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# DAVIS ISLANDS: THE BOOMING TWO MONTH TRANSFORMATION OF TAMPA'S MUDFLATS INTO TAMPA'S DREAMSCAPE

By THOMAS H. MEYER

By 1924 the Florida Boom was on. It started and centered around Miami, which had attracted swarms of tourists, speculators and investors. The tourists came looking for the good life in the Florida sunshine; speculators came seeking quick profits in property sales; and the investors came hoping to make large fortunes in real estate. The resulting effects upon Miami were explosive: record setting building and real estate activities, a frenzied storm of buying and selling of land, that was accompanied by widespread land speculation, followed by surging prices and values in property. Miami had boomed into a real estate crazed metropolis.

Greeting and then spurring on the throngs of tourists, speculators, and investors, along Miami's Flagler Street were big developers who sought to satisfy their visitors' individual wishes by building the world's most glamorous communities.<sup>1</sup> These big developers, remembered Nixon Smiley, were "men of vision": "they had "imagination, drive, belief in themselves; they possessed a flair for gaining attention, and they could sell their ideas."<sup>2</sup> These men represented Florida's "Big Promoters". "Their common trait was a consuming desire to get things done. They wanted to see ... dredges making islands, plowing through swamps and deepening rivers; to see land seekers mobbing their sales offices; to build hotels and to see houses and office buildings rising."<sup>3</sup> And these men got these things done. Men like George Merrick who "transformed his father's farm, Coral Gables,

into a fabulous Mediterranean-like city";<sup>4</sup> and of course, men like Carl Fisher who "transformed the mangroves and swamps of a forlorn island" into the magnificent island resort of Miami Beach. Accounts of the tremendous building exploits of these "big promoters" and of the real estate mania of Miami began to spread like wildfire throughout the state -- the Boom was growing.

The Boom quickly engulfed Tampa Bay, and then catapulted the city of Tampa into its own high-flying boom. After a highly prosperous year in 1923, along with a flourishing winter in 1923-1924, accounts of Tampa's extraordinary prospects began circulating throughout the North. By the spring of 1924, the *Tampa Tribune* was reporting that northerners were acclaiming Tampa as "a young city which had leaped from the mediocre to a position which demanded world-wide attention; of a Utopia whose assets were an ideal good year-round climate, tropical skies and beautiful waterways; of a future without obstacles, of unlimited space in which the city could grow and prosper for years to come."<sup>5</sup> Tampa became the subject of increasing and widespread interest from all parts of the country. "This manifestation of newly aroused interest was hailed by Tampa's alert and watchful realtors", noted the *Tribune* adding, "they quickly took advantage of it to spread the gospel of Tampa and the Gulf Coast of Florida."<sup>6</sup>



**D.P. Davis**

A prime example whereby Tampa's realtors witnessed and promoted the blossoming of Tampa's fame occurred in June 1924 at the annual convention of the National Association of Real Estate Boards in Washington. The Tribune observed, "Tampa received more first class and desirable publicity than any other city represented at the gathering", noting further that the "benefits of the publicity and advertising Tampa received at that convention have been increasingly manifested ever since."<sup>7</sup> For people throughout the nation -- who a few years ago knew only Miami and thought "Miami was synonymous to Florida" -- were now not only growing more aware of Florida as never before, but in particular they were acquiring an awakening to the prospects of Tampa. In fact, instead of focusing on Miami and the East Coast as in previous years, the great trend in 1924 was talking about Tampa and the West Coast.<sup>8</sup> By September 1924, Tampa was being touted as "better known to the people of the

whole United States than almost any other southern city."<sup>9</sup>

Bolstering Tampa's fame was its booming economy. After its "most successful winter" 1923-1924, Tampa ushered in the "biggest and busiest six months" in its entire history.<sup>10</sup> For the first nine months of 1924, Tampa bank clearings amounted to \$138,558,238.12; whereas, the clearings for the whole year of 1922 amounted to only \$118,325,307.80. Bank clearings for the third quarter of 1924 were 33 ½ % greater than for the same quarter of 1923, or a gain of more than \$10,000,000.; and September alone showed a 51% increase over September of 1923, the difference being nearly \$5,000,000.<sup>11</sup> These gains were "unprecedented and illustrated that Tampa business was "increasing at a rapid rate".<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Tampa building and construction costs for 1924 kept the record pace. In the first nine months of 1924 building and construction costs amounted to \$3,631,575 which exceeded the total costs for all of 1923. Building costs for the third quarter of 1924 were 43% greater than for the same quarter of 1923, a gain of more than \$694,801; and in August alone there was a 56% increase over August of 1923, a difference of \$498,984.<sup>13</sup> So great was the activity in realty, development and construction circles that in many cases they had been actually unable to keep up with their work.<sup>14</sup> Real estate dealers, for example, declared "that volume of sales during the summer has exceeded that of any similar periods in the city's history".<sup>15</sup> At the end of the 1924 summer season, a reporter offered a glimpse of Tampa's prosperity:

"A stroll along Franklin Street, or any of the downtown streets any afternoon or evening, and observation of the daily increasing



**Dredging Work on Davis Islands. Note dredge to right of connecting bridge**

Photo from Charles Ward, Jr. Collection, Tampa Historical Society

number of pedestrians and automobiles on these thoroughfare is an indication. Where a year or two ago one had little or no difficulty in finding parking space for an automobile, now one must drive for block after block before finding an opening in the closely ranked cars. Pedestrians crowd the sidewalks; street cars pass slowly along the streets in the congested traffic loaded to capacity; hotels of the city report that day after day and night after night they are practically filled up; cafes and restaurants have doubled their staffs in the effort to keep pace with increasing patronage. Where a year or two ago at this time of year, one noted with interest the fact that three or four autos bearing licence tags of other states might be seen on the streets, today every state in the Union is represented in Tampa by motorists who have come here far in advance even of the beginning of the tourist season."<sup>16</sup>

