

Davis Shores, St. Augustine, Florida
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Despite his success in Tampa, and partly because of it, Davis Islands creator David P. Davis grew restless during the early months of 1925. Though Davis Islands was still in its infancy, he began to look for something new. As the project taking shape in Hillsborough Bay 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.

On October 15, 1925, the same day Davis completed sales on Davis Islands lots, and just five days after his marriage to Elizabeth 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."

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.

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.

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.

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 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.

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.

Organization of Davis Shores's 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.

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.

The first stage of land sales began November 14, 1925. Within a few hours, all available lots sold for a total of \$16,268,000. The first one hundred days of operation, Davis crowded, 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 of the total land cost, 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.

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.

Next month: The Florida land boom goes bust, and so does D. P. Davis.