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# David Paul Davis' Unfulfilled Dream: Davis Islands from October 1926 Until The Crash of 1929

Rodney Kite-Powell II

"D. P. DAVIS LOST FROM  
SHIP IN MID-ATLANTIC  
ON VOYAGE TO EUROPE  
Radio Message Brings News  
But Details Are Lacking"

--*Tampa Morning Tribune*,  
October 14, 1926

This headline sent a shockwave through the city of Tampa. Millionaire developer David Paul Davis was dead. By October 1926, though, his dream of an island paradise in Hillsborough Bay had assumed a life of its own. Neither his life, nor that of the island, unfolded in the manner Davis planned.

## D. P. DAVIS: THE MAN WITH A DREAM

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 a sister, Elizabeth.<sup>1</sup> By 1900, the Davis family moved to Tampa where, according to the 1900 Federal Census, they rented a home at 208 Pierce Street. The three Davis boys were listed as students and their father served as an engineer on a steamboat, probably the *Manatee*.<sup>2</sup>

In 1901, sixteen-year-old Davis worked as a clerk at the law firm of Macfarlane & Raney and paid rent in his parent's Pierce Street home. Two years later he served as a mate,

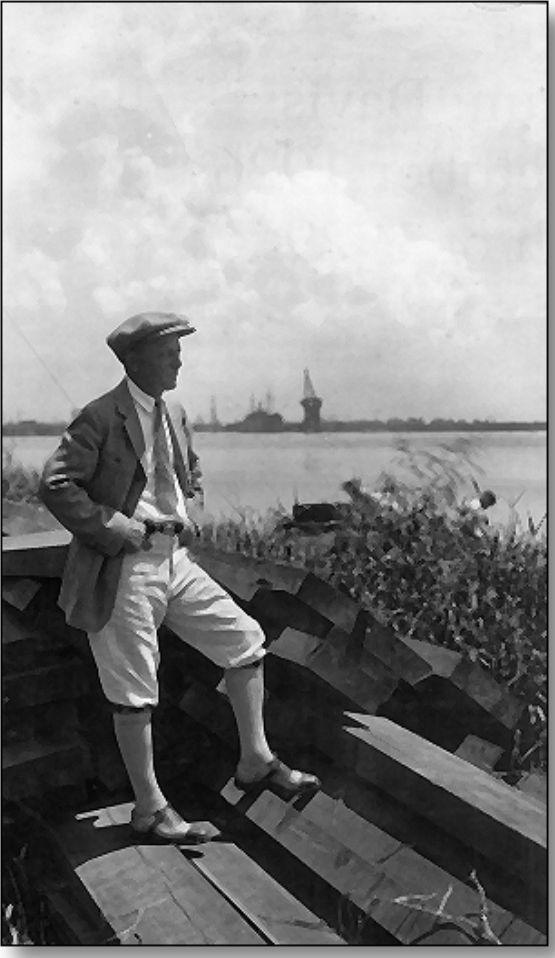
probably aboard his father's steamship. He, along with his father and brother Charles, lived at his sister's home at 606 Jackson Street. It is around this time that Davis' mother disappears from the historical record.

In 1907, Davis formed a partnership with Robertson T. Arnold and 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.<sup>3</sup> It is safe to say that he was only biding his time, waiting for his next opportunity.

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

## DAMS IN JACKSONVILLE

Davis' biographical trail fades until his marriage to Marjorie H. Merritt in Jacksonville, Florida on November 11, 1915.<sup>5</sup> Davis worked as an independent real estate agent in Jacksonville during that year,



**David Paul Davis is shown standing on the Bayshore looking out at his islands dream taking form. He is in the approximate location of the original bridge to the islands.**

(Burgers Brothers photograph courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center.)

but by 1916 he was an officer in the ambiguously titled All Star Features Company. The company's president, James W. Edmondson, also headed two investment companies headquartered in Jacksonville. Given Edmondson and Davis' backgrounds, it is fair to assume that the All Star Features Company was at least nominally concerned with Jacksonville real estate.<sup>6</sup>

Davis remained with All Star Features until the end of World War I. The exact date of

his departure from Jacksonville is unknown, but it can be assumed he left in late 1918 or early 1919. He apparently headed south with the money he made during the war. Davis arrived in Miami and by 1920 had turned his attention to South Florida's emerging real estate market.<sup>7</sup>

## THE MIAMI YEARS

Miami, and most of southeast Florida, found itself in the midst of a real estate boom at the close of World War I. An increase in the state's population, and the improvements made to the automobile and heavy machinery, made living in south Florida much easier than in the years preceding the war. New roads were built, connecting not only the state with its neighbors, but also the cities within the state. This, coupled with low land prices, introduced an excellent opportunity for people willing to suffer through the heat and mosquitos, two facets of tropical Florida that had not yet been conquered.

