

# *The Greatest Men of Florida*



## **Henry M. Flagler** *Empire Builder*



“The man who saw wilderness and out of it created an empire; who saw a desert and out of it made a garden spot,” is the way Henry M. Flagler was described by Richard H. Edmonds, famous editor of the Manufacturers Record.

Forty years ago, Mr. Flagler saw in the East Coast a country without transportation facilities and without material development of any kind. It was the most discredited part of Florida in the estimation of the general public. He turned his entire attention and resources to the building of a railroad to open up that wilderness, and to the construction of magnificent hotels in order to furnish those seeking relief from the severe Northern winters modern accommodations in an American Riviera.

With unfaltering faith, and despite the skepticism of even his closest friends, who regarded his investment of millions and tens of millions of dollars in the East Coast country as the expenditure of a visionary enthusiasm, Mr. Flagler continued his work of creating an empire.

“The man who bets on the growth of the United States and keeps his debts paid will win financial success,” he once said in an interview.

That he was undoubtedly among the greatest, if not the greatest, constructive genius that America has produced is a settled fact. That his vision of the future was correct is proven by the rapid development the entire State of Florida is experiencing.

Henry Morrison Flagler was born in a little town in New York state thirty years before the outbreak of the war between the states. He lived to see the completion of his greatest undertaking-the construction of the Key West extension-shortly after his eighty-second birthday and two years before the beginning of the World war.





His father was the pastor of a small Presbyterian congregation in Hope, New York, and in the course of a year he received the equivalent of \$400 either in salt which was then used as currency, or in barter with which pastors and editors were usually paid in those days. The birth of a son was momentous only in that it necessitated redrafting the family budget so that it would provide for the wants of four persons instead of three.

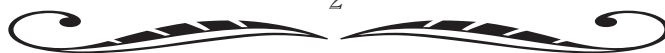
In the next dozen years, Henry grew up to be a stalwart youth, inheriting much of his father's physical vigor and a great deal of the gentle faith which had comforted his mother in times of stress. The schools in Hope extended no further than the eighth grade but Henry took full advantage of their instruction which was augmented at home by much reading from the Bible and the theological library of his father. There were a few sectarian volumes on the shelves-the poetry of Thomas Campbell, the prose of Sir Thomas Browne and John Bunyan, and Carlyle's rough-hewn philosophy.

At fourteen Henry had learned all that was taught in the school and was beginning to chafe for a career in lieu of further studies.

Had he not been tall for his age and a serious-minded youth it is doubtful if young Flagler would even have achieved his parents consent when he decided to set out at fourteen for the Western Reserve which embraced all the territory then the back-country of the original colonies. Realizing that small amount of money left over from bare living expenses was needed to educate his sister, Henry determined to rid his father of the burden of supporting two children. Seven years short of maturity he cast himself upon the frontier world to earn his own way.

Like Ben Franklin, he set forth with a carpet bag in one hand and his lunch in the other, walking nine miles to the town of Medina, N.Y. There he struck the tow-path of the Erie Canal along with so many other later affluent men who also left their footprints. He worked his passages on a canal freighter to Buffalo. From there he took a boat for Sandusky, in Ohio, which he heard was a thriving village. For three days the little vessel was tossed about on Lake Erie and when Henry stepped ashore he was a sick boy, so weak and dizzy that he feared people might think him drunk. But to use his own words:

"I remember that I went ashore early in the morning. Weak and dizzy, I staggered along the wharf, between long piles of cordwood, and was mortified to think someone might see me and believe I was drunk. I paid twenty-five cents for a hot breakfast and felt better. I pushed on to the little Ohio village of Republic. When I got there I had a five-franc piece a French coin which passed in this country for a dollar; five cents in silver and





four copper pennies. The five-franc piece is at home in my desk. I have kept it all these years, imitating the man in the Bible who had but one talent. I went to work in a country store for five dollars a month and my board. I have always been contented, but I have never been satisfied. To be dissatisfied means that you are ambitious to progress, to do things, not that you may be richer, but that you may be useful and take a part in the work of the world.

