

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019

---

2005

## Plant City, Florida, 1885-1940: A Study In Southern Urban Development

Mark W. Kerlin  
*University of Central Florida*



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019 by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### STARS Citation

Kerlin, Mark W., "Plant City, Florida, 1885-1940: A Study In Southern Urban Development" (2005).  
*Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019*. 580.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/580>



University of  
Central  
Florida

STARS  
Showcase of Text, Archives, Research & Scholarship

PLANT CITY, FLORIDA, 1885-1940:  
A STUDY IN SOUTHERN URBAN  
DEVELOPMENT

By

MARK W. KERLIN  
B.A. Fort Lewis College, 1981

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of History  
on the College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term  
2005

© 2005 Mark Kerlin

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the development of Plant City, Florida as a railroad town developing on the Southwest Florida frontier from 1885-1940. The study chronicles the town's origins and economic, political, and social development in relationship to the broader historical theories of southern urban development, specifically those put forward in David Goldfield's pioneering work, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region 1607-1980*.

Goldfield contended that southern cities developed differently than their northern counterparts because they were not economically, politically, philosophically and culturally separated from their rural surroundings. Instead, they displayed and retained the positive and negative attributes of southern society and culture, including a commitment to maintaining a biracial society until the 1960s, an affinity for rural lifestyles and values among urban residents, and an economic dependence on outside markets and capital.

Since Goldfield derived his findings from research that centered on the cotton producing regions of the Old South, this study sought to determine whether the tenets of his thesis applied to the urbanization process in the frontier areas of Florida, a region often considered an anomaly to the greater South.

In the end analysis it was determined that Goldfield's theory generally fits Plant City with some exceptions derived from regional differences found in Florida.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to my committee members Dr Roselind Beiler and Dr. Ezekiel Walker for their part in this project. I especially want to thank my committee chair Dr. Shirley Leckie for her continuous guidance and support. I would also like to thank my wife Cheryl and my children Eli, Anna, and Bonnie for their encouragement throughout the process of research and writing. In addition, I would like to acknowledge my mother Colette Kerlin for her editing help and Marcella Farina for her part in formatting this document.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 1: FOUNDING .....	13
CHAPTER 2: BUSINESS .....	27
CHAPTER 3: GOVERNMENT .....	52
CHAPTER 4: SOCIAL LIFE .....	81
CHAPTER 5: THE BLACK COMMUNITY .....	104
CONCLUSION.....	126
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	134

## INTRODUCTION

Before the 1970s, although there were studies of the major smaller cities of the antebellum era, there was little investigation into the process of urban development in the South. Southern historians were busy exploring more traditional subjects in southern history including the Civil War, Reconstruction, plantation agriculture, slavery, and pre and post Civil War politics or the character and unique qualities of southern cities in comparison to their northern and western counterparts. This changed in the 1970s when historians like Blaine A. Brownell, Edward Haas, Howard Rabinowitz, and David Goldfield began researching and writing about urban development in the pre and post war South. Since then many other historians including Dewey Grantham and Edward Ayers have written about various aspects of the development and character of the South's cities.

Unfortunately, there have been very few studies of the urbanization process in Florida although there have been a variety of studies concerning certain aspects of specific cities like Raymond Mohl's study of ethnic politics in Miami, Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta's work on Ybor City in Tampa, and David Colburn's book on racial change in St. Augustine. There are also other studies that have looked at the demographic and cultural changes in modern Florida. They include "From Migration to Multiculturalism: A History of Florida Immigration" by Mohl and Pozzetta and Mohl and Mormino's "The Big Change in the Sunshine State: A Social History of Modern Florida." However, the best overview of Florida's transition from its rural southern roots to the modern cosmopolitan urban state of today is found in Raymond Arsenault and Gary

R. Mormino's essay "From Dixie to Dreamland: Demographic and Cultural Change in Florida, 1880-1980."<sup>1</sup>

This project seeks to investigate the origin and development of Plant City, Florida from 1885 to 1940 in relationship to the aspects of southern urban development presented in the pioneering work of David Goldfield in his book *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980*. In this work Goldfield contends that southern cities developed differently than their northern counterparts. They were not economically, politically, philosophically and culturally separated from their rural surroundings as cities in other parts of the country. Instead, they often displayed and retained the positive and negative attributes of southern society and culture, including a commitment to maintaining a biracial society until the 1960s, an affinity for rural lifestyles and values even among urban residents, an historical memory, and an economic dependence on outside markets and capital.

According to Goldfield, in many cases these factors caused the region's urbanization and prosperity to suffer. Economic ties to staple crop agriculture and dependence on outside markets limited economic diversification. Rural values of individualism and independence coupled with

---

<sup>1</sup> Raymond A. Mohl, "Ethnic Politics in Miami, 1960-1986," in *Shades of the Sunbelt: Essays on Ethnicity, Race, and the Urban South*, Randall Miller and George E. Pozzetta eds. (Boca Raton: Florida Atlantic University Press, 1989); David R. Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991); Gary R. Mormino and George E. Poqgetta, *The immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Raymond A. Mohl and Gary R. Mormino "The Big Change in the Sunshine State: A Social History of Modern Florida," in *The New History of Florida*, Michael Gannon ed. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996; Raymond A. Mohl and George E. Pozzetta, "From Migration to Multiculturalism: A History of Florida Migration," in *The New History*; Raymon Arsenault and Gary R. Mormino, "From Dixie to Dreamland: Demographic and Cultural Change in Florida, 1880-1980," in *Shades of the Sunbelt*.

the commitment to maintaining a biracial society resulted in the inefficient and often inadequate development and funding of social institutions and government services.<sup>2</sup>

Goldfield derived his findings from researching all the states of the old confederacy but very little from Florida. In many ways the state is an anomaly to the greater South. While it was a slave state with primarily an agricultural economy at the time it joined the Confederacy, most of the state was underdeveloped and lightly populated and remained so through Reconstruction. Even in 1880 most of the central and southern areas of the peninsula fit the census criteria for the frontier with a population density of less than two people per square mile according to the United States Census Bureau.

The development that followed the extensive railroad building in the last two decades of the nineteenth century spurred the state's agricultural development. But, outside of the previously settled areas in the north, panhandle, and isolated areas on the Gulf coast where slaves had grown cotton and sugarcane, there was no traditional relationship between landowners, labor, and a particular crop. Florida's agricultural staple's varied according to region and had a variety of labor needs. Moreover, as these new forms of agriculture and the industries associated with them grew, so did the tourist industry, and in the case of Tampa and Hillsborough County, cigar manufacturing and phosphate mining. In addition, unlike the rest of the South, Florida carried a Spanish legacy, and attracted to some cities large immigrant populations such as the Cubans and Italians in Tampa and Greeks in Tarpon Springs and New Smyrna.

---

<sup>2</sup> David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 1-11.

All of these variables make Florida unique to most of the South. The part they play in proving or disproving Goldfield's assertions about southern urban development in the case of Plant City will help those interested in southern history gain an understanding of Florida's cultural relationship to the rest of the South and how much of a factor southern culture was to Florida's urban landscape before World War Two. Furthermore, the process of examining Goldfield's assertions about southern urban development in the case of Plant City will add to the debate as to how applicable these claims are to different regions in the South. To examine Plant City's development, this study separates the principle components of urban life and examines each as they evolved through time with additional sections devoted to the town's founding and its African American community.

Chapter one discusses the founding of Plant City in relationship to its dependence on outside capital as well as its connection to Tampa's political and economic elite. The second chapter examines the town's commercial development and its connection to the agricultural and extractive industries of the region and also evaluates to what extent Plant City's economy fits into the colonial pattern found in much of the South. In the following chapter the formation, organization, and actions of the municipal government are reviewed with regard to the influence of Florida's yellow fever epidemic, Progressive Era reforms, the Florida Land Boom, the Great Depression, as well as the influence of southern rural cultural values. The fourth chapter looks at the town's social life and institutions and their role in community life and the extent to which they reflected the traditional conservative values associated with southern culture. Finally, the last chapter investigates the commercial and social development of Plant City's black community in the era of Jim Crow and the extent to which it represented the biracial patterns of organization

and interaction found in southern cities. The conclusion reveals that the basic tenets of Goldfield's thesis apply to Plant City's development with some exceptions derived from the unique aspects of its region and its location within Florida.

Goldfield contends that southern cities cannot be separated from their regions. One must examine the area from which a town or city grows. Thus, an overview of eastern Hillsborough's history as part of the state of Florida and the United States is necessary in understanding the dynamics of the region at the time of the town's genesis in 1883.

The inhabitants in the region of Central Florida that became Plant City were of European and African descent, and like many other areas in the United States, they had replaced the indigenous population. Their existence in eastern Hillsborough County in the early 1880s is part of the legacy of European colonial conquest in the Americas and the later expansion of the United States into the region.

By the time Europeans and Africans arrived in the early sixteenth century, present day Hillsborough had been home to two very different Indian cultures, the Calusa and Timucuan, for thousands of years. They in turn were part of a trade network that stretched from the Ohio Valley to Mexico. The Timucuan were an agricultural people residing to the north of the Hillsborough River. The Calusa, on the other hand, as hunters and gatherers, lived primarily from the sea and their territory extended from Fort Meyer's north to the Hillsborough.<sup>3</sup>

They were an especially fierce tribe. When the Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon sighted Florida's southwest coast in 1513, he became the first conquistador to encounter them. After

---

<sup>3</sup> Gloria Jahoda, *River of the Golden Ibis* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1973), 13.

Calusa lured his ship toward shore with friendly gestures, they attacked him with such vehemence that he and later European explorers left southwest Florida largely alone.<sup>4</sup> The region remained isolated from European influence, settlement and control until it became a territory of the young United States in 1819.

Although conspicuously absent from the southwest coast, Spain gained control over the east coast, northern interior and panhandle of the peninsula, thereby bringing Florida under Spanish dominion and establishing Europe's first colonial presence in North America. Spain soon found itself confronted by English colonies to the north and French settlement to the west, and the ambitions of the regions native peoples. By the early decades of the seventeenth century, the three-power rivalry provided the crucible from which the Southeast and especially Florida developed a new identity. It was one in which the Europeans triumphed. Where Spanish guns and religion were unable to subdue Florida's Indian population, disease succeeded. By the end of the seventeenth century, European illnesses had ravaged the Timucuan, Calusa and other Florida Indian populations. Moreover, the slave trade in South Carolina brought English traders and Yamassee Indians from the Carolinas who raided villages and carried an estimated thousand or more into slavery.<sup>5</sup> At the start of the eighteenth century, Florida's Indian population had been reduced to a remnant. At this point events were unfolding that would lead to a new migration of native peoples into the peninsula.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>5</sup> James Mahon and Brent R. Weisman, "Florida's Seminole and Miccosukee Peoples," in *A New History of Florida*, Michael Gannon, ed. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), 186.

In 1715 after English encroachment on their land, the Yamassee attacked their former allies at Charles Town and its surrounding settlements in an attempt to drive them away. After their unsuccessful campaign, the Yamassees and their Lower Creek allies fearing English reprisal fled southward and allied themselves with Spain, politically and economically. Spanish authorities sent Diego Pina from 1716-1718 to encourage their migration into Florida as a military buffer.<sup>6</sup> Whole Creek villages migrated and by mixing with Florida's remnant population, began creating a new people the Seminoles, whose name is derived from the Creek word for wanderer.

With the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, Spain lost control of its territories in eastern North America, and Florida now became English property. After twenty years Spain regained the peninsula as a reward for supporting the colonies in the Revolution.

By 1819, Florida's population was a mixture of Seminole bands, early Spanish, English, and American pioneers, slaves, fugitives, run-away slaves, and free blacks. Confrontations over border disputes and the harboring of runaway slaves eventually led to conflict with the United States. Andrew Jackson's campaign in Florida, known as the First Seminole War, finally brought an end to Spanish Florida and marked the beginning of the process that would bring most of the earliest pioneer families to eastern Hillsborough County.

When the United States gained control of Florida as a result of the 1819 Adams-Onis treaty, its primary problems were two fold. Spanish land grants created havoc in real estate taxes, and took decades to straighten out in court. Even more serious was Seminole resistance to the

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 186-187.

loss of their beloved homeland. After taking administrative control, the United States negotiated the Treaty of Moultrie Creek. This 1823 treaty assigned the Seminole to reservation lands north of Charlotte Harbor, south of Ocala, and twenty miles from either coast. The government built Fort Brooke on Tampa Bay in 1824 to force the Indians on to their reservation and to provision them with supplies for one year until they were settled on their new land. As the Seminole were forced from the north central interior the influx of new settlers brought the non-Indian population from less than 8,000 in 1821, to nearly 35,000 by the 1830s.<sup>7</sup>

The pressure to open former Seminole land began almost immediately, and in 1832 at Payne's Landing, the government imposed a policy of Indian removal to the west. The refusal of some Seminole leaders to accept this policy brought on the Second Seminole War, which lasted from 1835 to 1842. After seven hard fought years, almost all Seminole were shipped west except for a small contingent that slipped into the Everglades and avoided capture.

Tampa Bay and Fort Brooke had played an important role during the war as a staging area for U.S. troops, and a holding facility and shipping point for Indians. By the end of hostilities, the fort had become the center of the small village of Tampa with ninety-six permanent residents excluding soldiers. To encourage further stability in the region, the government instituted the Armed Occupation Act, which gave 160 acres of land to any arm-bearing person over eighteen who would build a suitable habitation, and clear and work five acres for five years. Although the act lasted only one year, over a thousand applicants applied for grants in central and south Florida. This plus the Preemption Act of 1841, which allowed small

---

<sup>7</sup> Michael Gannon, *Florida: A Short History* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1993), 32.

farmers to settle on public land and buy as much as 160 acres for \$ 1.25 an acre, brought many people to the frontier of southwest Florida.<sup>8</sup>

Those who migrated to Hillsborough County included large and small planters with and without slaves and individuals. People came from other parts of Florida, adjoining southern states, particularly Georgia and South Carolina, and as far away as Europe and Latin America. In 1850 Hillsborough's civilian population of 2,377 included 1,706 whites, eleven free-blacks, and 660 slaves, twenty times the number in 1840.<sup>9</sup>

The composition and distribution of Hillsborough's population reflected the productivity of its soil and water resources. Tampa's population was relatively cosmopolitan from the beginning since the settlement attracted northern merchants, Cuban fisherman, Irish laborers, free-blacks, and slaves. These people engaged in trade, fishing, and providing goods and services to Fort Brooke. The surrounding countryside, on the other hand, consisted primarily of white nuclear and extended family groups with few or no slaves. They were involved largely in subsistence farming and cattle ranching.<sup>10</sup>

Very little of Hillsborough's land was capable of sustaining traditional cash crop agriculture using antebellum methods, but it was well suited for cattle raising. Most of the land consisted of pine flatwood forests with infertile sandy soils dotted with ponds, lakes, and streams. Low lying marshy areas called low hammocks and slightly elevated hard wood copses called high hammocks contained the richest soils and were scattered in pockets throughout the

---

<sup>8</sup> John Solomon Otto, "Hillsborough County (1850): A Community in the South Florida Flatwoods," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 62 (October 1983): 180.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

countryside with the largest areas being low hammock lying near major rivers and lakes.<sup>11</sup> These larger tracts were in the hands of a small number of wealthy planters who had enough slaves to clear and work them effectively. In 1850, 40 percent of Hillsborough's improved land and 42 percent of its slave population was in the hands of five individuals growing mostly sugar in low hammock along the Manatee River south of Tampa.<sup>12</sup>

Since the land was better suited to small scale farming and ranching, Southwest Florida became cattle country. From the 1840s to the 1890s, cattle played a major role in supporting the economy. Cows were raised on open pasture and driven north to Jacksonville and sometimes as far as Savannah until the late 1850s when trade opened with Cuba. In 1859, cattle accounted for 64 per cent of the total value of exports shipped from Tampa Bay. On the eve of the civil war, Hillsborough County, with a ratio of thirteen to one, had the largest cattle to person ratio of any community in the Old South.<sup>13</sup>

Although still remote and isolated in 1860, Tampa and its surrounding area were growing and its community was evolving. All, however, came to a crashing halt when the Civil War devastated the region. While Union gunboats blockaded Tampa thereby cutting off trade, hundreds of Hillsborough men left to serve the confederate cause. Cattle were driven north to feed armies in the field, and women were left to care for homesteads in the war torn economy. By the end of hostilities, the region's economy and limited infrastructure were in ruin.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>13</sup> John Solomon Otto, "Florida's Cattle-Ranching Frontier: Hillsborough County (1860)," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 63 (July 1984): 73.

Fortunately for Hillsborough County and the state of Florida as a whole, the state emerged from the war as the least physically affected southern state. Most of the damage was from neglect and isolation and not the result of combat.<sup>14</sup> As men returned to their homesteads, others followed. Central and south Florida remained the only frontier east of the Mississippi, and many southerners, having lost everything in their home states, moved to the region hoping to get a fresh start. Northern men who had served in Florida as occupying forces were often looking for new opportunities as well, and in the two decades following the war the state's population nearly doubled.<sup>15</sup>

In 1865, occupation forces moved into Fort Brook. The garrison's need for supply and soldiers with real money to spend gave Tampa and the region's economy a much-needed boost. However, it was the Cuban Civil War in 1868 that provided the economic catalyst that sustained Hillsborough's post-war recovery. For ten years Cuba could not supply its own cattle needs, and area cowmen and merchants moved in readily to meet the supply. After all Cubans paid premium prices for their cattle, and they paid in gold. During the ten years of Cuban conflict that followed, Florida cattlemen shipped 165,000 cattle to Cuba which returned \$2,441,846 to Florida cattlemen.<sup>16</sup> In the interim fortunes were made, and people continued to trickle in to this region of the peninsula. Agricultural, mercantile, and manufacturing businesses expanded and diversified in Tampa and surrounding settlements. Tampa residents, moreover, began processing beef and fish, brewing beer, rolling cigars, and processing lumber. Along with cattle, county

---

<sup>14</sup> Gannon, *Florida*, 46.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony P. Pizzo, *Tampa Town 1824-1886: Pioneer Village with a Latin Accent* (Miami: Hurricane House Publishers, Inc, 1968), 79.

agriculturists were produced butter, eggs, rice, corn, oats, cotton, sugar, molasses, potatoes, and honey. They also dedicated increasing acreage to citrus. By 1880, Hillsborough's population had reached 5,888 with 5,011 whites and 877 blacks.<sup>17</sup>

Although no longer a frontier, the county was still isolated. Transportation to and from Hillsborough that did not include a sea voyage, took days or weeks to complete depending on distance. Travelers had to travel on horseback, by wagon, or stagecoach along deep sand roads interrupted with multiple creek and river crossings. Anything farmers produced that could not withstand the time and pressure of overland transportation to Tampa and the sea voyage beyond were unprofitable. A trip from the present site of Plant City to Tampa by wagon took two days. What the people inhabiting the land and small hamlets in eastern Hillsborough in 1880 needed to reach the productive capacity of their region was a regional center with good transportation. This need was soon to be met by Henry B. Plant and a consortium of Tampa's political and business leaders.

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 80.

## CHAPTER 1: FOUNDING

Spurred on by land grants and tax incentives created by state governments to entice investment and promote growth in their states, railroad companies built thousands of miles of new track in the South between 1880 and 1910. In the 1880s alone the region's rail networks increased 98% with Florida going from last to fifth in total trackage.<sup>1</sup> With the tracks came the beginning of southern urbanization as thousands of new towns were born and development and population increased in many that already existed. During this period the number of people living in cities, towns or villages grew by five million.<sup>2</sup>

Historians agree that nearly all of these towns owe their existence to the railroad and therefore to outside capital, largely from the North. Most existed or started their existence as marketing hubs for agriculture, and that the majority of their residents were southern born and culturally rural. David Goldfield has pointed out that dependence on outside capital for growth and the continuation of a region's traditional economic and social power structure and attitudes toward that structure often determined where, when and how urban areas developed. Railroads hoped to make money in the long term through freight revenue generated as an area developed. To make sure it developed smoothly, company's often allied themselves with local elites who

---

<sup>1</sup> Howard N. Rabinowitz, "Southern Urban Development, 1860-1900," in *The City in Southern History: The Growth of Urban Civilization in the South*, Blain A. Brownell and David R. Goldfield, ed. (Port Washington, New York: Northern University Publications, 1977), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 1992), 55.

already controlled much of a region's economy and politics. Goldfield points out that southern leadership remained constant over time, and its ranks were drawn from successful commercial and professional men from well connected families with long time residence in an area.<sup>3</sup> As most of these men had their roots in the traditional economic engine of the south, agriculture, their interests in developing urban areas tended toward organizational structures that solidified existing economic and social conditions. Sometimes this lead to expanding growth and economic opportunity and other times it stunted growth by inhibiting economic diversification apart from a region's traditional agricultural production. While these factors were prevalent across much of the South, to what extent did they affect towns developing in the frontier areas of peninsular Florida?

In 1880 at the eve of the railroad's arrival, Hillsborough County was sparsely populated and the city of Tampa had barely 700 residents. Yet, even here the alliance of outside capital and the local power structure is evident in the founding of Plant City, which eventually became the county's second largest city.

Plant City owes its origins to the investment and development in southwest Florida initiated by Henry Bradley Plant's purchase of the Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West Railroad charter in June 1883. Plant was a Connecticut Yankee, who had become a successful businessman in the South with his purchase of the Southern Express Company before the war. While Plant sat out the war in England, his company continued service and survived. During Reconstruction the company flourished and he began expanding his business holdings by

---

<sup>3</sup> Goldfield, 98.

purchasing various rail lines in Georgia. Plant was looking to expand his railroad and express enterprises to the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean and beyond. To accomplish this he needed rail connections from his Georgia Railroads to a port city on the Gulf, which the Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West charter provided. However, to accomplish this and still be able to collect the charter's land grants, he had to build seventy-two miles of track in six months between Tampa and Kissimmee.<sup>4</sup> As Plant's company set out to accomplish the task, men throughout the region the new railroad would cross began harnessing their own resources to take advantage of the long awaited road. Among these were a group of investors, which included Tampa Circuit Court Judge Henry L. Mitchell, T.K. Spencer, John T. Leslie, and W.B. Henderson.<sup>5</sup>

Before the railroad, the small farms and towns that dotted eastern Hillsborough County sat next to the county's navigable rivers, or the roads built between forts during the Seminole Wars. The vicinity near the present location of Plant City consisted of two small towns, family enclaves, and scattered farms. When the railroad came, its route took it a few miles south of these settlements. Mitchell and his associates were able to speculate on land along the railroad's right of way for the formation of a new town that would eventually absorb the other two. The story of Plant City's origin, therefore, is three fold. The people and places that made up the region before the railroad, the establishment of the new town site by Mitchell and his associates, and the consequent adaptation of the new location as the region's new commercial center.

---

<sup>4</sup> George W. Pettengill, *The Story of the Florida Railroads, 1834-1903* (Boston: Railway and Locomotive Historical Society Bulletin No. 86, 1952), 76.

<sup>5</sup> Quintilla Geer Bruton and David E. Bailey Jr., *Plant City: Its Origin and History*, (Winston Salem: Hunter Publishing Company, 1984), 73.

Plant City's social history began as settlers after the second Seminole War moved into the area around the abandoned Seminole village of Hichipucksassa, which means place where tobacco grows. Many of these settlers came as a result of the Armed Occupation Act of 1842. They settled on or close to the Fort Brooke to Fort Mellon road near the abandoned Fort Sullivan in the Hichipucksassa area, where they raised cattle and engaged in general farming.<sup>6</sup> Simon and Samuel Sparkman, S. Moore, Mr. Pendelton, John and Rabon Raulerson, John Futch, Reverend Sam Knight, Steven Hollingworth, John Henry, Samuel Rogers, Rigdon Brown, Enoch Collins and Jacob Summerlin were among the earliest settlers.

The area grew steadily from the four families found on the A.M. Randolph survey of 1843, and by 1849 the population had increased enough to receive a post office. In 1852 Hichipucksassa, now spelled Ichipucksassa by the postal service, had a general store owned by M.C. Brown, a public school, and the Salem Baptist Church, founded in 1851. The first post master was area cattleman Jacob Summerlin, who housed the post office in his own mercantile establishment. In 1860 the name of the post office and hence the town was changed to Cork after the Irish birthplace of the mail carrier who as the story goes was asked to pick any name but Ichipucksassa.<sup>7</sup>

The following year Florida joined the confederacy, and Hillsborough produced four companies of soldiers, one of which was stationed in Cork under the command of John T. Lesley.<sup>8</sup> Although eastern Hillsborough suffered little combat damage during the war, it did

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 28-45.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 46.

suffer from isolation and neglect. Markets other than the Confederate Army were closed to the region's products. The federal post offices closed, and homesteads deteriorated as women struggled to maintain them while men were serving in the army.<sup>9</sup> Like many southern veterans, the men returning home to Cork came back to a home far different from the one they had left.

