

Davis Islands in the 1950s

by Rodney Kite-Powell
Curator, Tampa Bay History Center

Though developed in the 1920s, Davis Islands was poised at the close of World War II to experience its greatest period of growth. The locally owned Crest View Realty Company purchased the Islands from Davis Islands, Inc. (itself owned by the Boston-based engineering firm Stone & Webster) on October 22, 1945. The ownership group, which retained the services of long-time Davis Islands, Inc. employee Laursten G. Moore, included W. Howard Frankland, J. H. L. French, Wallace C. Tinsley and Alfred Dana. Two of the members, Tinsley and Dana, already owned buildings on Davis Islands; Tinsley co-owned the Mirasol and Dana owned the Venetian Apartments. The *Tampa Morning Tribune* reported “the new owners plan to begin construction on 100 or more new homes, ranging in price from \$7500 to \$15,000 or above, when materials become available.”

Over two hundred homes were constructed on Davis Islands between 1946 and 1951. In addition, eleven apartment buildings, four townhouses and two commercial buildings sprang from the sandy ground. This phenomenal growth flourished from an even larger trend felt across the city and state. Home buying statistics for 1950 showed that sales in Tampa were at an all-time high, totaling \$53,000,000 in city-wide sales.

City officials decided, during this period, to sell city-owned land that was previously set aside for a large park at the southern end of the Islands. The first series of sales occurred on August 10 and 11, 1954. At the conclusion of the two-day sale, 56 lots, of an available 73, were sold for a total of \$173,440. The city held another 55 lots, which it planned to sell in the near future, as well as land formerly occupied by the nine-hole golf course.

At about the same time that the city was divesting itself of its residential holdings, Davis

Islands, Inc. was doing the same thing, ending an almost thirty year presence on the Islands. Frankland and his partners finished what D. P. Davis started in 1924 and L. G. Moore sustained in the 1930s and 1940s. Construction of an expanded business district, growth in the multi-family segment of the Islands' real estate market (represented mostly in rental properties) and the completion of long-standing infrastructure projects occurred under Crest View's management. The Islands' few remaining empty lots rested in the hands of a small number of developers and private land owners, while city and county agencies owned the public buildings and lands.

The end of Davis Islands, Inc. did not mean the end to growth on the Islands. Quite to the contrary, both residential and commercial construction sped along on newly paved roads. In particular, expansion of the business district spread quickly along East Davis Boulevard between Barbados and Chesapeake. What had always been set aside for commercial use finally stirred from a long hibernation.

D. P. Davis built only one commercial building dedicated to retail amenities during his ownership and development of Davis Islands. That building, Bay Isle, was designed by noted Tampa architect M. Leo Elliot. Located at 238 East Davis Boulevard, the Bay Isle building remains the anchor of the Islands' business district. In the early 1950s, though, it stood alone amid a sea of sand and slowly maturing palm trees. Other, less attractive if more functional, buildings eventually joined the landmark on East Davis Boulevard, starting with 230 and 232 East Davis, constructed between 1950 and 1951. By 1956, there were twenty-six business addresses along East Davis Boulevard, including two automobile service stations. These buildings, which together constituted what amounted to a small strip mall, offered a clothing store for women, a toy store, a pharmacy, a hardware store and variety of other shops.

Municipal additions to the Islands included a fire station, Tampa Fire Department's

Station #17, which opened on the Islands in 1958 and an addition to the Hospital, also completed in 1958. The hospital renovation, the first of many that would greatly increase the institution's size, overwhelmed the original building, obscuring its north face from view.

Construction of commercial buildings on East Davis Boulevard coincided with a larger pattern of building on the south side of Davis Islands. South Davis Boulevard, non-existent before the mid 1950s and absent from directories until even later, became clogged with work trucks and building materials during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Other streets, such as Hudson, Itasca, Ladrone, Madeira, Martinique and Rhine, blossomed in a similar fashion in a matter of a few years, after lying virtually dormant for decades. This rise in construction pushed the total housing inventory on the Islands to 861 in 1956.

Most of the houses constructed during this era reflect the architectural tastes of the time, not to mention the removal of the approval process established by Davis and continued, with revisions, under Davis Islands, Inc. Single-story, ranch style homes became the norm, with few builders opting for the more compatible Mediterranean Revival style homes reminiscent of Davis Islands' 1920s heyday. By 1961, roughly 74% of the current buildings on Davis Islands had been constructed. Davis Islands was finally reaching maturity.