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Tampa Bay History Center
801 Water St.
Tampa, FL, 33602
<https://tampabayhistorycenter.org/>

Visit Date: February 24, 2024
In-person visit

Location

The Tampa Bay History Center is located in the heart of downtown Tampa, edging along the famously know Riverwalk, with direct access to the trail as well as centrally located to many great eateries and other Tampa Bay spots. The center was originally founded in 1989 by the Hillsborough County Board of Commissioners, and opened the riverwalk location in 2009. The history center had a physical presence in Tampa Bay in the 30 years between its inception and its accumulation of the Riverwalk property, but they were smaller shop-front like locations and frequently changed.

The three story building covers close to 12,000 years of Florida History through it three floors of permanent and rotating exhibitions. The main collections focus on Native-American civilizations, African-American and Hispanic communities, environmental and industrial fluctuations, and piracy throughout the state's vivid history. This history center also partners with Hernando County to curate collections and artifacts at the Chinsegut Hill Historic Site.

Partnerships

The Tampa Bay History Center has a plethora a familial and corporate partnerships that help them fund curate the center and its exhibits. These partnerships vary from monetary donations, exhibit and archive donations, sponsorships.

This center also has prominent connections with the Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library System, the University of South Florida, Ybor City, Hernando County, and the Chinsegut Hill Historic Site. A comprehensive lists of sponsors, partners, and doners were not provided on the website.

There is ample opportunity on the website to provide donations or sponsorship from individuals, families, or local businesses to the history center, as well as provide them with digital versions of historical artifacts or documents, to possibly be used in future exhibits.

Accreditation Status

The History center was accredited in 2015 by the American Alliance of Museums, as well as becoming a Smithsonian Affiliate museum in 2012.

Publications

In their 2019-2023 strategic plan, the center set out for goals for publishing more with their internal journal (I believe called the Tampa Bay History Journal which is also associated with USF), using more joint media platforms to promote their exhibits, other content-based articles, and writing a book titled "State of Change – A STEM & Social History of Florida". They

also mentioned goals of producing more in-exhibit documentations and guides to assist patrons through their experience.

The center also has a blog that discusses the different education opportunities, highlights from exhibits, historical facts relevant to the “insert history” month and area, and various press releases. Lastly, there is also an annually-released newsletter called The Contanchobee which touches on learning opportunities, upcoming exhibits, community events, membership information, donors/sponsors, financial breakdowns, and more internal operations memos.

All present and most past exhibits and other miscellaneous artifacts are also published through the history center’s website for patrons to view them digitally and read about their stories. This along with the center’s education tools is an almost perfect summation of a full scope of interaction and availability on the center’s part.

Programs for Youths and Adult Lifelong Learning

There are a ton of youth and adult programs through the history center. For K-12, there is SHIP-SHAPE (Scaffolding Historical Inquiry for Preschoolers: School & Home Active Play-based Explorations) which is sponsored by the University of Florida College of Education; Learning At Home activities that include virtual tours and videos, interactive activities, artifacts in 3-D, and lesson plans; Museum at Home/History to-go kits, where students can bring history outside of the center; school field trips; Teen council, which provides volunteer based seats as a miniature council that helps the center connect with teens and institutions, create programming, and run events; and finally a variety of summer camps for all age ranges, genders, and historical interests.

For Adults, there are two different types of education opportunities; one more academic, the other more professional-focus. As for the more academic opportunities, the history center provides adult learners with Book Group, which meets once a month to discuss the best books in Florida (all topics welcomed); OLLI-USF lifelong courses, which are non-degree seeking courses for individuals in the community who want to learn in a class-setting (Classes hosted online through USF); and outreach programs that involve community talks, lectures, and presentations from local historians and community members.

Lastly, the history center has the two available research centers; the Lavinia Sparkman-Witt Research Center and the Touchton Map Library. The research center is dedicated to in-house artifact and resource discovery, analysis, and publication. It can be accessed by appointment only and no resources or artifacts can be removed from the premise. The Touchton Map Library is established through relations with the University of South Florida; this collection allows researchers to access maps from more than 500 years ago up until present time. Their relationship with USF allows for access to all the physical and virtual map collections available through USF’s library subscriptions.

