

In Search Of David Paul Davis

by

Rodney Kite-Powell

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Major Professor: Gary R. Mormino, Ph.D.  
John Belohlavek, Ph.D.  
Edward Silbert, Ph.D.

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## Dedication

For my mom, Margaret Kite-Powell. Thanks for everything.

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## In Search of David Paul Davis

Rodney Kite-Powell

### ABSTRACT

The 1920s land boom in Florida produced a wide variety of characters. Among the most important, but lesser known, of those was David Paul Davis. Davis was born in November 1885 in Green Cove Springs, Florida. His family moved to Tampa in 1895, where he attended school and held a number of different jobs. He left Tampa in 1908 and reappeared in Jacksonville in 1915. That same year, in Jacksonville, he married Marjorie H. Merritt.

The young couple moved to Miami in 1920, where Davis began to sell real estate. He became quite adept, developing a number of subdivisions in the Buena Vista section of the city. He made a considerable fortune in Miami, but lost his wife, who died while giving birth to their second child.

Davis moved back to Tampa in 1924 and began work on the largest development on Florida's west coast. That development, Davis Islands, made him wildly rich and nationally famous. He followed up Davis Islands with Davis Shores, a subdivision in St. Augustine that Davis envisioned as being twice the size of Davis Islands.

The Florida land boom collapsed before Davis could complete Davis Shores. In an attempt to keep the St. Augustine project afloat, Davis sold his Tampa development in August 1926. The effort was in vain and Davis slipped further into debt. He died under mysterious circumstances while en route to Europe aboard a luxury liner on October 12, 1926.

## Chapter One

### David Paul Davis and the Florida Land Boom

Florida's 1920s real estate boom caused a sensation across the United States. Hundreds of thousands of people, more mobile than ever in their Ford Flivvers, Oldsmobile 8s and Studebakers, took to newly constructed highways and headed south into an anticipated paradise. They searched for palm-lined streets paved with gold – year-round sunshine with profits sprouting from the sandy soil.

A profusion of real estate pitchmen awaited the southbound throng, hoping to separate fools from their money. From this frenzy of hucksters emerged several professional developers who earnestly desired to change the landscape of Florida. The names Carl Graham Fisher, Addison and Wilson Mizner and George E. Merrick readily come to mind when considering the pantheon of the Florida land boom. More often than not, one particular Florida real estate mogul is relegated to second-tier status or neglected altogether. This is unfortunate considering his accomplishments: numerous developments in Miami, completion of projects in Cocoa Beach and Tampa's Hillsborough Bay and near completion of a development on Anastasia Island in St. Augustine. David Paul Davis achieved all of this between 1920 and 1926. More unusual still, he was a Florida native and dabbler in real estate as early as 1907.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For general information on Florida real estate developers during this period, see Charles E. Harner, *Florida Promoters* (Tampa, 1973); David Nolan, *Fifty Feet in Paradise* (New York, 1984); Doug Stewart, "The Madness that Swept Miami,"

Davis disappeared as quickly as he appeared. His death in 1926, ruled an accidental drowning, resulted from a fall out of a stateroom window of the luxury liner *Majestic*. The ship's captain ordered an immediate search of the dark Atlantic waters. The ship circled continuously for over an hour, searchlights scanning every inch of ocean within sight, but to no avail.

Biographers have continued to search for Davis through the years, but they, too, have been stymied – not by darkness and deep water, but by the incredible stories concocted during his lifetime, some of which Davis himself manufactured in an effort to craft his own unique image. His life is shrouded in the kind of myths that could only come out of the frenzy of the Florida land boom. Any biographer of Davis must look past the myths and propaganda and attempt to locate the truth. This study is a search for the real David Paul Davis.

### The Davis Family

David Paul Davis was born on November 29, 1885 in the north Florida town of Green Cove Springs, the county seat of Clay County, to Gertrude M. Davis and her husband, George Riley Davis. The small town, situated on the western bank of the St.

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*Smithsonian* (January 2001). For previous biographical studies of David P. Davis, see James W. Covington, "The Story of Davis Islands, 1924-1926," *The Sunland Tribune*

(November 1978); Thomas H. Meyer, "Davis Islands: The Booming Two Month Transformation of Tampa's Mudflats into Tampa's Dreamscape," *The Sunland Tribune* (November 1992); Rodney Kite-Powell, "David Paul Davis' Unfulfilled Dream: Davis Islands from October 1926 Until the Crash of 1929," *The Sunland Tribune* (December 1999).

Johns River about 25 miles south of Jacksonville, supported trade and tourism between the big river and the agricultural towns of north central Florida. The major draw to Green Cove Springs was the springs themselves, thought to hold incredible medicinal powers. A large resort, the Clarendon House, catered to weary northerners attempting to escape their harsh winter climate.<sup>2</sup>

David was a second-generation Floridian. His paternal grandfather, George Mercer Davis, came to Florida from South Carolina in 1853. Florida was among the newest states in the Union at the time, earning statehood in 1845. Settlers such as Davis streamed south to stake their claim in America's vast southernmost frontier. For the bulk of those recent arrivals, Florida only went as far south as Lake George, the source of the St. Johns River – to them North Florida was Florida.<sup>3</sup>

Born on April 26, 1832, George Mercer Davis came to Palatka, Florida as a talented twenty-one-year-old carpenter. The hand-hewn rafters he supplied for St. Mark's Episcopal Church in 1854 were among his first major contributions to his new hometown. That same year, Davis married fellow South Carolinian Martha A. Baisden. The marriage took place in Palatka on May 5, with William Collier presiding. Eleven

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<sup>2</sup> For an examination of Green Cove Springs and Clay County, see Arch F. Blakey, *Parade of Memories: A History of Clay County, Florida* (Green Cove Springs, 1976) and Thomas D. Ryan, *Clay County, Florida: A Sketch of Its Past* (Green Cove Springs, 1972). The location of Davis's birth is one of the only constants in all previous biographies about him.

<sup>3</sup> Putnam County Archives, hereinafter cited as PCA, biography of George Mercer Davis, available on the internet at [www.co.putnam.fl.us/palatka/tour\\_files/slide0078.htm](http://www.co.putnam.fl.us/palatka/tour_files/slide0078.htm). See Daniel L. Schafer, "US Territory and State" in *The New History of Florida*, Michael Gannon, editor, (Gainesville, 1996) p. 219, for emigration patterns during this era.

months later, in April 1855, the Davises welcomed their first child into the family.

Harriet “Hattie” Davis was the first of eight children born to George and Martha Davis.<sup>4</sup>

The second Davis child, George Riley Davis, arrived January 15, 1857. Like his sister, George Riley was born in Palatka. By this time, Palatka boasted many features befitting a growing town, including a sawmill, churches, a school and bustling trade. This growth was hampered by a damaging freeze in the winter of 1857. While not as severe as the freezes of 1835 or 1894-95, the drop in temperature drove many farmers out of business and kept tourists out of town.<sup>5</sup>

The people of Palatka soon recovered, but for some reason the Davis family chose to leave sometime between 1857 and 1860, going upriver to the new settlement of Welaka, on the eastern bank of the St. Johns River, twenty miles south of Palatka and seventy-five miles south of Jacksonville. Welaka, whose name is derived from a Seminole word meaning “chain of lakes” (an apt description of the St. Johns), had an economy similar to Palatka’s. The poet Sidney Lanier, who traveled throughout Florida in the early 1870s, described this portion of the St. Johns River:

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<sup>4</sup> PCA, biography of George Mercer Davis; Brian E. Michaels, *The River Flows North: A History of Putnam County* (Palatka, 1976) p. 89; *Putnam County, Florida: Marriages, 1849-1890. Putnam County Genealogical Society Quarterly Journal (PCGS)*, Spring/Summer/Fall 1985, Vo. 3, Nos. 1-3. Original in marriage book A, p. 20, PCA; *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900: Population*, Putnam County, Florida.

According to the *PCGS*, Collier performed only one other marriage and no records could be found to establish if he was a Justice of the Peace or minister or whether or not he had any “authority” to perform marriage ceremonies.

<sup>5</sup> *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Population*, Putnam County, Florida; obituary of George Riley Davis, *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 14, 1930. See Michaels for a description of Palatka in the 1850s.

Twenty miles above [Palatka], on the east bank, one hundred miles [sic] from Jacksonville, is Welaka, the site of an old Indian village, and subsequently of a Spanish settlement. Here the St. Johns narrows to a third of a mile in width. [...] Immediately opposite Welaka is the mouth of the Ocklawaha River.<sup>6</sup>

According to the 1860 Federal Census, the family's new land held a value of \$1,000, plus Davis had an additional \$500 in personal property. George Mercer Davis also reported a different occupation, that of farmer. No details exist to explain why Davis shifted from being a carpenter to working the land, or even that he completely gave up carpentry. The census does reveal that the Davis family lived better than most of their neighbors. Of the sixty-six total families enumerated in Welaka, only fourteen held more real estate and twenty-five owned more personal property. The census also lists a third child, one-year-old Nancy Davis. It is believed that she died in 1860 – likely a casualty of Florida's high infant mortality rate during this time.<sup>7</sup>

### War Between the States

The relative peace and progress of the Davis family, like that of almost every family in Florida, if not the South, would soon be shattered. Long simmering national

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<sup>6</sup> *Eighth Census*. Welaka was misspelled "Walaka" in the census. Allen Morris, *Florida Place Names* (Coral Gables, 1974) p. 149; Sidney Lanier, *Florida: Its Scenery, Climate, and History* (Philadelphia, 1875; reprinted Gainesville, 1973) p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> *Eighth Census*. The census data does not list what personal property Davis owned. George Mercer Davis does not appear on the census bureau's 1860 Slave Schedule as a slaveholder. A Nancy Davis is buried in the Westview Cemetery in Palatka with members of the Davis Family. The only date listed is the year of death, 1860. Also, Nancy Davis is not listed with the rest of the Davis family in the 1870 Federal Census.

tensions between North and South finally boiled over with the 1860 presidential election. South Carolina was the first state to leave the Union in protest over Abraham Lincoln's victory, followed by Mississippi on January 9, 1861. The next day, Florida's secession convention voted to depart. Soon, Florida would join a new nation, the Confederate States of America, headed by Mississippi's Jefferson Davis.

Members of the Davis family were caught up in this early surge of southern patriotism. When their fourth child was born in 1862, they named the boy Jeff, giving him the same name as the Confederate president. The family had returned to Palatka by this time, though nothing exists in the historic record to explain the move.<sup>8</sup>

George Mercer Davis enlisted, along with forty-four of his neighbors, in the Confederate Army on August 2, 1862 in Palatka as a member of the First Partisan Rangers Battalion. His unit's designation would change to Company B, Second Florida Infantry Battalion (IB) on June 24, 1863. By that time, Davis had seen light action in the defense of his state. That would soon change.<sup>9</sup>

In late 1863, Davis and the Second Florida IB fought in two more engagements in Florida, both at Fort Brooke (Tampa). In May 1864, the battalion was transferred out of Florida's military department and into Finegan's Brigade, Mahone's Division, Third Corps, Army of Northern Virginia. Davis now found himself in the middle of the war –

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<sup>8</sup> *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: Population*. Putnam County, Florida.

<sup>9</sup> David W. Hartman and David Coles, *Biographical Rosters of Florida's Confederate and Union Soldiers, 1861-1865* (Wilmington, 1995) vol. 3, p. 1181; Stewart Sifakis, *Compendium of the Confederate Armies: Florida and Arkansas* (New York, 1992) p. 16.

he and the Second Florida IB fought in the Battle of Cold Harbor (Virginia, June 1-3) and participated in the ill-fated defense of Petersburg (Virginia, June 1864 - April 1865), two of the bloodiest engagements of the war.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most overwhelming period of Davis's service in the Civil War was the Union siege of Petersburg, which began in June 1864. Davis's unit had again been reorganized, this time just prior to his arrival at Petersburg. Now a member of Company G, Tenth Florida Infantry, Davis and his fellow Confederates defended the Virginia city against Union attack. The besieged Rebels were at an extreme disadvantage; they were outnumbered, outgunned, hungry and poorly equipped.<sup>11</sup>

Arguably the most sensational episode of the siege was the Battle of the Crater, July 30, 1864. Union soldiers of the Forty-eighth Pennsylvania, led by Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pleasants, dug a 511-foot shaft underneath the Confederate lines. The former anthracite coal miners then dug a seventy-five foot powder chamber running parallel to, and twenty feet below, the Rebel positions. The chamber was filled with explosives and, at 4:44 a.m. on July 30, 1864, the command was given to blow it up. The initial blast, which opened up a crater nearly a quarter acre in size, killed or wounded 278 Confederate soldiers, but the Rebels soon regrouped and began pouring a merciless fire down on Union troops, who had crowded into the crater in an attempt to get through the Confederate lines. By 9:30 in the morning the battle was over. Total losses were 4,000 Union soldiers dead, wounded or missing, and 1,300 Confederate casualties, most of

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<sup>10</sup> Sifakis, pp.16 and 25.