Even though times were hard, in the fifteen years following the end of hostilities, people continued to migrate to eastern Hillsborough. Some came to take advantage of the Homestead Act of 1860. Many came from adjoining southern states to what was the last frontier east of the Mississippi River to make a new start after the war's devastation. By the early 1880s, the population in and around Cork had grown considerably. The town center moved a short distance to the southwest to Cork Lake in 1872. In 1883 a year before Plant City's founding, Cork had a general store, post office, grist mill, cotton gin, the Cork Academy, two resident Baptist ministers, and a resident physician.<sup>10</sup>

The influx of settlers to the greater Cork area spawned another small village called Shiloh located about two miles north of the Plant City site. This settlement had its origins in the organization of the Shiloh Baptist Church from a body of people who met near Cork at what was known as the Old Salem Meeting House in 1866. It then moved to the site where the town developed. A body of Methodists moved to Shiloh in 1872, and by 1883 the settlement had two general stores, a cedar mill, cotton gin, a school, and a Masonic order.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>11</sup> "Clearwater Woman Recalls Early History of Old Cork," [undated] "Shiloh Article." [undated] Hampton Dunn Collection, Special Collections, University of South Florida. Hereafter referred to as SCUSF; Ernest Robinson, *The*

The greater Cork area, which included Shiloh and its surrounding farms, was also home to three family settlements, Knights, Collinstown, and Wilder. These were family enclaves where second and third generation children and other relations settled near the families' original homesteads. Knights started when Reverend Samuel Knight migrated with his sons, Jesse and Joel, and his son in law Jacob Summerlin and their families to the Ichipucksassa area in the early 1840s. The small trading center that grew in their domain was called Knights and after the railroad, Knights Crossing.<sup>12</sup>

The area referred to as Collinstown developed out of the families established by Enoch Collins' twenty-nine children from three marriages. Collins was married to Reverend Knight's oldest daughter in Georgia. After her death, Collins remarried, but the children from his first marriage went to live with their grandfather in Florida. When his second wife died, he too came to Florida with the children from this marriage, settling in the Ichipucksassa area where he eventually married again.<sup>13</sup>

The Wilder family settled to the east of Plant City in the mid 1850's as well. The family had been moving from north Florida when Hopkins M. Wilder died en route in Hernando County. His wife Bathsheba brought the family south to Hickapucksassa where they homesteaded more than two hundred acres and made their livelihood raising cattle. Like Knights, Wilder developed into a small trading center which later became known as Midway.<sup>14</sup>

---

*History of Hillsborough County: Narrative and Biographical* (Saint Augustine: The record Company Printers, 1928), 71.

<sup>12</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39; "Clearwater Woman".

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-41.

By 1883, a year before the railroad came, the area around the future Plant City was an established and growing farming and ranching section. Many of the county's 50,000 cattle and a large number of its 18,000 citrus trees were grown there.<sup>15</sup> In and around Cork and Shiloh, there were over 25 citrus growers and many others engaged in general farming. Fifty-one area farmers owned over 100 acres, and another seventy-five owned smaller plots.<sup>16</sup> These farmers carried produce or herded cattle overland to Tampa where their products went by ship to Cuba or to the only west coast rail head at Cedar Key.<sup>17</sup>

Shipping difficulties hindered the area's growth and potential, and residents waited with anticipation for a railroad to reach them. Two lines had charters that brought proposed routes directly into the greater Cork area. The 1882 map of eastern Hillsborough shows the route of the Tropical Florida Railroad running south from Wildwood, turning toward Tampa at Shiloh and running less than a mile north of Cork. The proposed path of the Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West lay roughly three miles to the south on its way to Tampa.<sup>18</sup>

Both of these roads as well as others had been in planning for a long time, and the general area of their routes was also known. Strangely enough apparent outsiders from Tampa were responsible for Plant City's geographic beginnings, and they rather than eastern Hillsborough's residents profited through speculation from the opportunities that were present. However, their

---

<sup>15</sup> *Descriptive Pamphlet of Hillsborough County: With Numerous Engravings and Maps*. 1885, Hillsborough County Real Estate Agency (New York: The South Publishing Company), 40.

<sup>16</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 56-58.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>18</sup> Plat Map Hillsborough County, 1882. Eastern Hillsborough County Historical Society Archives, Plant City, Florida. Hereafter referred to as EHCHSA.

part in the founding of Plant City was indicative of the influence of the economic and social power structure of the post war south, and its ability to steer local affairs.

Henry L. Mitchell and his associates W.B Henderson, John T. Lesley, S.M. Sparkman, and T.K. Spencer had deep connections to Hillsborough County and one another. All were from or connected to families that had come to the county during the 1840s and 1850s, and they were directly associated with the development of its land and institutions.

Mitchell helped his father establish their homestead between Tampa and Plant City in the 1840s and went on to become one of Tampa's leading attorneys and political leaders. He held many positions in local and state government including the governorship of Florida from 1892-1896.<sup>19</sup>

S.M. Sparkman, whose pioneer uncle Elijah B. Sparkman homesteaded near Ichipucksassa in the 1840s, read law under Mitchell. He was the state's attorney for the 6<sup>th</sup> Judicial District from 1878-1887, the chairman of the Democratic Party's State Executive Committee, and the General Council for the South Florida Railroad beginning June 1883.<sup>20</sup>

T.K. Spencer, W.B Henderson and John T. Lesley were also Tampa businessmen and civic leaders with deep roots in the community. Spencer published the *Sun Land Tribune*, and Henderson and Lesley were partners in the Cuban Cattle Trade and two of the richest and most

---

<sup>19</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 77.

<sup>20</sup> Plant Investment Company Papers, Box 6, Special Collections, Smathers Library, Gainesville, Florida; Edward C. Williamson, *Florida Politics in the Gilded Age 1877-1893* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1976), 163-189.

influential men in Hillsborough County. At the time of Plant City's founding, Henderson was chairman of the Hillsborough County Commission and Lesley was serving in the state senate.<sup>21</sup>

The foundation for the relationship of these men and the power they held in Tampa and the county at large went beyond the business and family ties of place. All of them except Sparkman, who was too young, had served in the confederate army. Spencer was a drummer in the Fourth Florida Infantry, and Henderson a Captain in Company D of the 7<sup>th</sup> Florida Regiment. Leslie and Mitchell after serving outside the state returned to become the Captain and First lieutenant of a Cow Cavalry unit made up of Hillsborough men called the Sandpipers stationed in Cork.<sup>22</sup>

In his book *Urban Vigilantes in the New South: Tampa 1882-1936*, Robert Ingalls explains, "During the Civil war and Reconstruction southern whites revered military officers and came to accept the right of such men to lead in civilian life as well."<sup>23</sup> Mitchell and his associates were Confederate veterans, office holders, and lawyers and as such became leading members of the county's small elite after the war.<sup>24</sup> They could choose and establish the site for Plant City without the knowledge or objection of local landowners and businessmen because they had the inside information, financial power, and social authority to do so.

Mitchell and his associates had knowledge of the lines projected to come to Tampa and where they would go. What they did not know was which line would arrive first. At the end of

---

<sup>21</sup> Donald J. Ivey, "John T. Lesley: Tampa's Pioneer Renaissance Man," *Sun Land Tribune* Collection [document on-line] *Floridiana on the Web*, University of South Florida, 16; Minutes of the Hillsborough County Commission, December 4, 1883. EHCHSA, Microfilm roll 4.

<sup>22</sup> Ivey, 5; Bruton and Bailey, 51.

<sup>23</sup> Robert P. Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South: Tampa 1882-1936* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 21.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

1882, Lesley was serving in the state senate and sitting on the Railroad and Telegraph Committee.<sup>25</sup> All legal questions concerning the railroads in Hillsborough had to go through the courts in the 6<sup>th</sup> Judicial District of which Mitchell and Sparkman were the Judge and State's Attorney. Additionally, Mitchell and his law partner J.B. Wall had represented one of the roads the Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West before the board of the Internal Improvement Fund in 1881.<sup>26</sup>

In a letter to his brother James Ferris on February 6, 1882, Tampa businessman William Ferris told his brother that three railroads were coming. The closest was seventy miles away, one was grading from Tampa toward Jacksonville, and another was surveying a route from Live Oak.<sup>27</sup> The lines were the Tropical Florida, which was in the process of building from Ocala to Wildwood, the Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West, and the Live Oak, Tampa and Charlotte Harbor.<sup>28</sup>

Mitchell and his Tampa syndicate knew in the beginning of 1883 that although the Live Oak, Tampa, and Charlotte Harbor Railway Company was under Plant ownership, well funded and heading toward Tampa, it had been stopped at Newnansville because of a territorial dispute with the Florida Southern Railway. They also knew that the Tropical Florida Railroad surveyed to come from Ocala to Tampa was stalled in Wildwood and in the middle of a consolidation with the Florida Transit and Peninsular Railroad. Finally, although the Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key

---

<sup>25</sup> Ivey, 16.

<sup>26</sup> *Minutes of the Board of Trustees Internal Improvement Fund of the State of Florida*, vol. 1-6 (Tallahassee: William M. McIntosh Jr. and T.B. Hillison, State Printer, 1901), vol 3, 3.

<sup>27</sup> William G Ferris Family Collection, Selected letters in "Tampa is the Place of Places," *Sun Land Tribune Collection* (November 1996): 17.

<sup>28</sup> *Minutes of the Board of Trustees Internal Improvement Fund of the State of Florida*. vol 3, 264.

West's primary purpose was to build from Jacksonville to Sanford, it lacked the capital to build the Tampa extension.<sup>29</sup> Without the certitude of one of these connections, a business venture that depended on securing land in the right spot along the railroad right of way would have been too precarious.

The investors would not have selected the location of Plant City before Plant began negotiations with Alfred Parslow to buy the Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West's franchise for a line from Tampa to Kissimmee in early 1883. Before that time, its reality was a possibility they would not have considered. It was a secondary franchise and not part of the primary route of the Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West. The company's poor financial position was limiting its expansion to its main route in the north, and the deadline to complete the road and secure the charters land grants, which would have been at least half the incentive for any investor, expired in less than a year on January 25 1884, thereby making it almost impossible to complete.<sup>30</sup>

Undoubtedly, Mitchell and his partners were privy to Plant's initial inquiry and subsequent negotiations with Parslow and the Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West.<sup>31</sup> As the deal came to fruition the logical site for a successful town would have become apparent. Because Plant also owned the Live Oak, Tampa, and Charlotte Harbor road, it was unlikely that he would spend time and money fighting with the Florida Southern to gain a second entry into Tampa. The Tropical Florida Railroad, on the other hand, had a good chance of being completed after it was

---

<sup>29</sup> Pettengill, 48, 66, 76.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 66, 75-76, 80-81.

<sup>31</sup> The Minutes of the Board of Trustees cited earlier support this assumption because they indicate that Mitchell and Wall had represented the company before and Sparkman, who later became the South Florida's attorney, was also a law partner of Mitchell and Wall.

merged into the Florida Transit and Peninsular. If it traveled along its surveyed route, it would cross the track of Plant's South Florida Railroad coming into Tampa, thus, creating a crossroads and the perfect location for a town.

The fact that the Plant City site was not chosen until this time and that the investors had to move carefully and tactfully to obtain the property seems to be born out in the timing and method of the land's purchase. Plant and Parslow closed their deal in June of 1883. The same month Thomas Wheeler bought forty acres from John G. Thomas. He conveyed the land to Mitchell in September. Mitchell then bought fifteen more acres adjoining his previous forty directly from Thomas on October 3.<sup>32</sup> The following month on November 15, Mitchell had his property, surveyed for a town called Plant City. Thomas then surveyed his land calling it the "Thomas Subdivision, a part of Plant City". Afterward, he deeded it to Mitchell on December 12, minus the lots he had sold two days after train service from Tampa began.<sup>33</sup>

Although little is known about Wheeler, the sequence and timing of the purchase and transfer of the Thomas land indicates that he must have been working for the investors. Mitchell and his associates as members of the county's wealthy elite would have been at a disadvantage in trying to procure a particular piece of land. Rumors about a coming railroad may have been in the air, and Thomas may have grown suspicious and increased his price or refused to sell.<sup>34</sup> But, if they could gain control using a surrogate, their status would be advantageous.

---

<sup>32</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 72.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 73, 78.

<sup>34</sup> Other letters in the William G. Ferris Family Collection talk about the coming of railroads as early as 1859 and continue to the 1880s, which would indicate public excitement as news became public.

Mitchell and Lesley had been the commanders of Cork's Civil War home guard whose members included many families still living in the area.<sup>35</sup> After learning that Mitchell controlled the forty acres sold to Wheeler, Thomas would have had a difficult time refusing the old commander's request for fifteen more, especially if the request included the opportunity to participate in a land deal with such strong partners, as was obviously afforded Thomas.<sup>36</sup>

After Thomas deeded his section back over to Mitchell, the town was resurveyed into the "Revised Map of Plant City", the street names of which revealed the dual nature of its founding.<sup>37</sup> On the south side of the railroad track the streets running north and south are named for Mitchell and his associates. Those running east and west honored men affiliated with the railroad, including Colonel Henry Haines, who at one time had been Robert E. Lee's rail chief. On Thomas's north side the town council later named the streets running east and west and north and south after prominent local men. They included Collins, Evers, and Thomas, who would move in to bring life and personality to the new creation.<sup>38</sup>

The people living in and around Cork, Shiloh, Collinsville, Wilder, and Knights in December 1883 would become Plant City's future citizens, traders, agriculturists, manufacturers, and politicians. Even though they were from established villages with names and histories, this new creation "Plant City" sat by the tracks and therefore the gate of opportunity. Others would

---

<sup>35</sup> Ivey, 5. Ed Wilder and at least four members of the Collins family served with Lesley and Mitchell.

<sup>36</sup> Considering the economic and social climate of the time, it would have been almost impossible for Thomas to work parallel to or against Mitchell and the Syndicate. These men had the money, power, and connections to look after their investments and would have had connections to the Ultimate source of power the "Plant Investment Company".

<sup>37</sup> Bruton and Bailey, *Plant City*, 73.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

join them from small settlements further away like Keysville, Alafia, and even Tampa. Many would seize its promise and work to transform it into the regional trading hub of their section.

The founding of Plant City fits David Goldfield's and other historians findings concerning the importance of outside capital to urban development in the New South in that it came into existence as a result of Henry B. Plant's investment in southwest Florida. It also shows a relationship between Plant's company and Tampa's small group of elite citizens led by Mitchell. However, Mitchell's Tampa Syndicate's real interest in creating Plant City was to profit from a land deal, not to control how the town developed. Mitchell and his associates knew that the land and people held promise. But, they left that promise in the hands of those in the region who could bring enterprise to the settlement and to the greater region of which they were a part.

## CHAPTER 2: BUSINESS

The South Florida Railroad began daily rail service between Tampa and the newly platted town of Plant City on December 10, 1883, marking the beginning of great change for the men and women of eastern Hillsborough County. A month and a half later, completion of the line to Kissimmee joined the region to the states growing rail network, providing transportation to Sanford and steamer connection from that point on the Saint Johns River to the railroad hubs at Jacksonville. The January 23, 1884 *Sanford Journal* summed up the general euphoria reading, “Boom! Boom! Let it Boom!!!... Sanford the Gate City of South Florida and Tampa the Pride of the Gulf joined by iron bands!... Joy to the World.”<sup>1</sup>

For the people in eastern Hillsborough County, the railroad ended over sixty years of isolation. And although Plant City was little more than surveying stakes and lines and names on paper, its existence as a town on the tracks represented unlimited possibility and opportunity. As a frontier and agricultural region, the area’s economic foundation had always been limited to what could be harvested from the natural environment, or to the amount and types of crops a farmer could produce and transport overland to Tampa for shipping.

Plant City was one of many new small towns that grew along the thousands of miles of new railroads built in the South after the Civil War. The railroad and railroad towns consolidated

---

<sup>1</sup> *Sanford Journal*, 23 January 1884.

commerce by creating central locations where farmers could sell their commodities for cash or trade them directly for merchandise and supplies. Wholesalers profited by packing and distributing products to waiting markets, or storing them for later distribution at better prices.<sup>2</sup> A town's character, the rhythm of its commerce, whether it grew and prospered or dwindled and disappeared were determined by what the region could produce for the markets it had access to. Most historians agree that with few exceptions reliance on a region's traditional staple crop and the commitment to a biracial society both socially and economically often limited developing southern municipalities by preventing them from utilizing all natural and human resources at their disposal. This in turn as David Goldfield has asserted kept most of the South in a colonial economy as suppliers of raw and semi-finished materials and importers of finished goods.<sup>3</sup> This model holds true in the aggregate, especially when the region is compared with the North and West. However, it does not allow, as Edward Ayers suggests, for the very real differences in the agricultural and industrial development of individual regions or the changes over time to the South's macro economy.<sup>4</sup> The influences on a town developing in the Black Belt of Alabama were quite different from those of a town on the frontier in southwest Florida. While Plant City did show many of the economic properties traditionally associated with southern cities, it also displays economic diversity that defies the norm.

---

<sup>2</sup> Edward Ayers, *Southern Crossings: A History of the American South 1877-1906* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Goldfield, 79.

<sup>4</sup> Ayers, *The Promise*, 105.

In its first year Plant City grew into a municipality with 350 residents, thirteen business houses, a post office, a school, and two churches.<sup>5</sup> This initial population and economic base came from the immediate transfer of many of the businesses, their owners and families, and the post office from the regions two principle settlements, Cork and Shiloh. It also included new entrepreneurs as well as, construction, railroad, and farm laborers who came to work and make a new start at the Plant City site.

According to the records available, the business houses established in Plant City at the time of its incorporation in 1885 were the general merchandise houses of Collins and Franklin, and W.F. Burts and Company, both of which had relocated from Shiloh, and Pemberton and Roberts, a new concern. Also included were Moody's Drugstore, transplanted from nearby Seffner, William Cone's Meat Market, the Cone brothers' livery, Greene Brothers' Carriage & Wagon Makers and Blacksmiths, and the post office, which had been moved from Cork to postmaster Tyner's new stationary store. The town also had two hotels, the Robinson House and the Plant City Hotel, run by J.B. Robertson and R.B. McLendon, and three real estate brokers, McLendon and Young and C.W. Andrews, who also offered a notary service. The town newspaper, the *South Florida Courier*, was owned by Captain F.W. Merrin, who had moved his printing equipment from Mississippi in 1884, and at least two professional men, C. Calhoun and R.M. Wells were practicing law and medicine. The latter had moved his practice from Alafia.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> *Webb's Historical, Industrial, and Biographical Florida, 1885* (New York: W.S. Webb & Co, 1885) Special Collections, University of South Florida, Tampa, 58. Hereafter referred to as SCUSF.

<sup>6</sup> *Descriptive Pamphlet of Hillsborough County: With Numerous Engravings and Maps. 1885*, Hillsborough County Real Estate Agency (New York: The South Publishing Company), 33-40.; *1886-1887, Florida Gazetteer and*

The first shipments made from the town were indicative of the traditional agricultural and extractive industries driving regional economies throughout the South. In Plant City's case they included lumber, naval stores, cotton, oranges, vegetables, and cattle. These represented economic endeavors that had been pursued in the region for fifty years.<sup>7</sup> Plant City's position as a transportation center would encourage growers to increase these commodities. In the ensuing years some would become more dominant as new markets opened and developed, transportation facilities expanded, and other sources of revenue were discovered. These factors, central to the subsequent development of the town's commercial landscape and the character of its business community should be analyzed against the backdrop of the county's growth as a whole, Tampa's expansion in particular, and the effects wrought by unforeseen natural disasters and international incidents.

The years from 1885 to 1895 marked the beginning of Hillsborough County's journey from isolated backwater to agricultural and manufacturing prominence. They also marked the beginning of separate developmental paths for Plant City and Tampa. With the arrival of Vicente Ybor and cigar manufacturing in 1885 and the beginning of port expansion and development in 1886, Tampa began its trek toward becoming the state's leading manufacturing center and one of its principle shipping points.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, Plant City started on its way toward becoming

---

*Business Directory* SCUSF, 372; Official Minutes: Plant City, Florida, January 19, 1885-December 2, 1886, City Hall Vault, Plant City, Florida; Bruton and Bailey, 71-95.

<sup>7</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 43. Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 341.

the commercial hub for what would become some of eastern Hillsborough's strongest agricultural sections.

In 1880 Hillsborough County, which included today's Pinellas County, had a population of 5,814; fewer than 1,000 lived in Tampa. There were 757 farms and only six manufacturing facilities. By 1890 the county population had increased to 14,941 with roughly 5,000 living in Tampa. The number of manufacturers had grown to 50, but the number of farms had only increased by 22 to 779. Ten years later the total population reached 36,013; that of Tampa's exceeded 15,000. The number of farms nearly doubled to 1,449, and manufacturing facilities reached 212. In the same two decades, the capital invested in manufacturing went from \$13,100 in 1880 to \$5,010,934. The value of farm products increased from \$210,800 to \$667,678, and farm values grew from \$583,767 in 1880 to \$2,964,910 in 1890 before dropping to \$2,590,070 by 1900.<sup>9</sup>

The completion of the railroad and the introduction of cigar manufacturing created boom town conditions in Tampa. On September 15, 1887, the *Tampa Journal* related that the cigar factories had brought 3,000 new inhabitants, put between \$8,000 and \$10,000 weekly into the local economy in the form of wages, and had led to the construction of buildings valued at one-half million dollars.<sup>10</sup>

The economic advantages of supplying the boom rippled throughout the county. The factory employees, as well as the hundreds of laborers, mechanics, and sawmill operators and

---

<sup>9</sup> United States Census: 1880-1900. Census data available from <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census>, Internet.

<sup>10</sup> *Tampa Journal*, 15 September 1887; Mormino and Pozzetta, 69. The weekly pay of V.M. Ybor and Company reached \$4,000 weekly by 1888.

their families needed clothing, food, fuel, and other necessities and luxuries. The *Tribune's* editor put it succinctly when he said, "These people have to be fed, and they make a market for our beef, and for everything the farmer can raise."<sup>11</sup>

Plant City enjoyed its own miniature boom with the railroad's construction in 1883-1884, but Tampa's growth, which provided a massive consumer base only twenty miles away, helped sustain it. The larger port city also added to the economic foundation upon which the region's agricultural and raw material industries and, therefore, the town could grow.

According to the 1886-1887 *Florida Gazetteer*, the number of business establishments in Plant City had nearly doubled. New general merchandise houses included those of Arnet and Sexton, Baker and Collins, and James Edmonson. Other new establishments included Beatty's Grocery; Calhoun and Brasswell, Confectioners and Grocers; Calhoun and Sons, soda water bottlers; Crumb and Whitehurst Meat market, T.B. McCall and Co., druggists; and a jewelry store run by D.A. Green. In addition, there was a tailor, Charles Gunn, a millinery store run by a Mrs. Edmondson, and The Yates Opera House and Skating Rink. A new hotel the Florida House had also been built, and three new sawmills were in operation. The number of professionals practicing had also increased. The town had added another physician, a dentist, and an attorney.<sup>12</sup>

In September of 1887 residents of Plant City and Tampa thought their cities would enjoy unlimited prosperity. However, the illusion was shattered within a month when Yellow Fever struck Tampa and soon spread to Plant City.<sup>13</sup> Business in both places came to abrupt halts and

---

<sup>11</sup> *Tampa Journal*, 15 September 1887.

<sup>12</sup> *1886-1887, Gazetteer*, 372-373.

<sup>13</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 97.

the towns were quarantined.<sup>14</sup> Plant City was especially hard hit considering the size of its population. In a town with little over 300 inhabitants there were twenty-two deaths with scores more who had been stricken and survived. The disease lingered throughout 1888, and not until December 1, did the town reopen to the outside world.<sup>15</sup>

Both Tampa and Plant City suffered greatly from the plague, which now threatened to reverse their gains. Fortunately, Henry B. Plant, the man who had brought the railroad, stepped in again. He announced that rather than pull out of Tampa he intended to build a first-class luxury hotel (now the site of the University of Tampa) and expand his rail facilities and steamboat lines at Port Tampa.<sup>16</sup> Within a year business in Hillsborough was again expanding.

In Plant City and for much of rural Hillsborough County this meant the growth of agriculture, primarily in citrus and vegetable production. The *1884-1885 Descriptive Pamphlet of Hillsborough County* put out by the Hillsborough Real Estate Agency declared that the county wanted “those of an agricultural and horticultural turn of mind.”<sup>17</sup> It also pointed out that although cattle had always been the county’s most reliable and profitable commodity, farms and orchards, now growing slowly, would be expanded with rail transportation.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Tebeau, 214; Official Minutes of Plant City, November 20, 1888.

<sup>15</sup> Official Minutes, November 20, 1888.

<sup>16</sup> Gary R. Mormino and Anthony P. Pizzo, *The Treasure City: Tampa* (Tulsa Oklahoma: Continental Heritage Press, Inc, 1963), 85.

<sup>17</sup> Pamphlet, 66.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 40, 49. The increase in the farm population and the settlement of land was not an easy process. Cattlemen and farmers had controversies concerning range and fences until the early part of the twentieth century.

The Agency's members, who hoped to sell land, much of which they owned, advertised the virtues of citrus production and truck farming.<sup>19</sup> The pamphlet maintained that starting a ten-acre grove, which required eight years to become productive, cost \$1,147.50. The amount included land at \$1.25 an acre and the cost of clearing the land, erecting dwellings, planting trees, hiring labor and purchasing eight years of fertilizer. The estimated return on a productive grove, the pamphlet assured readers, ran as high as \$1,000 dollars an acre.<sup>20</sup> The Agency also promoted truck farming, estimating that an acre of cabbage or potatoes would return \$400 to \$700, and tomatoes, cucumber and beans were becoming important crops. The writers suggested that would-be settlers, "Try a truck farm while the orange grove grows."<sup>21</sup> The agency also promoted propagation of other types of tropical fruits and more traditional crops. However, Hillsborough farmers apparently preferred to engage in the fledgling citrus industry and truck farming, especially those in the Plant City region.

The *Gazette* listed sixty orange growers and seven vegetable and truck farmers in the Plant City area in 1885. Ten years later, it recorded 152 vegetable and fruit growers.<sup>22</sup> Most of the region's 85 new farms had been established between 1890 and 1895. Since the average citrus grove took eight years to begin producing, many of these farmers engaged solely in truck or traditional crop agriculture, or both while waiting for the acres they had in citrus to begin bearing

---

<sup>19</sup> Almost all of the original Tampa Syndicate, who partnered with Mitchell in Plant City's initial phases, were part of the Real Estate Commission and many, especially Henderson and Leslie, owned land throughout the county.

<sup>20</sup> Pamphlet, 40.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*,57.

<sup>22</sup> 1895-1896, *Florida Gazetteer and Business Directory*.

marketable fruit.<sup>23</sup> Plant City business revolved around the rhythm of the planting, maintaining, harvesting, packing, and shipping of its vegetable, livestock, sustenance, and citrus crops.

