

“The Ponce de Leon, for that matter comes as near producing, all by itself, the illusion of romance as a highly modern, a most cleverly-constructed and smoothly-administered great modern caravansary can come . . . and is, in all sorts of ways and in the highest sense of the word, the most ‘amusing’ of hotels.”

Henry James, *The American Scene*, 1907

In 1885 Henry M. Flagler, multi-millionaire industrialist and partner with John D. Rockefeller in Standard Oil, initiated a grand scheme to turn the Florida wilderness into the “American Riviera” and St. Augustine into the “Winter Newport”. Flagler’s tenacity would transform St. Augustine and its skyline forever. Hotels, churches, houses and the network of streets connecting them with the colonial city remain the dominant elements of the city’s urban landscape.

But Flagler’s legacy did not stop with St. Augustine. Over the next 28 years he would run his railroad down the east coast of Florida, build a series of resort hotels along the way, and foster development of many contemporary cities.

In 1905 Flagler, having recognized the strategic importance of the newly constructed Panama Canal, committed his personal and financial resources to construction of a railroad through the Florida Keys. This commitment would consume nearly as much of his fortune as had all of his Florida investments cumulatively, would withstand plagues, epidemics, and hurricanes, and would require pioneering engineering methods. Flagler’s Overseas Railroad, labeled the “Eighth Wonder of the World,” would be dedicated in 1912, a year before his death on May 20, 1913 at age 83.

The inaugural edifice and centerpiece of Flagler’s St. Augustine empire was the Hotel Ponce de Leon. This palatial Spanish Renaissance Revival resort hotel with Italian, French and Moorish influences ranks as America’s first large building constructed of cast-in-place concrete. *The building stands as the only one in the world to reflect the talents of: John Mervyn Carrere and Thomas Hastings as their first architectural commission. The firm designed more than 600 buildings including the New York Public Library. Bernard Maybeck, later designer for the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, served as one of the chief draftsmen.*

Construction was the responsibility of the St. Augustine firm of McGuire and McDonald, former New England shipbuilders who refined their craft in the construction of Flagler’s hotels. Thanks to Thomas Edison’s Electric Company’s four direct current dynamos, the hotel boasted four thousand electric lights, and each hotel room featured steam heat. Water was pumped out of the ground, filtered through fountains, and stored in the twin towers before servicing hotel rooms. Each tower held 8,000 gallons of water.

Louis Comfort Tiffany designed the interior of the building with Thomas Hastings, as well as being responsible for the 79 art (stained) glass window (the largest in situ collection in the world) flanking the grand staircase’s culmination at the entrance to the Dining Room, those throughout the Dining Room, and in the carriageway. This work was at the beginning of Tiffany’s career when he was registering patents for his glass works and prior to the time he devoted himself to the artistic designs of lighting fixtures for which he is so known.

George Willoughby Maynard painted two sets of murals: *Elements: Air, Fire, Water and Wind; and Exploration: Adventure, Discovery, Conquest and Civilization in the Rotunda.* In 1897, a decade after their creation, he replicated the latter set in the Treasures Gallery, Thomas Jefferson Building (Library of Congress). He created murals for the Dining Room, also. His commissions included Trinity Church, Boston, and the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City.

Italian-born New York painter Virgilio Tojetti created murals on canvas for the Grand Parlor, now the Flagler Room. These were created shortly after he completed the Den ceiling in Thomas Edison’s home Glenmont at Llewellyn Park in Orange, New Jersey. Most of Tojetti’s works are in museums and private collections, making his contributions to the Hotel Ponce de Leon significant as one of the only large scale representations of his talent available to the public.

Kenan Hall, former service building and staff quarters, now classrooms and faculty offices. Renamed Kenan Hall, reflects the continued importance of Henry Flagler to the College as his heirs, descendants of his third wife Mary Lily Kenan Flagler, were instrumental in the establishment of Flagler College.

The Ponce de Leon Art Studios face Valencia Street, completing the block on which the hotel is located. This building showcased a series of artists Henry Flagler hosted to provide entertainment for his guests and to promote St. Augustine through their paintings. Several of these artists gained fame; most notably, **Martin Johnson Heade’s landscape scenes grace the White House and National Gallery of Art (and his magnolia blossom is featured on a postage stamp).** Linking the Art Studios to Kenan Hall is the former Boiler Building which housed the Edison Electric Company’s steam dynamos and includes a 125-foot tall cylindrical polychromatic smokestack. In 2007 the two rehabilitated structures were dedicated as the Molly Wiley Art Building, honoring Mary Lily Flagler Wiley, namesake great-niece of Mrs. Flagler and sister of Flagler College’s founder Lawrence Lewis.