

All Aboard! The Train Comes To Hillsborough County

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"1907. The vegetable train ran between Turkey Creek and Palmetto. Farmers would place vegetables alongside the track for pickup. The man in the front with the broom kept the tracks from [the] gravel." Source: State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

By Charles Nelson

All Aboard! Today, internal improvements are a hot news topic. One element of that catch-all phrase is transportation. Until a community establishes adequate transportation for its residents, growth is challenging. That was true of Hillsborough County until the railroads arrived.

East and south of Tampa, pioneer settlement was slow. Available land was heavily forested, and roads (such as they were) consisted of little more than poorly maintained trails, with few bridges. Access to markets to sell products and buy essentials was slow and challenging in the 19th century.

Small, subsistence farming was the norm. Early settlers produced minimal excess farm goods. Most farmers opted to trade any excess with neighbors rather than haul goods by wagon into Tampa on

difficult sandy trails or by long water trips along the Alafia River and Hillsborough Bay.

Significant changes arrived in Hillsborough County when Henry Plant brought the South Florida Railroad to Tampa in January 1884. As a direct result of that railroad, Plant City was the first town established in rural Hillsborough County. At about the same time, the boomtown of Lenna City (now Seffner) was born. This new Plant System railroad added passenger and freight service to newly established communities and farms along the route.

By the end of the century, two new roads, roughly paralleling the rail tracks, were built from Tampa to Plant City (roughly along today's U.S. 92) and Riverview. These rail and road improvements provided some market relief for farmers along those corridors; however, Riverview Rd. ended just after crossing the Alafia River in the tiny community of Peru. South county farms were still as isolated as ever due to a continuing lack of transportation infrastructure.

Plant's success attracted a second railroad company's attention. The Florida Central and Peninsular Railroad Company, soon to become the Seaboard Air Line Railroad, seized on an opportunity to serve underdeveloped rural Hillsborough County areas. Seaboard reached Plant City in 1889 from the north and built a second line into Tampa south of Plant's tracks resulting in the new towns of Valrico, Limona and Brandon.

More critical to Central and Southern Hillsborough County, Seaboard established vital north-south routes through Hillsborough County to connect Tampa with Bradenton and Sarasota. In October 1901, under the direction of Seaboard agent C.H. Davis, construction began on the oddly named United States and West Indian Steamship and Railroad Company (renamed the Florida West Shore Railroad in 1903). This new railroad created a little over 25 miles of north-south rail service from Seaboard's main line Turkey Creek station in an almost straight line to the Manatee County line at Willow. From there, the railway continued to Bradenton and Sarasota.

This new rail line, providing easy access to markets in Bradenton and Tampa, transformed Southern Hillsborough County’s economy. New towns and larger farms developed rapidly. New train stations at Durant, Boyette and Balm created new towns, post offices, stores and industry along the line. Seaboard’s C.H. Davis began a brand-new town along the rail line in a sparsely settled area exactly midway between Turkey Creek and Bradenton. He named the new village Wimauma by combining his three daughters’ names: Wilma, Maude and Mary.

Davis also built a new bridge across the Little Manatee River in December 1902. (Remnants of that abandoned bridge still span the river.) Using his own money, Davis personally financed the final bridge over the Little Manatee River to connect with Bradenton.

The railroad brought boom times to the area and access to distant markets. Newspapers announced that fresh oranges shipped from Southern Hillsborough County reached Jacksonville markets. Balm boomed by attracting a cotton gin, logging concerns and packing houses to serve newly established strawberry and potato fields. Even religious organizations benefited from the new rail service. A Methodist camp meeting near Durant attracted hundreds of worshippers now arriving by train.

Later internal improvements would arrive in the county’s rural areas, albeit slowly. By 1920, the Atlantic Coast Railway would build tracks along the Bayshore route through Gibsonton and Ruskin to Bradenton. But it was the Seaboard Air Line Railroad that first opened up most of rural Hillsborough County to growth.

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