

## Famous Floridians: Henry Morrison Flagler

Henry Morrison Flagler is best known for his development of Florida's east coast. He was responsible for building the Florida East Coast Railway from Daytona to Key West. Flagler made a significant contribution to Florida's economy through tourism and agriculture.

Flagler had some success in the grain business. Then he joined John D. Rockefeller to found Standard Oil in 1870. In two years, Standard Oil was leading the U.S. oil industry.

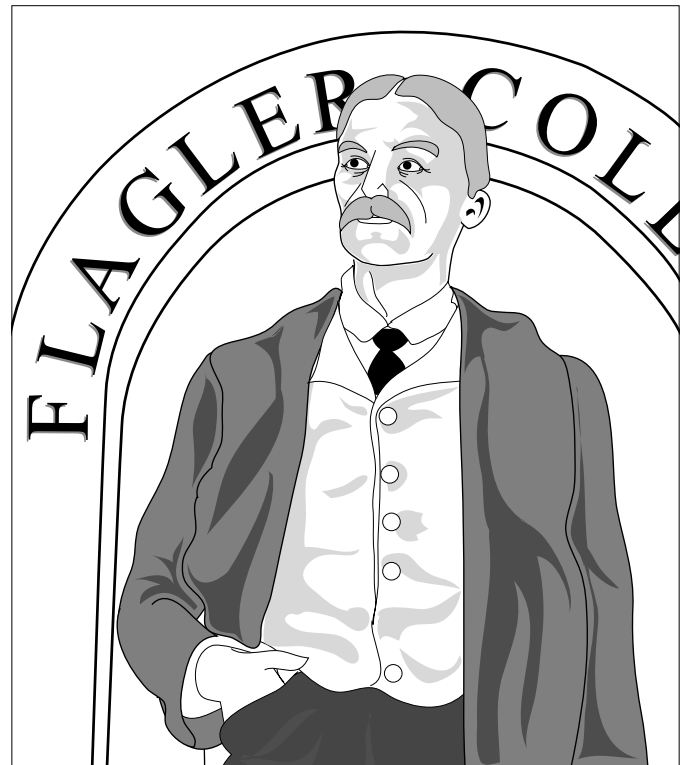
Flagler, his wife, and children lived in New York but his wife's health was not good. The doctor suggested they try Florida. The Flagler family tried wintering in Jacksonville, then the only accessible city in the state.

On Flagler's second trip to Florida in 1882, he visited St. Augustine. He was charmed by the city and the weather but frustrated by the lack of hotels and transportation. He recognized Florida's potential to attract out-of-state visitors. He decided to pour his oil fortune into the state's development.

The oil tycoon, with the bushy mustache and hair parted down the middle, left day-to-day operations to Rockefeller and focused on Florida. He was to become one of the state's most glamorous developers.

In 1885, he began construction on the 540-room Hotel Ponce de Leon hotel in St. Augustine. Realizing the need for transportation to his hotel ventures, Flagler began purchasing existing railroads. This was the start of Flagler's railroad system.

Two years later, Flagler built a railroad bridge across the St. Johns River to gain access to the southern half of the state and purchased a hotel, just north of Daytona. He next extended his railroad and hotel empire to Palm Beach. Flagler's hotels and railroad established Palm Beach as a winter resort for the wealthy members of American society. Flagler built a palace, called Whitehall, as his residence in Palm Beach.



**A statue of Flagler stands in front of Flagler College in St. Augustine.**

Henry Flagler intended his next expansion, West Palm Beach, to be the end of his railroad system, but during 1894 and 1895, severe freezes hit the area. Legend says that landowner Julia Tuttle, a young widow who lived in Miami and advocated development, sent Flagler a spray of orange blossoms—proof that the freeze had left southern Florida untouched—as incentive to extend his

railroad to Miami. To further convince him to continue the railroad to Miami, Flagler was offered land in exchange for laying tracks.

