

## TURKEL ON FLAGLER

The Amazing Story of the Visionary Tycoon Who Invented Florida

# Henry Morrison Flagler

By Stanley Turkel, MHS, ISHC

In 1890, America was astounded by Henry Morrison Flagler whose Florida East Coast Railroad was pushing southward along the Atlantic Coast from St. Augustine to Miami. Seven years earlier Flagler built the 450 room Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine where Ponce had planted the Spanish flag in 1513. Who was this 53-year old multi- millionaire whose exploits have been mostly overlooked by history?

Henry Morrison Flagler left his home in western New York in 1844 at 14 years of age to join his half-brother, Daniel M. Harkness, in Republic, Ohio. Young Henry, tall and handsome for his age was eager to leave farm life in Medina, New York and to seek his own fortune. His father, Isaac Flagler, was a poor preacher-farmer who had served several Presbyterian congregations in Western New York and northern Ohio. Henry worked on a small boat headed for Buffalo in exchange for his fare. Early on the second day away from home, Henry found a boat headed for Sandusky, Ohio. The trip across Lake Erie was rough and lasted three days and nights. Henry was seasick and unhappy until the boat reached Sandusky. On the very next day, young Henry went to work for L.G. Harkness and Company under the watchful eye of Dan Harkness, whose Uncle Lamont Harkness owned the general store business. After five years, 19 year-old Henry Flagler joined the firm of Chapman, Harkness and Company in Bellevue, Ohio where he met and married Mary Harkness on November 9, 1853.

As the Chapman, Harkness Company expanded into the grain distillery and liquor fields, Flagler was able to buy the Chapman interest. One commission merchant in Cleveland, John D. Rockefeller, handled most of their shipments and got to know Flagler fairly well. This association later paid dividends when Flagler relocated some years later to Cleveland. Rockefeller was born in Richford, N.Y. on July 8, 1839 and was nine years younger than Flagler. His father peddled medicine throughout western New York. John D. Rockefeller graduated from high school in 1855 but did not go to college. During the 1860's oil discoveries in western

Pennsylvania led to an oil boom in search for “black gold”. Thousands of Civil War veterans joined the oil rush. Among them were horse traders, gamblers, get-rich-quick seekers and dead-beats. All were interested in one purpose: to make a fortune quickly. By 1865, Cleveland was the leading petroleum center with 30 refineries. In 1867, a partnership between Rockefeller and Flagler was formed. The Cleveland Leader commented,

“Our readers will notice by the advertisement in another column, that the old and reliable firm of Rockefeller and Andrew has undergone a change, and now appears under the new title of Rockefeller, Andrews and Flagler..... Among the many oil refining enterprises, this seems to be one of the most successful; its heavy capital and consummate management, having kept it clear of the many shoals upon which oil refining houses have so often been stranded.”

In 1869, Flagler and Rockefeller decided to incorporate their holdings into the Standard Oil Company. When asked if this was his idea, Rockefeller said, “No, sir, I wish I’d had the brains to think of it. It was Henry M. Flagler.”

When Flagler relocated to New York City in 1877, he gradually separated himself from the leadership of Standard Oil. After Mary Flagler died in 1881, Flagler’s influence steadily diminished in Standard Oil but he remained the second largest stockholder after John D. Rockefeller. By the time Standard Oil was dissolved in 1911, Henry Flagler was an extraordinarily wealthy former founder and interested spectator. His interests in Florida had completely replaced his attachments to the Standard Oil Company.

In 1883, Henry Flagler married Ida Alice Shourds at the Madison Avenue Methodist Church in New York City. She was 35 years old and he was 53. Miss Shourds had been an attendant to his first wife before Mary Flagler died. Because Flagler hated cold weather, he planned a belated honeymoon in Florida in December, 1883. Their trip from New York to Jacksonville took 90 hours because of the different gauges of railroad tracks along the way. In 1870, Harper’s Weekly reported:

“There are two ways of getting to Jacksonville (from Savannah) and whichever you choose you will be sorry to have not taken the other. There is the night train by railroad, which brings you to Jacksonville in about 16 hours; and there is the steamboat line, which goes inland nearly all the way, and which may land you in a day, or you may run aground and remain on board for a week.”

Florida's population in 1880 was 270,000 people, of whom 40,000 lived in the long-settled northwest coast between Jacksonville and St. Augustine which had been used by invalids even before the Civil War but wealthy northerners were just beginning to discover its balmy weather at the end of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, Flagler was surprised at the lack of large hotels and other real estate development. The Flaglers stayed at the new six-story San Marco Hotel. After consultation with the owner James A. McGuire and his hotel manager Osborn D. Seavey, Flagler decided to build a new hotel. One event that might have heightened his interest was the celebration of the landing of Ponce de Leon in March, 1885. He later recalled the difficulty of deciding on the design of the Hotel Ponce de Leon, “Here was St. Augustine, the oldest city in the United States. How to build a hotel to meet the requirements of nineteenth century America and have it in keeping with the character of the place - that was my hardest problem.”

Flagler went to McKim, Meade and White of New York, the leading architectural firm in the United States and hired two young architects: John M. Carrere and Thomas Hastings. The 450 room Ponce de Leon Hotel opened on a five-acre lot with Spanish Renaissance architecture. The hotel had electric lights, steam heat, private parlors, reading and game rooms, exquisite draperies, imported rosewood, walnut and mahogany furniture and Brussels carpet. Since standards of the day deemed public bathrooms sufficient, the hotel originally had only one private bathroom in Flagler's suite. Almost immediately it became necessary to add private bathrooms to the hotel rooms. It also became necessary to build a companion hotel, less elaborate and less expensive. Flagler built the Spanish Renaissance Alcazar Hotel across the street to plans also drawn by Carrere and Hastings. The Alcazar was equipped with sulphur and saltwater baths, steam rooms and a complex of game courts. Flagler said that the Alcazar was every bit as good as the Ponce de Leon.

