

TAMPA HEIGHTS: TAMPA'S FIRST RESIDENTIAL SUBURB

**By MARSTON C. LEONARD
Ybor City Campus
Hillsborough Community College**



PALM AVENUE IN 1920

- Burgert Bros. Photo, Tampa Public Library

Tampa Heights was Tampa's first prominent residential suburb. From the 1890s to its zenith in the 1920s, the Heights was the favorite location for a home for a majority of the city's outstanding business and professional leaders.

When the 1900 *Tampa Tribune* Midwinter Edition featured a pictorial showcase of Tampa's finest homes, fully 70 per cent of them were Tampa Heights residences, eight of them on Seventh Avenue East.

Thomas Puch Kennedy, Jr., son of one of Tampa's earliest pioneers, is credited with the



WILLIAM B. HENDERSON HOME, 7th AVENUE, 1902

-University of Tampa Special Collections

district's name. In the early 1880s Kennedy moved from his home on the southwest corner of Franklin and Madison to the highlands one mile north of downtown and called the area, "the Heights." Earlier homesteaders like Joseph Robles and Northern orange growers along Nebraska Avenue quickly adopted the name.

There were many reasons for the Heights' rise to preeminence besides the natural expansion of Tampa after the 1885 boom. The yellow fever epidemic of 1887 convinced many residents that these uplands were a healthier place to raise a family. The emergence of Ybor City, the development of the Tampa Street Railway Company trolley to Sixth and Central Avenues in 1886, and the construction of the Fortune Street bridge to West Tampa in 1892 made Tampa Heights a convenient, but

still rural locality for the successful entrepreneur.

Individual Contractors

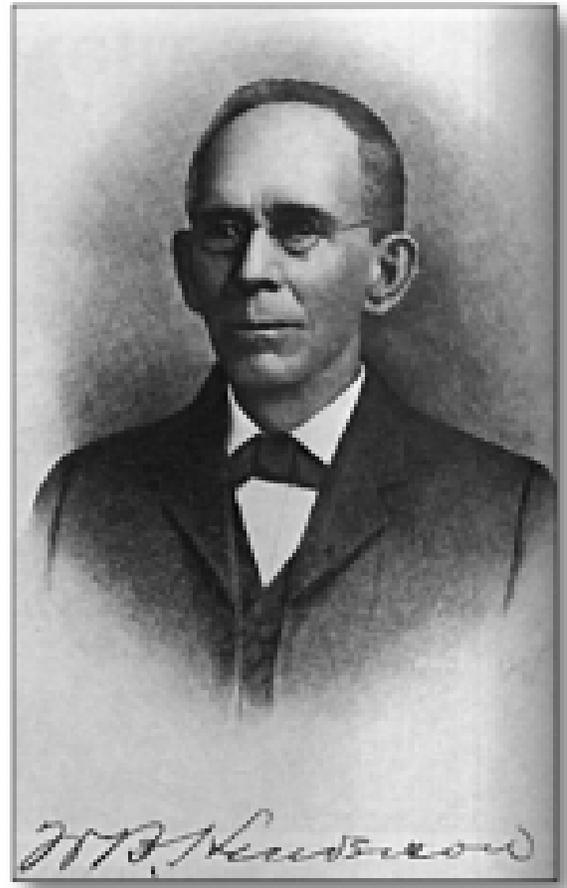
By the 1920s, a resident of East Oak Avenue could step from the sidewalk in front of his house onto a trolley heading south into downtown Tampa, or east into Ybor City, or west to West Tampa, or north along the Osborne Street line or the Sulphur Springs line.

Unlike many of Tampa's identifiable sections, Tampa Heights was an area of many small subdivisions, established by original homesteaders or developers. Most of the early homes were constructed by individual contractors and while the area had its share of land speculators, the Heights was designed for

Tampans with little newspaper promotion and attractions for Northern winter visitors.

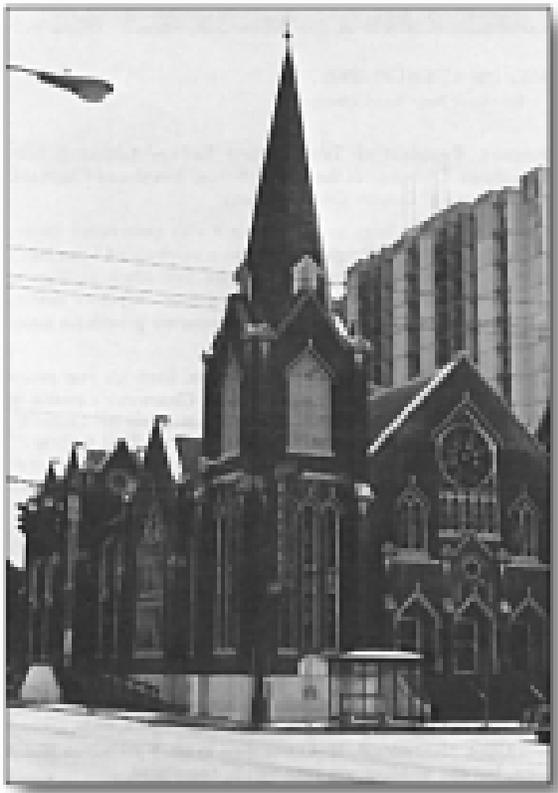
Perhaps the four block Tampa Heights subdivision, created in September of 1889, by William Benton Henderson, best reflected the growing prestige of Tampa Heights in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