<sup>11</sup> Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative* (New York, 1974), vol. 3, p. 629.

them wounded. The battle was a Confederate victory, but the morale of both sides sank in the aftermath. Unlike elsewhere along the Petersburg siege lines, there would be no more informal truces near the Crater, and sniper activity, always a problem, proved even more ferocious along this section of the line.<sup>12</sup>

Eventually the rigors of military service, the prolonged separation from this wife and children and the growing hopelessness of the Confederate cause, drove Davis to desert the siege lines at Petersburg on August 22, 1864. He did not go alone. With him were Sergeant David A. Dunham and Private Alexander L. Davis, both of whom enlisted with Davis in Palatka two years before. Two other Palatkans, Privates John Green and Lewis Roberts, were killed at Petersburg before Davis's desertion. The three deserters, soon captured by Federal soldiers, took an oath which renounced the Confederate cause and pledged their allegiance to the United States and were sent to Philadelphia. The war, for them, was over.<sup>13</sup>

While George was away on the battle front, Martha kept things together on the home front. Palatka was not physically ravaged, but it did see its share of adversity. The most intense episode occurred very early in the war, on October 7, 1862. The Union gunboat USS *Cimarron* arrived at Palatka to evacuate Union sympathizers from the area. The commander of the gunboat, Maxwell Woodhull, was told by former Florida Governor William A. Moseley (who lived near Palatka) that no Confederate soldiers

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<sup>12</sup> Sifakis, p. 25; Foote, pp. 531-538.

<sup>13</sup> Hartman and Coles, pp. 1180-1181. It is unknown whether the two Davises were related.

remained in the vicinity. At the same time, the gunboat's crew saw "armed and mounted men" in the center of town, near the present-day site of Westview Cemetery. The gun crews fired several shells and dispersed the small Rebel presence. Woodhull, infuriated at the lie Governor Moseley just told, gave the order to torch the town. Palatka was saved by a northern transplant, Mary Emily Boyd, who assured the Union commander that Moseley did not know about Confederate military movements and convinced Woodhull to spare the town.<sup>14</sup>

### A Time to Rebuild

George, like countless other disillusioned southerners, eventually made his way back home and attempted to return to a normal life. North Florida experienced the ravages of war more than the southern section of the state, but it also experienced a fairly rapid recovery. Tourists soon trod where armies previously marched, and that unstoppable artery, the St. Johns River, would again pump life into Putnam County. Davis's family began to reflect this growth, adding four more children during the next five years. The first post-bellum arrival was Charles, born in Palatka in 1867. Alice, born the following year, came next. When the census taker arrived at the Davis family's Palatka home for the 1870 enumeration, he found the seven member family led by thirty-nine-year-old George, who had returned to work as a carpenter. Martha, forty-one at the time of the census, still held the responsibility of "keeping house" with help from fifteen-

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<sup>14</sup> Allegra Kitchens, "Palatka, 150...and Counting," *Welcome Magazine* (Winter/Spring 2003). Kitchens quotes an article from the *Palatka News* dated April 28, 1917 giving Boyd's first-hand account of the incident.

year-old Harriet who, with her brothers George and Jeff, attended school. The two youngest, Charles and Alice, were not yet school age.<sup>15</sup>

It is unfortunate that the 1870 census does not list real estate or personal property values for anyone in Putnam County, making it impossible at this point to see how the Davis family fared financially in the decade following the 1860 enumeration. They, like other Floridians of the time, were busy putting their lives back together as best they could.

Ten years later, the Putnam County census taker again counted seven members in the Davis household. The family did change, though. George Riley, now aged twenty-three, moved out and his brother Jeff either followed suit or passed away in the intervening ten years. Additions to the household, still led by carpenter George, included nine-year-old Sarah and seven year old Howell Anderson. Remaining at home was the oldest offspring, Harriet, still unmarried at age twenty-five. She undoubtedly helped her mother with house keeping and child rearing responsibilities. Those responsibilities were compounded by seven renters sharing space in the Davis home. The 1880s would prove to be successful in many ways for the Davis Family. Three children, Harriet, George Riley and Sarah, would each marry and have children, and George Mercer Davis would find financial success right in his own backyard.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ninth Census; Tenth Census of the United States, 1880: Population.* Putnam County, Florida.

<sup>16</sup> *Tenth Census.* Four of the renters were black, including a father and his two daughters. It is impossible to tell at this time if any of them were former slaves of the Davis Family, but it is unlikely.

Harriet was courted by, and married, a local preacher named William Armistead. Eighteen years her senior, Armistead appears as one of the boarders at the Davis home in the 1880 census. The Virginia-born minister married Harriet on December 29, 1881 in a ceremony officiated by George K. Allen.<sup>17</sup>

Little is known about the marriage of George Riley Davis – not even Gertrude's maiden name is known at this time. According to the 1900 Federal Census, Gertrude was born in Cuba in September 1867, making her ten years younger than George. The chart also lists the duration of marriage – seventeen years. This narrows their marriage date to 1883 or possibly 1882.<sup>18</sup>

Record of Sarah Davis's marriage can be found in the Putnam County marriage book. She married Samuel L. Lyon on May 29, 1889 at Palatka's First Baptist Church.<sup>19</sup>

In 1883, fifty-two year old George Mercer Davis began manufacturing cypress tanks and cisterns by hand in a small shop behind the family home, located at the corner of Lemon and Fifth Streets. The business continued to grow, and by 1892 Davis was joined by his youngest child, Howell, and the concern became known as G. M. Davis & Son. The following year, they built a factory three blocks from the original location, adding steel tower construction to their list of services. Their partnership would last until

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<sup>17</sup> *Tenth Census; Putnam County, Florida: Marriages, 1849-1890. PCGS.* Original in marriage book B, page 168, PCA.

<sup>18</sup> *Twelfth Census*, Hillsborough County.

<sup>19</sup> Marriage book 1, page 80, PCA.

George Mercer Davis's death on June 11, 1896.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> PCA, biography of George Mercer Davis.

## Chapter Two

### George Riley Davis and Family

At some point between 1870 and 1880, likely more toward the latter, George Riley Davis left home to begin his own life. He settled in Green Cove Springs, approximately thirty miles down river from Palatka in neighboring Clay County. He does not appear in the 1880 census of either Clay or Putnam Counties, but that does not mean he did not live in one or the other area. George Riley is thought to have operated a steamboat along the St. Johns, carrying passengers and freight along the north-flowing river. However, he may have traveled as far south as Cuba, Gertrude's birthplace, or to Key West, one of Florida's largest cities during this era and a haven for Cuban exiles fleeing the Ten Years War (1868-1878), Cuba's revolution against Spain.<sup>21</sup>

It is around this time, between 1882 and 1884, that George and Gertrude were married and had their first child, Elizabeth. In another unfortunate twist of history, the State of Florida Census for 1885 is incomplete, with several counties, including Clay County, presumably lost forever. Putnam County's census was preserved, though, and the elder Davis Family is listed. What is known is that in Green Cove Springs, on November 29 of that ill-fated census year, George and Gertrude welcomed their second child into the

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<sup>21</sup> Nolan, p. 192. See Jefferson Browne, *Key West: The Old and the New* (St. Augustine, 1912; reprinted Gainesville, 1973) for a description of Key West at this time.

family – a son they named David Paul.<sup>22</sup>

Guide books of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century painted Florida as a paradise. One of these, Rambler's *Guide to Florida*, described Green Cove Springs from the vantage point of the St. Johns River:

On rounding Magnolia Point, the steamer enters a beautiful bay where, in full view, lies Green Cove Springs, the Saratoga of the St. Johns. It is already a favorite resort, which possesses several of the best hotels in Florida. Its importance is assured.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Rambler's bucolic description, George Riley Davis decided to move his young family, in 1895, from Green Cove Springs to another fast-growing town – a city, in fact – located on Florida's west coast. North Florida had just endured the worst winter on record. Two successive freezes, the first in December 1894 and the second two months later, virtually wiped out Florida's citrus industry north of Orlando. This undoubtedly had an effect on the Davis family and George Davis's boating industry, of which citrus growers were a huge part. With his steam boating experience on the St. Johns, Davis landed a job with the Favorite Line of steamers, plying the warm waters of Tampa Bay as

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<sup>22</sup> *Twelfth Census*, Hillsborough County; Nolan, p. 192; Duval County, Florida, 1917-18 Civilian Draft Registration. Most sources list David Davis's date of birth as November 1885, with a few giving the precise day, November 29. The only official record obtained thus far that lists his exact date of birth is his World War I draft card. Several attempts, mostly unsuccessful, have been made to obtain birth and marriage records for David Davis and his siblings. The 1890 Federal Census for Florida was destroyed by fire with the rest of the 1890 census data at the Commerce Department in Washington, DC on January 10, 1921.

<sup>23</sup> Rambler, *Guide to Florida* (New York, 1875; reprinted Gainesville, 1964), p. 92.

an engineer aboard the *Manatee*.<sup>24</sup>

### The Davis Family in Tampa

Tampa, the county seat of Hillsborough County and the Davis's new hometown, traced its history to the early days of Territorial Florida. The town grew along the northern boundary of a Federal military reservation known as Fort Brooke, established in 1824. The first post office, which opened in 1831, carried the name "Tampa Bay," but it was soon shortened to Tampa. The meaning and origin of the name has been debated for years, with no consensus, but a strong theory is it was the name of a native village (sometimes spelled Tanpa) on the bay.<sup>25</sup>

Judge Augustus Steele laid out the first town plots in the 1830s, but the United

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<sup>24</sup> Nolan, p. 192, asserts that George Riley Davis grew citrus trees for a living. For an account of freezes throughout the history of Florida's citrus industry, see Thomas B. Mack, *Citrifacts II: A Portion of Florida Citrus History* (Lakeland, 1998), pp. 125-127. For a general history of Florida during this time, see Samuel Proctor, "Prelude to the New Florida, 1877-1919" in *The New History of Florida*. George Riley Davis's obituary lists 1895 as the year of his arrival in Tampa.

<sup>25</sup> There a number of works regarding Tampa's history. Those of note include Karl Grismer, *Tampa: A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St. Petersburg, 1950) and Gary R. Mormino and Anthony P. Pizzo, *Tampa: The Treasure City* (Tulsa, 1983). For an examination of Tampa's nineteenth-century political development, see Curtis Welch, *Tampa's Elected Officials* (Tampa, 1997).

States government invalidated these because they included Fort Brooke property. In 1847, the federal government reduced the size of the fort and donated the excess land to Hillsborough County. The land was platted for sale, the proceeds of which funded the construction of a new county courthouse in Tampa. Tampa received a city charter from the State of Florida on December 15, 1855. Prosperity seemed certain, but national politics held different plans for Tampa and Hillsborough County.

The Confederate Army held Fort Brooke throughout most of the Civil War. It was shelled by Union warships on several occasions and was captured in May 1864. After scouting the area for a day, the victors found nothing of use and abandoned the post. Federal troops returned after the war to occupy the town.

In the years immediately following the war, the only profitable (legal) ventures in the Tampa area were fishing, logging and cattle ranching. As early as the 1850s, cattle traders established a route between Florida and Cuba, and resumed the traffic shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War. Cubans paid for the cattle in gold, not inflation-prone paper money, so area ranchers soon were back on their feet.

Florida, and Tampa, however, remained destitute for almost two decades. Finally, in 1881, relief was on the northern horizon. Henry Bradley Plant wanted to bring his new railroad south, and he selected Tampa as his railhead. The railroad arrived in 1884, and the following year construction began on Tampa's first two cigar factories, Sanchez y Haya and V. M. Ybor and Co., in a new industrial enclave – Ybor City. The railroad and cigars would shape Tampa like nothing else had. Plant improved the fledgling port at the southwestern tip of the Interbay Peninsula, and soon Port Tampa was shipping goods and

people to and from harbors throughout the Gulf of Mexico.

Hillsborough County's population grew, as did its prosperity. Tampa's population ballooned from 720 people in 1880 to 5,532 people just ten years later. Immigrants from Cuba, Spain and Italy came to work in the cigar factories of Ybor City and, later, West Tampa. Tens, and later hundreds, of millions of hand rolled cigars were produced in Tampa factories every year.

The same year that Ybor first came to Tampa, 1885, pebble phosphate was discovered in a riverbed near Fort Meade in Polk County. Phosphate was later discovered in the Hillsborough River and in the largely undeveloped southern portion of Hillsborough County. Though not mentioned as much by writers as the cigar industry and the railroad, the phosphate industry outlasted both. Tampa in 1895 still lagged behind Jacksonville, Key West and Pensacola in population, but it was rapidly gaining ground.

The Davis family was growing, too. By the time George Davis brought his family to the fast-rising city, two more boys had been added. Charles E., born in 1890 and Milton H., born two years later, rounded out the Davis brood.<sup>26</sup>

Just three years after arriving in Tampa, the Davises were witness to one of the young city's greatest spectacles, the arrival of United States soldiers on their way to Cuba and the Spanish-American War. Over 30,000 soldiers descended on Tampa, whose population hovered around 15,000 at the time. People were everywhere, and military campsites sprang up all over town. The *Manatee* undeniably carried an increased load of

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<sup>26</sup> *Twelfth Census*, Hillsborough County.

sightseers, and potentially was pressed into use by a harried quartermaster corps desperately in need of quality boats and qualified boatmen. Some private citizens got rich, and legends abound that twelve-year-old Dave Davis took part in the profiteering.

