

The Legend of Gasparilla: Myth and History on Florida's West Coast

André-Marcel d'Ans

From *Tampa Bay History*, Fall/Winter 1980, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp 5-29, with permission.

Translated by Marie-Joele Ingalls.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The great value of the following article is its lucid explanation of how Gasparilla the Pirate, an entirely fictional character created for tourists' sales promotion purposes in the early 1900's, overcame the best containment efforts of historical research and explication, and like Collodi's "Pinocchio," came to life.

The article is a "period piece," couched in the quaint terminology of the era in which it was written. Its references to such social entities as the "wealthy elite" or "restless Latin workers" echo an historic period in both Florida and Cuba when political and ideological realities left stylistic imprints on the language of scholarship.

The venerable Library of Congress, itself, was fooled recently by the bogus Gasparilla documentation cited in this article, and added yet another layer of respectability to the legend by referring to it as genuine. This is particularly sad for the embattled Native American shell mounds of Charlotte Harbor, which have sustained almost unimaginable damage at the hands of looters in search of the non-pirate's non-treasure. The editors are hopeful that the reprint of this illuminating example of historic investigative reporting will bring good information to our readership and set the stage for an end to the era of cultural resource abuse that the fabricated tales of buried loot have caused.

In Tampa, Florida, the legend of the Spanish pirate Jose Gaspar is the basis of a colorful festival every February. Members of the local business elite, disguised as pirates, arrive on a galleon, land, and take the city to sack it. The festival ends with a parade in which all the authorities of the city escort King Gasparilla and his Queen. The royal couple is elected for the occasion by members of "Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla," a very exclusive club which organizes the festival and the social activities that revolve around it. On the route of the pageant, the pirates of Gasparilla's crew, cigars in mouths, openly drinking and firing thousands of blank shots in the air, throw handfuls of fake gold coins, plastic pearl necklaces, and empty cartridge shells among the spectators at the parade. Children and adults alike jostle each other to get hold of these mementos.

It would be difficult to find anyone in Tampa unfamiliar with the name of Gasparilla. This is so despite the fact that **the pirate Jose Gaspar, alias Gasparilla, never existed; a fact proven both by the absence of his name in the Spanish and American archives and by the total absence of any material trace of his presence in Florida. There are no ruins that might be attributed to him and not a single coin from his fabulous treasure has ever been found.**

This study examines the genesis and structure of the urban myth of Tampa to attempt to understand why, among so many possible and imaginable heroes, this bogus Spanish pirate had the good fortune to become the legendary patron of the city. Tampa's history was shaped by events in Cuba while it was still a Spanish colony. There, in 1868, started the deadly War of Independence that lasted ten years and ended, ultimately, in defeat. The immediate repercussions of the uprising were tragically impressive. As early as 1869, 100,000 Cuban refugees had fled to foreign countries, their exodus leading them to the republics of Latin America, to Europe (this destination was chosen mostly by rich separatist patricians), and above all to the United States. There, Cuban immigration was divided into two branches: the refugees from the middle class went to northern cities (New York, Philadelphia, and Boston), whereas workers opted for the closest possible exile, Key West, only 90 miles from Cuba.

Most of the Cuban workers who went into exile were cigar makers who had made the glory of Havana. The Cuban cigar industry, badly hurt by the Panic of 1857 in the United States, had been in economic trouble for several years. The workers who suffered the consequences of these financial difficulties had developed great solidarity and militancy. As early as 1860, a few Cuban manufacturers had moved to Key West, where they were so close to Havana that the importation of the precious leaves of Cuban tobacco did not cause many problems.

The factories in Cuba closed down in 1869 after the start of the Cuban Independence War, and the cigar industry was transplanted to Key West. At the head of one important factory was a Spanish businessman from

Havana, Vicente Martinez Ybor. The immigrant Cuban workers looked forward to the day that their homeland would become an independent country so that they could return to Cuba. Alas, the reverse was true. Spain suppressed the insurrection, and at the end of the war in 1878, the Cuban exodus increased.

In Key West and Havana, frustrated cigar workers turned from the struggle for independence to trade-union militancy. The workers of both urban centers exchanged information, solidified ties, and planned common strategies. The easy communications between Key West and Havana presented problems for the cigar manufacturers who had to fight many strikes. The Key West owners, therefore, began to think about relocating their factories. Ideally, they needed a place close enough to Cuba to easily import the raw material, but also far enough from the island to break the trade-unionist link between the exiled Cuban workers in America and their counterparts in Cuba. This situation in the cigar industry soon led to the rapid development of the city of Tampa.

