

Twentieth-Century Life along the Hillsborough, as seen by the Burgert Brothers

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Commercial photography came into its own as a specialty in the early twentieth century, documenting the events, people, and places that created the modern world. Businessmen, newspapers, and chambers of commerce hired photographers to convey a message about a certain product or place. Along the way, sometimes intentionally, sometimes accidentally, these photographers created a documentary record of the events, people, and structures of a community.

Burgert Brothers began in 1899 as the S.P. Burgert & Son portrait studio in Ybor City, a predominantly Cuban section of Tampa; the Burgerts themselves had come from Germany and France a few decades earlier, first settling in Ohio and Kentucky before moving to Florida. Facing bountiful if not formidable local photographic competition, the Burgert family's business survived and even prospered and by 1919, their studio was known as Burgert Brothers.

The Burgerts were energetic, talented, and innovative. Demanding high quality work, the Burgert Brothers developed a consistently recognizable style, with crisp focus and sharp detail. The style is a practical and uncomplicated realism that makes their work accessible to the viewer, even decades after the shutter snapped. Although the brothers hired photographers to work with them, the name "Burgert Brothers" appeared in the corner of every print.

Burgert Brothers documented the social life, economic ventures, and cultural events of twentieth-century Tampa. That many of these images show the Hillsborough River reflects the role the river played in the life of the city, not any particular focus of the photographers. Often real estate agents and local

businessmen hired Burgert Brothers to photograph a parcel or building for sales brochures or promotional literature, and some of these projects were along the river. Burgert Brothers frequently photographed the city's annual Gasparilla Festival, including the dramatic pirate invasion up the Hillsborough River from Hillsborough Bay. Other photographs could have been taken for the Chamber of Commerce, showing peaceful scenes along the banks of the river.

The Burgert Brothers appear to have meant what they advertised — "We Photograph Anything-Anytime-Anywhere." However, as authors Robert Snyder and Jack Moore point out in their highly recommendable book about the Burgert Brothers, "... their accumulated photographs express no grand critical vision but demonstrate acceptance of the everyday life with which they were familiar as white middle-class Americans." Minorities do appear in some of the Hillsborough River photos, but as a group, they are underrepresented.

When the studio closed for business in 1963, Burgert Brothers' legacy included 70,000 or so negatives, each recorded in handwritten ledger books, with date, location, and description. These negatives passed through several hands, but remained largely intact, as their value was patently obvious. In 1974, the bulk of the collection was sold to the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System. The University of South Florida library and the Florida State Archives in Tallahassee also have significant Burgert Brothers holdings. Gradually these institutions are stabilizing, cataloging, and scanning the photographs for online digital access; however, thousands of images have yet to become available to researchers. Undoubtedly, more scenes of the Hillsborough River will be discovered.

Perhaps overshadowed by the glamour and drama of the beach, the Hillsborough River is frequently not present in popular images of Tampa. This should not be taken to mean that the river has no place in the life of the city — quite the opposite is true. The river and the city are inseparable. The Hillsborough has been a working river, with lumberyards and fish markets, ship works, and oil terminals. It has been a playing river, with resort hotels and swimming pools, rowing clubs, and waterfront restaurants.

The Hillsborough River and the city of Tampa have entered a time of transition, with the future role of the river to be decided. Will greenways line the riverbanks, or the shores support condominiums and office towers? Will boaters and fishermen have easy access, or will private landowners control the entry points? The dialogue concerns what Tampanians want for their city, not just a vision for a river.

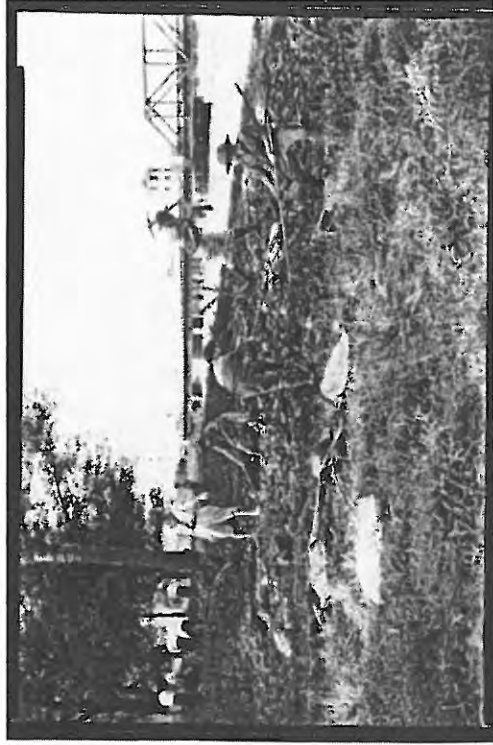
Today, the city seems disconnected from the river but this was not always the case. Postcards and maps provide information about the active role the Hillsborough played in creating this city, as do the Burgert Brothers photographs. A reexamination of these images shows that the river is and always has been a part of Tampa's heritage.



Couple in rowboat fishing on the Hillsborough River (1921).
(courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library System)



Boats surrounding Gasparilla Pirate Ship on the Hillsborough River, as seen from Tampa General Hospital (1954).
(courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library System)



Boy scouts cleaning up west bank of the Hillsborough River south of the Cass Street Bridge (1924).
(courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library System)



Women feeding pigeons in Plant Park, Lafayette Street Bridge and the Hillsborough River in the background (1947).
(courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library System)



Tampa Water Works water treatment facilities, on northwest corner of 30th Street and Sligh Avenue, looking east toward the Hillsborough River (1952). (courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library System)