One of the most enduring stories is of German-born Robert Mugge, who owned the franchise for selling August Busch's Budweiser beer on Florida's west coast. With an anticipated 30,000 extra customers on the way to Tampa courtesy of the United States, Mugge ordered a trainload of beer from the main office in St. Louis. An indignant Busch wired back, informing Mugge that "There will not be a war and we do not sell beer by the trainload." Mugge persuaded Busch to sell him the beer anyway and he sold every drop of the amber refreshment. Davis did not have the connections or money of a Mugge, but he allegedly had the same acumen. A story persists that Davis sold newspapers for the *Tampa Daily Times* during this time. Davis sold his issues earlier, faster and at a higher volume than his fellow paperboys, making a small fortune in the process.<sup>27</sup>

In 1899, the Davises rented a house at 406 Madison Street in downtown Tampa, which at the time was still as much neighborhood as business district. They moved the following year to another rental home at 208 Pierce Street. The three Davis boys were enrolled in school and their father served as an engineer on a steamboat, most likely the *Manatee*. The Davises only daughter, Elizabeth, is not listed in the census. The sixteen-

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<sup>27</sup> Margaret Regener Hurner, "Robert Mugge – Pioneer Tampan," *The Sunland Tribune* (November 1989), p. 23. See Mormino and Pizzo, pp. 120-128, for an extensive account of Tampa and the Spanish-American War. For an account of Davis and the Spanish-American War, see Bentley Orrick and Harry L. Crumpacker, *The Tampa Tribune: A Century of Florida Journalism* (Tampa, 1998) p. 103 and Nolan, p. 192.

year-old apparently lived away from home, possibly at a boarding or religious school.<sup>28</sup>

In 1901, sixteen-year-old Dave, as he was coming to be called, worked as a clerk at the law firm of Macfarlane & Raney and paid rent at his parents' Pierce Street home. Two years later he served as a mate, probably aboard his father's steamship. He, along with his father, sister and brothers, lived in a rented home at 606 Jackson Street. Around this time, probably in 1901 or 1902, Gertrude either passed away or divorced George. She is not listed in the 1903 city directory, nor any other directory or census thereafter. Gertrude's departure may also explain Elizabeth's reappearance.<sup>29</sup>

By 1904, Davis gained employment with the firm of Knight & Wall, one of the largest hardware and sporting goods stores in the state. In addition, they held the exclusive contract to sell firearms in the newly liberated nation of Cuba. A group photograph of Knight & Wall's sales staff in 1904 gives us our first look at Davis's appearance. He is an uncomfortable looking young man, wearing an ill-fitting suit and misshapen hat. He is the shortest person in the photograph, except for the young boy at the bottom of the frame. Yet he still has a look of confidence, possibly even arrogance – a look seemingly inappropriate for a man of his limited means. Davis stayed at Knight & Wall until 1905 or 1906.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Sholes' Directory of the City of Tampa, 1899* (Savannah, 1899); *Twelfth Census*, Hillsborough County.

<sup>29</sup> *Tampa City Directory* (Jacksonville, 1903), hereinafter cited as *TCD*. An extensive search has been made by the author in an attempt to determine the fate of Gertrude Davis. She is not listed in any cemetery in Hillsborough County, nor is she listed in the available obituary indexes for Tampa.

<sup>30</sup> Harner, p. 49. The original cabinet card is in the collection of the Tampa Bay

On November 7, 1906, Elizabeth Davis, now twenty-two years old, married twenty-three-year-old George Henry Hodgson, a wood dealer who lived a little more than a block away from the Davis Family. The wedding took place in the newly constructed Sacred Heart Catholic Church, located in the center of Tampa's downtown. Elizabeth and George would maintain a close relationship with Dave and the rest of the Davises.<sup>31</sup>

In 1907, Dave partnered with Robertson T. Arnold and started the real estate firm of Davis & Arnold, located in the American National Bank Building at 616 Franklin Street in downtown Tampa. This early venture into Tampa real estate was short lived, however, because by 1908 Davis worked as a bookkeeper at the Sanchez & Hermanos cigar factory in West Tampa. Around this same time, in late 1907 or early 1908 George Davis married for a second time. His new bride, Kathryn, was fifteen years younger than George.<sup>32</sup>

It is possible, though improbable, that even at this early date Davis had his mind set on developing Big and Little Grassy Islands, the small deserted keys in Hillsborough Bay. The Army Corps of Engineers enlarged a portion of Little Grassy Island to form Seddon Island in 1905. Now known as Harbour Island, Seddon Island was developed as a phosphate and lumber depot by the Seaboard Air Line railroad as a part of the city's wharf expansion and channel dredging projects. What effect that had on Davis is

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History Center. Harner states that Davis, "then aged seventeen, took a full time job in a wholesale and retail hardware store," remaining there for three years.

<sup>31</sup> Hillsborough County Marriage Book 'U,' p. 230.

<sup>32</sup> TCD, year 1908; *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910: Population, Hillsborough County, Florida.*

unknown. Certainly, however, he was aware of the geographical area and rising value of property on the west side of the Hillsborough River and the shoreline of Hillsborough Bay.<sup>33</sup>

Davis's historical trail fades after his stint as a bookkeeper. Myths fill the void left by the absence of fact. It is speculated that Davis traveled to Texas or California, made a fortune in the Panama Canal Zone, or sold land in Gainesville, Florida (to pay his way through the University of Florida, no less). In 1971, a reporter for the *Tampa Daily Times* asked Milton Davis to explain his brother's whereabouts for this time period. Milton responded, "I was the one who went to Panama. D. P. went to Buenos Aires [Argentina] to run a cattle business. He was there about a year."<sup>34</sup>

There is no evidence to confirm or refute any of these assertions, but usually the simplest theory is the true one. Davis, in search of new prospects, probably traveled throughout the state, perhaps even the southeast or his mother's native Cuba. As previously mentioned, Knight & Wall, one of Davis's previous employers, had extensive connections in Cuba, including a store in Havana. Unfortunately, without the discovery of a journal, diary or other personal papers owned by Davis, we will probably never know where he spent those missing years.

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<sup>33</sup> Grismer, p. 224.

<sup>34</sup> Harner, p. 95; Nolan, p. 193; *Tampa Daily Times*, October 20, 1971.

## Chapter Three

### Davis in Jacksonville

Davis reappears in official records with his marriage to a twenty-four-year-old Tennessean named Marjorie H. Merritt, in Jacksonville, Florida on November 11, 1915. According to Jacksonville's city directory, Davis worked as an independent real estate agent during that year. Apparently he did not succeed in real estate, because in 1916 he worked as a salesman at C. F. Cole Shoe Company. That same year, he and Marjorie welcomed their first child into the world, George Riley Davis, II.<sup>35</sup>

The following year, Davis was an officer with the All Star Features Company. All Star Features operated a film exchange, shipping motion picture films to and from the various movie theaters in Jacksonville. The company's president, James W. Edmondson, also headed two Jacksonville-based investment companies. How the thirty-one-year-old Davis went from being a shoe salesman one year to being the vice president of a film distribution company the next will seemingly never be known.<sup>36</sup>

The United States at this same time was embroiled in World War I, and Jacksonville's Camp Gordon Johnston housed thousands of soldiers preparing to fight in the trenches of France and Germany. It is often stated that Davis operated a commissary,

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<sup>35</sup> *Jacksonville City Directory* (Jacksonville, 1915), hereinafter cited as *JCD*; *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920: Population, Dade County, Florida*.

<sup>36</sup> *JCD*, Years 1915 through 1917. The two companies were the Edmunds Investment Co. and Citizens Home Investment Co.

or more to the point a hot dog stand, across from the camp's entrance. While it is possible, the theory seems highly unlikely. Though probably not doling out hot dogs and Coca Cola to hungry doughboys, Davis did participate in at least one war-related event. He registered for the military draft, waiting until the final registration day to do so.<sup>37</sup>

Davis remained with All Star Features until 1919. Office work, or any other “regular” job, never satisfied him. If his past shows us anything, it is that he was impatient and always had at least a glancing eye toward real estate. He needed a place where a man of his abilities and interests could thrive, and Jacksonville was not it. Coinciding with this, thousands of people began cascading down from the Northeast and Midwest into south Florida, in search of sunshine, orange trees and their own slice of Florida land.

Davis knew opportunity abounded with all of these new arrivals. So, with Marjorie and their young son, Davis headed south on the Dixie Highway to Florida's original Magic City, Miami. By 1920 Dave, who soon went by the initials D. P., had turned his attention to South Florida's emerging real estate market. His third foray into land sales would prove to be a success.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See Nolan, p. 193, for the best retelling of the hotdog stand legend. Duval County, Florida, 1917-18 Civilian Draft Registration. According to USGENWEB, a widely respected, web-based genealogical resource, some men do not have birth locations listed on their draft cards because they registered on the final draft registration day in 1918 when this information was not recorded. Davis's entry does not include a birth location.

<sup>38</sup> *JCD*, year 1918. Harner, page 50. *Fourteenth Census*, Dade County.

## Chapter Four

### Davis in Miami

The people of Miami found themselves in the midst of a real estate boom at the close of World War I. Several factors contributed to the astonishing growth in south Florida. Personal transportation had been revolutionized by the appearance of affordable automobiles and the construction of new roads, connecting not only the state with its neighbors, but also cities and towns within the state. This combined seamlessly with the emergence of a new American middle class that had both extra time and extra money. Florida's notoriously low land prices provided the necessary catalyst, offering an excellent opportunity for people willing to suffer through the heat and mosquitoes – two facets of tropical Florida that had not yet been conquered.<sup>39</sup>

Miami, before Davis and a multitude of other developers arrived, was an outpost in the wilds of south Florida. Henry Flagler's railroad brought civilization and some brave tourists to Miami with the opening of his line on April 21, 1896. The young city continued to grow through the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The first developers of Miami properties, specifically in Miami Beach, were the Lummus brothers, John and James, followed in 1910 by John Collins and Carl

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<sup>39</sup> William W. Rogers, "The Paradoxical Twenties" in *The New History of Florida*. See Paul George, "Brokers, Binders, and Builders: Greater Miami's Boom of the Mid-1920s" in *Florida Historical Quarterly*, vol. LXV (July 1986), pp. 27-51, for a thorough treatment of Miami during the 1920s Florida land boom.

Graham Fisher in 1912.

Fisher, who is almost synonymous with the Florida Boom in Miami, also constructed the Dixie Highway, linking south Florida with the large population centers of the Midwest and Northeast. Davis praised the pioneering developer in 1924, telling the *Tampa Morning Tribune* that “Miami did not begin to make its magic strides until Carl Fisher had bought Miami Beach, a stretch of dreary sandland, and converted it into a fairyland of beauty.”<sup>40</sup>

By 1920, tourists and immigrants were pouring into Miami and south Florida. Well-built roads, the benefit of a new state road department and the Federal Road Aid Act, carried Florida’s growing populous more efficiently, and in far more directions, than the railroad ever could. Miami’s population almost doubled between 1913 and 1919. The Lummus brothers, with Collins and Thomas Pancoast, started a streetcar line between Miami and Miami Beach in 1919, facilitating access to the respective cities and providing a leisurely sightseeing tour, as well. Another innovation in Miami was the creation of Binder Boys. Noted by their quick cadence and snappy attire (collectively, they kept the golf knickers industry in business through the 1920s), they would purchase lots with a thirty-day binder for ten percent of the total cost. That binder could be sold and resold, rising in value each time, before it came due. Historian William Rogers notes that “at one time Miami had 25,000 such street brokers.” By their sheer numbers, they

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<sup>40</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, January 30, 1924; Mark S. Foster, *Castles in the Sand: The Life and Times of Carl Graham Fisher* (Gainesville, 2000), p. 119, pp. 148-155; Foster’s work is the most complete treatment of Fisher and his impact on Florida’s development in the 1920s.

contributed greatly to Miami's meteoric population increase.<sup>41</sup>

Davis was not in the early group of land speculators, but he did watch and learn from them. He noted what worked and what did not. While others laid the foundation, Davis applied his own abilities and went to work building his own corner of paradise – which he would subdivide and make available for twenty percent down. Like most every aspect of his life, the story of how Davis first started selling real estate in Miami is more parable than history. The basic story is as follows: Davis came across a development that had been “languishing” on the market. While not in the most advantageous location, with a little perseverance and a lot of advertising, Davis sold every available lot within days, making a tidy profit for his efforts.<sup>42</sup>

While there is undoubtedly some truth to the story, Davis's publicity machine, which went into overdrive after 1924, probably enhanced the original details. Davis did begin selling land that was thought too difficult to sell because it sat two and a half miles from the city center. He then opened his own company, United Realty, and started his first development, a business district dubbed Commercial Biltmore. This property lay in the greater Buena Vista subdivision, located just north of Miami's city limits. Buena Vista, or at least a section of it, is likely the fabled “languishing” property. Regardless, Davis made Commercial Biltmore a success with the same qualities attributed to him in both fact and fiction. He knew the importance of advertising, but more importantly he

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<sup>41</sup> George, pp. 35-37; Rogers, p. 293.