In Ormond, North of Daytona, Flagler bought a small hotel, enlarged it, beautified the grounds and named it the Ormond Beach Hotel. He built a 18 hole golf course and provided for bicycle and automobile racing.

After two years of study, Flagler obtained a charter from the state of Florida in 1892 authorizing him to build a railroad along the Indian River as far south as Miami. Awarded 8000 acres of land for each mile of railroad built south of Dayton Beach, he eventually owned two million acres of Florida land.

Flagler created the Model Land Company which probably did more than to build up Florida's east coast than any of his other undertakings. The Model Land company, under the direction of Henry Plant's former top executive, James E. Ingraham, hired expert agriculturists, horticulturists and stockmen who were well versed on soils, crops and farm production. Flagler's land policies resulted in the settling of Delray, Deerfield, Dania, Ojus, Peerine, Homestead, Kenansville and Okeechobie as well as Fort Lauderdale, Miami and West Palm Beach.

At Lake Worth, nearly 250 miles south of St. Augustine, Flagler laid out West Palm Beach on the mainland and Palm Beach on the snake-like stretch of sand and palm trees on the edge of the Atlantic. There he built the Royal Poinciana Hotel and the Palm Beach Inn, the name of which was soon changed to the Breakers.

Unlike his hotels in St. Augustine which were built of stone and coquina, Flagler used wood for the Royal Poinciana. It opened on February 11, 1894, nine months after construction began, with 1,150 rooms, the largest resort hotel in the world. In season, the Royal Poinciana Hotel employed 400 waiters, 287 chambermaids; it had a separate dining room for the lower echelons of hotel staff, another for first officers, a third dining room for the second officers, a fourth for servants of the guests, and a fifth for children. The staff had its own orchestra for their dances and other social functions. The head housekeeper had a three-room suite. At the height of each season, more than 100 private railroad cars arrived at the hotel.

Outdoor activities were very popular at the Royal Poinciana including golf, tennis, boating and fishing and more. In an unfortunate manifestation of the racism of the day, African American bicyclists pedaled guests seated in attached wicker chairs (so-called “Afrimobiles”).

Flagler’s second hotel in Palm Beach was the unpretentious Palm Beach Inn, about a quarter mile east of the Royal Poinciana on the Atlantic Ocean which was built as an annex for bathers and swimmers. It was destroyed by fire in 1903, rebuilt in 1906 and destroyed again by fire in 1925 and immediately rebuilt again at a cost of \$7 million with its name changed to The Breakers and remains one of the finest resorts in the world.

At the age of 70, Flagler built himself a fabulous Palm Beach mansion, called Whitehall, which was reputed to cost \$2.5 million. A reporter for the New York Herald, writing in March 1902, described the mansion as “more wonderful than any palace in Europe, grander and more magnificent than any other private dwelling in the world.” The Whitehall is now the Flagler Museum.

Then, as now, northern Florida was subject to periods of wintry cold. After an intense cold snap in 1894, Flagler turned his attention farther south. At the urging of the widow Julia Tuttle, acquired a substantial parcel near the junction of the Miami River and Biscayne Bay. Acquiring more land on Biscayne Bay, Flagler extended his railroad in April 1896 to Miami where he built a railway terminal, street, and a municipal water system. Soon thereafter, Flagler built a new inn, the five-story Royal Palm.

Flagler still had ambitions. This time he turned his attention to the string of coral islands that extended in a graceful, 150- mile westward arc from Biscayne Bay to Key West. He determined to connect the keys with a rail line. This vast construction project, called the Overseas Railroad, required the construction of causeways, bridges, roads, and trestles across the open sea from island to island. Seven years and millions of dollars later, the railroad opened with a special inaugural train of the Florida East Coast Railway, which arrived in Key West on January 22, 1912. Bursting with pride, octogenarian Henry Flagler waved from his observation car. He died 14 months later.

The death of Henry Flagler in 1913 marked the end of an age. During the last years of his life he returned often to St. Augustine. But the last decade of his life was filled with personal tragedy. He was estranged from his only son Harry, had his wife committed to an insane asylum, had been criticized for divorcing Alice to marry again. After his death in Palm Beach, his body was buried with those of his first wife and daughter in St. Augustine. His body was rested in state in the rotunda of the Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine.

The Overseas Railroad operated for 20 years, until Labor Day 1935, when the line was irreparably damaged by a hurricane that toppled bridges, twisted rails, overturned causeways, and smashed trestles. When the railroad's directors refused to rebuild the ruined rail line (owing to the Depression), the state of Florida acquired the rail right of way and reengineered it to open in 1938 as the spectacular overseas highway to Key West that is still in use today.

In addition to the right of way to Key West, some of Flagler's other developments also remain. In St. Augustine, the Alcazar and Cordova hotels became city and county office buildings. The Ponce de Leon now bears the name of Flagler College. (Flagler's name is also on a county and graces the village of Flagler Beach, south of St. Augustine.) The Ormond Beach Hotel became a retirement home. Whitehall was converted to a hotel in 1925 with the addition of a 300-room tower. The tower was removed in 1959, and the restored mansion was dedicated as the Henry Morrison Flagler Museum.

Other landmarks are gone. The Royal Poinciana in Palm Beach and the Royal Palm in Miami were demolished to make room for other developments. The Breakers continues operation today after it reopened in December 1926, with designs by Shulze and Weaver. The magnificent Breakers Hotel and the nearby Flagler Museum are fitting tributes to Henry Morrison Flagler, the visionary tycoon who invented Florida.

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