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# Building Tampa: The Lafayette Street Bridge

Lucy D. Jones

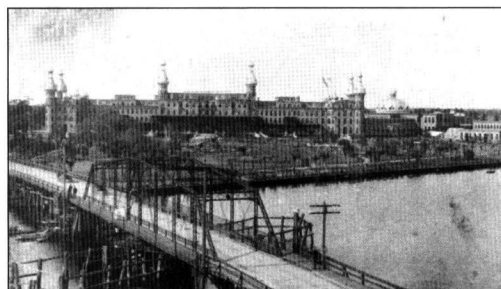
When Henry Bradley Plant first built his railroad to Tampa, he did not want to extend the tracks from east to west over the Hillsborough River. Every extra mile of track was money out of Plant's pocket. When Plant heard that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers would dredge a ship channel in Old Tampa Bay rather than Hillsborough Bay, he quickly arranged to lay track to Black Point (later Port Tampa), where he constructed a wharf out to deep water in order to accommodate maritime traffic. To get the railroad tracks across the Hillsborough River, Captain John McKay built a draw-bridge for the trains at Cass Street.<sup>1</sup> McKay was invested in the railroad reaching both Old Tampa Bay and the shallow-water docks along the River, since he captained Plant Systems vessels running between Tampa and Havana.

Plant's transportation system included both trains and steamships. Since passengers on both lines needed accommodations, hotels were a logical extension of the Plant System, but none of the hotels operating in Tampa in the late 1880s was up to the standard of Plant's "prestige" clientele. The transportation magnate decided to build a lavish resort near the Tampa terminus of his railroad, but on the west side of the Hillsborough River. In July 1888, the Tampa Bay Hotel's cornerstone was laid. Luxury winter resorts such as this often could not rely on existing infrastructure. The necessary rail access or utilities were built at the developer's expense, or at the expense of

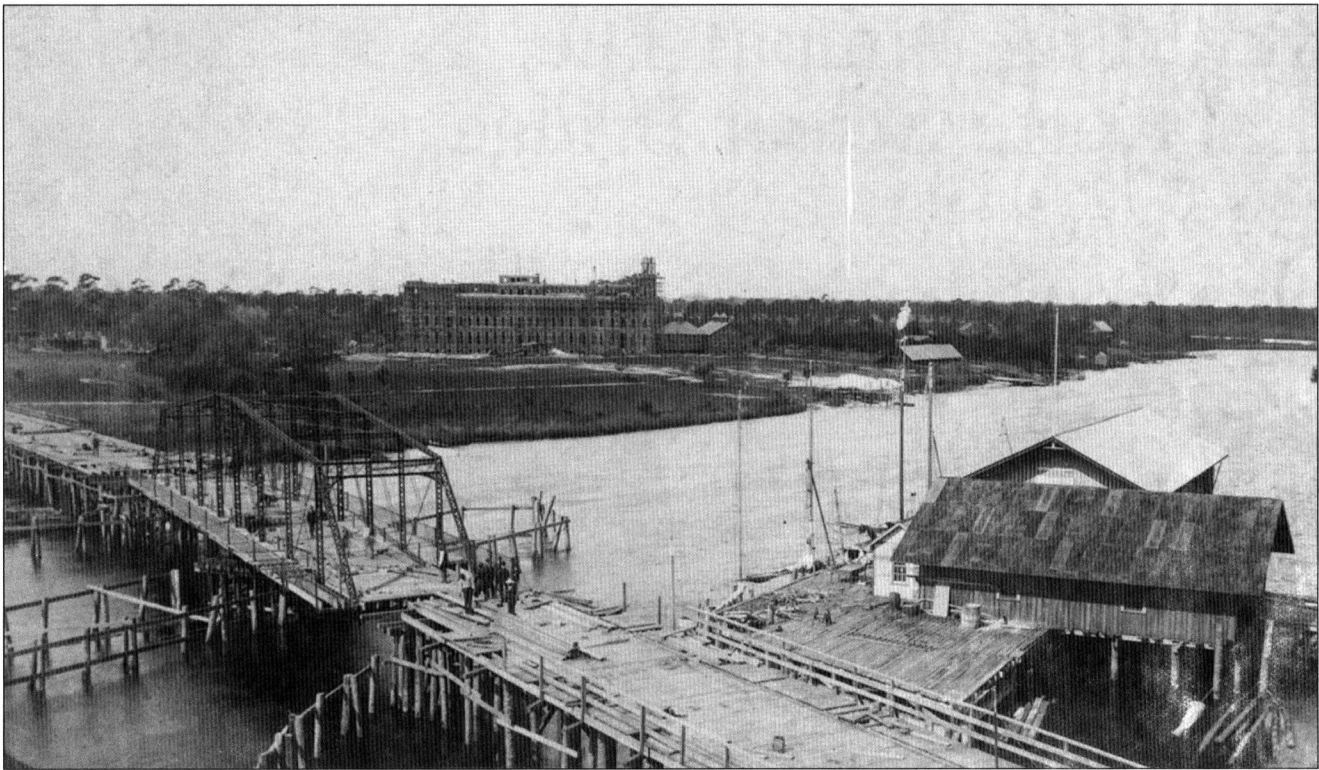
the host city at the request of the developer. In the case of Tampa, the hotel was such a boon to the growing town that the City Council readily agreed to several development incentives, including low, fixed-rate taxes and a promise that the town would build a bridge over the Hillsborough River, leading to the hotel.<sup>2</sup> This last agreement began a tale of three bridges, each of which mirrored the conditions and people of Tampa in its formative decades. As the bridges were built, served their purposes, outlived their usefulness, and were replaced, they produced a history-in-miniature of the city that created them. This study examines that history to discover what it has to tell about the motivations, technology, and accomplishments of Tampa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

## The first Lafayette Street Bridge

In March 1885, the Tampa council chartered Jesse Hayden's ferry at Jackson Street, stipulating that he keep one good flat boat and two good skiffs to carry people,



1890s photograph of the first Lafayette Street Bridge over the Hillsborough River with the Tampa Bay Hotel in the background (Courtesy the State Archives of Florida).