<sup>42</sup> Nolan, p. 193; Harner, p. 50. Nolan asserts that Davis made \$40,000 in ten days. Harner states that Davis “bought into the big Shadowy Lawn development.”

understood the benefit of providing complete infrastructure with his subdivisions. For Commercial Biltmore, that infrastructure included wide streets, curbing, sidewalks, water and sewer service and lush landscaping. The business district included stores, most notably Moore Furniture Company, a theater and business offices. Davis did not use the Mediterranean Revival style of architecture that later would become synonymous with the Florida Boom. Instead, his architects used a local vernacular style, building mostly bungalows in the residential areas with Colonial and Federal influences found in the commercial sections.<sup>43</sup>

Before Commercial Biltmore neared completion, Davis began developing the adjacent property into a residential section appropriately called Biltmore. The architectural styles within Biltmore reflected those of his neighboring development, and the homes were mostly bungalows, which widely popular and relatively inexpensive to build. As with all of his properties, past, present and future, Davis followed the axiom “location, location, location.” In reflecting on his Miami properties, Davis said that he always tried to chose “the most strategically located property in big and growing population centers,” then focus on the “improvements,” streets, landscaping or light poles, and the buildings themselves.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to Commercial Biltmore and residential Biltmore, Davis started sales on another residential project in the greater Buena Vista section, Shadowlawn. Located

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<sup>43</sup> *Miami Herald*, January 11, 1922; *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, October 1, 1925; *Miami City Directory* (Jacksonville, 1921), hereinafter cited as *MCD*.

<sup>44</sup> *Miami Herald*, January 11, 1922; *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, October 1, 1925.

within the former Broadmoor subdivision, Shadowlawn boasted features that were becoming ubiquitous – wide, curbed streets, spacious sidewalks and an abundance of tropical plants. Shadow Drive, the neighborhood’s main thoroughfare, featured a stone-faced set of entry columns, providing an air of class and individuality to an otherwise ordinary subdivision.<sup>45</sup>

The two Biltmores quickly neared completion at the close of 1921. Families and businesses began moving in to the newly constructed edifices and some, like Moore Furniture Company, hosted elaborate grand opening celebrations. In addition, many empty lots were still being sold back and forth between a growing cadre of land speculators. Though Davis undoubtedly participated in this fervent resale market, United Realty declared that every lot in all three developments was sold out, at an average cost of \$2,500.<sup>46</sup>

The Miami papers were filled with two very different types of stories throughout January 1922. While Hollywood funny man turned outcast Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle endured his retrial on career-ending rape, drug and murder charges, Davis prepared for a media blitz that would further boost the developer’s career. The fortunes of the two men, both in their mid 30s, were going in completely opposite directions.

Print ads for United Realty’s newest subdivision, unimaginatively titled

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<sup>45</sup> *Miami Herald*, January 11, 1922. A photo of the columns appears in a two page ad United Realty placed in the center of the *Herald*.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, January 14, 1922.

Shadowlawn Extension, began running on January 11, 1922. The first ad covered the two center pages of the *Herald*. Davis touted his previous successes, promising that Shadowlawn Extension would bring the same results. He included photographic proof of the progress of his earlier projects, featuring all thirty-five completed structures within the developments.<sup>47</sup>

The same day that United Realty placed the two page advertisement, the *Herald* printed an anonymous “news” article featuring Davis and his new development. This was a fairly common ploy used by savvy developers at the time. The first sentence of the story was just a tease for the “most unusual advertisement on the two center pages of this morning’s edition.” The story quoted only one source, United Realty’s publicist J. A. Riach, who probably wrote the piece himself. Riach speaks in reverence about Davis and “the thorough going manner in which [he] does his development work. He bothers more about the quality of the work than he does about the cost.” The pitch-man then compliments the City of Miami and the *Herald*, relating the story about how United Realty did not need to go out of town to Jacksonville or Savannah for graphics work. Instead, “right here in Miami in The *Miami Herald* office, it was all turned out for us.” The story closes with a final quote from Riach:

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, January 11, 1922.

It is to my mind fortunate for Miami that a man of the type of Mr. Davis, happened to take the helm in the development of such an important section as he has in the composite properties. The phenomenal success he has had is the natural result to be expected of such a comprehensive program.<sup>48</sup>

Another tactic to gain the public's trust was the use of an independent, professional organization to lend an air of legitimacy to a particular project. Just four days prior to Davis's mass marketing, the Miami Realty Board placed an ad of its own in the *Herald*. The Board warned the real estate-buying public about "unscrupulous hucksters and real estate conmen" who preyed on unwitting buyers throughout Miami. In response, the realty board printed a code of ethics and assured the public that all the members adhered to these rules or faced expulsion from the organization. The code, among other things, forbade "sensational and unethical methods of selling and advertising Miami real estate" and railed against "the molestation of Miami citizens and visitors on the streets, sidewalks and street corners" by these knickers-clad shysters.<sup>49</sup>

It is impossible to know whether Davis influenced the timing of this, and similar, advertisements placed by the Miami Realty Board in the months of January and February. At the very least, he took notice and made sure to include the "Member, Miami Realty Board" seal on all four corners of every ad he placed for Shadowlawn Extension. Davis peppered the *Herald* on a daily basis with ad copy, maintaining either a full or half page advertisement for his latest development from January 11 through February 20. Each one

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, January 7, 1922.

had subtle variations, focusing on a different point or targeting a different demographic.<sup>50</sup>

One of the most common tactics used during the month-long barrage were references to his other projects, which of course were in “close proximity” to the new venture. Davis also repeatedly mentioned how close Shadowlawn Extension was to the Buena Vista terminus of Miami’s streetcar system (a three minute walk) and how his company would take reservations for the day that sales would begin – January 18. Among the promises were a seventy-five-foot wide avenue intersecting Biscayne Boulevard, leading to the new neighborhood and, of course, fantastic profits to the investor wise enough to buy early.<sup>51</sup>

The advertising reached its zenith on January 18, with the second straight day of full-page ads. Buyers had been advised for the past week that, unlike most of Miami’s land sales, the sale of Shadowlawn Extension would not be an auction. The lots had a fixed price of \$1,500, first come, first served. Davis’s ad closed with the ominous admonition “Do it now – Tomorrow will never arrive.”<sup>52</sup>

Despite the apocalyptic warning, tomorrow did arrive, bringing with it news of another United Realty success. As with the announcement of land sales on the eleventh,

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, January 11 through February 20, 1922. Davis did not place an ad in the January 27, 28 or 30 editions of the *Herald*.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, January 11-18, 1922.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, January 18, 1922.

the January 19 edition of the *Herald* featured an unattributed article relating the news of Davis and his development. The headline touted “Davis Subdivision Opening Sale Big,” and the story went into detail about the development and the people who bought there. The subhead spoke of “Home People,” locals, who were the main buyers of lots. This theme was continuously repeated in United Realty ads. Unlike the previous article, Davis himself was quoted in the January 19 piece. He, too, was impressed with the number of Miamians who purchased lots in his subdivision, stating:

A significant fact is that the folks who bought our lots are all home folks. It makes me feel gratified that those who have been here, and are Miamians, and who ought to know values, have come out to buy where they are getting values for their money.<sup>53</sup>

Davis and United Realty placed advertisements, usually one half or one third of a page in size, in the *Herald* through the entire sales period of Shadowlawn Extension, which concluded on February 20. These ads exhorted those who had yet to buy to go out and see the project, assuring them that once they did so they would snap up a lot or two. The ads also relayed a reassuring tone, speaking of the profits on resale and on the value of Shadowlawn Extension as an investment, perhaps even for “your fourteen-year-old” who, when he turns twenty-one will “have a lot of his own.” Davis’s efforts paid off and Shadowlawn Extension, like his earlier investments, was an unqualified success.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, January 19, 1922. Saying that locals were buying in Davis’s subdivision was supposed to assure visitors and newcomers that it was a safe bet. This is akin to looking for cars with local license plates in restaurant parking lots when dining in an unfamiliar town.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, January 19 through February 20, 1922.

The year 1922, while providing a financial windfall for Davis, also took away something very dear. His wife, Marjorie, died while giving birth to their second child, a boy named David Paul Davis, Jr. It is unimaginable how Davis, at the peak of his professional life, felt as his personal life seemed to fall apart. The baby survived the ordeal, and Davis pulled himself together and finished his real estate projects. He did not do it alone. He asked his younger brother, Milton, along with Milton's wife Louise, to come to Miami and help him with his developments and, probably, with his wounded family. Milton went to Miami and, though he worked for a different company, Fidelity Realty, their offices were less than a half-mile apart. They spent 1923 working on D. P. Davis's projects, which would grow to include the Alta Vista and Bellaire subdivisions.<sup>55</sup>

After his wife's death, Davis began to indulge in the excesses that marked the Jazz Age. Defying prohibition, a Davis hallmark, was a core tenet of the era. He also began seeing a woman named Lucille Zehring, one of movie producer Mack Sennett's "Bathing Beauties." Another product of the free-wheeling Twenties, Zehring would play a very pivotal role in Davis's future.<sup>56</sup>

Davis had to realize that, despite his accomplishments in Miami, he could not compete with developments like Fisher's Miami Beach or George Merrick's Coral Gables, or for that matter Addison Mizner's Palm Beach. Once again, Davis began to look elsewhere for new opportunities. He decided to return to Tampa, which itself was

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<sup>55</sup> *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, May 10, 1953; *Tampa Daily Times*, October 20, 1971; *MCD*, Year 1922.

<sup>56</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, October 20, 1971.

caught up in Florida's land boom. In addition, with the exception of Milton who was in Miami, Davis's immediate family lived in the bustling west coast city, and he could rely on them to help care for his two young boys.

Perhaps as important, Davis knew of the possibilities that Tampa held. Transportation by rail, ship, automobile or even airplane, fostered a growth on par with that of Miami. Davis felt that Tampa, unlike Miami, would cater to both a vacation market and a business market, meaning more year around residents and, consequentially, a greater need for quality housing near the city's business center. Unfortunately, all of the prime real estate had long been sold and developed – at least the land above sea level. Davis heard of a plan that would change the City of Tampa forever. Burks E. Hamner, a local real estate promoter, had conceived of the idea of developing the mudflats in Hillsborough Bay in 1921. He was likely too busy at the time working on Temple Terraces, a subdivision named for the Temple orange, to devote any energy toward this new idea. Located north of Tampa in what is now the City of Temple Terrace, the development catered to the “weekend farmer” who could leave the city to a restful, Mediterranean-Revival style home amid the orange groves. The island development would share Temple Terrace's architecture, but not its lifestyle.<sup>57</sup>

Hamner likely contacted Davis in late 1922 or early 1923 about beginning what would become Davis Islands. During a Tampa Rotary Club lunch in early 1923, Hamner

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<sup>57</sup> *TCD*, Year 1924; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 6, 1924; Grismer, p. 390. The idea that Davis Islands was Hamner's idea is contradicted by what Milton Davis explained in his 1971 interview with the *Tampa Daily Times*. He stated, simply, that coming to Tampa “was D. P.'s idea.” Milton had to have known of Hamner's involvement, but probably wanted to make his big brother appear to be in total control.

described “in minute detail” his idea for an island development. Club members, at the time, claimed he had a “vivid imagination.”<sup>58</sup>

Davis and his two boys departed Miami in January 1924, almost exactly four years after his arrival. He left behind six thriving communities and, in a more practical move, retained his Miami business office which he renamed D.P. Davis, Inc.<sup>59</sup>

### Cocoa Interlude

One facet of Davis's real estate career that has not been covered by previous biographers is his possible involvement in a development on the Indian River in the City of Cocoa, 205 miles due north of Miami. This new subdivision, Carleton Terrace, was designed and put to paper in March 1924 by the Miami engineering firm of Watson & Garris. The plat, filed in Brevard County the following month, on April 21, 1924, featured the hallmarks associated with Davis and other high-class developers of the period: broad streets with exotic names situated close to a body of water. A small development, the neighborhood consisted of only fourteen streets, including the Dixie Highway which ran north-south through the eastern portion of the subdivision.<sup>60</sup>

Davis allegedly partnered with a local firm, Trafford Realty Company, on this

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<sup>58</sup> B. L. Hamner, “Tampa: A City of A Million People in 1936,” an address delivered to the Tampa Rotary Club, August 24, 1926, Tampa Bay History Center Collection, hereinafter cited as TBHC.

<sup>59</sup> *MCD*. Years 1923 - 1924.

<sup>60</sup> Amended Plat of Carleton Terrace, filed April 21, 1925 and addition to Carleton Terrace, filed January 13, 1925, Brevard County Property Appraiser's Office.

project, but there is very little primary evidence to directly tie Davis to Carleton Terrace.

No link has been established between Davis and Trafford at this time, either.

Circumstantial evidence, however, does provide some insight. One characteristic of the development, its street names, strengthens the theory that Davis was at least partially behind the development. The names Biltmore, Bellaire and Dade may reflect his past experiences in Miami, as does Lucerne, a street name Carleton Terrace shares with Miami Beach and Davis Islands in Tampa. Still, Davis's name does not appear anywhere on the original plat or the addition to Carleton Terrace, filed January 13, 1925. An examination of the Cocoa newspapers of the time did not reveal any extra details.<sup>61</sup>

Today, the neighborhood carries the same layout and, with few exceptions, the streets retain their original names. Additionally, twenty-two homes dating from the heady days of Florida's boom are still standing.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Brevard County Property Appraiser's Office. Mr. A. H. Trafford, the son of the founder of Trafford Realty and a Cocoa realtor himself, says he met D. P. Davis when Davis and his father were working on Carleton Terrace.

<sup>62</sup> Brevard County Property Appraiser's Office; Brevard County Property Appraiser's website, [www.brevardpropertyappraiser.com](http://www.brevardpropertyappraiser.com).