By the end of 1894, an agricultural pattern had been established, and the town's business concerns had grown in response to the goods and services the farmers and town's people needed. Aside from producing for their own needs, from September through June truck farmers shipped a variety of vegetables including: cabbage, English peas, string beans, okra, cucumbers, summer squash, egg plant, sweet and Irish potatoes, as well as strawberries and black berries.<sup>24</sup>

At the end of October farmers started harvesting and shipping the citrus crop. Growers brought fruit into town until April, trying to pick it at the right time when the fruit was ripe and the prices were high. In 1892 nearly 120,000 boxes were packed and shipped in Plant City, and a year later close to 100,000 boxes went out.<sup>25</sup> Because the season was relatively short and the labor intensive, local packers and others representing firms from out of town set up shop at warehouses near the railroad, thereby providing seasonal employment for locals and transients. Plant City packers in 1894 included Webster's Packinghouse, Schneider Brothers, C.J. Yates Packing Company, and the Fuller Packing House.<sup>26</sup>

As its agricultural foundations grew, the commercial sector also expanded. The town now had around 30 business establishments, and it had become a two-railroad town when The Florida Central and Peninsula reached it from Wildwood in 1889 giving it connection to towns in north

---

<sup>23</sup> Although there are not documents specifying the number of Plant City area farms and what they raised, I believe this is an accurate statement based on the growth of Hillsborough farms found in the U.S. Census data along with the knowledge of how long it took citrus to come into production.

<sup>24</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, 24 November 1893.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>26</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, January 1893-1898.

central Florida and Jacksonville.<sup>27</sup> Along with several general merchandise houses, there were two drug stores, a Farmers' Alliance and Exchange store, two millinery shops, a meat market, two barber shops, a jewelry store, a bakery, a livery, a hardware store, a furniture store, real estate sales, a restaurant, three hotels and a newspaper. Other businesses and services included shoe, harness, and wagon making and repair, and medical, dental and legal services.<sup>28</sup>

Plant City had established itself in the ten years since the railroad's completion in 1884. It had weathered the storm of Yellow Fever, and as its first decade came to a close, everything seemed settled and the future looked bright. No one could have imagined that within months another disaster would strike.

Ten years earlier a writer had unwittingly predicted the future when he wrote with tongue in cheek about South Florida's future. "Will the boom fall out of South Florida? Yes we answer, that is, when Tampa Bay freezes over, and the Orange trees of South Florida are laden with icicles and snowflakes,"<sup>29</sup> Two days before the years end on December 29, 1894 a cold front dropped the temperature in Tampa to 14 degrees, and after a warming trend in January, another front blasted through in February dropping temperatures below freezing and as low as 11 degrees for three days.<sup>30</sup> While the Bay did not freeze over, icicles and snowflakes were seen in groves all over the state and the boom that had been the citrus industry was indeed over.

---

<sup>27</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 101.

<sup>28</sup> 1895-1896, *Gazetteer, Tribune*, January 1894-December 1895.

<sup>29</sup> Pamphlet, 39.

<sup>30</sup> Robinson, 91-92.

The freeze destroyed almost all of Florida's citrus production and set much of its other agriculture back a season. During the 1893-1894 growing season, Floridians produced, packed, and shipped roughly 5,000,000 boxes of oranges. The following year only 75,000 boxes left the state. Plant City, which had shipped nearly 100,000 boxes during the 1893-1894 season, would not ship oranges again until 1898.<sup>31</sup> The effects were devastating. Many farmers lost the work of a lifetime, and merchants went bankrupt when they were unable to collect on the credit given in anticipation of the coming crop. To survive and continue, Plant City and its people as well as those living in and around towns in other citrus producing regions of the state had to repair and reinvent their economic foundations.

Post freeze agricultural production in and around Plant City was both cautious and innovative. Farmers went back to the region's traditional crops and experimented with new ones. The Plant City correspondent to the *Tribune* reported that the 1896 spring planting would include more corn, cassava, sorghum, sugar cane, and sweet potatoes than any year in a long time. In addition, many planted cotton, and others took a great interest in tobacco. Farmers also formed a new organization, the Fine Havana Tobacco Association and the Tobacco and Cotton Association.<sup>32</sup> Finally, some farmers turned to strawberry production, which had begun to show promise a couple years before the freeze.

Although tobacco production in eastern Hillsborough was short lived, strawberry culture snowballed into one of the region's primary industries. The first recorded rail shipment came

---

<sup>31</sup> *Tribune*, 24 November 1893; 5 January 1898.

<sup>32</sup> *Tribune*, 7 January 1896.

from a Mr. Robinson in 1892.<sup>33</sup> The following year four more growers had shipments, and after the freeze, production skyrocketed. In 1896, the *Tribune* reported that strawberries were “sweeping the country like a title wave.”<sup>34</sup> By 1902, between 150-300 acres were devoted to strawberries annually, and one day’s picking in March of the same year yielded 19,856 quarts.<sup>35</sup> In 1920, Plant City named itself “The World’s Winter Strawberry Capital”, and at the end of the decade nearly 6,000 acres were devoted to production. One day’s harvest in the 1930s saw 30 railcars containing 518,400 pints depart from the city’s platforms.<sup>36</sup>

The average strawberry farm was ten acres or less, owned by the farmer or rented for cash, and usually worked by a family.<sup>37</sup> Farmers began harvesting berries near Christmas and continued until the end of April. Buyers, representing a variety of companies, paid cash for fruit on the platform. At times in the 1930s the line of farm trucks waiting to see the buyer stretched for over a mile.<sup>38</sup> Since fruit ripened daily, everyday was a harvesting, marketing, shipping, and payday. The continuous cash flow put money in the pockets of farmers and merchants alike and spawned and supported a variety of service and support businesses. Altogether strawberry production had become one of the town’s primary industries.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 139.

<sup>34</sup> *Tribune*, 7 January 1896.

<sup>35</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 136.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 141

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 139

<sup>38</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 141.

<sup>39</sup> Between 1900 and 1940 the number of farms in Hillsborough County with ten acres or less increased from 159 to 914, moving from roughly 11 percent to nearly 26 percent of the county total. The number with twenty acres or less changed from 160 to 1,543. When combined, farms less than twenty acres accounted for over 50 percent of all farms. With 6,000 acres in berry production at the end of the 1920s and the average producing acreage being under ten, over 500 of the county’s farms had to be engaged in berry production, and almost all of these were within a ten mile radius of Plant City.

While agriculture was going through the process of recovery after the freeze, Plant City was fortunate to have the Warnell Lumber and Veneering Company relocate to town in 1898.<sup>40</sup> The company, which primarily produced vegetable crates and fruit baskets, provided jobs in the construction of its physical plant as well as in its production departments at a time when the town was still suffering from the freeze's aftermath. These jobs brought many through the down turn, and made Plant City more than just a shipping and supply center for agriculture. By 1901 the company employed 340 people and had a monthly payroll of \$8,000 dollars.<sup>41</sup> Different from the more common extractive industries like sawmills found in many areas of the South, Warnell manufactured finished products, although simple ones, that were marketed throughout the region. On average, the company shipped 960 solid car loads of crates and carriers in addition to those sold locally.<sup>42</sup>

The mill and the rapid growth of the strawberry industry helped change Plant City's urban center in the decade following the great freeze. By the end of 1902, the town had a population of over 700 and had acquired many of the business services and technological advances that characterized a modern progressive small town. During the year, the city got its first bank, the Hillsborough State Bank. The Plant City Ice and Power Company came on line providing electrical service at night and ice for the shipment of produce and home refrigeration, and the Peninsular Telephone Company established service. The town's business district now included fifteen general stores, three drug stores, three millinery shops, two meat markets, two

---

<sup>40</sup> The company was attracted to vast amounts of timber in the region and expected the supply to last around 20 years, which turned out to be quite accurate.

<sup>41</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 110.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 110.

barbershops, three blacksmiths and wagon repair, and a bakery. In addition, there was a newsstand, two shoe shops, a bicycle repair, two liverys, three hotels, two ice dealers, a restaurant and several boarding houses. Other business enterprises included the Warnell Mill Store, the Farmers Alliance and Exchange store. The former catered to mill employees and the later acted as a cooperative for local farmers. There were also several cool-drink stands, selling iced drinks, probably including Coca Cola, which was spreading rapidly throughout the South along with many other new products from dedicated salesmen who crisscrossed their territories by rail.<sup>43</sup>

As the decade progressed, Plant City enjoyed a small boom as other businesses and industries came to town spurred on by the growth from the mill and the increase in agricultural production.<sup>44</sup> In 1903 another sawmill, the Roux Lumber Company, opened for business. Five years later, the company employed twenty-two people and produced rough and dressed lumber that was shipped all over Florida and overseas to Cuba.<sup>45</sup> Another building related industry, the Plant City Granite Brick Company, was founded in 1906. The plant was built with the most modern equipment available to take advantage of a deposit of granite sand found two miles south of town. Although fire destroyed the plant in 1911, it was resurrected as the Roux Composite Brick Company in 1913. The Roux Company produced over five million bricks annually, which were used in many aspects of building including bricks for streets, sewers, cisterns and other

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 125-126; Ayers, *A Promise*, 101-102. Electric service was probably made available to the towns businesses first and then residents. By 1911 improvements to the plant's equipment and increased demand provided the town both day and night current six days a week.

<sup>44</sup> *Tribune*, July 24, 1903.

<sup>45</sup> *Tribune*, September 24, 1903; Bruton and Bailey, 119-120.

projects.<sup>46</sup> Two more factories came to town in 1908. One was the Havana Plant Cigar Factory, which for a number of years produced a variety of products before going out of business. The other, the Plant City Foundry made structural steel beams for buildings.<sup>47</sup> While cigar manufacturing did not endure in Plant City, the building industries flourished partly as a result of the town's third major tragedy since its founding.

In 1907, fires on July 4 and October 15, destroyed the town hall and leveled two business blocks south of the A.C.L. track on the town's south side. The town records burned in the July fire and the Tribune reported the loss of fourteen business houses, the city jail, and five dwellings valued at over \$60,000 from the one in October.<sup>48</sup> While the fires were devastating to citizens and merchants alike, many of the buildings were rebuilt with locally produced brick and lumber. As a result, half the business district was modernized and improved.

As strawberries and the Warnell Mill had helped Plant City recover from the freeze, another new industry, phosphate mining, helped it recover from the fires. The discovery of large deposits in Southwest Florida in the 1890s began a frenzy of activity, much of it in Plant City's backyard, as prospectors flooded the region to stake claims and begin operations. Mining began the same decade but only on a limited scale. Because the major markets were in Europe, inadequate port facilities in Tampa limited shipping capacity and therefore production. By 1908, the problems with the port had been remedied. This along with new production methods using

---

<sup>46</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 167-168.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>48</sup> The October fire also burned the Plant City Courier offices and production plant. All the earlier issues of the paper except for a few were lost.

steam powered centrifugal pumps allowed production to increase dramatically. The same year the Coronet Phosphate Company, located three and a half miles southeast of town, began production. Plant City was advertised as the “Key to the phosphate region of South Florida” and by late 1912, roughly 16,000 tons made its way from the city’s rail terminals to Port Tampa weekly.<sup>49</sup> While the Cornet mine was also a company town, many of its workers instead lived in Plant City. Many others did their shopping and banking there, adding another consistent source of cash flow to the town’s economy.<sup>50</sup>

By the end of the century’s first decade, the primary industries that would underpin Plant City’s economy until the Second World War had been established. The town was still primarily an agricultural shipping and supply center, but its agricultural base had diversified and now rested on a variety of crops including, strawberries, citrus, truck, general farming and ranching.<sup>51</sup> It also had a small but prosperous manufacturing sector producing rough and dressed lumber, bricks, finished steel and wood products, ice, and cigars. Furthermore, it was a shipping, housing, and supply center for the region’s phosphate industry.

This decade also marks the establishment of the town’s black business community.<sup>52</sup> Unlike most areas of the South, eastern Hillsborough County had few blacks living in the region before 1880. At the time of its incorporation in 1885 there were only twenty-nine black men, women, and children living in Plant City out of a total population of 350. By 1900 the number

---

<sup>49</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 178; Ayers, 110.

<sup>50</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 183-185.

<sup>51</sup> *Polk’s Florida Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1911.

<sup>52</sup> This marks the beginning of a summary of the black community as it relates to the overall business community. Chapter five covers this community in detail.

had only increased to 115. However, from 1900 to 1910 the number jumped to nearly 1000.<sup>53</sup> These people, many of whom were fleeing rural poverty in adjoining southern states, come to work on the region's farms and in all of the town's industries in positions acceptable to the white majority in keeping with the segregated system of the New South.<sup>54</sup> With the influx came black entrepreneurs and professionals who opened stores and set up practices in the black district on the town's southeast side. In 1910 black enterprises included restaurants, saloons, a grocery and general store, a drink stand, a fish market, a tailor shop, and a barber shop. Black professionals included a physician, a nurse, two pastors, two teachers, and an insurance writer.<sup>55</sup>

In the next decade Plant City added only 100 black residents compared to 1,148 new whites. However, the 1920s saw another large increase with the black population growing by over 1,000 to number 2,114 out of a total of 6,800 before declining to 1,780 during the depression era.<sup>56</sup> The end of the 1920s marked the apex of the black business community until after the Second World War. The business district had grown to include a movie theater, an auto repair shop, a mortuary, a sanitarium, and a pool hall in addition to those enterprises existing in 1910.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Florida State Census 1885, Orange County Public Library: Microfilm; United States Federal Census 1900, Orange County Public Library: Microfilm. Hereafter referred to as OCPL.

<sup>54</sup> Ayers, *A Promise*, 151. In the *Jim Crow Guide to the U.S.A.*, Stetson Kennedy gives a detailed list of the jobs most blacks worked in up until 1949 on page 115. These include sawmills, forestry, brickyards, and farm labor in addition to those in the service industry. Plant City had all of these by the end of 1910.

<sup>55</sup> United States Federal Census, 1910; The Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps: Chadwyck Healy Inc. Microfilm Reel 12. 1909 map. University of Central Florida Library, Orlando.

<sup>56</sup> United States Federal Census, 1920 and 1930, OCPL: Microfilm.

<sup>57</sup> The Sanford Fire Insurance Maps. 1925.

Between 1910 and 1920, Plant City gained official urban status as its population grew over 2,500 to 3,729.<sup>58</sup> In many ways its economic development at this point mirrors other post war railroad towns throughout the South, but in many other ways it was a hybrid. Like all southern cities, race played a role in how the town's work force and commerce were organized. However, race was not a factor in whether industries developed or the extent to which they developed as in cotton-producing regions where debt peonage and sharecropping developed as a method of securing labor and often interfered with economic diversification. In addition, while some parts of Plant City's commerce reflected the colonial model, others did not. Raw materials, agricultural products, and semi-finished goods such as phosphate, cattle, and rough lumber traveled from Plant City to outside markets for processing, and all manner of finished goods from the North and overseas were sold in the city's retail establishments or were available by mail. But, Plant City was not just a commercial hub for agriculture, mining, or mill operations like the cotton, coalmine, or textile mill villages of Alabama, Kentucky, or Georgia. It serviced all three industries. Each had its own markets and required its own support services and labor. This created a mosaic of interactions between the citizenry and business, which was much more complex than towns depending on the production of a single crop, natural resource, or product.

For example, handling Plant City's agricultural products was more complicated than that for cotton or tobacco and as a result added a variety of different business services not found in many areas. In this era Strawberries, citrus, and vegetables were specialty perishables, which needed to be packed, and shipped as soon as possible. The markets for these crops were

---

<sup>58</sup> Ayers, 55.

conducted in cash and controlled by professional buyers. They were not the territory of the local merchants, who in cotton producing regions might serve as a lender and buyer to the farmer and later commodity broker.<sup>59</sup>

In the days before juice production and frozen food plants, citrus, vegetables, and strawberries required specialized packaging and storage. Buyers worked with local packers to handle the produce, much of which required ice for storage and shipment. Strawberries required not only hand packing in ice but also small portable cold storage containers, called Pony Refrigerators, which could be put in express areas of passenger trains. As a result, the production of ice and the manufacture and maintenance of Pony units became large businesses.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, taking product orders and arranging their shipment to so many different places required specialized communications services. Because of the inefficiency of the early telephone system, negotiators used a specialized telegraph service called “The Bug” from the town’s Western Union and Postal Telegraph offices.<sup>61</sup> Plant City’s agricultural industries’ need for ice, communications, and the round the clock movement of rail traffic also required consistent electric service, giving it twenty-four service as early as 1915.<sup>62</sup>

Plant City’s economy depended on agriculture, but the nature of its commodities required a more complex web of related services than those regions producing mostly non-perishables. When strawberries, citrus, and vegetables left the towns rail platforms, they were essentially

---

<sup>59</sup> Goldfield, 87.

<sup>60</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 143.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>62</sup> *Plant City Courier*, March 6, 1915

finished products sent directly to the consumer. The town's extractive industries were also unique to those in other parts of the South. While phosphate was mined locally and processed elsewhere, the timber taken from the region often left as dressed lumber for building, wood fiber baskets or crates, or was used to kiln dry bricks used for building locally or elsewhere.

By the end of the Twentieth Century's second decade, Plant City served its own citizens, those in the surrounding rural areas, as well as those traveling in and out of town for business related to agriculture, mining, manufacturing, or the town's retail and wholesale trade. The commercial landscape included approximately 180 business entities. These included medical, dental, veterinarian, legal, engineering, banking, real estate, insurance and educational services. There were a wide variety of merchant houses selling clothing, shoes, drugs, hardware, hats, groceries, produce, jewelry, dry goods and furniture. Several lodging and eating facilities existed including hotels, boarding houses, restaurants and refreshment stands. Personal services included photography, barbering, tailoring, cleaning and dressmaking. Other services were bicycle and automotive repair, blacksmithing, and livery.<sup>63</sup>

Citizens living in or near town might work in any of the above establishments or for any of the town's commission merchants, packing houses, or for the Atlantic Coast Line or the Seaboard Air Line (formerly the Florida Peninsular) Railroads. Many were employed at the Roux and Warnell Mills, the brick factory, the water works and sewage treatment plant, the ice factory, the foundry machine shop and boiler works, or at the telephone or telegraph offices. When work was finished, people could shoot pool at one of the town's two pool halls, take in a

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.,

movie at the Capital Theater, or perhaps see a play or concert from a traveling or local band or a performing troop at the high school auditorium or the Abbott Theater.<sup>64</sup>

Thirty-five years after its incorporation in 1885, Plant City's economic institutions had developed, matured and stabilized. It had become the largest inland shipping point in the state and stood as the economic center of eastern Hillsborough. While it continued to exist in Tampa's shadow, it was an independent town. The larger city was a ready market for much of what Plant City produced, but it was only one of its trading partners.<sup>65</sup> The town's agricultural sector suffered or prospered as the prices for its commodities rose and fell, but it was not dependent on a single crop or a single market. When phosphate production slipped with the loss of European exports due to World War One, the strength of its agriculture and manufacturing kept it growing until the war was over and the market for the mineral resumed.

During the 1920s, post-war prosperity, improved automotive and rail transportation, mass marketing, and the lure of easy wealth brought millions of people to Florida, many permanently. The population increased from 968,470 in 1920 to 1,468,211 in 1930. The massive immigration set off a wave of investment and development that began on the lower east coast and spread to nearly every corner of the state. Between 1923 and 1925 nearly 300,000 developers and promoters came to do business. New subdivisions popped up everywhere along the hundreds of

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>65</sup> The figures for agricultural sales only reflect those recorded at the platform for shipping north... Plant City growers also supplied the local market including berries sold at the Tampa Bay Hotel.

miles of newly paved roads. Brisk sales and quick profits drove up land values settling off the flurry of speculative buying known as the Florida Land Boom.<sup>66</sup>

Plant City's population nearly doubled during the decade moving from 3,729 in 1920 to 6,800 in 1930. Most of the growth came in the first five years from the Boom which reached its peak in 1925. The town's amenities and attributes at that time were summarized in *R.L Polk & Co.'s 1925 Florida Gazetteer*. The directory's writer noted that Plant City was "distinctly not a tourist town." Instead, it had more than 5,000 permanent residents with 12,000 more living in direct proximity. It was located in one of Florida's most productive agricultural sections and had, at the same time, a small but thriving manufacturing sector. Moreover, it boasted a modern infrastructure; its principle roads were paved, and its business district was modern and built mostly of brick and concrete. It was also home to the largest cash market for produce in the state and had three banks with more money per capita than any other town its size in Florida. The average farm was from ten to twenty acres and managed by a family that generally devoted a portion of its land to citrus, truck, and strawberries. The writer continued by noting the desirability of the town's churches, schools, and people, and the continuing opportunities for settlers.<sup>67</sup>

Unfortunately for Plant City and the rest of Florida the enthusiasm and prosperity of 1925 ended the following year when the bottom fell out of the state's real estate market. The frenzy of investment and development that had swept the state ended abruptly when run away speculation,

---

<sup>66</sup> Tebeau, 385; Gannon, *A Short History*, 85; David Noland, *Fifty Feet in Paradise: The Booming of Florida* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1984), 291; Bradley R. Keeler, "Bricks, Bonds, and Boosters: The Good Roads Movement in Central Florida, 1890-1929" (M.A. Thesis, University of Central Florida, 1998), 74.

<sup>67</sup> *R.L. Polk and Company's Florida Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1925. SCUSF.

land fraud, a rail embargo, port problems in Miami, and bad press combined to choke off sales beginning a financial train wreck which rippled through the state.<sup>68</sup>

As building slowed, developers were unable to pay the banks or meet payrolls. Unemployment ensued and thousands began leaving the state taking their bank deposits with them. Banks failed, over forty in 1926. Declining tax revenues strapped municipal and county governments, many of whom had floated large bond issues to build infrastructure. Land values declined. Farm land and machinery in Hillsborough County alone dropped from the 1925 high of \$24,977,390 to 16,721,990 in 1930. Then to add to the troubles, two hurricanes hit the lower east coast in Miami and West Palm Beach in 1926 and 1928 respectively, and a Mediterranean fruit fly infestation wrecked havoc on Central Florida's citrus industry in 1929.<sup>69</sup>

Much of Florida had entered the depression years before the market crash of 1929. Plant City suffered like the rest of the state. However, because its economy was not based on tourism or building and development alone, it fared better than many places including Tampa. Plant City lost two of its three banks and had to cut teachers' pay. It also had to discontinue or cut back some city services. The city lost its share of merchants, and had difficulty collecting taxes among other problems. However, whereas thousands left many of the state's cities after 1926, Plant City gained over a thousand new residents increasing its population to 6,800 by 1930.

In the 1930s, in the depths of the depression, the population continued to increase growing to 7,491 by 1940. Various Civilian Conservation Corporation and Works Progress

---

<sup>68</sup> Tebeau, 385; William W. Rogers, "Fortune and Misfortune: The Paradoxical Twenties" in *The New History of Florida*, Michael Gannon ed (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), 294.

<sup>69</sup> Tebeau, 393-394; Rogers, 295-298; Joe Knetsch, and Laura Ethridge, "A Brief Outline of the Agricultural History of Hillsborough County: 1880-1940," *Sun Land Tribune* [on-line] (November 1987): 10.

Administration projects carried out in town kept many working, but it appears that many people may have been drawn to Plant City during this time because they thought they could make a living as strawberry producers or in other areas of agriculture.<sup>70</sup> The number of Hillsborough farms increased by approximately one thousand, many in the Plant City region. During this time strawberry production increased from five million quarts annually to 7,571,153. Hillsborough also maintained its position as the fourth-largest citrus producer and a good portion of the crop was grown in the region and marketed through Plant City.<sup>71</sup> Times were difficult and the prices for the town's primary agricultural products were depressed. However, a market still existed and people were able to get by better than many living in cities and towns in other regions of the South more dependent on crops like cotton with depressed prices or in cities like Tampa more dependent on manufacturing.

From its founding, Plant City's economic growth was dependent as most regions of the South on the development of its agricultural and raw materials resources. However, because it was established in a sparsely populated frontier area, it did not have an entrenched economic system based on a single commodity or labor system that kept its farmers and business people from pursuing other opportunities. The region's abundance of natural resources in phosphate and timber as well as the quality of its soils and climate for unique crops like strawberries and citrus, gave it a broad foundation from which to grow. Other factors such as Tampa's explosive growth, the yellow fever epidemic, the Great Freeze, the town fires, the First World War, the end of the

---

<sup>70</sup> W.P.A projects in Plant City included drainage for mosquito control, road construction and repair, construction of a new armory complex, installation of new water lines and fire hydrants, construction of a new baseball field, and construction of the new state farmers market.

<sup>71</sup> Knetsch and Ethridge, 10.

Florida Land Boom, and the Great Depression accelerated or slowed growth. In the last analysis, the town's people seized the opportunity the railroad afforded them to successfully develop an urban center. It, in turn, provided a structural foundation for economic expansion and stability. That formed the basis for political and social development that nurtured the sense of community and attachment to place.

## CHAPTER 3: GOVERNMENT

As the railroad industry grew throughout the United States and stretched into the frontier, wherever the rails went, towns appeared. In some instances preexisting towns grew larger and others, bypassed by railroads, shrunk or disappeared altogether. This was also true along the many railroads reaching into remote areas of Florida in the 1880s. In these places, the railroad's arrival meant the end of isolation and the gateway to opportunity. Rail transportation provided direct access to markets and allowed a region to tap its natural resources, expand its agriculture, and potentially lure capital for industrial development. It also opened the door to the ever expanding world of information and merchandise, thereby bringing newspapers, magazines, machinery, tools, sundries, the latest fashions, and a host of other products. Along the line Henry Bradley Plant pushed across Central Florida from Kissimmee to Tampa in 1883, the city that bore his name came to life. Whether it would flourish or not was another matter. Although many of the town's initial residents were like-minded individuals who shared similar cultural backgrounds and experiences, a collection of people living in one place did not automatically create a community among people with rural values. Plant City required a sound economic base and the establishment and development of its own institutions, if it were to thrive.

