## **FLORIDA BUILDINGS I LOVE**

## No. 59: 'The Ponce' at Flagler College, 1887, St. Augustine

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Regular readers of this feature may get the impression the buildings are listed in a particular order. To wit, the higher they are on the list, the more I love them.

This is not the case. I try to love them all the same.

Admittedly, I direct more of my admiration to Sarasota's postmodernist Chapell-Lifeso House, No. 1 on the list, than the Twistee Treat ice cream stand in North Fort Myers, despite the fact I have not been served ice cream at the Chapell-Lifeso house.

So, ignore the numerical designation of this week's beloved building. Flagler College's landmark, constructed as the Hotel Ponce de Leon in 1887, is not my 59th favorite. No, this elegant fortress of a hotelturned-college building is way, way up there. Top 10 for sure.

That's because the building is a masterpiece of design and a cultural and historical beacon for Florida. It marked early-career high points for its architects, John Carrère and Thomas Hastings, not to mention Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933) he did the interiors and 79 stained-glass windows — and the other craftsmen and artisans who created it.

"The Ponce," as it is called, also was the first, and maybe the best, of the Florida luxury resort hotels built by Henry Flagler (1830-1913) after the Standard Oil co-founder branched out into the transportation and hospitality industries in the early 1880s.

Carrère (1858-1911) and Hastings (1860-1929) trained in Beaux-Arts design in Paris, started their New York careers at the famous McKim, Mead and White firm and would go on to design hundreds of projects, including the 1908 New York Public Library, according to historian Leslee F. Keys in his 2015 book "Hotel Ponce de Leon: Rise, Fall and Rebirth of Flagler's Gilded Age Palace" (University Press of Florida).

The hotel's appearance was inspired by the architecture of the Mediterranean, particularly the Moorish designs of southern Spain. They led a talented team exclusively assembled by Flagler for what would be his "flagship" property.

Even Thomas Edison was involved. The hotel opened in January 1888 with electric



The garden and courtyard area of the former Ponce DeLeon Hotel on the campus of Flagler College in St. Augustine. The building is a National Historic Landmark. BRIAN MYRICK



Tiles in the courtyard of the former Ponce de Leon Hotel. COURTESY OF FLAGLER COLLEGE

lights, powered by the great inventor's new direct-current technology.

Flagler's hotel gave St. Augustine's economy a huge boost in the lean years after the Civil War. In fact, Flagler — and cross-state rival Henry Plant — practically invented the Florida resort tourism industry. The building made St. Augustine a prime vacation destination for passengers on Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway.



The rotunda of the former Hotel Ponce de Leon rises 80 feet above the floor and is adorned in murals by George W. Maynard. Maynard's allegorical images also adorn the Metropolitan Museum of Art. COURTESY OF FLAGLER COLLEGE

In his book, Keys notes that the hotel barely survived the Great Depression — Flagler's other St. Augustine hotels were forced to close — before the Ponce became the founding headquarters for the Coast Guard Reserve during World War II.

The hotel returned to hosting civilians, but closed in April 1967. The following year, Flagler College was founded by Lawrence Lewis Jr., Henry Flagler's greatnephew, and the Ponce had a new use.

The Ponce was the nation's "first major cast-in-place concrete structure," Keys writes. In 1957, the American Institute of Architects, celebrating its centennial, named the structure one of America's 100 most important buildings.

But the formidable façade and courtyard garden are elegantly matched by the entry foyer, which includes a rotunda with paintings by George Maynard and Virgilio Tojetti.

The college began a restoration program in 1988, its centennial year, and the Ponce was named a National Historic Landmark in 2006.

Thomas Hastings once said that a culture's historic monuments reveal the "soul of that people." Floridians who care about historic preservation will find their inspiration in "the Ponce."

"Florida Buildings I Love" is Harold Bubil's homage to the Sunshine State's built environment. This article originally ran on Jan. 27, 2018.



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