The skyrocketing results and wild activities of Tampa's boom were predicted by many to become much more apparent and prevalent during the city's upcoming tourist season. For example, realtors returning to Tampa in September 1924 from northern trips augured great prospects for the upcoming winter. They forecasted "an unprecedented tourist travel to Florida during the coming season 11 with much of it heading toward Tampa."<sup>17</sup> The later travel, ticketed as "the drive for Tampa",<sup>18</sup> was considerably sparked by an escalating interest by travelers and investors from across the country in Tampa Bay real estate. According to returning realtors, "scores of men declared they intended to come to Tampa next winter to invest in property."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Tampa's realty concerns were reporting in mid-September,

"there going to be an influx here of wealthy persons from Chicago and the Middle West this season. All these men are planning to add in the growth of Tampa. Many have communicated with realtors in regard to suitable places for building and investment."<sup>20</sup> Consequently, it was predicted by Tampa's realtors that when this "Middle West wave" begins rolling into Tampa in October 1924 "it will be one of the largest and most sweeping in the real estate ocean."<sup>21</sup>

Many of the ensuing waves of tourists and investors who were attracted to Tampa Bay's real estate had heard of the area's low-priced developments. In September 1924 it was reported, "the most surprising thing about Tampa is the low price of real estate here compared with other cities ... the average price here is from 25 to 50 per cent under what might be expected. You could ... buy any piece of property in Tampa for sale at that price and be sure of making a fortune out of it."<sup>22</sup> In September there were more than two hundred subdivisions actually platted and in progress of development and sale in and adjacent to Tampa.<sup>23</sup> Announcements trumpeted the new suburban order "Temple Terrace is too well known here and abroad to require comment"... Oldsmar "is known all over the United States... "everybody in Tampa and hundreds of thousands of persons living in other parts of the country, have learned in the last year or so of Beach Park, Sunset Park, Virginia Park, New Suburb Beautiful and other superb residential developments within a few minutes drive of the city's heart."<sup>24</sup>

But of all of Tampa's boomtime developments, the "most stupendous development" was planned within the heart of the city -- actually it was in the bay, still underwater.<sup>25</sup> D.P. "Dave" Davis planned to



## Wide Boulevards winding through the Islands

**C**URVING about like lissome nymphs in classic freedom are twenty-seven miles of boulevards, winding in and out by parks and streams—past homes like precious jewels in a setting of rich, warm beauty—broad, paved thoroughfares with ample space they are, and each adorned with tropic trees and plants and shrubs and flowers. Motoring over DAVIS ISLANDS roadways, or strolling along her many crystal-studded walks, will be an exhilarating means of enjoyment to those who reside on, or frequent the Islands.



convert the mudflats and the three small islands in Hillsborough Bay near the mouth of Hillsborough River into "one of the brightest gems in Florida's royal diadem."<sup>26</sup> He first encountered these muddy islands as an adventurous boy growing up in Tampa. He used to play and dream of finding pirate's gold, never realizing then however, that this boyhood dream of finding an island fortune in the Hillsborough Bay would turn into reality. He first left Tampa at the age of 20 in search of making a fortune, and he actually wound up making and losing several of them. Finally he landed in Miami around 1919 where he made a huge fortune in real estate by developing several successful subdivisions. But most importantly, it was in Miami where he became inspired by men like Carl Fisher who created high-priced island developments from the bottom of Biscayne Bay. Sensing, however, that Miami's real estate market was over-flooded with big developers, Davis headed back to his boyhood city in 1923 with the belief that Tampa was destined to be Florida's business boom city.<sup>27</sup> Greeted with full-fledged fanfare and hailed as a hero, he arrived in Tampa driven by an island making dream. Remembering those muddy islands in Hillsborough Bay, he sought to transform them into a 900-acre development by implementing the island building techniques of Carl Fisher. "Davis, observed David Nolan, "meant to top the master and become Florida's premier "Maker of Islands."<sup>28</sup>

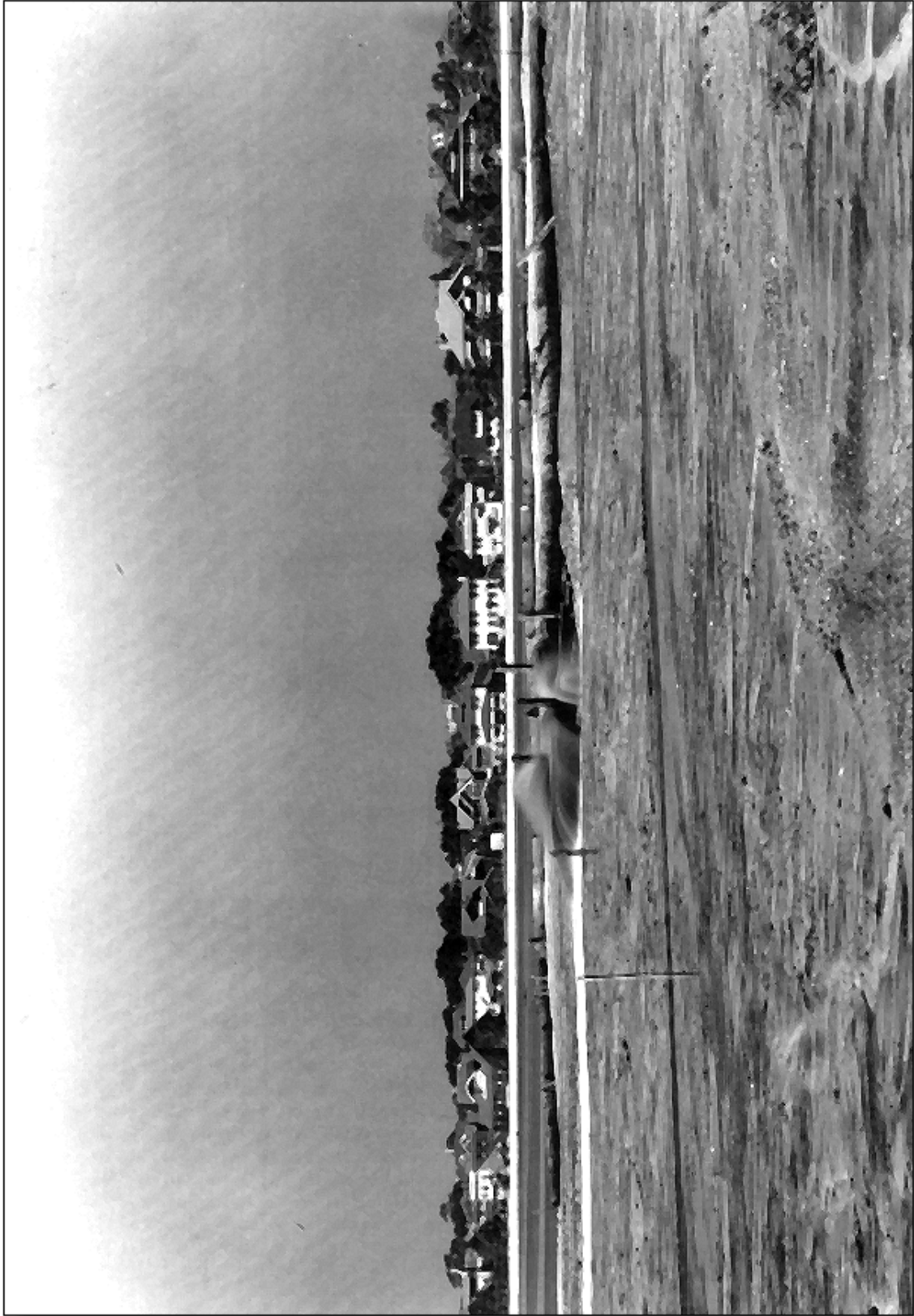
To begin his island making dream Davis had to overcome several formidable hurdles. First he had to acquire ownership of the property. Two of the small islands were privately owned by the estates of early settlers. The other island and the surrounding submerged bottom lands were owned by the city. But remarkably by February 1924, he had managed to buy the

