

## **Before They Were \*The Islands\***

by Rodney Kite-Powell  
Curator, Tampa Bay History Center

There have been islands in Hillsborough Bay for almost as long as the bay has existed. The original delta islands were formed as sediment and other material flowed out of the Hillsborough River and into the bay's estuary system. Plants eventually took root and more material accumulated on the growing islands, more so on the southerly island than on the one closer to the river's mouth. Small sand bars extended out from the two islands, demonstrating the shallow nature of Hillsborough Bay. It was these two islands, and the surrounding tidal area, that developer David P. Davis used as the nucleus for his.

The islands first appeared, nameless, on early sixteenth century Spanish maps depicting Hillsborough and Tampa Bays (then known as Bahia de Espirito Santo, or Bay of the Holy Spirit). The islands were included as part of the Fort Brooke military reservation created in the 1820s, and it is probably during the fort years that the larger of the two islands picked up its first name, Depot Key. Various other names, all describing a particular feature of the islands, appeared through the years, including Rabbit Island, Big and Little Islands, Grassy Islands and, eventually, Big Grassy and Little Grassy Islands.

The first recorded sale of either of the bay islands came on April 18, 1860, when William Whitaker purchased the southern tip of Depot Key (Big Grassy

Island), a total of six and one third acres, for one dollar per acre. Little Grassy Island and the remainder of Depot Key were purchased in 1881 by a number of different interests. William C. Brown purchased all of Little Grassy Island, totaling sixteen and one third acres, for the same price per acre as Whitaker paid twenty-one years before. Brown and William B. Henderson teamed up to purchase a large portion (sixty-nine and three quarter acres) of Big Grassy Island from the state for ninety cents per acre. The town of Tampa purchased the remainder of the island, consisting of twenty-eight and one half acres, at the same price. Brown and Henderson, in turn, obtained a ninety-nine year lease for the city's portion of Big Grassy Island for twenty dollars a year.

During one of the first channel dredging projects of the 1880s, cypress tree stumps were discovered in eight feet of water a few yards south of Big Grassy Island. This discovery illustrated that the whole bay was a freshwater cypress swamp during the last Ice Age. Another channel dredging project, begun in the early 1900s, bisected Little Grassy Island, creating Seddon Island on the east side of the channel and a remnant of Little Grassy Island on the west side. Little Grassy Island usually disappeared under a strong high tide, but Big Grassy Island generally remained dry. Both islands, however, were completely covered by water during the 1921 Hurricane.

Tampa's City Council, on June 8, 1920, offered a referendum to voters

asking whether they would support the purchase of Little Grassy Island for use as a city park. In an incredibly tight vote, the referendum passed 694 - 692. Though non-binding, the city agreed with the majority and purchased Little Grassy Island from William Brown's widow, Mary E. Brown, on May 9, 1921, for \$25,000.

Many histories of Tampa and Davis Islands relate stories of Boy Scout Troops going out to the bay islands for camp outs. Tampa children made unsupervised forays to the islands, as well, including a young D. P. Davis. According to his brother, Milton, the boys ventured out onto the scrub-covered mud flats in the late 1890s, catching crabs and frying fish instead of attending school. As an adult, Davis found another use for the bay islands. To his chagrin, he found that it was no easy task obtaining ownership of the islands, as well as the rights to the bay bottom that he would need to make his idea of Davis Islands a reality. Those efforts will be the subject of a future Davis Islands News article.