

Eighty Years Ago on Davis Islands

by Rodney Kite-Powell, II
Tampa Bay History Center

By 1927, Davis Islands had been a reality for two years. Developer D. P. Davis had already sold the Islands to Stone & Webster, a Boston-based engineering company, but the project was far from finished. A number of buildings and companies arrived on the Islands in 1927, while the real estate market in general continued its downward spiral. The following are some of the milestone events as they relate to Tampa and Davis Islands.

Tampa Municipal Hospital

One of Davis Islands most enduring buildings spanned the Davis/Stone & Webster eras -- Tampa Municipal Hospital, now known as Tampa General Hospital. A hospital never appeared in the original plans for Davis Islands, nor did it appear, it is safe to say, in the wildest imagination of David Davis.

The city initially wanted to expand the existing Gordon Keller Hospital on North Boulevard, and citizens approved a \$215,000 bond issue for that purpose. The idea proved impractical and the search for a new hospital site began. A site committee suggested building on Davis Islands, using a portion of the land deeded to the city by Davis. Voters, in 1925, again approved a bond issue, this time for a new hospital, in the amount of \$1,000,000.

One hurdle still existed -- the proposed location in Marjorie Park still sat under water. Davis promised to have the land available, and in March 1926 construction began on the modern 250-bed facility. The Gordon Keller Nursing School also moved to the Islands, with both opening their doors in 1927.

Stone & Webster Continue Davis' 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* which trumpeted "Dredging Hits Record Speed." The piece continues, explaining about a "new million dollar contract" it 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."

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. The first Islands office, in 1927, was located on the corner of Columbia and Barbados. The 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.

Post-Boom Islands Real Estate

The major hotel projects were finished by the time Stone & Webster purchased the Islands. All but one of the hotels originally planned for the Islands were actually built. That one, projected to sit between Blanca Avenue and the waterfront, did not have the financial backing necessary to insure its completion. The hotel market on the Islands did not live up to the

high expectations placed on it by the D. P. Davis Properties promotional brochures.

The financial picture was not totally bleak. One area of marked growth on the Islands occurred in the rental market. Davis Islands featured six apartment buildings in 1927: the Venetian Apartments, Spanish Apartments, Royal Poinciana Apartments, an apartment building at 48 Davis Boulevard, Boulevard Apartments and the Flora Dora Apartments. Combined, they sustained a 60% occupancy rate, which is somewhat skewed by Boulevard Apartments lying entirely vacant. By mid-1928, 23 apartments were added when the Augustine/Columbia Apartments opened on Columbia Drive. In total, there were seven buildings with a combined 92 apartments. Of those, 37 remained unoccupied, maintaining the 60% occupancy rate from the previous year.

Davis Islands Awarded

Validation for Davis' determined plan came in 1927 when the American Association of City Planners awarded its first prize to Davis Islands. Though he did not survive to see it, Davis' dream of a model community became reality. The award was as much for Davis' visionary planning as it was for Stone & Webster's continued execution, referred to in the last sentence of the commendation. "The development of these features has continued throughout the property with provision of all utilities enjoyed by the most exclusive residential communities."