One of the most important institutions in any town is the development of its municipal government. Since a community's political system, social life, and economy evolve simultaneously, understanding how each aspect develops and complements the others over time gives historians an understanding of the urbanization process. David Goldfield contends that

urban development in the American South was different because southern cities were, for the most part, economic and cultural extensions of the rural communities from which they grew. Economically, this meant strong ties to agriculture and dependence on outside capital for development. Culturally, it meant the prevalence of southern rural values, which included an acceptance of social hierarchy, the commitment to racial segregation, and a belief that individuals were responsible for themselves. These factors tended to be manifested politically in the melding and concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a region's local elite, who, in turn, served an electorate that accepted their leadership, and expected a minimum of government services. According to Goldfield, these attributes combined to put southern cities at a developmental disadvantage often limiting economic diversification, thereby slowing economic growth, and creating inefficiency, inequity and a general lack of government services.<sup>1</sup> While most historians agree that these elements can be found in most New South cities, how prevalent were they in a town growing on the Florida frontier like Plant City?

In January 1885, a new era was beginning for the people in and around the new settlement. On January 10, fifty registered voters living within a half-mile circle from a point near Mitchell and Thomas streets voted on a referendum for incorporation and elected the town's first political leaders.<sup>2</sup> The election resulted in a 49 to 1 vote in favor of incorporation. The six aldermen elected were William Collins, George W Wells, R.B. McLendon, T.S. Smith, T.S.

---

<sup>1</sup> Goldfield, 90-109.

<sup>2</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 81.

Brown, and Robert B Spier, who then gave the title of mayor to Jonah Yates and town marshal to J.H. Baker.<sup>3</sup>

.These men had a difficult job to do with limited resources and time. They were local businessmen, farmers, and professionals who had to attend to their civic responsibilities in their spare time and free of charge. When they took office, the town was a collection of hastily built wooden stores and houses that had been constructed in the fourteen months since its platting on November 15, 1883. Their roughly 350 constituents consisted of businessmen, professionals, laborers, farmers, and their families who had migrated from other parts of the region, state, and nation for opportunity in the new railroad town.<sup>4</sup> In these boomtown conditions, creating and nurturing a new municipality was a difficult task.

In its initial meeting, a little over two weeks after the election, the government's first job was to organize itself. The mayor and the aldermen in the new system would create the city's ordinances, address the community's needs, and allocate the city's resources. The clerk would account for and disperse funds, and the marshal would collect taxes and enforce the city ordinances. Civil and criminal disputes would be settled in the mayor's court.<sup>5</sup> The council voted McLendon president and appointed Spier as Clerk. It decided the marshal's pay at fifty dollars a month, and retained the services of attorney Calvin Calhoun. The next order of business finalized

---

<sup>3</sup> Official Minutes of Plant City, City Hall Vault, Plant City, Florida, January 19, 1885.

<sup>4</sup> *Webb's Historical and Biographical Florida*, 1885. SCUSF.

<sup>5</sup> No copy of the first ordinances exists, but a basic understanding of the functioning of the city government can be gleaned from a review of the minutes of the council.

the names of some of the town's streets including Haines, Collins, Evers, Brown, and Bay, and authorized newspaperman Francis W Merrin to print the town's first ordinances.<sup>6</sup>

In the months that followed to the end of the year and the town's second elections, the difficulty of the task and the limitations of the new government became apparent. The new leaders faced a variety of obstacles, the most fundamental of which involved lack of funds. Until taxes could be assessed and collected, revenue was non-existent and a realistic budget impossible to create. Within six months the effects of the government's fiscal limitations became apparent. The council had to lower the marshal's pay from fifty dollars to twenty-five dollars a month and dismiss attorney Calhoun. In September, they solved the problem temporarily by issuing town script, which merchants could redeem for cash at a later time, and giving citizens to whom the government owed money tax relief.<sup>7</sup>

The first year also brought about personnel problems, arising partly from financial difficulties and also probably from the conflict citizens experienced between taking care of personal business and fulfilling the responsibilities of office. On separate occasions the council fined members for absences and asked one member to attend meetings or resign his position.<sup>8</sup> In the course of the year, William Collins and T.S. Brown resigned from the council, Baker resigned as marshal, and Yates stepped down as mayor. To compensate for the resignations, John

---

<sup>6</sup> Minutes, January 19, 1885.

<sup>7</sup> Minutes, Jan-June 1885

<sup>8</sup> Minutes, June-October 1885.

Mooney was elected to fill the marshal's term, and the council appointed McLendon to finish Yates' term while Yates took McLendon's place on the council.<sup>9</sup>

Even with the problems and personnel changes the new government managed to organize itself and conduct meaningful business. The men structured the council into three standing committees with three members each. These were Commerce, Charity, and Rules and Ordinances. Each of the members served on two committees. Business conducted the first year pertained to all the committees and reflected the initial stages of the lengthy development and evolution of the political system. Council members named streets and organized their cleaning and repair by residents. They also built a jail, and arranged for the marshal to take a Mrs. Greathinse, a "lunatic," to see Judge Mitchell in Tampa about her confinement. They raised the licensing fees for circuses, theatrical and minstrel shows, and for selling beef, and made it illegal to shoot off fireworks within twenty feet of a building. The members also made the first attempt to solve a problem that would take the time of every council for the next five years--whether or not to let hogs run free in the streets, which they attempted to stop by imposing a fifty cent fine per head per errant pig.<sup>10</sup>

In January 1886, Plant City held its second election. Voters made J.R. Edmonson mayor and returned Moody and Spier to the marshal and clerk positions. New alderman included Pemberton, Strickland and Beaty.<sup>11</sup> During their term, the council added a Street Committee to the three previously organized and changed the marshal's pay to include half of the fines levied

---

<sup>9</sup> Minutes, October 8, 1885, November 21, 1885, December 8, 1885.

<sup>10</sup> Minutes, September 12, 1885.

<sup>11</sup> Minutes, January 20, 1886.

in a month in addition to his twenty-five dollar salary. They levied taxes in July and set August 1, as the deadline for payment. The council also paid for a diagram of the town's railroad and telegraph lines and granted the Florida Railway and Navigation Company the right to run a single track and necessary sidetracks on Ingraham Street.<sup>12</sup>

While much of the government's business reflected the growth and progress of Plant City's development, other areas reflected the weakness of the council's authority and the difficult and often slow transition of culturally rural and agricultural people to the realities and necessities of an evolving urban environment. Ordinances to keep hogs from running in the streets within the town limits were met with hostility and eventually ended in failure. Boys had to be threatened with a \$20 to \$200 fine to keep them from shooting slingshots on the town's streets. When the reelected Edmonson and the new 1887 aldermen took office in January, they had to create an ordinance that fined people \$10 to \$100 for making their own streets or alleys without council permission.<sup>13</sup>

After two years the city government was loosely in control of a town in which hogs and chickens still roamed the dirt streets in front of wooden storefronts and houses, residents milked cows in the backyard, and groves, fields and pastures still occupied parts of the center of town.<sup>14</sup> The acceptance of governmental authority, however, was soon to be greatly accelerated when the town came under the shadow of Yellow fever.

---

<sup>12</sup> Minutes, January 20, 1886 - December 16, 1886. The right of way given to the Florida, Railway and Navigation Company was eventually transferred to the Florida Central and Peninsular, which completed the line in late 1889. Later the line became the Seaboard Air Line.

<sup>13</sup> Minutes, January 20, 1896- March 3, 1887. Minutes, July 4, 1889, September 22, 1890, June 1, 1891, September 7, 1891.

<sup>14</sup> This description of the town is reasonable accurate according to the early city maps as well as the types of topics addressed in various meetings about livestock, street work etc.

The Florida Yellow fever epidemic of 1887-1888, which began in Key West and spread to Manatee, Tampa, Plant City, and eventually, Jacksonville, killed hundreds of people, crippled the state and local economies, and damaged the image the state was trying to project as a healthy place to live. It also represented the first major challenge for the Plant City government, taxing its resources, stretching its administrative skills, and in the process solidifying its authority for years to come.

When news of the disease in Key West traveled up the peninsula, people began to take action. Although no one at that time knew where the fever came from, past epidemics in Florida and elsewhere told of its capacity to spread rapidly with deadly consequences. On May 27, 1887, the Plant City council passed two resolutions. One made Dr. Richard M. Wells, town physician, and the other instituted a quarantine forbidding people from Key West, or any other affected place, from entering the town. Armed volunteers wearing yellow armbands patrolled the roads and railroads leading into town.<sup>15</sup> By October the situation became more dangerous as the epidemic spread to Tampa and terrified residents fled the city. On October 7, the council called a special session to consider imposing a quarantine against Tampa. Only sixty-three dollars was available for the project, but the mayor imposed it anyway, charging the marshal with the responsibility for keeping residents from visiting the infected city and imposing a dollar fine, plus court costs, for a violation.<sup>16</sup> The meeting on October 31, made further attempt to keep the sickness from the town by allocating seventy-five dollars toward moving the quarantine station and line to a point west of the city between ranges twenty and twenty-one. The council ordered

---

<sup>15</sup> Minutes, May 27, 1887; Bruton and Bailey, 97.

<sup>16</sup> Minutes, Oct 7, 1887; Bruton and Bailey, 97.

handbills struck and displayed and a notice in the paper. All prevention efforts, however, fell short as the disease claimed victims in November.<sup>17</sup> Now the council had to deal with fighting the fever itself as well as maintaining the quarantine.

On November 14, 1887, the mayor issued an order to have one of the victims bedding burned and the room in which he died fumigated. As 1888 began, the fever worsened. In the January election Cone, Strickland, and Merrin joined the council, and Edmonson was retained for a third term as mayor. In an attempt to stop the spread of the disease, the council created a sanitation committee, ordered the Tropical Hotel and the houses of R.B Mclendon and William Collins fumigated and the marshal to clean up the town.<sup>18</sup> By March matters had deteriorated further. The council ordered Dr. Wells to go before the Hillsborough County Board of Health to get aid and assistance to improve the town's sanitary condition, and a general order was given for people to scrub, clean and fumigate houses. Nothing, however, halted the fever.

At the April 17, 1888 council meeting, the situation appeared dire. Several town residents were sick including Town Physician Dr. Wells. People were forbidden to visit the sick without permission. The council appointed Dr. John Douglass to take the place of Dr. Wells and told him to do anything he thought necessary for the good of the town.<sup>19</sup> By November the disease had finally run its course, and at the meeting on the 20th the council made arrangements to open the town. Refugees could return to their homes and anyone could come in except from infected

---

<sup>17</sup> Minutes, October, 31, 1887, November 14, 1887.

<sup>18</sup> Minutes, November 14, 1887- January 31, 1888.

<sup>19</sup> Minutes, April 17, 1888.

places.<sup>20</sup> In early 1889, the *Courier* wrote a report, signed by all the aldermen, stating that the town was free of fever. The report was published in the *Jacksonville Times Union*, the *Savannah Morning News*, and the *Plant City South Florida Courier*.<sup>21</sup>

The fever had had a devastating effect on the town. Scores had been sick. At least twenty-two people had died, and commerce and growth had come to a halt.<sup>22</sup> The crisis however, had brought the community together through shared hardship and loss. As for the town government, it had attained legitimacy. No longer did Plant City citizens adhere to the idea that the government is best that governs least. People looked to their local leaders for protection and guidance, and the government had met the challenge to the best of its ability. When the 1889 council and their selection as mayor, W.F. Burts, took office in January, they began their service in a stronger position of authority as Plant City returned to its normal business.<sup>23</sup>

For the next four years, leading up to the town's first rechartering in 1893, the government's business consisted of meeting the everyday needs of a growing community. In 1889 the council divided the alderman's terms into one or two years and drew ballots to determine who would serve what length of time.<sup>24</sup> The council also added the position of scavenger to the city payroll to deal with the sanitation issues generated by a growing population and their outdoor plumbing. The scavenger's job was to clean out and disinfect the privies within the town limits. The new charter in 1893 formalized the responsibilities of both property owner

---

<sup>20</sup> Minutes, November 20, 1888.

<sup>21</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 99.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>23</sup> After 1889, the town minutes show little indication that citizens were ignoring the council's authority, like building their own streets etc as was indicated before.

<sup>24</sup> Minutes, January 23, 1889.

and scavenger, setting strict specifications for privy construction and the rules and regularity of the service.<sup>25</sup>

Other considerations of the council fell into three basic categories: business, regulation of the building and maintenance of infrastructure, and the passing of ordinances to control the behavior of citizens. Major council actions concerning business included granting the Florida Central and Peninsular Railroad the land to build a depot and warehouse on Reynolds Street and giving a five-year tax exemption to the ElGeaoc Cigar Factory. In terms of infrastructure, the city constructed many wooden sidewalks, reroofed the jail, dug ditches to remove stagnate water, and repaired holes and cut the weeds that grew in the streets.<sup>26</sup>

At this point in its development Plant City had some of the qualities Goldfield identifies in governments in the southern city but not all. Many of its early leaders were from or had connections to families that had been in the region before the town was founded. But, because the area had been so remote and its agriculture so different from the cotton or tobacco growing states, they were not part of a planter elite protecting an established local hierarchy based on a traditional form of agriculture with which they all had an interest. Many were up and coming businessmen with mercantile and agricultural investments from other parts of Florida or adjoining southern states who had moved to prosper with the country.<sup>27</sup> They promoted and gave

---

<sup>25</sup> Minutes, July 4, 1889, July 6, 1891. Abe Seckinger, the first town scavenger, received \$3.50 a month to clean out and disinfect the privies within the town limits. By 1891 the job paid \$8.00, and people had to do their own disinfecting.

<sup>26</sup> Minutes, July 4, 1889, September 22, 1890, June 1, 1891, September 7, 1891.

<sup>27</sup> Hillsborough was cattle country with very little acreage in staple crop production, and the citrus industry was just getting started. There were families that had been engaged in this production for a long time but very few. Collins, Yates, Spier, and Wells all had connections to established families. However, none of them could be planters. Most of the important families in the county had their primary interests in Tampa.

advantages to commercial and agricultural enterprises, but because of their experience with yellow fever, they were not indifferent to promoting measures that affected the public's health and welfare. However, maintaining this balance would grow more difficult as the town entered into three decades of rapid growth and gained for the first time a biracial population.

Between 1900 and 1910 southern cities experienced their fastest growth until after the Second World War.<sup>28</sup> Plant City's population doubled, moving from roughly 350 to 720 with the number of black residents growing from 29 to 115.<sup>29</sup> The era brought not only permanent residents but also a rotating population of transient workers, who added a new more urban face to the once quiet agricultural village.<sup>30</sup> The influx brought more social problems including vandalism and drunkenness. For the first time, the council hired a night watchman to patrol the streets and encouraged the railroad companies to hire their own men to watch their property. Of the thirty-two crimes deemed serious enough to be recorded in the town minutes from 1891-1893, over half were for being drunk and disorderly or fighting on the streets.<sup>31</sup> Citizens, involved in civic organizations including the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the council fought these problems by attempting to make it illegal to sell alcohol inside the incorporated boundaries on December 5, 1892, and creating ordinances against vagrancy, and the defacing and destruction of school property.

---

<sup>28</sup> Blaine A. Brownell, "The Urban South Comes of Age," in *The City in Southern History: The Growth of the Urban Civilization in the South*, Blaine A. Brownell and David Goldfield, ed. (Port Washington New York: Kennikat Press, 1977), 124

<sup>29</sup> United States Federal Census, Florida, 1900, OCPL.

<sup>30</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 110.

<sup>31</sup> Plant City Minutes Book: Record of crimes is found on the last pages of the 1885-1893 book found in the courthouse vault.

Vagrancy laws were being instituted throughout the South at this time in response to a rising transient population, much of which was black.<sup>32</sup> These people were rural migrants of both races forced off the land from the era's declining agricultural economy, brought on by declining commodity prices and crop destruction from the boll weevil. Men moved throughout the South looking for work trying to escape the grinding cycle of poverty associated with sharecropping and the region's extractive industries only to find themselves, in some cases, arrested and sentenced to convict labor to pay their fines. An old story and what the vagrancy laws were intended to produce.<sup>33</sup>

By 1893 Plant City had outgrown its original charter and council members spent the summer writing a new one and applying to the state legislature for acceptance at the next session. The new charter's main purposes were to organize the structure of government better by separating and clarifying the powers and duties of officials and granting the government authority to issue bonds to finance a new school building.<sup>34</sup> The town ran under this form with a few minor changes until 1911 when it needed to be rechartered again.

The first two decades of the twentieth century brought remarkable changes to Plant City. During the time period, the population increased from 349 with 29 black residents in 1890 to almost 2,500 with nearly 1,000 black residents in 1910. Before 1895, it was the model of the typical southern town, an extension of the hinterland providing merchandise, professional services, and marketing and shipping for farmers producing citrus, truck crops, and cattle.

---

<sup>32</sup> Minutes, December 5, 1892-May 1, 1893; Ayers, *The Promise*, 154.

<sup>33</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 75-78, 105.

<sup>34</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 202.

However, the Big Freeze of 1895 wiped out the area's citrus production forcing a reconfiguration of the region's agricultural economy. For Plant City the disaster fostered a diversification of its economic base allowing it to grow beyond the provincial trading village that marked so many railroad towns throughout the South. The event opened the door for its famous strawberry production and the industries that serviced and supported it. In addition, this seventeen year period saw the growth of a small but vibrant manufacturing sector including the Warnell Mill, which opened in 1898; the Roux Mill established five years later; the Composite Brick Co. founded in 1906, and the Plant City Foundry, which opened in 1908. Mining of pebble phosphate also began near the town in the same year, adding another set of workers and their families who lived or traded in Plant City.<sup>35</sup>

As the town's economy and population grew and diversified, the town government rose to meet the new challenges. From 1893-1910 Plant City had only four mayors. Two of them, Dr. Olin S. Wright, who served from 1893 to 1896 and again from 1899 to 1901, and George B Wells, who was in office from 1902 to 1911, held these posts thirteen of the seventeen years.<sup>36</sup> Wright and Wells were mayors during the two major disasters affecting the town during the period, the Great Freeze of 1895 and the town fires of 1907. However, aside from these two events, life in Plant City was generally uneventful, and the government's business was mundane, dealing primarily with providing services and regulation to the community's business and social life. Council business, carried on during and after the 1893 rechartering, included finding and purchasing land for a new cemetery site and the continual work of building and rebuilding

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 166-168.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 290.

sidewalks, and grading, paving and cleaning streets. In 1898 the government arranged for Small Pox vaccinations to be given, and a year later new oil burning street lamps were installed.<sup>37</sup> The biggest projects, however, were the construction of four additional schoolrooms for \$3,700, cleared by the School Board of Trustees, and the construction of the municipal waterworks, sewer system, and the paving of the town's first brick streets, paid for by the first improvement bond election in 1902.<sup>38</sup>

All these projects and others that were to follow were in keeping with the South's version of Progressivism, which tended toward reforms promoting governmental efficiency, economic development, and a greater measure of social control.<sup>39</sup> Under Governors Napoleon Broward and his successors Albert Gilchrest and Park Trammell, Florida gained compulsory education, state assistance in funding schools, and increased standards and pay for teachers. The state also reformed the prison system, began regulating child labor, created equitable apportionment in the legislature, and began draining the everglades to enhance development.<sup>40</sup>

By 1907 Plant City was a town in transition. What had once been a village along the tracks was growing into a stable municipality. It had a thriving agricultural economy in strawberries, truck and citrus crops along with a growing manufacturing sector anchored by the Warnell Mill, which primarily produced vegetable crates and baskets. The town boasted several brick streets and buildings, several wooden and paved sidewalks, and electric, water, and phone

---

<sup>37</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, 23 October 1898, 1 January 1899.

<sup>38</sup> Bruton: 108; *Tampa Tribune*, 5 June 1903.

<sup>39</sup> Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983), xvi.

<sup>40</sup> Gannon, *Florida: A Short History*, 67-70.

service among other amenities for those who could afford them.<sup>41</sup> It also retained, however, several of its original wooden buildings and as yet had not developed any organized method for fighting fire. On July 4 when a fire erupted that destroyed several buildings including the one used as the town hall, the council went into action. In special sessions held on July 5 and 9, members created an ordinance for consideration concerning fire limits and building standards with penalties for violations. In addition, the council solicited and collected funds for the organization of a fire department. The city purchased water pumps, pipe, and two fire carts. Captain Rudy Mehaffey, a daytime lineman and night operator for the telephone company, organized the volunteer company. The company's two carts were kept at livery on opposite sides of town. When a fire broke out, people called the telephone operator who called the electric light plant where a set of whistle signals informed the volunteers of the fire's location.<sup>42</sup>

On October 15, a fire broke out on the town's south side putting the new department to the test. Because of the wind, the fire spread rapidly destroying two complete business blocks including fourteen businesses, the jail, and five houses.<sup>43</sup> The fire department, whose fire fighting strategy was primarily to slow and stop fires from spreading, saved some buildings and limited the fire's spread. Still the fires were devastating. The *Tampa Tribune* estimated the monetary damage of the October fire at over \$60,000. Included in the destruction were all the early city hall records as well as all the back issues of the *Plant City Courier*, whose building burned in the July fire. While the fires were costly to the town and all the residents who lost

---

<sup>41</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 124.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 160.

property, they also provided the opportunity for urban renewal. Many of the buildings burned were rebuilt with brick from the Plant City Granite Brick Company established the previous year. Despite these obstacles, the town continued to grow, increasing in population from 2,000 in 1905 to 2,500 in 1910 and increasing its assessed valuation from \$133,000 to \$321,590.<sup>44</sup> Politically the town was growing and maturing as well.

Like most southern towns, Plant City's electorate was solidly Democratic. The town went for William Jennings Bryan and free silver in both 1896 and 1900 and merited a whistle stop and five-minute speech during the 1900 campaign.<sup>45</sup> During election seasons, city, county, and state candidates came to give speeches at the town's well-attended political picnics. Even Republican views were heard. The Republican nominee for the Board of Public Instruction spoke at an August 1900 event.<sup>46</sup> And the Honorable E.R. Grunby of Tampa talked about politics from the Republican perspective at the Atlantic Coast Line platform meeting in June 1904.<sup>47</sup> Plant City's local elections were now more complex and competitive with spirited campaigns and rumors that Tammany Hall machine politics now dominated after the council selected attorney George Wells over businessman Wesley Herring for mayor in 1903.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 160,167.

<sup>45</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, 11 November 1896, 22 February 1900. There is no indication that Plant City voters and politicians had strong ties to the Farmers Alliance movement in the 1890s. There was an Alliance store in town and the relationship seems to be like that of many Florida towns more of an economic relationship.

<sup>46</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, 9 August 1900. The Tribune writer stated that even though the people listened, they would never support a Republican.

<sup>47</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, 29 June 1904.

<sup>48</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, 31 October 1903. The idea that the attorney Wells might have been better connected within the Democratic Party would fit with Edward Ayers suggestion that lawyers were in a position to have multiple contacts in the party because of their work.

At the end of the decade, growth again forced a rechartering in Plant City, and in Hillsborough County it was mandating bigger changes. The county's population had grown to 78,374 by 1910 entitling it to seven representatives in Tallahassee. The law, however, limited it to three. For this and other reasons, both eastern Hillsborough and the Pinellas peninsula fought hard to separate from the power and influence of Tampa. Citizens became enthusiastic about the possibility of the county being split into three different counties including "Plant County" with Plant City as its county seat. In the end, only Pinellas succeeded in becoming a new county.<sup>49</sup>

Although county division failed in eastern Hillsborough, writing and enacting the new charter in Plant City was successful. The 1911 charter, approved by the state legislature, changed the corporate name from Town of Plant City to City of Plant City. It again restructured some official duties, including making the City Clerk the Treasurer and Tax Collector even though the town marshal would continue to collect the money. The new municipality could own, maintain and operate public utilities, including waterworks, electric plants, and sewer systems. It was also authorized to raise funds for street paving and repair through taxation, bonds, or assessment. Before bond issues could be voted on, affected property owners had to be consulted and give their approval. Then the issue had to be approved by a two thirds majority of registered voters who owned property within the city.<sup>50</sup> For the first time the new charter gave the city the ability to issue refunding bonds to pay for maturing bonds. In addition, it gave more power to the city to

---

<sup>49</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 203-205.

<sup>50</sup> The fact that the new charter required government to get citizens consent is an example of southern values toward limited government.

regulate liquor sales and certain city activities, including amusements, exhibitions, shows, parades etc.<sup>51</sup>

Changes made to the city charter in 1911 carried the city forward for the next sixteen years. In that time the events that affected the world, nation, and Florida had their own effects on Plant City's citizens. Military demand for food in World War One helped farmers, but the loss of the phosphate market in Europe closed mines and put many in the industry out of work. The war also required sacrifice. Citizens supported the effort in many ways including volunteering for the Red Cross and buying Liberty Bonds to help finance the war. The town's young men served in the Armed Forces, some paying the ultimate price, including some members of the Plant City Rifles, who had been called to duty on the Mexican border in June 1916 before moving to the European Theater the following year.<sup>52</sup>

The war's end brought new changes and challenges. A flu epidemic swept the nation in 1919, and a year later, women gained the right to vote. Prohibition was underway, although most of Florida was already dry by local option, the Florida Land Boom, 1920-1926, began and ended and the Ku Klux Klan emerged throughout the South including Florida and Hillsborough County as a social and political force. Along with these events, technological innovations added to social change creating issues with which federal, state, and local governments had to contend.

The years 1911-1927 kept Plant City government busy trying to provide service and protection to its growing population, which increased from 2,481 in 1910 to 6,800 in 1930.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.,185-187.

<sup>53</sup> Growth Chart. Special Collections, University of South Florida, Tampa. Plant City File.

These increases, combined with the advent and growth of the automotive, electronic, and communications industries, created greater demand for roads, electricity, water, and sewage treatment.