## Chapter Five

### Davis Family Remains in Tampa

While Davis moved around the state, and possibly out of the country, his family remained in Tampa. By 1913 George and Kathryn Davis owned a home, located at 207 South Boulevard, in the Hyde Park neighborhood. David's brothers, as well as other families, would occasionally rent rooms in the Davis house. The mud flats that would become Davis Islands could be seen from the roof of the South Boulevard home.<sup>63</sup>

Tampa, like Miami to the south, experienced a building and population boom following World War I. The west coast city climbed past all except Jacksonville in the state's 1920 census rankings, propelled by the cigar industry and valuable war-time shipbuilding contracts. Tampa's corporate limits expanded in 1923 with the annexation of most of the land south and east of the Hillsborough River to Fortieth Street, including the Seminole Heights, south Sulphur Springs and Gary neighborhoods. By the time Davis returned in 1924, Tampa boasted a greater metropolitan area population of over 124,000 people and the cigar industry, still the city's largest employer, produced half a billion cigars annually – all made by hand. Tampa rightly laid claim to the title "Cigar Capital of the World." Tampa's statistics would grow even bigger in 1925 with the annexation of West Tampa, a cigar making enclave located west of the Hillsborough

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<sup>63</sup> *TCD*, Year 1913. The Davis home at 207 South Boulevard has since been demolished. The Lee Roy Selmon Expressway presently passes through the property.

River and formerly a separate municipality. Davis's new creation in Hillsborough Bay, Davis Islands, would also add land area, people and money to the Tampa economy.<sup>64</sup>

#### Before They Were 'The Islands'

The two islands Davis used as the nucleus for his development had been known by a variety of names throughout Tampa's history. They first appeared, nameless, on the earliest sixteenth century Spanish maps of Tampa and Hillsborough Bays. The islands were included as part of the Fort Brooke military reservation created in the 1820s, and it is probably during the fort years that the larger of the two islands picked up its first name, Depot Key. Various other names, all describing a particular feature of the islands, appeared through the years, including Rabbit Island, Big and Little Islands, Grassy Islands and, eventually, Big Grassy and Little Grassy Islands.<sup>65</sup>

The first recorded sale of either of the bay islands came on April 18, 1860, when William Whitaker purchased the southern tip of Depot Key (Big Grassy Island), a total of six and one third acres, for one dollar per acre. Little Grassy Island and the remainder of Depot Key were purchased in 1881. W. C. Brown purchased the entire sixteen and one third acre Little Grassy Island for the same price per acre as Whitaker paid twenty-one years before. Brown and William B. Henderson teamed up to purchase a large portion

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* Year 1924; Robert Kerstein, "From Annexation to Urban Renewal: Urban Development in Tampa During the 1950s and 1960s," *Tampa Bay History*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1997), p. 73.

<sup>65</sup> Grismer, p. 255; D. B. McKay, "Pioneer Florida Pages," *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, October 26, 1958; Mormino and Pizzo, p. 153.

(sixty-nine and three quarters acres) of Big Grassy Island from the state for ninety cents per acre. The remainder of the island, twenty-eight and one half acres, was purchased by the town of Tampa at the same price. Brown and Henderson, in turn, obtained a ninety-nine year lease for the city's portion for twenty dollars a year.<sup>66</sup>

During one of the first channel dredging projects of the 1880s, cypress tree stumps were discovered in eight feet of water a few yards south of Big Grassy Island, illustrating that the whole bay used to be above sea level during the last Ice Age. Another channel dredging project, begun in the early 1900s, bisected Little Grassy Island, creating Seddon Island on the east side of the channel and a remnant of Little Grassy Island on the west side. Little Grassy Island usually disappeared under a strong high tide, but Big Grassy Island generally remained dry. Both islands were completely covered by water during the 1921 Hurricane.<sup>67</sup>

Tampa's City Council, on June 8, 1920, offered a referendum to voters asking whether they would support the purchase of Little Grassy Island for use as a city park. In an incredibly tight vote, the referendum passed 694 - 692. Though non-binding, the city agreed with the majority and purchased Little Grassy Island from Mary E. Brown, widow of W. C. Brown, on May 9, 1921, for \$25,000.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Grismer, p. 255. The islands were also part of the disputed 1818 Duke of Alagon grant. See Grismer, p. 46.

<sup>67</sup> McKay, *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, October 26, 1958; Grismer, pp. 223-224, 248.

<sup>68</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 12, 1920 and May 15, 1921; referendum results and the contract between the City of Tampa and Julia Travers, et al, May 9, 1921, filed with the City of Tampa Archives and Records Services (hereinafter cited as TARS); Grismer, p. 255. The referendum was strongly supported by the Board of Trade, which

Many histories of Tampa and Davis Islands relate stories of Boy Scout Troops going out to the bay islands for camp outs. Davis and his brothers, according to Milton, also ventured out onto the scrub-covered mud flats, catching crabs and frying fish instead of attending school.<sup>69</sup>

### A Revolutionary Development

Davis had bigger fish to fry when he returned to Tampa in January 1924. He intended to put Hamner's bay island plan into motion, but a variety of obstacles faced them before this could be accomplished. Davis first needed to meet with the city's leadership, both political and financial, to insure the islands investment was a viable and legal proposition. Tampa's mayor and city commission readily endorsed the plan, as did the Board of Trade, the city's major business organization, and Peter O. Knight, the city's most powerful and well-connected business and civic leader.<sup>70</sup>

The next step centered on land acquisition and a contract with the city that would sell him Little Grassy Island plus its share in Big Grassy Island, and allow him to fill in the submerged lands surrounding them. Negotiations between Davis, represented by Giddings Mabry from the prominent Tampa law firm Mabry, Reaves and Carlton, and the

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advocated the purchase of both Little and Big Grassy Islands for a total expenditure of \$80,000. It is not known why the city only purchased Little Grassy Island, but lack of funds is a likely cause. By and large, the referendum was supported by the middle and upper class precincts within the city, with the majority of "no" votes coming from the working-class neighborhoods.

<sup>69</sup> *Tampa Daily Times*, October 20, 1971.

<sup>70</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 5, 1924.

city were surprisingly public, with the *Tampa Morning Tribune* covering their progress on an almost daily basis. The two parties quickly came to terms, with approval by the City Commission the final hurdle. Some public opposition did exist. A small, but wealthy and influential group of residents who lived on or near Bayshore Boulevard objected to Davis's plans because it would be detrimental to their view of Hillsborough Bay. These residents, led by Dr. Louis A. Bize, who in addition to his medical practice also served as president of Citizens Bank and Trust, outlined their problems in a letter sent to Tampa City Commissioners on February 12, 1924. The Bayshore residents' view corridor was not the end of their problems with the Davis project. Their letter outlined six points of "protest" to the city commission. The first four stated that the city had no right under Florida law to sell the riparian (under water) rights to Davis, or any other developer, for the purpose of filling in. The fifth point served as an appeal to the environmentalists on the commission (there were none), explaining that the development "would be a spoilation of a great portion of Hillsboro [sic] Bay, the greatest natural attraction in the vicinity of said city." They ended with a general attack on the contract itself, which Bize and his neighbors saw as "vague, uncertain, indefinite, and fails to provide limitations against additional encroachments upon the lands held in trust by the City of Tampa and the State of Florida."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Letter to the City of Tampa from L. A. Bize, W. E. Dorchester, G. B. Drason, C. J. Marion, India F. Morris, John Anderson, Jr., W. M. Rowlett and John C. Martin, dated February 12, 1924, TARS. Only Bize, Dorchester and Rowlett lived on Bayshore Boulevard. Covington, p. 28n.13, points out that the real problem would not be the view along Bayshore. Instead "a greater danger would arise when the natural flushing of the bay would be ended by the dredging and terrible odors and peeling of house paint would develop to plague the home owners for many years." While the islands did interrupt the

Though submitted by eight people, the neighborhood contingent kept their protest to one page. In contrast, Karl Whitaker, powerful local lawyer and future city attorney, wrote a twelve page epistle, attacking the proposed contract point by point. Whitaker began by explaining he did not “care at this time to enter into a discussion as to the merits or demerits of the so called Davis Development Project.” Whitaker then outlined what he would like to see happen to Little Grassy Islands, a park similar to one in Miami’s Biscayne Bay.<sup>72</sup>

He continued to dissect the draft agreement. His comments ranged from the legalities and limits of the project to the wording of certain parts of the contract to the size and dimensions of planned city park space to the small number of limitations placed on Davis and his development. While the city did adopt some of Whitaker’s suggestions in this regard, such as the prohibition of “railroad terminals,” they did not include a covenant restricting “persons of African descent” from buying property within the Davis Islands neighborhood. The appearance of such a covenant would not have been unusual, as there were other developments in Tampa and around the country that included them, but it was not expressly detailed in the final contract.<sup>73</sup>

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“natural flushing” of the bay, the Hillsborough River had been dammed years before, impeding its flow into Hillsborough Bay. It did not become a serious problem until the islands were dredged.

<sup>72</sup> Letter to the City of Tampa from Karl Whitaker, dated February 12, 1924, TARS.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*; Kerstein, *Politics and Growth in Twentieth-Century Tampa* (Gainesville, 2001) p. 308n.1. Kerstein mentions two such subdivisions in Hillsborough County from this time period – Tropical Pines and North Bon-Air.

A number of people and organizations supported Davis's proposed island development. As previously mentioned, the Board of Trade strongly backed the idea, as did the Optimist Club of Tampa and numerous other business people, especially real estate agents and builders. Even Bize warmed to the prospect of the islands development.<sup>74</sup>

While wrangling with the city and citizenship over his proposed contract and development, Davis also went about the task of purchasing the non-public portions of Big Grassy Island from the estates of the Brown, Henderson and Whitaker families. Davis and his attorney negotiated the purchase of the Brown and Henderson portion of Big Grassy Island for \$100,000, or \$1433.69 an acre. He was not as fortunate in his dealing with the Whitaker Estate, of which Karl Whitaker was an important part. Davis finally purchased the six and one third acres of Big Grassy Island for \$50,000 – \$7936.50 an acre. Following the mantra of the times, if Whitaker could not stop progress, he would at least profit from it.<sup>75</sup>

City Commissioners signed the completed contract with Davis on February 26, 1924. The contract, altered slightly through the efforts of both Bize and Whitaker, still heavily favored Davis. It began with the sale of the city's rights to Little Grassy Island, its

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<sup>74</sup> Letter to the City of Tampa from the Optimist Club of Tampa, *TARS*; W. Scott Christopher, *Tampa's People With a Purpose* (Tampa, 1993), p. 70.

<sup>75</sup> Grismer, p. 256. While many sources mention the purchase price and families involved, no one has connected the excessive price the Whitakers charged Davis to Karl Whitaker's opposition to the island project.

share of Big Grassy Island, and all of the surrounding submerged land, for \$200,000.<sup>76</sup>

Restrictive covenants occupied the second section of the contract. Included among them were no “manufacturing plants, wholesale purposes shipyards; steam-railways or railway terminals, or commercial docks or wharves.” The city also forbid “buildings or structures” or “any fill ... west of the west boundary of said property.” No mention appears of any other boundary restrictions, one of Whitaker’s major issues. While it remains unclear why the contract was written in this manner, Davis did not exceed any of the boundaries of the original sale.<sup>77</sup>

The project was described in the contract as a “high-class residential subdivision,” which included a bridge to the development and parks within it. Both would be deeded to the city under the parameters of the contract.<sup>78</sup>

The \$200,000 Davis paid for the islands came as a surety bond, which would be returned to him in stages. The city would release \$100,000 “if and when the said bridge shall be constructed and the seawall and fills herein provided for shall be fifty percent complete, the city may accept a deed to the said bridge and fifty-five (55) acres of parks.” Davis would receive the rest when “said seawalls and fills herein provided for shall be

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<sup>76</sup> Contract between the City of Tampa and David P. Davis, signed February 26, 1924, *TARS*.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

completed.”<sup>79</sup>

City code stipulated that a contract of this scope must be ratified by the citizenship within ninety days, so a referendum was set for April 22. The voting public overwhelmingly approved the contract, with 1313 voting for and fifty voting against.<sup>80</sup>

A review of the details behind the \$200,000 surety bond Davis placed with the city allows an interesting look into the 1920s Florida land boom. Davis did not use his own money, but instead had investors, including two sitting Tampa City Commissioners, William A. Adams and William J. Barritt, purchase bonds of varying amounts, totaling \$225,281.25. A wide variety of people held these bonds, and the bonds themselves held a range of values. A total of eighty-two people, from business owners to window dressers, attorneys to teachers, real estate men to physicians, laid their money down, apparently convinced of the Davis project’s success. Investments, in the form of promissory notes, ranged from \$1875 to \$5000. No consistent pattern exists connecting the eighty-two investors, though they are possibly linked through the Board of Trade. Another probable connection is Peter O. Knight, who was an owner or investor in a number of the businesses represented in the tally of note-signers.<sup>81</sup>

Both city commissioners invested toward the end of the process, placing their money in after the required \$200,000 mark had been met. While there are records of

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 23, 1924; Grismer, p. 256.

