

Davis Islands and World War II

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With the Sixtieth Anniversary of the end of World War II close at hand, it is interesting to look back at what effects the war had on Davis Islands. The war, and the Depression which preceded it, serves as break between the two major growth periods on the Islands, the 1920s and the 1950s. It also serves to demonstrate on a small scale what was occurring in Tampa, and Florida, as a whole.

World War II brought a variety of benefits and liabilities to Davis Islands. One of the primary concerns of local political leaders and their military counterparts during the war concerned the housing of soldiers in town for training. Davis Islands' apartments and hotels, particularly the Mirasol and the Mirasol Plaza (formerly the Palmerin, now Hudson Manor) hotels, accommodated some of the city's newest military residents. Laursten G. Moore, vice president of Davis Islands, Incorporated, was too old to serve in the military, but still contributed to the war effort by serving on Hillsborough County's rationing board.

Among the most pressing concerns early in the war was the question surrounding the future of Peter O. Knight Airport. The Army Air Corps had taken over two of Tampa's municipal airports, Drew and Henderson Fields. Peter O. Knight, then, became the only airfield in Tampa available for commercial and private planes. This did not protect the field from closing "for the duration," which was seen as a method of securing the area and reducing the number of airplanes appearing in local skies. The main drawback to the closure plan, though, was the elimination of civilian air travel in a large portion of the Tampa Bay area. The Tampa Aero Club mounted a campaign to save the airport, which proved successful. Passenger and private planes continued to use Peter O. Knight Airport throughout the war.

As pro-airport advocates correctly predicted, Peter O. Knight gained importance due to its role as the only public airport available and its close proximity to downtown, but its deficiencies also began to show. It seemed apparent, as early as 1943, to some of the area's aviation boosters that the Islands' airport was too small for the larger passenger planes. People such as Roslyn Burritt, who championed the saving of Peter O. Knight Airport, now wanted Henderson Field, near Temple Terrace in northern Hillsborough County, to be the county's international airport when the war ended. County leaders began constructing Henderson Field before the United States became involved in World War II, but the war department intervened before construction could be finished.

Neither Peter O. Knight Airport nor Henderson Field became Tampa's international airport. Drew Field, in existence since the 1920s and expanded by the army air corps during the war, became Tampa International Airport in 1947. Peter O. Knight currently serves small, private planes. Remnants of Henderson Field's asphalt runways are barely visible amid the tourist meccas of Busch Gardens and Adventure Island.

While Allied forces raced through Europe, giving the people of the United States a sense that an end to the war in Europe was near, things began to stir on Davis Islands. On January 10, 1945, Mr. and Mrs. Melvin Hudson purchased one of the Islands' original hotels, the Mirasol Plaza Hotel, located at 115 East Davis Boulevard, plus three rear lots which fronted on Columbia Drive. Previously known as the Palmerin (and not to be confused with the Mirasol Hotel, 84 Davis Boulevard), the hotel soon became known as Hudson Manor. The hotel featured 52 rooms, each with a bath, and "was filled with guests" at the time of the purchase. The former owner, Dr. Sherman Smith, owned another set of 1920s boom-era properties in the area, Temple Terrace Estates, which he sold to Florida Christian College earlier in 1945.

Events on the other side of the globe quickly grabbed headlines in the middle of 1945, culminating with the news that Japan had surrendered on August 14, 1945, ending World War II. Closer to home, W. Howard Frankland, owner of Tampa's Pioneer Tire Company, began to acquire a real estate empire consisting mostly of 1920s properties in downtown Tampa. His investment company, Crest View Realty, purchased the Wallace S. Building, the Stovall Office Building and the Haverty Furniture Company Building in February of 1945. These procurements were small in comparison to his takeover, with three partners, of Davis Islands, Incorporated on October 22, 1945. The sale encompassed "the stock of the corporation and its realty, consisting of between 800 and 1000 lots on the island, as well as the Davis Islands Country Club." With the purchase of Davis Islands by Frankland's syndicate, the property returned to local hands. Vast amounts of vacant land sat ready for development, which was right around the corner.