privately owned land for \$150,000, and the city commissioners had sold him their portion for \$200,000. However, the sale by the commissioners had to be ratified in a special election by the city's electorate. Davis, nevertheless, won the election almost unanimously. Yet he had to clear one more hurdle. Many of the wealthy residents on Bayshore Boulevard were adamantly opposed to Davis' plan for a massive island development and consequently set out to squelch it. They filed a lawsuit claiming the city had no right to sell the submerged bottom lands to Davis. After a Hillsborough County Circuit judge upheld the city's right to sell the lands, the case went to the Florida Supreme Court on appeal -- but the court was on its summer recess, and so a decision would not be rendered until the fall of 1924.

Even though Davis' island dream was perilously entangled in a judicial nightmare and an unfavorable decision would inflict a sure deathblow to it, Davis nevertheless proceeded undauntedly near the end of August to turn his development into a reality. Emboldened by Tampa's unprecedented boom, and encouraged by the prospectful waves of tourists and investors rolling into Tampa, Davis boldly launched a phenomenal advertising and building campaign for his island development, the likes of which Tampa had never seen. The goal of this frenzied campaign was to establish before the winter a credible showing of what the development was to become. As stated by Davis in August, "The visitors in Tampa this winter will find the Island Development well under way and they will be able to gain an excellent idea of what it will mean to the city and the investor when completed."<sup>29</sup>

Davis' advertising and building drive took off on 26 August, 1924, heralded by full blown, front page<sup>30</sup> headlines in the *Tampa*





Bayshore Boulevard in rear. Pumping from dredge *Burlington* near present site of Tampa General Hospital.

Photo from Charles Ward, Jr. Collection, Tampa Historical Society



*Tribune*: "DAVIS AWARDS DREDGING CONTRACT", "FINE HOTEL TO BE ERECTED ON ISLAND"; and "Tampa Firm Gets Contract to Build Temporary Bridge from DeLeon Street to Island Development Site." The hoopla had earnestly begun.

The two million dollar dredging contract entailed the dredging of approximately nine million cubic yards of bay bottom and sand by two immense dredges, acclaimed to be the largest ever used, which were to begin work as soon as possible followed later by two additional dredges. This work would not only increase the acreage in the island development from approximately 300 to nearly 11000 acres, but the dredging work also planned for the cutting of canals and the constructing of a number of lagoons and yacht basins "to enhance the scenic value of the property". Furthermore, the bridge contract called for a \$25,000 temporary structure, 693 feet long, with a 28-foot roadway for vehicles and a five foot sidewalk, constructed of wood on crosotted piling which was already enroute to Tampa. The dredging and bridge contracts were reported by the *Tribune* as "the first formal contracts in connection with the development of the bay island project and their award was taken as definite assurance that work on the immense project will be started without delay".<sup>31</sup>

Davis not only promised to dredge up an immense and scenic island from the bottom of the bay with a vehicular bridge leading to it but amazingly enough on the same day he further aroused the public's attention by planning not one but three magnificent hotels on the island. At this time Davis' efforts would concentrate on the erection of the island's first hostelry, which was to be built and operated by a group of men from New York. Plans called for "an immense

tourist and year-round hotel" "of magnificent proportions": a front of 400 feet facing the Bayshore sect I on of Tampa at a cost of \$1,500,000. "Early start on the construction of this tourist hotel was indicated when it was pointed out that the first dredging and filling will be on the hotel site"; furthermore the *Tribune* related "evidencing his faith in the growth of Tampa, Mr. Davis has planned two additional hotels for the island" to be arranged at a later date.<sup>32</sup>

The first step of Davis' publicizing and constructing drive was an unimaginable success. By September 7, it was already being reported that Davis' Island development "has been made known wherever the printed word reaches."<sup>33</sup> It was the epitome of sensationalism:

Conversion of the three islands in the bay near the river's mouth into a single great island, surrounded by an enduring seawall and a deep water channel and containing palatial hotels, parks, golf links, club houses and homes of a millionaire colony, has created interest from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from Duluth to New Orleans. Involving as it does the dredging of more than nine million cubic yards of material from the bottom of the bay to aid in the creation of a single immense island. "Dave" Davis' project possesses spectacular features not inherent in the other big development projects under way or planned for Tampa and vicinity, involving the ultimate expenditure of any where from \$20,000,000 to \$30,000,000 – surely sums sufficiently imposing to arrest the attention of even the most blase.<sup>34</sup>



## *Alluring Waterways* — of Rare Venetian Charm

**F**ASCINATING pools and streams —soft white-capped waves from Tampa Bay—waterways that speak of Venice and Old Italy—for speeding motorcraft, canoes that idly drift along, sailboats and yachts to cruise about the Gulf sea shores—eleven and one-half miles of water frontage with endless space beyond for DAVIS ISLANDS residents to enjoy.



