

CHASING SHADOWS: Apalachicola's 19th century brick masterpieces

By Pam Richardson Special to the Times September 2020

Three distinctive brick buildings define Apalachicola's riverfront: the Center for History, Culture and Art, the Grady Market and what was, until Hurricane Michael, City Hall. Without these, there would be precious little to remind us of our city's vibrant past.

The Grady Market Building is the newest of the three structures, built in 1900 to replace John E. Grady's chandlery which burned to the ground in the devastating fire of that year. Our former City Hall was built in 1837, but has been altered substantially over the years.

The only almost-original of these buildings is the one housing the HCA Center at 43 Water Street. Also built in 1837, it stands today as a beautiful memorial and tribute to the once booming Port of Apalachicola and one of its most prominent citizens, David G. Raney.



From a small settlement in a marshy pine barren in the 1820s, Apalachicola grew quickly. Cotton from upriver plantations was its primary commodity. In 1835, when the Apalachicola Land Company held its first public land auction, it sold 30-foot by 80-foot waterfront lots in the center of town with the stipulation buyers must erect only three-story, fireproof buildings on them.

Only two years later, the *Apalachicola Gazette* reported the hodgepodge of shanties along the river had been replaced by the construction of a continuous line, three-quarters of a

mile long, of three-story brick stores and warehouses. Their Greek Revival design, with granite posts and lintels from Quincy, Massachusetts, and bricks from Baltimore, Maryland, emulated many commercial buildings built about the same time at South Street Seaport in New York. Eventually, there were over 50 such buildings along Water Street, many of them with wharves extending out in front of them.



Apalachicola's brick buildings have always been described as cotton warehouses, so it is no small surprise to learn in an unpublished paper by the late research historian, Lee Willis, that the ground floors of a large percentage of these buildings were occupied by stores, restaurants, saloons and coffee houses while the second floors generally contained offices of insurance companies, commission merchants, auctioneers and lawyers, and the third floors served as living quarters for clerks working in the offices below.

Willis arrived at this conclusion by studying advertisements in early Apalachicola newspapers. The mercantile houses sold a wide variety of goods brought in by ship from New Orleans, Baltimore, Boston, and Providence as well as Cuba, England and Europe. Once the ships' holds were emptied onto the wharves in Apalachicola, stevedores would then refill them with the thousands of bales of cotton that upriver plantation owners

sent down for export. Where was that cotton stored, if not in warehouses? On the wharves and in Water Street, it seems.

In 1843 the city marshal staked off Water Street, dividing it from wharf property in front, “to prevent our principal thoroughfare from being almost closed up by cotton bags and other merchandise.” And in 1860, a young clerk wrote to his fiancée that “the whole Levee,” as he called Water Street, “is so covered with cotton bales that I can walk the whole length of it on them... there are not enough drays in town to move it from the wharves or all would be well.”

David G. Raney, the great-great-grandson of an Irish immigrant, was born in 1799. He came from Petersburg, Virginia to Florida around 1827 as the envoy of three brothers, Latinus, Marcus Aurelius, and Fabian Armistead, who employed him in their trading and land speculation firm. They had a franchise to operate a ferry across the Apalachicola River near what is today Chattahoochee, and they sent Raney there to help develop the short-lived settlement of Aspalaga where Raney served as postmaster from 1829 to 1831.

In 1833, after Latinus Armistead’s death, Raney married Latinus’s young and very wealthy widow, Harriet Frances Jordan. The newly-weds relocated to Apalachicola where Raney, on an earlier scouting mission for the Armistead firm, had realized there was enormous financial opportunity. Raney quickly partnered with George Washington Harrison, a fellow Petersburg transplant, in establishing a dry goods and groceries business. It was perhaps in his honor, Raney named his second child, born in 1837, William Harrison Raney.

The location of their first store is unknown, but early issues of the *Apalachicola Gazette* show that Harrison & Raney moved once from their original site to a two-story framed house on Commerce Street and, then again, to their brand new, three-story brick building at 43 Water Street. In January 1838, Harrison & Raney were open for business in their “new brick store” where they would sell, as before, “a General Stock of Dry Goods and Groceries, offered on accommodating terms.”

What Harrison & Raney sold

Some of these items, taken from one of the establishment’s many advertisements, were as follows (spellings are theirs):

Cotton oznaburgs

Blankets, flannels & Kerseys

Brown shirtings and sheetings
Plain & figured challey & plaid challey dresses
Shoes assorted
Irish linen
Dinner setts, Cut Glass Decanters, Tumblers
Crates of Crockery and Glasses
Hardware and Cutlery, Iron, Nails & Brads
250 pcs. Heavy Hemp Bagging
200 coil Bale Rope
Gloves, ribbons, combs, etc
Calicoes, cambrae and muslins
Plain and figured silks and satins
Brown and Loaf Sugar
Leftwich's Chewing Tobacco
Silk, cotton and woolen hosiery
Shawls, scarfs and handkerchiefs
Carpetting and Rugs
Cuba and Rio Coffee
Choice Claret Wine in Cases & Champaign Wine
Old Madeira Wine, Port & Sherry Wine in Bottles
Silk, Beaver and Wool Hats and Caps
Holland Gin, Cognac and Champaign Brandy
Gun Powder, Imperial & Hyson Teas in Can'trs
Whiskey, Gin and Rum

Oznaburg, kersey and brown shirting were fabrics also known as Negro or Slave Cloth. They were coarse, durable fabrics given to slaves to turn into clothing for themselves. In 1840, David Raney owned nine slaves, and George Harrison owned eight, according to census information. There were another 60 or so slaveholders in Apalachicola and many more on plantations upriver.