<sup>81</sup> Davis file, *TARS*.

money exchanges from 1924-1926, there is no evidence that any of these notes were returned or discontinued when the Davis contract was finally fulfilled in 1928.<sup>82</sup>

A section of Davis's contract with the city stipulated that he had the "right to acquire, at his own expense a judicial determination of the City's right to grant to him the rights herein set forth." His attorneys brought the issue through the court system to the State Supreme Court, which ruled on September 9, 1924, that the city did have the right to sell not only land but also the submerged areas around that land.<sup>83</sup>

While Davis's legal case wound its way through Florida's court system, work began on lining up the necessary contractors to bring Davis and Hamner's dream to life. Davis signed a two million dollar contract with Northern Dredge and Dock Company to pump nine million cubic yards of sand from the bottom of Hillsborough Bay onto Big and Little Grassy Islands, creating Davis Islands. While he promised the city an expensive permanent bridge to the development, he needed a quick and cheap temporary bridge just to get men, machines, mules and materials to the site. The temporary bridge opened November 8, 1924, thirty-five days after land sales began for Davis Islands. The following day's *Morning Tribune* featured a photograph of Davis's business partner, A. Y. Milam, with two-year-old David P. Davis, Jr. in his arms, the first people to drive onto Davis Islands. Within days after completion of the temporary bridge, photographers and sightseers joined the construction crews on the ever-growing property.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Grismer, p. 256. The justices were divided 3-2 on the issue.

<sup>84</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 9, 1924. Al Burgert, of the Burgert

When Davis announced details of his plan to build "Florida's Supreme \$30,000,000 Development," the response from prospective buyers was overwhelming. Davis used the experience he gained in Miami and applied it well to the new Tampa venture. He opened a sales office in a very prominent downtown location, 502 North Franklin Street. One of the legends of the time relates that Davis chose this site because it previously housed Drowdy's Corner, a candy store whose windows he wantonly stared into as a boy.<sup>85</sup>

The sales office was awash in plans, schematics and propaganda detailing the future look, feel and functions of Davis Islands. A forty-foot by twenty-foot three-dimensional model of the project, designed and constructed by noted artist Harry Bierce and his staff, filled the center of the office. The model, like most everything else Davis did, was billed as "the world's largest." The Davis Islands development would encompass three separate islands and would be a city within itself, created for the new America booming all around. Built with both the automobile and pedestrian in mind, Davis Islands would have wide, curving streets, and the main thoroughfare, Davis

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Brothers photography firm, has also laid claim as the first person to cross the temporary bridge onto Davis Islands, doing so on April 22, 1925. Though the Burgert Brothers were contracted by Davis to take extensive photographs of the progress on Davis Islands, the bridge had been open for five months before the photograph of Al Burgert was taken. It may be that it was another bridge on the islands, not the main bridge. See Leland Hawes, "How Davis Islands Emerged From the Bay," *Tampa Tribune*, July 10, 1988, for Burgert's claim.

<sup>85</sup> Covington, p. 28n.18. Davis made every effort to mention the cost of his Davis Islands investment. He placed the \$30,000,000 price tag in almost every brochure, advertisement and news story produced between 1924 and 1926.

Boulevard, would have roomy sidewalks running along both sides. Landscape design responsibilities were given to Frank Button, a widely respected and nationally recognized landscape architect.<sup>86</sup>

Residential properties took a variety of forms. While single-family homes dominated the drafting boards of Islands architects, other housing options existed for seasonal and year-round residents. These multi-family residences, both apartments and hotels, were restricted to Davis Boulevard and a few streets close to that central corridor. All structures built on the islands would follow design guidelines established by Davis's company, D. P. Davis Properties. These rules, though greatly relaxed, would last until 1956.<sup>87</sup>

Davis designed the islands development so that it widened from north (closest to the mainland) to south. Davis Boulevard splits into East and West Davis Boulevards, then reunite at the bottom of the islands to form South Davis Boulevard. West and South Davis Boulevards were reserved exclusively for homes, while East Davis was predominantly apartments, hotels and the business district. The streets winding through Davis Islands carry a themed naming system. To further immerse residents and visitors into the islands scheme, all right of ways, except Davis Boulevard, were named after magical and exotic-sounding islands or bodies of water, such as Aegean, Jamaica and

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<sup>86</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 2, 1924; *Tampa Tribune*, January 14, 1990; Meyer, p. 50.

<sup>87</sup> Plan of Davis Islands, TBHC. The proposed Davis Arms Hotel, which was to be located at the western end of Biscayne Avenue, was an exception to the rule of apartments and hotels remaining close to Davis Boulevard.

Ceylon. They would also follow a loose alphabetical pattern, from north to south (Adalia to Susquehanna), with none more than 500 yards from the water.<sup>88</sup>

Relaxation and athletics were other important facets of the Davis Islands Plan. Tennis courts and a nine-hole golf course, each with its own clubhouse, covered a considerable portion of the islands. The tennis courts were situated within the fifty-five acre city park, which Davis named Marjorie Park in honor of his deceased wife. A Roman Pool and Yacht Basin rounded out the Davis Islands recreational landscape.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Plan of Davis Islands, TBHC.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter Six

### Davis Islands Becomes Reality

Davis launched, in the summer of 1924, a sales campaign unparalleled in the area's history. He continuously touted Davis Islands in half and full page newspaper advertisements in Tampa's morning and evening papers, plus in guide books and tourist magazines targeted toward the growing tourist market. The term 'mass media' had just entered the national lexicon in 1923, and Davis understood its power. He bought time on Tampa's flagship radio station, WDAE, and insured his ads found their way into all manner of Tampa tourism and promotional publications. He also sponsored, in 1926, publication of Kenneth Roberts's *Florida*, a history of the state.<sup>90</sup>

Another step toward making Davis Islands a reality was the formation of D. P. Davis Properties, Inc. Davis knew the importance of connecting with the right people. In Tampa, that meant Peter O. Knight. In Florida it meant Arthur Y. Milam. When Davis incorporated his new investment company, he placed Milam in the vice president's chair. Milam, a Jacksonville attorney, had entered Florida's House of Representatives the previous year and would, in 1925, assume the position of Speaker of the House. Milam

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<sup>90</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune* and *Tampa Daily Times*, August through November 1924; Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition (Springfield, 1995); Hampton Dunn, *WDAE: Florida's Pioneer Radio Station* (Tampa, 1972), p. 19; Kenneth L. Roberts, *Florida* (D. P. Davis Properties Edition; Tampa, 1926). Popular publications of the time included *Suniland Magazine* and *Rinaldi's Guidebook of South Florida*. See Meyer for an examination of Davis's advertising campaign in 1924.

held both political and financial power and, with his brother Robert Richerson Milam, himself a Jacksonville attorney and future president of Florida's Bar Association, added state-wide credibility and clout to the Davis organization.<sup>91</sup>

Everything Davis did in the summer of 1924 led up to his ultimate goal – the opening of land sales on Davis Islands. Davis spent lavishly on elaborate brochures, a fleet of buses and vast improvements, costing an estimated \$10,000, to the Franklin Street sales office. With the final design of the islands complete, maps were created showing lot locations. Davis divided the development into 8 sections, six of which carried a name describing a particular feature or its proximity to nearby landmarks. The Hyde Park Section, at the northern end of the islands nearest to Hyde Park, the Bay Circle Section, just southwest of the Hyde Park Section, named for its waterfront lots and circular street pattern, the South Park Section, at the southern end of Marjorie Park, the Hotel Section, so named for the Davis Arms Hotel, which was never built, the Yacht Club Section, named for the Yacht Club which, too, was not built, and the Country Club Section, including five of the nine holes of the Davis Islands Golf Course and its clubhouse. The southern end of the islands, though platted, did not carry section names. Land sales, Davis decided, would go one section at a time. The fateful first day was finally at hand.<sup>92</sup>

The first sale of lots, the Hyde Park Section, came on October 4, 1924, less than

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<sup>91</sup> Grismer, p. 256; Florida State Archives, photograph and short biography of Arthur and Richard Milam.

<sup>92</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 26, 1924; Plan of Davis Islands, TBHC. Each newspaper article about the various land sales mentions which section had just been sold.

four weeks after the favorable Florida Supreme Court ruling. The results of that first day's land sales are well documented -- all available lots, a total of 300, sold within three hours at an average cost of \$5,610 per lot. Few of those lots were above sea level, let alone graded and ready for construction. Some speculators waited in line for forty hours for the opportunity to buy into the yet unbuilt islands. Total sales for that day reached an overwhelming \$1,683,000. More interesting was the staggering resale of those same lots, some reportedly made inside the Franklin Street sales office between the first owners and eager prospects still waiting in line.<sup>93</sup>

Davis encouraged everyone to view his emerging paradise. Like many other real estate developers of the time, Davis owned a fleet of buses on which prospective buyers could tour Davis Islands. The buses, specially painted with the D. P. Davis Properties logo, brought people from as far away as Sarasota, Orlando and even Miami. Prospective buyers received colorful brochures, booklets and photographs showing how all of their dreams could come true, just by buying property on Davis Islands. Venetian style canals, luxurious homes, boating and waterfront grandeur all were depicted on lithographed pages within leather-bound booklets.<sup>94</sup>

Davis created a carnival-like atmosphere around his land sales, sponsoring boat races around the Islands and along Bayshore Boulevard, airplane exhibitions with stunt

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<sup>93</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 5, 1924.

<sup>94</sup> See Stewart, p. 66, for examples of this in South Florida. Photographs of Davis Properties buses are in the collections of both the Tampa Bay History Center and the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System. Examples of these booklets are in the Hillsborough County Collection, TBHC.

flyers, sports celebrities such as Olympic swimmer Helen Wainwright, who swam around Davis Islands, plus tennis tournaments and golf lessons from tour professionals Bobby Cruickshank and Johnny Farrell.<sup>95</sup>

The fervor created by the first land sale carried into the next, when lots in the Bay Circle Section went on the market on October 13, 1924. This scenario repeated itself each time lots came on the open market. As in Miami, Davis made sure to mention that many lots were purchased by "home folks" who knew a good investment when they saw it. Realizing the need to not flood that lucrative market, Davis spaced out the sales from days to weeks apart, allowing the property values to increase each time.<sup>96</sup>

Resales between individual buyers contributed to the frenzy of Florida's land boom, and the action surrounding Davis Islands proved no exception. Davis understood the importance of resales, both in how they maintained interest in his property and how they enhanced his own bottom line. He could raise the price on his own lots and, in theory, could also participate in the resale market himself. After October 15, 1925, resales were the only method of acquiring land on Davis Islands.

Many of the promises made by Davis and his company were realized, such as the golf course, hotels, apartments, canals and parks. One key aspect of the Islands plan, a business district, was also completed. Billed by Davis as "congruous with the plan of

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<sup>95</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, September 23, 1924.

<sup>96</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 14, 1924.

establishing on Davis Islands an ideal residential city complete in itself," the business section centered around the Bay Isle Building, located at 238 East Davis Boulevard and designed by noted Tampa architect M. Leo Elliot. Elliot followed Davis's requirement that the building "harmonize architecturally with the surrounding Island beauty." Completed in 1925, the Bay Isle Building is still the anchor of the Islands' business community.

Diagonally across East Davis Boulevard from the Bay Isle Building sat another commercial structure. Little is known about this second business building, except that it contained eleven store fronts; four facing Biscayne Avenue, five facing East Davis Boulevard and two opening south toward the neighboring property. A central arcade traversed the large building, which occupied four lots. The only evidence of this structure lies within the pages of the Sanborn Fire Insurance Company's maps of Davis Islands. It is possible that this market never existed. The words "from plans" run beneath the schematic of the building on the Sanborn map. Aerial photographs from the time are of too poor a quality to determine if this mystery structure actually stood on the southeast corner of East Davis and Biscayne.<sup>97</sup>

Houses, too, began to dot the sandy landscape of the growing islands. The architecture of these single-family structures strictly followed the design guidelines set forth by D. P. Davis Properties. Mediterranean revival, Italianate and Spanish styles featured soft pastel colors and intricate tile and figural designs. Two houses, one located at 32 Aegean and the other at 116 West Davis Boulevard, merit special attention. Both

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<sup>97</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map of Tampa, 1931 (vol. 4).

homes are associated with Davis. The West Davis Boulevard home has long been cited as Davis's personal residence. The existing historical evidence suggests differently, indicating that the home on Aegean was where Davis resided. Both homes are roughly the same size (around 3,000 square feet), but the home on Aegean is directly across from Davis's office. The home on West Davis may have been a "company home," since two presidents of Davis Islands Incorporated (successor to D. P. Davis Properties) occupied the home in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Like so much in Davis's life, the answer to this question may never be known.<sup>98</sup>

The Islands Plan included several hotel and apartment projects. The most noticeable are the Mirasol, Palazzo Firenze (Palace of Florence), Palmarin Hotel (now known as Hudson Manor) and the Spanish Apartments. The Mirasol, Davis Islands' tallest building, sits at the end of a canal and has its own yacht basin. The Palace of Florence drew its inspiration from the Palazzo Vecchino in Florence, Italy. Designed by Athos Menebun and M. Leo Elliot for Philip Licata of the Tampa Investment Company, the Palace of Florence incorporated a variety of materials, such as terra cotta, wrought iron and stucco and boasted a tower on each end of the front elevation.<sup>99</sup>

Some early residential buildings, notably the Biscayne Hotel, Bachelor Apartments and Venetian Apartments, have since been demolished. Others, such as the

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<sup>98</sup> *TCD*, years 1925 through 1932; Hillsborough County Property Appraisers Office.

<sup>99</sup> Covington, p. 26; Del Acosta, et al, *City of Tampa, Local Historic Landmarks and Local Historic Districts* (Tampa, 2003), pp. 15-16. Both Hudson Manor and the Palace of Florence are locally landmarked by the City of Tampa.