“I worked hard and saved my money. I never earned more than \$400 a year when I was employed by others. Fostoria, now a thriving Ohio city, was nearby. In those days it was called Rome. The father of Charles Foster lived there, and had a store. Charley clerked for his father, and he and I were said to be the best salesmen in Seneca county. Charley made a fortune, became governor of his state and secretary of the treasury in General Benjamin Harrison’s administration. But business and politics are unlike, and he died poor.

“When I had accumulated a little money I moved to Bellevue, a small place in the next county, and went into the grain business. John D. Rockefeller was a commission merchant in Cleveland and I sent him a good many carloads of wheat, which he sold as my agent. I also had an interest in a distillery. It was eminently respectable in those days to manufacture and sell liquor. The distillery gave me an outlet for considerable grain.

“Nevertheless, I had scruples about the business and gave it up. I made \$50,000 in Bellevue. Then I went to Saginaw and tried to manufacture salt. At the end of three years I had lost my little fortune and owed \$50,000 to about 5,000 Irishmen who had been working in the salt factory. My relatives loaned me enough money at ten per cent interest to pay my debts, and I moved to Cleveland and engaged in the grain and produce commission business.

“John D. and William Rockefeller and Samuel Andrews had started a small oil refinery in Cleveland on the side of a hill. When the second refinery was built in 1867, Stephen Harkness backed me for \$100,000 in a partnership with Mr. Rockefeller and his associates. Other little refineries sprang up and we bought them. Our business was developed rapidly, and in 1870 we closed our partnership and organized the Standard Oil Company. We worked night and day, making good oil as cheaply as possible and selling it for all we could get.”

The “other little refineries” Flagler referred to were chiefly the Union Oil Company, a brisk competitor of the Standard in the early days, which was absorbed by the existing corporation only after a bitter economic struggle. The war between the two pioneer oil companies was the birth of the gigantic concern which was for many years the world’s largest corporation.





Testifying before the United States Senate in the trust investigation of years ago, Mr. Rockefeller was asked: "Who conceived the Standard Oil Company." His reply was: "Henry M. Flagler, for he had something that we did not have—a genius for organization whose equal I have never seen." The incident marked an epoch in American industrial history in which captains of Industry were created and greater numbers were pushed back into the ranks of the millions who own corporate interests.

That the Standard Oil Company prospered it is not necessary to say. Tremendous profits were taken out of the concern by Flagler and his partners. Then Fate intervened in Florida's behalf, working quietly but with the inexorable precision of the gods.

With the millions made in oil, Flagler came to Florida; but not on business. Mrs. Flagler, the first of his three wives, always a semi-invalid, had become weaker. Her physician advised a trip to Italy or the Pacific coast during the winter of 1883-84 but Flagler vetoed both suggestions as his wife was unwilling to go anywhere without him and he could not spare time from his business for an extended trip. Casting about for a substitute, a friend suggested St. Augustine, the oldest city, where it was believed the climate was more nearly that of Italy than any other resort in the United States. Having read something of the old Spanish settlement, Flagler decided to spend a portion of the winter there and set forth from Cleveland with his wife and a party of friends and relatives.

All went well until the party reached Jacksonville where Mrs. Flagler was taken severely ill while stopping at the old St. James hotel, Jacksonville's large tourist hotel. After several days of inaction during which the solemnity of the little city and its sandy monotony palled on Flagler's nerves he inquired as to the route to St. Augustine and other points on the East Coast.

The clerk informed him that he could either wait a week for a steamer to St. Augustine or go down the St. Johns River as far as Tocoï and complete the journey by carriage. Flagler turned from the desk with disgust. Such transportation facilities were disgusting to him for the North was already well developed in this respect.

His interest piqued, however, by his first glimpse of Florida around Jacksonville, he decided to chance the river trip and ordered that carriages be in readiness at Tocoï on a certain date. This was done and he and his party arrived at St. Augustine where they went to the town's best hotel. Evidently they considered the fare very poor for Flagler decided before he left the ancient city that if he were to return—and both he and his wife liked the climate—he should certainly have a better place to live than the leading tourist hostelry.





It was 1885, two years later, that he returned to St. Augustine, wealthier than ever and a stalwart, vital figure for all his fifty-five years. That the Ponce de Leon, Florida's first magnificent tourist hotel, was his initial undertaking at St. Augustine is well known. He often referred to it as his most difficult also.

