



South Florida East Coast Corridor Study News Clip

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Florida was shaped by one man's passion for tourism

This month marks the 100th anniversary of the completion of the railway that connected the Keys to the rest of the state

By Jay Clarke

Only a few people are still around who can remember what it was like to ride the spectacular Over-Sea Railroad that once skipped from island to island and over dozens of bridges and viaducts down the Florida Keys to Key West. One of them is Minnie Dameron, 86, whose parents had homes in Plantation Key, just south of Tavernier, and Key West.

"The trip took about two hours from Plantation to Key West, and we packed a lunch to have on the train," Dameron said as Florida prepares to observe the 100th anniversary of the railroad's completion. She made the trip four times as a 10-year-old, but admits she found the journeys frightening. "All you could see was water on both sides, especially on Seven-Mile Bridge," she said.

Hailed as the "Eighth Wonder of the World" when it reached Key West on Jan. 22, 1912, the railway was the last link in one man's remarkable passion to bring tourism to Florida.

The Over-Sea Railroad is long gone, much of it destroyed by a hurricane in 1935. But many other works remain that were built by the man most responsible for turning Florida into a major tourist destination, Henry M. Flagler.

From Jacksonville to Key West, the state's east coast is dotted with Flagler's legacy. He built hotels, golf courses, roads, public buildings, hospitals, churches and even whole towns as he extended his railroad down the east coast. Many of these are still open to the public.

ST. AUGUSTINE

His first venture was in St. Augustine, whose pleasant winter climate captivated him on a visit in 1883. First he constructed the distinctive Ponce de Leon Hotel, with its Moorish-style castellated

towers and terra cotta tiling. Then, to serve less affluent guests, he built a second hotel, the Alcazar, also in Moorish style. He bought a third hotel, the Casa Monica, and renamed it the Cordova.

Those three properties still exist today, but in different capacities.

The Ponce de Leon closed as a hotel in 1946 and became Flagler College. Visitors can tour the campus. The Alcazar closed as a hotel in 1932. The front wing is now the St. Augustine City Hall. The rear section, which housed the hotel's recreational facilities (among them the world's largest indoor swimming pool), now houses the Lightner Museum, which displays relics of America's Gilded Age. The Cordova, which served as a courthouse for 50 years, reopened as a hotel in 1999 under its original name, Casa Monica.

Flagler, who made millions in oil as a partner of John D. Rockefeller, also built or helped finance several churches in St. Augustine, notably the Memorial Presbyterian Church (where he is buried), the Catholic cathedral and a Methodist church. He built a hospital there, helped finance municipal buildings, a school, water works, electric company, a new railroad depot, sewers and homes for workers.

Having bought and modernized the railroad from Jacksonville to St. Augustine, Flagler began to extend the track down Florida's east coast. To reach Daytona, he purchased the St. John and Halifax River Railway and incorporated it in his Florida East Coast Railway. In Ormond Beach, just north of Daytona, he bought and expanded the iconic wooden Ormond Hotel. The hotel existed only until 1992, when it was torn down and replaced with condominiums.

PALM BEACH

In Palm Beach he built the Royal Poinciana Hotel, which opened in 1894 with 540 bedrooms and later expanded to accommodate 1,200 guests.

"It was the biggest wooden hotel in the world at the time," said Jim Ponce, 94, historian for the nearby Breakers Hotel. With three miles of corridors, Florida's first 18-hole golf course and other upscale amenities, the Royal Poinciana quickly became popular with the cream of American society.

That hotel fronted on Lake Worth, not the ocean, so Flagler in 1896 built the beachfront Palm Beach Inn nearby as an overflow for guests who wanted to stay by the breakers [waves], said Ponce. Soon, however, it became just as popular as the Royal Poinciana and was expanded and renamed The Breakers.

The Royal Poinciana served society for many years, but was hit hard by changing times, hurricanes and the Great Depression. It closed in 1934 and was torn down the following year.