In the Progressive Era's spirit of greater efficiency, constructing new roads and repairing and improving old ones became a top priority in the first decades of the twentieth century. Counties and municipalities funded and built most early roads with the state and federal governments becoming more involved as time passed.<sup>54</sup> A \$400,000 bond issue in 1903 created many new roads in Hillsborough County, and by 1913 the cost of maintaining both the new and those previously existing roads had reached nearly one million dollars.<sup>55</sup>

Florida created the State Road Department in 1915 to facilitate construction and paving. Because the department existed, the state was able to take advantage of the first federal money for roads made available through the Bankhead Act of 1916 and later from the Federal Highway Act of 1921.<sup>56</sup> Before 1919, federal aid could only go to principal roads on which the mail would be carried, and states had to raise money to match federal funds. After 1919, almost all roads were eligible. By 1924 the state had 748 miles of paved road and by 1928 it had finished 1,588. The same year the combined total of all state and county roads both improved and unimproved totaled 2,242. Two years later it had jumped to 3,254.<sup>57</sup> Plant City benefited from county, state, and federally funded projects that created farm to market roads, made possible by the passage in

---

<sup>54</sup> Bradley R. Keeler, "Bricks, Bonds, and Boosters: The Good Roads Movement in Central Florida, 1890-1929" (M.A. Thesis, University of Central Florida, 1998), 23, 31.

<sup>55</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, Supplemental Magazine 1914, (Plant City file) SCUSF

<sup>56</sup> Baynard Kendrick, *Florida Trails to Turnpikes 1914-1964* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1964), 15-16; Gannon. 71.

<sup>57</sup> Tebeau, 378.

1916 of the Federal Aid Highway Act. Ninety nine years after President James Monroe had vetoed John C. Calhoun's proposal to build a national system of roads, it allowed the federal government to begin building a national system of highways. Signed into legislation by the southern born president, Woodrow Wilson, it also permitted cities, such as Plant City, to connect with principal cities in the state and nation and eventually become like U.S. 92, part of the federal system. In 1926, major hard surfaced roads crossed in town leading west to Tampa or east to Orlando and points on the east coast, or north to Dade City and eventually Jacksonville or south to Punta Gorda.<sup>58</sup>

In Plant City itself road building and improvement was also a high priority. Various surfacing projects came through the Council. In 1913 it gave the Southern Clay Manufacturing Company a contract to hard surface city streets for a \$1.55 a yard.<sup>59</sup> The following year a bond election raised \$20,000 for brick paving more of the town's main streets and also for waterworks improvement.<sup>60</sup> Contractors estimated 45,000 bricks per block, but fortunately one local business, the Roux Composite Brick Company was capable of producing millions of bricks for city and county projects.<sup>61</sup> Although U.S entry into the war in 1917 temporarily slowed construction, the prosperity of the peace that followed, coupled with the Florida Land Boom, accelerated the state's seemingly unending need for more and better roads. In 1924, Plant City's mayor W.E Lee continued to plead for more money for paving.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Kendrick, 1923 Florida Road Map.

<sup>59</sup> *Plant City Courier*, Special 75th Anniversary Issue 1960, SCUSF.

<sup>60</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 7 July 1914.

<sup>61</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 10 April 1914.

<sup>62</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 9 May 1924.

The automobile's expanded use created more than just infrastructure considerations for local government; cars also required the creation of ordinances to regulate their use. In 1912 Plant City councilmen set the town speed limit at eight miles per hour and mandated that cars travel on the right and pass on the left.<sup>63</sup> During the war years, the Federal Fuel Administration prohibited Sunday driving except for doctors, and later the state began registering and licensing cars and trucks.

The growing population also needed more electricity, water and sewage treatment. The increasing availability and affordability of electric appliances and lighting along with similar advances in indoor plumbing created new issues for consideration for local government. Although the 1911 charter allowed the city to have a municipal electric plant and the council considered the option in February of 1914 and again in 1916, it never went into electricity production and distribution.<sup>64</sup> It did, however, continue to develop and maintain city water and sewer.

Some of the council's considerations concerning water supply included maintaining adequate supply and pressure for city residences, businesses, and the fire department. Pressure at hydrants was an issue in 1911 because fire fighters could use only one hydrant and hose at a time. Improvements to the water works in 1914 and water mains in 1915 eased supply and pressure problems.<sup>65</sup> The city sewer system, which began in 1903, was expanded in 1914 through a bond initiative. Under the supervision of the Board of Public Works, the city built

---

<sup>63</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 6 January 1912.

<sup>64</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 10 February 1914, 10 February 1916.

<sup>65</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 10 March 1911, 10 February 1914, 13 April 1915.

nearly 37,000 linear feet of sewer lines and two septic tanks, which adequately served the city's needs until 1929.<sup>66</sup>

While too numerous to examine in detail, many other serious and not so serious matters confronted Plant City politicians and voters between 1911 and 1927. They provide insight into the town's rural roots and developing urban character. For example, the council voted two to one in 1914 to keep cows outside the city limits. It also considered whether dogs found on the street without a license and a muzzle should be shot.<sup>67</sup> More seriously, members examined the City Board of Health's recommendation that schools, churches, movies and all public meeting places close for flu prevention in 1920.<sup>68</sup> And city politicians and voters alike experienced the political maneuvering and controversy concerning prohibition and women's suffrage, which touched every community in the nation.

In 1914, most Florida counties were dry by local option; however, Monroe, Escambia, and Hillsborough were not. Hillsborough was divided with the eastern sections voting dry and Tampa and the bay area with its large immigrant population carrying the majority and voting wet. Through the organization and support for the temperance movement, Plant City went for local option and made the town dry in late 1914. Nine saloons operating within the city limits closed, but two outside stayed open. The Plant City Law and Order League raised \$3,000 to help enforce the law.<sup>69</sup> The referendum, however, did not pass without controversy and a fight at the ballot box. An editorial in the *Courier* accused the wet proponents of registering blacks to vote

---

<sup>66</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 224.

<sup>67</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 10 February 1914, 7 July 1914.

<sup>68</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 14 February 1916, 30 February 1920.

<sup>69</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 18 December 1914.

against the county ban. On the other side, those previously holding the town's liquor licenses threatened to appeal all the way to the Supreme Court.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, the town stayed dry even though the county remained wet until the advent of Florida's state prohibition laws in 1917.

After Tennessee became the thirty-sixth state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, thereby putting it in the constitution and giving American women the right to vote, Plant City women took to the polls. While the poll tax, instituted with the 1885 Florida constitution, had disenfranchised most black and poor white men from the voting process, the idea of having nearly fifteen million southern women, four million of whom were black, eligible to vote raised fears of a black take over by some southern citizens.<sup>71</sup> In Plant City getting women registered to vote and paying poll taxes separately from their husbands took some time and created some confusion. Even two years later in the 1922 election, the *Courier* was reminding women to carry their own poll tax receipts to the polls not their husbands.<sup>72</sup>

By 1926 Plant City had grown and developed into Hillsborough County's second largest city and politically it represented the dichotomy of function and philosophy taking place in many southern urban areas. Technological advances and the region's rapid growth were changing the economic and social landscape. Southerners wanted political organization and service but within the context of their traditional values, which included maintaining racial separation and hierarchy as well as traditional morality. Concerns over these issues inspired both positive and negative changes. For the first time women, now empowered by the vote, were able to promote

---

<sup>70</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 9 October 1914.

<sup>71</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 1 March 1918.

<sup>72</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 2 June 1922.

traditionally neglected social justice reforms, as manifested in antiracial violence campaigns and a call for improvement in social services. Negatively, the era led to the continued alienation of black citizens from the political process reinforced by the rise of the new Ku Klux Klan, which was active in maintaining traditional southern values by forcing social conformity through intimidation and political action.<sup>73</sup> The Klan openly participated in government, and its popularity was displayed in Plant City with the election of four pro-Klan candidates to the state's Democratic National Committee in 1926.<sup>74</sup>

On the positive side, Plant City moved to improve its government organization by changing to the new city manager city commission form of government from the former mayor city council system. Whereas most aspects of Progressivism had melted away by the 1920s, the movement toward greater government efficiency had not. The commission system, which first appeared in Galveston after the 1901 hurricane, organized municipal government according to business principles making each commissioner both the manager of a city department and a legislator. The movement in Plant City began with the town's Kiwanis Club, which proposed the change and quickly gained the support of the local press, chamber of commerce, and the Plant City Board of Realtors. These groups held a public meeting explaining the system, which was already in place in Tampa and other Florida cities. Enthusiasm from the meeting added to the momentum and led to the formation of a Commission Government Club to study the idea further.

---

<sup>73</sup> Dewey W. Grantham, *The Life and Death of the Solid South: A Political History* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 79.

<sup>74</sup> Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 414-415; Michael H. Mundt, "The Ku Klux Klan's 1926 Assault on the Democratic Party in Hillsborough County, Florida" *Tampa Bay History* (Spring/Summer 1997 ):12-13.

In September that year, voters chose nine members for a Charter Board, whose job it was to write and approve a new charter draft. The board approved the 223 section document on November 27, and put it up for popular vote on December 31. The newspapers, as well as most of the town's prominent citizenry, supported the change, but some, including attorney George.B Wells, had concerns. Wells, who had helped draft the charter, was unhappy about the provision that put the city manager under the control of the commission. He believed it would take away, "any initiative or independence of action at all" from that city official. Concerns aside, the initiative passed by almost three to one giving Plant City its new form of government beginning in 1927.<sup>75</sup>

The years, 1927-1940 marked hard times for the state of Florida, the nation, and the world. The economic bubble created by the Florida Land Boom burst in 1926 sending thousands packing from the state and beginning Florida's long bout with economic depression. Plant City suffered with the rest of the state, but it continued to grow. The population, which had increased 82 percent between 1920 and 1930 going from 3,729 to 6,800, rose another 10 percent and by the end of the decade totaled 7,491.<sup>76</sup>

Plant City's growth and economic situation in the depression era is a story in seeming contradictions. City and factory workers in Tampa and other parts of the county and state were hit hard as the economy slowed and jobs disappeared. Many tried to survive the downturn by returning to the land. Nearly 2,000 acres of land were improved in Hillsborough between 1925 and 1940, and the number of farms increased from around 2,500 to 3,700. During the same

---

<sup>75</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 206-207.

<sup>76</sup> Growth Chart

period, farmland, buildings, and equipment values fell from \$24,977,390 in 1925 to \$15,521,851 in 1940.<sup>77</sup> Despite the drop in land and asset values, farmers kept the county's production levels up. Hillsborough continued as the fourth largest citrus producer in Florida and became the state's number one strawberry producer increasing production from over 5,000,000 quarts annually in 1930 to 7,571,153 in 1940.<sup>78</sup>

As the central marketing and shipping point for strawberry production, Plant City benefited from the increase in farms. At the same time, the slow down in other industries like mining, cigar manufacturing, building and other industries in the town and surrounding region created unemployment and the poverty and problems associated with it. Throughout the depression era, Plant City government struggled to provide services and opportunities for its citizens, taking advantage of its own resources and those provided from the federal government as part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal.

The fiscal restraints from declining tax collections that plagued city, county and state government did not occur instantly as the state's economy fell into decline. In Plant City, the town council had enough money and confidence to purchase a new La France 75 fire truck in 1927, and in 1929 it supported a major expansion of the city's sewer system.<sup>79</sup> By the early 1930s, however, the severe economic situation was affecting city revenues. The council passed an ordinance in January 1931 to allow taxpayers to make installment payments on taxes and

---

<sup>77</sup> Joe Knetsch and Laura Ethridge, "A Brief Outline of the Agricultural History of Hillsborough County: 1880 to 1940," *Tampa Bay History* (May 1982) : 10.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>79</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 224, *Plant City Courier*, 2 March 1927.

liens.<sup>80</sup> County tax collections were also down which had already led to reductions in teachers' pay and a shortening of the school year from eight to seven months.<sup>81</sup> Adding to the problem beyond those who were unemployed was the fact that the wages of those working were also depressed. The hard times affected everyone everywhere, and Plant City citizens like many in the nation hung their hopes on Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal in 1933.

Like communities throughout the nation, Plant City benefited from New Deal programs. Many citizens received direct relief, and many more were helped with jobs from the Works Progress Administration and Civilian Conservation Corporation projects. Hillsborough received nearly 17 million dollars in WPA money in the first five years. Many Plant City men, along with others throughout the state, worked on CCC projects, and the Plant City Commission petitioned the WPA successfully for a number of projects to improve the town and aid the community.<sup>82</sup>

Projects in town included drainage for mosquito prevention, road construction and repair, and the construction of a new armory complex.<sup>83</sup> In addition, the Wilson School and Plant City High School received repairs and additions. The Plant City waterworks gained nearly 3,500 feet of new water lines, repair to existing lines, and new fire hydrants. Other improvements included new bleachers, lights, and a clubhouse at Adelson Field, and the building of a new baseball field

---

<sup>80</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 2 January 1931.

<sup>81</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 194. The Plant City school year was seven months while many places in Hillsborough only had six months. In addition, Plant City teachers were never paid in script as was the case in many areas.

<sup>82</sup> James Francis Tidd, "The Works Progress Administration in Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties, Florida" (M.A. Thesis, Electronic Version, University of South Florida, 1989), 78-79.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

on west Reynolds.<sup>84</sup> WPA money also went into the construction of the State Farmers Market in 1939.

Other commission sponsored WPA programs consisted of a sewing room in which women turned out pillowcases, sheets, obstetric pads, and quilts for the city jail and the Arcadia orphanage.<sup>85</sup> There was also a toy repair group operating out of the Brown Packing Plant, a short lived emergency housekeeping aid program, canning projects, which produced food for Strawberry School lunch programs, and a Toybary, where children could check out toys for a proscribed length of time, on Baker Street.<sup>86</sup> Plant City also supported white-collar WPA workers, who completed a new tax survey of the town.<sup>87</sup> Some programs drew criticism, however, including the Plant City sewing room, which was accused of hiring women who were not WPA qualified workers. Members of the town's black population were evidently overlooked since they pleaded to the commission for WPA programs to help reduce unemployment in their community.<sup>88</sup>

Other concerns for Plant City government during the depression era included enforcing cattle fence laws, issuing six-month health cards to food handlers as required by the State Board of Health, and putting up new speed limit signs at the entry points into town. The city also aided the county in reassessing the property taxes in Plant City's four tax districts, promoted bus transportation to area communities, and many other projects, activities and services too

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 90,93.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 131,145. This chapter is an overview of Plant City government. Questions concerning conditions in Plant City for blacks will be covered in the chapter on the black community.

numerous to mention.<sup>89</sup> All the municipal government's activities worked toward giving citizens service and security and restoring economic stability and prosperity. However, like most places in America, it was not until World War Two that the latter goal was achieved.

The development and role of Plant City government exemplifies the long and difficult process of creating municipal institutions in the frontier environment of New South Florida. The town's early residents were culturally rural people who evolved, along with the town, into more sophisticated urban citizens in a stable municipality of over 7,000 residents within sixty years. The town's governmental structure, which began in 1885, was able to provide service and security and at the same time adjust to the circumstances prosperity and adversity warranted. It did so within the confines of the southern political environment of the time, which included institutionalized racial segregation and Democratic Party dominance. Nevertheless, by 1940 Plant City politicians had gone from arguing about whether hogs should be permitted to run in the streets of downtown to working in partnership with agents of the county, state, and federal government as well as private industry to create a stable and prosperous community for its citizens.

---

<sup>89</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 3 September 1929, 2 January 1931, 10 January 1936.

## CHAPTER 4: SOCIAL LIFE

When Florida became an official territory of the United States on March 4, 1822, its land, towns, and people began the transformation from Spanish and Indian culture to that of the American South and the United States as a whole. Through its territorial years, early statehood, secession, war and reconstruction and into the modern era, the people who migrated to the state attempted to establish a life for themselves and their families. In the larger picture they became Floridians. However, in the regions of the state in which they lived, they became members of smaller communities in the hundreds of towns and cities, which came into existence like Plant City.

Every municipality needs a viable economy and political system, but a community's social fabric is woven of manifold threads connecting its people to the place they live and the people around them. Shared experiences and beliefs give a place its own character and its people a common bond. David Goldfield in *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers* contends that southern urban areas were different from their counterparts in other regions of the country because they were not economically, politically, philosophically or culturally separate from the rural areas from which they developed. The majority of their populations were rural migrants who brought the culture of the countryside to the city. Socially these rural values were remarkably enduring and permeated every aspect of community life. Southern concepts of economic progress and the stress on individualism, self-sufficiency, chivalry, Christian morality, as espoused in evangelical Protestantism, and a system of racial hierarchy shaped the South's social institutions and the way

it did or did not participate in the rest of the country's cultural, social and political movements. According to Goldfield, these attributes often disrupted urban development and social progress. Southern cities tended to have fewer educational and social services and more poverty.<sup>1</sup>

Communities like Plant City developing along the railroad lines pushing into the Florida frontier in the 1880s, reflected the strength of southern rural values on the urbanization process and the character of southern society. Before 1880, southwest Florida was void of any urban culture. Tampa had less than 500 inhabitants, and the rest of Hillsborough County was sparsely populated with scattered farms and a few trading villages. When Plant City was founded, its first residents were the rural people from its own surrounding area. However, people from other southern states, primarily Georgia, Alabama and the Carolinas immediately joined them. These people were from a variety of southern environments and moved into a community that was virtually void of urban economic, political and social tradition. Yet, over time many of the characteristics broadly associated with the urban South became part of the social institutions and traditions they established and developed.

Many socializing influences provide shared experiences that contribute to a community's culture and character. Schools are a primary socializing institution, and as with many towns emerging on the frontier, Plant City's schools reflected the evolution of the town and region. Before the town was platted in 1883, there were a few schools in nearby towns like the Cork Academy and the Oaklawn School. Many people living in rural areas, however, taught their

---

<sup>1</sup> Goldfield, 81-132.

children at home.<sup>2</sup> The first schools operating in Plant City after incorporation were private and held in homes. The first public school was Hillsborough County School 67, which opened in 1885 in a two room building on the corner of Thomas and Mahoney streets and serviced over sixty students.<sup>3</sup>

As the area developed, the smaller villages and farming enclaves surrounding Plant City established country schools nearby. As Plant City's hinterland became the center of strawberry production in Florida, these schools became known as Strawberry Schools since they operated according to the berry production calendar. That meant they had their break in the winter instead of summer so the children could help their parents harvest the crop. These schools, an integral part of the greater Plant City community, served over 4,000 children in grades one through twelve in twenty-two buildings in 1946. These schools, segregated by race, were often poorly attended and had in many cases inferior supplies and less qualified teachers. Strawberry schools for blacks were the worst. They received the least funding and offered as little as four months of school per year instead of the standard seven for white children until the 1920s. The schools were eventually phased out and discontinued in 1956 under pressure from school reformers but to the anger of many farmers and residents in eastern Hillsborough.<sup>4</sup>

Inside the town limits, children continued to attend the original two-room school opened in 1885 because there was no money for a new one. Funding for a new brick school finally

---

<sup>2</sup> "Clearwater Woman Recalls Early History of Old Cork." *Tampa Tribune* [undated] article found in the Hampton Dunn Collection, SCUSF.

<sup>3</sup> David Elmer Bailey, "A Study of Hillsborough County's Legends and Folklore, with Implications for the Curriculum" (M.A. Thesis, University of Florida, 1949), 192; Robinson, 69; Bruton and Bailey, 270.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen D. Andrews, "Brass hats and Baby Fingers: The Battle Over Rural Education," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 75 (Winter 1997): 307-315; Anthony Iacono, "The Creation and Growth of Hardee County, Florida" (M.A. Thesis, University of Central Florida, 1993), 75.

became available in 1893 when the town's new charter allowed for a bond issue.<sup>5</sup> In 1903 four new rooms needed to be added to the new school because the city's population had nearly doubled from 349 to 720.<sup>6</sup> The same year Plant City graduated its first high school class of four boys in a commencement ceremony held at the Opera House above Herring's Drugstore.<sup>7</sup>

From 1900 to 1910, the town added another 1,761 new residents. By 1909 the new school, even with its additional rooms, was too crowded and a separate two-room high school was built on the new school's south side. Soon it was also overcrowded. Finally, in 1914 Plant City constructed a beautiful new three-story brick school on four acres on Collins Street. The new campus came through the efforts of the School Improvement Association with much support from Plant City women's clubs, the willingness of the taxpayers to accept a five- mill levy, and the passage of a bond issue, that raised \$40,000.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to classroom space, the new facility had science and chemistry labs, a domestic arts room, a darkroom, a manual training room, a lecture/gym room, and an auditorium that seated 1,500.<sup>9</sup> During the 1915 school year all students were in the new building except the first grade, which used the old high school facility. The increased space allowed Plant City's educators to expand the curriculum to include music, art, manual training, and home economics and in 1920 to add an agricultural department.<sup>10</sup>

By 1920, Plant City's population had increased another 50 percent to 3,729. To

---

<sup>5</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 105.

<sup>6</sup> Growth Chart.

<sup>7</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 273.

<sup>8</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, Special Supplemental, 1914, SCUSF (Plant City File); Bruton and Bailey, 171, 275-277.

<sup>9</sup> Special Supplement.

<sup>10</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 278.

accommodate the growing school population, all the elementary grades had been moved back to the old school facilities now known as Central Grammar School. However, growth did not stop and the Florida Land Boom, which brought millions of people to the state between 1920 and 1926, caused the town's population to nearly double to 6,800 by 1930.<sup>11</sup> School expansion became a priority, and in 1923 the Ester D. Burney Elementary School, built on the town's southwest side, became the first of four new grammar schools completed in town. The Stonewall Jackson, William Jennings Bryan, and Woodrow Wilson schools all opened in 1926. Middle school students moved into the old Central Grammar School complex, which became known as the Mary L. Tomlin Junior high, leaving only high school students at the Collins Street campus.<sup>12</sup> Plant City's white schools remained with this configuration through the 1940s.

Plant City did not have a sizable black population until the first decade of the twentieth century. By 1910 a third of town's population of 2,481 was black.<sup>13</sup> There was a black school operating in or near Plant City as early as 1898, but the first black school in town was built between 1909 and 1914 on Florida Street and became known as Midway Academy in 1920. The school covered grades first through eighth; not until 1936 did its classes extend beyond grammar school. Beginning that year and subsequent years a high school grade was added until in 1940 all grades were taught and Plant City Negro High School came into existence. Later in 1949 it was renamed Marshall High School.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Gannon, *Florida*, 77. Growth Chart.

<sup>12</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 277-278.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>14</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, 2 November 1898; Bruton and Bailey, 278.

Plant City education grew in size and sophistication as the city itself evolved from a remote village to the second largest municipality in Hillsborough County. While many innovations and adaptations were developed and adopted, which improved Plant City schools, two in particular added to the quality and diversity of learning.

The first involved the placement of Hillsborough County's Normal School for teacher training at Plant City in 1894.<sup>15</sup> The program was under the direction of Ludwig Buchholz, who had immigrated to Florida from Berlin in 1880. Professor Buchholz tried farming but quickly became involved in Hillsborough County and Florida's education system to which he contributed greatly. He became superintendent of schools and later a professor at Florida Teachers College and the University of Florida.<sup>16</sup> The tuition was free to any county teacher but room and board was not. The county began to rotate the Normal to different locations in 1896 even though Plant City offered low rates and other incentives to keep it in town. It made its way back to town in 1903. When the training was in Plant City, local teachers received much needed training at little expense, thereby benefiting both city and rural schools.<sup>17</sup>

Another unique program, which separated Plant City schools from others in the county, was the creation of Hillsborough's agricultural school within the town. The beginning of the program came in 1920 with 18 students who took classes at the high school. By the end of the decade the program was located on ten acres in the center of town and included a two-room classroom building, library, office, and storerooms. There was also a dairy barn, milk and poultry

---

<sup>15</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, 5 May 1894

<sup>16</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 272.

<sup>17</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 18 March 1903, 9 April 1896.

houses, and a slat-house for fern and flower production. The full-time day program, available to any boy over fourteen, included courses in horticulture, animal husbandry, rural engineering, plant production, and farm management as well as regular high school course work if desired. The program also offered night courses in soil improvement, citrus, disease and insect management, fertilizers, poultry production, dairying, and so forth to area farmers who wanted to improve their operations. Funding for the program came from the county and state and federal government through the Smith Hughes Act of 1917, which provided federal money for agricultural, industrial, and home economics education. Through the years it provided instruction to thousands in Hillsborough County and was still in operation as late as 1984.<sup>18</sup>

Student activities and events held at Plant City schools were central to the community's social life. Students traveled on excursions to places like Picnic Island near Tampa and Double Pen Hammock for special celebrations like Washington's Birthday or to celebrate the end of the year.<sup>19</sup> They also presented plays and some concerts to raise money for the schools. In the 1920s, when school sports became better organized, football and basketball games against rival schools became a centerpiece of town life and were covered consistently in the Courier. Especially important were the football games between the Plant City Planters and their arch rivals the Plant High School Panthers from Tampa.

Plant City students also participated in academic and occupational clubs like debate and the boy's corn and girl's canning clubs. In 1927 the debate team won the district championship and went to the state tournament, and Don Miley, the winner of the state Boy's Corn Club

---

<sup>18</sup> Robinson, 84-85; Bruton and Bailey, 277.

<sup>19</sup> Plant City Courier, 25 February 1897, 8 May 1901.

exhibition, won a trip to the national exhibit in Chicago.<sup>20</sup> High School students also labored on the yearbook, which first came out in 1916.<sup>21</sup> More importantly, attending the town's schools and sharing the experiences of teachers, classes, clubs and events, established personal relationships, which often continued as students ended their education and moved into adult community life.

In many ways Plant City schools reflected the educational trends, accomplishments, and problems seen throughout the South. Progressive Era reforms for public school improvement and better vocational training like those spearheaded by the General Education Board, its affiliate the Southern Education Board and women's clubs across the South undoubtedly affected and improved the town's education system. John D. Rockefeller started and began funding the General Education Board in 1902 to promote education in the United States. It joined forces with the Southern Education Board, which worked with concerned citizens through local officials, to improve and modernize elementary education in the rural South as well as promote high school development, and industrial and agricultural education. The school construction accomplished between 1903 and 1914 and the addition of manual training and home economics to the curriculum are probable examples of the efforts and influence of these groups.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Plant City schools were consistently under funded and overcrowded, and the segregated system created inefficiency and restricted opportunities for black children, giving them inferior facilities and materials, a shorter school year, and an incomplete high school education until

---

<sup>20</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 29 April 1897, 5 March 1903, 1 December 1922, 3 March 1927, 8 November 1932, 20 October 1933.