The Tampa Bay Hotel and swing bridge, both under construction in February, 1889, in a rare photo by James Cooley Field. (Courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum Photographic Archives.)

stock animals, and goods across the Hillsborough River.<sup>3</sup> Until the trains came, Tampa residents had little use for a bridge over the Hillsborough River, but public and private interest in a bridge increased along with the railroad. Several conflicting proposals were made, but the city council's final decision in the fall of 1887 was to build a free public foot and wagon bridge at Lafayette Street.<sup>4</sup>

Although a severe yellow fever epidemic disrupted the town's routine operations, plans for the bridge were in the works by December of 1887. In May 1888, the council received three proposals for the bridge over the Hillsborough River, accepting that of the King Iron Bridge Company, a prominent American bridge manufacturer in the late nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Zenas King, founder of the King Iron Bridge Company, had a factory in Cleveland where stock parts and designs were produced, ensuring rapid fulfillment of customers' orders. The company shipped bridge parts by rail to each construction site for assembly. King created a large web of agents and representatives who placed bids for the company all over the country, whenever and wherever a new bridge contract was advertised. The company's 1888 catalogue claimed parent-

age of 10,000 bridges, with 350 new orders each year.<sup>6</sup>

The King Iron Bridge Company began construction of the Lafayette Street Bridge soon after the contract was awarded. When yellow fever struck Tampa again in August 1888, the King Iron Bridge Company asked the city for a time extension on their contract, but the request was denied. Despite quarantines, engineering changes, and federal concerns about potential navigational obstructions, work on the bridge progressed, and by February 1889 the approaches were ready to be filled with shell. Signal lanterns were purchased, and the city advertised for a bridge keeper.<sup>7</sup> Less than a year after work began, the King Bridge Company notified the city council that construction was finished, and the council formed a Committee of the Whole (that is, a committee comprised of all of the members of the council) to inspect the bridge. In early March 1889, the city opened the first Lafayette Street bridge to the public.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that Tampa felt compelled to build the bridge in order to satisfy Henry Plant was undeniable, as Tampa was a young city desperate for investors. Money for the bridge and other civic improvements

came from municipal bond issues.<sup>9</sup> Building public works was a widespread and monumental task in the nineteenth century. A relatively new country was being created, as it were, from scratch, and the United States did not have a large pool of old-money potential investors, as did some older nations. Public works also labored under the Jacksonian view of government, which held that it was impossible to use federal money to help one region without harming another. Public infrastructure construction was, therefore, a state and local issue.<sup>10</sup> Because of a shortage of capital and a reluctance to raise taxes, state and local funding of public works was largely speculative, typically large-scale, unsecured public debt. Such speculative debt, however, was necessary to promote growth, and Tampa was no exception.

After the Lafayette Street Bridge was built, residential development on the west side of the Hillsborough River boomed. Where it had once been difficult to cross the river – the only means being a ferry with no regularly scheduled service – a modern iron bridge zipped man and beast alike from one bank to the other. Spotting an opportunity, O. H. Platt of Hyde Park, Illinois, subdivided twenty acres of Robert Jackson's former homestead on the west side of the Hillsborough River. Lots sold quickly, and a middle-class residential community formed as the easy commute to the central business district attracted professionals, shoppers, and businessmen.<sup>11</sup>

While it was in Plant's interest to have Tampa thrive as a city, construction of single-family homes near his luxury resort hotel was not his intention, nor was it particularly to his benefit. Plant had asked for a bridge because it would benefit his Tampa Bay Hotel, and development of new residential neighborhoods across the river was merely a collateral effect. It was, nevertheless, an effect that proved more durable than Plant's original project. After his death in 1899, Plant's assets were sold off during vicious family fights over the terms of his will. In 1902, the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad bought Plant's system of railroads, and in 1905 the Tampa Bay Hotel became the property of the City of Tampa.<sup>12</sup> The hotel's importance faded over time, but the suburbs created as a sidebar to its construction prospered.

The Lafayette Street Bridge did not long

remain the only general traffic bridge over the Hillsborough River. In 1892, Hugh Macfarlane, one of the original members of the Tampa Board of Trade as well as Tampa's city attorney, marketed 200 acres of land on the west side of the river, north of downtown. A crucial first step towards success was to provide access to his new development, called West Tampa. In 1892, with the help of other investors, Macfarlane built an iron drawbridge at Fortune Street. Since a street railway between West Tampa and Ybor City would run over the bridge, developers anticipated that cigar factories would locate in West Tampa. The commercial-civic elite of Tampa viewed the bridge, paid for with private funds, as a good business strategem, and support of the city's economy as equivalent to good citizenship.<sup>13</sup> Their vision was rewarded as West Tampa quickly achieved stature as a "cigar town" to rival Ybor City.

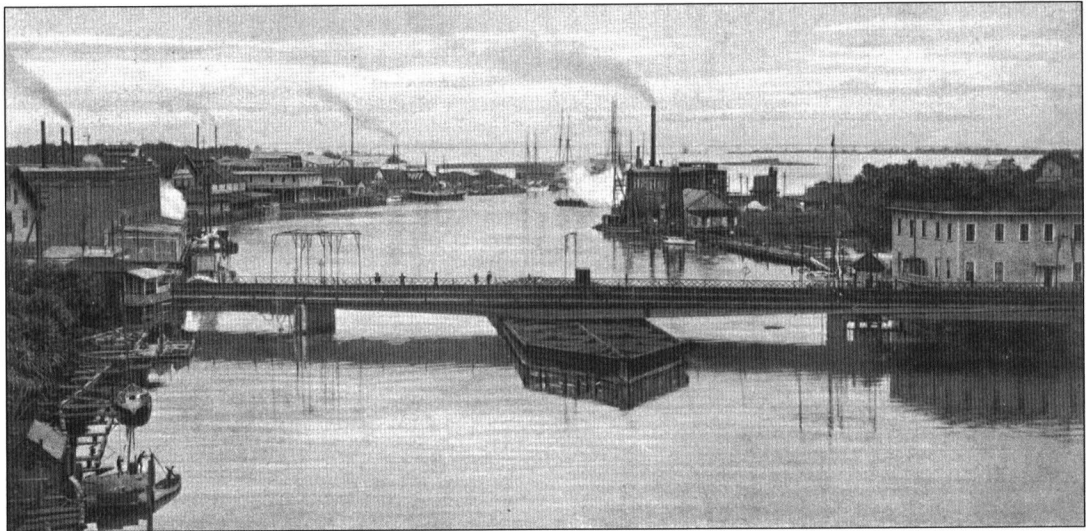
### The Second Lafayette Street Bridge

Bridges are designed to meet the conditions of the time when they are built. They are rarely designed for future conditions. When the first Lafayette Street Bridge was built, Tampa's leaders did not consider things like electricity and streetcars, nor the probable extent of suburban development west of the river. The first bridge did not hold up well to the new demands placed on it. Among other problems, an electric cable at the bridge burned out, forcing the power company to use a switch connection for their wires. For a time, whenever the draw opened at night, the lights went out in Hyde Park until the bridge closed again.<sup>14</sup>

The bridge and bonding issue became contentious topics in the mayoral campaign



Photograph of the second Lafayette Street Bridge taken in 1905, showing the narrow width and heavy usage of the bridge (*Courtesy the State Archives of Florida*).