Davis was not in the first group of land speculators, but he did watch them and learn from them. Before pioneer developer Carl Fisher arrived in 1912, Miami Beach was just a row of uninhabited barrier islands. He built them into isles of unequalled beauty, at least in the eyes of people eager to invest their money in them.

When Davis finally tried his hand at land sales, he proved to be quite adept. He took one unsuccessful developer's property, which had languished on the market, and sold it in a few days. He accomplished this through superior marketing and creativity. Soon, he was developing land on his own, and making a good amount of money doing it. By 1921 he was the sales manager for United Realty Company. Within the next two years, Davis had made an estimated \$5



**David Paul Davis is shown standing in a small skiff directing the placement of pilings for the first wooden bridge built to the islands. Homes along the Bayshore and curious bystanders can be seen behind Davis. This photograph and the one on the facing page appear to have been taken during the same Burgert shooting session.**

(Burgert Brothers photograph courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center.)



million. Stories of fast fortunes spread quickly, though, and soon South Florida was filled with land speculators. Davis sought out a new location for real estate to boom. He believed Tampa, where he got his start in real estate, would be the scene of the next explosion.

#### DAMS FAMILY REMAINS IN TAMPA

While Davis traveled around the state, and possibly out of the country, his family remained in Tampa. His parents either divorced or his mother died, because by 1908 George Davis was married to a woman named Kathryn. By 1913 George and Kathryn Davis owned a home, located at 207 South Boulevard. David's brothers, as well as other families, would occasionally rent rooms in the Davis house. If anyone cared to look, the mud flats that would become Davis Islands could be seen from the roof of the South Boulevard home.<sup>8</sup> Davis made his return to Tampa in January 1924. He arrived older, wiser and bolder, and he brought with him a plan to forever change the look of the city.

#### THE PRODIGAL SON RETURNS

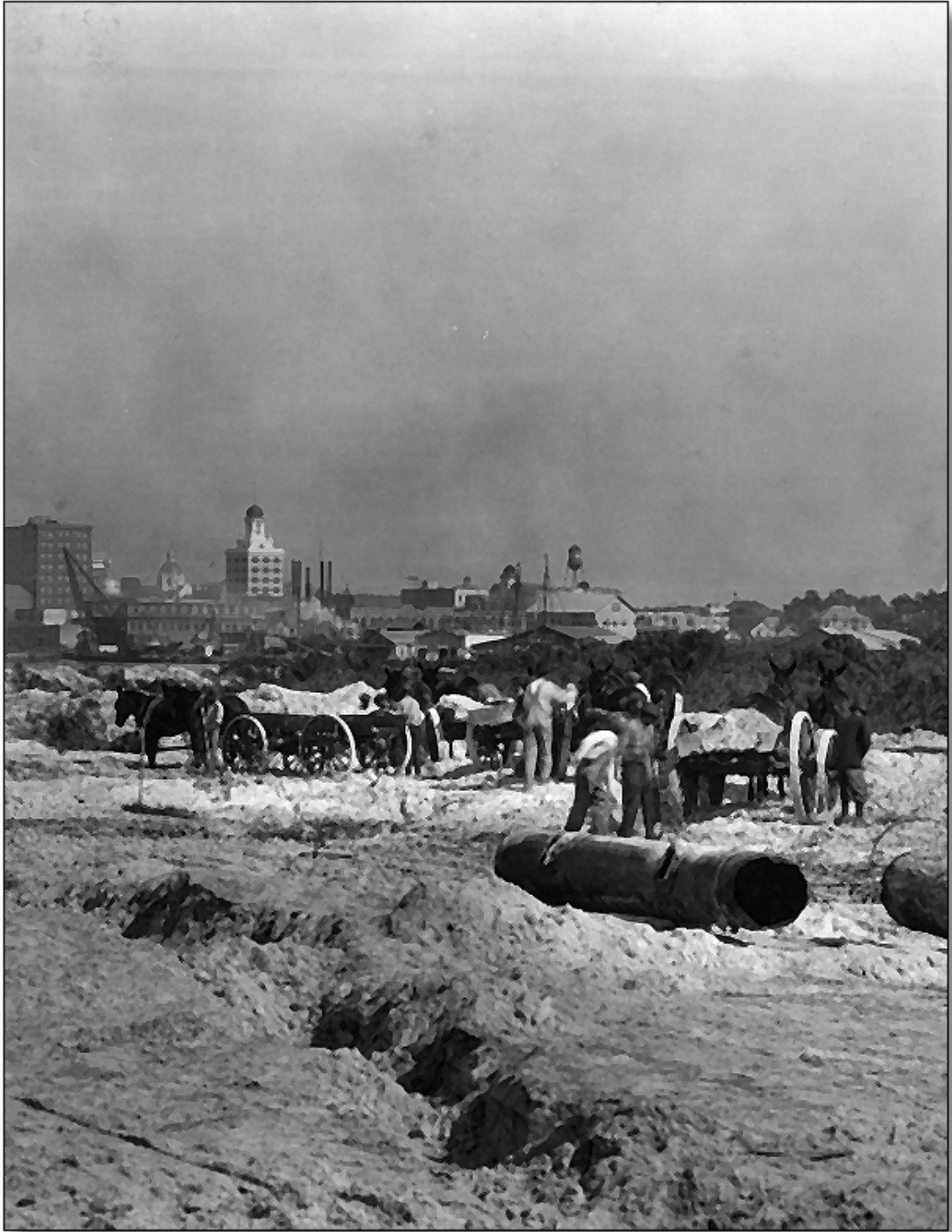
When Davis announced his plan to build "Florida's Supreme \$30,000,000 Development," the response from prospective buyers was overwhelming.<sup>9</sup> Davis used the experience he gained in Miami and applied it well to the new Tampa venture. He opened a sales office in a very prominent downtown location, 502 Franklin Street. He knew his plans for building up the mud flats in Hillsborough Bay, adding exponentially to their size, would be challenged in a court of law because of the land use and riparian rights issues, and planned accordingly. Most importantly, he knew he would need to launch a sales campaign unparalleled in the area's history.