<sup>21</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 227.

<sup>22</sup> Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 248-253; Ayers, *The Promise*, 419.

1940. In 1920, the total expenditure for Florida's black schools was \$643,701 compared to \$8,262,903 for white schools, and the length of the school term averaged 132 days as compared to 162.<sup>23</sup>

Another primary social institution in Plant City was the church. The two cornerstones of the town's spiritual life were the Methodist and Baptist churches, which were the two most common and popular denominations throughout the South.<sup>24</sup> Both moved from nearby Shiloh in 1885. Plant City's First Baptist began as a congregation in Shiloh in 1866 and had connections to one of the area's earliest churches, the Old Salem Baptist Church, which began around 1850. Even after its move to Plant City, the church maintained its Shiloh name until 1891 when it became the Plant City Baptist Church. Finally, in 1910 it became known as First Baptist. For eleven years the church shared a building with the town's Masonic order. In 1896 a new sanctuary was constructed on the same spot on Collins and Mahoney. Twenty-five years later, the congregation moved to the corner of Collins and Baker where they began building a larger facility still in use today.<sup>25</sup>

When the Methodists moved to town, the congregation, which had started thirty years earlier, built a small church on Haines Street under the direction of Rev. T.J. Phillips. In its early days it was serviced by circuit riding preachers. In 1901 as the membership approached 200, a new larger church was built on the corner of Reynolds and Wheeler. The church expanded again when the Ladies Parsonage Committee Association raised money and bought the lot next door

---

<sup>23</sup> William W. Rogers, "The Paradoxical Twenties," in *The New History of Florida*, Michael Gannon, ed. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), 300.

<sup>24</sup> Ayers, 160.

<sup>25</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 263.

for a parsonage. In 1924 the congregation had grown to nearly 500 and a new complex had to be built, which continued in use until 1946.<sup>26</sup>

The migration to Plant City included more people than those living in the immediate vicinity. As the population grew and became more diverse more spiritual communities developed. Among them was the Presbyterian Church, which began in 1885 under the leadership of Francis W. Merrin, the town's newspaperman from Mississippi. At first the congregation, numbering twenty in all, met every third Sunday at the Methodist Church until they were able to construct a church of their own in 1892 on the corner of Reynolds and Thomas. In 1925 a new more modern sanctuary was built on the same site.<sup>27</sup>

In 1893 Plant City's black citizens founded the Allen Chapel of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The original members met in a one-room house with wooden boxes for seating located on Lake Street between Laura and Alabama near the Roux Mill. In 1905 the congregation moved to a new location on Laura donated by a family in the congregation, the Benbows. Later in 1919 the church purchased a lot on the corner of Laura and Warnell where they built a parsonage in 1923 and a new church in 1925.<sup>28</sup>

By 1910 the town's black population had grown to near 1000 and by 1930 it numbered 2,114. With African Americans came more churches. They included two A.M.E. churches, the Mount Olive and Zion; the Saint Luke Methodist; the Mount Moriah Baptist; the Bethel

---

<sup>26</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 260; Tampa Tribune, 10 September 1903. Before moving to Plant City in 1885, the Methodist church had had both circuit riding preachers and lay ministers to conduct services.

<sup>27</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 266.

<sup>28</sup> *Founders Day Souvenir Booklet*: Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church, February 13, 2000. Booklet in the author's possession.

Missionary Baptist; the Evening Star Church of God; and the Holiness Church.<sup>29</sup> The Holiness movement, which developed out of Methodism, swept the South in both white and black churches. Its doctrine of a second blessing combined with a more experiential worship service and decentralized and open administration, which allowed women and those without formal theological training to preach, caused excitement and consternation throughout the South.<sup>30</sup>

The opening of the Warnell Mill in 1898, the beginning of strawberry production, and the growth of other manufacturing businesses brought an influx of people to Plant City. With them came other denominations including the Seventh Day Adventists, who organized a small church after a camp meeting in 1904, and the Primitive Baptists, who started a church in 1916. Beginning in 1912, mass was given once a month at the home of one of the town's few Catholic families. As more Catholics moved to the region, Plant City and Lakeland became part of the mission work of Father William Fillinger. Identified as the Holy Name Mission, it made all eastern Hillsborough a parish in 1929, and Saint Clement Church was built in Plant City in 1931. In the years following 1940, other denominations established themselves in the community.<sup>31</sup>

As in most small towns, church activities generated much of Plant City's social life. Events revolved around every aspect of church life from fund raising to evangelism. The needs of the various congregations and the fact that churches had buildings that could be used by their members or the public created opportunities for hosting events. Ladies groups from all of the town's denominations held ice cream socials, bake sales, festivals and concerts to raise money

---

<sup>29</sup> The Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, Chadwyck Healy Inc. Microfilm Reel 12. 1925 map, University of Central Florida Library, Orlando, Florida.

<sup>30</sup> Ayers, 399-402.

<sup>31</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 265-67.

for new seats, windows, organs, foreign missions, charity, and other necessities of the church.<sup>32</sup> In addition, churches sponsored meetings of temperance groups like the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League, whose members throughout the country promoted the betterment of their communities through abstinence from alcohol and other social vices. There were also reading circles, vacation bible schools, tent meetings, revivals, and Sunday school class activities. Churches were, in addition, the sites of funerals, weddings, receptions and conferences.<sup>33</sup>

Along with school and church, Plant City had various social clubs and activities citizens participated in. In its earliest years choices were limited and events were intermittent, but as early as 1885, residents enjoyed a varied social life. As people moved from the surrounding communities and other places to the new town, they brought social institutions with them. Not only country churches moved to Plant City, but so did at least one social club, the Shiloh Masonic Lodge, founded in 1875. There was also music, theater, and other forms of recreation, much of which took place at the Yates Opera House and Skating Rink. So many traveling shows came through town that in some of its first business, the town council raised licensing fees on circuses and minstrel shows.<sup>34</sup> While the yellow fever epidemic of 1887 slowed the town's growth, when full recovery came in the following decade, a more expanded social life developed.

---

<sup>32</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, 2 May 1894, 30 November 1898, 17 May 1900, 18 April 1900, 12 November 1904.

<sup>33</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, 2 March 1894, 16 January 1896, 11 February 1897, 24 February 1898, 30 November 1898, 2 August 1899, 19 January 1900, 26 April 1900, 26 June 1901, 24 December 1903, 7 May 1904; *Plant City Courier*, 9 October 1914, 26 October 1915, 6 May 1921, 3 April 1931, 8 November 1932, 12 October 1937.

<sup>34</sup> Official Minutes of Plant City, February 28, 1885, Plant City Courthouse vault.

During the 1890s Plant City continued to grow and establish itself as Hillsborough County's second principal city behind Tampa. The population increased from roughly 350 to 720. Socially, the decade saw the establishment of one woman's club, the Plant City Literary Society, which was part of a growing number of women's clubs throughout the nation where women met socially to improve their knowledge of the arts, music, literature, and history among other subjects. There were also two men's organizations.<sup>35</sup> They included Camp 36 of the Confederate Veterans Association and the Good Templars. There was also an Epworth League to help train young Methodist men and women in their religious life.<sup>36</sup> These organizations were active privately but they also sponsored various community functions. For example, the Literary Society participated in debates with clubs from other towns and put on plays including "Our Folks" and "Play among the Breakers".<sup>37</sup> The confederate veterans sponsored a Fourth of July barbecue.<sup>38</sup> Other events included band and vocal concerts including a brass band contest held in 1893.<sup>39</sup> Educational Lectures and presentations were also given, like the stereoscopic views presentation on Paris, at which people looked at three dimensional pictures through a special viewfinder.<sup>40</sup> Young people got together at chaperoned picnics or parties like the one held at the Tropical Hotel hosted by the young men of Plant City.<sup>41</sup> From time to time citizens attended traveling circuses and minstrel shows that came through town or traveled to events in Tampa like

---

<sup>35</sup> Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc, 1980), 57.

<sup>36</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, 11 November 1897. 5 January 1899.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 November, 1893, 29 December 1893, 12 October 1899.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 June 1899.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 May 1893, 12 October 1894, 21 December 1894, 12 October 1899.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 October 1898.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 December 1893, 16 April 1896.

fairs, operas, or the town's celebration of Queen Victoria's birthday, which was representative of American's interest with European royalty at the time.<sup>42</sup>

The Great Freeze of 1895 and the subsequent collapse of the citrus industry brought many changes to the Florida landscape. At the turn of the twentieth century, Plant City and the surrounding area were in the initial stages of developing what would become the foundation of the region's strawberry industry, and the town, as noted earlier, had also become home to the Warnell Mill. Strawberry farmers and mill workers, and later phosphate miners from the Cornett mines joined the population. Life accelerated as more manufacturing and retail establishments came to town and residents celebrated when they gained their first bank, telephone service, and an electric power company, which also made ice.

The population leapt from 720 to 2,481 by 1910 and with the increase came a plethora of social clubs, activities, and events. New organizations included the Knights of Pythias, the Plant City Boosters Club, Assembly 238 of the American Benevolent Association, the Young People's Literary Society, the Thimble Club, the Plant City Social club, as well as an Odd Fellows Lodge. There was a sewing club, tennis club, Mendelson Music Club, and the Plant City Chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Movement, mentioned earlier, now boasted forty-one active and twenty-one honorary members.<sup>43</sup>

The men and women's clubs in Plant City at this time reflect the Progressive Era's spirit of political, economic, and social improvement and reform. Fraternal organizations, aside from

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 21 December 1894, 22 December 1898, 1 June 1899, 27 November 1899.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 23 May 1900, 2 March 1901, 22 January 1903, 19 March 1903 31 March 1903 8 December 1904; Bruton and Bailey, 171.

helping men develop friendships and business relationships, tended to work toward improving political efficiency and advancing economic activity within the community. Women's clubs, on the other hand, focused on bettering and enriching the lives of local women and children and improving social conditions. For example, the Plant City Chapter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union hosted the state WCTU convention in 1909. During the convention the delegates resolved to pass laws against trafficking in women, to secure enforcement of laws concerning the manufacture and sale of cigarettes and the use of narcotics, and to stop further desecration of the Sabbath.<sup>44</sup>

Goldfield points out that compared to the rest of the country, progressive reforms in the South largely ignored social issues and were instead directed toward improving commerce and governmental efficiency.<sup>45</sup> While this comparison is accurate, reforms did take place and women played a significant role in them. Many of the improvements that came in southern society in the era were the work of both white and black women's clubs and organizations. These groups, whose actions were the precursor of more formal female involvement in political and social issues, were instrumental in passing laws concerning child labor, food and drug inspection and prison reform. They were also active in improving education and the environments of their cities, and agitating for temperance causes, which went far beyond the sale and use of alcohol.<sup>46</sup> In 1916, the Florida Association of Women's Clubs had 138 clubs registered with over 7,000

---

<sup>44</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 171,174. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find the name of this convention.

<sup>45</sup> Goldfield, 101.

<sup>46</sup> Grantham, 202-203.

members.<sup>47</sup> Under the Association's president May Mann Jennings, the wife of Governor William Jennings, Florida women worked for compulsory education, child labor laws, a juvenile court system, stock fence laws, a State Park Service, public libraries, and other causes.<sup>48</sup>

In the first decade of the twentieth century it could be said that there was always something to do in Plant City. Along with plays presented at the public school hall or opera house like The District School and Trip to China Town, there were also regular concerts by the Cornett Band and visiting musicians like the Boys Band and Drum Corp of Georgia, or Groton's Minstrels.<sup>49</sup> The young people got together for chaperoned picnics, parties, banquets, and even camping trips to places like Tampa Bay.<sup>50</sup> During this time the city baseball league was organized and games were played between towns.<sup>51</sup> Citizens also enjoyed special events, such as the Knights of Pythias street parade or the New Year's party at the opera house, and touring shows like the Roda Royal Shows, Moore Family Virginia Exhibition, or the Rabbits Foot Comedy club.<sup>52</sup>

The century's second decade began with promise. However, the beginning of the war in Europe in 1914 followed by America's entry into the fighting in 1917 had its effects on the town. Once the United States joined the Allied cause, the townspeople wanted to help in the war effort. The commencement of hostilities in Europe dried up much of the market for Florida phosphate

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>48</sup> Samuel Proctor, "Prelude to the New Florida, 1877-1919" in *A New History*, 278; Grantham, 383.

<sup>49</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, 1 February 1900, 23 January 1901, 24 January 1900, 26 February 1901, 6 February 1903.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 9 August 1900, 16 February 1901, 19 March 1903, 26 May 1903.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 10 July 1901, 30 July 1903.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 17 January 1901, 22 January 1903, 9 April 1903.

eliminating many jobs in eastern Hillsborough, while war time demands for food increased the region's agricultural output.<sup>53</sup>

Overall the war brought prosperity to Hillsborough County even though some items for daily consumption were scarce and prices were inflated. Agricultural production was up and prices were good. Tampa benefited from the expansion of activity at its port, increases in shipbuilding, and military presence. Still, the country was at war and people wanted to help in the war effort and share in the sacrifice of their countrymen in harm's way. The overall mood of the people was somber, sober and patriotic. Floridians observed "meatless, wheatless, and heatless days, lightless nights, and gasless Sundays. They followed the restrictions on the amounts of pork, beef and sugar that could be used, over purchased war bonds, and did anything else they could for the war effort."<sup>54</sup>

Plant City's social life as the decade wore on reflected the spirit of patriotism, service and seriousness associated with the Great War. Social and service clubs, especially for women, increased while participation in some of the traditional forms of amusement decreased. New clubs for women included the American Women's League, the female extension of the Odd Fellows, the Rebeccas Violet Lodge #21, the Eastern Star Lodge #81, the Chautauqua Reading Special Supplement, 1914; Plant City Courier, 7 July 1914, 6 June 1916, 1 March 1918; In his book *Urban Vigilantes in the New South*, Robert Ingalls talks about the anti-immigrant movements during WW1 on page 212. The United American Mechanics may have been formed

---

<sup>53</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 181; Tebeau, 372-375.

<sup>54</sup> Tebeau, 371.

in response to this movement. Circle, and the Plant City Chapter of the Red Cross.<sup>55</sup> New fraternal organizations included the Plant City War Savings Organization, and the Knights of Maccabee of the World. There were also the insurance related Woodman of the World, the Red Men Wehantra Tribe #56, the Patriotic Order of the Sons of the American Revolution, and the Junior Order of the United American Mechanics, whose mission was to fight against foreign competition and labor pressure from foreign populations.<sup>56</sup> (The latter organization indicated that native-born Americans were becoming less tolerant and more suspicious of immigrants, especially those from central and eastern Europe and nativism was again on the rise.) Other clubs associated with the arts and culture were the Lyric Glee Club, the Plant City Social Club and the Plant City Movie Club among others.<sup>57</sup>

During this decade fewer plays, concerts, and traveling shows were performed in town and those that were, were not as well attended. In an editorial presented in the *Courier*, one writer lamented the poor attendance given to the Fisher Ship Concert and encouraged citizens to support these presentations.<sup>58</sup> Yet, while there were fewer forms of what had been traditional entertainment, new events were added. Some of Plant City's citizens fortunate enough to own a new Victrola gave musical concerts in their homes.<sup>59</sup> In the middle of the decade Plant City's first movie house, the Abbot Theater, opened. There were also some unusual events like the

---

<sup>55</sup> Special Supplemental, 1914; *Plant City Courier*, 20 January 1911, 3 November 1911, 5 April 1912; Bruton and Bailey, 122.

<sup>56</sup> Special Supplement, 1914; *Plant City Courier*, 7 July 1914, 6 June 1916, 1 March 1918; In his book *Urban Vigilantes in the New South*, Robert Ingalls talks about the anti-immigrant movements during WW1 on page 212. The United American Mechanics may have been formed in response to this movement.

<sup>57</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 20 January 1911, 3 November 1911, 5 April 1912, 7 July 1914, 6 June 1916, 1 May 1918.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 March 1911. A selected overview of the decades newspapers show a decline in reporting of social events of this nature.

<sup>59</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 120.

arrival of Jack Williams, the Human Fly, who climbed the wall of one of the downtown's buildings in 1916. The Florida Health Train also visited town as did an automobile-touring group from Indiana and on November 11, 1919 citizens celebrated the one year anniversary of the end of World War I and the nation's first Armistice Day.<sup>60</sup>

As the decade closed and with the war behind them, the people of Plant City like the rest of the nation looked forward to the 1920s. The prosperity that began toward the end of the war in Florida moved into the decade and continued to accelerate. People began pouring into the state. In 1925 nearly 2.5 million people came to the state.<sup>61</sup> Plant City's fortunes also rose as the town nearly doubled its population from 3,729 to 6,800, most of it coming in the first half of the decade.<sup>62</sup>

New arrivals to the community's social registry included the Plant City Women's Club; the 4H club; the Boy Scouts; the Salmagunde Club; the United Daughters of the Confederacy, a group that dedicated itself to the Lost Cause of the American Civil War; the Daughters of the American Revolution, now more patriotic than ever; and various bridge clubs. The most influential group of the decade, however, was the Kiwanis Club formed in 1921.<sup>63</sup>

The Kiwanians' major contribution to the City landscape was two fold. The organization was instrumental in revitalizing interest in civic and business affairs. It helped create the Plant City Chamber of Commerce out of the defunct Board of Trade and worked with the chamber to

---

<sup>60</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 13 April 1915, 7 July 1914, 6 June 1916, 4 January 1918, 7 July 1919.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Gannon. *Florida: A Short History*, 77; Tebeau, 382-385.

<sup>62</sup> Growth Chart.

<sup>63</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 5 February 1924, 1 April 1926, 3 September 1929; Bruton and Bailey, 122.

raise funding for the Hotel Plant, which became a show place for the town and the site of many social events.<sup>64</sup>

With the economy strong more entertainment returned to the city. The new school constructed in 1914 included an auditorium that could accommodate over a thousand people, and many activities were held there. Citizens were able to see and hear a variety of musical shows and theatre including the Gilbert and Sullivan opera the Mikado by the community players of Tampa and the junior class play, the Fascinating Fanny Brown. Some of the musical productions were Variety Music's "Turn to the Right," and "An Evening in Hawaii" presented by the touring Georgia Concert Orchestra. The Plant City Band gave concerts every first and third Sunday.<sup>65</sup> Citizens could also see the latest movies like Behind the Screen with Charlie Chaplin or Body and Soul with Alice Lake at the Abbot Theater.<sup>66</sup> For sports enthusiasts there were basketball and football games at the high school, and Strawberry and City league baseball, where twenty-five cents was the price of admission.<sup>67</sup> Other events, which captivated Plant Citians, included the high wire walkers who transported a woman in a wheelbarrow on a wire stretched across the street in front of Knight's Drug Store in 1922, and the barnstorming Gates Flyers, who gave an exhibition and rides at the Cornett Flying Field five years later.<sup>68</sup>

Unfortunately, the prosperity of the 1920s came to an end in Florida by late 1926. Real estate prices collapsed in the summer and a major hurricane struck Miami in September. Matters

---

<sup>64</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 197-198.

<sup>65</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 5 April 1921, 6 May 1921, 6 March 1923, 3 September 1929.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 April 1921.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 May 1921, 3 September 1929.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 January 1922, 2 March 1927.

were made worse with the Palm Beach hurricane of 1928, the Mediterranean Fruit-Fly infestation of 1929, which reduced the state's citrus crop by nearly eleven million boxes and the Stock Market crash the same year.<sup>69</sup> Like every where in Florida, things were difficult in Plant City. In a town that had experienced 100 percent growth or more every decade since its incorporation, the 1930s saw over 10 percent as the population increased from 6,800 to 7,491.<sup>70</sup> Still while many municipalities lost population, Plant City, whose agricultural economy remained active, was still growing.

By the end of the 1930s, the town had changed dramatically from its humble beginnings. Every facet of its community had grown and become more sophisticated, yet at the same time, its culture was still southern, rural and religious, with all these qualities reflected in the decade's new social organizations. Plant City now had a Junior Chamber of Commerce, a Lions Club, a Business and Professional Woman's Club for the town's female entrepreneurs and professionals and an American Legion Post for its veterans. At the same time, it also had a newly-formed Future Farmers of America and a new Christian group the Order of Beatitudes.<sup>71</sup>

Edward Ayers in *Promise of a New South* explains that southerners have always liked entertainment, especially music, and in general "preferred singing, playing and dancing to reading and writing."<sup>72</sup> Perhaps this is why Plant City had always enjoyed a wide variety of entertainment, and why in spite of the struggling economy, the rise of Fascism in Europe,

---

<sup>69</sup> Gannon, 83-84.

<sup>70</sup> Growth Chart.

<sup>71</sup> *Plant City Courier*, 8 November 1932, 1 March 1932, 2 January 1931, 19 November 1940.

<sup>72</sup> Ayers, 373.

conflict in Asia, and the threat of another war, social activities were still robust in the Depression Era.

During the 1930s a new place for staged entertainment opened called the Capital Theater, and between it, the high school auditorium and the Abbot Theater, citizens could hear and see a variety of movies, concerts, and plays. Some of the more interesting acts and shows presented included the Royal Holland Bell Ringers, the musical comedy Wanted a Wife with music by the Southern Syncopaters, and the drama Confessions of a Nazi Spy.<sup>73</sup> Those interested in sports could watch high school basketball as well as football and amateur boxing, car races, and summer and winter baseball. Citizens could play golf at the Cornett course or join the city Diamond Ball League.<sup>74</sup> People also had the opportunity to see the All State Airplane Tour, the Lewis Murphy Sharp Shooting Act, and an escape artist free himself from a straight jacket while hanging from the roof of the Capital Theater.<sup>75</sup>

The 1930s were also the starting point for two annual traditions one of which still continues today. On Armistice Day for many years a dance, parade and snowball fight were held, and in 1930 the city held its first strawberry festival.<sup>76</sup> Nearly 15,000 people attended the first year, and roughly 55,000 quarts of berries were consumed during the event, netting area farmers approximately \$40,000.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 2 February 1934, 11 December 1934, 9 May 1939.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 1 March 1932, 8 November 1932, 7 February 1933, 9 August 1935, 7 July 1939, 29 March 1940.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 2 January 1931, 7 February 1933, 7 November 1939.

<sup>76</sup> The snow for the snowball fight came in on boxcars.

<sup>77</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 152. Plant City Courier, 8 November 1932.

The festival began with a contest sponsored by the town's Future Farmers of America to select a queen from young women nominated by citizens of Plant City and the surrounding communities. Their names were entered in the contest on forms published in area newspapers. After the queen was selected, she and her court, which consisted of the runner ups, would begin the festivities by leading the festival parade through town to the exposition grounds. During the next three days visitors took in the agricultural exhibits, for which prizes were awarded, entertainment, and food. The festival continued throughout the Great Depression. Although it stopped for a time during World War Two, it was revived in 1947.<sup>78</sup>

In its first fifty-five years, the social institutions and cultural opportunities in Plant City grew and developed in sophistication along with the town. Primary social institutions as well as fraternal organizations were abundant. Unfortunately, like all southern towns, they were also divided by race and sometimes class. However, in terms of the performing arts, Plant City citizens, as a whole, enjoyed a wide variety of cultural opportunities, many provided by traveling showmen and exhibitors. Whether this was related to the relative prosperity of the residents or the town's proximity to Tampa where many of the traveling acts of the era would have stopped is not readily apparent. Regardless, citizens had opportunities that offered a relatively rich cultural experience that seems unexpected in retrospect for a town of its size.

---

<sup>78</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 152-156.

## CHAPTER 5: THE BLACK COMMUNITY

After the Civil War the central and south Florida peninsula was the only frontier area east of the Mississippi River. Many southerners who had lost their livelihood as a result of the Civil War or the economic downturn that followed were attracted to the possibility of starting over in a land that was similar culturally and not so far away geographically. The state also attracted people hoping to find opportunity and a new life from the North and some from other countries. Migration into Florida increased slowly throughout the late 1860s and 1870s but began to increase rapidly in the 1880s as railroad building opened up vast areas of land to settlement. Among the migrants of the latter decades were a generation of black Americans who had grown up outside the institution of slavery and who, for their own reasons and opportunities, chose to move to a new location.

The mobility of this generation of blacks and the new lives they began in Florida and elsewhere must be understood within the context of an increasingly closed and hostile political, economic, and social environment that developed in the South in the decades following the end of Reconstruction. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution and the Civil Rights Act of 1875 had guaranteed freedom, citizenship, voting rights and nondiscrimination to blacks. However, the end of Reconstruction and occupation began the unraveling of black gains in the post-war years.

Beginning in the 1880s, as the horrors of the war began to fade, Americans from both the North and South began distancing themselves mentally and emotionally from the issues of

sectional strife that had caused the war as they moved toward national reconciliation. The Supreme Court decisions on the civil rights cases in 1883 stopped congress from preventing owners of private establishments from discriminating against patrons based on race, ushering in the era of Jim Crow.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the resurrection of Democratic Party dominance in the South required the destruction of political opposition whether it came from black Republicans or the working classes of both races through Populism. Laws eliminating those deemed unworthy of political participation began appearing in the form of literacy and property requirements and poll taxes all of which were designed to eliminate blacks from politics.<sup>2</sup>

In 1896 the Supreme Court upheld Jim Crow segregation laws by declaring that the races could be segregated in public facilities (and, by implication), in schools as long as the facilities and schools were “equal.”<sup>3</sup> By the turn of the twentieth century, national reunion had been achieved by a tacit agreement between North and South. White southerners had made their peace with the Civil War by adopting the myth of “The Lost Cause.” It held that southerners had fought valiantly on the field of war to protect their rights, but they accepted the Union victory as beneficial to national unity. At the same time, they saw Reconstruction as a failure since it had purportedly victimized the region through corruption and by bringing blacks into the political system when they were inferior and degenerative by nature. The North collaborated with the South by agreeing that white southerners knew best how to deal with blacks and, thus, national

---

<sup>1</sup> 789-791. Timothy L. Hall, “Segregation,” in *The Encyclopedia of Civil Rights in America*, vol 3.

