

The Runnymede Hotel, 1885 – 1940

Located about ½ mile north of Lake Runnymede and 300 yards east of East Lake Tohopekaliga in Osceola County Florida, it was built on a small ridge of land that would have flood waters very near in rainy season if Mr. Hamilton Disston of Pennsylvania had not become involved in Florida's beginning history as an American state. Like so many before him, Hamilton's father, Henry Disston, came from England as a child and built a successful business in Pennsylvania. The Keystone Saw Works of the 1840's was financially growing, expanding and continued to grow by the time Hamilton and his brothers took control of the plant at their father's death in 1878.

As a socialite and adventurer, Hamilton was invited by Henry Sanford to go on a fishing trip to Florida in 1877. While on this trip, he observed that large tracts of land could be reclaimed for agriculture if Lake Okeechobee were drained. He never succeeded in draining the Lake but did succeed in draining so much land in Florida that he became the largest landowner in the U.S. with his purchase of 4 million acres at 25 cents per acre in June of 1881. For his investment and efforts of draining Florida lands he would gain half of all drained lands. This was the agreement between him and other investors and the State of Florida. By December 1883 he had sold 2 million acres to Sir Edward James Reed, a member of the British Parliament for \$600,000. Sir Reed then began to sell his land to wealthy Englishmen who settled the Narcoossee area. (Note: this is where the subject of Runnymede Hotel connects to the British development of our area.)

One of the first British settlers (1883), Beauchamp Watson, had his home and a store in what at that time was known as Wharton which may have been named after an area northwest of London. In 1885 he and a group of English settlers decided to build a large wooden hotel to meet the need of having a nice place for friends and relatives coming from northern states and England to stay and to provide a social gathering place for themselves. Many social events were enjoyed there over the next ten or so years. There were dances, teas, a lawn tennis club and a polo club which even started Orlando's first polo club.

About this time the area got a new name, Runnymede, maybe because of this hotel's location and the knowledge of the Englishmen that near London was an area known as Runnymede where in 1215 the King and Barons tried to settle their grievances by signing the Magna Carta. The Runnymede Hotel was reached by wagons and buggies and by the Sugar Belt Railroad when it was built to connect rail service for Narcoossee's turpentine and lumber business. There was a small platform a few yards east of the hotel where guests could be picked up by wagons and buggies. Mr. John L. Hall ran the hotel.

Local residents of Narcoossee, Ashton, St. Cloud and visitors continued to use the hotel as a social gathering place and it was a successful business until the freezes of the late 1800's caused the local English population to move away or return to England. During this time the Hotel was used by many different interests. Disston set up his Sugar Mill offices there and the state of Florida tried to establish an Agricultural School. (Note: further research may determine if the remnants of structures within Chisholm Park were built by Disston or

the state.) Promoters of St. Cloud as a retirement city for veterans of the Civil War used the Hotel as a place to house those coming to look at the developing city.

Many years saw little use of the grand hotel until another hotel promoter, J. Edward Krause, from Indianapolis, Indiana found and purchased it. He improved and expanded the facility. Placing many advertisements in newspapers and sending pictured fliers back to northern friends and businesses, he opened the Runnymede "Lodge" about 1920. However all his experience and efforts could not sustain the hotel, so for some years it saw little use. After selling the furnishings, he allowed the building to set unused until Mr. John J. Padgett, Jr., son of an Osceola cattle rancher, bought it in 1940. He salvaged enough lumber from the old building to build 15 or 20 small houses in Orlando. This indicates that the first lumber cut and used in this area was of such superior quality that it was worth salvaging and reusing. The Grand Old Hotel lives on!

A note about Hamilton Disston: During the financial crisis of 1893 and 1894 he and many in America lost much of their financial assets. He had returned to Philadelphia where he died at age 51 of a self-inflicted gunshot has been told, however the local coroner's report said that he died in bed of a heart attack and the New York Times reported that he was not in good health due to typhoid pneumonia a few months earlier.



Picture of the Runnymede Hotel as it looked in early years.



Runnymede Lodge in 1920s after J. Edward Krause refurbished it.