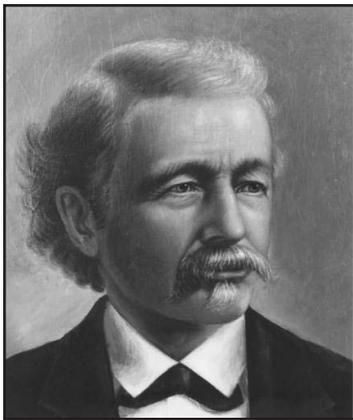


# *The Greatest Men of Florida*



## **Henry B. Plant**

*Genius of the West Coast*



For more than thirty years the Moorish minarets of the Tampa Bay Hotel, rising above the palms and the mighty oaks of Plant Park, have stood as a monument to the memory of Plant, the builder-Plant, the seer of visions-Plant, the pioneer in the development of this vastly rich and unimaginably fertile region on the verge of the tropics that today is known as the Gulf Coast section of South Florida.

For more than three decades those minarets in their bowing leafage have been a sort of trade-mark of Tampa; familiarized in the minds of hundreds of thousands through photographs and drawings and paintings, they have typified Tampa more than any other one thing, just as the vision and the labors of their builder pointed the way for others who have followed him in the turning of the primeval wilderness of pine and palm and palmetto and funeral cypress into the garden spot of the Western Hemisphere. Today, with the dreams of Henry Bradley Plant nearer to their fulfillment than ever before, with the name of Tampa in the mouths of millions and with the wonders of this glorious Gulf Coast region grown familiar to thousands who a few years ago knew it only as a geographical location, it is fitting that Plant should be accorded a high place in the ranks of those who have done much for Florida.

It is said that when Mr. Plant had completed the Tampa Bay Hotel, a few years after Henry M. Flagler had built his first great hotel on the East Coast, Mr. Plant had specially engraved an invitation to the builder of the Florida East Coast Railroad to attend the opening ball at the new hotel. According to the story, Mr. Flagler telegraphed back:

“Invitation received. Where the hell is the Tampa Bay Hotel?”

Mr. Plant’s reply was equally laconic. It merely read:





“Just follow the crowds.”

Whether or not this is an anecdote of something that actually occurred, or merely apocryphal makes little difference; it is characteristic of the man. The fact that Henry B. Plant’s death occurred before the “crowds” his message referred to have really begun turning their footsteps toward Tampa and the Gulf Coast, likewise means little. The invitation and the message testified to the man’s faith—a faith that has been and is now being justified in such measure as even he could hardly have dreamed.

Henry Bradley Plant, a native of Bradford, Connecticut, had begun to make his mark in the country’s affairs long years before his eyes were turned, fortuitously, toward Florida. Before the War Between the States he was one of the organizers of the old Adams Express Company, which, with the Wells-Fargo Company in the then new, raw West, was beginning to build the network of commercial and mercantile communication that in later years grew into the greatest interlinking system of its kind in the world. But the internecine strife that rent the South and North for four long and terrible years shattered the system, as it appeared; of course, no communication existed between the sections, and Mr. Plant’s labors, as were those of everyone else in the nation, were turned in other directions.

With the end of the war the whole country took up the task of rehabilitating itself. Southern railroads were little more than masses of junk. Henry B. Plant, with Colonel Henry S. Haines, of Savannah, undertook the Herculean labor of placing them again on their feet. Colonel Haines had been one of the foremost officers in General Robert E. Lee’s transportation system, and, with Mr. Plant, he was largely instrumental in rebuilding the lines that the havoc of war had practically destroyed. During the years immediately following the close of the war Mr. Plant and associates acquired control of the old Charleston and Savannah Railroad; the Savannah, Florida and Western, at that time extending to Jacksonville by way of Live Oak; the Florida Central and Peninsular Railroad, and one or two other rail lines extending into Georgia and Alabama. As the direct result of Mr. Plant’s genius as a railroad builder, all of these lines were rehabilitated within a remarkably short period, proving of incalculable aid in the physical, agricultural and financial recuperation of the South and the Southeast.