Postcard image of the second Lafayette Street Bridge, facing south, or downstream. The building with the smokestacks near the center of the image on the river's shore is the Tampa Electric Company's plant (from the author's collection).

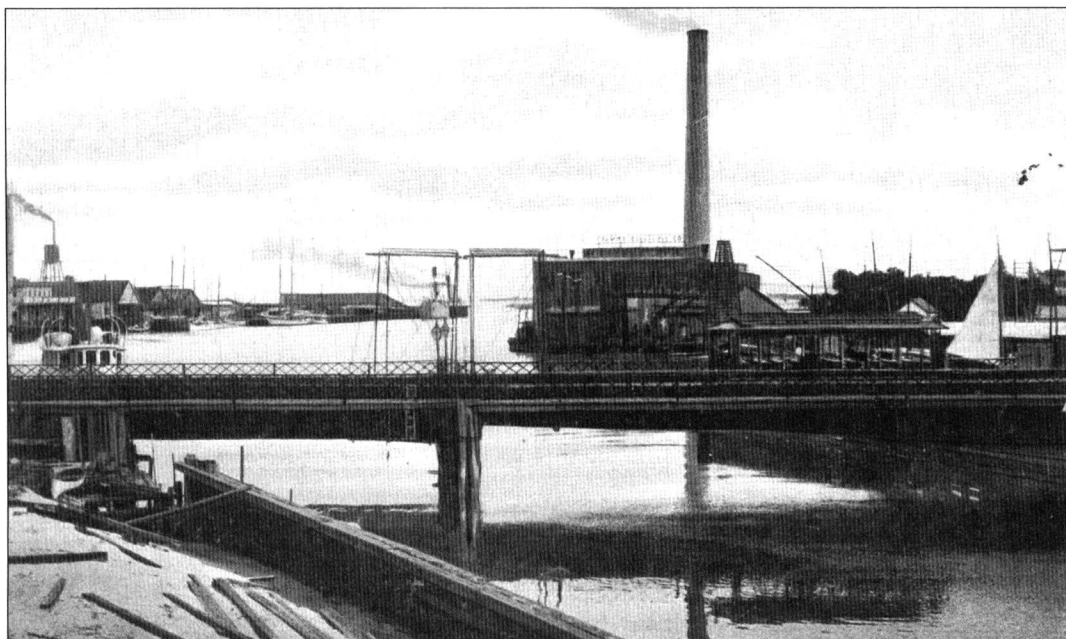
of March 1895, a heated contest between F.A. Salomonson and M.B. Macfarlane. A native of Holland, Salomonson moved to Tampa in 1884 and went into the real estate business. By 1895, he had served three terms as a city councilman. Matthew Biggar Macfarlane (brother of Hugh MacFarlane) was a native of Scotland, educated in the northern United States, a lawyer, and later served as Collector of Customs for Tampa. (M.B. Macfarlane was also quite prominent in Florida's Republican Party, and would be an unsuccessful gubernatorial candidate in 1900 and 1904.) Salomonson won the mayoral race by a margin of 50 votes.<sup>15</sup>

Less than two weeks after the election, Salomonson spoke to the city council about the city's financial condition. The mayor recommended that the city first draw up a new charter, then vote a bonds issue, and then install a sewer system, followed by construction of a new bridge at Lafayette Street. The council agreed and instructed the city attorney to draw up a new charter authorizing a Board of Public Works. (As well, the council voted to change mayoral elections from annual to biennial events.<sup>16</sup>)

The mayor's recommendation for a new bridge was actually "old business." In late February 1895, the city council had authorized a loan of \$45,000 and hired the Florida Dredging Company to build a new bridge across the Hillsborough River at Lafayette Street.<sup>17</sup> Although there were as many as twenty-five men at a time working on the bridge, Tampa residents urged the contractors to use more workers and finish the

bridge more quickly. Construction became a public spectacle, until the builders finally asked rubberneckers to stay out of their way. There was a lot to see at the site. Workers cleared old bridge timbers out of the river. Crews drove pilings for retaining walls, and laid timbers on the pilings. Masons covered the tops of the timbers, while divers built cofferdams around pier emplacements. The Water Works Company re-laid mains on both sides of the river at the bridge. More workers built a footway 100 feet upstream from the old bridge as a temporary crossing.<sup>18</sup>

Money ran short, and work at the Lafayette Street Bridge halted in December 1895, awaiting a new bond election. The optimism felt in City Hall and Hyde Park after the voters' resounding approval of the project quickly evaporated. A month later, the city had received no money and no explanation from W. N. Coler & Company, the New York bankers who agreed to sell Tampa's bonds.<sup>19</sup> The city council asked the Plant Investment Company for a \$15,000 loan to finish the bridge, but Henry Plant turned them down. (Plant rarely contributed money towards utility construction or public works in cities served by his railroads or where he had hotels, avoiding political or close personal associations in those cities.<sup>20</sup>) Finally, in February 1896, Tampa received its first installment from the bonds, and the bridge builders resumed work. For months, the *Tampa Weekly Tribune* railed against Coler's delay, accusing the company of hampering Tampa's growth:



Postcard showing trolley crossing the second Lafayette Street Bridge (*from the author's collection*)

“Instead of muddy streets and gloomy countenances, the people would be buoyant with bright anticipation of great improvements.”<sup>21</sup>

On a Saturday morning in March 1896, with little ceremony, workers cast aside the barriers at the Lafayette Street Bridge. Mr. Hathaway, Manager of the Tampa Bay Hotel, and F. de C. Sullivan, Henry Plant’s private secretary, drove a carriage over the bridge to Mayor Salomonson’s office, where they were joined by City Engineer Neff and several councilmen. These men then went to the Tampa Bay Hotel for an elegant lunch. Although few people were present at the bridge’s opening, word spread quickly and that afternoon a stream of wagons, carriages, and pedestrians flowed across the river.<sup>22</sup>

A few days later, city leaders formally dedicated the bridge, with grand flourishes. Crowds of spectators filled the approaches, while the Fifth Battalion Band played as eighteen mounted policemen and three carriages of dignitaries neared the bridge. Fire Station One’s hose wagon, engine, and hook and ladder truck added to the festive atmosphere, as Fire Chief Harris’ daughter waved to the crowds amid a mass of flowers. Precisely at the center of the bridge, the parade halted, as Reverend W. W. DeHart rose in his carriage, uncovered his head, and spoke: “In the name of the commonwealth of Tampa I now declare this bridge open on this the 24th day of March, 1896, and call on you one and all to join in giving three

cheers and a tiger.” After that, the parade continued to the grounds of the Tampa Bay Hotel where DeHart spoke further from a balcony, heralding the bridge as tangible evidence of Tampa’s manifest destiny.<sup>23</sup>

On March 28, 1896, the first streetcar crossed the bridge. Mrs. C. W. Chapin, owner of the Consumers Electric Light and Street Railway Company, gathered a party in her custom-made parlor coach, which traveled from Ballast Point to Hyde Park, then across the bridge, to Franklin Street and thence to Ybor City. By the time the car turned to go back, dusk had fallen and the partygoers shot Roman candles from the trolley.

