

Historic Downtown Sarasota



Looking west toward Sarasota Bay, this photograph captures several of the significant buildings in downtown Sarasota from the 1920s. This area was known as the “Broadway Development” because what is now the Tamiami Trail was known then as Broadway Avenue. The complex included the El Vernona Apartments, El Vernona Hotel, Burns Realty office, and the new headquarters of the Sarasota Times newspaper. The area was well-planned and unified by the selection of the Mediterranean Revival Style for all new buildings.

In the foreground is the Sarasota Woman's Club, located at what is now 1241 North Palm Avenue. It was built in 1915. The clubhouse is now home to the Keating Theater, the main stage of Florida Studio Theatre.

Next to the Woman's Club is the Frances-Carlton Apartments, designed by Francis James of Tampa and Alex Browning of Sarasota. They are located at 1221-1227 North Palm Avenue. They were built beginning in 1924 as furnished, rental apartments. The Mediterranean Revival Style buildings were originally characterized by the use of dark-hued stucco with trim, string course moldings and projecting white windowsill moldings. The stucco facades are currently pink. Today these units are condominiums.

Behind the Frances-Carlton Apartments is the Sarasota Times Building at what is now 1216 1st Street. It was designed by Dwight James Baum and built by Ricketts and Haworth in 1925 using materials similar to Ca' d'Zan. Today the building is home to the Sage Restaurant.

Across Broadway is the Burns Realty Company office, also designed by Dwight James Baum and built in 1925. Both Burns and Baum used it to conduct their business in Sarasota. In June 1933, Karl Bickel announced that he and his wife were purchasing the building, and it was their home until 1972. Bickel was instrumental in the state operation of the Ringling Museum in 1945-1946. The building was razed in 2000 to make room for the Sarasota Ritz-Carlton.

Next to Burns Realty is the El Vernona Hotel, constructed by Owen Burns in 1926 and named it after his wife. This enormous 150-room Moorish-inspired building was designed by Dwight James Baum. Burns lost the property by foreclosure in 1930 and John Ringling acquired the hotel at auction. The name was changed to the John Ringling Hotel. After Ringling's death in 1936, his nephew, John Ringling North, introduced a circus theme to the hotel. Trapeze artists and aerialists swung from ropes tied to wood beams in the dining room during the heyday of the hotel in the 1940s and early 1950s. Its M'Toto Room was the preferred destination for celebrity guests to Sarasota. The hotel closed about 1957, was converted to apartments, and reopened in 1964 as the John Ringling Towers. It closed again in 1980 and remained vacant for eighteen years. After numerous unsuccessful attempts at rehabilitation, the empty building at what is now 111 North Tamiami Trail was demolished in 1998 to make way for the Sarasota Ritz-Carlton.

In the far upper right of the photograph is the building commonly known as the Belle Haven. Originally named the Casabona Apartments, the three-story Mediterranean Revival building at what is today 1133 Fourth Street was designed by Dwight James Baum and built by the Ricketts and Haworth construction company. It has an "L"-shaped plan and is built of stucco and cast stone. Less than 2 months after construction it was purchased by Owen Burns and renamed for his wife as "The El Vernona Apartments." It opened for occupancy in March 1926. In the early 1930s, the name changed to the Belle Haven Apartments. It was converted into an office building in 1984 but was closed in 2005 and has been empty since. GreenPointe, developer of the Quay Sarasota property, plans a full restoration of the building as part of its waterfront development project.

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(<https://www.heraldtribune.com/news/20160904/legacy-of-owen-burns>) and other sources.