Early in this period of his post bellum activities Mr. Plant also found time to lay the groundwork and complete the preliminary organization of the Southern Express Company, becoming the first president of the company—a post which he held for many years—and one of its largest stockholders.





It is strange how apparent chance enters into the lives of men, altering their purposes or giving new directions to them. But is it chance, or is it all a part of a Great Plan, a Great Design? Who can say? If it is chance, just a blind, unpurposed “happen-so” then the affairs of the world, since time began, have largely been ruled by chance; and that is an admission not easily made, any more than one may easily admit that the sweep of the universe, the rise and fall of the tides, the succession of the seasons, are matters of chance. However it may be, chance or design, in the early part of 1882, brought Henry B. Plant in contact with J. E. Ingraham, then president of a company that projected the building of a railroad from Sanford, by way of Winter Park, to Orlando and ultimately intended to penetrate to Tampa, then only a village.

But on this Mr. Ingraham himself may be quoted. The former president of the South Florida Railroad, later Flagler’s chief lieutenant, told of his chance meeting with Plant and its outcome, as follows:

“Early in 1882 Mr. Plant and several of his associates, including some of the most important business men of the United States, built the Waycross Short Line, from Waycross, Georgia, to Jacksonville, very materially shortening the time from New York to Jacksonville. Mr. Plant’s associates in this included Henry Walters, B. F. Newcomer of Baltimore, Albert Jenkins of Wilmington, Delaware; Judge Henry Chisholm of Savannah, Morris K. Jessup of New York, Henry Sanford of New York, then president of the Adams Express Company, all of whom were interested in the various enterprises of Mr. Plant.

“At this time the writer (J. E. Ingraham) was president of the South Florida Railroad, a ‘newspaper railroad’ owned by R. M. Pulsifer and Company, owners and editors of the old Boston Herald. The road extended from Sanford by way of Winter Park to Orlando; it was under construction and nearly completed to Kissimmee, and was projected to Tampa.

“About this time I was walking on Bay Street, in Jacksonville, with General Sanford, when he remarked to me:

“Do you see the elderly gentleman on the other side of the street—the one wearing the long black broadcloth coat and silk hat? That is a man whom I think you ought to know. He is Henry B. Plant, president of the Savannah, Florida and Western Railway Company, with whom I traveled on my last trip down from New York.’

“After saying that I should like to meet Mr. Plant, I was introduced to him. He greeted me with:





“So you are the young man who is building a railroad from Sanford to somewhere in the south of Florida?”

“Yes, Mr. Plant,” I replied, ‘we have a little narrow-gauge railroad down there and we feel quite proud of it. We expect to open that railroad to Kissimmee shortly -some time early next week-and I should be more than glad to have you and your friends come down and be our guests at the opening.’

“Mr. Plant told me of his purchase of a steamer, the ‘Henry B. Plant,’” and his plan of running it, under command of Captain Jim Fitzgerald, to Sanford. Immediately I asked him for a connection for our road, such as we had with the DeBarry line three days a week, saying I would like to have Mr. Plant’s best connection for alternate days. He agreed to this request and also said he would join our party on the initial trip over the new road. Inquiring how many we could take care of, I told him to bring as many as he wished, and that a special train would meet him and his party when the ‘Henry B. Plant’ reached Sanford.

“Early on the appointed day my associates and I, with our wives, met Mr. Plant’s party at the wharf at Sanford. We boarded a brand new train, composed of a parlor car, coach and baggage car, the train crew having on new blue uniforms and white gloves. In Mr. Plant’s party were Mr. and Mrs. Plant, Colonel Henry S. Haines and his wife and half a dozen business associates.