To build a hotel to meet the requirements of nineteenth century America and yet be in keeping with the character of the place, that was his task. An architect was sent to Spain to study the architecture of that country, a move based upon the wise assumption that the similarities in climate of the two regions and the history of Spanish buildings would provide a splendid precedent for the construction of what was then the world's most magnificent hotel.

The architect returned with the idea of erecting a Moorish palace, embodying the old world style of building in a modern structure for housing fastidious winter visitors. Flagler gave the plan his approval and work was begun late in 1885. The unknown firm of Carrer and Hastings, New York, was awarded the job of building the Ponce de Leon and the spot Flagler picked for its location was typical of his developments along the East Coast. It was a swamp.

So his first hotel was rapidly built from below the ground up. Before it was completed in 1888 he had the Alcazar under course of construction. Two mammoth hotels, gorgeously appointed, were springing up in the marshes and no means by which the tourist might reach them except by river steamer, ocean voyage or over the ramshackle, narrow-gauge line running into St. Augustine from Jacksonville.

With \$2,000,000 tied up in what he had announced would be the world's finest hotel and another million being sunk in the Alcazar across the street, Flagler was precipitated by the course of events into railroad building. And it was in this field that he won fame as great as that of any captain of industry, not excepting James J. Hill, termed the empire builder of the West.

All negotiations with the owners of the Jacksonville, St. Augustine and Halifax River Railway Company failed to convince these men that their road should be standardized and enlarged to meet anticipated traffic requirements. So Flagler bought the road outright, made it standard gauge, rebuilt the track system, added better equipment and made a railroad of what had been a streak of rust through the wilderness.

Here another trick of Fate made Flagler push on. The series of human events seemed determined that he could not stop, but must continue opening up new fields, going farther and farther down into the East Coast Wilderness every year.







The first guests at the Ponce de Leon-and they were few-complained of the odor from the city's slaughter pens nearby. Flagler offered to give a fair price for the property, and said he would let the councilmen select their site and he would erect thereon a \$60,000 market place in exchange for the old site. This generous plan was turned down by the council, one member complaining that Flagler's entry would ruin business. He himself owned two little storehouses which he said he could not rent if Flagler insisted upon erecting fine store buildings with plate glass windows and marble counters. No, Flagler must be kept out at any cost, he would disrupt the old mode of living and prevent them from making money.

Thus progress was virtually checked until a new council went into office and Flagler's request was granted. But the memory of the St. Augustine council's unreasonable treatment remained in Flagler's mind. If he held to his present plans St. Augustine would be the terminus of the Flagler line, a fact that would enrich the inhabitants and make it one of the largest cities in the South. No, he would not do that for people who so ill deserved it.

Consequently in 1890 he went to Daytona where he found two men named Anderson and Price, struggling to attract tourists to their hotel in the beautiful Halifax river country. Flagler bought the hotel and retained its managers, laying plans to improve his railroad to Ormond and Daytona which soon became popular winter resorts. It was because of Flagler that John D. Rockefeller was drawn to Ormond where he now maintains his winter home.

In 1893, Flagler discovered Palm Beach and bought it almost on sight. The spirit of the benevolent conquistador was beginning to take hold of him. Asked once how he happened to undertake such extensive developments in Florida he replied: "The hardest problem a man has is to help people. This desire to help others comes when a man has more than enough for his own needs. I have come to the conclusion that the best way to help others is to help them to help themselves."

He didn't expect his enterprises to pay-at least for a long while. Speaking to one of his friends once, he said: "They won't be profitable during my lifetime for I shan't live long enough to see it all accomplished. But in years to come they (meaning his works) will provide happy employment for millions." Nor was this said in any spirit of boasting. He was matter-of-fact in every estimate, be it of himself, or a friend or an enemy. His statements all bore the unemphatic positivity of the insatiable searcher for facts. And of one who always found them.

During 1893-94 Palm Beach underwent the same transformation that St. Augustine had experienced following Flagler's arrival. Millions of feet of lumber were ordered for the





construction of the Royal Poinciana hotel while hundreds of men were sent out to create a modern railroad between St. Augustine and Palm Beach. By the time the line was in operation Flagler had finished the Royal Poinciana and had commanded the erection of a second large tourist hotel, the Breakers. The latter was destroyed by fire in 1903 but was immediately rebuilt on the same site with additional improvements. These two hostelries remain the largest wooden buildings in the world used exclusively for hotel purposes; and the fire hazard has been reduced to a minimum by a marvelous policing system.

