

Davis Islands Reaches Historic Milestone

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October 2004 marks the eightieth anniversary of land sales for lots on Davis Islands. Developer David P. Davis had worked his whole life to get to that point, and over one and half million dollars in sales proved that the wait was worthwhile. He did not work alone, nor did he just hang out a sign on the morning of October 4, 1924 stating, “lots for sale.” Davis organized men and materials, planned entertainment and baited the local newspapers. Months in the making, the advertising operation for Davis Islands was like no other.

Davis launched his sales campaign in the summer of 1924. He continuously touted Davis Islands in half and full page newspaper advertisements in Tampa’s morning and evening papers. He also placed large ads in other newspapers across the state, in guidebooks and in tourist magazines targeted toward that growing market. The term “mass media” had just entered the national lexicon in 1923, and Davis understood its power. He bought time on Tampa’s flagship radio station, WDAE, and insured his ads found their way into all manner of Tampa tourism and promotional publications. He also sponsored, in 1926, publication of Kenneth Roberts’s *Florida*, a history of the state.

Everything Davis did in the summer of 1924 led up to his ultimate goal ■ the opening of land sales on Davis Islands. Davis spent lavishly on elaborate brochures, a fleet of buses and vast improvements to his sales office, located on the corner of Franklin and Madison Streets in downtown Tampa. With the final design of the islands complete, maps were created showing lot locations. Davis divided the development into eight sections, six of which carried a name describing a particular feature or its proximity to

nearby landmarks. The Hyde Park Section, at the northern end of the islands nearest to Hyde Park, the Bay Circle Section, just southwest of the Hyde Park Section, named for its waterfront lots and circular street pattern, the South Park Section, at the southern end of Marjorie Park, the Hotel Section, so named for the Davis Arms Hotel, which was never built, the Yacht Club Section, named for the Yacht Club which, too, was not built, and the Country Club Section, including five of the nine holes of the Davis Islands Golf Course and its clubhouse. The southern end of the islands, though platted, did not carry section names. Land sales, Davis decided, would go one section at a time. The fateful first day was finally at hand.

The first sale of lots, the Hyde Park Section, came on October 4, 1924. The results of that first day's land sales are well documented -- all available lots, a total of 300, sold within three hours at an average cost of \$5,610 per lot. Few of those lots were above sea level, let alone graded and ready for construction. Some speculators waited in line for forty hours for the opportunity to buy into the yet unbuilt islands. Total sales for that day reached an overwhelming \$1,683,000. More interesting was the staggering resale of those same lots, some reportedly made inside the Franklin Street sales office between the first owners and eager prospects still waiting in line.

Davis encouraged everyone to view his emerging paradise. Like many other real estate developers of the time, Davis owned a fleet of buses on which prospective buyers could tour Davis Islands. The buses, specially painted with the D. P. Davis Properties logo, brought people from as far away as Sarasota, Orlando and even Miami. Prospective buyers received colorful brochures, booklets and photographs showing how all of their dreams could come true, just by buying property on Davis Islands. Venetian style canals,

luxurious homes, boating and waterfront grandeur all were depicted on lithographed pages within leather-bound booklets.

A carnival-like atmosphere surround all Davis Islands land sales, including boat races around the Islands and along Bayshore Boulevard, airplane exhibitions with stunt flyers, sports celebrities such as Olympic swimmer Helen Wainwright, who swam around Davis Islands, plus tennis tournaments and golf lessons from tour professionals Bobby Cruickshank and Johnny Farrell.

The fervor created by the first land sale carried into the next, when lots in the Bay Circle Section went on the market on October 13, 1924. This scenario repeated itself each time lots came on the open market. As with his developments in Miami, Davis made sure to mention that many lots were purchased by ■home folks• who knew a good investment when they saw it. Realizing the need to not flood that lucrative market, Davis spaced out the sales from days to weeks apart, allowing the property values to increase each time.

Resales between individual buyers contributed to the frenzy of Florida's land boom, and the action surrounding Davis Islands proved no exception. Davis understood the importance of resales, both in how they maintained interest in his property and how they enhanced his own bottom line. He could raise the price on his own lots and, in theory, could also participate in the resale market himself. After October 15, 1925, resales were the only method of acquiring land on Davis Islands. These resales remained steady for another few months. Davis' good fortune soon reversed, and in the spring of 1926 he collected only a small portion of the property payments owed him. Despondent, Davis sold his islands investment to Stone & Webster, a Boston-based engineering

company. He received \$250,000 in stock from the new company and booked passage aboard the Majestic. He died under mysterious circumstances at sea on October 12, 1926, just two short years after the first sale of Davis Islands land.