In 1836, it appears Harrison and Raney, together with several other parties, purchased 43 Water Street (Lot 9) and the property directly behind it (Lot 12), on which they immediately built a three-story brick building and a small brick warehouse. Their financial situations, however, necessitated a mortgage which they acquired from one Alphonse

Loubat, a Frenchman living in New York City, who owned an import-export business. He married a wealthy American and over time increased their worth to the millions of dollars. His imports included wheat and wine and he exported high-demand products such as tobacco and cotton. That the buyers of Lots 9 and 12 found a distant New York investor to lend them the necessary funds exemplifies the close connection that existed between merchants in the two port cities. Loubat probably never even visited Apalachicola, but he - like Raney and so many others - smelled opportunity and invested in real estate on its waterfront.



Incidentally, Loubat was a fascinating man. Besides his entrepreneurial undertakings and property collections, he planted vineyards in Brooklyn in the 1820s, wrote a now collectible book entitled *The American Vine Dresser's Guide*, retired to a fashionable address (currently a Gucci store) in Paris in the mid-1840s, became mayor and built a château (later owned by Gustave Eiffel) in suburban Sèvres, invented something called a grooved rail upon which he created the first tramway in Paris. He left his wealth to his son who donated vast sums to Columbia University and the Catholic Church.

But, back to our story. It didn't take long for Harrison and Raney to graduate from mere tradesmen to commission merchants, men who bought and sold products, including a lot of cotton, for a percentage of the sales price. In the boom days of the 1840s, there were over 40 commission merchants in Apalachicola, almost all located on Water Street, according to Willis. From fall through spring, when the water in the river was high enough for boats to navigate, bales of cotton spilled out over the crowded wharves into Water Street, the air rang with the cries and bells of auctioneers, sailors and stevedores thronged the downtown, and commission merchants filled their coffers with huge sums of money.

David Raney was not only a prosperous businessman, he was also popular with his peers. In Dec. 1840, a group of men interested in horse racing met in Apalachicola's luxurious Mansion House hotel, dubbed themselves the Apalachicola Jockey Club and elected Raney their president. One member, a prominent turfman in northwest Florida, offered to

establish a race track if the necessary funds could be raised. It took them only two days to do this, which speaks to the kind of wealth floating around Apalachicola at the time. In 1841, horses came from stables in north Florida, Alabama and Georgia for five days of races at the Franklin Course, with purses ranging from \$200 to \$1,000. But when the next season rolled around, the country was in a depression and Franklin Course closed, never to re-open.



Other feathers in Raney's cap were his positions as a founding member of the Apalachicola Library Association, member of the board of directors of the Apalachicola branch of the Bank of Pensacola, president of the Chamber of Commerce, and mayor for two consecutive terms (1843 and 1844). He also encouraged theatrical companies to come to town by providing them with theatre space.

George Harrison met with less success. He and Raney maintained their partnership until the early 1840s, but then Harrison ignominiously left Apalachicola and returned to Petersburg, making Raney the sole proprietor of the business. Harrison had apparently racked up a lot of debt, declared bankruptcy in 1843 and then compounded his problems when he arranged for his slaves to be sent from Apalachicola to Petersburg by having his brother-in-law pose as their owner so as to prevent Harrison's creditors from seizing the slaves for the money owed them. When this ruse was found out, the creditors took Harrison and his brother-in-law to court. Whether or not Harrison ever made good on his debt is unknown, but he and his family soon went to Victoria, Texas where he died in 1850 at the age of 49.

After Harrison left Apalachicola, Raney no longer had exclusive use of the building at 43 Water Street. In 1844, the second floor was rented out to Robert H. Goodlet, a cotton weigher, and T.H. and C. H. Austin, grocers and commission merchants. Despite this apparent attempt to defray costs, the Commercial Advertiser ran a notice in 1846 of Loubat's foreclosure on Lots 9 and 12. Later that year, Commission Merchant William T. Wood occupied 43 Water Street, and Raney advertised his business next door at #44. This was also the last year for which any newspaper advertisement for Raney's business can be found, but this may be due to the loss of almost all local newspapers in the last half of the 19th century. Indications are Raney continued to work as a commission merchant until his retirement almost 30 years later. Loubat, living in Paris, owned Lots 9 and 12 until 1859 when he sold them to Thomas Orman.

The shipping of cotton and other goods into and out of Apalachicola came to a virtual standstill during the Civil War due to Union blockades of Southern ports. After the war, there was a short revival, but soon railways, which didn't get to Apalachicola until 1907, made it more profitable for plantation owners to send their cotton by rail to ports like Savannah. Apalachicola went into a deep decline and, over time, fires, hurricanes, and age destroyed the once glorious line of brick buildings.

By 1897, only six of the original 52 were still standing. The Harrison-Raney Building was one of these, in use at the time as a general store and a ship chandlery. Miraculously, it survived the catastrophic 1900 fire which destroyed so much of Apalachicola's business district. Sanborn Insurance maps show the building was still being used as a general store in 1903, for storage in 1922 and as a honey warehouse in 1931. The removal of the building's third story - its most notable alteration - occurred in 1949-50, according to the Florida Master Site File. Boarded up and left to fall into ruin, the building was brought back to life by Lynn Wilson and her husband, Bill Spohrer, in the 1990s. Then, in 2005, the city acquired the property and turned it into the exciting art and history museum it is today. The HCA's board of directors has just applied for a grant to pay for flood mitigation and building resiliency procedures for the 183-year old structure, now on the National Register of Historic Places, to ensure its survival as an icon of 19th century seaport architecture and Apalachicola's golden age.