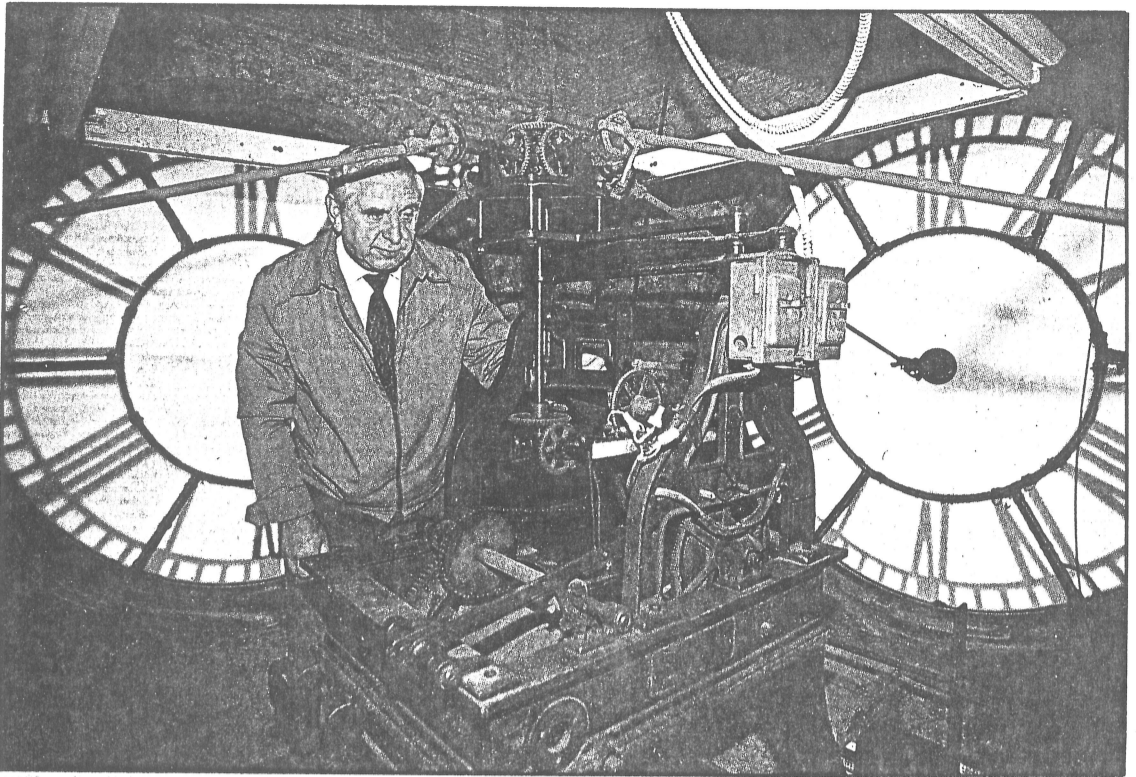


# Know Your Tampa

■ A WEEKLY HISTORY LESSON



SKIP O'ROURKE/Tribune photo

Ron Dalfino, building maintenance supervisor for the city of Tampa, checks the gears of Hortense the Clock which sits atop the old city hall building.

## The four faces of Hortense peer over downtown Tampa

By NANETTE WOITAS 1/24/94  
Tribune Staff Writer

TAMPA — As the city's oldest employee enters her 89th year of work, she has only one thing to look forward to — time on her hands.

Hortense, the sometimes crotchety clock over city hall, has remained a source of civic pride since she was installed in 1915. Her four expressionless faces have looked out over Tampa, through sunny days and hurricanes, through two World Wars and a Depression.

But she almost never came to be.

When architects from the Bonfoey and Elliot firm designed the layer cake-shaped building at what is now Kennedy Boulevard and Florida Avenue, they included plans for a four-faced clock. But when it came time to build, the money wasn't there.

So Hortense Oppenheimer Ford, socialite daughter of a prominent local doctor, began a campaign in 1914 to raise the \$1,267 needed to buy a public timepiece. City records are unclear as to how the money was raised, but the memory of its champion refuses to be forgotten.

Alice Williams, executive assistant for former mayors Curtis Hixon, J.L. Young, Nick Nuccio and Julian Lane, remembers Hortense Ford as a short, vivacious fireball who tenaciously attacked civic problems and came up with lasting solutions.

"She made an impression wherever she went," Williams recalled. "She stood out in a crowd."