Augustine and Columbia Apartments on Columbia Drive, and the Flora Dora Apartments and Boulevard Apartments on Davis Boulevard are still occupied. The Merry Makers Club, situated on land given to the club by Davis on the corner of Danube and Barbados, represents the only social club originally planned for the Islands.

The Davis Islands Coliseum, completed in 1925, embodied the largest project originally planned for the community. Funded through the sale of stock certificates, the Coliseum housed concerts, auto shows, conventions and many other events within its auditorium – among the largest of its kind in the southeastern United States. Located on Danube, the Davis Islands Coliseum was destroyed by fire in the mid-1970s.

Among the original buildings hidden from view on the islands is the Davis Islands Garage. Located at the northern tip of the main island near the site of the original tennis courts, the garage reinforces the notion that Davis Islands was designed for people with automobiles. Part storage facility, part repair shop, the Davis Islands Garage fits architecturally, thematically and functionally into Davis's idea for a self-sufficient planned community.

Blessed, in early 1925, with success, cash and an extraordinary ego, Davis cast his determined stare in a more personal direction. One of the enduring stories regarding Davis at this time centers on what seemed an absurd assertion, that he would marry the next Queen of Gasparilla, who had yet to be named. Davis once again, the legend goes, showed he could accomplish anything he truly desired, marrying twenty-two-year-old Elizabeth Nelson, Queen Gasparilla XVII, on October, 10, 1925. Davis, who had recently turned forty-one, allegedly made this claim over a glass of champagne early in 1925,

probably in January, possibly even on New Year's Eve. Gasparilla, Tampa's version of Mardi Gras, starred members of Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla, made up of Tampa's business elite, in pirate garb "invading" the city. In a more traditional sense, Gasparilla also was a social scene, complete with an annual grand ball and coronation of a king and queen. The king came out of the Krewe's membership and usually was in his forties or fifties, while the queen was the daughter of a Krewe member, usually in her teens or twenties.<sup>100</sup>

The naming of the court of Gasparilla is a secret, but it is decided in advance of the Coronation Ball. Davis had a number of connections within the Krewe, and it is quite likely that he knew Nelson would be elected queen. The real question is did he know her and did they have a secret relationship; did he have an unrequited desire for her, using his boast to gain her interest and attention; did he even care who it would be? We will probably never know.

Elizabeth Nelson was not the only woman in Davis's life. According to Milton Davis, D. P. Davis's marriage to Nelson was designed to make Zehring, whom Davis continued to see since his Miami days, jealous. Davis and Zehring maintained a long distance, on and off relationship which apparently was in an "off" stage.<sup>101</sup>

Davis and Nelson divorced and remarried in the span of eight weeks. Rumor and innuendo flew as to the reasons why the couple's relationship was particularly stormy. By this time, Davis had developed a substantial drinking problem, an unintended

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<sup>100</sup> Orrick and Crumpacker, p. 115.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*; *Tampa Daily Times*, October 20, 1971.

consequence of prohibition colliding with the Jazz Age. Like many men of his time, including Carl Fisher, Davis enjoyed the advantage Florida's coastline provided bootleggers who brought illicit alcohol into the state. While no evidence exists showing Davis's drinking affected his work, contemporaries acknowledge that it brought out his melancholy side and greatly affected his personal life.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Orrick and Crumpacker, p. 116; *Tampa Daily Times*, October 20, 1971; Foster, p. 297.

## Chapter Seven

### Davis Shores, St. Augustine, Florida

Despite his success in Tampa, and partly because of it, Davis grew restless once again. As the Hillsborough Bay project was the next step for Davis to take from his Miami experiences, Davis Islands became a stepping stone to an even more ambitious project. That project, Davis Shores in St. Augustine, arguably led to his financial downfall and untimely death.

The same day Davis completed sales on Davis Islands lots, and just five days after his marriage to Nelson, he announced plans for a new development in northeast Florida on St. Augustine's Anastasia Island. As in Tampa, St. Augustine's newspapers heralded the news of a new Davis development as a magical elixir. The *Evening Record's* banner front page headline stated simply "Davis to Develop Here."<sup>103</sup>

St. Augustine's history is as storied as any place in the United States. Established in 1565 by Spanish conquistador Pedro Menendez de Aviles, it is the oldest city in the United States. Both fought over and neglected through the years, St. Augustine always maintained a presence on Florida's northeast coast, holding the mouth of the Mantanzas River as it enters the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> St. Augustine *Evening Record*, October 15, 1925.

<sup>104</sup> See Michael Gannon, "First European Contacts," in *The New History of Florida*, pp. 16-39, for a complete history of St. Augustine's early history.

More a point of entry than a place to stay, St. Augustine still attracted her share of characters. The city served as railroad tycoon Henry Flagler's Florida foothold in the 1880s, but was roundly rejected in favor of her southern sisters during the early portion of Florida's Land Boom. Davis, born only thirty miles west of the "Ancient City," planned to change that.<sup>105</sup>

If Davis's plan for Davis Islands seemed ambitious, those he held for Davis Shores appeared close to impossible. Davis asserted he would spend \$60,000,000 on the Shores project, twice his pledge for Davis Islands. The layout featured a \$1,500,000 hotel, \$250,000 country club, a yacht club and a Roman pool complete with a casino, each costing \$200,000 and two eighteen-hole golf courses, all crisscrossed by fifty miles of streets and one hundred miles of sidewalks. Each lot was designed to border a golf course or the water. Unfortunately for Davis, few of these plans would actually materialize.<sup>106</sup>

Why did Davis decide to start a large-scale real estate project in St. Augustine? Previous developers, going back to Flagler, viewed the old city as merely a gateway into Florida. Davis was seemingly going in reverse, from Miami to Tampa to St. Augustine. Part of the reason lies with his partner, A. Y. Milam. Milam, along with J. Clifford R. Foster, Adjutant General of the State of Florida, put the idea into Davis's mind. Jacksonville financiers, undoubtedly the Milam brothers and/or their associates, backed

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<sup>105</sup> George Buker and Jean Parker Waterbury, *Oldest City: St. Augustine, Saga of Survival* (St. Augustine, 1983), pp. 226-227; Foster, p. 139.

<sup>106</sup> Tallahassee Daily *Democrat*, November 4, 1925.

the project with a \$250,000 investment. Davis placed Foster in charge of acquiring the land, a total of 1,500 acres covering the northeastern portion of Anastasia Island.<sup>107</sup>

The early press regarding Davis Shores always mentioned the historic importance of St. Augustine, as well as its beauty and charm. Davis admitted that it would be a daunting task to integrate Davis Shores into the existing architecture of St. Augustine, which the reader was constantly reminded lay only 2,200 feet away. Advertisements for Davis Shores demonstrated his belief that the company was up to the challenge.<sup>108</sup>

Organization of Davis Shores' corporate structure would follow that of Davis Islands, with Davis and the Milam brothers in the top positions. Davis held the office of president, with A. Y. Milam as vice president and R. R. Milam general manager. A host of other positions filled out the corporate flow chart, including architects, accountants, engineers and stenographers.<sup>109</sup>

Davis wanted to build the Davis Shores office on St. Augustine's main plaza, an area held sacred by many St. Augustinians. Citizens sued and won, forcing Davis to consider a spot south of the plaza on Aviles Street. That office would never be built.<sup>110</sup>

The first stage of land sales began November 14, 1925. Within a few hours, all

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, October 17, 1925; Davis Shores file, St. Augustine Historical Society (hereinafter cited as SAHS). Foster's title of Adjutant General was an honorary one, connected with the state's militia system. Davis was also an "officer," a Lieutenant Colonel, in the state's militia under Governor John Martin, see Nolan, p. 196.

<sup>108</sup> Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, October 17, 1925.

<sup>109</sup> Davis Shores file, SAHS.

<sup>110</sup> Buker and Waterbury, pp. 227-228.

available lots sold for a total of \$16,268,000. The first one hundred days of operation, Davis crowed, brought in a total of \$50,000,000 in lot sales. Unfortunately for Davis, that was the total value of the land. Buyers paid only a small percentage, usually five to ten percent, as a down payment, with the rest coming in as monthly mortgage payments. Only a fraction of the \$50,000,000 actually flowed into Davis Properties coffers.<sup>111</sup>

As with Davis Islands, dredging was a necessity for the ultimate success of Davis Shores. A “world record” dredging contract, which would go on non-stop until all 13,000,000 cubic feet of fill was in place, began on Halloween 1925, fifteen days prior to the first sale of land. Ultimately, it would be Davis who was haunted by the specter, rather than the spectacle, of Davis Shores.<sup>112</sup>

### "The Bubble Bursts"

In 1926, there were over 850 companies and individuals listed in the Tampa City Directory under its various real estate listings. The realtors covered Hillsborough County and west Central Florida, with a few touting investments in South Florida. Eighty-two of these companies placed real estate ads in the directory's special advertising section, up from seventy-four in 1925. Other economic signposts of 1926 began to suggest a turn in another direction. The year began with news of slow real estate sales, a condition which did not worry Davis or most other Florida developers. But as the temperature increased from winter into spring, so did Davis's problems. Instead of receiving an expected four

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<sup>111</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 15, 1925.

<sup>112</sup> *St. Augustine Evening Record*, October 15, 1925.

million dollars in second payments on Davis Islands property, only \$30,000 in mortgages payments arrived. Both Davis Islands and Davis Shores had sold out by this time, and resales were moving slowly. In short, Davis had a serious cash flow problem.<sup>113</sup>

Con men had so infested the Florida real estate market, stealing millions of dollars from hapless investors across the United States, that potential buyers grew very skittish. Northern banks, too, grew weary of Florida investments. This stance against any Florida real estate investments soon spread across the country. The state of Ohio passed "blue sky" laws that forbade "certain firms" from selling Florida land in Ohio. This view was shared by a Chicago investment banker who claimed that "this Southern land boom is a fertile field for pirates of promotion." Though not a "pirate of promotion," Davis's luck changed as well, with more and more investors defaulting on their loans, starving him of much needed cash.<sup>114</sup>

Davis was not alone in his fall from realty grace. The entire Florida real estate market began a steady decline in 1926 and outside observers were quick to point that out. The *New York Times* reported a "lull" in the Florida market in February. By July, the *Nation* claimed that the real estate business in Florida had collapsed. "The world's greatest poker game, played with building lots instead of chips, is over. And the players are now ... paying up."<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> *TCD*, years 1925 and 1926; Covington, p. 27

<sup>114</sup> Covington, p. 26.

<sup>115</sup> Both the *New York Times* and *Nation* quotes are from Michael Gannon, *Florida: A Short History* (Gainesville, 1993), p. 82.

Davis Shores continued to draw away all available resources, resulting in slower construction on Davis Islands. An overall shortage of building materials made matters worse. Davis had little choice but to sell his Tampa investment.

### Davis Sells his Islands

The failure of a project on the scale of Davis Islands spelled potential catastrophe for Tampa, both in terms of pride and prosperity. A considerable number of important people bought into the islands and now the situation looked bleak. Though it is not known which bank or banks Davis utilized for deposits and credit, it can be assumed, given his initial problems with Dr. Louis Bize, that it was not the Citizens Bank and Trust Company. Two more likely choices were First National, which had direct ties with Jacksonville and, potentially, with the Milam brothers, and Exchange National Bank, where Peter O. Knight served as a vice president.<sup>116</sup>

Either way, Knight, who at the time was president of Tampa Electric Company, had an intense interest in keeping Davis Islands afloat. Despite stories to the contrary, the dredging project was far from completion, roads awaited paving and large improvements such as the pool and the promised bridge still lay years in the future.<sup>117</sup>

Knight convinced the Boston engineering firm of Stone & Webster, owners of

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<sup>116</sup> For insight into Knight's influence in Tampa's growth, see Kerstein, *Politics and Growth in Twentieth Century Tampa*.

<sup>117</sup> Evidence of the islands' being incomplete lies in the advertisements placed in the *Tampa Morning Tribune* after Davis sold the development and in Burgert Brothers photographs of Davis Islands.

Tampa Electric, to purchase Davis Islands. Stone & Webster formed a new subsidiary, Davis Islands Investment Company, which in turn purchased Davis Islands on August 2, 1926. Davis received forty-nine percent of the stock in the new company, which he immediately used as collateral on a \$250,000 loan so work could continue on Davis Shores. This amount proved far too small to plug the gapping holes in Davis's St. Augustine financing – Davis Shores was simply too expensive.<sup>118</sup>

Davis needed a change of scenery. He booked passage, with a disputed number of friends and associates, aboard the luxury liner *Majestic*. The German-built ship was billed as “The Largest Steamer in the World,” and was owned and operated by the Cunard Line of steamships. The ship made regular trips between New York, Great Britain and France, catering to the wealthy and world-wise.

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<sup>118</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 3, 1926; Covington, p. 27.

## Chapter Eight

### Casualties of The Boom

Davis would not live to see the end of the trans-Atlantic voyage, much less either of his monumental projects, Davis Islands or Davis Shores, completed. Stories of Davis's death always include some element of mystery. The only undisputed facts are that he went overboard and drowned while en route to Europe aboard the ocean liner *Majestic* on October 12, 1926 and that Zehring accompanied him on the voyage. What is in question is how he ended up in the water; by accidentally falling out of a state room window, being pushed out or jumping out to end his own life. A multitude of stories fill the void.