Then Fate intervened again and with its divine goad drove him further South. The freeze of 1884-95 which perversely killed orange groves supposedly below the "frost line" sent men out of their homes to walk the streets with bitterness in their hearts and desperation in their eyes. Many lacked bread and meat to feed their families. Those were bleak days for the pioneer citrus growers. Flagler helped immeasurably.

One day when suffering was at its height, someone showed him a spray of lemon blossoms, more delicate than the orange, which had been grown near Miami. If the Indian river section had survived the freeze that was proof enough for Flagler. It was a place he must penetrate to make livelihood safer for homeseekers. His engineers were sent out to survey the wilderness for a road to Miami. Only two families then lived where the city of Miami now stands.

Down the East Coast, through Titusville and the now rich muck of the Indian river country, Flagler's lieutenants projected the pickets of civilization. At last the line reached Miami-the miracle city which Flagler himself planned. The inhabitants wanted to name it for the great man but he declined to have his name memorialized in this manner.

In Miami it seemed that Flagler had reached the southern terminus of the system he had built up to be the Florida East Coast Railway. His vision had materialized as his hotels in St. Augustine, Daytona and Palm Beach were becoming well patronized. Miami was beginning to take on form and become a town of a few thousand.

It seemed the man must rest, at 72, a very rich man in holdings if not in actual cash. He seemed to be through, but the perfect mechanism of his mind could not be idle. His usefulness ended only with death, nor even that statement his entirely true.

Miami then had no port, and that was what Flagler sought-an outlet to the sea and a line of communication with South America. He also anticipated the construction of the Panama Canal several years. Key West was the nearest deepwater port-a key to the National defense and a communication point within six hours of Havana.





One day in the year of 1901 he called one of his associates to him and showed him a map of Florida.

“What do you think of that,” he said, pointing to the outstretched map.

“Looks like a very good map of the state,” his associate quickly answered.

“Don’t you see that red line,” Flagler demanded, putting his finger on a mark from Miami to Key West over the Florida keys. “That’s going to be a railroad.”

His friend was dumfounded at the old man’s audacity-visualizing the building of a railroad across the open sea for eighteen miles and through more than 125 miles of marsh land almost impassible to men on foot. It seemed like the dream of a madman but Flagler’s spirit was aroused-to do the impossible; to place on his record the stamp of indisputable genius.

A conference with his engineers followed a thorough survey of the terrain which involved months of study. When the results were laid before Flagler he did not ask: “How much will it cost?” or “Will it pay?” “Can it be done?” he inquired. His engineers told him it could.

“Then let’s get to work. I want to see it done before I die.”

That was his only demand regarding the time of its completion nor did he know what it would cost. And he lived to see it all finished.

Shortly after his eighty-second birthday, fourteen months before his death, Flagler rode into Key West in his private car over his own rails to one of the most royal and unique receptions ever accorded an American citizen by his countrymen. Proudly he stepped from his coach, a Homeric figure of erect age, deaf and a bit blind, yet master of it all. No wonder the crowd at Key West shattered the aloof turquoise clarity of the sky with their cheers which sent deep echoes reverberating from reef to reef and across the opaline Gulf toward Morro Castle.

That belated celebration of his birthday was the supreme moment of Flagler’s life; the perfect yet unusual culmination of a great man’s work at the end of life’s day.

But it was not achieved as easily as the telling of his story. The history of Flagler’s great railway system and resort hotels is one of unending difficulties and obstacles overcome. In May, 1886, he had bought his first railroad in Florida; in 1888, the St. Augustine and Palatka line, with a twelve mile branch leading to Toco. The same year he acquired the St. Johns and Halifax running from East Palatka to Daytona-a narrow-gauge road which he standardized in 1889. The same year he bridged the St. Johns river at Palatka and the following year he spanned the same stream at Jacksonville with a bridge which is now being rebuilt and double-tracked.