<sup>2</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 82-84

<sup>3</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896, in *Major Problems in the History of the American South: Volume II: The New South* Paul D. Escott and David R. Goldfield, ed. (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1990), 176-179.

reconciliation was achieved at the expense of African Americans as southerners were allowed to vitiate the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.<sup>4</sup>

These agreements created an environment that left blacks unprotected from violence and economic exploitation throughout the South. This was also true in Florida. The state led the country in the rate of lynching and blacks were often subjected to forced labor through vagrancy laws and the debt peonage systems in its phosphate mines, and turpentine and lumber camps.<sup>5</sup> Yet, despite the racism and exploitation, thousands of blacks joined whites and foreign immigrants migrating into the state's hinterlands and developing urban centers like Plant City in Hillsborough County.

After 1880 Hillsborough County experienced a large influx of people, including many blacks. Its population grew from 5,814 of whom 915 were African American in 1880 to 180,148 of whom 31,577 were black by 1940. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century alone, the black population in the counties in Florida's Gulf Plain increased 121 percent.<sup>6</sup> Most of the people arriving in Hillsborough moved to Tampa, whose black population continually represented 50 to 60 percent of the county's total.<sup>7</sup> The rest settled in other areas of the county including Plant City. All these people became an integral part of the communities in which they settled, but because of segregation and its marginalizing effect, the story of black communities, which grew in the shadows of the dominant white community, were often left unrecorded. In the

---

<sup>4</sup> David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 128-121.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Gannon, *A Short History*, 86-87; Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed*, 127-166.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Ayers, *The Promise*, 156.

<sup>7</sup> United States Census Bureau, 1880-1940 Census data available from <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census>, Internet; Walter T Howard and Virginia M. Howard. "The Early Years of the NAACP in Tampa, 1915 to 1930" *Tampa Bay History* (Fall/Winter 1994): 41.

case of Plant City, as with many other places, it is a difficult story to tell because of the scant documentary evidence in existence. However, census materials plus some documents that do exist allow some understanding of the development of the town's black community from 1885 to 1940, the end of this study.

Southern urban historians agree that one of the principle factors shaping urban development in the New South was its commitment to a biracial society that maintained white supremacy. David Goldfield points out that this factor undermined the economic progress and development that most civic boosters hoped to achieve. Keeping blacks from fully participating economically and politically in the society stifled overall development. Economically it drove down wages for working people of both races cutting capital accumulation, investment, and consumption. Politically it solidified power and promoted inefficiency. It kept blacks and poorer whites, whose needs from government were often the same, from joining forces to bring about political change and at the same time caused government to spend more of its limited revenue to provide separate public facilities.<sup>8</sup> However, while segregation was a constant source of frustration and humiliation for blacks, it brought some opportunity by providing a place relatively free from white interference where they could develop their own communities, economically and culturally. Plant City's black community reflects both the initiative and inventiveness of its citizens and the oppression of segregation.

When Plant City was incorporated in 1885, the population was approximately 350. The state census for that year shows that there were roughly twenty-nine blacks represented in seven

---

<sup>8</sup> Goldfield, 114-115.

households. The members of these families listed their birthplaces as Georgia and all of those old enough to work are listed as common laborers.<sup>9</sup> At that time the town was principally a trading and shipping point for the region's agricultural production, which consisted primarily of citrus, truck crops, cotton, and cattle.

Many changes, as noted earlier, occurred in Plant City over the next fifteen years. The town weathered the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1887 and the Great Freeze of 1895 and had begun to diversify its agricultural and urban economies. Farmers had begun to grow strawberries, tobacco, cotton, and more truck crops as citrus was replanted after the freeze. It was also fortunate to attract the Warnell Mill, which produced crates, baskets and other wood products when it decided to relocate in 1898.

The 1900 Census indicates that over this fifteen-year period Plant City's black population increased thirty percent to roughly 115 out of a general population numbering 720. There were twenty-eight black households listed, all of which were headed by men except one. The residents' birthplaces included Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Mississippi, Virginia, and Ohio, which marked a change from the people listed in the 1885 census, who were all from Georgia. Black residents with listed occupations in 1900 included three servants living with white families, workers in the turpentine industry, farm and general laborers, a teamster, woodcutter, railroad foreman, a teacher, and a minister.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Florida State Census. 1885, Microfilm, Orange County Public Library, Orlando, Florida. Hereafter referred to as OCPL.

<sup>10</sup> United States Federal Census, Florida 1900, Microfilm, OCPL

At the turn of the century, the black community was growing in population and the first signs of the institutional development of a separate black community had begun. The community had started a school, and in 1893 like-minded individuals established the Allen Chapel of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>11</sup> The church was located on the town's southeast side near Laura Street, which would become the economic and social center of the black community. While there is no indication of any black-owned merchant activity as of 1900, it would appear that Plant City was beginning to draw the attention as a possible place for some blacks throughout Florida and other parts of the South who were struggling to make a living in a declining agricultural economy.

In the following decade Plant City's population grew 244 percent from 720 to 2,481. Nearly 50 percent of the new arrivals were blacks whose population increased from 115 to around 1,000.<sup>12</sup> These people were probably drawn to Plant City solely for economic benefits. In the same ten-year period Tampa's black population doubled from 4,382 to 8,951.<sup>13</sup>

Economic development in and around Plant City in this decade would have made the town an attractive place for relocation. Strawberry farming, which began to expand rapidly after the freeze of 1895, was creating a new industry. A family could make a living on just a few acres of land, and planting, picking, packing and shipping the fruit required a lot of labor creating many jobs. By mid-decade citrus production was coming back and it, along with the area's truck

---

<sup>11</sup> Starting a school was a difficult feat in this era. The state authorized public schools but did not provide funding. Residents would have had to provide a portion or all of the funds for the school themselves. They may possibly have received money from a northern charity or a little from the county although many counties refused to provide money for black schools.

<sup>12</sup> United States Federal Census, Florida, 1910, Microfilm, OCPL. One third of the population of Plant City was black as of 1910.

<sup>13</sup> Howard and Howard, 41.

farming and cattle production, created more economic opportunity. In addition, phosphate mining began just outside Plant City opening another avenue for employment.<sup>14</sup>

Along with the growing agricultural and mining base, new manufacturing businesses located in town. These included the Roux Lumber Company, the Plant City Granite Brick Company, the Plant City Ice and Power Company, the Havana Plant Cigar Factory, and the Plant City Foundry. In addition to these larger firms were many smaller concerns in the manufacturing, retail, construction, and service sectors, all of which created a wide variety of work, some of which would have been available to blacks.<sup>15</sup>

Edward Ayers points out that two of the best places to make a decent living for young black men in the New South were saw mill towns and lumber camps.<sup>16</sup> The Roux Mill was a saw mill producing rough and dressed lumber, and the Warnell Mill, although it produced baskets and crates, had a saw mill component, and both drew lumber from the region's forests. In addition, phosphate companies recruited thousands of blacks to work the Florida, Georgia, and Alabama mines.<sup>17</sup> By 1910, Plant City had the four industries that employed the highest percentages of blacks up until 1949 outside the service sector located within five miles of the town.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 128.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 120,167-168.

<sup>16</sup> Ayers, 151.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.,110.

<sup>18</sup> Stetson Kennedy, *Jim Crow Guide to the United States: The Laws, Customs and Etiquette Governing the Conduct of Nonwhites and Other Minorities as Second Class Citizens* (London: Lawrence & Wishart LTD, 1959), 115. The highest percentage of blacks worked in the following industries in descending order. servants, sawmills, forestry, hotel and lodging, brickyards, and farm labor.

By the end of the decade, Plant City's black immigrants had formed a solid segregated community on the town's southeast side, which included its own business, social, educational and spiritual institutions. The community consisted of approximately 215 households, 33 of which were headed by women, representing all areas of the vocational spectrum.<sup>19</sup> Entrepreneurs had opened restaurants, saloons, a grocery and general store, a drink stand, a fish market, a tailor shop, which altered and made men and women's clothes, and a barbershop.<sup>20</sup> Black professionals included a doctor, nurse, two pastors, two teachers, and an insurance writer. Some of the skilled laborers included carpenters, masons, sawyers, a brakeman, teamsters, dressmakers, and a musician. General laborers included household servants, porters, janitors, waiters, cooks, turpentine, farm, mine, lumber mill and railroad workers.<sup>21</sup>

Plant City's rapid growth during the decade was unfortunately offset by two fires, which destroyed two business blocks on the town's south side in 1907. How much damage out of the reported \$60,000, if any, was done to the black district is unclear. However, it might have been minimal or none as most of the town's business district south of the Atlantic Coast Line track was also on the western side of the Seaboard Air line Track, which branched off the A.C.L track dividing the town's south side in half. The black district was in the southeast section. One account by someone who was a child at the time said that his father told him to go to some woods on the other side of the S.A.L tracks to be safe. More over, there is no mention of damage to the Roux Mill, which bordered the black district on the south side of Laura Street just to the

---

<sup>19</sup> United States Federal Census, Florida 1910, Microfilm, OCPL.

<sup>20</sup> The Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps: Chadwyck Healy Inc. Microfilm Reel 12. 1909 map, University of Central Florida Library, Orlando, Florida.

<sup>21</sup> United States Federal Census, Florida 1910. 1909 Sanborn Map.

east of the S.A.L. track.<sup>22</sup> Thus, it seems likely that black businessmen and property owners may have escaped the decade's worst tragedy leaving them in stable condition for the decade to come.

While the first decade of the twentieth century brought a large influx of blacks into Plant City, the second decade brought very few. While the overall population grew from 2,481 to 3,729, of the 1,248 new residents less than 100 were black. How much migration there was in and out of Plant City's black community is unclear, but the overall net gain was less than 10 percent.<sup>23</sup> Black migration to Tampa also slowed during this decade. While there was a 100 percent increase between 1900 and 1910, there was less than a 30 percent increase between 1910 and 1920.<sup>24</sup>

The slowing of black migration into Plant City, Tampa, and Florida as a whole in these years was, in part, tied to the first wave of the Great Migration. Hundreds of thousands of blacks throughout the South moved to jobs and less discrimination in the cities of the North during World War One.<sup>25</sup> It was probably also connected to the high levels of lynching and racial violence in Florida where ninety black men and women were lynched between 1900 and 1917.<sup>26</sup> In addition to these factors, in Plant City's case, it was also due to the decline in phosphate production brought on with the loss of European markets in 1914.

---

<sup>22</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 159-160. Sanborn Map 1909. The detailed story of the fire written in the Courier was lost with the other back issues of the newspaper by another fire, which destroyed the printing plant a few years later.

<sup>23</sup> United States Federal Census, Florida, 1920, Microfilm, OCPL.

<sup>24</sup> Howard and Howard, 41.

<sup>25</sup> R. Douglas Hurt, Introduction in *African American Life in the Rural South 1900-1950*, R. Douglas Hurt, ed. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> Maxine D. Jones, "The African American Experience in the Twentieth-Century" in *A New History of Florida*, Michael Gannon, ed. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), 379.

The 1920 census records that approximately 296 black households were living in Plant City. Women headed 34 of them and 77 reported owning their residences. For the first time literacy rates are given and 110 people, including 68 women, could not read or write.<sup>27</sup>

While Plant City's black population increased only slightly during the decade, it remained constant, and this seems to have had a maturing effect on the community. This is reflected in a continuation of black businesses, the arrival of more professionals and skilled laborers as well as some new churches. The Sanborn Fire Insurance maps of 1914 and 1919 show a developing black section with Laura Street as its center.

It is possible that during this time the growth of the white community provided more opportunity in the service sector and slightly better pay as the number of blacks available to do this work would have decreased as a percentage of the population. Expansion in agricultural production may also have done this in agriculture. This may have brought more income and investment into the black community, giving rise to the development which occurred at this time. The new professionals who arrived during the decade could have come as a result of a higher level of prosperity, but are more likely to represent the fact that there was a shortage to begin with.

Through the decade Laura was the location of a tailor shop, two restaurants, three groceries, a doctor's office, a poolroom, and a barbershop. There were also two lodge halls, one of which was for the town's black Masons, the Allen Chapel of the A.M.E. church and the Saint

---

<sup>27</sup> United States Federal Census, Florida, 1920.

Luke's Church, which is recorded as Methodist.<sup>28</sup> Other entities listed for blacks on other streets included a boarding house, offices and a restaurant on Union Street, the Mount Olive A.M.E. church on Madison, the Mount Mariah Baptist Church on Florida, and the Bethel Missionary Baptist Church on West Renfro. Another club hall and the black public school are shown on Florida Street as well.<sup>29</sup>

As of 1920, most of the black population continued to work in nonskilled or semiskilled jobs, including general labor on farms, factories, mines, restaurants, hotels, stores, or on the railroad. Others labored as domestic help as servants, maids, cooks or gardeners. However, during this decade Plant City increased its population of skilled black laborers and professionals. There were now two doctors and two nurses, four teachers, and four pastors, twice the number in each field from 1910. Skilled blue collar workers included teamsters, mechanics, blacksmiths, truck drivers, machinists, a fireman, clerks, a painter, and a chauffeur. There were also three men in managerial positions in addition to the black business owners who controlled their own shops, including two men listed as truck farm section heads, and one as a railroad section head.<sup>30</sup>

During the 1920s, over 100,000 blacks migrated to Florida raising the black population from 329,487 in 1920 to 431,828 in 1930.<sup>31</sup> Many of these people were displaced by the overall decline in staple crop agriculture in other regions of the South.<sup>32</sup> Some came to work picking fruit and vegetables. Others probably hoped to find service sector and construction work

---

<sup>28</sup> The Sanborn map records the one lodge hall as a Mason's hall. The other just says lodge hall, so the affiliation is unknown.

<sup>29</sup> The Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1914, 1919.

<sup>30</sup> United States Federal Census, Florida, 1920.

<sup>31</sup> Gannon, *New History of Florida*, 382.

<sup>32</sup> Wendell Holmes Stephenson and E. Merton Coulter, ed., *A History of the South, vol X. The Emergence of the New South 1913-1945* by George Brown Tindall (Louisiana University Press, 1967), 354; Hurt, 14.

associated with the Florida Land Boom and the growing tourism industry. Whatever the hope that spurred the growth, Plant City's black population doubled from approximately 1,056 to 2,114. The overall population increased 82 percent to 6,800 making blacks count for a little over 30 percent of the decade's new residents. Composing the community were 543 households with 117 headed by women. Of the 543 households, 212 owned their homes and 297 including 100 women were listed as illiterate.<sup>33</sup> With the people came significant growth and maturation of the black community, which would not see better times until the end of World War Two.

During the decade there were some notable additions to the black district. They included a movie theater, an auto repair shop, a mortuary, a sanitarium, and a new public school campus, which had six buildings including a cafeteria and, as noted earlier, was called the Midway Academy.<sup>34</sup> Aside from new entrepreneurs and their businesses, the community also drew more skilled laborers and professionals. Occupations listed and not seen among blacks in previous census data included a mortician, a book keeper, two telephone operators, two insurance agents, a dress maker, a music teacher, a contractor, a midwife, a railroad clerk, and a railroad switchman.<sup>35</sup>

The decade also produced three new churches in addition to the Allen Chapel and Mount Olive A.M.E churches, Saint Luke's Methodist, the Bethel Missionary Baptist, and the Mount Mariah Baptist Church. These included another A.M.E church called Zion, the Evening Star

---

<sup>33</sup> United States Federal Census, Florida, 1930, Microfilm, OCPL.

<sup>34</sup> The Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1925.

<sup>35</sup> United States Federal Census, Florida, 1930.

Church of God, and the Holiness Church.<sup>36</sup> The later two were part of splinter groups from the Methodist and Baptist churches that spread in both white and black communities throughout the South.

Even though Plant City's black community appeared to be stable as of 1930, there were already significant problems beginning to ripple through the Florida and national economy, which would suppress growth and undermine prosperity for the next ten years. The end of the Florida Land Boom in 1926, coupled later with two major hurricanes and the Mediterranean fruit fly infestation, began the Great Depression in Florida even before the Stock Market Crash of 1929.

The depression era hit Plant City black residents hard. By 1935 the population had decreased from 2,114 to 1,780 and the number of households had dropped from 543 to 488 with 132 headed by women. The number of homeowners dropped from 212 to 126 and there were approximately 207 people who were unemployed, which probably made the unemployment rate over 30 percent for this sector of the population.<sup>37</sup>

The loss of black population in Plant City was consistent with the rest of the state. While Florida's total black population increased from 431,828 to 514,198 during the 1930s, the black urban population declined from 27.7 to 27.4 percent. It appears likely that many of these people as well as many whites returned to the land as jobs in town declined. During the decade the

---

<sup>36</sup> The Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1925.

<sup>37</sup> Florida State Census, 1935, Microfilm, OCPL. The unemployment figure is an estimate. There were 356 households headed by men. Assuming that in at least half these families both the husband and wife worked we get a working population of around 534. If we then add in all the female heads of houses the number grows to 766. 212 out of 766 gives a 27% rate, but it is very probable that more people worked in these households making the percentage higher.

number of farms in Hillsborough County increased significantly providing more agricultural work for both races.<sup>38</sup> This increase in the number of farms ran counter to the trend in most of the South where the Agricultural Administration Act paid farmers to take land out of production. As a result, landowners released thousands of tenants from the land and used the money to buy machinery, which began transforming southern agriculture from small family farms to larger commercial operations.<sup>39</sup>

While the population and economy shrank, the community remained intact with several businesses surviving. Those listed in the Florida Gazetteer of 1937-38 include, three barbers, a confectioner, a cleaning business, a dressmaker, three grocers, nine lunchrooms or restaurants, a funeral home, a wood dealer, a boarding house, and a physician's office. There were also more in existence like the pool hall, which were not listed in this publication.<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately, detailed records of the 1940 Federal Census for Florida are not available. However, occupations listed in the 1935 state census show some differences from earlier records. All major professions, which had existed in Plant City, were still represented and so were the common skilled and unskilled positions previously listed with the exception of a new pullman porter. However, in this census there are five people working for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and three working for the Civil Works Administration (CWA) showing

---

<sup>38</sup> Joe Knetsch and Laura Ethridge, "A Brief Outline of the Agricultural History of Hillsborough County: 1880-1940", *Sun Land Tribune* (November 1987): 10; William W. Rodgers, "The Great Depression" in *The New History of Florida* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), 305-306; Jones, 382. In his interview with E.J. and Mattie Marshall, According to Knetsch and Ethridge's graph the number of farms increased by around 1,000 from around 2,500 to 3,500. Federal Writers Project author Paul Diggs reports in 1937 that E.J. was overseeing twenty-one black tenants.

<sup>39</sup> Pete Daniel, "Federal Farm Policy and the End of an Agrarian Way of Life" in *Major Problems*, 403-404.

<sup>40</sup> *Florida Gazetteer, 1937-1938*. EHHSA, Plant City, Florida.

that some New Deal Programs were affecting blacks in Plant City by the middle of the decade although the number was miniscule.<sup>41</sup>

The fact that less than one percent of Plant City's black citizens worked in New Deal Programs reflects patterns throughout the South. While the National Recovery Administration had its "color blind" provision and other programs including FERA and the CWA had nondiscrimination wage and employment policies, enforcement was lacking and southern white administrators often ignored them. Many programs were manipulated to provide work for whites first, and when blacks were hired, they were paid less.<sup>42</sup> Evidence of this treatment in Plant City is reflected in the fact that the City Commission petitioned the Works Progress Administration (WPA) successfully for a number of projects in town, yet black leaders were still pleading for programs for their community.<sup>43</sup>

While a general understanding of the growth of Plant City's black community can be seen through this overview of the census and other material from 1885 to 1935, what cannot be understood clearly are the specifics of the community's day to day, spiritual, social, educational, and political life. The newspapers of the era make only passing comments about the black community's affairs unless they had to do with criminal activity. Therefore, the small gossip and news articles that give insight in to the workings of the white community are unavailable. What can be known about these elements of black society has to be based on inferences from data

---

<sup>41</sup> Florida State Census, 1935

<sup>42</sup> Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 111-116.

<sup>43</sup> James Francis Tidd, "The Works Progress Administration in Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties, Florida" (Masters Thesis., Electronic Version University of South Florida, 1989) 131.

available about the greater Plant City community, that for other towns comparable to Plant City, and the few documents about the town's blacks.

Day to day life in and around the town was difficult even under the best conditions. The interviews by WPA writer Paul Diggs with black families living in and around Lakeland and Plant City in the late 1930s reveal the difficult living conditions in the region. Diggs describes the home of E.J and Mattie Marshall, who were the most prosperous of the interviewees. They lived in a two story house with six rooms made from unpainted weatherboard with a mossy shingle roof and dilapidated car shed on the corner of Alabama and Maryland Street in Plant City. This house had electricity, telephone service, and water but no bathtub inside the house. The housing of William and Corneal Jackson, John and Hannah Whitehead, and John and Bessie Derrick were far more typical. Jackson was a phosphate miner who lived in the black quarters of the Southern Phosphate Company between Lakeland and Plant City. The Whiteheads worked as a lawnmower and cook for Lakeland's white families, and the Derricks were tenant farmers just on the outskirts of Plant City. All lived in two or three room houses with no electric or water service. The Whiteheads, who lived in a converted garage with no windows, shared a pump and outhouse with three other families.<sup>44</sup>

All these people were employed and all but Marshall still complained of how difficult it was to make their monthly expenses. Most had children living at home and working to contribute to the family's livelihood or sending money to them from the places they were living and

---

<sup>44</sup> Paul Diggs, Federal Writer's Project. Interview with E.J and Mattie Marshall, William and Corneal Jackson, John and Hannah Whitehead, George and Bessie Derrick. [documents on line] American Memory Project. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/browse/> (July 15, 2005).

working. All were able to accumulate some possessions although Diggs describes each home's furnishings as simple and often old and rundown. Three of the men had used cars, and the woman in each house had a sewing machine. Many of the men had to work odd jobs to supplement their income and every family gardened as much as they could to reduce food expenses. To ease the burdens of day to day life, people shared tools and worked together. When problems went beyond the help of neighbors, people relied on the larger institutions of the community.<sup>45</sup>

The most important social institution in Plant City's black community from 1885 to 1940 was the Church. The A.M.E Allen Chapel, founded in 1893, was the first social organization created. The other major churches including the Mount Olive A.M.E, Saint Luke's Methodist, the Mount Mariah Baptist, and the Bethel Missionary Baptist had all operated for decades before the end of this study in 1940.<sup>46</sup>

Each church gave its congregation a system of support and a community center to use not only for worship but also for other social and political events, like meetings, weddings, and funerals. It also provided, in most cases, a college educated leader to mentor, guide, and counsel individuals or families. In some cases, a pastor operated as a liaison between the black and white communities.<sup>47</sup> The churches also represented the industry, organization, and resourcefulness of

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>46</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1909, 1914, 1919, 1925; United States Census, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930. Florida State Census, 1935.

<sup>47</sup> All the census reports, which give information about levels of education, show ministers as having either graduated from college or having attended a few years. Some individuals listed themselves as preaching elders, and they did not have as much education.

Plant City's blacks as well as their commitment to the development and personal growth of their community.

While the story of every church is unknown, the development and expansion of the A.M.E Allen Chapel is probably representative of many and demonstrates the commitment of this congregation to its church, community and pastor. The church was started in a home on Laura Street in 1893. It soon needed a new location, which was provided in 1905 by one of the families who donated a lot they owned closer to downtown on Laura. Later in 1919 the church collected \$1,000 and bought four lots on the corner of Laura and Warnell. In 1923 the congregation built a parsonage and two years later, after securing a mortgage, a new church. The membership with the help of a sister church then worked to pay the note as soon as possible. The church also received state funding to build a daycare facility, which was furnished and supplied by some of the town's black businessmen. In this case the facility was tied to one of the state's black leaders, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, the founder of the Daytona Literary and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls, who helped with the organization and set up.<sup>48</sup> Bethune later merged her school with the all boys Cookman Institute in Jacksonville in 1923, creating Bethune-Cookman College, which she directed as president until 1943.<sup>49</sup> Dr. Bethune was in a position to help blacks in Florida because she held the highest position of any African American when she became the Director of the Division of Negro Affairs in the WPA's National Youth Administration during the Depression.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church: Founders Day Souvenir Booklet. Booklet in the author's possession.

<sup>49</sup> Jones, 385.

<sup>50</sup> Biles, 78.

These actions of the Allen congregation in conjunction with the business community, the government, and the state leadership demonstrated the independence and self-sufficiency of Plant City's blacks and their ability to utilize the resources at their disposal. This was probably representative of other actions taken to solve problems and improve the community.

Another institution that the black community established was a system of education. A school of some variety was in operation for Plant City's black children as early as 1898. That year the paper announced that the black school had opened with Violet Hall as the teacher.<sup>51</sup> The starting date of late October or early November indicates that this school started a month later than the white schools, probably due to inadequate funding or to allow these children to help with harvesting late season truck crops or putting in the winter strawberry crop. Most likely, both possibilities were at work. In March of 1903 the paper announced that the black school children had gone on a picnic to celebrate the end of the year that suggests the black school term was only four or five months long, which was common for black rural schools where they existed though out the state.<sup>52</sup> These early schools must have operated outside the city limits until sometime between 1909 and 1914 when the first black public school inside the city was built on Florida Street.

The school on Florida Street eventually became the Midway Academy in 1920. It taught first through eighth grade until 1936 when it began adding one high school grade each year until all twelve grades were taught. The upper grades became the Plant City Negro High School, and

---

<sup>51</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, 2 November 1898.