So, the advertising and building marvels of Davis' island development had a symbiotic relationship – each fueling the other, booming incessantly upwards to a pinnacle demanding and receiving wide acclaim.

In this same Sunday paper that was lauding the wide spread national interest of Davis' island development and Tampa's boom, Davis himself took out his first – of what would be many - full page advertisements. His message was brief. "We congratulate Tampa on its wonderful progress as shown in this issue", and he assuredly declared, "Our development will be a vital factor in Tampa's future"-<sup>35</sup> eventhough he had not yet cleared his final Judicial hurdle.

But Davis' premature assurance was grandly vindicated on September 10th with an "Important Announcement" on the *Tampa Tribune* front page: "DAVIS ISLE GRANT UPHELD". "First Time in History Supreme Court has Convened in Special Session During Summer Recess. Davis Elated Over Favorable Outcome. Things Will Move Fast, He Says, City's Right to Convey Bottom Lands Legal and Far-Reaching Precedent is Thereby Established." How Davis acquired previous knowledge of this "Important Announcement" is unknown and highly conjectural, but what is known is it triumphantly cleared the path for "the Rapid Development" of Davis' "Great Residential Project". "From now on", Davis exclaimed, "the people of Tampa may expect to see activities increasing swiftly. We shall endeavor to go forward at a pace which will perhaps enable us to make up for some of the time lost due to clearing up of the legal phases of the development"; and that was precisely what Davis set out to do.<sup>36</sup>

Accompanying the Supreme Court's announcement on the front page of the paper was another important announcement which

also bolstered Davis' confidence -- the commencement of construction for his island development. The work had actually started the day before, curiously foretelling of the Court's favorable decision which made such development worthwhile. Davis himself gave the signal which set the machinery in motion to erect the bridge which would connect the mainland to what Davis claimed "to be one of the greatest development projects in the history of Florida".<sup>37</sup>

Also, in the centerpiece of the front page were the first photographs used so effectively to promote the development. Titled, "Scenes at Commencement of Island Work", the action photos show the dramatic figure of D.P. Davis confidently signaling the pile driver into action.<sup>38</sup> Davis' gesture also signaled the new accelerating pace of his advertising and construction drive. At such a pace, Davis was almost assured of achieving his campaign's goal of erecting a believable conception of his island development.

At the same time, Davis quickly erected a company for his island development: the D.P. Davis Properties. Along with his close associate A.Y. Milan, he recruited the most talented people for his rocketing campaign. The arrival of F.W. Montayne, "one of the best known advertising men in New England",<sup>39</sup> summoned the build-up of Davis' promotional team. Next came one of Chicago's biggest realty men, J.P. White. He joined the Davis team as its sales director with the belief that, "Tampa is the place to make money ... within two years Tampa will be built up with hotels and other accommodations enough to take care of 100,000 visitors here at the same time."<sup>40</sup> But White also stressed, "I am certain the D.P. Davis Properties will have the highest class sales force in the South" for "only men of

irreproachable character can be members".<sup>41</sup> In the coming days Davis hired other first-rate, high-profile types. Assisting Montayne and taking charge of the art work in the advertising department was Athos Menaboni "an artist of considerable reputation" from Italy.<sup>42</sup> In addition Frank M. Button, the "nationally known landscape artist," climbed aboard to oversee the beautification of the island development. Credited to his name were such projects as the Vermont State Capitol, Lincoln Park in Chicago, and probably his finest works were in Miami at the Charles Deering Estate and the George Merrick project at Coral Gables.<sup>43</sup> Summing up the talent of his highly promoted team Davis said, "the bay island development is of such importance to Tampa and the entire state of Florida that should I attempt to develop it with anything short of the best brains and ability obtainable I would be failing in the trust that has been placed in me by the whole community to make this Florida's greatest subdivision, the supreme setting for distinguished Tampa homes."<sup>44</sup>

Having recruited a new promotional team of the "best brains and ability," Davis now considered a suitable site to promote his dream. Constructed at Madison and Franklin streets, known as Drawdy's corner, the building was chosen purely for promotional purposes - to enhance the goals of Davis' development campaign. As he put it, "going to offices in the center of the city will be a great advantage to my organization. Having headquarters on Franklin street will enable me to come in contact with influential Tampans and persons visiting here, without any trouble. I want Tampa and Florida to know those who are behind my development as well as of the development itself."<sup>45</sup> Inside the building, the "main office was fitted up to represent the lounging room of a millionaire's club", and it featured a realistic

reproduction of the proposed island development, enclosed in a glass cabinet. When completed by the "high-priced experts", the detailed reproduction of the Davis Islands development would be between 35 and 40 feet long at a "cost of many thousands of dollars" - "It would be the largest realty development model in the country, if not in the world."<sup>46</sup> The world-class model and office building ultimately undergirded Davis' development campaign.