Until 1892 Flagler contented himself with buying up old lines and modernizing them, but in that year he began construction of the road south from Daytona and two years later trains were running into Palm Beach over the Flagler System of tracks. By 1896 he had pushed on to Miami where he halted, only to be flagellated into action by the ambition of an Alexander.

The years between 1901-when he conceived the Oversea Railroad and 1905 were fraught with impatience for Flagler. Time was passing so speedily, years of his usefulness now were so limited; he must do something gargantuan to pave the way for his graceful exit.

And that gesture proved to be the construction of what skeptics for seven years termed “Flagler’s Folly,” the staunch arm which broke Key West’s isolation from the rest of the states, drew Cuba in touch with her parent country and opened a new and more direct route to the Panama Canal Zone.

Those seven years from April, 1905, when work was started on the Extension, to January 22, 1912, when the first train was put into operation placed a greater task upon Flagler than his broad shoulders had ever borne before. A tropical twister in 1904 had taught engineers to fear West Indian hurricanes. Destroying much equipment and almost obliterating their path it had indicated that Nature meant to defeat its aged challenger if that were possible.

The first heavy work was encountered at Homestead where it was necessary to put in a 100-foot bridge to span the edge of the Everglades and reach Jew Fish Creek. It was here that the road left the mainland and undaunted engineers gazed out across open water that they had promised to bridge for “The Chief.” The concrete bridge was flung across Cards Sound at the south end of Biscayne Bay and Key Largo, the first to be touched by the line, was reached.

Month by month the chain of tracks and ties was extended from key to key, always at great expense and under almost insuperable difficulties. Then the Long Key viaduct was started, a structure of two and seven-tenths miles, built of solid concrete arches. Indian Key was reached at last and the work proceeded steadily, the pressure of anxiety growing stronger daily as the project was farther and farther away from its beginning. It was too late to turn back now. Then a calamity befell the work.

As Knights Key was reached J.C. Meredith, chief engineer in charge of the work, succumbed to disease. Nor was that the end of trouble. Nature, sensing man’s victory





imminent, gathered its forces for one last assault upon the encroachments of the conquistador. In the autumn of 1909 a terrific hurricane broke from the leaden clouds, whipping the waves into a frenzy, and driving the seabirds in mad flight headlong into the girders of the pitiful little strip of steel, wood and concrete that Man had dared to place in the roaring majesty of the sea.

That last charge of the elements almost ended the Extension. For days the construction camps stretched along the way between Homestead and Knights Key were beleaguered sentinels of civilization. When the damage was checked up it was found that many lives had been lost, property sent to the bottom of the sea and that portions of the already built road had been washed away.

No one felt more keenly the responsibility for the lost lives than Flagler. Orders went out to spare no expense in rescuing the men and money was cabled all over the world in order that workmen picked up by passing ships might return to this country from the far countries to which they had been carried by the outbound steamers.

Calling J. R. Parrott, his chief aide, to him, Flagler gave one of his rare positive commands: "Collect all equipment and prepare to sell the highest bidder." The order almost broke the hearts of his engineers who were still confident they could win. It was a desperate thing to cross "The Chief" on his peremptory command but Parrott took the chance. He kept silent and issued no orders for the collection of the equipment strewn along the right-of-way. The work proceeded.

Several days later, Flagler called Parrott to account for the rolling stock, dredges and other machinery which was to have been sold. Then Parrott told him the truth. Flagler received the news quietly, wavered a moment in what must have been horrible suspense for Parrott, and then smiled grimly. It was all right, the work would continue.

"If we quit now we'd admit defeat and have no harbor. We'll go on," Flagler said.

With W. J. Krome, who had been Meredith's assistant, in charge the work was recommenced with renewed vigor. It was months before the damage of the storm was repaired and construction resumed its normal progress with the greatest problem of all confronting the builders. This was the Flagler Viaduct, a seven-mile span across the open sea and the world's engineering wonder at the time. It remains the longest bridge in the world today.

Reams have been written of this bridge, in treatment both technical and non-technical. There it stands. One must ride over it in a comfortable Pullman to appreciate its magnificence.





On January 22, 1912, the Key West extension was opened to traffic-with Flagler's special train running from Jacksonville to Key West where a gigantic celebration had been prepared for "The Chief's" birthday, celebrated twenty days late.