The streetcar line benefited greatly from the Lafayette Street Bridge and was of particular interest to the Chapins, who lived in a mansion on the Bayshore. The Consumers Electric Company’s streetcar line encouraged development along the bay towards Ballast Point. Many of the new homes being built along and close to the route were elegant mansions for Tampa’s elite, and the streetcar made it possible for the residents to escape the city.<sup>24</sup> Consumers had a contract with the city allowing the streetcar line to use the Lafayette Street bridge, and requiring the company to pay a portion of the cost for bridge repairs.<sup>25</sup>

Peter Oliphant Knight, the Chapins’ business partner, also helped organize the Exchange National Bank and the Tampa Gas Company, and served as county solicitor.

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tor and state attorney. Knight, one of the business and civic leaders who guided the city's fortunes, was conservative and anti-labor, and his business interests often influenced local political decisions. By the end of the 1890s, Consumers faced rough economic waters and was sold.

Advertisement appearing in the *Tampa Daily Times*, September 7, 1912.

With the demise of their company, the Chapins left Tampa. Stone & Webster of Boston formed the Tampa Electric Company, which assumed operation of the streetcar lines, with Knight as the company's local attorney.<sup>26</sup>

The second Lafayette Street Bridge had not been open long before public opinion of the project turned from "crowning achievement" to something less favorable. The new bridge jolted so much under Consumers' heavy, double-deck streetcar that the company discontinued the car's use until new hardware was added to the bridge. The bridge draw failed repeatedly. At times, it froze in the open position, blocking automotive and streetcar traffic; other times it refused to open, disrupting river traffic. Either way, it was a constant and nagging source of irritation.<sup>27</sup>

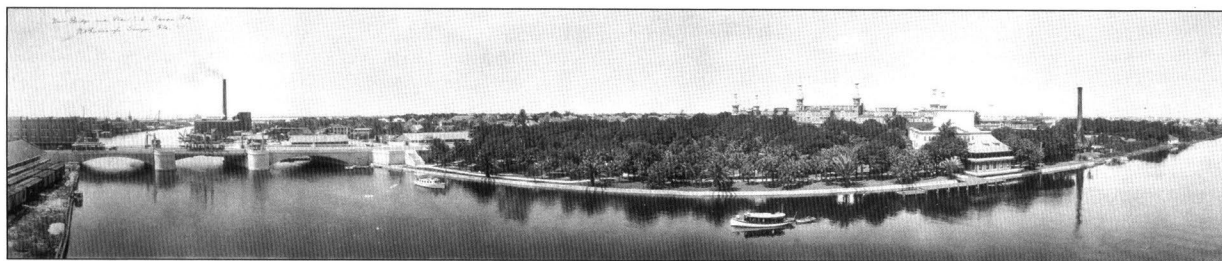
Like other growing cities across the nation at the beginning of the new century, Tampa threw itself into progressive reforms, a response to increasing urbanization and industrial growth. In Tampa, successful reform efforts combined personal interests with the promise of greater wealth either for businesses or the community as a whole. City leaders were historically reluctant to raise taxes to provide civic improvements, including public works projects. Therefore, to be implemented, reforms had to appear likely to increase Tampa's prosperity, whether by enhancing markets or

by increasing property values. Since Tampa had twice as many real estate agents per resident than other American cities, reforms that could be linked with rising property values won quick approval.<sup>28</sup>

Real estate investors tended to be upper middle class merchants and lawyers who needed investment options for the capital accumulated through business acumen and hard work. Nineteenth century frontiers required vast sums of capital to build a modern infrastructure from scratch, and the demand for domestic capital often overwhelmed supply, leading American bankers to lend to short-term rather than long-term users. Smaller investors looked to the mortgage market, the stock exchange being too volatile for any but the extremely wealthy. Thus, businessmen and urban professionals invested in the suburban development of the cities they led. These investors were able to use their expert knowledge of their community's resources to reap a fairly certain capital reward for promoting the city's growth.<sup>29</sup>

D.B. McKay of the *Tampa Daily Times* and Wallace Stovall of the *Tampa Tribune* supported reforms intended to create business growth in Tampa. After all, they themselves were in the news business, and growth meant more readers and more advertisers.<sup>30</sup> McKay was Old Tampa, the third generation of his family to live in the city. Stovall was a Kentuckian who moved to Tampa in 1893, a representative of the southern businessmen who came to Tampa at relatively young ages and found success. McKay's and Stovall's papers regularly rallied their readers to support various Progressivist reforms: street paving, sewer systems, and public hospitals.

As Tampa moved into the first decade of the twentieth century, factionalism characterized local politics. In 1900, the reformist Citizen's League took the upper hand. The League called for, among other things, making corporations pay their city taxes. Pro-growth businessmen and politicians had been in the habit of bestowing generous tax breaks to corporations as an incentive to come to or stay in Tampa. A side effect was a shortage of revenue for the city. Francis L. Wing, the Citizen's League's successful mayoral candidate, campaigned to eliminate the poll tax and increase the number of lower income voters. The Citizen's League also advocated public ownership of



The third Lafayette Street Bridge, detail from a ca. 1914 photograph taken facing south down the Hillsborough River. (Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photography Division [reproduction number LC-USZ62-135761]).

the water works and the electric plant, and soon found itself in opposition to the Tampa Board of Trade, which had hitherto had the support of the local government. The Citizen's League suggested changing the city charter, and eliminating the Commission of Public Works. The Tampa Board of Trade halted these changes, and an exasperated Peter O. Knight accused the Citizen's League of being anarchists.<sup>31</sup>

Pro-growth and pro-public investment, F.A. Salomonson returned to the mayor's office in 1904. Shortly after taking office, Mayor Salomonson called for extensive repairs to the failing Lafayette Street Bridge, saying that when the bridge did not work it was more than just an inconvenience for Hyde Park. If the bridge failed, it disrupted the streetcar lines and schedules and was an inconvenience for the whole city; therefore, the city council should find the money to fix it.<sup>32</sup>