“The trip extended all the way to Belleair, then the terminus of the rail line, as St. Petersburg was at that time nothing more than a few cottages and huts occupied by fishermen. Mr. Plant was visibly impressed by the country along the route, and after returning from Belleair he called a conference, at which he asked:

“Mr. Ingraham, what can I do for you on this railroad project?”

“If you will give us connection with your St. Johns River steamer, and obtain for us through representation as to tickets and rates, I would be greatly obliged,’ I replied; continuing, that it was my ambition to extend our railroad to Tampa and to put on a line of steamers to Key West and Havana.

“Do you think your stockholders would sell an interest in this property?’ he asked; to which question I replied:

“If you can see your way to purchasing, say, a three-fifths interest in the railroad, extending it to Tampa and eventually putting on such a line of steamers, I am satisfied they would.’





“As a result of this conference and a subsequent meeting in Boston, the Plant Investment Company became owner of a three-fifths interest in the South Florida Railroad, under contract to build the road from Kissimmee to Tampa. The work was pushed to completion very rapidly, and on the fourth day of January 1884, the South Florida Road was opened to Tampa. Governor Bloxham and his entire cabinet, with their families, were among the guests of the company and were present at the driving of the last spike.”

Thus the casual fact of the presence of Henry B. Plant and Mr. Ingraham in Jacksonville on the same day; the chance that took them both along the same street at the same time, and the fortuitous circumstances of the presence of a mutual friend, led to the focusing of Mr. Plant’s interest on the then almost unknown Gulf Coast of South Florida—an interest that was maintained and intensified until the time of his death. But who shall say that it was blind chance? Who can doubt that it was the working of some sort of definite plan? The section with which the name of Henry B. Plant is so prominently identified was ripe for at least preliminary development. The railroad that was needed to bring that development about was built, opening for the first time a region that needed only to be known to be appreciated. That this was true is evidenced by the fact, a matter of record, that in the first eighteen months of operation of that first railroad to Tampa, more than 45,000 persons were brought into the newly opened territory, first comers of that tide of emigration from the North and East that never has ceased from that day to this.

Not long after the completion of the railroad, now known as the Atlantic Coast Line, Mr. Plant established the first regular passenger steamer service, known then as the Plant Line, and carrying that name for many years, between Tampa, Key West and Havana. As a part of that operation the railroad was extended from Tampa to Port Tampa, a distance of about ten miles. Tampa had no deep-water channel from the Gulf at that time; indeed, it was many years later that the first deep-water channel to the head of the Hillsborough River was dredged. Meanwhile, Port Tampa was really the port of Tampa, into and out of which sailed practically all of the waterborne traffic of the city that was beginning to shed its fledgling pinfeathers and assume the airs and importance of a modern city. There were yet no paved streets; there were sidewalks of planks on Franklin Street; in other parts of the Tampa of that day the streets and the footways were sand. An ancient wooden bridge spanned the river at Lafayette Street, displaying signs on each end, “Walk Your Horses.” The section that is now Hyde Park was an almost uncharted wilderness, cattle paths





winding in and out among the woods and through the palmettos. Along the bay shore a few hardy pioneers had built homes, and they were real pioneers, too, with few followers for years. Then Henry Plant decided to build his Tampa Bay Hotel.

A big, rambling hostelry had been built meanwhile at Belleair, the nucleus of the present Bellevue Hotel that is the winter Mecca of hundreds of northerners fleeing the blizzards and rigors of New England or the Middle West. When Mr. Plant announced his purpose of building a hotel of at least three hundred rooms, and of locating it on the west bank of the Hillsborough River, there were none who did not hoot the idea. They said Plant was crazy; such a palace as he planned could not be built in the wilderness that was Hyde Park thirty-odd years ago; even if it were built, nobody would patronize it and servants would not remain there. These were just a few of the objections voiced by the doubting Thomases of that day-the ones who could not visualize a Tampa of even 10,000 population in the next fifty years; the ones to whom the thing that never had been done before was impossible ever to accomplish. But Plant moved right on with his plans. He had acquired all the land he needed. Part of it is the Plant Park of today, declared to be one of the finest tropical parks to be found anywhere, and without doubt the finest one of its kind in the United States. Another part is Plant Field, location of the great South Florida Flair. The remainder of the former Plant holdings in the Hyde Park section has long since passed into other ownership and is today built up in handsome homes and business structures.