Davis also networked with the city's business and political leadership, knowing he would need their support for the development. Evidence of this lies in the deal Davis made with the city to acquire Little Grassy Island, the smaller of the two bay islands, and the riparian rights around it. He was required to post a \$200,000 surety bond. He did not use his own money, but instead allowed investors, including two sitting Tampa City Commissioners, to purchase bonds of varying amounts, totaling \$225,281.25.<sup>10</sup> The bond money would be returned by the city when Davis completed the permanent bridge and deeded 55 acres to the city for park space. The park would be dedicated to the memory of Davis' wife, Marjorie, who died in 1922 after just seven years of marriage.

His next task centered around the new islands' infrastructure. Davis signed a \$2 million contract with Northern Dredge and Dock Company to pump 9 million cubic yards of sand from the bottom of Hillsborough Bay onto Big and Little Grassy Islands, creating Davis Islands. He promised the city that he would build a permanent bridge to the development which would cost at least \$100,000. First he needed a temporary bridge just to get workers, machines and materials to the site. Within days after the temporary bridge was built, photographers and sightseers joined the construction crews on the ever-growing property.

#### DAVIS ISLANDS BECOMES A REALITY

The first sale of lots came on October 4, 1924, less than four weeks after the Florida Supreme Court ruled in Davis' favor on his right to build up the land in Hillsborough Bay for commercial purposes. The results of



**Workers lay and position what appear to be dredging pipes on the island using mules and wooden wagons filled with dirt. The scene, taken on the northern tip of the island, provides an excellent view of Tampa's skyline. City hall, the Hillsborough County courthouse, hotels, and Sacred Heart Catholic Church are visible. The riggings of sailing ships can also be scene in the channel.**

(Burgert Brothers photograph courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center.)



**Another view of the dredging operation shows a crowd of smartly dressed visitors who arrived by car. Motorcycles can be seen at the center. Moms and Dads in suits and hats -- and even children running in the sand -- appear to be scouting locations for their new dream homes. This view was taken looking southwest.**

(Burgert Brothers photograph courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center.)



**Cranes were employed along with the dredging to reposition the fill and raise the height to levels suitable for building. This scene may show the creation of connections from island to island.**

(Burgert Brothers photograph courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center.)



that first day's land sales are well documented -- all available lots, a total of 300, sold within three hours at an average cost of \$5,610 per lot. Hardly any of those lots were above sea level, let alone graded and ready to build on.<sup>11</sup>

Total sales for that day reached a staggering \$1,683,000. More interesting was the staggering resale of those same lots, some reportedly made inside the Franklin Street sales office between the first owners and eager prospects waiting in line. The feat repeated itself each time lots came on the open market. Realizing the need to not flood that lucrative market, Davis spaced the sales months apart, allowing the property values to increase each time.<sup>12</sup>

Davis encouraged everyone to view his emerging paradise. Like many other real estate developers of the time, Davis owned a fleet of buses on which prospective buyers could tour Davis Islands. The buses, specially painted with the D. P. Davis Properties logo, brought people from as far away as Sarasota, Orlando and even Miami.