Tampa in 1876 was a struggling village of “crackers” producing oranges, vegetables, and a little sugar, occasionally exported by sea towards New Orleans or Key West and Cuba. By land, Tampa was connected to Gainesville only by a road that one could travel in two-and-a-half days. After the last garrison of Fort Brooke left in 1882, Tampa opened itself to the world. The first bank was opened in 1883, just before the arrival of the first railroad in 1884 that Henry B. Plant built from Jacksonville.

Meanwhile, labor upheavals continued to shake Key West. In the wake of new strikes and a fire—possibly arson—that devastated his workshops, Vicente Martinez Ybor decided to transfer his business, including 2,000 workers, to the growing city of Tampa, which had already jumped in population from 720 in 1880 to 2,376 in 1885.

Under the energetic leadership of the Board of Trade (predecessor of the Chamber of Commerce), Tampa quickly became more of an urban center. The city soon had running water, an ice-cream factory, a bridge over the river, a telephone network, electricity and an opera.

The harbor also grew. The discovery of phosphate in Polk County increased Tampa's importance as a port. In 1888, Henry B. Plant extended his railroad to the harbor, and he started a line of steamships that began to shuttle regularly between Tampa and Havana with a stop in Key West.

In the meantime, the railroad magnate had broadened his network southward to the next natural harbor in Charlotte Bay. There, ignoring the pleas of the village located near the old Fort Myers, Plant chose to end his railroad in a deserted village, Punta Gorda, where a new center was created around the luxury hotel built by Plant in the image of his elaborate Tampa Bay Hotel.

The method of Henry B. Plant, pioneer and capitalist, was brilliantly simple. His railroads brought cities to life, and he speculated on the ensuing real estate boom. His goal was to attract not only industries to these new cities but also the rich clientele of the North drawn by the southern climate. The opulent palaces that Plant constructed on the west coast of Florida awaited those first winter vacationers. In addition, joining the useful to the pleasant, he organized in Tampa the first industrial fair, which took place annually until the promoter's death in 1899.

While Plant amassed his colossal fortune, prosperity did not elude Vicente Martinez Ybor and the other cigar manufacturers who had moved their factories from Key West to Tampa. The cigar industry was centered in neighboring Ybor City, named for Vicente Martinez Ybor, the very prototype of the paternalistic and good-natured Latin American boss who reigned over this growing amalgam of cigar workers made up of Cubans, Spaniards, and Italians.

Unexpectedly, this apparently explosive mixture entertained good relations with the cigar bosses in the 1890's. There was a good reason for this. In the beginning of that decade, the dreams of Cuban independence were born again, and social conflicts moved to the background. The factory workers helped finance the Cuban Revolution, to which they gave one day of their weekly salary. Of course, their union militancy was dampened by this. Consequently, the cigar owners prospered, and they openly supported Cuban independence, defended also by the U.S. government.

Once this independence was achieved, its consequences betrayed the hopes of workers and owners alike. The workers could not go back to Cuba's ruined fields and to its cities plagued by unemployment, and the owners had difficulty facing the post-war situation.

Martinez Ybor died in 1896 and never saw how victorious American capital came to dominate the cigar industry not only in Cuba but also in Tampa, where as early as 1899 the cigar factories were bought up one by one by the American Cigar Company. This marked the end of the era of the pre-industrial, good-natured, and personalized capitalism and the beginning of an industrial era dominated by the drive for efficiency and the

rationalization of work. For the Latin workers of Ybor City, 30 years of bitter social conflict were about to start against the American businessmen who controlled Tampa.

The last of the pioneer promoters left the stage with the turn of the century and the deaths of Henry B. Plant in 1899, and Martinez Ybor three years earlier. In 1902, Plant's empire was dismantled and sold. The Atlantic Coastline Railroad gained control of his railroads, and in 1905, the City of Tampa bought the proud Tampa Bay Hotel. This purchase was more than symbolic. The days of the founding fathers were gone, as was personal capitalism. The era of trusts and social conflicts was arriving. In Tampa, a business class had consolidated itself as a caste and ruled the city. At this time the festival of Gasparilla started in 1904.

The very first written version of the legend came in an "advertising brochure" of the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railroad Company. The leaflet was given to visitors who used the Plant System and the Boca Grande Hotel [Construction of the Boca Grande Hotel was completed in 1911; after being greatly enlarged, it was renamed *The Gasparilla Inn* in 1913]. Boca Grande [was then] the principal town of Gasparilla Island, and therefore, in theory, it was the old haunt of the king of the pirates. "Taking the best of everything when a capture was made, he chose the best of the islands in Charlotte Harbor, for his own secret haunts," declared the leaflet. In fact, at the beginning of the 20th century, Gasparilla Island became "the winter home of the bluebloods."

