



The Man Who Built Florida

Henry Flagler

By Karen Baxter

Henry Morrison Flagler—the son of a poor minister who worked his way to become one of the richest men in America—once described himself as “contented ... but never satisfied.”

That would explain a lot about the 19th-century oil tycoon, developer and railroad magnate. At 53, a time in his life when most would be happy to sit back and enjoy the fruits of their labor, Flagler was only just beginning to make history and was still to become the “grandfather of Florida tourism.”

Flagler was born in Hopewell, N.Y., on January 2, 1830, to a poor Presbyterian minister, Isaac Flagler, and his wife, Elizabeth Caldwell Harkness Flagler.

From an early age, the penniless Flagler had his eyes set on the business world. In 1844, with only an eighth-grade education, the 14-year-old moved to Bellevue, Ohio, to work for the Harkness family in their grain store, L.G. Harkness and Co. After climbing up the ranks in the business, Flagler bought out one of the com-

pany's partners in 1852 and brought his half-brother, Dan Harkness, into the business.

A year later, Flagler married Mary Harkness (Dan's cousin), and the couple had two daughters, Jennie Louise, born in 1855, and Carrie, who was born in 1858 and died in 1861, and a son, Harry Harkness Flagler, born in 1870.

In 1862, Flagler sold his share in the grain company, and along with Mary's brother, Barney York, moved to Saginaw, Michigan, where they founded the Flagler and York Salt Mining Co. The venture prospered during the Civil War, when demand for salt was high, but business slowed post-war and folded in 1865, leaving Flagler some \$50,000 in debt.

To pay off this debt, Flagler reportedly moved his family again, this time to Cleveland, where he re-entered the grain business as a commission merchant. It was during this time that Flagler met fellow grain merchant John D. Rockefeller.



The Standard Oil Days

When Rockefeller left the grain industry to start an oil refinery in 1867, he called upon Flagler to join him. With a loan from a relative, Flagler became part of a triad of partners in the Rockefeller, Andrews and Flagler Oil Refinery (RAF Refinery), along with British chemist and inventor Samuel Andrews.

"The part played by one of my earliest partners, Mr. H.M. Flagler, was always an inspiration to me," Rockefeller said in his book *Random Reminiscences of Men and Events*. "He invariably wanted to go ahead and accomplish great projects of all kinds. He was always on the active side of every question and to his wonderful energy is due much of the rapid progress of the company in the early days."

In 1870, RAF emerged as a joint-stock corporation under the new name Standard Oil. Two years later, Standard Oil was leading the refinery industry, producing 10,000 barrels per day. In 1877, the company headquarters moved to New York City, and the Flaglers moved into a residence on 5th Avenue.

Within a year, Mary was diagnosed with tuberculosis. At the doctor's advice, Flagler took her to Jacksonville, Fla., for the winter to escape the cold. With Mary feeling stronger, and it being difficult for Flagler to manage Standard from so far away, the couple returned north to their 5th Avenue home. Mary's condition worsened in New York, and she died in 1881.

A Grand Vision for Florida

Not only had he lost his wife, but Flagler's business practices had become the subject of media and public scrutiny, with Flagler accused of calling in political favors to ward off competition. In 1882, he was called to testify before a Senate antitrust committee.

"Flagler had amassed a fortune ... but at the same time his monumental business achievements had brought him the apparent enmity of an entire nation," writes author Les Standiford in *Last Train to Paradise*. "In addition, he had lost his [first] wife, the virtual supporting pillar of his private life."

"It should have come as no surprise then," Standiford observed, that Flagler "should be poised for a sea change."

In his personal life, Flagler didn't have to look far to find a new companion. He married one of Mary's nurses, Ida Alice Shourds, in 1883. Like Flagler, Ida Alice was also a minister's child, who grew up in poverty. Flagler was smitten with the woman, who is said to have had flaming red hair and a volatile temper, although friends and family disapproved of her lack of formal education and refinement. Upon marrying Flagler, Ida Alice became known for her fabled shopping sprees and one of the most elaborate wardrobes in New York City.

Flagler and his new bride traveled to St. Augustine for their December honeymoon. Finding the town charming, but the hotels and transportation inadequate, Flagler, the perennial entrepreneur, launched into his next venture: setting out to make Florida more accessible to tourists. In just a few years, Florida would become Flagler's empire and a playground for the rich.

After resigning himself from the day-to-day operations of Standard Oil, Flagler began construction of the luxurious Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine in 1885. The hotel was built in Gilded Age imitation of Spanish Renaissance style and was outfitted with Tiffany windows and chandeliers. Its grandeur attracted presidents including Grover Cleveland and William McKinley and millionaires like Rockefeller and George Pullman. With the 540-room establish-

ment a success, Flagler built another hotel in St. Augustine, the Alcazar, and purchased a third, the Cordova. The hotels included luxuries unknown to Florida at this time, such as indoor pools, tennis courts, concert rooms, bowling, high-end shops, tropical gardens and more. Even Thomas Edison was said to be a frequent guest at the Alcazar, which boasted a casino.

In an 1887 interview with the *Jacksonville News Herald*, a reporter asked Flagler why a man with a major interest in what was arguably the most powerful company on earth, Standard Oil, would want to get into the hotel business – which could never provide such an income. Flagler told the reporter, "For the last 14 or 15 years I have devoted my time exclusively to business, and now I am pleasing myself."

That Flagler was to become a permanent fixture in Florida became official when he finally constructed a private residence there, called Kirkside.





Paving A Path

Flagler knew that if his hotels were to be successful, he needed to create an easy way for tourists to reach them. So, he turned his eyes to transportation, and first on his list of rapidly growing acquisitions was the Jacksonville, St. Augustine & Halifax Railroad, which he purchased in 1885, and would eventually become the Florida East Coast Railway. He also constructed a depot, churches, schools, utilities and neighborhoods for his workers.

