



# Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, Inc.

## Southeast Chapter

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## JEWELS IN THE SUNSHINE

### The Flagler System Hotels

By Seth Bramson

**Editor's Note:** The following article was written by lifetime R&LHS member Seth Bramson. He is THE expert on the FEC Railroad and it's founder, Henry Flagler. The article introduces his new book titled *Jewels in the Sunshine: The Flagler System Hotels*, detailing their history and operation. I think this introduction will make you want to buy *Jewels in the Sunshine!* - JAS

The name *Flagler* is synonymous with Florida! Much of Florida's history from 1883 (the year Flagler moved to Florida on a seasonal basis) until 1939 (the year that the Florida East Coast Railway [FEC] commenced the operation of its first streamlined, diesel-electric powered passenger train, named for the railway's founder) was directly attributable to either Flagler himself or the system which bore his name and which he had almost single-handedly created.

Numerous articles, biographies, books on the history of the Florida East Coast Railway (FEC) and untold numbers of speeches have paid homage to Flagler. For some reason, however, little has been done to commemorate the role of Flagler's "jewels in the sunshine," the group of hotels known as the Florida East Coast Hotel Company (FECH Co.), which consisted, through the years, of a total of eighteen owned, leased or operated properties.

The seasonal operating concept of the Flagler Hotel System was completely different from today's 365 days a year round modus operandi. With the exception of the Continental Hotel at Atlantic Beach, east of Jacksonville, which was a summer-only resort, all of the other properties (except for the short-lived 1960s Flagler Inns, which were motels on or near interstate highways) operated in the winter season only, usually open-

ing in late December and closing at the end of February or early March.

While such seasonal schedules are impossible today, several factors combined to allow strictly seasonal operation at that time. First, construction costs were much lower, for several reasons, including greater abundance of material with fewer scarcities. This included minimal transportation costs regardless of origin or destination of freight or employees. Goods and products destined for the company-owned hotels were transported on the FEC utilizing special tariffs which allowed those goods to be declared as company service items, in many cases moving at no charge to the hotel company's properties.

The second reason the hotels could operate on a seasonal basis at the time (from the late 1880s through the mid-1960s when the Breakers moved to an all-year round operation) was that the employees, all of whom were non-union, were cared for in a paternal fashion. Most of the Flagler System hotel's managers operated summer season hotels, in many cases for companies which were owned by other railroads in the north and northeast - Maine, New Hampshire and New York. An example is Joseph P. Greaves. He was the manager of the Royal Palm Hotel in Miami, but he spent his summers at the Oriental Hotel at Manhattan Beach, near Coney Island. That hotel was owned by the Long Island Rail Road and Greaves' stationery at either hotel showed not only the name of

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his opposite season hotel but the operating months for each property!

For the most part, much of the staff at each hotel went along with their manager. Chefs, kitchen personnel, maitre d's, waiters, dining room staff, chambermaids, porters, housekeeping and maintenance employees as well as secretaries and office-function related individuals would, for the most part, remain together through the seasons and work as an operating unit for years. Staff housing was provided in all Flagler System hotels (dormitories for the employees and private rooms for managers). In addition, staff meals and use of the hotel's laundry facilities were provided to employees at no charge.

Another significant employee benefit was that the Hotel System, being under the same ownership umbrella as the Florida East Coast Railway, would request passes, or reduced-rate vouchers, for each employee, either on the FEC or connecting railroads, to the point of destination. These perks made a substantial benefits package!

The third reason that the hotels were able to operate for seasons that were sometimes as short as just over two and a half months was that seasonal closing costs were relatively low. Following the end of the season a skeleton staff remained on premises to provide security and routine off-season maintenance. When staff would return to their respective Florida hotels, each person was familiar with his or her assignment. So reopening costs could be held to a minimum.

The fourth reason for the hotels' seasonal success was a network of railroad ticket offices. In the case of the Flagler System, as well as some of the larger railroads, every railroad ticket office in the United States and Canada was the equivalent of a hotel sales office. Railroad passenger traffic departments were encouraged to "sell" reservations at Flagler Hotel properties

The glamour and mystique of a Florida vacation, particularly from the late 1880s until the early 1950s was something generally reserved for those with money, or those who could at least put on a show of having money. Reports of the day indicate that most, if not all, of the FEC Hotel's winter resorts operated at or near capacity throughout the

season. Because occupancy rates were so high, and the tariff, for the time, was anything but moderate, the hotels could cover all fixed costs as well as variable expenses, and still earn a profit for each season.

Only one of the System's properties could be considered to have been a failure, and that was the Continental, east of Jacksonville at Atlantic Beach. The Continental was the only Flagler hotel built as a summer "opposite season" resort. It had rail service (as did the Ormond, Palm Beach and Miami hotels) direct to the door - the FEC station being placed adjacent to the hotel. The hotel was never able to cover its costs and was sold by 1910. The idea of Florida, at that time, as a summer resort was simply not realizable. With the disposal of the Continental, the company limited itself to the operation of only winter season resorts.