The erecting of his new office building also provided Davis with a golden opportunity to ballyhoo it as another Davis achievement, and as with all the other promotional opportunities during his development campaign he did not allow any of them nor this one to slip by unnoticed. Case in point: the *Tampa Tribune* reported in September that "during the last few weeks the work on the Davis offices has attracted much attention. High boardings have hidden the establishment from the public and those who do not know of the design of the new building are anticipating its opening with much interest."<sup>47</sup> When the new headquarters for the Davis enterprises formally opened they were verified by authorities who had traveled extensively throughout the United States as "among the most imposing of their kind in the country."<sup>48</sup>

So the island development had a new team, a new office, and now needed a new name. "Hundreds of names have been submitted by friends and acquaintances of Mr. Davis as well as many others personally unknown" for "Florida's greatest subdivision". Ever since his first step toward acquisition of the islands, it had been his plan to "name the islands in a fitting manner to perpetuate the memory of Mrs. Davis, who died two years ago." Yet, he hesitated, "thinking his motive





in using the name Davis might be misconstrued as an effort to seek personal aggrandizement." Finally on September 24th, D.P. Davis announced that "the official name of his bay island project will be 'Davis Islands' and the fifty acre park which he will deed to the city subsequent to its development will be named Marjorie Park. The combined names represent that of his late wife, Marjorie Davis, in memory of whom the development is respectfully dedicated."<sup>49</sup>

While Davis was developing his promotional team, erecting his influential office building, and naming his island development-- that is, tending to the promotional side of his campaign -- he was also vigorously administering to the building aspect of his development campaign. For practically the whole month of September a drag dredge had been in operation mounting the foundational work for a larger dredge. It was near time for the 20-inch hydraulic dredge, the largest of its kind ever used in the South to begin work. With a capacity of 12,000 cubic yards a day, the hydraulic dredge was scheduled to do the work of filling the bay, the most important preliminary work on the islands. Furthermore, this dredge was reported to be accompanied by two other dredges, one arriving on October 15, and another on November 20. "The dredge work", pointed Davis, "will start on the north end of the island which will consist of the park area for the city, along with that portion of the island nearest Hyde Park, which will first be offered for sale".<sup>50</sup> Davis touted, "we are ready for real work, we are going to get results which will surprise the entire country".<sup>51</sup> This bold announcement concluded the first booming month of activity in Davis' promotion and construction campaign for his Davis Islands development.

The success of the campaign's first month had now positioned Davis to enter into the biggest and busiest stage of his development campaign. If the first month was a "boom" then the second month was an explosion. For starters, Davis launched his campaign into orbit when he announced that the first section of Davis Islands property, the Hyde Park section would soon be placed on the market. Casting this announcement into Tampa's sea of realty caused a feeding frenzy among Tampa's realty sharks. J.P. White, director of sales for the island development accounted, "we are receiving scores of telephone calls from Tampans wanting to know when the first section will be placed on the market,"<sup>52</sup> along with a "rush of prospective purchasers".<sup>53</sup>

Such wild activity inspired White to predict that at the start of the opening day of sales "the first section will soon be sold out."<sup>54</sup>

Yet, before this section went on sale in the first week of October, D.P. Davis propelled the hype of his development even higher by announcing on October 1 the creation of another section to his island development. Davis was in the process of formulating a business zone to include a palatial restaurant and apartment house and sundry public establishments. He was currently negotiating with several capitalists, prominent hotel and restaurant owners who were planning to erect buildings in this particular section. Additionally, Davis promoted that "plans are underway also for erection of an apartment house in the Hyde Park section, the portion of the property which will be opened for sale next week".<sup>55</sup>

Davis inaugurated the "Official Opening" of the "Great Sale" for the Hyde Park section's 300 "highly restricted" lots and "several tracts suitable for the location of high class apartment houses and costly residencies"

with Menaboni's first eye-catching full page advertisement in the *Tampa Tribune* on Saturday October 4. The lots were to be ready for sale at 10 o'clock that morning at the new headquarters of the Davis Properties organization. The grand spread emphasized the panic-driven atmosphere surrounding this sale: "You must fully realize that there will be a tremendous rush for this property. If you want to be assured of your choice it behooves you to secure plats, prices and terms at once and to make your selections immediately" for we have been "literally swept off our feet by the virtual stampede of prospective buyers."<sup>56</sup>

But more importantly, the advertisement openly stressed for the first time the overriding theme in Davis' advertising and building campaign: profit and fortune making. The advertisement aired that the "Hyde Park Section is but half a mile from the central business section of Tampa and faces Bay Shore Drive only a few hundred feet away. 'Tis needless to say it will be a quickly and highly developed section featuring magnetic values of thrilling opportunities." In appreciation for the public's aid in his acquisition of Davis Islands, the ad emphasized that the properties of the Hyde Park section would be "offered to the people of Tampa and vicinity at special Pre-Development Prices. Property which is so eagerly and universally sought as this is, would sell today-quickly-at much higher prices". But "the more money the people can make on this property, the more pleased Mr. Davis will be-the greater the return on their investment at Davis Islands, the greater his satisfaction!" And to insure more money-making, "We have decided to limit the purchase of two lots to one person. This will give a greater number of people the chance to share in this attractive proposition."<sup>57</sup>

Unbelievably, the sensational expectations became true that day; and in fact, those expectations turned out to be quite humble in comparison to what actually occurred. Prospective buyers lined up the day before in front of Davis' offices to choose from the best selection of lots. The streets around the building were jammed with traffic. When the doors opened, the *Tampa Tribune* reported that a "veritable rush and crush ensued. It was a scene such as is described in fiction of the boom days of the West." In three hours, the entire Hyde Park Section, all 306 lots were sold. "The sale would have been done in much less time if it had been physically possible for the office force to handle the transactions with greater speed. Mr. Davis was literally showered with checks." Total sales amounted to \$1,683,582 -- "a world's record for the sale of subdivision lots."<sup>58</sup>

Although the mad demand for Davis' Island property had left many prospective purchasers disappointed over being unable to get in on the first sale, those lucky few who had were now eager to reap the immediate rewards of their conquest -- instant profits. As promised by Davis earlier, this "universally sought property would sell today - quickly - at much higher prices," and it did. The *Tampa Tribune* observed that "a feature of the record-breaking sale was the number of re-sales made by initial purchasers to those who were too late to get in on the first list, all of these being made at substantial profits to the first purchasers".<sup>59</sup> For example, "Penn Dawson, of the Dawson-Thornton Dry Goods Company, had obtained two lots and, before he could leave the offices was persuaded by E.W. Cloughton, of Atlanta, one of those who was 'too late', to transfer his two lots to him for a bonus of \$1,000. Mr. Cloughton is the owner of the Bayshore Apartments now being built on Howard Avenue, and he was

delighted at being able to get two lots even at the large advance over the sale price.”<sup>60</sup>

The next day, Davis not known for his humility in advertising, triumphantly made his phenomenal success of Saturday known to all with a full page advertisement in the *Tribune's* Sunday edition. Proclaiming in large type, "To Tampa Goes the World Real Estate Sales Record", followed in much larger type by, "\$1,683,582 In 3 Hours", and the ad goes on worshipping the sale as "thrills almost beyond human conception".