“Plant’s Folly,” as the new hotel was called-and how many projects, dubbed “follies,” have remained to prove the folly of those who so named them-assumed form. A huge pile of brick and mortar, above which rose half a dozen Moorish minarets, the pictures of which against the Florida sky have familiarized countless thousands in all parts of the world with the name of Tampa as no other one thing has done, grew in the beginnings of Plant Park. Henry Plant and Mrs. Plant scoured the New World and the Old World for furnishings and objects of art with which to decorate the hotel. No complete catalogue of these furnishings ever was made; many of them, the rarest and best, have been removed from time to time, either by the Plant heirs or through other agencies. But enough remains to show the scale of magnificence on which the Tampa Bay Hotel was originally beautified. An authenticated Louis XIV table; a genuine Marie Antoinette chiffonier; bronzes from the ateliers, of worldfamed sculptors; paintings that were the work of equally famous artists; rugs from Persia and Turkey and the far corners of the world-all these and many more were gathered together by the Plants and strewn through the lounge and the corridors, the





music rooms and the dining rooms of the hotel. At this time many of the objects of art that guests observe carelessly would be prized specimens in any metropolitan art museum, even though most of the “cream” of this collection, unique for the every-day use of any hotel, has been skimmed.

The opening of the Tampa Bay Hotel was an event in the history of Tampa. Notables of Florida, of New York, Washington, Boston, Philadelphia, Savannah, Atlanta, New Orleans, and even from England and France, made up the throng that inspected the majestic pile on that occasion. Special trains were run to Tampa to bring Mr. Plant’s invited guests. Henry Flagler, doing the same work for Florida’s East Coast that Mr. Plant was doing for the Gulf Section of the state, was among the guests, and the dinner that was served on that occasion perhaps never has been excelled for variety and for sybaritic luxury in the South. Bands brought from the North to play during the day and evening, and the feasting, dancing and revelry continued until the rays of the rising sun dimmed the lights from hundreds of candles and lamps in the candelabra and sconces throughout the immense structure.

A list of those who at one time or another have made the Tampa Bay Hotel their abiding place for a day or a week, a month or a season, would include names that stand out in the history of world events. General Shafter, commanding the American troops that camped in Tampa prior to their departure for Cuba in the Spanish-American war, was a guest of the hotel. So was Theodore Roosevelt, colonel of the famous Rough Riders. So also was Leonard Wood, then a major in Roosevelt’s regiment and later a major general in the United States Army. Diplomats of a dozen countries; kings of the world of finance; men and women whose names are or were prominent in the Blue Book of society; explorers; men who have hunted big game in every out-of-the-way nook on the globe; all these and untold others have at one time or another made the Tampa Bay Hotel their home for longer or briefer stays. And many are the tales the old rooms could tell, if walls had ears and tongues, of the revelry, the intrigues, the plannings and plottings, the ambitious schemes, that have taken place in the old, massive pile of Moorish architecture.

Today “Plant’s Folly,” as it once was called, is the property of the city of Tampa, the building and the park in which it stands, together with Plant Field, having been sold to the city several years after the death of Mr. Plant. Built and furnished at a cost said to have been more than a million and a half of dollars, the city acquired the entire property, excepting only some of the art objects removed after Mr. Plant’s death, for a little more





than \$ 100,000. Today the hotel and other buildings and the park in which they stand are conservatively valued at more than five million dollars - so has the wisdom of "Plant's Folly" been demonstrated.