With the singular exception of the Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach, FL, the Flagler System of Hotels no longer exists. Several of the hotels still survive, either as hostleries or for other uses and purposes: the Ponce de Leon is now Flagler College; the Alcazar is St. Augustine City Hall and Lightener Museum of Hobbies; and the Cordova Hotel has been returned to its original, pre-Flagler name and is now the (Marriott) Casa Monica. The two Nassau, Bahamas hotels, the Royal Victoria and the Montague Beach survive as hotels while the Casa Marina in Key West retains that name and is operated by Waldorf Astoria Hotels.

What remains, however, is a legacy of resort hotel operations that is legendary in the industry. The Flagler System was the leader in instituting a number of operational methods, practices and procedures which are still in use today in the hospitality industry.

Because the Flagler System was in operation as early as it was (the Ponce de Leon opened on January 10, 1888), almost everything that was done operationally by the System's management, was innovative for the time. Many of the then-unique managerial procedures would become standard operating practice for much of the American hospitality industry. C. B. Knott, originally manager of the Cordova Hotel in St. Augustine, would become general superintendent of the Flagler System. It was he who

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#### **SOUTHEAST CHAPTER OFFICERS**

<b>William F. Howes Jr.</b>	<b>Chairman</b>
<b>Arthur L. Towson</b>	<b>Vice-Chairman</b>
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implemented many of the FEC Hotel Company's then-unique management and operating systems.

Knott was schooled in the railroad tradition of following rules. He originally wrote the "Rules of Service," standards for hotel re-openings and provided employees with written and formal rules for the operation of various segments and departments within the hotels. In addition, the Flagler System had, as early as 1903, a formal "chain of management authority." Although simplistic by today's standards, that diagram delineated responsibility for hotel operations at each property.

Another area of interest and concern to Knott and to later system officers was purchasing standards, and it appears that specifications for purchasing various commodities (including food and beverage) were in place, having been jointly developed with the railroad, prior to 1900.

The hotel system prided itself on its food, and the hotels took pleasure in advertising the quality and copious quantities of food available to guests on the American plan (three meals per day included with the room rate). A 1907 luncheon menu offered oysters prepared eight different ways; eight varieties of fish; steaks, chops, veal, mutton, poultry, cold meats, salads, sandwiches, five cheeses and at least six different desserts, with nary a hamburger in sight!

Of all of the areas of innovation, advertising and promotion was the apex of the System's accomplishments. It is because of the tie-in with the FEC Railway and Flagler's commitment to bring more people to Florida (via his trains and to fill his hotel rooms) that the pinnacle of Florida resort advertising was reached by the Flagler System. It was carried on in a manner of refinement, elegance and hyperbole that now cause the most glamorous of later efforts to pale by comparison.

Palm Beach became "the beautiful," and Miami "the magic city." The railroad's extension to Key West became "the Oversea Railroad" and the east coast of Florida came to be known as both "the American Rivera" and "paradise regained." Words, phrases and descriptions of the magnificent east coast became household words nationally, and that in a time before radio, television, computers or electronic messaging.

To reach the maximum number of people, hotel and railroad advertising was combined, and prospective guests were considered to be potential FEC passengers. Naturally, the reverse was also true, and the railroad, in its timetables and descriptive booklets and brochures, would frequently wax rhapsodic not only regarding a trip to Key West on the over-the-sea railroad but on and about the glories of the Flagler System hotels. Although the gambits were many,

and the hype unrelenting, it would fall to the railroad and the hotel company to devise what would be remembered as the single most striking piece of Florida promotional advertising ever conceived.

Appearing for the first time on the back cover of the 1901-1902 edition of "East Coast of Florida," the companies presented a map of the state showing the railroad's lines along the east coast in red and specifying, in large letters, the locations of the cities in which Flagler System Hotels were located. The sun shone brightly upon the map, but ONLY on the east coast of the state, so that the remainder of the peninsula was in shadow. Below the bordered map appeared the legend, "The East Coast of Florida is Paradise Regained." Another advertisement had a tag line that stated "Out of the Shadows...Into the Sun" followed by the words "Again the TROPICS CALL." It was mightily effective at a time when the special magic of Florida's winter warmth and glorious weather was just beginning to pervade the northern public's consciousness.

While the Flagler System is now, in effect, one hotel, the legacy of Henry M. Flagler and the pioneering spirit and innovations of the hotel company will remain a major part of Florida lore, legend and legacy. Simply put, without Flagler and his great and grand enterprises, one of the most prominent of which was the hotel chain he created, the story of the east coast of Florida would be entirely different. Indeed, the story of Flagler and the histories of the railroad and the hotel company (along with the almost as monumental story of Flagler's friend and friendly competitor, Henry Plant and his great enterprises) are the commercial history of Florida.

Without Flagler, without the railroad, without the hotel company and without the remainder of the Flagler-founded corporate entities, much of Florida's history would simply not exist.

