Top: Postcard ca. 1905. The large wooden building to the left of Plaza Ferdinand is the stable that was razed to build the new city hall. Pensacola Historical Society Collection

The T. T. Wentworth, Jr. Florida State Museum
Cynthia Catellier

Cynthia Catellier earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of California, Irvine, and a Master of Arts in Public History from the University of West Florida. In addition to teaching at Pensacola State College, she works as an independent historical consultant.

A visitor looking east across Pensacola’s Plaza Ferdinand might wonder at the history of the beautiful T. T. Wentworth, Jr. Florida State Museum building located on Jefferson Street. Situated in the downtown historic district and near Pensacola Bay, the setting is ideal for such an architecturally interesting edifice. In 2012 the structure was named one of Florida’s top 100 Buildings by the American Institute of Architects. Some of the styles attributed to the building are Spanish Renaissance, Spanish Colonial, Alamo Mission Style, Renaissance Revival, Italianate, and Italian Renaissance.¹

In 1906, Pensacola officials selected the site of their new city hall with great care. Both British and Spanish colonial governments considered the site suitable for erecting governmental buildings. Civil engineer Elias Durnford arrived in Pensacola in 1764, appointed by the British Crown to devise a plan of streets and lots based on the standard “gridiron” plans used to lay out British towns.² A map of Pensacola drawn by Joseph Purcell ten years later shows key buildings erected by the British, including the Commanding Officer’s House and gardens located where the T. T. Wentworth, Jr. Florida State Museum now stands.³

After Spain reclaimed Pensacola in 1783, Vicente Sebastian Pintado was hired to plan the location of new governmental buildings.⁴ Pintado planned to erect the city’s prominent public buildings—a customs house, church, and the exchequer counting office—east of a grand plaza. Unfortunately, the Spanish Crown never provided funds for Pintado’s concept, and the buildings he envisioned were not erected.⁵ Once reserved for the city’s public buildings, the lots east of Plaza Ferdinand were acquired by private owners over the next few decades.⁶ The Pensacola city directories reveal that livery stables occupied the property at the corner of Jefferson and Zaragosa Streets from at least 1885 through 1905.⁷

Pensacola failed to prosper under both the British and Spanish regimes. Even when Florida became a state in 1845, twenty-four years after becoming a United States territory, the city remained under-developed. The main reason for Pensacola’s stagnant economy was the lack of transportation routes into the interior of the continent.⁸ Railroads connected to Pensacola after the Civil War, and the city began to prosper. During the late nineteenth century, the city’s hub of municipal activity shifted away from Plaza Ferdinand to Palafox Street.⁹

In 1901 the city passed an act permitting the issuance of bonds “for the purpose of providing or constructing a city hall”—Pensacola’s first building funded by a public bond issuance. Authorized in 1904 by a majority vote, the citizens of Pensacola were determined to erect an edifice befitting the city’s emerging importance. The city began acquiring the land east of Plaza Ferdinand and west of Commendencia Street from the private citizens who owned the property.¹⁰

From a multi-state pool of submissions, a special committee selected Montgomery, Alabama, architect Frederick Ausfeld to design Pensacola’s new city hall. Ausfeld’s plan called for a three-story building with a basement. Once the committee selected Ausfeld’s plan, the call went out for a builder. Local contractor Charles H. Turner submitted the winning bid. A short list of Turner’s other local projects include the Blount Building, the Isis Theatre, the Citizen’s and People’s Bank, the Masonic Building, the Saenger Theater, and the San Carlos Hotel. After tearing down the old wooden buildings that had housed the stables, Turner laid the corner stakes for the new city hall on September 11, 1906.¹¹

Finally, early in the twentieth century, the site reserved for government buildings on the east side of Plaza Ferdinand was to have a municipal building worthy of the grand ideas of Spanish planner Vicente Pintado. The thirty-three page “Housewarming Edition” of the September 23, 1906, Pensacola News Journal promoted the city’s enthusiasm for the new city hall and for Pensacola’s future.¹² Even though Pensacola suffered a devastating hurricane only three days later, the city continued building the new city hall.

The construction did not occur without incident. In November 1906, the city council called the architect be-
fore a hearing to discuss “defective earth, or soft earth, found under the footing of one of the proposed walls.” City Inspector Hill asked the architect to test the ground around the footing. A newspaper report stated that “before sixteen [shovelfuls] of sand had been removed, a spring was found.” Despite concerns caused by Pensacola’s high water table, the project ensued.13 By early 1908, Pensacola’s new city hall was ready for use.

The new building provided offices for Pensacola’s mayor and city council as well as for the city attorney, clerk, tax collector, comptroller, and other officials. Also in the building, Pensacola’s citizens could find the offices of the city building and plumbing inspectors, the city electrician, city engineer, and street superintendent. Although officials moved their belongings into the new city hall on Valentine’s Day 1908, the city council delayed the dedication ceremony until March 5, 1908, because custom chairs ordered for the balcony had not arrived from Cincinnati.14

Pensacola invited the public to a grand opening ceremony presided over by J. E. Davis Yonge, president of the city council. The event was complete with speeches by former mayors and music by the Marine Corps band. City officials escorted the public through the halls of the new, state-of-the-art municipal building.15 The thriving city of Pensacola finally had its grand building facing the plaza.