The railroad brochure does not bear any date. Everything else indicates that the leaflet circulated a little after 1900 and that it provided the inspiration for the promoters of Tampa's first Gasparilla festival in 1904. [Editor's note: The Charlotte Harbor and Northern (CH&N) Railway began construction of its rail line in 1905, with the first segment—between Port Boca Grande and Arcadia—completed in 1907. The American Agricultural and Chemical Company, the railway's owner, probably did not begin to promote Boca Grande as a winter resort until formation of the Boca Grande Land Company, chartered by the State of Florida on April 29, 1907, to buy, sell, and develop real estate. Prior to that date there was nothing to promote. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the "railroad brochure" on Gasparilla the pirate could have been published any earlier than 1907.]

The transfer of the legend from Charlotte Harbor to Tampa came at the very moment of the collapse of the Plant System that connected Charlotte Harbor to Tampa. After Henry B. Plant's death in 1899, his team managed the Plant System for three years. Then after 1902 his empire was broken up and sold. Meanwhile, with the end of the pioneer era, the class of businessmen located in Tampa strengthened itself, becoming the city's new elite.

With Tampa's appropriation of the Gasparilla legend, the myth lost somewhat the strong territorial character that had tied it to Charlotte Harbor. Away from the area where the legendary story occurred, the main emphasis shifted to a symbolic interpretation of the mythical facts that impressed the Tampa group which adopted the legend. Without losing too much of the romantic dimension of its episodes, the legend gradually hid its fictional character behind an apparatus of fabricated evidence proving its authenticity. This was a slow process.

In 1923, a local historian from Salem, Massachusetts, Francis B. C. Bradley, great grandson of an American privateer in the War of 1812, published a well-documented book on the last years of piracy. Having received from Robert S. Bradley, Esq., of Boston, President of the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railway Company of Florida, the brochure relating to the legend of Gasparilla, Bradley clearly accepted its historical authenticity on the basis of the honor of the man who gave it to him. Bradley not only reproduced the legend in its entirety, but he also added a few episodes that should be attributed to another pirate named "Richard Coeur de Lion." From then on, that nickname would follow the name of Gasparilla in a few versions of the legend.

(figure 2.4.1) **The Gasparilla Pirate's Band from Boca Grande, circa, 1920's.** (bghs #01-0028)



The following year, in 1924, Philip Gosse published a more popular book, *The Pirates' Who's Who*. He included in it, leaning obviously on the authority of Bradley, a concise version of Gasparilla's exploits. The book was successfully reissued in 1968, and its condensed version is in a way the one commonly accepted

today. Finally, in 1936, Gasparilla escaped from the pages of piracy to enter the pages of the history of Florida for the first time. In *Florida Old and New*, the historian, Frederick W. Dau, wrote a few paragraphs about Gasparilla, placing him in a very convincing manner (and undoubtedly in good faith) among real historical figures. From that moment on, there were authoritative books to which one could send the persons who had the nerve to doubt the historic reality of Gasparilla.

In the meantime, the Gasparilla festival had taken place every year with but two interruptions, directly related to financial and political crises. The festival was not organized from 1907 to 1909 as a result of “the Rich Man's Panic,” which brought a downturn in the nation's economy. During 1918-19, following American entry into World War I, the festival was also not celebrated. In spite of these two lapses, the Gasparilla celebration became more elaborate every year. The public show had started in 1904 with pirates mounted on horses invading the city. In 1905, there was a triumphant parade of all the city's automobiles—all 60 of them! In 1911, for the first time, a ship was used—just as in the modern version—to invade the city. Very quickly, the celebrations, which were initially an entertainment for the city's elite, evolved to become grandiose festivities for popular consumption. Nevertheless, the festival did not lose its initial character since ordinary townspeople were but spectators in a show given by Tampa's elite. “Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla,” the quasi-religious society that organized the annual celebration, symbolized the social division that separated the festival's participants from spectators. Only members of Tampa's elite were selected to join the exclusive society.

In Tampa this social class adhered with all its strength to the ideal of American respectability and placed its values (in addition to money and religion) in romantic love, manly friendships, and a peaceful society. The defeat of the pirate marked the mythical transfer of his royal power to the new establishment of American business, controlled, by white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant elite.

All the historical evidence clearly shows that the legend of Gasparilla was essentially the product and property of Tampa's Anglo establishment. The seductive argument based on place names in fact undermines the historic reality of Gasparilla. **The islands called Gasparilla, Captiva, and Sanibel were all listed under those same names on maps that predated the supposed arrival of the legendary pirate.**

The study of proper names, which supporters of the legend used incorrectly, helps prove the Anglo origins of the supposedly Latin figures. **The very name “Gasparilla” is effeminate and totally ridiculous in Spanish. It is hard to believe that a ferocious Spaniard, a Latin lover, would have chosen such a nickname.** His first officer, Roderigo Lopez, should have been called “Rodrigo” in correct Spanish. In the same vein, the name of Captiva Island looks more like the English word *captive* than the Spanish word for captive, *cautiva*. Finally, *Sanibel* might seem to an American like a suitable Spanish woman's name, but in Spanish it brings to mind a brand name for sanitary appliances. Thus, an examination of leading names in the legend again reveals that under the Latin mask looms an Anglo-Saxon myth.