Victory National Life Insurance Company, founded by Sumter Lowry, (a member of Tampa's City Commission in 1924) sold Davis a \$300,000 policy a few months before his death. Davis held policies with other insurance companies and, since his body was not recovered, some felt that Davis faked his own death. Lowry, "anxious to make a reputation for paying claims promptly," hired an investigator, who, in Lowry's words:

went to England and talked to the Cunard Line offices. They established the fact that a reliable steward had been standing outside Mr. Davis' cabin and he heard voices in the cabin. In a few minutes one of the parties in the cabin rushed out and said that Mr. Davis had gone overboard.

The steward had seen Mr. Davis go in the cabin and he had never left his position at the door until the announcement was made that Mr. Davis was lost. He rushed in the cabin which was small and it would have been impossible for a man to hide himself in. The cabin was empty. D. P. Davis was gone.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Sumter Lowry, *Ole 93* (Tampa, 1970), pp. 37-38.

Lowry paid out the claim based on the investigator's conclusion that Davis was indeed dead.

Lowry's findings regarding Davis's death did not assuage all doubts on the subject. Many felt that Davis leapt overboard to end his life. Chief among this theory's proponents was the captain of the *Majestic*. Another who thought Davis killed himself was Jerome McLeod, who had joined D. P. Davis Properties in 1925 as assistant publicity director after a stint at the *Tampa Daily Times*. "He got drunk," McLeod told a later interviewer, and "when he got drunk he got maudlin." A third story comes from a steward who stood outside Davis's room and overheard an argument between Davis and Zehring. The *Majestic's* employee claimed Davis said, "I can go on living or end it. I can make money or spend it. It all depends on you." The statement was punctuated by a loud splash. This runs somewhat counter to the testimony given Lowry, in which the steward had to be told of Davis's fall by Zehring.<sup>120</sup>

Davis's brother Milton had a different story. While acknowledging D. P. Davis had a drinking problem, he believed his death was an accident. Milton traveled to New York City to speak with Zehring about his brother's final moments. Milton, who claimed David probably intended to divorce his second wife and marry his girlfriend, restated Zehring's recollection: "Lucille said there had been a party and D. P. was sitting in an open porthole, one of those big ones. It was storming outside, and he blew out the window. She said she started to scream and grab his leg, but it was blown out of her

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<sup>120</sup> Orrick and Crumpacker, p. 116; Nolan, p. 226.

hands. That's what happened."<sup>121</sup>

There are a variety of problems and inconsistencies with each of these stories. Some say that Davis and Zehring were alone while others say there was a party. The *Majestic* was among the largest ocean liners in the world and undoubtedly had "large portholes," and Davis was a small man, but could he really sit in one and then be "blown overboard"? Could the steward standing outside of the closed stateroom door hear a loud splash that occurred *outside* the ship and dozens of yards below the open window? The idea that Davis booked passage with a large party, including Davis Properties employees, places doubt that the intent of the voyage was to divorce his wife.<sup>122</sup>

Davis's drinking problem unquestionably contributed to his untimely death, but to what degree? Some point to the possible fight with Zehring, others to his overall financial collapse, as reasons why he would commit suicide. Alcohol inevitably compounded those problems. Others, like Davis's brother, felt that his alcoholism merely put him in the position of hurting himself, intentionally or otherwise.

Murder, too, is a possibility. Some stories relate that Davis had up to \$50,000 in cash with him. Others discount this, claiming that he hardly ever carried large amounts of money on him. Motive and opportunity do not seem to be on the side of murder, but no one could lead his life without making enemies, especially after losing so much money in

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<sup>121</sup> *Tampa Daily Times*, October 20, 1971.

<sup>122</sup> All attempts to locate interior photographs of rooms on the ship have been unsuccessful. The *Majestic* herself was sold to the British navy for training purposes and burned accidentally in the 1939.

such a brief period of time.<sup>123</sup>

Yet another theory intimates that Davis faked his death. While discredited by Lowry's investigation and Milton's assurances to the contrary, it remains a possibility. How, or even if, he fell overboard is still a mystery. Until new evidence is found, any theory regarding Davis's death is just that, theory.

### Davis Islands Awarded

Validation for Davis's determined plan came in 1927 when the American Association of City Planners awarded its first prize to Davis Islands. The Association pointed favorably to the layout, which,

embraced sixty streets, representing a total of twenty-seven miles of broad, curving boulevards sixty to 100 feet in width, and several miles of picturesque, winding waterways.

It provided for nearly eleven miles of waterfront locations and a large amount of golf course frontage for fine homes. It was so planned that not any residential lot in the entire property would be more than 500 yards from the water.<sup>124</sup>

Though he never saw his creation to completion, Davis's dream of a model community became reality. The award was as much for Davis's visionary planning as for Stone & Webster's continued execution, referred to in the last sentence of the

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<sup>123</sup> *Tampa Daily Times*, October 20, 1971; Nolan, p. 225; Orrick and Crumpacker, p. 116.

<sup>124</sup> Hillsborough County Planning Commission, *Davis Islands Plan: Tampa Urban Case Study* (Tampa, no date), p. 20.

commendation. "The development of these features has continued throughout the property with provision of all utilities enjoyed by the most exclusive residential communities."<sup>125</sup>

### Stone & Webster Continue Davis's Vision

Stone & Webster continued construction on Davis Islands in late 1926, with attention focused primarily on infrastructure. The company placed an advertisement in the *Tampa Morning Tribune* trumpeting "Dredging Hits Record Speed." The piece continues, telling of the launching of a "new million dollar contract" just signed with Northern Dredge & Dock Co., the same company Davis originally hired for the project. The new owners of the Islands were eager to get the project back on its feet. "In an endeavor to expedite and complete the dredging at an early date, a provision of the new dredging contract allows a bonus to the dredge company any month that more than 600,000 cubic yards of fill are placed." Northern Dredge operated six dredges at the site and planned on adding a seventh as soon as possible. The newspaper ad ended with the announcement that "600 workmen have been added, 2,157 ft. of sanitary sewers installed, 2,900 feet of water mains laid, 3,000 feet of gas mains placed and 250 lots graded."<sup>126</sup>

Stone & Webster moved their Tampa offices from 101 Tampa Street in downtown to Davis Islands, possibly as a show of support for the Islands' business district. Their first Islands office, in 1927, was located on the corner of Columbia and Barbados. The

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 10, 1926.

company moved to the second floor of the Bay Isle Building in 1928. By 1930, however, they abandoned the Islands altogether – a harbinger of things to come.<sup>127</sup>

### Changes in the Dream

With the transfer of ownership from Davis's D. P. Davis Properties to Stone & Webster's Davis Islands Incorporated came increased flexibility in the design restrictions. The Kornell Apartments, completed in 1928 and located at 25 Davis Boulevard, was a radical departure from the Mediterranean style required by Davis. Several residences also deviated from the prescribed style, examples of which still exist at 26 and 116 Adalia.<sup>128</sup>

Davis Islands Incorporated continued construction on the Islands for the benefit of both private and business residents. The firm also pursued the internal improvements included in Davis's original plans, which were necessary for the smooth flow of the increasing automobile traffic. The permanent bridge leading to Davis Islands was dedicated in a ceremony featuring Tampa Mayor D. B. McKay and Howard G. Philbrook, president of Davis Islands Incorporated, on May 16, 1928. It took nearly eighteen months to complete the bridge, with a portion of the time spent fighting an injunction by Patrick and Euphemia Kelliher, who claimed the bridge infringed on the riparian rights of their property at 105 Bay Street. The Florida Supreme Court dissolved the injunction allowing

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<sup>127</sup> *TCD*, years 1927 through 1930.

<sup>128</sup> The name of the holding company for Davis Islands changed from Davis Islands Investment Company to Davis Islands Incorporated between 1926 and 1928.

construction to continue.<sup>129</sup>

Davis Islands Incorporated kept another of Davis's promises, in 1929, with completion of the Davis Islands Pool. Located on the corner of Columbia Drive and Bosphorous Avenue, the \$75,000 swimming pool represented one of the last large-scale projects funded by Davis Islands Incorporated.<sup>130</sup>

Davis Islands Incorporated continued to advertise the virtues of visiting and living on the Islands, but a reduced marketing budget directed the message to a different target audience. The prospective buyer was not the same one who originally rushed to buy lots on the first day in 1924. In 1928 a Davis Islands brochure titled *Florida's Wonder Spot* still touted the location, convenience, fun and luxury of the property, but the printed piece was produced on a smaller budget. Paper quality, artwork and design were all affected by the low cost approach. The greatly expanded use of photography rather than the fanciful artwork of previous sales brochures was another difference, but was probably due as much to the fact there were more finished buildings to photograph in 1928 as with the cost of creating and printing original drawings.

Flowery language was another casualty of the new times. One of the captions for a photograph of the Mirasol Hotel gives an example of these changes. "The Mirasol -- one of the Davis Islands Hotels - where the visitor finds real resort luxury at moderate cost." As a comparison, the hotels in *Life on Davis Islands, Tampa In The Bay*, produced by D. P. Davis Properties in 1925, were "robed in quiet refinement where everyone ... free

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<sup>129</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 16, 1928.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, August 25, 1929.

from care, may enjoy the vitalizing Island life that beckons near at hand." When placed next to each other, the post-Davis version is somewhat lacking. Some silvery prose is still present, but it is definitely tarnished.<sup>131</sup>

The year 1930 saw the end of the old Davis marketing machine, when the administration offices moved from 32 Davis Boulevard into space on the second floor of the Bay Isle Building – the offices recently vacated by Stone & Webster. The Davis Boulevard office became the Seaborn Day School that same year.<sup>132</sup>

Real estate promotion in Tampa, and across Florida, continued its free fall in the latter part of the 1920s. In 1927, only twenty-nine realty companies decided to buy space in the advertising section of Tampa's city directory. The total number of realtors that year plunged by half to 416. Only 292 showed up in the 1928 city directory, with twenty-one of those taking out special ads. By 1930 only five real estate companies placed ads in the

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<sup>131</sup> D. P. Davis Properties, *Life on Davis Islands, Tampa In The Bay* (Louisville, 1925). Both *Florida's Water Spot* and *Life on Davis Islands* are in the collections of the Tampa Bay History Center.

<sup>132</sup> *TCD*, year 1930.

directory, a ninety-four percent decrease from 1926. The final blow, of course, was the stock market crash on October 29, 1929. The rest of the country was simply joining Florida in economic depression.<sup>133</sup>

All hope of a recovery in Florida real estate was now lost. Davis possibly felt the inevitable approaching and did not want to be around to see it. His islands would again become desirable property, but it would take another world war and another Florida real estate boom, caused by the strong economy and incredible population growth in the 1950s, for it to happen.

#### Coda

David Davis was among the most notable casualties of Florida's real estate boom and bust. Countless subdivisions were left in its wake, often just paved streets leading to nowhere. Eventually all of Davis's properties would prove successful. In Miami, his Commercial Biltmore development has seen new life in the form of the city's fashionable Design District. Davis Islands has continued to be a popular and profitable address with

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<sup>133</sup> *TCD*. The following is the total page count, real estate advertising page count and percentage of pages devoted to advertising, 1926 - 1930: **1926** - 108, 23¼, 21%; **1927** - 71, 9, 12%; **1928** - 59, 6½, 11%; **1929** - 44, 3¼, 7%; **1930** - 34, 1¾, 5%. Years consulted were 1926 through 1930. In the 1926 directory, there were seven real estate related categories. These remained roughly the same through 1930, with a few exceptions.

some homes selling for a million dollars or more. The same holds true for Davis Shores, though it did not reach completion until the 1950s.

Davis's family experienced the usual mix of success and failure typical to most Americans. His brothers worked with him on Davis Islands, with Milton carrying the Davis name to Fort Myers and Havana, Cuba. The brothers eventually returned to Davis Islands in retirement, living out their golden years on their big brother's island.<sup>134</sup>

Their sister, Elizabeth Hodgson, remained in Tampa with her husband until 1949. George Hodgson, David's brother-in-law, worked in a variety of capacities for Davis Properties, Davis Islands Incorporated and the Davis Islands Garage. Eventually, the Hodgsons left Tampa, retiring in Bradenton Beach, Florida.<sup>135</sup>

George Riley Davis passed away on February 13, 1930, at the age of seventy-three, after a brief illness. He died at Tampa Municipal Hospital, located at the northern tip of Davis Islands. His youngest brother, Howell Anderson, served two terms as mayor of Palatka and continued their father's business until his death in 1957.<sup>136</sup>

David Davis's sons, George Riley, II and David Paul, Jr. were both sent to live "with relatives" in California following their father's death. The junior Davis, thirty-one years old at the time, came to Tampa in 1953 to visit family, including his aunt and uncles. He also wanted to see Davis Islands for the first time in twenty-seven years.

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<sup>134</sup> *Tampa Daily Times*, October 20, 1971.

<sup>135</sup> *TCD*, various years; Obituary of George Hodgson, *Tampa Tribune*, December 7, 1959.

<sup>136</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 14, 1930; Biography of Howell A. Davis and Family, PCA.

Davis only had faint memories of his father and his developments, saying, “It is like trying to piece together the hazy fragments of a vague dream.”<sup>137</sup>

Without knowing it, David Davis, Jr. described the burden that weighs on all of his father’s biographers. The legends surrounding his life and death are a tangle of public relations stories, selective memory, honest mistakes and outright lies. Sorting through it all and “piecing together” those “hazy fragments” into a coherent history is difficult indeed. Once complete, the substance of the man and the impact he made on his native state are a far cry from a vague dream.

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<sup>137</sup> *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, May 10, 1953.

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