

## **The Davis Islands Business District**

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The Davis Islands business district is a very important, and often discussed, part of life on Davis Islands. Though envisioned by Islands creator David P. Davis, the district did not reach its present size until the mid 1960s, on the heels of the second Davis Islands land boom. The gem of the district is the Bay Isle Building. Designed by noted Tampa architect M. Leo Elliot, the building opened in 1926 and housed a small number of professional offices. Davis Islands Inc., the company that purchased the entire Islands development from Davis, moved into the building from the old Administration Building (now Seaborn Day School) in 1928 and remained there until 1951.

Retail businesses were slow to move onto Davis Islands. That changed in the mid 1930s, when an important tenant moved into the Bay Isle Building – a grocery store. The Davis Island Market served the small community of people living on Davis Islands until late 1941 or early 1942. It is not known why the store closed, but the beginning of World War II, with rationing and worker shortages, probably played a role. Though it did not have any competition in leasing retail space, the Bay Isle Building was almost vacant just before, and during, World War II. This changed after the war, when the Islands stood at the threshold of another era of explosive growth.

After World War II, both residential and commercial construction sped along on newly paved roads. In particular, expansion of the business district spread quickly along East Davis Boulevard between Barbados and Chesapeake. What had always been set aside for commercial use finally stirred from a long hibernation.

The Boston-based owners of Davis Islands, Inc. would not be around to see this second boom. A local syndicate headed by businessman Howard Frankland bought the

company in 1946. The new owners maintained their offices at the Bay Isle Building until 1951. By that time, the amount of space in the Islands' lone commercial building would prove insufficient, and others would soon join it along East Davis Boulevard. However, there was enough room, and a great need, for a grocery store again. This need was filled when the Davis Island Market reopened in the Bay Isle Building the same year that Frankland and his partners purchased Davis Islands.

A "School for Speech and Oral Education," for children with hearing problems, operated in the Bay Isle Building from 1947 to 1955. Administrators for the school contemplated at one point a complete take-over of the building plus constructing additional facilities. The school moved before its plans could be carried out.

The prolonged nature of the 1950s boom insured that the Bay Isle Building would no longer stand alone amid a sea of sand and slowly maturing palm trees. Other, less attractive if more functional, buildings began to join the East Davis landmark, starting with a building at 232 East Davis, constructed in 1950. The Davis Island Sundries store first occupied the new building, but the Davis Islands Pharmacy – which still occupies the space today – soon replaced the variety store.

The east side of East Davis Boulevard developed a little slower. The first commercial building on that side of the street, 201 East Davis, was built in 1952 as a doctor's office. Two more structures were completed the following year at 215 and 223 East Davis. These buildings, joined by the building at 205 East Davis, constituted a small strip mall and offered a clothing store for women, a toy store, a pharmacy, a hardware store and variety of other shops.

By 1956, there were twenty-six business addresses along East Davis Boulevard, including two automobile service stations. One of the largest commercial buildings in the business district was completed that year. The Davis Island Market outgrew its space in the Bay Isle Building and constructed their new home at 304 East Davis.

Construction of commercial buildings on East Davis Boulevard coincided with a larger pattern of building on the south side of Davis Islands. South Davis Boulevard, non-existent before the mid 1950s and absent from the Tampa City Directories until even later, became clogged with work trucks and building materials as the construction boom moved south during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The city added to the collection of buildings on East Davis, a little south of the business district, with the construction of Tampa Fire Department's Station #17, which opened on the Islands in 1958.

Physicians and insurance agents, perhaps drawn to the Islands by Tampa General Hospital, were the two largest categories of businesses to move to the East Davis business district during this era. The strip was home to five doctors (including Dr. Theodore Blau, a psychologist) and two pharmacies during the mid 1960s.

Subsequent years saw more additions to the urban-esque landscape of East Davis Boulevard. Law offices and more physicians, including a couple more psychologists and a psychiatrist, moved onto the Islands. They were joined by dance instructors, hair stylists and barbers, restaurants, florists and Sandy Gandy, a well known photographer.

The type, style and composition of businesses on East Davis was fairly well established by the late 1980s. By the early 1990s, many businesses that Islands residents and visitors know today were already in operation. While today's business district is dominated by a wide variety of restaurants, there is still a diverse mix of other

commercial ventures, including attorneys' and doctors' offices, two banks, the Davis Islands Pharmacy, a dog-owners supply store, two salons, two gas stations/ convenience stores and a specialty gift store. There is even a chinchal (small, independent cigar manufacturer), an interesting and coincidental nod toward the Islands' Latin influence. Of all the amenities planned by D. P. Davis, the Davis Islands business district took the longest to develop, but it may have had the greatest impact on the development's ultimate success.