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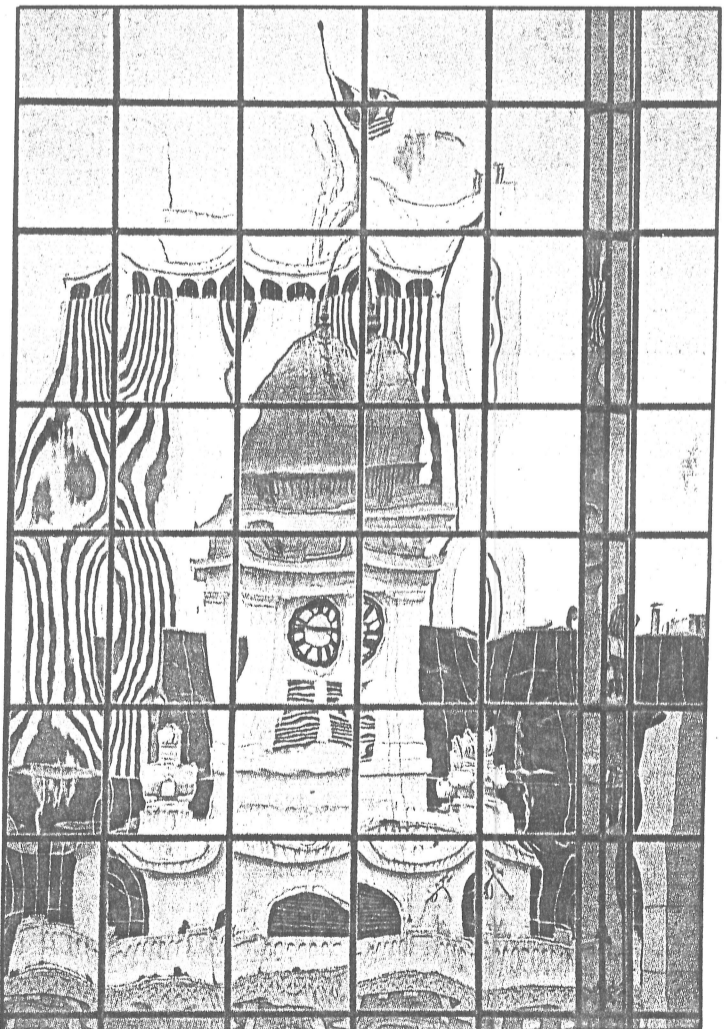
Hortense the Clock, the unofficial name given by city fathers in honor of Ford's effort, ticked off 26 years while Williams worked in city hall.

Now that Tampa has grown and the municipal building seems to have shrunk with age, Williams says it's important for today's generations to remember the past. The clock serves as an everlasting symbol, she said.

"I'm 75 and the people I knew so well, that knew the history, are all dying off," Williams said. "I'm tired of these glass buildings — skyscrapers with no character.

At one time, city hall towered over all else in

■ Seth Thomas Clock Co., which made Hortense, built about 3,600 tower clocks in the late 19th century and the early 20th century. An estimated 60 percent to 80 percent are functioning with the original mechanisms. The biggest changes to Hortense include replacing the original cedar hands with metal ones and abandoning a weight system in favor of a motor.

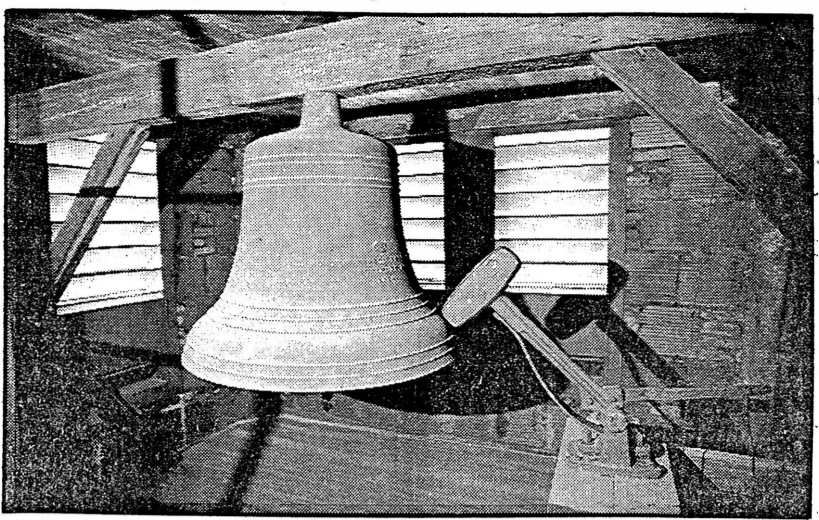


SKIP O'ROURKE/Tribune photo

The old city hall building with Hortense the Clock reflects in the windows of One City Center in Tampa.

young Tampa. The World War I cost to construct the limestone, granite and brick building was \$235,000. Newspaper articles of the period spoke of residents' pride in its construction and the

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SKIP O'ROURKE/Tribune photo

This thick bronze bell marks time — one bong on the half-hour, a series counting out each hour — inside Hortense the Clock.

## City hall clock tower 'could last forever'

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esprit de corps of the workers that made it rise from a tract of sand.

Its ornate architecture and stately columns still stand out among its newer neighbors, but the building's crowning glory has always been Hortense.

"Having the public timepiece is important. It makes it [city hall] that much more of a focal point," said Debra Alderson, spokeswoman for the Historic Tampa-Hillsborough County Preservation Board.