<sup>52</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, 12 March 1903; Anthony Joseph Iacono, "The Creation and Growth of Hardee County, Florida" (M.A. Thesis, University of Central Florida, 1993), 75; William W. Rodgers, "The Great Depression" in *A New History of Florida*, 313.

later, in 1949, Marshall High School. All grades met at the Florida Street site until 1957 when a new Marshall High School was constructed and elementary and junior and senior high students were separated.<sup>53</sup>

Along with the clergy, teachers composed some of the community's most educated citizens. Education levels are unknown until 1935. The census of that year shows that all but one were high school graduates and that a few had Normal School training or some college. The lowest level was the tenth grade.<sup>54</sup> The average pay for black teachers in 1936 was \$495 compared to \$1,039 for that of whites. What teachers credentials and pay were in Plant City's earlier years is unknown, but very likely they would have completed at least the eighth grade and probably high school and after 1893 have passed a teaching exam for the grade levels they would be teaching.<sup>55</sup> Pay inequities similar to those in 1936 are a given.

The church and the school provided common experiences for Plant City's black residents as they did for the white members of the community. In addition to the social interaction of worship services or attending classes, churches and schools provided social events like musical presentations, plays, picnics, and parties.<sup>56</sup> There were also other places to find entertainment as Plant City hosted many traveling shows, exhibits, sporting events, concerts, and movies, but whether blacks could afford or attend these events is unknown. Jim Crow laws throughout the

---

<sup>53</sup> Bruton and Bailey, 278-279.

<sup>54</sup> Florida State Census, 1935.

<sup>55</sup> Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 305. Iacono, 74.

<sup>56</sup> *Tampa Tribune*. 12 March 1903; *Plant City Courier*, 2 March 1927.

South provided separate shows or seating for those blacks who could afford a ticket.<sup>57</sup> By the 1920s, there was a black movie theater, and after prohibition ended there were again black dance halls and saloons. In addition to these types of entertainment and social events, Plant City blacks had at least one fraternal organization after 1914, a chapter of the Masons.<sup>58</sup> There were undoubtedly others but again no documentation confirms it.

While blacks living in and around Plant City had their own businesses, farms, schools, and churches, they had no meaningful voice in politics. The poll tax created by the 1885 state constitution disfranchised most blacks and poor whites and the development of Florida's white primary in 1901 eliminated participation from the only meaningful elections in state.<sup>59</sup> Of all the black families interviewed in Plant City by Federal Writers Project writer Paul Diggs, only one man had been politically active. The man, the aforementioned E.J. Marshall, a former electrician but at the time of the interview an overseer of farm tenants for the Swift Company, had been a long time resident and was a relatively prosperous man. He had lived in Plant City for thirty-seven years and owned his own farmland, a house in town, and a car. When asked about politics, he explained that he had been a steady Republican voter for many years and that he and other blacks had sat at one time on a board of trustees, probably for a school, but said that the whites

---

<sup>57</sup> Theaters and sporting events run by individual business owners could choose whether they wanted to admit blacks or not after the Civil Rights Cases of 1883. Those that wanted to do business with blacks without offending whites undoubtedly created separate entrances and exits, seating, and ticket windows for blacks; Paul Diggs interview with Ed and Ida Gray in 1937 records that these people lived about six miles from Plant City and they used to go into town to dance. They also said a white man brought a machine to show movies out to the blacks on the farms. His interview with George and Bessie Derrick reports that their son George would go to bars in Plant City and also watch baseball.

<sup>58</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1925.

<sup>59</sup> Woodward, 84-85; Grantham, *The Life & Death*, 27-28. The Florida Constitution of 1885 also excluded convicted felons from voting. Since vagrancy laws and lopsided enforcement of other laws often convicted black men of crimes, this was another form of disfranchisement.

had cut them out. He went on to say that he had lost interest in politics and had not voted for a few years, but because of his reputation and relationship with powerful whites, he was still able to make things happen for the black community, using as an example a new playground for the school.<sup>60</sup>

The majority of town's blacks had been legally eliminated from the most important forms of political participation, but intimidation and fear also kept them from encroaching on white power as well. Hillsborough County had seen a good amount of vigilante justice against blacks and foreigners since the turn of the century, and in the 1926 Democratic Primary, candidates supported by the Ku Klux Klan received 55 percent of the vote in Plant City, making the community's attitude toward race quite clear.<sup>61</sup>

Like all southern cities, Plant City developed a vibrant black community next to the greater white community. Within its realm, blacks of every vocational and educational background from other places in Florida, the greater South, and some northern states developed careers and institutions. These, in turn, provided sustenance and a sense of place for their own families and the community at large. Moreover, they accomplished this within the system of legalized segregation, which was designed to deny them social, economic, and political equality and which gave them a lack of full justice and limited chances for mobility.

---

<sup>60</sup> Paul Diggs, E.J. and Mattie Marshal.

<sup>61</sup> Michael H. Mundt. "The Ku Klux Klan's 1926 Assault on the Democratic Party in Hillsborough County, Florida." *Tampa Bay History* (Spring/Summer 1997): 13.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to evaluate David Goldfield's assertions about urban development in the South when applied to Plant City, Florida, as a railroad town developing on the Florida frontier from 1885-1940. Was it, as Goldfield argued, economically, politically, philosophically, and culturally inseparable from the southern rural environment from which it developed? Was it dependent on outside markets and capital? Did it prefer and maintain cultural rural values? Was it committed to the maintenance of a biracial Society, and did these factors impede economic, social, and political development?

Economically, Plant City's origins and subsequent development were tied to outside capital through Henry B. Plant's investment in a Florida railroad, which connected the region to the nation's markets. Throughout the fifty-five years of this study, its economy remained colonial in that it was primarily a shipping and supply center for the agricultural and natural resource production of its hinterland. The difference between it and much of the rest of the South was in the fact that its climate and soils allowed for the production of specialty crops that were perishable like strawberries, citrus, and vegetables. Because citrus could only be produced in a few areas of the country and strawberries and vegetables could be produced in the winter in Florida, the market for these crops remained steady providing the basis for a continual expansion of this sector of the economy even in the Depression. Furthermore, these commodities required special handling, packaging, and shipping which produced a variety of support industries that were fairly complex in terms of communications, energy, and manufacturing. Therefore, while

Plant City's economic mainstay continued to be agriculture, the types of agriculture it was involved in created economic diversification and expansion not the stagnation that plagued other southern towns dependent on a single commodity or resource.

Two other economic entities took the town slightly outside Goldfield's colonial parameters. These included the manufacturing facilities associated with the region's extractive industries. The town's mills produced finished wood products for agriculture and building. These were exported but also used locally as were the bricks produced at the brick plant. While citizens were dependent on outside producers for almost all their finished products, they could look locally for some that were needed for construction and agriculture. In the aggregate, however, Plant City's economy never expanded outside industries that were directly connected to its region. However, its rich resource base provided a variety of avenues for expansion within it.

Politically, the town reflected southern rural philosophy and values. Rural concepts of independence, individual responsibility, and self-sufficiency were reflected in the actions and expectations of municipal government. The town's political leaders, who were consistently drawn from the ranks of the town's merchant and professional classes, concentrated their efforts on economic development and improved governmental efficiency, tasks at which they were reasonable successful. They put very little effort into social programs outside of education for the betterment of individuals within the community with the exception of some actions taken for community health. The town's experience with yellow fever early in its history had given the city an understanding of the role of government in disease prevention and control. City officials arranged for small pox vaccinations, considered measures for flu prevention, and engaged in various drainage projects for mosquito control. However, these were limited and there were no

campaigns to combat problems like hunger, housing, or poverty and no expectation from citizens to do so. Southern tradition dictated that these problems were the responsibility of individuals, families, the church or charity and not the responsibility of government. Even in areas in which the government played a role, its power was often limited which impeded optimum efficiency. For example, Plant City had the authority to issue bonds to raise money for the city's infrastructure, but the city charter continued to put checks on the government's ability to override individual property rights by connecting issuance to the permission of affected property owners. Consequently, the town was constantly behind in its ability to provide streets, sidewalks, sewage treatment, water supply etc at a rate in proportion to its population growth. The building of schools exhibited this same infrastructure lag, which caused continuous overcrowding.

Socially, Plant City mirrored the traditional social conservatism and Christian heritage of the rural South. The town's churches were some of the most important and influential institutions and were a cornerstone of community life. Their leadership and members made up the organizations that promoted community standards like the temperance movement. Its actions drove the campaign for local option, which made the town dry early in its history. Other organizations like the Confederate veterans and the Daughters of the Confederacy reflected the community's ties to southern tradition and heritage and the values and beliefs associated with it. However, within the accepted boundaries of this cultural climate, the town offered a wide variety of clubs and events that provided a wide range of opportunities for social affiliation and personal growth.

Finally, Plant City developed and maintained a strict separation of the races. The town's African American community, as in the rest of the South, was marginalized in every aspect of

life. Economically blacks were limited to conducting business within their own business district and through racism and tradition consigned to the least desirable jobs. Politically, the poll tax and the white primary eliminated their voice from government. In education they were deprived of access to the higher levels of secondary education until 1936, and socially they were denied the dignity of equal access to community events and social organizations. Still, within the confines of segregation, Plant City provided enough opportunity for its black citizens to establish their own economic and social institutions. This provided some opportunity for people to advance economically and professionally, to obtain property, and to assume leadership roles and participate in the institutions of their own community.

In the end, Plant City's development up to 1940 fits the general tenets of Goldfield's thesis and emphasizes his main point. This is that urban development in the South overall, and the problems generally associated with it, were different from those of the rest of the United States because the South itself was different. This does not negate in anyway the ingenuity and resourcefulness of Plant City's citizens in creating and sustaining a municipality out of the wilds of frontier Florida. It also does not imply a predestined framework that will apply to the development of all southern urban centers. For Plant City shows, there are regional differences.

This study has attempted to put a face on this process as it appeared on the local level in Florida up until the dawn of World War Two, knowing that sixty-five years of development have elapsed since then. However, the year 1940 was a natural stopping point because the World War II was another watershed event that began a new era that brought sweeping changes to the South, Florida, and Plant City. This period inaugurated changes that were more profound for the region than those that occurred after the Civil War and are too numerous to include in a project

constrained by the length of a master's thesis. This writer chose to concentrate on Plant City's pre-World War II development realizing that the post-war era offered an equally interesting topic for historical analysis.

These changes began in the depression as New Deal wage policies and government support for unionization began forcing southern industry to comply with minimum pay standards and compete with the federal wage scale paid on WPA projects. This weakened the paternalistic patterns of employment in southern industry and set in motion investment in equipment that began modernizing southern manufacturing.<sup>1</sup> New Deal farm subsidies that paid farmers to take land out of production had similar effects in agriculture. Federal payments made it advantageous for southern landowners to release tenants from the land and forego the traditional labor relationships of sharecropping and invest in machinery and make their operations more commercial.<sup>2</sup> These changes in industry and agriculture displaced thousands of workers by the end of the Depression and helped expose the overall problems of the South's economy. This caused President Roosevelt in 1938 to declare the South the country's number one economic problem and made it the responsibility of the Federal Government to be more proactive in promoting economic growth in the South, which came to fruition with the advent of the war.<sup>3</sup>

During the war years the South's powerful leaders in congress helped funnel billions of federal dollars into the region. New military installations and defense plants provided employment throughout the South breaking the paternalistic patterns of employment that had

---

<sup>1</sup> Gavin Wright, "How New Deal Wage Policy Influenced Southern Industry," in *Major Problems*, 406-410.

<sup>2</sup> Pete Daniel, "Federal Farm Policy and the End of an Agrarian Way of Life," in *Major Problems*, 401-403.

<sup>3</sup> Numan V. Bartley, "The New Deal as a Turning Point," in *Major Problems*, 396.

existed for decades in agriculture and industry. Blacks fled the region in record numbers for defense jobs in the North. However, for those that remained these changes plus the heroic efforts of African Americans on the battlefield and national reflection about the meaning of freedom and equality began fueling the Civil Rights Movement. It would eventually break the back of southern apartheid and finally grant blacks full citizenship in the South.<sup>4</sup>

In Florida the war and post-war years were equally eventful. Federal dollars flooded the state as tens of thousands of soldiers trained at the expanded and improved old and new military installations, especially pilots who learned to fly at one of the state's forty flying fields. Tourist hotels became barracks and their beaches training grounds. Workers came to fill jobs building ships in Tampa and Jacksonville's shipyards. The state's agriculturists produced food for the army that was processed at the many fruit and food processing plants springing up within the state.<sup>5</sup> When the war ended, thousands of the soldiers and their families as well as other Americans came to visit or live in the state setting off the largest period of population and economic growth in Florida's history.

From 1950 to 2000, the state's population grew from 2.5 million to 15 million. The Social Security Act of 1935 and the introduction of company pension plans combined with improvements in medical treatment made it possible for the first time for many Americans to consider retirement as more than just a cessation of work. Florida offered a relatively inexpensive cost of living, a warm climate, and good transportation which brought millions of

---

<sup>4</sup> Morton Sosna, "World War II as a Watershed in Southern History," in *Major Problem*, 458-463.

<sup>5</sup> Gannon, *A Short History*, 101-105; Tebeau, 418.

retirees to the state beginning in the 1940s. This was especially true for retired military personnel who settled near the states military bases with their shopping and recreational facilities and Veterans Administration hospitals.<sup>6</sup>

Continued military spending through the Cold War, the Federal Highway Act of 1956, new techniques in insect control, the invention of affordable air conditioning, the leisure revolution, theme parks, and the new Sunbelt economy have all also contributed to the flood of growth. As before, transportation has made the difference. The highway system has made travel within the state easier than ever, and changed forever the face of Florida's development. Towns bypassed by the system have declined while those with access to it have grown. Everywhere it has promoted urban sprawl, which has decentralized housing, commerce, and industry, causing more Floridians to live now in unincorporated areas than the state's incorporated city centers.<sup>7</sup>

Today, Plant City sits three miles off Interstate 4 and in the year 2000 its population reached 28,300.<sup>8</sup> Gone are the hundreds of small strawberry farms that covered its hinterland in 1940. They have given way like the rest of southern agriculture to large specialized commercial operations, as have citrus and vegetable production. Gone also are the strawberry schools, which were forced to shut down in 1956, and the towns segregated schools, which were finally integrated in 1971. The town's old business district and one of its old rail road depots remain, one full of antique stores and restaurants and the other a museum. The black business district on

---

<sup>6</sup> Gary R. Mormino, "The Big Bang: Tampa Bay, 1950-2000," in *On the Verge: Florida's Megacities in the New Millenium*, Lance delHaven-Smith and Dena Hurst ed., (Tallahassee: Florida Institute of Government at Florida State University, 2000), 30-31.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 21-41.

<sup>8</sup> Demographics, Plant City Chamber of Commerce. Pamphlet in the author's possession.

Laura is gone but the community remains as does the Allen Chapel of the AME church. The State Farmer's Market is still busy, but the strawberry and citrus packing houses have been replaced by over ten food processing plants, the first producing frozen orange juice beginning in 1944.<sup>9</sup>

All these changes in Plant City and many more unlisted are tied into the contemporary history of the South, Florida, Hillsborough County and this town. Plant City is still Hillsborough County's second largest city, but it is no longer what it was in 1940. The processes that brought about this change and how much, if any, of its social, economic and political life still fit into Goldfield's paradigm provide a rich field for further historical inquiry.

---

<sup>9</sup> Industrial and Manufacture Listing, Plant City Chamber of Commerce. Pamphlet in the author's possession; Bruton and Bailey, 221.

## LIST OF REFERENCES

### Archival and Special Collections

#### *Eastern Hillsborough Historical Society Archive*

Florida Gazetteer. 1937-1938. Plant City,. Florida.

#### *Smather's Library, Special Collections, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida*

Plant Investment Company Papers. Box 6. Special Collections. Smather's Library  
Gainesville, Florida.

Diggs, Paul Federal Writers Project. Interviews with Ed and Ida Gray, George and  
Bessie Derrick and E. J. and Mattie Marshall.

#### *Special Collections, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida.*

Florida State Gazetteer and Business Directory. 1886-1887 and 1895-1896.

Polk, R. L. and Company. Florida Gazetteer and Business Directory. 1911 and  
1925.

Special Magazine Summary of Plant City 1914. Plant City File.

Webb's Historical, Industrial, and Biographical Florida. 1885. New York: W.S.  
Webb & Co. 1885.

### Government Documents

#### *City Hall Vault, Plant City, Florida.*

Official Minutes Plant City. Plant City Minutes Book 1885-1893.

*Eastern Hillsborough Historical Society Archive*

Minutes of the Hillsborough County Commission. Dec. 4, 1883. Eastern Hillsborough Historical Society Archives. Plant City, Florida. Microfilm roll 4. 1883-84.

*Orange County Public Library, Orlando, Florida*

Florida State Census, 1885 and 1935

United States Federal Census,.1880-1940.

*Universtiy of South Florida, Tampa, Florida.*

Minutes of the Board of Trustees Internal Improvement Fund of the State of Florida. Vol 1-6. Tallahassee: William M McIntosh Jr. T.B. Hillison, State Printer. 1901 Vol 2 and 3. Florida Documents, University of South Florida, Tampa.

Plessy v. Fergusson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896)  
<http://www.orez.org/oyez/resource/case/307/> (accessed July 6, 2005).

Growth Chart of Hillsborough County cities. Special Collections, Plant City file.

Selected Interviews, Maps, and Pamphlets

Demographics. Plant City Chamber of Commerce Pamphlet.

Descriptive Pamphlet of Hillsborough County: With Numerous Engravings and Maps 1885, Hillsborough County Real Estate Agency New York: The South Publishing Company. Special Collections: University of South Florida, Tampa.

Founders Day Souvenir Booklet: Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church. February 13, 2000.

Industrial and Manufacture Listing. Plant City Chamber of Commerce Pamphlet.

Paul Diggs, Interviews with William and Corneal Jackson, John and Hannah Whitehead, George and Bessie Derrick. American Memory Project.  
<http://lcweb2loc.gov/ammem/browse/>

Plat Map Hillsborough County 1882. Eastern Hillsborough County Historical Society Archives. Plant City, Florida.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps 1909, 1914, 1919, and 1925.

### Newspapers

Plant City Courier.

Plant City Courier Special 75th Anniversary Edition 1960. Eastern Hillsborough County Archives. Plant City, Florida.

Sanford Journal.

Tampa Journal.

Tampa Tribune.

### Secondary Sources

#### Books

Ayers, Edward. *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Southern Crossings: A History of the American South 1877-1906*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Biles, Roger. *The South and the New Deal*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994.

Blair, Karen J. *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914*. New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc, 1980.

- Blight, David W. *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002.
- Bruton, Quintilla Greer and David E. Bailey, Jr. *Plant City: It's Origin and History*. Winston Salem: Hunter Publishing Company, 1984.
- Colburn, David R. *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991.
- Gannon, Michael. *Florida: A Short History*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1993.
- Goldfield, David R. *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region 1607-1980*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982.
- Grantham, Dewey W. *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Life and Death of the Solid South: A Political History*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988.
- Hurt, R. Douglas. *African American Life in the Rural South 1900-1950*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003.
- Ingalls, Robert P. *Urban Vigilantes in the New South: Tampa 1882-1936*. Knoxville University of Tennessee Press, 1986.
- Jahoda, Gloria. *River of the Golden Ibis*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1973.
- Jones, Jacqueline. *The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.
- Kendrick, Baynard. *Florida Trails to Turnpikes 1914-1964*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1964.
- Kennedy, Stetson. *Jim Crow Guide to the United States: The Laws, customs and Etiquette Governing the Conduct of Nonwhites and Other Minorities as Second Class Citizens*. London: Lawrence and Wishart LTD, 1959.
- Mormino, Gary R. and Anthony P. Pizzo. *The Treasure City: Tampa*. Tulsa, Oklahoma. Continental Heritage Press. Inc, 1963.
- \_\_\_\_\_, and George E. Pozetta. *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998.

- Noland, David. *Fifty Feet in Paradise: The Booming of Florida*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1984.
- Pettengill, George W. *The Story of the Florida Railroads, 1834-1903*. Boston: Railway and Locomotive Historical Society Bulletin. No. 86.
- Pizzo, Anthony P. *Tampa Town 1824-1886: Pioneer Village with a Latin Accent*. Miami: Hurricane House Publishers. Inc, 1968.
- Robinson, Ernest L. *History of Hillsborough County: Narrative and Biographical*. Saint Augustine: The Record Company Printers, 1928.
- Sosna, Morton. "World War II as a Watershed in Southern History". in *Major Problems in the History of the American South vol 2 The New South*. Paul D. Escott and David R. Goldfield ed. 458-463. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Co. 1990.
- Tindall, George Brown. *A History of the South Vol, X: The Emergence of the New South 1913-1945*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1967.
- Tebeau, Charlton W. *A History of Florida*. Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971
- Williamson, Edward C. *Florida Politics in the Gilded Age 1877-1893*. Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1976.
- Woodward C. Vann. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

#### Articles

- Andrews, Stephen D. "Brasshats and Baby Fingers: The Battle Over Rural Education." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 75 (Winter 1997): 307-315.
- Arsenault, Raymond and Mormino, Gary R. "From Dixie to Dreamland: Demographic and Cultural Change in Florida, 1880-1980." in *Shades of the Sunbelt: Essays on Ethnicity, Race, and the Urban South*. Randall Miller and George E. Pozzetta, ed. 161. Boca Raton: Florida Atlantic University Press, 1989.
- Brownwell, Blaine A. "The Urban South Comes of Age." in *The City in Southern History: The Growth of the Urban Civilization in the South*. Blaine A. Brownwell and David Goldfield, ed. 124. Port Washington New York: Kennikat Press, 1977.

- “Clearwater Woman Recalls Early History of Old Cork.”[undated] “Shiloh Cemetery Article” [undated] Hampton, Dunn Collection, Special Collections, University of South Florida.
- Daniel, Pete. “Federal Farm Policy and End of an Agrarian Way of Life”. in *Major Problems in the History of the American South Vol 2 The New South*. Paul D. Escott and David R. Goldfield ed. 406-410. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Co. 1990.
- Hall, Timothy L. “Segregation”. in the *Encyclopedia of Civil Rights in America*. Vol 3 David Bradley and Shelly Fisher Fishkin ed. 790. Armonk, New York: Reference. 1998.
- Howard, Walter T. and Virginia M. Howard. “The Early Years of the NAACP in Tampa, 1915 to 1930.” *Tampa Bay History* (Fall/Winter 1994):41.
- Ivey, Donald J. “John T. Lesley: Tampa’s Pioneer Renaissance Man.” *Sun land Tribune Collection* [document on-line] Floridian on the Web, University of South Florida.
- Jones, Maxine. “The African American Experience in the Twentieth-Century” in *A New History of Florida*. 379. Michael Gannon, ed. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996.
- Knetsch, Joe and Laura Ethridge. “A Brief Outline of the Agricultural History of Hillsborough County: 1880 to 1940.” *Tampa Bay History*. (May 1982):10
- Mahon, James and Brent R. Weisman. “Florida’s Seminole and Miccosukee Peoples.” in *A New History of Florida*, Michael Gannon, ed.186-187. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996.
- Mormino, Gary R. “The Big Bang Tampa Bay 1950-2000” in *On the Verge Florida’s Mega Cities in the New Millenium, A Case Study of the Tampa Bay Region*. Lance deHaven-Smith and Dena Hurst ed. 21-43. Tallahassee: Florida Institute of Government Florida State University, 2000.
- Mohl, Raymond and Mormino, Gary R. “The Big Change in the Sunshine State: a Social History of Modern Florida.” in *A New History of Florida*, Michael Gannon, ed. 418. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996.
- Mohl, Raymond and Pozzetta, George E. “From Migration to Multiculturalism: A History of Florida Immigration.” in *A New History of Florida*, Michael Gannon, ed. 391. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996.

- Mundt, Michael H. "The Ku Klux Klan's 1926 Assault on the Democratic Party in Hillsborough County, Florida" *Tampa Bay History*. (Spring/Summer 1997): 12-13.
- Numan, V Bartley. "The New Deal as a Turning Point". In *Major Problems in the History of the American South vol 2 The New South*. Paul D. Escott and David R. Goldfield ed. 396. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Co, 1990.
- Otto, John Solomon. "Florida's Cattle-Ranching Frontier: Hillsborough County (1860)" *Florida Historical Quarterly*. 63 (July 1984): 73
- Otto, John Solomon. "Hillsborough County (1850): A Community in the South Florida Flatwoods." *Florida Historical Quarterly*. 62 (October 1983): 180.
- Proctor, Samuel. "Prelude to the New Florida, 1877-1919 in *A New History of Florida*. Michael Gannon ed. 278. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996.
- Rabinovitz, Howard N. "Southern Urban Development, 1880-1900." in *The City in Southern History: The Growth of Urban Civilization in the South*. Blaine Brownwell and David R. Goldfield ,ed. 105. Port Washington New York: Northern University Publications, 1977.
- Rogers, William W. "Fortune and Misfortune The Paradoxical Twenties". In *The New History of Florida* Michael Gannon. ed. 294-298. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996.
- Rogers, William W. "The Great Depression" in *The New History of Florida*. Michael Gannon ed. 305-313. Gainesville: Florida Press, 1996.
- William G. Ferris Family Collection, Selected Letters in "Tampa is the Place of Places," *Sun land Tribune Collection* (November 1996): 17.
- Wright, Gavin. "How New Deal Wage Policy Influenced Southern Industry" in *Major Problems in the History of the American South vol 2 The New South*. Paul D. Escott and David R. Goldfield ed. 406-410. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Co, 1990.

#### Government Documents

- Florida State Census. 1885 and 1935. Orange County Public Library, Orlando, Florida.
- United States Federal Census. 1880-1940. Orange County Public Library, Orlando, Florida.

## Unpublished Material

Bailey, David Elmer. "A Study of Hillsborough County's Legends and Folklore with Implications for the Curriculum," M.A. thesis, University of Florida, 1949.

Iacono, Anthony. "The Creation and Growth of Hardee County, Florida".M.A. thesis, University of Central Florida, 1993.

Keeler, Bradley R. "Bricks, Bonds and Boosters: The Good Roads Movement in Central Florida, 1890-1929," M.A. thesis, University of Central Florida, 1998.

Tidd, James Francis. "The Works Progress Administration in Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties, Florida," M.A. thesis, Electronic Version, University of South Florida, 1989.