

Tarragona Tower: An Intriguing Local Landmark

By Randy Jaye

The medieval-looking octagonal tower and arch structure at the intersection of Tarragona Way and International Speedway Boulevard in Daytona Beach has intrigued locals and tourists for many years. There are several fictitious stories circulating around regarding its origin which include a Spanish prison, 19th century lighthouse, Civil-War era military outpost, sugar mill ruins and a relocated European castle from the Dark Ages. The reality of the structure's origin is not as flamboyant as these imaginary stories, but it is certainly of historic interest.

The structure is called the Tarragona Tower (a.k.a. Tarragona Arch or Tarragona Castle.) It was designed by local architect Elias F. De La Haye¹, and the artwork is attributed to noted local artist Don J. Emery². The structure's design was inspired by an octagonal medieval tower and arches located in Tarragona, Spain. Its construction was completed in 1925 during the Florida Land Boom³ by prominent local builder Charles Ballough⁴ who often utilized native coquina rock in his projects. It originally had a double arch, one on each side of the tower which is 45 feet tall. The identical arches measure 40 feet high and are 150 feet in length and extend at forty-five degree angles from the central tower. The solid coquina rock walls vary in thickness from 18 inches up to 4 feet and include several narrow window openings of various sizes that are located at different levels around the structure. The 24 feet wide arches originally spanned across two streets: Tarragona Way and Volusia Avenue (now International Speedway Boulevard), and actually had motorized traffic driving underneath them ([Figure 1](#)).

The structure's original purpose was to serve as a showy and atypical entranceway to the 1000-acre Daytona Highlands ([Figure 2](#)) Mediterranean Revival residential development (originally called Coquina Highlands⁵) which was proclaimed as "Florida's Suburb of Hills and Lakes." The structure was, in essence, a marketing strategy to promote property and home sales. It contains eight separate rooms. The ground floor was originally used as the developer's sales office and featured handmade Spanish furniture, a fireplace and powder room. It also included a lecture room, storeroom and drafting room above the ground floor. The top floor, accessible by an interior staircase, provided prospective property buyers and investors a bird's-eye view of the development and the surrounding area through a series of 24 windows. A powerful searchlight was also installed on the top floor that cast a beam of light through the 24 windows. The searchlight was illuminated every night and served as an advertisement for the development as it could be seen for miles around.

The structure was built from local coquina rock of irregular shapes (all of the rock used was quarried from the nearby Tomoka quarry which was owned by Charles Ballough.) Approximately 4,000 cubic yards of coquina rock, 1,000 bags of cement mix, 1,800 feet of imported Spanish roofing tiles and imported Spanish flooring tiles were used in the construction.

Demolition of the Northern Arch in 1942

During World War II the US Army was concerned that the arch over Volusia Avenue (now International Speedway Boulevard) would restrict troop and military vehicle movement. As a

result, it was torn down in 1942 despite community opposition. Ironically, the US Army never used the road for its anticipated military purposes and the demolition of this portion of the Tarragona Tower structure was not necessary.

The patchwork repairs done to the north wall on the Tarragona Tower, which faces International Speedway Boulevard, after the arch was demolished are still observable ([Figure 3](#)). About two thirds up the north wall a triangular point is noticeable where the gable roof of the arch was once attached to the tower. From this triangular point all the way to ground level are coquina rock replacements that do not quite match with the original masonry. The doorway on the second level that led into the tower from the arch now has a wooden door with a square window that is secured with an exterior iron banister. A non-original exterior porch was constructed from coquina rock and its steps lead to an interior stairway. Iron railings were added to the porch and the entranceway to the tower's staircase has an iron gate that is locked for obvious safety and security purposes.

Entire Structure Moved in 1994

The Florida State Department of Transportation announced as early as 1985 that International Speedway Boulevard would be widened to six lanes. Several ideas were considered regarding the Tarragona Tower, which was in the way of the proposed new road construction. It could be torn down, the new road could go around it, the entire structure could be disassembled and rebuilt elsewhere, or it could be physically moved. There were problems and challenges with all these options. Tearing it down met with fierce public opposition, so that option was ruled out. Going around the structure proved to be too costly as the purchase of surrounding land was too expensive. Disassembling it and rebuilding it at another location was not feasible according to the state's engineers. Finally, it was decided to physically move the entire structure. In November 1994 the 800 ton structure was jacked up and placed on a specially constructed track and moved 75 feet south from its original location. The project cost \$500,000. The move saved the Tarragona Tower from destruction, but its interior spaces remained in dire need of repair and restoration.

Restoration Project in 2004

After the Great Depression halted building in the Daytona Highlands development the Tarragona Tower was no longer used as the developer's sales office. Residents used it as a community center until the 1950s. After many years of neglect (lack of maintenance and service) the Tarragona Tower's interior spaces became contaminated with debris, mold, rat and pigeon droppings. Additionally, it was suffering from significant termite damage to the interior wooden beams, and the structure's interior spaces had deteriorated to point that it was not functional and in hazardous condition.

BHM Architecture, Inc. coordinated the preservation of the structure by ensuring that existing problems were corrected and the interior restored. The structure's restoration project was completed in 2004 and cost approximately \$400,000. The structure also received a non-evasive preventative subterranean termite treatment to prevent any future termite damage.

Since the interior spaces of the structure are small it was not feasible to install heating and air conditioning systems or provide handicap accessible restrooms and ramps. Per the Americans with Disabilities Act, Title III (Public Accommodations) the structure is not accessible to the public because it does not meet minimum standards for accessibility for alterations and new construction of facilities.

Listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places in 2005

On May 6, 2005 the Tarragona Tower was entered into the U.S. National Register of Historic Places (VO0043⁶). Its historic functions are listed as Recreation and Culture/Monument/Marker with an Architectural Classification being Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals/Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival. Its areas of significance are listed as Architecture, Community Planning and Development. The period of significance is 1925-1955.

Florida Trust for Historic Preservation Award in 2006

The Mission Statement for the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation, "...is to promote the preservation of the architectural, historical and archaeological heritage of Florida through advocacy, education and historic property stewardship." The restoration and preservation of the Tarragona Tower received the prestigious Outstanding Restoration/Rehabilitation Award in 2006.

Summary

The Tarragona Tower structure stands today ([Figures 4-7](#)) as a reminder of the overzealous developers who attempted to lure affluent buyers to the Daytona Beach area during the Florida Land Boom of the 1920s. It narrowly escaped attempts to tear it down and is now one of Florida's largest historic subdivision monuments left standing. It is a unique structure and serves as an intriguing landmark in the Halifax area. Since it is now listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places it has a fighting chance to receive additional funding to help preserve it for future generations to learn from and to enjoy its distinctive features.

End Notes

¹ **Elias Francis De La Haye** (July 12, 1887 - December 2, 1952) immigrated to the United States in 1896 and became a successful architect in the Daytona Beach area. He was the treasurer and secretary of the Florida Association of Architects for 17 years. He served as the supervising architect for the Florida Hotel Commission for more than 25 years. He designed many buildings in Volusia County in addition to the Tarragona Tower including the Issena Hotel, Samsula School, Emporia School, several restaurants and a considerable number of homes.

² **Don J. Emery** (December 25, 1888 - September 7, 1956) is considered the father of the art tradition in Daytona Beach. He served in the US Army during World War I and was stationed in France and Belgium. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the French Croix de Guerre, and the British Military Medal. He and his wife Isabel moved to Daytona Beach in 1922. He worked on the staff of the *Daytona Beach Daily News*. During his art career he painted scores of landscape and portrait paintings, and designed commercial art for various local businesses, the City of Daytona Beach, the Chamber of Commerce and the Daytona Highlands Real Estate Development Company.

³ The **Florida Land Boom** started after World War 1 as many Americans found they had the money and means (the automobile and railroad) to travel to Florida and invest in real estate. In 1925 a ‘Florida Depression’ of sorts was caused by a series of natural disasters (an extremely hot summer followed by freezes and hurricanes) that negatively affected the economy and slowed the ‘boom’. The Great Depression, starting in 1929, promptly ended the ‘boom’.

⁴ **Charles A. Ballough** (May 29, 1856 - November 12, 1937) was an early settler in Seabreeze (now Daytona Beach) and became a prominent citizen in the area. During the meeting to incorporate Daytona (now Daytona Beach) on October 26, 1876 he was designated as acting marshal. He opened the first quarry in Volusia County and completed several buildings and homes using native rock from this quarry. Several bridges that connected the mainland to the peninsula are credited to him as well. He was a partner in the impressive Hotel Clarendon, which was originally built in 1895 at the current location of the Plaza Resort and Spa. He served on the Board of Volusia County Commissioners in 1895 and 1896. In 1902 his influential book entitled *The Power That Heals and How to Use It* was published. He was awarded U.S. Patent 1,202,351 for a Submarine Vessel (Filed July 9, 1915.) Ballough Road in Daytona Beach was named after his family.

⁵ The **Coquina Highlands** residential development was renamed to **Daytona Highlands** so the town of Daytona, Florida (not yet called Daytona Beach – later, in 1926 the separate towns of Daytona, Daytona Beach, Kingston and Seabreeze merged as the city of Daytona Beach) would receive national publicity from the advertising campaigns of the developers. It was originally to be designed as an exclusive golf and country club style community that was planning for boulevards, canals, hotels, lakes, parks, playgrounds, two golf courses and tennis courts. The onset of the Great Depression promptly halted its development.

⁶ **National Register of Historical Places** – Registration Form – **Site Number: VO0043**. “The Tarragona Tower...for three quarters of a century has represented the western gateway to Daytona Beach, standing beside U.S. Highway 92, the primary access to the city and its famous Atlantic Ocean beaches.”

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Figure 1 – 'White Border Era Postcard' showing the original Tarragona Tower structure which featured two arches that spanned across two different streets – Postmarked JAN. 17, 1926, 3 PM, Ormond, FLA. – Author's Personal Collection.



Figure 2 - Daytona Highlands, Est. 1924 sign in front of the Tarragona Tower structure - Photo by Author, July 10, 2016.



Figure 3 - Tarragona Tower – North Wall Showing Patchwork Repairs and Scars Resulting from the Demolition of the Northern Arch in 1942 - Photo by Author, July 10, 2016.



Figure 4 - Tarragona Tower - South Looking North View - Photo by Author, July 10, 2016.



Figure 5 - Tarragona Tower - East Looking West View - Photo by Author, July 10, 2016.



Figure 6 – Weather-Beaten Handmade Medieval-Style Wooden Doors with Forged Iron Hardware – Ground floor entranceway into the Tarragona Tower - Photo by Author, July 10, 2016.



Figure 7 - Tarragona Tower - North Looking South View - Photo by Author, July 10, 2016.