Over the years, Hortense, and especially her richly clanging bell, has represented many things to residents of Tampa. Off and on, residents have squabbled over whether the clock's chimes should be celebrated or silenced.

In 1979, after standing mute for four years, Hortense's bell rang out, striking 12 times at noon each day in remembrance of American hostages held in Iran.

These days, the thick bronze bell, 3 feet in diameter, marks time for downtown travelers — one bong on the half-hour, a series counting out each hour. Between 7 a.m. and midnight, a 24-pound hammer cocks back 8 inches and strikes, heralding time from high atop the city.

But city employees say they don't pay much attention to Hortense anymore. Some never realized she was there. Few say they set their watches by her — she's often criticized for being slow at times.

"You have to get far enough away to see it," said Gail Garcia of the city clerk's office.

But some nearby residents do pay attention to the aging timepiece.

"We give her a physical once in a while," said Ron Dalfino, city building maintenance superintendent. "People around here are very fussy about time. If she's off a couple minutes, they'll let you know."

Dalfino has been with the city for 25 years, keeping equipment, such as Hortense, up and running. Newspaper articles from 1977 quote Dalfino as saying the old clock "could last forever." He still believes it.

In helping to care for Hortense over the years, Dalfino has developed more than just a passive interest in clocks. He's collected a wide repertoire of timepiece puns and has built three grandfather clocks of his own.

It's in his blood.

Before moving his family to Tampa, Dalfino's father worked in the Seth Thomas Clock Co. of Thomaston, Conn. — the factory that turned out Hortense in 1915.

Factory workers crafted the last of the great tower clocks around 1940. Fifteen years later, all records of the clocks were destroyed in a history-making flood.

Now, in the factory where workers built Hortense, newfangled watches and clocks are sold and repaired.

And even workers trained to repair the old clocks are a dying breed.

"There just isn't that type of person around anymore," said Ron Allen, who owns the clock shop that now operates out of the Seth Thomas factory. "There are only about three left in the country anymore that even repair those clocks. That's like a sheep herder — it's a lost art."

Hortense has outlived most of her keepers. At one point, the city brought in a repairman from Europe each year to clean and oil the parts.

Lloyd Larish is one of the few people in the United States who still makes a living repairing tower clocks. Since the mid-1970s, Larish,

owner of the House of Clocks in Fairbault, Minn., has routinely traveled through 40 states fixing clocks that date back to the late 1800s.

He has never met Hortense but looks forward to working on her one day.

"Each one has a personality — [I'll bet] she's temperamental," he said.

"That clock was built by craftsmen who cared about their work down to the last detail. We can never afford to have that quality again, so that clock is irreplaceable."

Larish can spout off a fountain of knowledge about old clocks. But the most important thing about them, he said, is that they provide a symbol for the community and bond generations of residents. "They grew up looking at it, their fathers grew up looking at it," Larish said. "It's the one thing that stays with the community."

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Dalfino isn't a repairman, but he still climbs up to check on Hortense from time to time. He still believes she'll outlast us all.

Thursday, he greeted the tangle of greasy gears like old friend. "Hey there, Hortense. How are ya doing?" he said, leaning over to pat the noiseless, slowly moving parts.

To a veteran clock maker, the best thing about Hortense is her simplicity.

"There's nothing to wear out, except this motor," he said with a chuckle, noting the motor was added later as an "improvement in technology."

Before Hortense was electrified in 1956, the late city hall custodian, D.J. Gingrich, had to wind her weekly. The job started with a climb up a rusty, 39-rung ladder that rose through a square, narrow hole and past the ceilings and floors of the building's upper stories.

It's still the only way to get to the heart of Hortense.

The ladder starts at a noisy room above the eighth floor. The room is occupied by the building's massive cooling system and the old-fashioned motor that still powers its original elevator.

On the way up, climbers pass through a tiny room that houses the clock's 1,000-pound bell. Above it, her heart and soul lie in a 12-by-12 room, just below the dome.

In the center of the room sits a green stand covered with about 34 greasy gears. The gears range in size from just bigger than a thimble to about a foot in diameter. Four fluorescent lights illuminate the room and shine through Hortense's four white faces.

Years ago, custodian Gingrich made sure time never stopped in Tampa.

Every Monday morning, he manipulated about 1,700 pounds in weights that powered the clock and bell by steadily sinking through holes in the floor.

From the 2-foot core of interlocking gears, four rods radiate out to each wall. The rods power gears on each clock face, slowing turning giant minute and hour hands. One minute on the giant clock takes up 4 inches.

Former City Clerk Frances Henriquez marks her life by the changes at city hall. In 1954, she started as a clerk. By 1973, she had created quite a stir as the first woman elected to serve as city clerk.

When she retired last year, she left behind a major piece of her life — a life chronicled by a clock named Hortense.

"I usually went by her timing," Henriquez said. "She's a part of Tampa, a part of history. She's a good ole girl."