

## **The Early Life of David P. Davis**

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David Paul Davis, the man behind the creation of Davis Islands, is as well known as he is mysterious. Many know a few facts about him, but few know more than the basics. He was an unusual man who lived during an unusual period of Florida history. What follows is the first in a two part series focusing on the early life of one of Tampa's most famous citizens, David P. Davis.

Few undisputed details exist concerning Davis' life. David Paul Davis was born in Green Cove Springs, Florida, a small town on the St. John's River south of Jacksonville, in November 1885 to George Riley and Gertrude M. Davis. He had two younger brothers, Charles and Milton, and an older sister, Elizabeth. The Davis family moved to Tampa following the devastating freeze of 1894-95, which virtually wiped out north Florida's citrus industry. According to the 1900 Federal Census, they rented a home at 208 Pierce Street in downtown Tampa. The three Davis boys were listed as students and their father served as an engineer on a steamboat, probably the *Manatee*.

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.

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' appearance. He is an uncomfortable looking nineteen-year-old, 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.

In 1907, Davis, with partner Robertson T. Arnold, formed 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.

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 bay's other mud islands became Seddon Island in 1905. Now known as Harbour Island, Seddon Island was developed by the Seaboard Air Line as a part of the city's wharf expansion and channel dredging projects. What affect that had on Davis is 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.

Davis disappears from the historical record until 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.

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.

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, or more to the point a hot dog stand, across from the camp's entrance. While possible, it is highly unlikely.

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 George II, 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.