### The Third Lafayette Street Bridge

When the second Lafayette Street bridge proved inadequate and unreliable, Hyde Park and Bayshore residents, along with real estate agents, claimed that a new bridge would benefit the whole city. Despite their boosterism, a new bridge took years to accomplish. Tampa's government was strongly conservative when it came to fiscal matters, as were the voters, and bond issue after bond issue for public improvements was rejected or never even came to vote.<sup>33</sup>

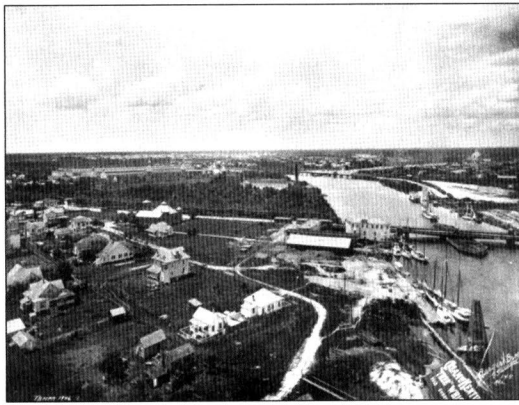
In 1907, with a growing city and a growing economy, Mayor W. H. Frecker suggested a \$600,000 bond issue for new civic buildings, paving projects, sewer installations, and a new bridge over the river at Lafayette Street. Mayor Frecker noted, "Tampa is in many respects one of the most progressive cities [of] the south, but in others has been sorely backward."<sup>34</sup> A bond

election was set for January 1908, but in December 1907, the city council cancelled the election in reaction to a nationwide financial panic, concerned that Tampa would not be able to handle the bond issue financially and that a weak market would yield a low price.<sup>35</sup>

In May 1909, Tampa voters turned down another municipal bond issue that would have paid for a new Lafayette Street Bridge, a city hall, a city hospital, and other public improvements such as sewers and paved streets. Some voters were against the bonds because they disliked the city administration, but the main reason for the bond issue's defeat was the bridge itself, which was perceived as being just too expensive.<sup>36</sup> In estimating the price of replacing the bridge, the city council expected two streetcar lines – Tampa Electric Company and the Tampa & Sulphur Springs Traction Company – to pay for a considerable portion of the cost, as much as a third.<sup>37</sup> With a preliminary estimate of \$165,000, even minus an estimated \$50,000 contribution from the streetcar companies, the price tag was too much for some people, including Mayor Wing, who called plans for the new bridge and a proposed city hall building "ridiculously exorbitant." Continued arguments between those who wanted to replace the entire bridge and those who thought that the bridge just needed a few repairs led the city council to solicit the opinion of New York engineer J. S. Hildreth. Hildreth's rather emphatic opinion was that the existing bridge was "out of date, too small, too close to the water, and totally inadequate," and should be replaced entirely. Faced with this harsh reality, the council asked the engineer what type of bridge should be erected.<sup>38</sup> Hildreth's recommendations were the genesis of the form the third bridge ultimately took.

Tampa Electric Company offered the city





Photograph taken in 1906 from the chimney of the Tampa Electric Company's plant on the Hillsborough River, facing north (Courtesy the State Archives of Florida).

\$50,000 towards the cost of the bridge, rationalizing that the strength demands on the structure derived in part from the streetcars. The streetcars were certainly an issue, as cars occasionally jumped the tracks and stopped all traffic, a problem that led the company to impose a three mile per hour speed limit over the bridge. Also at issue was what right the electric company, a privately owned corporation, had to use the bridge, a publicly owned conveyance. Should the city charge rent? Should the electric company pay for bridge maintenance? If the city accepted the money from the company, would it be seen as a concession? The city refused to grant Tampa Electric an exclusive franchise to run streetcar tracks over the Lafayette Street Bridge, and vacillated over whether or not to accept money from the company.<sup>39</sup>

In 1910, D. B. McKay helped form the White Municipal Party that took him to the mayor's seat from 1910 to 1920, and again from 1927 to 1931. The White Municipal Party was a local-level Democratic party that systematically and purposefully excluded African Americans from participation in local elections. Many voting taxpayers were reluctant to support programs or projects that benefited only some citizens (usually the commercial-civic elite), even though all had to pay. Depending on the issue, minority voters could sway the results in a tight vote, unless there was a way to keep these from voting.<sup>40</sup>

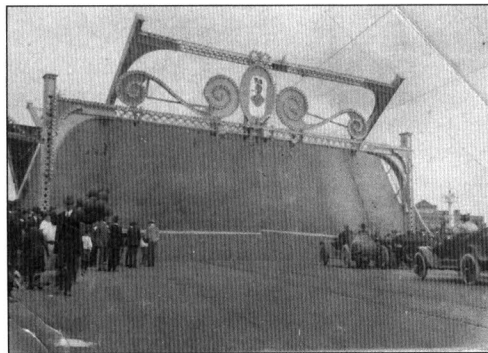
Tampa annexed large areas of Tampa Heights and Hyde Park in 1911. The Tampa city council was stirred to action by Hyde Park's rapid growth, as well as the wealth, social prominence, and political power re-

siding in the district. The council returned to the issue of the Lafayette Street Bridge with renewed vigor. The city advertised for bids for a new bridge and, in early September, the Board of Public Works met to select a builder. Four companies submitted bids with one company, the Owego Bridge Company of New York, submitting forty-two different plans and prices. The city councilmen, despite having known for years that the bridge should be replaced, and despite having nearly fifty different suggestions in hand as to how it might be accomplished, struggled to reach a consensus.<sup>41</sup> However, on September 13, 1911, the city awarded a contract to the Owego Company for \$205,000, to build an eighty-foot-wide bascule lift bridge over the river. After the announcement, the competing engineers dined at Garcia's restaurant and enjoyed late-night musical entertainment at the Tampa Yacht and Country Club.<sup>42</sup>

Such collegiality was short lived, and within just a few weeks, the city received three formal protests of the contract award to Owego. Confusion and concern grew to the point where Mayor McKay refused to sign the contract with the Owego Bridge Company.<sup>43</sup> For months, the city wallowed in a contractual quagmire. The mayor, the Board of Public Works, and the prospective contractors could not agree on the legality of the contract, with the mayor refusing to sign, the bridge company wanting the courts to decide the issue, and the board members throwing up their hands claiming ignorance. Finally, Owego released the city



A circa 1905 photograph of the Hillsborough River waterfront, taken facing south from the Lafayette Street Bridge (Courtesy the State Archives of Florida).