The eldest child of a large Georgia farm family, Henderson made his own way in life at the age of twelve. He came with his father to Fort Brooke in 1846 and started one of the first stores on the Alafia River. He married Caroline Spencer, daughter of Palma Ceia homesteader William Samuel Spencer. It was during the Civil War that Henderson gained his Colonel status, serving first in Captain (judge) James Gettis' Company D of the 7th Florida Regiment and later commanding John T. Lesley's Company after Lesley was wounded.



WILLIAM B. HENDERSON
Creator of Tampa Heights Subdivision

-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN
COLLECTION

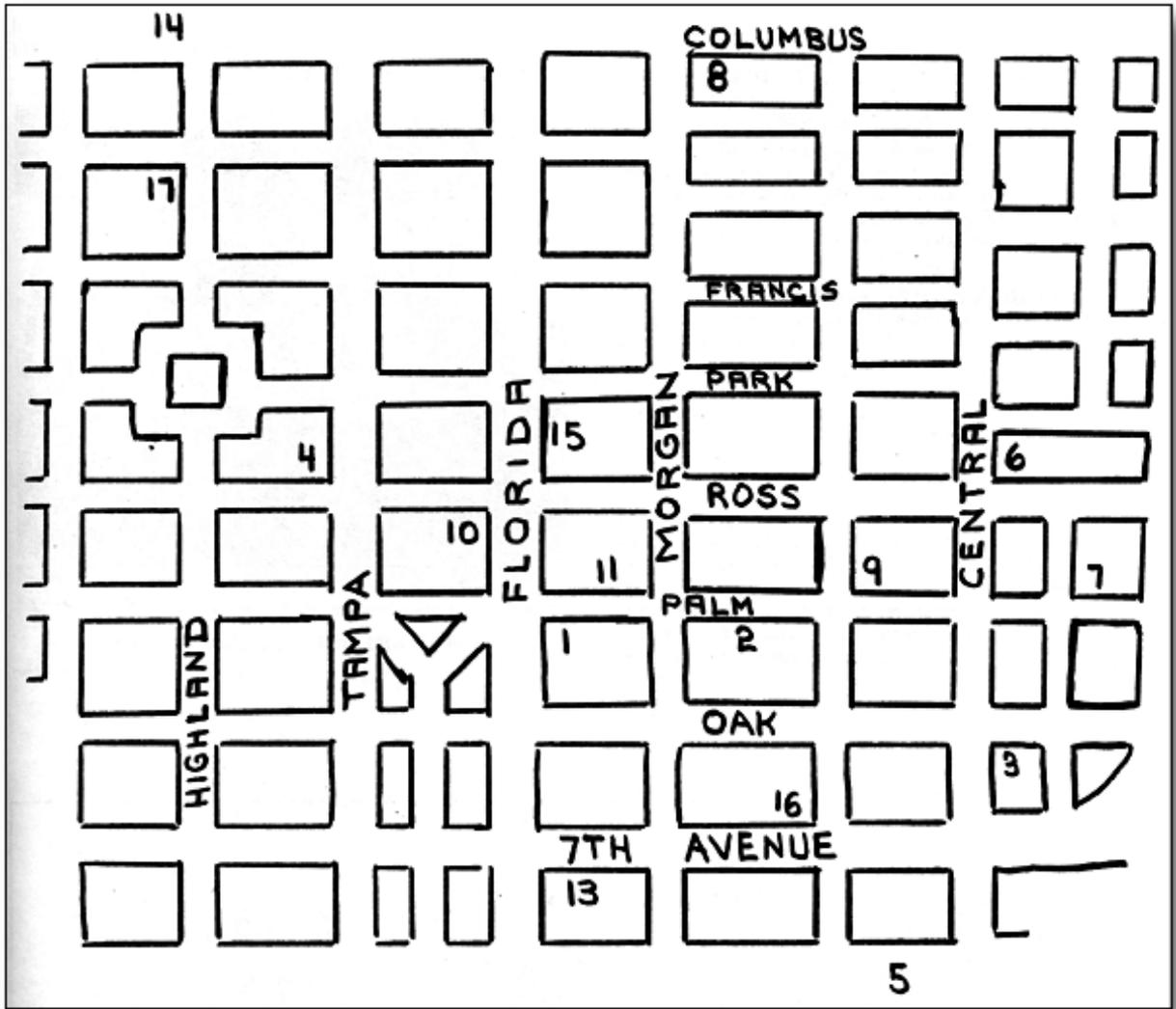


PALM AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH

... Palm Avenue and Florida Avenue

Consolidated Newspapers

After the war, he joined Captain John Miller in a steamboat and mercantile business that dominated Tampa's commercial contact with the outside world. Henderson was a diversified and dynamic promoter: he introduced Durham bulls into the Florida cattle industry; he built Tampa's first telegraph line; he started the banana trade with Central America; and consolidated two local papers into the Tampa Times.



SELECTED SITES OF TAMPA HEIGHTS:

- (1) Palm Avenue Baptist; (2) Rodeph Sholom Synagogue; (3) Schaarai Zedek; (4) Henry W. Brewster Vocation School; (5) W. B. Henderson School; (6) Tampa Hts. Methodist/Tyler Temple Methodist; (7) Tampa Hts. Presbyterian Faith Temple; (8) Robert E. Lee School; (9) Massari Arguelles House, 400 E. Palm; (10) Tampa Fire Station No. 5; (11) Stovall House, 212 Palm; (12) Tampa Free Library; (13) St. Joseph's Hospital; (14) Don's Service Station; (15) First Congregational Polish-American Club; (16) Guerra House, 312 7th Avenue; (17) Clewis-Mooke House, 2412 Highland.

His business ventures were so successful that he retired from active business, channeling his energies into financial investments and public service. This active involvement brought him even greater influence, as he served as: President of the Tampa Building and Loan Association, President of the West Tampa Land and Improvement Company,. President

of the Tampa Publishing Company, President of Tampa's first Railway Company, City Councilman, Chairman of the County School Board, and Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners.

When he built a large house, complete with observation turret, on the bluff at Tampa Heights, he was soon surrounded by so many business and family associates that the two block section of Seventh Avenue East resembled a Henderson corporate center, which would heavily influence Tampa's economic growth for many years.