Library Connections

The Tampa Bay History Center is directly affiliated with the University of South Florida’s libraries via their Touchton Map Library and the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library system via their Witt Research Center.

My Experiences

I had a really amazing time exploring the Tampa Bay History Center! The actual center was so much bigger than I was expecting, as I had really convinced myself that it was going to be a small makeshift space. It is incredibly well organized and stocked with information regarding the history of the Tampa Bay, and Florida as a whole. The first level of the museum is the gift store, a café/bar, and the first exhibit. This first exhibit was dedicated to the Native tribes and peoples who first lived in Florida, how they were affected by the oncoming colonizers, and how their societies meshed into each other. There was also a large section about the first Spanish-decent immigrants in the local communities, and their relations with the Cuban cigar business boom in South Florida.



Lives Matters movement, representation of African-American war veterans, athletes, scholars, and pertinent community members. Both were beautifully curated and well diversified for their many facets.



place and treatment within their community. It was so fascinating seeing my home in a totally different lifetime!

The second floor was dedicated to the environmental history of the land and sea in the Tampa Bay region. This looked at different aspects like agriculture, fishing, ecosystem health, and industrialization. The other half of the floor displayed African-American history and culture throughout Tampa Bay's past and present. It was incredible to see signs and posters created during the 2020 Black



The third floor was the rotating exhibit, which at this time examines the geographic and cultural

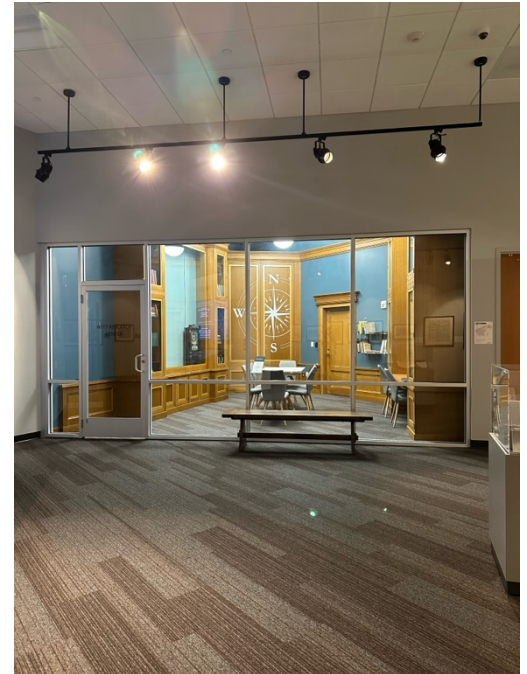
transformation of Florida throughout the 1920's. There were impeccably preserved women's swimsuits on display, original posters, photos, and letters, and artifacts like records and jewelry. My favorite pieces of this exhibit were the hand written letters on display, and the typed research paper on black men's

The fourth and final floor housed the two previously research centers, an entire exhibit dedicated to different Florida maps (in various scales and focus of location), and a display

dedicated to the pirates, colonizers, and explorers who travelled to Florida. In the back of the exhibit is also an observation deck with binoculars that can point to various islands and historical sites within Tampa Bay.

Each exhibit floor was laid out and stocked so well with different learning tools, interactive toys and modules, informational videos, and artifacts from that time period. Even as an adult I found myself enjoying the small interactive games and videos, as it made learning about the Tampa Bay's history fun. It was really interesting to see a local historical center adapt to their community's languages, as all the displays had some Spanish explanations under the English blurb; it was really refreshing to see that kind of community to institution connection. It was also incredible to see a historical institution to have two different research components and tons of community and education outreach opportunities. I am hoping now that research I conduct down the road will lead me to be able to use the resources in this beautiful center. My last little bit of excitement was to learn of the strong connection this history center has with the University of South Florida, as it

makes me wonder what other kinds of research and resources are available through our school that is not traditionally found in our grand digital library space. Out of all the exhibits, I have to say the pirate one was my all-time favorite. It was so fun being able to choose a fake pirate's story to follow, get to look at real astronomer's tools, learn about cartography and star charting, and even see old gold coins! I also thought the observation deck was an incredible way to inspire people to learn more about Tampa's history when they can see just how close those places really are. This was really a wonderful trip and I am incredibly thankful that Tampa Bay has a community that is dedicated to preserving its history.



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