Nevertheless, it was not by chance that the myth makers adopted Latin characters. At the beginning of the century, Tampa was clearly divided into downtown and Ybor City, the respective headquarters of capital and labor. The American businessmen living downtown founded their prosperity on the labor of the Latin population in Ybor City.

One aspect of the Gasparilla celebration becomes clear in recognizing this ethnic and social division: disguised as Latin pirates, members of the Anglo establishment invaded the city, acting out violence that was as much a part of themselves as the pirates they played. As soon as they landed, however, the violence disappeared in two ways. The social violence vanished through an apparent redistribution of wealth, and the ethnic tensions faded away as the Anglo businessmen adopted Latin disguises.

Through this dramatization of very real violence that pitted the repressive Anglo establishment against restless Latin workers, the ritual celebration of Gasparilla became a fraternal festival that attempted to bridge the social and ethnic gap that split the city.

At first glance, the Gasparilla festival resembles the Indian ritual known as “potlatch.” This was a ceremony in which the hosts gave lavish gifts and even destroyed property as a display of wealth that the guests were later expected to surpass. The celebration of Gasparilla certainly cost its organizers plenty of money, but they always distributed totally worthless fake coins and junk jewelry to the spectators. Thus, the essential ingredient of potlatch, which often stripped the benefactors of their wealth, was never part of Gasparilla.

Viewed from a different angle, however, Gasparilla did have a parallel with the potlatch ceremony. Gasparilla week was coupled with a big commercial fair that attracted businessmen from other cities. For those rival leaders, the Gasparilla festival demonstrated the power and authority of Tampa's elite. Under these

conditions, the question of whether or not the redistributed goods had any value was secondary, as long as the ritual was a convincing display of power. Thus, the true audience was not the one gathered along the parade route. Indeed, they were actors in the grand spectacle staged for outside businessmen who were the real guests. They were invited to witness a happy city and cheer its elite which flaunted its wealth and its power to control the society. However, the ritual was also intended to undercut outside businessmen by creating the publicity that would attract new customers to Tampa.

The legend and ritual of Gasparilla played an important role in Tampa's history. Born at a time when the adventurous plundering of pioneers had just given way to a system that necessitated the peaceful cooperation of all social classes, the Gasparilla festival drew on a legend that expressed the abolition of piracy by the new order of American enterprise. The ritual of the festival tried to open a safety valve to release the ethnic and social tensions in a city where the relations between the different classes and the different ethnic groups were marked by repressive violence in which a largely Anglo elite confronted mostly Latin and particularly militant workers. From its very origin, the festival had its roots in the establishment. "After their fortunes had become more secure, the capitalist upper class resorted to grand-scale conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste in order to impress their rivals," noted one observer of this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the non-elitist crowd always played an important role in the spectacle of empty "redistribution" that marked Gasparilla. It is difficult on the basis of existing evidence to measure the importance, the spontaneity, and fervor of popular participation in the early years of the festival when Tampa's social situation was especially tense. However, current participation is extensive, joyful, and unreserved.

Since the troubled days of strikes and violence, Tampa has questionably moved toward an abundance that may not be more equally shared, but is more widely distributed. Ethnic conflicts have also clearly lessened. The Latin population, composed of Cubans, Spaniards, and Italians, has become increasingly integrated into Tampa society.

Even though the festival still provides the elite with the opportunity to display its wealth and its self-assurance, some efforts have been made to include wider popular participation in Gasparilla week. Thus, for example, the Gasparilla run combines the fad of jogging with the myth, and it recently attracted 7,500 runners, drawn from all classes, races, and age brackets.

In such popular Gasparilla events, the non-elite participants and spectators seem less and less trapped by a ritual designed as a safety valve. Indeed, through their acceptance of an empty "redistribution" and their lack of opposition to the successful festival, the people of Tampa show their trust in the elite that uses the celebration for its own self-glorification. No one expects a real redistribution of wealth from the elite because people generally assume that the system itself will provide its own rewards. In short, symbolic gifts are enough, and as such, they illustrate cooperation of the different classes.

In celebrating Gasparilla as "the pirate who became a civic legend," widespread acceptance of the festival testifies to the good citizenship of Tampanans and their commitment to the existing system.

Note: Marie-Joele Ingalls, who translated this article from the original French, and Professor Robert Ingalls, former editor of *Tampa Bay History*, who granted permission to reproduce the foregoing excerpts are acknowledged with much gratitude. *Ed.*