Two doors away, at 208 Seventh Avenue, lived his real estate partner William H. Beckwith, who laid out Clearwater's streets in 1887. Across the street was the home of son-in-law Dr. Leslie W. Weedon, founder of the Hillsborough County Medical Society.

Wedding Disrupted

At 302 Seventh Avenue resided another son-in-law George C. Warren, whose wedding to Cora Lee Henderson began under rather discordant circumstances. As the Colonel led his daughter down the aisle of the First Methodist Church, an old lady rushed into the - procession.

"Dr. Wall! Dr. Wall!" she screamed. "McKenzie's come down with the yellow fever!"

Dr. John P. Wall rushed to the painter who contracted the dreaded fever while repairing the cabin of a ship recently arrived from Cuba. Alexander B. McKenzie died in his Washington Street home, but the wedding was successfully completed.

In 1891, Warren joined the real estate firm of Beckwith & Henderson & Warren, one of the longest lasting firms in Tampa history. Other Seventh Avenue residents were Henry C. Giddens, a Henderson partner in a clothing business, and builder William H. Kendrick.



MASSARI HOUSE, PALM AVENUE

-Burgert Bros. Photo, Tampa Public Library

Ironically, the growth of downtown Tampa, an objective of the Colonel's contributions, was the major cause for the destruction of most of the homes in the subdivision. The construction of St. Joseph's Hospital in 1933 destroyed many other old houses.

While Tampa Heights was primarily an Anglo-Protestant neighborhood, its proximity to Ybor City attracted many Latins, particularly east of Mitchell Avenue and south of Palm Avenue. Still standing at 400 Seventh Avenue is the residence of Vicente Guerra, President of the Guerra V. Diaz Cigar Company and the Centrol Espanol.

Publisher's Home

Next to Seventh Avenue, tree-lined Palm Avenue was the favorite address in Tampa Heights. Wallace F. Stovall, publisher of the Tampa Tribune, lived at 212 East Palm Avenue from 1895 to 1909, when he purchased an estate on the lower Bayshore.

The Neo-colonial house at 400 East Palm has the distinction of being featured in two books. The structure was built in 1904 for cigar manufacturer Facundo P. Arguelles and was

the headquarters for visiting Cuban dignitary Juan Pumariega when he came in 1909 to commemorate the opening of the Centro Asturiano. In his *Impresiones de un viaje a Tampa*, he praises his hostess Isabel Arguelles and her lovely home. Later the house belonged to the Massari family and was noted by Angelo Massari in his excellent memoirs as an immigrant to Tampa.