While Davis' first sale was a smashing success his development was, nevertheless, still a dream -- submerged under water. Therefore, still lingering in front of Davis was his most formidable challenge: transforming his dream into reality. He quickly assumed this challenge by engaging in an intensive island-building assault. On October 6, the immense hydraulic dredge began sculpturing the bottom silt of Hillsborough Bay into Davis Islands. Several days later, the second of "the largest" dredges began operation. Then on October 9th, in order to complete the physical development of Davis Islands in the shortest possible time, Davis augmented his island-making capability by contracting two more dredges at an additional cost of a quarter of a million dollars. The next day, Davis turned his island-making into a 24-hour a day assault. To demonstrate the boom in his island building capabilities, and at the same time receiving a well publicized photograph on the front page of the *Tribune*, Davis boated a party of prominent Tampanans out to witness what he called, "the amazing activity at Davis Island". On board were Col. W.F. Stovall, Mayor Perry G. Wall, City Commissioners W.A. Adams and W.J. Barritt, Frank D. Jackson, president of the Board of Trade, Col. D.B. McKay, and the master promoter himself, D.P. Davis.<sup>61</sup>

But this "amazing activity" was just the beginning of his building blitz. In three frenzied days -- October 8th, 9th, and 10th -- Davis rapidly ventured into his most massive building promotion of his entire campaign. To make his dream of an island development more credible to prospective buyers and investors he enlivened it, through effective advertising, with realistic forms: apartments, hotels, and homes. First, Davis clamorously publicized that Davis Islands will present to Tampa's and Florida's "visitors and home lovers the world's most beautiful apartments", and with an artist's rendition, he showed one of these "great towering structures."<sup>62</sup>

Along with this claim he announced in a full page spread in the *Tribune* the building of a \$750,000 apartment hotel set to begin within the next 60 to 90 days. This "first palatial apartment house" was to be erected between the Hyde Park section and the section of properties to be opened next. As a result, and of great importance to investors, "real estate values in both these sections will enhance rapidly and substantially".<sup>63</sup> The next day Davis advertised that his development will also present to Tampa's "home folk and millions of visitors the world's most palatial hotels". A picture illuminating one of these "luxurious palaces" accompanied the claim.<sup>64</sup> On the third day, he took out another full page announcement, "Plans Under Way for 300 Homes". Building and financing of at least thirty of these "distinguished homes" would be started in the Hyde Park section within the short period of ninety days. "These 300 Davis Island homes", the ad strikingly claimed, "will range in price from \$10,000 to \$50,000 and will be the surpassing creations of American architectural genius. Included In this most impressive building program are Mr. Davis' own plans for the



erection of a \$100,000 home on Davis Islands.”<sup>65</sup> Another attractive ad pictured one of the "world's most beautiful homes" to be built on “picturesque, water-kissed Davis Islands.”<sup>66</sup> Overall, Davis ballyhooed that "the reaction" to his building blitz, that is "to progress and development of such intensive character will be immediately obvious in the increasing value at Davis Islands”.<sup>67</sup>

And once again, in the midst of his building blitz, Davis' seemingly exaggerated boasting was to be matched and out done by actual events. Before anyone could catch their breath from Davis' first sales "thrills" he was prepared to launch off on another thrilling ride. With the announcement that the second section of Davis Islands would be opened for sales on October 13th, Tampa braced itself for another booming week of history making and record smashing. The *Tribune* reported that "the announcement by Mr. Davis of the opening of the second unit comes at the close of one of the most eventful weeks in the history of real estate concerns in Florida.”<sup>68</sup> The Bay Circle properties, the second unit of Davis' Islands, takes its name from the picturesque winding drives which circle two bay inlets forming yacht basins and providing a long length of water frontage. Having fewer lots than the Hyde Park section, the sale of the Bay Circle section was expected to cause "a second stampede". It did.

Spurred on by three consecutive days of full page advertisements by Davis, prospective buyers began forming a line in front of Davis' headquarters on Franklin Street forty-three hours before the start of the sale. "Many of the men had made arrangements with their wives or others to bring hot coffee and food to them at frequent intervals," observed the *Tribune*. "They were determined to stay regardless of inclement weather or personal comfort.”<sup>69</sup> Joseph J.

DeCotey of Bridgeport, Connecticut, a prominent New England real estate developer, exulted, "In all my experience I have never seen anything like it. I have conducted many big development sales but this sort of thing is almost beyond belief, and I fear that if I had not seen it with my own eyes, I might have doubted it.”<sup>70</sup> But little doubt remained. On October 13th, the *Tribune* reported that all previously established records for subdivision sales were broken again: \$1,028,200 worth of Bay Circle lots were sold, bringing the total amount sold in the record time of ten hours required for the two sales to \$2,711,782. Further proof were the photographs of the frenzied crowd of purchasers and their mad rush which were splashed across the pages of the *Tribune*. "One of the largest purchasers of Davis Islands property at the sale of Bay Circle section Monday was R. M. McNeel, Miami capitalist and owner of the McNeel Marble Works, of Marietta, Georgia. Mr. McNeel bought twelve lots, approximating \$75,000 in value. 'From my experience I can only see Davis Islands as another Miami Beach if it does not exceed that development.' Mr. McNeel stated. 'It takes the view of an outsider to fully appreciate what this great development means.’”<sup>71</sup>