The Breakers, however, lives on. It burned in 1903 and again in 1925, but was rebuilt each time. Elegant and constantly updated, the 540-room hotel today is considered one of the nation's most prestigious. Built in Italian Renaissance style, it has a half-mile of private ocean beach, two 18-hole golf courses, 10 tennis courts, an oceanfront spa, beach bungalows and nine restaurants. The hotel is still owned by the Flagler family's holding company, the Flagler System.

Flagler wanted to keep the Palm Beach hotel area separate from the commercial part of town, so he created the city of West Palm Beach, which is separated from Palm Beach by Lake Worth Lagoon. He laid out streets and named them alphabetically after trees, fruits and flowers; he helped finance construction of homes and municipal buildings as well as the Catholic church.

While he had built a home, Kirkside, in St. Augustine, it was in Palm Beach that he constructed one of the most elegant private homes in America.

When Whitehall was completed in 1902, the New York Herald hailed it as “more wonderful than any palace in Europe, grander and more magnificent than any other private dwelling in the world.” Its entrance hall alone, 110 by 40 feet, is larger than many large houses. A showcase of Gilded Age opulence, the 55-room mansion has an enormous ballroom, a huge pipe organ, gold plumbing and 14 guest suites.

On its grounds is one of Flagler’s two private rail cars, housed in a pavilion built to resemble a Beaux Arts railroad station. Guests can walk through the elegant car, which Flagler used on many occasions, including the first trip on the Over-Sea Railroad in 1912.

The home also has permanent exhibits on Flagler’s life and career.

MIAMI AND BEYOND

At first, Flagler had no plans to extend his railroad beyond Palm Beach. But when the severe winter of 1894-95 devastated crops in most of Florida, he began to rethink the possibilities. Miami’s Julia Tuttle had tried without success to get Flagler to extend the railroad to Miami, and legend has it that during that winter she sent orange blossoms to Flagler to show that the freeze had not reached Miami. That convinced Flagler; two years later in April of 1896, the first train chugged into Miami.

Bringing the train to Miami, of course, was just part of Flagler’s plan for the city. He built another grand hotel, the Royal Palm, at the mouth of the Miami River. When he opened the 450-room wooden hotel on Jan. 15, 1897, it had the most modern facilities then available — an electric generator, two electric elevators, an ice plant, a swimming pool 140 feet long, 100 rooms with private baths, a rail spur that brought train passengers directly to the hotel entrance.

As with his other grand hotels, the Royal Palm soon became the center of Miami’s social life as well as a favored destination for winter visitors. The hotel did well until 1926, when a great hurricane damaged the hotel so severely that in 1930 it was demolished. Several hotels stand on its site today.

As he had done in other locales, Flagler became involved in much more than hotels and railroad in Miami. He created the Miami Electric Light and Power Co., predecessor of Florida Power and Light Co. He established a water works and sewage system, built a hospital, donated land for churches and schools, and funds for a courthouse.

Flagler had planned to construct another of his grand hotels in Key West, but died in 1913 before he could put his vision into motion. The hotel, called the Casa Marina, eventually was built to his specifications, opening in 1920. It reigns today as one of the city’s most luxurious properties.

Some Florida colleges also benefited from Flagler's generosity. He endowed a chair at Rollins College, gave \$20,000 to Florida Agricultural College in Lake City for a gymnasium and \$60,000 to Stetson University to build a science wing, now named Flagler Hall.

Flagler's legacy also includes some newspapers. Most accounts say he despised the press, but recognized its value in informing the public, so he quietly began investing in the Miami News, the Miami Herald and others. In many cases, his participation was not known until after his death.

As for Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway, which literally created tourism wherever it reached, it went into bankruptcy during the Great Depression of the 1930s. It continued to take passengers for many years, but today operates only as a freight line.

Henry Flagler spent \$40 million in Florida at a time when just \$1 million was an incredibly large sum, and he did it at a time when many considered investing in Florida a waste of money.

No one else, before or since, did as much for Florida.