A snapshot taken by a bystander at opening ceremonies for the 1913 Lafayette Street Bridge. It is not clear from the photo whether it was taken at the December 1913 opening of the Bridge or at the "formal" ceremonies held on February 13, 1914. (Courtesy of Tampa Historical Society.)

from the contract with the understanding that the Board of Public Works would use Owego's previously accepted plans as the preferred design for the bridge, and new bids would be solicited only for the actual construction of the bridge, rather than design *and* construction. The Owego Bridge Company and other associated companies whose patents were used in the plan would be paid a royalty from whichever contractor was awarded the work. Tampa allowed Owego to bid on the construction contract, but the company was not to be given any special regard.<sup>44</sup> In May 1912, bridge builders from around the country again traveled to Tampa for a bid opening. Four bidders responded, with the local Edwards Construction Company winning the contract.<sup>45</sup>

This time, the city delayed the contract award for the simple reason that it did not have the money to pay for the project. The anticipated bridge cost, even with the low bid, was about \$240,000. The bond issue was for \$190,000. Ironically, the electric company's rejected offer to pay \$50,000 toward the cost of construction was now precisely the difference between the bond issue and the projected cost.<sup>46</sup>

Did the city have the right to spend more than the \$190,000 bonds approved by the state legislature? On May 16, 1912, Judge Robles issued an opinion that the legislative act allowing the \$190,000 bond issue did not prohibit the city from accepting money from Tampa Electric and that none of the plans to finance the bridge was illegal. The case went to the state Supreme Court, which in early July 1912, found that the \$190,000 bond issue limit applied to the

power to issue bonds, not to the cost of the bridge.<sup>47</sup> Tampa and Edwards Construction could sign the contract, get the materials, secure the bonds, and go to work.

Henry C. Edwards, general manager and owner of the Edwards Construction Company, worked in Tampa for fourteen years before getting the Lafayette Street bridge contract. A native of Wetumpka, Alabama, he fit in well with Tampa's strongly southern leaders.<sup>48</sup> The Edwards Company built many of Tampa's deep-water terminals, and practically all of the docks from the railroad bridge over the river to its mouth. Edwards started work on the new Lafayette Street Bridge even while the old bridge stayed opened to all traffic. Workers poured concrete walls, moved telephone cables and electrical wires out of the way, and began driving pilings. By early August 1912, forty men were working on the bridge, and twice that number later. At some point, however, the Lafayette Street Bridge would have to be completely closed before it could reopen. The city's original plan for traffic crossing the river was to send vehicles over the Fortune Street Bridge, and to use a cable ferry for foot traffic and bicycles at Jackson Street.<sup>49</sup>

Near the end of October, the U.S. Engineers approved a temporary bridge connecting Jackson and Eagle streets, and immediately the city council awarded Edwards the contract for its construction. The lighter *Annis B.* acted as the actual move-



Photograph from the Lafayette Street Bridge of the February 1914 Gasparilla flotilla passing under the bridge. (Courtesy of Tampa Historical Society.)

able draw, with temporary aprons connecting the boat to the stationary parts of the bridge. Since the *Annis B.* was afloat, it rose and fell with the tides. The temporary bridge was undoubtedly an inconvenience to motorists and pedestrians, and it also disrupted local business. The streetcar company was arguably the business most inconvenienced by bridge construction, losing a major river crossing.<sup>50</sup>

The last day that the old Lafayette Street Bridge was open to vehicle traffic was the day the circus came to town. On October 14, 1912, the Ringling Brothers circus performed on the west bank of the river at the Fairgrounds, and arrangements were made to keep the bridge open to traffic past the contractually specified date so that people could see the show. On its final day of full service, the bridge carried heavy loads of cars, bicycles, motorcycles, horse teams, and pedestrians.<sup>51</sup>

When construction began on the bridge in August 1912, the contract had called for work to be completed by May 9, 1913. Courting hubris, the engineers boasted that they could finish weeks before schedule, barring unforeseen difficulties. Indeed, as a newspaper reporter commented, "They have foreseen the difficulties, they believe, and allowed for them." The engineers' plans required concrete piers to be placed directly on bedrock under the river. To do this, the construction company built cofferdams to hold water away from where construction crews would pour concrete into wooden forms. Once the water was out, African American laborers stood on the riverbed, scooping muck into dredges by the shovel. A hundred-foot tower lifted the cement, and dropped it in "a white, slimy stream" down chutes into the frame for the pier.<sup>52</sup> Each of the four concrete piers required a cofferdam, and in February, workers began the second cofferdam. By April, engineers were still struggling to get rid of water seeping up through fissures in the limestone riverbed. Divers tried, unsuccessfully, to seal the bottom of the dam with concrete. Eventually, the frustrated engineers ran large pumps nonstop to remove the intrusive water. Finally, the *Tribune* was able to report progress:

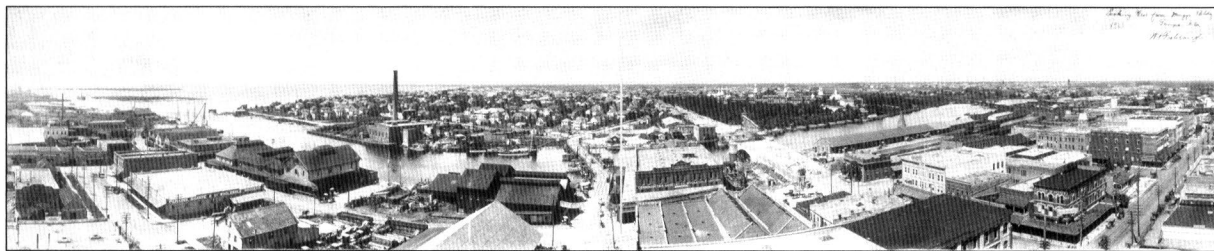
Two weeks ago there was no sound on the new Lafayette street bridge construction but occasional cussing. The engineers were figuring out some knotty engineering problems. Yesterday the

construction work growled with the noise of rotary pumps, the song of dusty negroes wheeling cement up plank tracks, and the low whistling of satisfied engineers.<sup>53</sup>

The unforeseen delays cost \$10,000. By August, a labor force of one hundred men working twelve-hour days and an average of three night shifts a week had completed most of the underwater work. The builders were now "almost certain" that the bridge would be finished by November 15, 1912.<sup>54</sup>

All that summer, Tampa buzzed with activity. New houses, new stores, and new public buildings reflected the city's prosperity. New electric streetlights lit the city's preeminent shopping district along Franklin Street from Jackson to Harrison. These lights were the first part of the electric company's plan to give Tampa a "White Way" nearly a mile long, with the next step being to install electric lights on Lafayette Street from Florida Avenue across the bridge.<sup>55</sup> Tampa Electric Company had installed arc lights on the old Lafayette Street Bridge in January 1912, lighting the roadway and under the draw to keep boats from hitting the bridge at night; however, those lights were for safety and convenience rather than part of a White Way.<sup>56</sup> For early twentieth century Progressives, the electric White Way stood for cleanliness, safer streets, and better policing. The darkness of night stood for illicit activity and dirtiness. The increase in business revenues and increased property values along White Ways were enough to convince businessmen in cities even without strong Progressive movements that street lighting was worth the investment.<sup>57</sup>