Visitors received colorful brochures, booklets and photographs showing how all of their dreams could come true, just by buying property on Davis Islands. Davis' marketing skills led to the production of sales materials showing the Islands as his dream realized. Venetian style canals, luxurious homes, boating and waterfront grandeur all were depicted in leather-bound booklets distributed to potential buyers.

Davis created a carnival-like atmosphere around his sales promotions, hosting boat races around the Islands and along Bayshore Boulevard, airplane exhibitions with stunt flyers, sports exhibitions such as Olympic swimmer Helen Wainwright's lap around Davis Islands, plus tennis tournaments and

golf lessons from tour professionals Bobby Cruickshank and Johnny Farrell.<sup>13</sup>

Many of the promises made by Davis and his company were realized, such as a golf course, apartments, hotels, canals and parks. One key aspect of the Islands plan, a shopping district, was also completed. Billed by Davis as "congruous with the plan of establishing on Davis Islands an ideal residential city complete in itself," the business section centered around the Bay Isle Building, located at 238 East Davis Boulevard and designed by Tampa architect M. Leo Elliot. Elliot followed Davis' requirement that the building "harmonize architecturally with the surrounding Island beauty." Completed in 1925, the Bay Isle Building is still the anchor of the Islands' business community.

The Islands featured a number of hotel and apartment projects. The most recognized are the Mirasol, Palazzo Firenze (Palace of Florence), Palmarin Hotel (now known as Hudson Manor) and the Spanish Apartments. Some early commercial buildings, notably the Biscayne Hotel and Venetian Apartments, have since been demolished. Others, such as the Augustine and Columbia Apartments on Columbia Drive, Flora Dora Apartments and Boulevard Apartments (now the Ritz Apartments, completed shortly after Davis' death) on Davis Boulevard are still occupied. The Merry Makers Club, situated on land given to the club by Davis on the corner of Danube and Barbados, represents the only social club originally planned for the Islands.

The Davis Islands Coliseum, completed in 1925, embodied the largest project originally planned for the community. Funded through the sale of stock certificates, the Coliseum housed concerts, auto shows, conventions





**Even as the islands' powerlines, streetlights and mediterranean-style buildings began to appear, work continued on the miles of curbing, roads, and other infrastructure. Trucks joined the mule wagons in hauling dirt and fill.**

(Burgert Brothers photograph courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center.)



**The Burgerts posed a full crew of carpenters and supervisors in the midst of construction of one the islands' distinctive homes.**

(Burgert Brothers photograph courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center.)

and many other events within its large auditorium. The Coliseum was among the largest of its kind in the southeastern United States. Located on Danube, the Davis Islands Coliseum was destroyed by fire in the mid 1970s.

Davis became bolder with each success. The Hillsborough Bay project was simply the next logical step for him to make from his Miami experiences. Davis Islands, in turn, served as a stepping stone to an even more ambitious project. That project, Davis Shores in St. Augustine, arguably led to his untimely death.

#### DAMS SHORES, ST. AUGUSTINE, FLORIDA

Davis embarked on the new project just one year after opening land sales on Davis Islands. 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."

If his plan for Davis Islands was ambitious, those he held for Davis Shores seemed 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 with casino, each costing \$200,000 and two 18-hole golf courses, all crisscrossed by 50 miles of streets and 100 miles of sidewalks. Each lot was designed to border a golf course or the water.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately for Davis, few of these plans would actually materialize.

#### "THE BUBBLE BURSTS"

Economic signposts pointed toward a drop in real estate activity. The year 1926 began

with news of slow real estate sales, a condition which did not worry the developer. But as the temperature rose from winter to spring, so did the problems. Instead of receiving an expected \$4 million in second payments on Davis Islands property, only \$30,000 in mortgages were paid.<sup>15</sup>

Also by this time, con men had infested the Florida real estate market, stealing millions of dollars from hapless investors located throughout the United States by selling worthless lots, or property they did not even own. Northern banks grew skiddish of Florida investments. The state of Ohio passed "blue sky" laws that, according to James Covington, Ph. D.,

". . . forbade certain firms to sell Florida real estate in Ohio. Walter J. Greenbaum, Chicago investment banker, said that other states should follow Ohio's lead for 'this Southern land boom is a fertile field for pirates of promotion.'<sup>16</sup>

Though not a "pirate of promotion," Davis' luck changed as well, with more and more investors defaulting on their loans, starving him of much needed cash.

Davis Shores continued to draw away all available resources, resulting in slower construction on Davis Islands. An overall shortage of building materials made matters worse. Davis had little choice but to sell his Tampa investment.