Fortunately, that is not the case, and *Jewels in the Sunshine: The Flagler System Hotels* presents a long-overdue history, and one that is important both to historians in general and Florida buffs in particular. It presents the history of one of America's first hotel "chains," discusses its fads, foibles and modus operandi, and, as a conclusion, will hopefully leave the reader with the understanding of the importance of the part that the Flagler System hotels played in the development of the state's east coast.

A poem, written by the FEC's publicists, presents both the aura of the times and the impact of the Flagler System on Florida and America. It appeared in the 1908-1909 issue of "East Coast of Florida," it is titled "Florida East Coast."

## Florida East Coast.

If from the ice and snow you'd flee  
Consult a "guide" for the F. E. C.  
Just pack your trunk with summer clothes  
And leave the North to storms and snows.

At Jacksonville, you are sure to see  
The best looking train marked "F. E. C."  
You'll find it strictly up-to-date  
Running "on time," seldom late.

The scenery? Fine as it can be  
Along the line of the F. E. C.  
You'll enjoy the trip all the way  
From Jacksonville to Biscayne Bay.

And when the Bay at last you see  
Close to the track of the F. E. C.  
You'll think of the north so icy cold  
Compared to our groves with fruit of gold.

You'll think right then, with mirthful glee  
"I'm glad I took the F. E. C.  
I've missed the snow, the freeze, the sleet,  
Nor do I suffer from chilly feet."

And next winter, you are sure to be  
On some train of the F. E. C.,  
Coming down, to weather fine,  
To balmy air and bright sunshine.

And then again, one year maybe,  
This first class road, the F. E. C.,  
Will to Key West extended be,  
And you will ride above the sea.

The rails will reach from Key to Key  
And traveling on the F. E. C.  
Will be in pleasure; best of all,  
You'll then come down in early fall.

Catch fish and sail or hunt maybe,  
Along the line of the F. E. C.,  
With fine hotels, all kinds of boats,  
Yes, everything that swims or floats.

You'll tell your friends, each one you see,  
Of the grandest of routes, the F. E. C.,  
Whose trains are fine and service best,  
Between Jacksonville and old Key West.



**Alcazar is now St. Augustine City Hall.**



**Casa Marina in Key West.**



**Ponce de Leon in St. Augustine is now  
Flagler College.**



**Breakers in Palm Beach, Florida**



**Cordova (or Casa Monica) in  
St. Augustine, Florida**



## June, July & August Minutes (condensed)

Meeting on June 14, 2012

Trip Committee: Chairman Carl Corsi put forth possible future trips. A day trip to Waycross Ga.'s Rice yard with a stop on the return in Folkston. A weekend trip to the Atlanta Ga. Area to view museums there. Co-Chair Larry Shugart proposed a side trip to Progress Rail's shop in Patterson Ga. where steam engines are being built be added to the Waycross trip. It was noted that demographically, only a third of any group will participate in group trip activities.

Meeting on July 12, 2012

Trip Committee: The weekend trip to the Atlanta Ga. Area to view museums there has been tabled until the weather becomes more pleasant.

Meeting August 9, 2012

Trip Committee: Carl Corsi reports that no trips are impending primarily due to the hot weather. He is waiting for Co-Chair Larry Shugart to get back to him on the yard/shop tours proposed last month.

### **Future meetings:**

September 13th: Meeting will be held at the Riverview East Conference Room, also on the 2nd floor. Follow the signs from the elevators.

October 11th : Larry Shugart: Locomotive 101

November 8th : Steve Vertescher: Forty Feet Below

## 2013 Election Notice

**During the September meeting there was discussion regarding the election of chapter officers (Chairman, Vice-chairman, Secretary and Treasurer) for 2013. A partial slate of officers was discussed, but we need to hear from any "out of town" members who might be interested in running for office. If you are interested in being a chapter officer, please send a note to Chairman Bill Howes (no later than November 6th) at our chapter's mailing address - P. O. Box 600544, Jacksonville, FL 32260-0544. If we have four people running for four offices, they will be installed using the Acclimation by Proclamation process.**

### **Tampa to Invest in Union Station**

The city of Tampa plans to spend \$5.2 million on repairs to Union Station, reports the Tampa Tribune (August 13, 2012). The project entails improvements to heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems and mitigation of moisture problems. It is expected to be completed by 2015. Amtrak currently serves the station with the daily Silver Star between New York and Miami. The station serves approximately 140,000 Amtrak passengers each year.

### **Announcements**

October 6 Florida Rail Fair, Volusia County Fairground, Deland, FL.

October 11 Regular chapter meeting, program will be by Larry Shugart: Locomotives 101.

October 20-21 Palatka Railfest train show, 10 AM - 4 PM both days.

November 8 Regular chapter meeting, program will be by Steve Vertescher: Forty Feet Below.

November 17 NE Florida Model Railroad open house at Green Cove Springs.

December 13 Regular chapter meeting.

January 5-6 Florida Rail Fair, Volusia County Fairground, Deland, FL.

February 16 Golden Spike Enterprise - Jacksonville, FL train show.