As autumn arrived, the bridge came together. The electric company laid wires and tracks for the streetcars. The electrical lift mechanisms were connected, the gates were installed in front of the draw, and the balustrades were painted.<sup>58</sup> Hugh Macfarlane, never one to hold back an opinion, raised an alarm when he noticed that the south wall of the east approach was nine inches lower than the north wall. The bridge engineer admitted this was true, but added that it was intentional, to leave space for L.J. Jones to build a sidewalk between the bridge and his new building on the east shore of the river. Jones' fish business had been demolished to make way for the new bridge, and he was now planning to build a three-story brick building, with steamboat docks on the river, a railroad platform, and



Detail from an October 1913 photograph taken facing west from the Muggé Building in downtown Tampa. The temporary Jackson Street Bridge is to the left, and the Lafayette Street Bridge is to the right. The concrete for the east approach and the east arch has been poured, and concrete work is progressing on the west side of the river (*Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photography Division [reproduction number LC-USZ62-135759]*).

a row of retail stores with plate glass windows shaded by copper marquees suspended by ornamental chains.<sup>59</sup>

W. H. Hodge, of Boller, Hodge, & Baird of New York, arrived in Tampa in mid-December to test the bridge. The engineer loaded two streetcars with 50,000 pounds each; these and two ten-ton steamrollers were sent across the draw at the same time. Hodge proclaimed, “She’s sound as a rock,” and the city opened the bridge.<sup>60</sup> A trolley car, packed with city officials, engineers, newspapermen, and “other favored persons” (including Peter O. Knight, who twenty years earlier had been a passenger in the first streetcar over the second Lafayette Street Bridge) passed over the river to Hyde Park. The bridge opening became a private affair, with the general public held back until the elites had finished claiming all of the “firsts.” After trying out the trolley car, the dignitaries scrambled to ride the U.S. Government’s launch *DeSoto*, the first ship to pass under the new bridge. Hugh Macfarlane was the first to drive an automobile over the bridge, and Everett Snow rode the first motorcycle. The Montgomery Amusement Company, which filmed weekly events in cities where the company owned theaters, recorded portions of the celebration, including the first car to cross and the raising of the bascule lifts.<sup>61</sup>

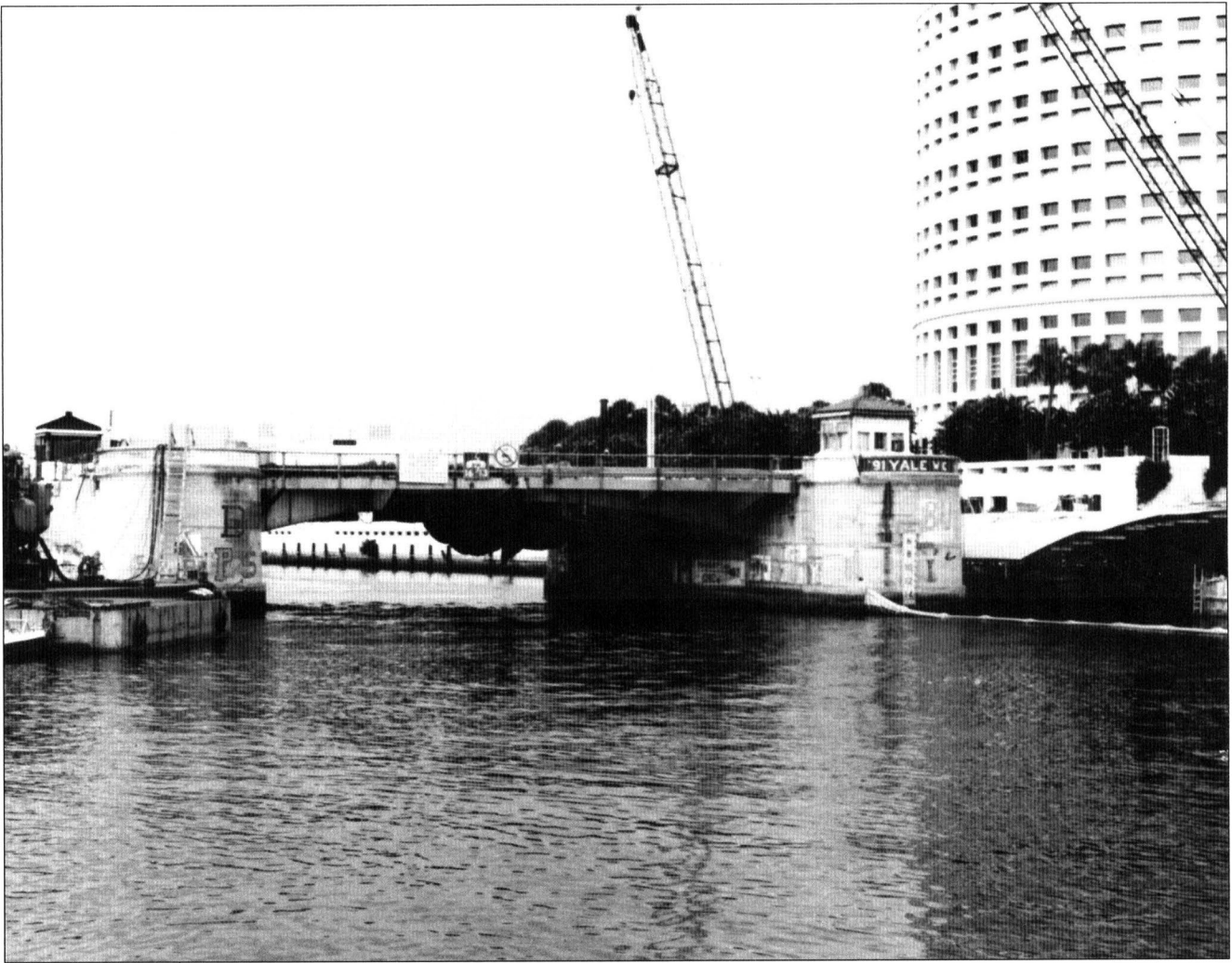
The same day the new bridge opened to traffic, Tampa Electric Company opened its new office building, on the west side of the river, to the public. The building gave people an excuse to stroll over the bridge, or to ride the streetcars that were again crossing the river after a seventeen-month interruption. Tampa Electric’s new office displayed the latest wonders of electricity: cooking equipment and Christmas trees decorated with tiny colorful lights. While the masses promenaded, city officials, prominent citi-

zens, and the bridge’s contractors and engineers feasted at Garcia’s restaurant. Amid a cloud of cigar smoke, the diners gave short speeches of satisfaction. The engineers and other out-of-town workers were doubly happy. After nearly a year and a half in Tampa, they could be home for the holidays.<sup>62</sup>