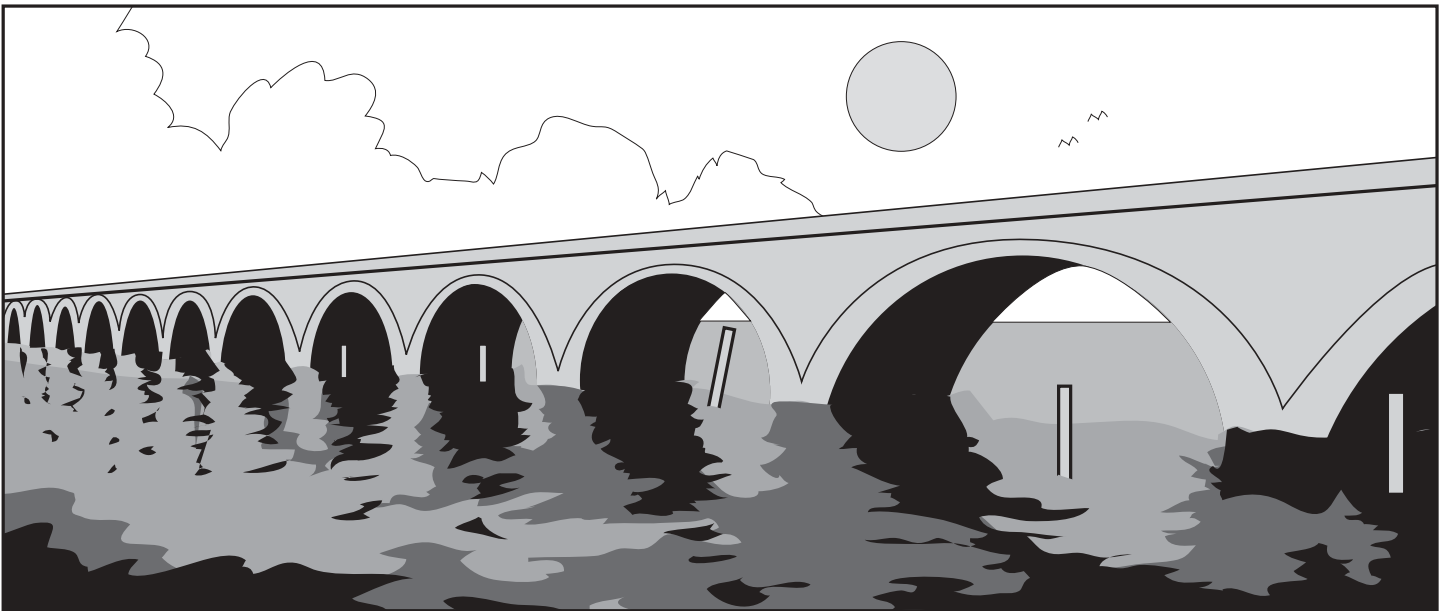
Flagler's railroad, now named the Florida East Coast Railway, reached Biscayne Bay by 1896. Flagler dredged a channel, built streets, instituted the first water and power systems, and funded the town's first newspaper. When the town incorporated, its citizens wanted to honor the man responsible for its development by naming it "Flagler." He turned down the honor. He persuaded them to keep the old Indian name, "Miami."

In 1905, he began constructing what would be called, "Flagler's Folly," a railroad that would span seven miles of open water on its way to Key West. At the time, Key West was Florida's most populated city. It was also the port nearest to the

canal that the U.S. proposed to build in Panama. Flagler wanted to trade with Cuba and Latin America as well as take advantage of increased trade with the west using the Panama Canal.

Almost 4,000 men built the railroad bridge in seven years. They had to contend with mosquitoes, sand flies, and hurricanes. Hundreds of workers died in the storms. The railroad was finished but it proved to be a failure. It never earned the expected money and was destroyed by a 1935 Labor Day hurricane.

Henry Flagler said, "I have always been contented, but I have never been satisfied." When he began his development on the east coast of Florida, it was largely an uninhabited frontier. Due to his vision and persistence, his accomplishments can still be seen. His dissatisfaction has left a legacy for those of us who followed.



**Flagler connected the Florida Keys by rail.**