

Then and Now: San Marco Hotel will pay tribute to historic predecessor



By Christen Kelley
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Before Henry Flagler built his famous Ponce de Leon Hotel, the place to stay in St. Augustine was the Hotel San Marco.

Towering five stories high on 25 acres, the San Marco sat west of the fort and offered amazing views of the Ancient City and Matanzas Bay.

Its southern Victorian architecture with grand towers and wrap-around porch, made entirely of wood, became an iconic piece of St. Augustine's skyline to be seen from miles away.

The San Marco was built in 1885 by Isaac Cruft, who was also responsible for the Magnolia Springs Hotel in Green Cove Springs as well as several other successful resorts across the country.

Flagler College Professor Thomas Graham, author of "Mr. Flagler's St. Augustine," said the San Marco convinced Flagler that St. Augustine had potential as a tourist destination, after he stayed at the hotel on his third visit to the city in 1885.

"Earlier he had been disappointed that the accommodations were poor, but the San Marco was a first-class resort hotel," Graham said. "It wasn't particularly elegant, but it was comfortable, and it was big and it had modern amenities. Flagler said 'I think I can do better.'"

In 1888, he finished the Hotel Ponce de Leon, hiring Joseph McDonald and James McGuire, the same builders of the San Marco. Flagler also hired the San Marco's manager, Osborn Seavey, to oversee the Ponce.

By 1896, the San Marco had fallen on hard times. The hotel was sold to new management, who had plans to lease it and eventually demolish it to build a more modern hotel. The new managers, however, were struggling to pay the hotel's bills. They were arrested for embezzlement days before the resort closed early for the winter season.

Then in the following year, the hotel was mysteriously set on fire — and not by accident. Newspaper articles at the time said the fire bell ropes were cut to delay the sounding of the fire alarm, and holes were cut into the suction pipes on the fire hydrant to prevent the firemen from fighting the flames.

“Everyone knew what was likely to come next in this huge pine wood structure; so dozens of men rushed into the ground floor and began carrying out furniture,” Graham wrote in “Mr. Flagler's St. Augustine.”

“As the fire spread throughout the five-story building, it lit up the whole town, and people in the country for miles around could see the flames. One eyewitness declared, ‘It was a grand sight. . . most sparks flew east on to fort grounds.’”

The Hotel San Marco burned to the ground at a loss of \$250,000, which translates to more than \$7 million today, with less than \$20,000 in insurance.

Rumors have circulated ever since that Henry Flagler may have had something to do with the fire, hoping to eliminate any competition to the Ponce. But Graham said that it's unlikely to be the case.

“[Flagler] built a hotel, as we all know, that's an architectural and artistic masterpiece, and he wanted something that was not your typical resort hotel,” Graham said. “So in a way they were competing, but Flagler was aiming at a way higher level of clientele.”

Now, the site of the Hotel San Marco is partially covered by the parking garage. But on the corner of San Marco Avenue and West Castillo Drive, construction is underway.

Local hotelier Kanti Patel, president of Jalaram Hotels, is building a new San Marco Hotel, one that will pay tribute to its 19th century predecessor. The 89-room Renaissance hotel will also include meeting space, a restaurant and bar, a Starbucks, a pool and an underground parking garage.

It's a project that's been in the works for more than a decade, after Patel hit a snag during the 2008 recession, but it's now expected to open in fall of this year.

With its mansard roof, intricate trimming and iconic turrets, the design and architecture of the hotel was inspired by the original Hotel San Marco, as well as two other hotels that existed around the turn of the century: the Barcelona Hotel and the Spear Mansion Hotel.

The hotel's architect, the late Jerry Dixon, worked hard to research all three hotels in order to incorporate elements of each. Instead of creating one large model of the San Marco, Dixon decided to make the hotel look like a collection of Victorian homes.

"Our first dream was, we wanna do the San Marco Hotel, the whole hotel. We were just across the street, so we thought, 'let's replicate this place on the other side of the street,'" Patel said. "So we did research, it was a full-service hotel. We saw the menus and everything from those days, and that's what inspired me to do this hotel."

Patel says they couldn't ask for a better location for the new San Marco, as it's close to the fort, Ripley's Red Train, the Visitor's Center and the city gates. The hotel will give guests the option to leave their car behind while they enjoy all that downtown has to offer.

Jalaram Hotels has developed nine hotels in St. Augustine, including the popular Bayfront Hilton that Dixon also designed. Their specialty is bringing in the top brands such as Hilton and Marriott and convincing them to tailor their designs to fit St. Augustine. But with the Renaissance, Patel says, they are reaching a whole other level.

"I think when they see it they're going to say 'wow.' A newcomer has no clue that this kind of structure will be here existing in St. Augustine," Patel said. "The way it's located and the brand we have, we are proud to have this location opening a Marriott Hotel. It's going to be the St. Augustine hotel."