

We Love to Tell the Stories

Stories of the Land

Steve Gardner

My family joined Hyde Park Methodist Church in 1972 shortly after I returned from Vietnam. At that time, the entirety of the church property was at 500 W. Platt Street. It consisted only of the sanctuary, the Wesley Building and what is now known as Knox Hall. The church did not own any of the property in the block fronting on Azeele, where the Harnish Activities Center and the church offices are now located. In the 1980s, the church consolidated its ownership for the entire block.

In the 1990s the church began acquiring property in the block to the south and by the end of the century had purchased all of the property in that block except for the parcel in the southwest corner which was occupied by The Magnolia Bar. The bar had been in operation for many years and was a popular hangout for businessmen after work as well as “the” place to be during the annual Gasparilla Parade which began downtown, went along Bayshore Boulevard and then turned onto Magnolia Avenue and went right past the bar.

Around the turn of the century, Rev. Jim Harnish asked me to spearhead the acquisition of property around the church as it became available. HPUMC was growing and he did not want us to end up being landlocked like some other churches in the area. As a result, the following happened:

1999 – An unexpected generous bequest of \$100,000 was received from the estate of a long-term faithful Hyde Park family. Since there was no designation and the church had no pressing need, it was set aside for potential property purchases. Lo and behold, in God’s perfect timing, the first of many properties became available soon thereafter. The first was the little building on the southwest corner of Magnolia and Azeele. It had once had been a filling station but after it closed, attorney Paul Game, Sr. bought it and turned it into his law office. When it became available, the then owner was Bill Blake, also an attorney. The same year we

acquired the lot on Azelle just west of the office building and used it for many years for additional parking.

1999 to 2003 – We bought three two-story wooden former residences which were being rented to people of low income and were referred to as “flop houses” or “boarding houses” Many of the residents were regulars at the Magnolia Bar and nightly, in inebriated states, were barely sober enough to make it across the street to our newly acquired properties. I went by and collected rent on a weekly basis until, soon thereafter, the residents were relocated, and plans were made to demolish the buildings. A near tragedy occurred when one of the houses caught on fire. One person was injured but fortunately, recovered after receiving care at Tampa General.

2002 - We purchased the Magnolia Bar and immediately closed it. was the answer to the prayers of Kathleen Gerald who years ago prayed for the bar to be shut down. She sometimes would go around passed out bodies on the sidewalk outside the bar as she walked to church on Sunday mornings. This completed our ownership of the entire block south of the church. After the 11 o'clock service on a Sunday shortly after the acquisition of the bar, the entire congregation processed out of the church and down Magnolia Avenue to the former bar, laid hands on it and prayed that it might be used for God's purpose. Within a year we tore the building down and by 2007 erected the Magnolia Building for youth ministry in its place.

2006 - We had been talking with one of the owners of the two-story medical building on the south half of the block fronting DeLeon Street. Much to our surprise, we received a call giving us the first option to buy it. We jumped on his offer and acquired the property and building. At the time, we thought we might be able to use it for church operations and for other local non-profit organizations. Unfortunately, it was determined that it would be too costly to rehabilitate so the building was torn down. Following the acquisition of the medical building we owned the south half of that block. We attempted to purchase the “pink house” at the southwest corner of Horatio and Cedar, but the owners were demanding much too much for it.

2011 - After not finding a buyer for the pink house for several years, the owners

became willing to sell it at a more reasonable price and the church bought it. Because it was designated in the “Historical District,” it could not be torn down. We subsequently sold it to a developer who moved it to a lot immediately west of the Bill Blake building. We then owned the entire block with one exception – the abortion clinic on the northwest corner.

2020 - After many years of frustrating and fruitless discussions with the owner of the abortion clinic, he went into bankruptcy. We were able to purchase property from the bankruptcy trustee, thereby completing our acquisition of both blocks south of the church.

And that, my fellow Hyde Parkers, is the story of our land. Some ask, “What will we do with it?” The answer lies with you and our future Christian brothers and sisters. Those who went before us could only have dreamed of these days for us. Our future is filled with their hopes, their love and their dreams. It will be up to us and those who follow us to decide how this land can best make God’s love real.