"I confess I was worried when the Extension finally reached Key West," Dr. Ward, his close friend, said. "I wanted him to see his undertaking completed, but I dreaded the withdrawal of this spur to living. He loved to overcome obstacles but once they were overcome they lost their charm."

And Dr. Ward was correct. The Extension proved Flagler's final mammoth task, for men cannot go on forever growing greater and greater. Immortality would be no gift.

In May, 1913, Mr. Flagler died, after a lingering illness precipitated by a fall in which he was severely injured. The whole state mourned at his bier. Men of high affairs came from all over the country for his funeral. It was indeed a time for sorrow; Florida's greatest benefactor lay dead. His body lies in the Flagler mausoleum at St. Augustine in the shadow of the beautiful Memorial church he donated to the Presbyterian congregation of that Ancient city.

Perhaps it would be trite or lacking in distinction to say that Flagler was a queer combination of strength and weakness. For all men are that. He had few peculiarities, however. A super-intelligent normality seems to have been his, an evenness of temperament and personality which defied classification or adjectivizing. No word seems to fit the man, no description evokes his image, no figure of speech pictures his personality. In this respect he showed more plainly than others the mark of genius; the possession of that ineluctable power which is great yet refuses to be classified.

The aesthetic side of the man was well developed despite his apparent relentless concentration on business. His home, Whiteball, at Palm Beach, was a masterpiece of good taste, unmarred by the rococo decorative schemes which characterize many of the homes there. His tastes were simple but well defined. He either liked a thing well, or not all, although his prejudices were seldom outspoken.

For some things he had a strong liking. He admired "David Harum" and doubtless read it half a dozen times in the course of his latter years. Poetry he loved also, particularly that of a serious and philosophical nature, answering some phase of mysticism in his nature. One poem he enjoyed for the aloof tenderness of its sentiment, much like his own manner, was "The Washerwoman's Song" by Eugene F. Ware, relating a skeptic's unwillingness to rob a poor woman of her simple faith. That Flagler knew the value of





perfect faith and soul contentment, no one can doubt after knowing the above as one of his favorite poems. That he may have left skepticism, despite his Presbyterian training, and have doubted passionately as some men do, his own pastor affirmed.

Just before his death, after his fatal fall, he asked one day.

“Do you think it was fair Doctor? I was old and blind and deaf, was it fair to make me lame?”

It was the man who had “made” the East Coast of Florida questioning his spiritual adviser. One believes that he must have felt something of the pangs of genius when the creative fires have died; must have realized the impermanence of life which creates life.

Perhaps he felt in his darker hours what Masters phased in Scholfield Hurley’s epitaph: “God, ask me not to record thy wonders, I admit the stars and suns the countless worlds. But I have measured their distances, and weighed them and discovered their substances. I have devised wings for the air, and keels for the water and horses of iron for the earth. I have lengthened the vision you gave me a million times. I have leaped over space with speech, and taken fire for light out of the air. I have built great cities and bored through the hills and bridged majestic waters. I have written the Iliad and Hamlet. I have explored your mysteries, searched for you without ceasing, and found you again after losing you in hours of weariness-and I ask you: “How would you like to create a sun and the next day have the worms slipping in and out between your fingers?”

He was a lonely man although surrounded by those who might have become his fast friends. Of these latter, however, he had but few. None knew all of his nature and scarcely a dozen knew even a part of it. No one was perhaps closer to him in a personal way than was Dr. Ward, pastor of the free-speech chapel in the Royal Poinciana hotel in Palm Beach.

To Dr. Ward he told the secrets of his heart and this man came to know the intimate spiritual side of Flagler as well as it was given to anyone to approach this remote capitalist who feared friends as sycophants and allowed but few to keep his company. According to Dr. Ward, Flagler thought constantly of Eternity and the next world, meditating for hours in the quiet loggia of his home on the problems of the soul.

“Like all strong, self-willed men he was restless that he could not know in advance what the future contained. He wanted proof of Eternity,” Dr. Ward said. Yet despite these characteristics he was as devoid of egotism as though he were not one of the world’s richest and most powerful men. There seems to have been no ego in his composition; rather an awe-struck obeisance to the higher powers which had designed him for such an important atom in the world’s plan.