Stories of Pensacola’s grand new building appeared in newspapers across the region. The Pensacola Journal stated in a glowing review of the facilities that “the city officials [of] Pensacola have one of the handsomest homes of any city in the south is clearly demonstrated

In 1957 Mr. Wentworthworth opened his museum near his home on Palafox Highway in the Ensley area north of Pensacola. Many people still recall fondly the multitude of treasures Mr. Wentworth had on display.

West Florida Historic Preservation, Inc., Wentworth Collection
by a visit to the new city hall.” The article described ceramic tile floors, Georgia marble baseboards, numerous brass light fixtures, and walls paneled in dark mission wood. The building was not only beautiful, it was practical. For security, the building provided vaults with “filing cases of steel.” Offices contained modern-style furniture that was tasteful but “not that of making a show,” and the building had electric lights inside and out.16

The area that currently serves as the second- and third-floor museum exhibit spaces once housed a soaring two-story council chamber. Three public balconies overlooked the second-floor council chambers. Additionally, the council chambers contained tables for the press and the marshal. Harking back to classical Greek architecture, Ausfeld embellished the chamber walls with Corinthian pilasters.17

Officials conducted business in the grand old building for over seventy years. However, by the 1980s the number of city employees had grown to the point that over two hundred people were forced to work in satellite offices. Though plans to relocate faced great opposition from some officials, the old offices were finally packed up and relocated to the new city hall building on Main Street in 1985.18

The namesake of the T. T. Wentworth, Jr. Florida State Museum, Theodore Thomas Wentworth, Jr. collected a dizzying array of artifacts over his amazing lifetime. The original T. T. Wentworth, Jr. Museum opened in 1957 on Old Palafox Highway in Ensley. Wentworth donated his collection to the state of Florida with the assurance it would remain in Pensacola. City and state officials raised funds, and in 1988 the architectural firm Bullock Tice Associates renovated the old city hall building into a museum. As a sign that times had changed, the building that cost $100,000 to build in 1906, cost $4,000,000 to renovate in 1988.19

In the fall of 2013, thanks to a $500,000 tourism grant from British Petroleum, the T. T. Wentworth, Jr. Florida State Museum will open a new Pensacola, City of Five Flags exhibit, building upon 12,000 years of Pensacola’s rich and varied history. This magnificent building preserves the mix of nationalities and cultures that has earned Pensacola its unique place in history.20


3 Vicente Pintado, “A Plan of the town of Pensacola and its contiguous suburb of Gardens, according to the general arrangement, corrections and addition made in the Years 1807, 1808, and 1809 and other alterations made up to the date,” from Pintado Papers, Pensacola Historical Society Archives. 

4 Ibid.

5 Vicente Pintado, “Lots laid off between the two open Squares,” from “A Plan of the town of Pensacola and its contiguous suburb of Gardens, according to the general arrangement, corrections and addition made in the Years 1807, 1808, and 1809 and other alterations made up to the date,” Pintado Papers, Pensacola Historical Society Archives. Also, “Reports of the Commissions of Land Claims, In East and West Florida: February 22, 1825,” American State Papers: Documents, legislative and executive of the Congress, Part 8 Volume 4, No. 16, “An Act of the Cabildo of the 7th of December 1813, Designating the lots of public buildings and also those for sale between the two squares, formed in virtue of the resolution of this ayuntamiento,” and No. 17 January 23, 1814, “Calamitous circumstances which prevail in this town for the supplies wherewith to furnish meat for some days, to the garrison which is on the point of perishing.” Pintado also brings up the sale of the lots inside his original plaza in his explanation of the Map of Pensacola, 1814, Pintado Papers, Pensacola Historical Society Archives.

6 The T. T. Wentworth, Jr. Florida State Museum resides on lettered lots “C” and “D” in the old city tract, Escambia County Deed Book 33, page 545. The city sold lot “C” to John Cosgrove 5 March 1888 “State law 3774 allows city to sell streets.” The city re-purchased all of lot “C” “commencing from the northwest corner of Jefferson and Zaragossa” from T. E. and Carrie Wells, Escambia County Deed Book 42, p. 532, on 24 April 1906. The city purchased the lot reserved for the church on the Pintado Plan from E. P. Allen, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Church, Escambia County Deed Book 44, p. 179, on 25 April 1906. Lot “D” was purchased from Jacob Lipp, Escambia County Deed Book 42, page 530, 23 April 1906, and John M. Hoffman, Escambia County Deed Book 42, p. 446, on 8 May 1906.


9 Webb’s Pensacola Directory 1885-1886. Indicates the Tax collector and Marshal were in the Customs House and City Council offices were above the jail. The 1884 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows Pensacola Jail location. Roots web http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~flwigs/escambiacountyfl/index.htm


12 Pensacola Journal, 23 September 1906.

13 Pensacola Journal, 11 November 1906.

14 Pensacola Journal, 14 February 1908 and 26 February 1908.

15 Pensacola Journal, 5 March 1908.

16 Gainesville Daily Sun, 5 December 1905; Jacksonville Sun, 17 February 1906; Montgomery Advertiser, 19 February 1906; Ocala Evening Star, 16 February 1906; Panama City Pilot, 12 December 1907; and Pensacola Journal, 15 February 1908, 15 March 1908.