Starting the day after the record sale, the unrelentless Davis campaign propelled yet another advertising bombardment of wondrous construction marvels planned for Davis Islands. From mid-October to the end of the month, Davis' daily ads effectively transferred his conception of what the development was to be into the minds of the people of Tampa and the city's arriving winter guests. Each 1/2 page ad was topped with an alluring artist's rendition, which was entitled in large type, followed by a glamorous promotion of the ad's topic. Davis pictured "pools of Roman Grandeur"

and sensationalized that his development will present "the worlds most enchanting pools".<sup>72</sup> Another advertisement lauded the Islands "modern Venetian canals" beckoning "I soft white waves and gondoliers" and bordered by "palms, bright green shrubs and flowers a-bloom all year".<sup>73</sup> Later ads touted that Davis Islands would have many "luxuriant parks"<sup>74</sup> "more parks than any land development in America",<sup>75</sup> including a golf course "created by real masters".<sup>76</sup> Finally, a "magnificent \$200,000 concrete bridge, brilliant in illuminating effects, and rich in architectural design", was unveiled.<sup>77</sup>

Besides promoting future building marvels, Davis also sensationalized his current building feats. Toward the end of his phenomenal two month campaign the physical development of Davis Islands was occurring as rapidly as Davis had boasted it would. For example, "determined to make the development program of Davis' Islands keep abreast of the record-breaking sales activity", Davis announced the building up of the roadbed of the main artery of Davis Islands, "after the roadbed is finished it will be paved 100 feet wide through the Hyde Park section and toward Bay Circle. Next... street lamps of unique beauty will dot this kingly thoroughfare in all its stately length and breadth."<sup>78</sup> By the end of October, weekly full page advertisements victoriously claimed that the road construction on Davis Boulevard "was completed in the Hyde Park section of the Islands from the bridge to the site of the Apartment Hotel and paving operations on this magnificent thoroughfare are now underway", with a promise of street lighting in thirty days.<sup>79</sup>

Other building achievements were similarly well publicized. The Engineers' program was completed to bring the lowest point on Davis Islands to an elevation two and one-half feet above the Bayshore

Boulevard.<sup>80</sup> Dredges, working night and day have "fringed great stretches of the Islands with a massive levee. Thousands of yards of earth have risen to impressive heights where once the land was low" or underwater.<sup>81</sup> "The temporary bridge completed with exception of the east approach on the Island. All work will be finished within a few days", whereupon, "automobiles will be rolling along the first sections of Davis Islands."<sup>82</sup> In his final full page "Physical Development" promotion in October, Davis proclaimed that "construction on the palatial ten story Apartment and a score of homes will be started. The hum of building industry on Davis Islands is in reality a matter of only a few days and in the wake of this activity will speedily follow greatly increased values for property owners. Hyde Park and Bay Circle sections are scenes of the most vigorous action with an assured result of quick increases for investors."<sup>83</sup>

Once again, Davis' wild claims -- that Davis Islands is "WHERE FORTUNES WILL BE MADE IN REAL ESTATE" - came true.<sup>84</sup> First, his prediction that owners of the Hyde Park and Bay Circle properties would enjoy "greatly increased values" most assuredly occurred. An examination of the city's tax rolls reveals that from their inception into the tax rolls in 1924 to the following year, the real estate values of all the Hyde Park and Bay Circle properties, at the minimum, doubled and in many cases recorded explosive increases. For example, the first time that lots 21 to 30 of Block 2 in the Hyde Park section appeared in the rolls in 1924 they were clustered together with a total real estate value of \$3,000 or \$300 a piece. The next year, lots 21, 22, 23, 27 and 30 were each valued at \$600 a piece, and therefore had doubled in value. Lot 25 was valued at \$2,600, which was a jump of nearly 9 times greater in value. Lots 26 and

29 each leaped to a value of \$3,800, a breathtaking increase of nearly 13 times in value. But most amazingly, lot 24 had skyrocketed to a property value of \$4,600 which was over 15 times greater than just the year before! In total, these ten lots had jumped in value from \$3,000 to \$18,400 or an increase in property value of more than six times in only one year. The greatest real estate value increase was recorded in the Hyde Park section by lots 27 and 28 of Block 5 which incredibly surged from a total property value of \$600 in 1924 to \$29,200 a year later - an explosion in value of over 48 times!<sup>85</sup> Therefore, Davis' advertising assertion, that "Davis Islands enjoys rank with great real estate values of Florida"<sup>86</sup> was not only truthful but in hindsight most humble.

Likewise, Davis' claims that investors of Hyde Park and Bay Circle properties were "assured quick increases", and that their purchases "meant extraordinary profits - not in a long term of years, but within a period of time which practically reduces itself to months" most definitely took place. In fact, many of the "quick increases" and profits actually occurred within a period of weeks, days, and even hours of the purchase. Examples of the quick increases of property and the profits made were plentiful. "Two hours after the contract was signed, the purchaser of Lots 22 and 23 in Block I took a profit of \$1,000. Lot 65 in Block 6 was quickly sold by the purchaser at a profit of \$1,800. The owner of Lot 70 in Block 6 has refused several offers of a \$2,500 profit. \$1,500 was the profit taken by the owner of Lot 8 in Block 6. The purchaser of Lots 83 and 84 in Block 6 decided to hold his property rather than take a profit of \$3,000. The purchaser of lot 71 in Block 6 refused a profit of \$3,000 two days after he bought. In four days the owner of Lots 3, 4 and 5 in Block 2 took a profit of \$3,000."<sup>87</sup> So just

as Davis had advertised many times, Davis Islands did indeed mean profits and once again, his seemingly wild promises were not only fulfilled but actually were surpassed.

