

# Sarasota’s century of benefactors, boosters



**Real History**  
Jeff LaHurd  
Sarasota Herald-Tribune  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Sarasota has come to depend not on the kindness of strangers, but, rather, of well-known citizens of this community who were captivated by its beauty and charm, fell in love with the picturesque surroundings and felt compelled to improve it.

William and Marie Selby are a great example. The couple moved to Sarasota in the early 1920s. and built a modest home on seven acres of land bordering Sarasota Bay and Hudson Bayou. Despite their wealth, derived from William’s partnership in the Selby Oil and Gas Company, they lived a quiet, unpretentious life away from the Sarasota social scene.

As a lover of nature, Marie had an interest in keeping Sarasota beautiful and green. Upon her death in 1971, she bequeathed her home and property to the community with the aim of forming a botanical garden “for the enjoyment of the general public.” Selby Gardens was founded two years later and opened to the public on July 7, 1975.

The legacy of William and Marie’s Selby Gardens features a variety of gardens and habitats, displaying tropical and subtropical plants from around the world. The gardens are a celebration of the institution’s world-class programs in horticulture, botany, conservation, and education.

Its beauty is a major tourist draw. An oasis of tranquility, offering a respite from the commotion of urban life. The perfect place to escape the hustle-bustle and bask in the beauty of nature.

...

Calvin Payne, another oilman who adopted Sarasota as his new hometown, was a major civic leader and Sarasota booster.

When the hurricane of 1921 tore up the fishing industry downtown on Sarasota Bay, it was a godsend to many who believed the byproducts of fishing – the nets, shacks, old boats, fishing equipment, stench and flies that swarmed the



**Calvin Payne, who with his wife Martha donated property for Sarasota’s first baseball park and also for displaced fishermen.**

area – was prohibiting growth.

But this was the livelihood for many, and through Payne’s generosity both the blighted area was cleaned up, and the industry was moved to a much better site at what became known as Payne Terminal at today’s 10th St.

Sarasota was always on the look-out for tourist attractions as well as advertising our many virtues. Spring Training baseball would provide a platform for both. Baseball was America’s number one sport in the 1920s, a sure means of attracting fans here. And equally as important, big city newspapers sent their scribes to report on the team’s progress as well as writing about the host-community.

John Ringling was credited with scoring the mighty New York Giants to town in 1924. Managed by the fiery John J. McGraw, aka Little Napoleon, who ruled his team with an iron fist, and had won the World Series the year before. Always in the Pennant race, he once said, “Sportsmanship and easygoing methods are alright, but it’s the prospect of a hot fight that brings out the crowds.” And McGraw brought the crowds.

Where to put the baseball diamond? This was just before the boom, and speculative cash was a problem. Again, enter Calvin and Martha Payne. They sold the property which would be



**Looking north, Payne Park 1965, after the Sarasota Mobile Home Park evolved around it. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY JEFF LAHURD/HERALD-TRIBUNE**

named Payne Park to the city at a greatly reduced price.

Mayor E.J. Bacon declared a public work day, and the citizens and craftsmen joined together to lay out a diamond and construct a grandstand. The ladies of the community made refreshments for the workers.

Over the years, the finest players and teams played there, drawing fans from around the country. And the press did write glowing accounts of the beauty of the community as it grew and developed.

Around the park, the Tin Can Tourists began to gather. After that the Sarasota Mobile Home Park grew. As early as 1960 there were rumblings about the park’s location and purpose. Calvin and Martha Payne deeded the property with the stipulation that it be used for “park, playground and other kindred uses and for no other purpose.” They did not intend a trailer park. Payne’s son, Christy, was quoted in The News, that the park is “wholly disregarding the intent of the gift my mother and father made.”

The controversy died down for quite a while and park life continued; inexpensive lodging in downtown Sarasota – what a novel concept. The beginning of the end was at hand in the 1980s when city commissioners discussed phasing away the park. It was a long process with eviction notices and lawsuits. And while the story did not end happily for the remaining residents, to-

day’s Payne Park is a beautiful and multipurpose play area for all ages, and in keeping with Calvin and Martha Payne’s wishes.

...

In 1924, in a show of civic responsibility, Owen Burns, Sarasota’s first major developer, sold the city a ten-acre tract of land to be used only for a municipal park for at least 20 years. He stipulated that the park would be named “Gillespie Park” to honor Sarasota’s first mayor, John Hamilton Gillespie, considered the Father of Sarasota. The price was set at \$30,200, an amount the Sarasota Times called well below the actual value.

Gillespie came to town to rejuvenate the failed Scot Colony and it was from he that in 1910 Burns bought approximately 75% of today’s city limits for \$35,000.

Burns, knowing that the council did not have enough money for his asking price, deeded over the property for \$1 and said the balance could be paid “whenever possible.” Burns was quoted: “Gentlemen, I am doing this as a civic proposition. Ever since the death of Colonel Gillespie I have been anxious to see a park somewhere in the city, which would be named after him, and in which a beautiful monument to his memory

**See BENEFACTORS, Page 9I**

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# Benefactors

Continued from Page 41

could be erected.”  
In December of 1926, Gillespie Park placed second among 1000 parks entered in a nationwide beautification contest and is still in use. The statue of Colonel Gillespie was never erected.

• • •

Sarasota’s first library was located on the second floor in Gillespie’s rusticated block building at Five Points and consisted of the books he brought with him when he arrived in 1886.

The task of running it was taken over by the Town Improvement Society. When they disbanded, the Woman’s Club of Sarasota took over the library, housing it in their clubhouse at 1241 Pineapple, now the home to the Keating Theatre, at the Florida Studio Theatre.

In the 1930s the books were moved to the old Sarasota High School building on Main Street, east of Orange Ave. which proved to be an unsatisfactory location.

Enter John and Ida Chidsey, seasonal visitors from Bristol, Conn. They responded to a call from the Junior Chamber of Commerce, which was raising funds for a suitable building in a better location. The Chidseys responded by promising to pay for the construction costs if the Junior Chamber would furnish it.

The noted architectural firm of



John and Ida Chidsey at the laying of the cornerstone to the John and Ida Chidsey Library. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY JEFF LAHURD/HERALD-TRIBUNE

Thomas Reed Martin’s, the Martin Studios was hired to design the building which cost the Chidseys \$25,000.

The cornerstone was laid on May 12, 1941, and a dedication ceremony was held on November 13, 1941, when it was formally accepted by Mayor E. A. Smith.

A year earlier the Chidseys also donated money to improve the Municipal Auditorium, adding a second floor, and the rear annex for a reported \$10,000.

At the front of the building, another donation, this one from shoe manufacturer R.P. Hazzard of Gardner, Me., who made possible the beautiful fountain which bears his name. Designed by



The interior of the Chidsey Library.

names of buildings at Sarasota Memorial Hospital, the Ringling Art School, New College, and numerous public sites.

In a recent issue of the Herald-Tribune, Samantha Gholar Weires reported a very special gift. Garci and Dennis McGillicuddy have added their names to the roster of benefactors by opening the All Star Children’s Foundation Campus of Hope and Healing for foster children.

What could be better than “To transform the lives of foster children?”

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See APPRAISAL, Page 101

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