No one in Tampa had thought about a formal celebration for the bridge’s dedication before September 1913, when the subject was brought up at a Tampa Merchants Association meeting.<sup>63</sup> The original plans for the celebration included speeches, parades, and brass bands. The Association began negotiations with the Pain Fire Works Display Company to provide illuminations along the river near the bridge and elaborate displays, with a pyrotechnic portrait of Mayor McKay and another of the destruction of Pompeii. The merchants’ motivation was clear and freely admitted: to attract people to Tampa, people who would buy things from their stores.<sup>64</sup>

A short time later, the boosters announced that the formal bridge opening would be held in conjunction with the Gasparilla Festival to be held in February of the following year.<sup>65</sup> The Tampa Merchants Association, a coalition of capital and labor, did not have the support of men such as Peter O. Knight or D.B. McKay. The purpose of the bridge celebration was still to attract attention and visitors, but by shifting the formal opening to coincide with Gasparilla, control was more strongly in the hands of the civic elite, rather than the city’s merchants.

When it finally arrived, the Gasparilla festival of 1914 was a celebration of Tampa’s place in the Industrial Age. The official program included a massive release of homing pigeons, a children’s floral parade, a human chess game, an historic pageant depicting “The Landing of DeSoto,” fireworks, a Sun-



The third Lafayette Street Bridge as it appeared at the start of restoration, 1994. (Courtesy of Tampa Historical Society.)

day sermon, a major league baseball game, and a nighttime carnival under Franklin Street's electric lights. Tampa Electric Company's float garnered the most attention from parade goers, featuring a working model of the new drawbridge.<sup>66</sup>

On February 23, 1914, the mayor led the formal dedication of the new bridge. At three o'clock in the afternoon, all traffic over the bridge stopped, the crowds edged closer to the grandstand, and soldiers stood at attention. Hailing the bridge as "the chief accomplishment of this administration" and "a monument to the administration under which it was constructed," McKay worked the crowd for political gain. Judge Parkhill continued the platitudes, proclaiming that the work of the mayor and the city officials "would be remembered for generations to come as the feet of the Tampans of the future trod the great cement way."<sup>67</sup>

The years surrounding the new bridge's

opening defined a time of prosperity. Other city improvement projects started or completed at about the same time were the seawall along Bayshore Boulevard, a new city hall building, a new sewer system, and Tampa Union Station. Tampa's first skyscraper, the eight-story Hillsboro Hotel, was built in 1912, followed in 1913 by a new Elks Lodge and the Knights of Pythias Building, each ten stories tall. The local phone company, Peninsular Telephone, replaced their old "common battery" system with new, automatic telephones in 1915. In 1914, the first direct railroad connection opened between Tampa and St. Petersburg, and work began to transform the Ybor Estuary into the Ybor Channel.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps most spectacularly, on January 1, 1914, Tampans crowded onto the Lafayette Street Bridge and along the Hillsborough River to watch as Tony Jannus landed his airplane at the foot of Lee Street. The first regularly scheduled airline service

in the world had begun.<sup>69</sup>

### The Lafayette Street Bridge today

Tampa continued to grow throughout the twentieth century, and eventually the passage of time and thousands of vehicles each day left their marks on the Lafayette Street Bridge. TECO stopped operating streetcars in 1947, with the last streetcar tracks in Tampa removed from the Lafayette Street Bridge in 1969.<sup>70</sup> Lafayette Street was renamed Kennedy Boulevard in December 1963, honoring President John F. Kennedy, who had visited Tampa just a week before his death; accordingly, the Lafayette Street Bridge became the Kennedy Boulevard Bridge.<sup>71</sup> In the late 1970s, overwhelming public opposition squelched a plan to replace the bridge's decorative urn-shaped balusters with modern steel rails. Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) plans to widen the bridge in 1988 were scrapped when nearby business owners objected to land takings. Budget cuts and rising construction costs added further delays, but engineers warned that the bridge would fall down if not replaced.<sup>72</sup>

After considering several designs, and with the input of engineers and historic preservationists, FDOT implemented a plan to renovate the bridge while retaining its original appearance. By the time the bridge closed for repairs in February 1994, an estimated 26,000 cars and trucks used the Kennedy Boulevard Bridge each day, so FDOT rerouted traffic over other downtown bridges. The local transit authority (HARTline) ran free shuttle buses at ten-minute intervals for the 2,000 pedestrians who normally used the bridge each day. As in 1913, local store and restaurant owners worried that they would lose money while the bridge was closed.<sup>73</sup>

On March 3, 1995, a small crowd of one hundred people looked on as a busload of dignitaries drove through a paper banner to mark the bridge's re-opening. At a dedication ceremony the next day in Curtis Hixon Park (the former location of Henry Plant's railroad depot), Mayor Sandy Freedman called the bridge a "door to downtown." The ceremonies coincided with the Gasparilla Festival of the Arts, which took place that weekend along the riverfront. The refurbished bridge was but one of several major construction projects taking place in downtown Tampa, including a new hockey

arena and the Florida Aquarium. Collectively, these projects were intended to attract people to downtown Tampa outside of business hours.<sup>74</sup>

The issues and attitudes surrounding the bridge replacement project of the 1990s were remarkably similar to those of a century earlier. A new (or substantially renovated) bridge was desired to replace an old bridge that could not be repaired in any practical sense. A new bridge was intended to help bring more visitors and business to downtown Tampa. People worried how they would cross the river during construction, and businessmen worried that they would lose customers while the bridge was closed. The most striking difference was financial, an astronomical leap in cost from the \$13,000 the original bridge cost in 1889, to the \$240,000 cost for the 1913 bridge, to the \$6.2 million cost of renovation in 1993.<sup>75</sup> There was also a fundamental difference in the approach to financing the construction. Each of the previous bridge projects had been paid for in part or all by municipal bonds, with contributions from outside agencies such as county government or private utility companies. In 1993, everyone in the state shared the cost of the renovation, not just the residents of a particular ward, or Tampa, or Hillsborough County.

The physical shape of a city is both a result and an expression of the people who live there. Some choices that form a city are not made intentionally, although where and how a house, factory, or bridge is built does shape both the city and how the city is valued. The Lafayette Street Bridge brings to mind few superlatives. It is not the first, largest, oldest, most beautiful, or most unusual bridge in Tampa Bay or Florida or the United States. It is, however, a strong and surviving physical manifestation of the people, beliefs, and events that shaped the city of Tampa, and as such has lasting value and significance.

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