At the same time that his underlying goal of profit-making for purchasers and investors -- and ultimately for himself -- was being realized. the primary goal of his campaign reached fruition in the extraordinary short span of two months. On October 28, 1924, the centerpiece of the front page of the *Tampa Tribune* presented for the first time a complete and detailed visualization of D.P. Davis' island development dream to the world. In addition, the Island Development was not only "well under way", but as evidenced by the *Tampa Tribune* it was already acquiring "an excellent idea of what it will mean to the city when completed". The importance of Davis Islands to Tampa was probably put in perspective best by Charles A. Faircloth, one of Tampa's leading bankers and president of the National City Bank. He contrasted the importance of Davis Islands with the opening of the Gandy Bridge. "Without question," he extolled, "the opening of the Gandy Bridge is second in importance only to the Davis Island Development as a forward step for Tampa."<sup>88</sup> Moreover and perhaps more far telling of the importance of Davis Islands to the city of Tampa were the comments of Miami capitalist and developer R.M. McNeel. On the final day of Davis' phenomenal two month campaign, McNeel stated, "Davis Islands is of such commanding beauty, and its value to Tampa and vicinity so great, that it even overshadows the far-famed Miami Beach. D.P. Davis, owner and developer of Davis Islands, has visualized even a greater project than did Carl Fisher when he began work on Miami Beach."<sup>89</sup> And ultimately, Davis had by the end of October clearly demonstrated what Davis Island meant to the investor:

profits -- big, ever-increasing profits to the investors.<sup>90</sup> So Davis, therefore, overwhelmingly fulfilled the goal of his island development campaign.

In sum, 1924 was acclaimed "the greatest year in Tampa Real Estate"<sup>91</sup> It was a Boom -- which marked the "awakening" of Tampa. For D.P. Davis, 1924 marked the awakening of his island development dream. While his amazing exploits for Davis Islands continued through October 1925 - when the entire development was sold out -- it would never reach the heights nor intensities that it had exhibited in his frenzied two-month-long campaign from the end of August to the end of October 1924. In that phenomenal two month blitz, D. P. Davis transformed Tampa's mudflats into Tampa's moneymakers; and of all the successful activities recorded in Tampa's boom in 1924, Davis' promoting and building marvel out-boomed them all.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The introductory material was retrieved from three sources. Federal Writers' Project, *Florida, A Guide to the Southernmost State* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1939), 61; Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* ( Coral Gables, University of Miami Press, 1971), 377-385; Paul S.

George "Brokers, Binders, and Builders: Greater Miami's Boom of the Mid-1920s", *Florida Historical Quarterly* 64 (July 1986), 27-35.

<sup>2</sup> Nixon Smiley, *Yesterday's Miami* (Miami, E.A. Seemann Publishing, 1973), 60.

<sup>3</sup> Charles E. Harrier, *Florida's Promoters, The Men Who Made It Big* (Tampa, Trend House, 1973), 11

<sup>4</sup> Smiley, *Miami*, 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, September 21, 1924,1C.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, September 7,1924,2D.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, August 30, 1924, 2

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, September 7, 1924, 2D.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, October 1, 1924, 5A.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, January 1, 1925, IB.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, September 7, 1924, 2D.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, August 30, 1924, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, September 21, 1924, 1 C.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, September 6, 1924,4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, September 21 , 1924, 1C.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, September 19, 1924, 1B.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, September 7, 1924, 2D.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Ernest L. Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County Florida* (St. Augustine, The Record Company, 1928),153.

<sup>26</sup> *Tribune*, September 7, 1924, 2D.

<sup>27</sup> Harner, *Promoters*, 50.

<sup>28</sup> David Nolan, *Fifty Feet In Paradise the Booming of Florida* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 194.

<sup>29</sup> *Tribune*, August 14, 1924, 5B.

<sup>30</sup> The "first page" of the *Tribune* as referred to here and throughout the rest of this paper is in actuality the first page of the "Second Section". The *Tribune*'s first section at this time was reserved exclusively for National and World news. Even though Davis and many others probably felt that news concerning his development was worthy of the paper's "first section", nevertheless, it was relegated along with



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other news originating from Tampa and Florida to the paper's "second section".

<sup>31</sup> *Tribune* August 26, 1924, IB.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., September 7, 1924, 2D.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., September 7, 1923, 16D.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., September 10, 1924, IB.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., September 19, 1924, IB.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., October 4, 1924, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., September 24, 1924, 3A.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., September 26, 1924, 3B.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., September 24, 1924, 3A.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., September 30, 1924, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., November 2, 1924, 6C.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., September 30, 1924, 10.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., October 5, 1924, 1B.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., September 25, 1924, 1B.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., September 28, 1924, IC.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., October 1, 1924, 5A

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., October 4, 1924, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., October 1, 1924, 5A

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., October 4, 1924, 10.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., October 5, 1924, 4F.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., October 9, 1924, 12A.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., October 9, 1924, 5A.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., October 8, 1924, 12A.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., October 10, 1924, 3A.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., October 10, 1924, 12A

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., October 7, 1924, 10A.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., October 10, 1924, 12A.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., October 12, 1924, 1D.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., October 12, 1924, 13F.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., October 13, 1924, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., October 14, 1924, 10A.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., October 13, 1924, 4.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., October 14, 1924, 3A.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., October 15, 1924, 3A.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., November 6, 1924, 3A.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., October 16, 1924, 12A.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., October 22, 1924, 3A.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., October 15, 1924, 11A.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., October 29, 1924, 5A.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., October 19, 1924, 12E

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., October 31, 1924, 4A.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., October 19, 1924, 12E; October 31, 1924, 4A.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., October 29, 1924, 5A.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., October 24, 1924, 3A.

<sup>85</sup> Hillsborough County Tax Rolls, 1925, 1101-1103; 1926, 1466-1478.

<sup>86</sup> Tribune, October 17, 1924, 3A.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., November 27, 1924, 3AQ.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., November 16, 1924, 1D.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., October 28, 1924, 1B.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., November 25, 1924, 5A.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., January 4, 1925, 1 C.

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The photo of D.P. Davis and the three promotional pages are from a booklet: *Life on Davis Islands, Tampa in the Bay*, by D.P. Davis Properties, 1925.