#### DAVIS SELLS HIS ISLANDS

Tampa lawyer and civic leader Peter O. Knight, who at the time was Tampa Electric Company's president, knew the importance of completing the Island project. Knight convinced the Boston engineering firm of Stone & Webster, who at the time owned Tampa Electric, to purchase Davis Islands.

Stone & Webster formed a new subsidiary, Davis Islands Investment Company, which in turn purchased Davis Islands on August 2, 1926. Davis received 49% of the stock in the new company, which he immediately used as collateral on a \$250,000 loan so work could continue on Davis Shores.

#### TAMPA GENERAL 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 Cordon 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.<sup>17</sup>

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 Cordon Keller Nursing School also moved to the Islands, with both opening their doors in 1927. The original hospital building is almost completely obscured by the prominent additions made to it in 1958, 1963, 1973, 1978 and 1985.<sup>18</sup>

It seems no one gave too great a consideration to the piece of land the new hospital occupied, aside from the fact that the city

already owned it. The location on an island accessible by only one bridge (two at present) would prove to be vulnerable during hurricane season, with evacuations not uncommon. Finally, after Tampa's close encounter with Hurricane Elena in August 1985, the hospital's main generator was moved from the basement to a higher and safer location. At present, the hospital can withstand the strongest of storms. Yet the risk of the Islands' bridges washing out, thereby isolating the hospital from the rest of the city, remains.

#### 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."<sup>19</sup>

Stone & Webster moved their Tampa offices from 101 Tampa Street in downtown to Davis Islands, possibly as a show of support



**D. P. Davis made certain his prospective buyers would see his dream islands in style. Suits and straw hats seem to be the proper garb to wear while touring the new development. A fleet of modern and luxurious D. P. Davis Properties' buses are shown lined up in front of the Administration Building. This office building would become the Seaborn Academy in 1930.**

(Burgert Brothers photograph courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center.)

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.<sup>20</sup>

#### 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. By 1929 many operated well below total occupancy and one, the Palace of Florence, functioned as an apartment/hotel. The Biscayne Hotel represented the only closure, in late 1929 - early 1930, only to re-open in 1931.

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.<sup>21</sup> 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





**Davis spared no expense in marketing Davis Islands as the place to live and entertain in a grand style. Olympic swimmer Helen Wainwright, seen above with a biplane stunt pilot, swam laps around Davis Islands in just one of several marketing promotions designed to bring attention to the development.**

(Burgers Brothers photograph courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center.)



**Davis' administration building is an example of the architecture that best typifies the mediterranean-style influence of the hotels, apartments, offices and homes. The building houses Seaborn Academy today.**

(Burgers Brothers photograph courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center.)

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.<sup>22</sup>

The occupancy rate dropped in 1929, to 53%, but the figure is misleading. Fifty apartments were added, two entirely new buildings plus the transition of the Palace of Florence from exclusively offering hotel rooms to also providing rooms for rent. The total number of leased apartments increased by 20. The rental market enjoyed a surge by 1930, when both the number of available apartments and the number of rented apartments both increased. The Kornell, the first departure from Mediterranean architecture in a Davis Islands commercial building, offered just three apartments, which were all leased, and the Venetian Apartments added two units to the 15 already available.<sup>23</sup>

#### FIRST PRIZE GOES TO DAMS ISLANDS

Validation for Davis' determined plan came in 1927 when the American Association of City Planners awarded its first prize to Davis Islands. The Association pointed favorably to the layout, which,

"embraced sixty streets, representing a total of twenty-seven miles of broad, curving boulevards 60 to 100 feet in width, and several miles of picturesque, winding waterways.

"It provided for nearly eleven miles of waterfront locations and a large amount of golf course frontage for fine homes. It was so planned that not any residential lot in the entire property would be more than 500 yards from the water.<sup>24</sup>

"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."<sup>25</sup>

#### CHANGES IN THE DREAM

With the transfer of ownership from Davis' D. P. Davis Properties to Stone & Webster's Davis Islands Incorporated came increased flexibility in the deed restrictions.<sup>26</sup> The Kornell Apartments, completed in 1928 and located at 25 Davis Boulevard, was a radical departure from the Mediterranean style required by Davis. Several residences also deviated from the prescribed style, examples of which still exist at 26 and 116 Adalia.

