

Davis Islands Golf Course

by Rodney Kite-Powell
Curator, Tampa Bay History Center

Of all the amenities originally designed and constructed for Davis Islands in the 1920s, the Davis Islands Golf Course was the largest in scale and the latest to be completed. Designed by “internationally known” golf course architect A. W. Tillinghast, the golf course occupied a large portion of the southern half of the Islands, was entwined within the streets and canals of the southern half of the Islands.

Construction began on the course in late January 1927, four months after the engineering firm of Stone & Webster purchased Davis Islands from D. P. Davis, and three months after Davis’ mysterious death at sea. The start of construction was heralded by the development’s newspaper, *Life on Davis Islands*, with the banner headline “Golf Course is Begun.”

The straight forward course layout consisted of nine holes, covering 3,060 yards. The only water hazard of any significance was the 100 foot wide Grand Canal that cut across the middle of the second hole. The same canal sat behind the green on Number One and ran along the left side of the fairway on Number Three. Sand bunkers seemed the bigger obstacle, with as many as five appearing on a given hole.

The clubhouse, located between the fairways of Number One and Number Nine, was constructed and open three years before the course opened. The Mediterranean Revival structure stood two stories tall and featured dining rooms, meeting space and a dance floor. More unique, however, was the retractable roof which could be opened to allow dancing under the stars. The building operated as a supper club before being converted back to its original purpose, that of a proper Country Club.

Opening festivities took place on December 31, 1928, with revelers simultaneously ushering in the New Year and the new golf course. A members-only tournament was held the following day to officially open the course. Membership to the country club was restricted and set by a meeting of “prominent Tampans” in December 1928. Memberships for winter visitors, still a big target demographic even after the Bust, were also available.

Despite its grand beginnings, the golf course eventually fell into disrepair. In the early 1950s, a young *Tampa Tribune* reporter named Leland Hawes played on the Davis Islands golf course. In speaking of the course years later, Hawes, a Tampa historian now retired from the *Tribune*, recalled that it was not in very good condition, to say the least. By this time, the Davis Islands golf course was public and owned and operated by the city. Though not necessarily neglected, the course did not receive the same attention it did as a private, members-only course.

Florida in general, and Tampa in particular, was experiencing another land boom during this time. Fueled by the confluence of a booming economy, new home construction under the GI Bill and the advent of affordable home air conditioning, the boom in part completed what the 1920s land boom started. All of this meant that land on Davis Islands was again marketable, and a nine-hole golf course was expendable in the face of potential profits.

Another, more sinister, theory exists to explain the course’s demise – the idea that, with continued successes of the Civil Rights movement, African Americans would have to be allowed to play on the city-owned course. The Davis Islands course was the only municipal course during this time that ran through a white residential neighborhood,

which potentially could explain this idea. Again, this is just a theory with no supporting evidence.

Whatever the reason, the Davis Islands golf course was transformed into the Byars Thompson addition to Davis Islands in the mid-1950s, with hundreds of homes appearing on the former fairways, greens and tee boxes. The Davis Islands Country Club transition into the “Davis Municipal Building” and by 1966 was demolished, too. All that survives of the golf course today is the incongruently named “19th Hole” cantina, which is now a private residence.