Flagler next purchased the St. John's Railway, the St. Augustine and Palatka Railway, and the St. John's and Halifax River Railway. By 1889 "Flagler's System" offered service from Jacksonville to Daytona. He continued developing hotels to entice northern tourists.

Beginning in 1892, Flagler began laying new railroad tracks instead of purchasing existing railroads and merging them into his growing rail system. Expanding the railroad south to Palm Beach in 1894, Flagler then opened the Royal Poinciana and the Palm Beach Inn, which was later renamed The Breakers.

Palm Beach was to be the railroad's final stop, but during 1894 and 1895, severe freezes hit the area, prompting Flagler to consider southward. He was further persuaded by offers of land from private landowners, the Florida East Coast Canal and Transportation Co., and the Boston and Florida Atlantic Coast Land Co.

In September 1895, Flagler's system was incorporated as the Florida East Coast Railway Co. and by 1896, the railroad reached Biscayne Bay, where according to a Flagler Museum



Photo page 18: Flagler's mansion, Whitehall, is now the Henry Morrison Flagler Museum in Palm Beach. This page: Florida East Coast Railway's Henry M. Flagler train picks up passengers in the 1940s, top; one of Flagler's first hotels, the Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine, is now the home of Flagler College, bottom.



Henry Flagler's second hotel in St. Augustine, the Alcazar, played host to many famous guests and featured a casino.

biography, "Flagler dredged a channel, built streets, instituted the first water and power systems, and financed the town's first newspaper, the *Metropolis*." The biography goes on to say, "When the town incorporated in 1896, its citizens wanted to honor the man responsible for its growth by naming it 'Flagler.' He declined the honor, persuading them to use an old Indian name, 'Miami.'"

Pushing ever farther south, he bought three ships in 1899 to transport guests to and from the Bahamas, where he owned two more hotels. This involved dredging a channel through the Biscayne Bay so his ships could enter the Miami harbor.

Although his empire was growing, Flagler's personal life was in turmoil at the time as his wife, Ida Alice, became mentally ill. She was institutionalized in 1897 and declared legally insane in 1899. Flagler divorced her and married his third wife, Mary Lily Kenan, in 1901. As a wedding present, he built her Whitehall mansion in Palm Beach. The New York *Herald* described Whitehall as, "More wonderful than any palace in Europe, grander and more magnificent than any other private dwelling in the world ..." At 60,000 square feet, the 55 rooms of the lush Gilded Age mansion included guest suites, servants' quarters and private offices for Flagler and his secretary.

The Final Push South

Beginning in 1905, Flagler embarked on his greatest challenge yet, to build what would be called "Flagler's Folly," a seven-mile stretch of railroad over open water to Key West.

"It is perfectly simple," Flagler told Dr. Andrew Anderson, a friend and associate. "All you have to do is build one concrete arch and then another, and pretty soon you find yourself in Key West."

The endeavor came at a time of the building of the Panama Canal, and Flagler envisioned Key West's deep harbor as becoming the trade hub for vessels passing through it with his trains then providing deliveries up and down the East Coast. At one time, more than 3,000 men were

employed to work on the project, which Flagler undertook with his own money, not a loan.

"With him it is never a case of 'How much will it cost?' Nor of 'Will it pay?'... Permanence appeals to him more than to any other man I have ever met," said writer Edwin Lefevre. "He often told me that he does not wish to keep on spending money for maintenance of way, but to build for all time."

Construction problems and hurricanes in 1906, 1909 and 1910 almost sunk the railway—literally. Hundreds of workers reportedly died in the 1906 storm. But in 1912, against all odds, Flagler's vision materialized with the opening of the Florida Overseas Railroad, and Flagler himself rode the first train into Key West in what was a belated 82nd birthday celebration.

He reportedly put his hand on the shoulder of Joseph Parrott, one of his advisers, and said, "Now I can die happy. My dream is fulfilled."

The next year, Flagler, 83, died in Palm Beach on May 20, 1913, following a fall down a flight of marble stairs at his Whitehall home. A black-draped train carried his remains back to St. Augustine, where hundreds reportedly gathered outside the Ponce de Leon to mourn him. Flagler was buried in the Memorial Presbyterian Church mausoleum with his first wife and daughter Carrie.

According to a report in the *St. Augustine Evening Record*: "The gloom inspired by the loss of Florida's foremost citizen was intensified by gathering clouds and the splashing of heavy raindrops, as if nature had joined in the general mourning, and was shedding tears. The silent crowds, with heads bared heeding not the falling rain, but followed the hearse as it moved slowly away on King Street, thence along Sevilla Street to Memorial Presbyterian Church, where the last sad rites were solemnized."

Flagler's last great accomplishment, the Florida Overseas Railroad, was destroyed on Labor Day 1935 by a hurricane, but the legacy of "the grandfather of Florida tourism" remains up and down Florida's east coast.

Flagler's name can be found on entities including Flagler County, Flagler Beach, Flagler Hospital and Flagler College (built on the site of the Ponce de Leon Hotel). There is a monument to him in Biscayne Bay, and the Flagler Museum in Palm Beach, at the Whitehall estate, is open to the public. One of Flagler's private railroad cars was restored to its original early 20th-century splendor and sits on the museum's grounds.

"Henry M. Flagler first built Standard Oil, then built the state of Florida. He may have been America's most modest industrial titan, and its most underappreciated," said writer John Steele Gordon in *Audacity Magazine*, 1996. "Henry Flagler was not only present at the creation of the modern economic world, but was one of its prime creators."