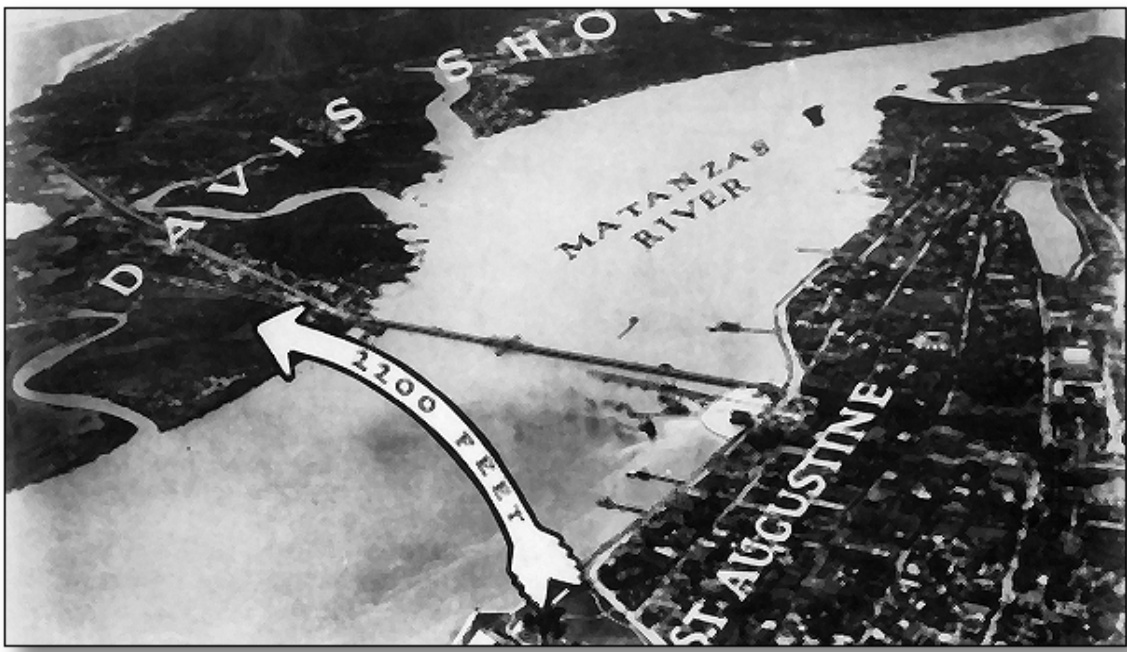
Davis Islands Inc. continued construction on the Islands for the benefit of both private and business residents. The firm also pursued the internal improvements on Davis' original road plans, which were necessary for the smooth flow of the growing automobile traffic. The permanent bridge leading to Davis Islands was dedicated in a ceremony featuring Tampa mayor D. B. McKay and Howard G. Philbrook, president of Davis Islands Inc., on May 16, 1928. It took nearly a year and a half to complete the bridge, with a portion of the time spent fighting an injunction by Patrick and Euphemia Kelliher, who claimed the bridge infringed on the riparian rights of their property at 105 Bay Street. The Florida Supreme Court dissolved the injunction allowing construction to continue.<sup>27</sup>

Davis Islands Inc. kept another of Davis' promises, in 1929, when they completed



**The Venetian Apartments, part of Davis's master plan for a complete community of lifestyles, incomes and interests, were built on the island side of the bridge taking full advantage of the water and walking proximity to downtown. The sign in the photo reads, 'COMPLETELY AND LUXURIOUSLY FURNISHED. ALL APPLIANCES ELECTRIC. REASONABLE YEAR ROUND RATES. APPLY WITHIN.' The building is no longer standing.**

(Burgert Brothers photograph courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center.)



**An ariel view of St. Augustine and the Atlantic Ocean in the distance was marked by Davis to show his new development, Davis Shores. Again, proximately to the town's main business district, "2000 FEET," was a big selling point. Davis would not live to see his dreams -- here or in Tampa -- fulfilled.**

(Photograph courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center.)



construction of the Davis Islands Pool. Located on the corner of Columbia Drive and Bosphorous Avenue, the \$75,000 swimming pool represented one of the last large-scale projects funded by Davis Islands Inc.<sup>28</sup>

Davis Islands Inc. continued to advertise the virtues of visiting and living on the Islands, but a reduced marketing budget directed the message to a different target audience. The prospective buyer was not the same one who originally rushed to buy lots on the first day in 1924. In 1928 a Davis Islands brochure titled *Florida's Wonder Spot* still touted the location, convenience, fun and luxury of the property, but the printed piece was produced on a smaller budget. Paper quality, artwork and design were all affected by the low cost approach. Another big difference was the greatly expanded use of photography rather than the fanciful artwork of previous sales brochures. That was probably due as much to the fact there were more finished buildings to photograph in 1928 as with the cost of creating and printing original drawings.