While most of the north-south streets in Tampa Heights contained middle class cottages, Highland Avenue, between Palm and Columbus Avenues, contains many older wooden homes of the Munro and McIntosh subdivision. It is a hilly, tree-lined road of Victorian frame structures, such as the Edwin Blake house at 2302 North Highland and the home of Philip Mooke at 2412 North Highland, interrupted only by a small circular park. One of the most unique buildings is at the corner of Columbus and Highland: Don's Service Station, a functioning 1936 gas station, constructed out of the cottage of grocer James Clarke.

'Michigan Ave.' School

Since Tampa Heights was a residential area, it lacked a defined commercial center until the infusion of business arteries along Nebraska and Florida Avenues. Beautiful churches and attractive schools were the main non-residential buildings of the Heights.

Some of Tampa's oldest school buildings still function in the Heights for at the time of the area's development, most of the original downtown schools were overcrowded and expansion into the first "suburbs" was the educational need. The first separate high school in the county was constructed in 1895 at Jefferson and Estelle Streets and its replacement in 1911 was at Highland and Euclid at a cost of \$60,000.

The Michigan Avenue grammar school, today Robert E. Lee Elementary, opened in 1907, with its unique wooden belfry, while in 1915 George Washington Junior High on Columbus Avenue was one of the nation's first three year middle schools. (Michigan Avenue later was changed to Columbus Drive).

The last school built in the Heights was also unique: Brewster Technical School opened in 1925 as the "Opportunity School," Tampa's first comprehensive high school.

Exquisite Churches

Tampa Heights became a district of exquisite churches when it was a middle class community. The oldest church building is the massive Palm Avenue Baptist Church, the city's second Baptist church. Built in four stages between 1901 and 1912, under the leadership of Rev. Charles H. Nash, the church has survived its changing neighborhood by fostering the nearby 16-story retirement building and developing a bi-lingual chapel.

At 2201 Florida Avenue is the First Congregational Church, built in 1906 when the block contained only an orange grove. Organized in 1885 at the home of Mrs. Caroline Pettingill, the congregation moved from a frame church in downtown Tampa at the urging of pioneer Obadiah H. Platt, for whom the six-story pointed spire is dedicated.

By the 1930s, the church had 1,500 members and mission churches in Ybor City and West Tampa. When most of its membership left the Heights, the church was sold to the Polish--American Democratic Club.

At Palm and Lamar Streets is the 1923 two-story Tampa Heights Presbyterian Church, sold in 1964 to the Faith Temple Baptist Church. Rev. Dr. John G. Anderson of

the First Presbyterian Church started this mission church in 1905, and Benjamin Graham, then Superintendent of Schools, and Sidney Lenfestey led the drive to collect \$7,300 to build a frame church in 1908. It was the church of the Kendrick family and Henry S. Giddens, who started the first Sunday school.

Jewish Congregations

The domed Tampa Heights Methodist Church, on the corner of Ross and Central Avenue, was started in 1899 at the request of Colin M. Blake who contributed the money for a frame church for Rev. Henry Hice. The present structure was started in 1910 and by 1927, when the three-story educational building was completed, there were 1,600 members.

Tampa's two earliest Jewish congregations moved from downtown to the Heights in the early 1900s. The Orthodox Rodeph Sholom Temple opened under the leadership of Rabbi Adolph Burger in 1925 at 309 East Palm Avenue. The two-story masonry synagogue's distinctive Mediterranean style with a triple arch entranceway was an architectural attraction for many years. Schaarai Zedek, the liberal congregation, used the wooden temple at 1901 North Central in 1918 while their Delaware Street synagogue was being constructed and later converted into the Hebrew Free School.

It was Tampa Heights' location near downtown Tampa, once considered so desirable, which led to its status today as a deteriorating inner core district. By the 1930s the area had lost its prestige as Florida and Nebraska Avenues developed as commercial arteries for traffic headed for the central business region, and the developments on the Interbay and Davis Islands offered newer homes with modern conveniences.

Urban Restoration

The predominantly elderly population of the Heights began to be replaced in the 1950s with younger, low-income families, many from the nearby housing projects or displaced by urban renewal in Ybor City. The large houses were often purchased by investors who converted them into apartment buildings. By the 1960s Lower Tampa Heights, once a residential showplace, had one of the lowest percentages of home ownership in the city and the buildings quickly deteriorated.

It is not likely that Tampa Heights will ever regain its original position as an area of beautiful homes, but urban restoration and historic preservation might rescue some of the Height's remaining residences and buildings of significance.