Meanwhile Mr. Plant's activities were not confined to the building of a hotel. At the Paris exposition he personally represented the South Florida Railroad, and the exhibit of Florida products which he assembled and displayed at the exposition was the first of its kind the state ever had made. In completeness and in the interest of its innumerable items, that exhibit remains today the finest the state ever has made at an international exposition.

Despite these and other activities, Mr. Plant continued to build railroads in South Florida. The old Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West Railroad had gradually been extended, first to Palatka, then on to Sanford, where it connected with the South Florida Railroad, and it was bought by Mr. Plant and his associates and made a part of the growing system. A little later he bought the South Florida Railroad's line from Palatka to Brooksville; still later he acquired the Sanford and St. Petersburg Railroad, extending from Sanford by a northern route to the growing city at the tip of the Pinellas peninsula. In 1884, Mr. Plant extended the South Florida Railroad from Pemberton Ferry by way of Dade City and Lakeland to Bartow, the road connecting with the old Florida Southern railroad at Pemberton Ferry, now known as Trilby.

In August of 1886 all of the railroad lines in the southern territory or the territory lying south of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi River were changed from the old 5 feet 2 inches standard gauge to the new standard gauge of 4 feet 8 1/2 inches. At this time the South Florida Railroad changed from three feet, narrow gauge, to the new standard gauge, and through Pullman cars were then run from New York to Tampa and Port Tampa. This was the first through service in Florida, and the arrival of the first train direct from New York was another occasion for rejoicing in Tampa. It was a year later that the standard line was built to Port Tampa, where Mr. Plant established immense wharves with a berthing capacity of twenty-six steamships at once. At the same time he provided ample tracks and facilities for loading and unloading steamships and for transferring cargo from cars to ships, and Port Tampa soon become known as the greatest phosphate shipping port in the world, a distinction it still holds. To this distinction, however, must be added the fact that through Port Tampa enters more Havana tobacco, for the use of Tampa's cigar manufactories, than comes into the United States through any other gateway. Port Tampa,





likewise, was the point of embarkation of General Shafter's division of American troops in the Spanish-American War.

In 1886 Henry M. Flagler, credited with creation of the original plans from which later developed the Standard Oil Company, became interested in the Gulf Coast Section of South Florida, joining the directorate of the South Florida Railroad and becoming a large stockholder in the Plant Investment Company. This was Mr. Flagler's first manifestation of interest in any part of Florida other than the East Coast, and, unfortunately, the interest was not maintained, appearing to expire with the passing of Mr. Plant.

But Plant died all too soon; most of his far-reaching plans and purposes died with him, because there was left no prophetic vision to peer into the not-distant future and visualize the immense potentialities for wealth and for the support of a population of millions contained in this South Florida country; there remained no firm hand to guide the destinies of the region's development. The vast holdings of timberlands, mineral lands, townsites and farmlands in the making, that were among the properties of the Plant Investment Company slipped away, little by little, or in larger units. Control of the Plant railroads, steamship lines, wharves and port facilities passed into other hands, controlled by minds that were keener for the immediate dollar.

But the advantages of the Gulf Coast section were and are too numerous and too apparent to remain forever unknown. In recent years more and more people have learned of the unparalleled climate of this coast, laved by the blue waters of the Gulf of Mexico and swept by breezes from hundreds of leagues of blue salt water; with golden sunshine practically every day of the year, and a productivity equaled only by the valley of the Nile. And strangers have come into the country, bringing new energy and new wealth to aid in its development; until today the name of Tampa and of other Gulf Coast cities is familiar to millions. On the whole stretch of this empire, from Palatka to Port Tampa, from Orlando to Fort Myers, the name of Henry Bradley Plant is written large. Of all those whose money and thought and labor have entered into the making of this section of Florida, none has done more than Plant the builder, Plant the dreamer, Plant the man who knew how to turn vision into abiding fact.