Flowery language was another casualty of the new times. One of the captions for a photograph of the Mirasol Hotel gives an example of these changes. "The Mirasol -- one of the Davis Islands Hotels - where the visitor finds real resort luxury at moderate cost."<sup>29</sup> As a comparison, the hotels in *Life on Davis Islands, Tampa In The Bay*, produced by D. P. Davis Properties in 1925, were "robed in quiet refinement where everyone . . . free from care, may enjoy the vitalizing Island life that beckons near at hand." *Life on Davis Islands*, printed by the Courier - Journal Lithography Company (complete with embossed leather cover), was issued to prospective buyers and visitors at the D. P. Davis Properties Administration Building at 32 Davis Boulevard. When placed next to each other, the post-Davis

version is somewhat lacking.<sup>30</sup> The silvery prose is still present, but it is definitely tarnished.

In a final blow to the old Davis marketing machine, the administration offices moved from 32 Davis Boulevard into space on the second floor of the Bay Isle Building -- space recently vacated by Stone & Webster. The old Davis Boulevard quarters became the Seaborn Day School in 1930.

### CAUSALITIES OF THE BOOM

David Davis was among the most notable casualties of the boom. He would not live to see either of his monumental projects, Davis Islands or Davis Shores, see completion. Stories of Davis' death always include some measure of mystery. The only undisputed facts are that he fell overboard and drowned while en route to Europe aboard an ocean liner. What is in question is how he ended up in the water; by accidentally falling out of a port hole, being pushed out or jumping out to end his own life. Victory National Life Insurance Company, founded by Sumter Lowry, sold Davis a \$300,000 policy a few months before his death. Davis held policies with other insurance companies, and, since the body was not recovered, there was some doubt that Davis was really dead. Lowry, "anxious to make a reputation for paying claims promptly," hired an investigator;

"who went to England and talked to the Cunard Line offices. They established the fact that a reliable steward had been standing outside Mr. Davis' cabin and he heard voices in the cabin. In a few minutes one of the parties in the cabin rushed out and said that Mr. Davis had gone overboard.

"The steward had seen Mr. Davis go in the cabin and he had never left his position at



the door until the announcement was made that Mr. Davis was lost. He rushed in the cabin which was small and it would have been impossible for a man to hide himself in. The cabin was empty. D. P Davis was gone."<sup>31</sup>

Lowry paid out the claim based on the investigator's conclusion that Davis was indeed dead. How he fell overboard is still a mystery. Until new evidence is found, any theory regarding Davis' death is just that, theory.

Davis was not alone in his fall from realty grace. The entire Florida real estate market began a steady decline in 1926. "By October 1925 the . . . boom peaked. By February 1926 the *New York Times* reported a 'lull'. By July the *Nation* reported a 'collapse': 'The world's greatest poker game, played with building lots instead of chips, is over. And the players are now . . . paying up.'"<sup>32</sup> Tampa realtors felt the sting, which is reflected in the city directories of the time. In 1926, there were over 850 companies and individuals listed in the Tampa City Directory under its various real estate listings. The realtors covered Hillsborough County and west Central Florida, with a few touting investments in South Florida. Eighty-two of these companies placed real estate ads in the directory's special advertising section, up from 74 in 1925. One year later, in 1927, only 29 realty companies decided to buy space in the advertising section. The total number of realtors that year plunged by half to 416. Only 292

showed up in the 1928 city directory, with 21 of those taking out special ads.<sup>33</sup>

Some growth in other areas of the industry did develop, as reflected by the directories. The most evident increase occurred in rent collection. Two agencies, Harris Realty Company and Jacob Highsmith, listed themselves under rent collectors in 1926. The number increased to 5 in 1927, when Walter J. Burnside, C. V. Dickins and Hendry & Knight Company joined Harris and Highsmith. Thrower Brothers Incorporated offered their services in 1928, in addition to the five other concerns. By 1929, however, it became obvious that not even rent collection could prove profitable. Just Burnside and Dickins survived in the listings at the end of the 1920s.

Real estate continued its decline, and by 1930 only 5 real estate companies placed ads in the directory, a 94% decrease from 1926.<sup>34</sup> The final blow, of course, was the stock market crash on October 29, 1929. The rest of the country was simply joining Florida in economic depression.

With that, all hope of a recovery in Florida real estate was lost. Davis possibly felt the inevitable approaching and did not want to be around to see it. His islands would again become desirable property, but it would take another world war and another Florida real estate boom, caused by the booming economy and population in the 1950s, for it to happen.

## ENDNOTES

The author wishes to thank Elizabeth Dunham, Robert Kerstein, Frank North and Curtis Welch for their assistance in the research and preparation of this article.

