

# Henry Bradley Plant

*From Christine Plant Perks*

*Via Kathy Compagno Member No 2*

**When you're building a railroad to nowhere...**

**how do you make the journey worthwhile?**

If you're railroad magnate **Henry Bradley Plant**, in the midst of the sand swamps that would be Tampa, you construct the most astonishingly magnificent hotel of its day, then fill it with treasures from around the world.

With its splendid Moorish architecture, opulent furnishings, and spectacular tropical gardens, Plant's **Tampa Bay Hotel** attracted a host of celebrated guests, from **Teddy Roosevelt** to **Sarah Bernhardt** to **Babe Ruth**.

A visit to the **Henry B. Plant Museum** and the authentically restored rooms of the **Tampa Bay Hotel** will transport you back to a time of indulgent ten-course meals, waltzing on the veranda and alligator hunting by moonlight....*The journey is still worthwhile.*

## *The History*

*The Henry B. Plant Museum is housed in the 1891 Tampa Bay Hotel, now a National Historic Landmark and home to [The University of Tampa](#). During the 1880's, Henry Bradley Plant was building an empire of railroads, steamships and hotels. The hotel was financed by Plant personally, not investors, at a cost of \$2,500,000 and an additional \$500,000 was spent for furnishings. It took two years to build, covered six acres and was one-quarter mile long. The 511 rooms were the first in Florida to be electrified. Advertised as completely fireproof, the structure is built of poured concrete reinforced with steel rails and cables in between floors. The building featured all of the latest luxuries including a billiard room, barbershop, shoeshine service, beauty shop, flower*

*shop, telegraph office, formal dining room, Grand Salon, Music Room with orchestra and telephones in all guest rooms.*

*The grounds of the Hotel were as awe-inspiring as the building itself, spanning 150 acres. The amenities included an 9-hole golf course, flower conservatory, tennis courts, croquet courts, boathouse, hunting and fishing grounds, stables, racetrack, kennels, exposition hall with Florida products on view, casino with 2000 seat auditorium, heated indoor swimming pool, bowling alley, spa facilities and card rooms, totaling 21 buildings in all.*

*After the death of Henry Plant, the building was bought by the city of Tampa in 1904. It continued to operate as a hotel until 1932. In 1933, the Tampa Municipal Museum was established in order to preserve the legacy of the Tampa Bay Hotel, becoming the Henry B. Plant Museum in 1974.*

*Today its mission is to interpret the Tampa Bay Hotel at the turn of the century and the Victorian lifestyles of America's Gilded Age for people of all ages, backgrounds, and levels of interest.*

## **Henry B. Plant Bio**

*Henry Bradley Plant, (October 27, 1819 - June 23, 1899), founder of the Plant System of railroads and steamboats, was born in Branford, Conn., the son of Betsey (Bradley) and Anderson Plant, a farmer in good circumstances. He was the descendant of John Plant who probably emigrated from England and settled at Hartford, Conn., about 1639. When the boy was six, his father died. Several years later his mother married again and took him to live first at Martinsburg, N. Y., and later at New Haven, Conn., where he attended a private school. His grandmother, who hoped to make a clergyman of him, offered him an education at Yale College, but, impatient to begin an active career, he got a job as captain's boy, deck hand, and man-of-all-work on a steamboat plying between New Haven and New York. He was then eighteen.*

*Among his various duties was the care of express parcels. This line of*

*business, hitherto neglected, he organized effectively, and, when it was taken over by the Adams Express Company and later transferred from steamboats to railroads, he went along with it. After a few years he was put in charge of the New York office of the company. In 1853 his wife, Ellen Elizabeth (Blackstone) Plant, to whom he had been married in 1842, was ordered South for her health. Several months spent near Jacksonville, then a tiny hamlet, impressed the shrewd Yankee with the possibilities of the future development of Florida.*

*The next year he became the general superintendent of the Adams Express Company for the territory south of the Potomac and Ohio rivers. In the face of great difficulties he successfully organized and extended express service in this region, where transportation facilities, although rapidly growing, were still deficient and uncoordinated. At the approach of the Civil War the directors of Adams Express, fearing the confiscation of their Southern properties, decided to transfer them to Plant. With the Southern stockholders of the company he organized in 1861 the Southern Express Company, a Georgia corporation, and became president. His company acted as agent for the Confederacy in collecting tariffs and transferring funds. In 1863, following a serious illness, he took an extended vacation in Europe, and he returned by way of Canada.*

*After the war, the railroads of the South were practically ruined and many railroads went bankrupt in the depression of 1873. In this situation he found his opportunity. Convinced of the eventual economic revival of the South, he bought at foreclosure sales in 1879 and 1880 the Atlantic & Gulf Railroad and the Charleston & Savannah Railroad. With these as a nucleus he began building along the southern Atlantic seaboard a transportation system that twenty years later included fourteen railway companies with 2,100 miles of track, several steamship lines, and a number of important hotels. In 1882 he organized, with the assistance of Northern capitalists, among whom were H.M. Flagler, M.K. Jesup, and W.T. Walters, the Plant Investment Company, a holding company for the joint management of the various properties under his control. He reconstructed and extended several small railroads so as to provide continuous service across the state, and by providing better connections to*

*the North he gave Florida orange growers quicker and cheaper access to Northern markets. Tampa, then a village of a few hundred inhabitants, was made the terminus of his southern Florida railroad and also the home port for a new line of steamships to Havana.*

*For the accommodation of winter visitors he built in Tampa, in the style of a Moorish palace, an enormous hotel costing \$2,500,000. The subsequent growth in wealth and population of Florida and other states tributary to the Plant System made its founder one of the richest and most powerful men in the South. A good physical inheritance, preserved by temperate habits, made it possible for Henry Plant to keep working until almost eighty years of age.*

*His first wife died in February 1861, and in 1873 he married Margaret Josephine Loughman, the daughter of Martin Loughman of New York City, who with one of his two sons survived him.*

*In his will he attempted to prevent the partition of his properties to the value of about \$10,000,000 by forming a trust for the benefit of a great-grandson, but the will was contested by his widow and declared invalid under the laws of the state of New York. This decision made possible the consolidation of his railroads with other properties to form the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad. His son, Morton Freeman Plant (1852-1918), was vice-president of the Plant Investment Company from 1884 to 1902 and attained distinction as a yachtsman. He was part owner of the Philadelphia baseball club in the National League, and sole owner of the New London club in the Eastern League. Of the younger Plant's many gifts to hospitals and other institutions the most notable were the three dormitories and the unrestricted gift of \$1,000,000 to the Connecticut College for Women.*

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*Additional information on Mr. Plant can be found in a 20-page booklet [Henry Bradley Plant, The Nineteenth Century "King of Florida" by Canter Brown, Jr. - available from the Museum Store for \\$2.95](#)*