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<sup>1</sup> US Census Bureau, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900: Population* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1902) Obituary of

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George Riley Davis, *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 14, 1930.

David Davis' sister, Elizabeth, is referred to in the obituary of George Davis. It is likely that she is the oldest of the four Davis children because she is not listed with the Davis household in the 1900 Federal Census. Presumably she had already moved out of the house by that time.

<sup>2</sup> *Twelfth Census of the United States. Sholes' Directory of the city of Tampa, 1899*, A. E. Sholes, Publisher, Savannah, Georgia, 1899. In the 1899 Sholes' Tampa Directory, George Davis is listed as an engineer on the steamer *Manatee*.

<sup>3</sup> *Tampa City Directory* (R. L. Polk & Co., Publishers, Jacksonville, Florida, hereinafter cited as PTD) Year 1908.

<sup>4</sup> Grismer, Karl, *Tampa: A History of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Area of Florida*, edited by Donald B. McKay (St. Petersburg Printing Company) pp. 224

<sup>5</sup> Previous biographers have placed him across the country, and the hemisphere, including a stint as a land speculator in the Panama Canal Zone.

<sup>6</sup> *Jacksonville City Directory* (R. L. Polk & Co., Publishers, Jacksonville, Florida) Years 1915 through 1917.

<sup>7</sup> Harner, Charles E. *Florida's Promoters: The Men Who Made It Big* (Trend House, Tampa, Florida, 1973) pp. 50.

<sup>8</sup> The Davis home at 207 South Boulevard has since been demolished. The Lee Roy Selmon Expressway presently passes through the property.

<sup>9</sup> Davis made every effort to mention the cost of the Davis Islands investment. He placed the \$30,000,000 price tag in almost every brochure, advertisement and news story produced between 1924 and 1926.

<sup>10</sup> Among the City of Tampa's materials relating to Davis Islands is a copy of a list of investors who held contracts with David Davis for surety bonds on Davis Islands. The list includes W. A. Adams and William J. Barrio, both sitting City Commissioners at the time. City of Tampa Archives and Records Service.

<sup>11</sup> Covington, James W. "The Story of Davis Islands 1924-1926," *The Sunland Tribune*, Vol. IV (November 1978), pp. 21.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Nolan, David *Fifty Feet in Paradise: The Booming of Florida* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, California, 1984) pp. 196.

<sup>15</sup> Covington, pp. 27

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 26

<sup>17</sup> A wealth of information on the hospital is contained in the Tampa General Hospital sponsorship page, hereinafter cited as TGH, found in Mormino, Gary R. and Pizzo, Anthony P *Tampa: The Treasure City* (Continental Heritage Press, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1983) pp. 242 and 243.

<sup>18</sup> TGH, pp. 242.

<sup>19</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 10, 1926.

<sup>20</sup> Bigwigs of Stone and Webster

<sup>21</sup> PTD. Year 1927.

<sup>22</sup> PTD. Years 1927 -1928.

<sup>23</sup> PTD. Years 1929 -1930.

<sup>24</sup> *Davis Islands Plan: Tampa Urban Case Study* (Hillsborough County Planning Commission, Tampa, no date) pp. 20.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> The name of the holding company for Davis Islands changed from Davis Islands Investment Company to Davis Islands Incorporated between 1926 and 1928.

<sup>27</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 16, 1928.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., August 25, 1929.

<sup>29</sup> *Florida's Wonder Spot* Produced for the Mirasol and Palmerin Hotels, Davis Islands Incorporated, (Florida Grower Press, Tampa, Florida, 1928)

<sup>30</sup> *Life on Davis Islands, Tampa In The Bay* D. P. Davis Properties, Inc. (Printed by Courier - Journal Lithography, Louisville, Kentucky, 1925) Both *Florida's Water Spot* and *Life on Davis Islands* are in

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the collections of the Tampa Bay History Center, Tampa, Florida.

<sup>31</sup> Lowry, Sumter, *Ole 93* (privately published, Tampa, Florida, 1970) PP. 37-38.

<sup>32</sup> Cannon, Michael *Florida: A Short History* (University Press of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, 1993) pp. 82.

<sup>33</sup> *PTD*. Years consulted were 1926 through 1929. In the 1926 directory, there were seven real estate related categories. These remained roughly the same through 1929, with a few exceptions.

<sup>34</sup> *PTD*. The following is the total page count, advertising page count and percentage of pages devoted to advertising, 1926 - 1930: 1926 - 108, 233, 21%; 1927 - 71, 9, 12%; 1928 - 59, 62, 11%; 1929 - 44, 33, 7%; 1930 - 34, 1 3/4, 5%