Watch Your Step in Tampa and St. Petersburg; You May Put Your Foot on Augusta Georgia Vitrified Brick & Clay Company's AUGUSTA and AUGUSTA BLOCK bricks paved the streets of more than 30 Southeastern cities.

By Bill Baab

If you live in the Augusta area and plan to visit friends on Florida's west coast, drive down West Barcelona Street in Tampa, or Central Avenue in neighboring St. Petersburg.

You'll be riding on, or stepping on, pieces of history that originated in Columbia County, Georgia, in 1902. The Georgia Vitrified Brick & Clay Company was founded that year by the late Dock F. Jack and Frank R. Clark..

Large beds of shale had been discovered near the community of Bel-Air on the Columbia-Richmond county border and huge clay deposits were found near Campania, just down Highway 78 from Harlem, Ga.

The company's manufacturing processes provided the right mix and a paving brick called AUGUSTA BLOCK was born. To vitrify a brick, it has to be fired at much higher temperatures than, say, building brick, to reduce its moisture absorption rate. The company's administration headquarters were located in the city of Augusta, while the factory was in Campania in Columbia County.

The timing was right, since Augusta Mayor Jacob Phinizy in 1902 had been discussing his options with City Council's streets and drains committeemen toward paving several city streets.

During the 1890s, Broadway (a.k.a. Broad Street) had been given an asphalt overcoat, but it didn't hold up well, according to various newspaper accounts. The city did not own an asphalt plant and soon the surface became pitted with potholes and there was no means to repair them.

So the city's main thoroughfare soon gathered dust and trash from traffic coming from unpaved side streets. Daily efforts to keep it clean with a rotary broom resulted in dust storms that coated passers-by as well as adjacent storefronts.

Seasonal temperature changes also affected the asphalt, turning it sticky during hot summer days. When frosty weather arrived in late fall, contractions in the surface caused cracks and holes to develop and those got worse, taking a beating from heavy, iron-rimmed dray wagon wheels.

By December of 1902, the city had reached the end of its patience with crumbling asphalt, and Mayor Phinizy had decided to resurface Broad with vitrified brick. Costs of repairing the asphalt had escalated many times more than had been estimated.

In late February 1903, The Augusta Chronicle conducted a straw poll among Broad Street merchants and residents, asking the question: Asphalt or brick? The result: Brick won by a 2-to-1 margin.

The Georgia Vitrified Brick & Clay Company notified city officials in October 2003 that it had just 50,000 paving bricks available, not enough for the Broad Street job, which would require more than an estimated 100,000. As it turned out, more than 3 million bricks would be needed.

Nisbet Wingfield, the city's public works commissioner,
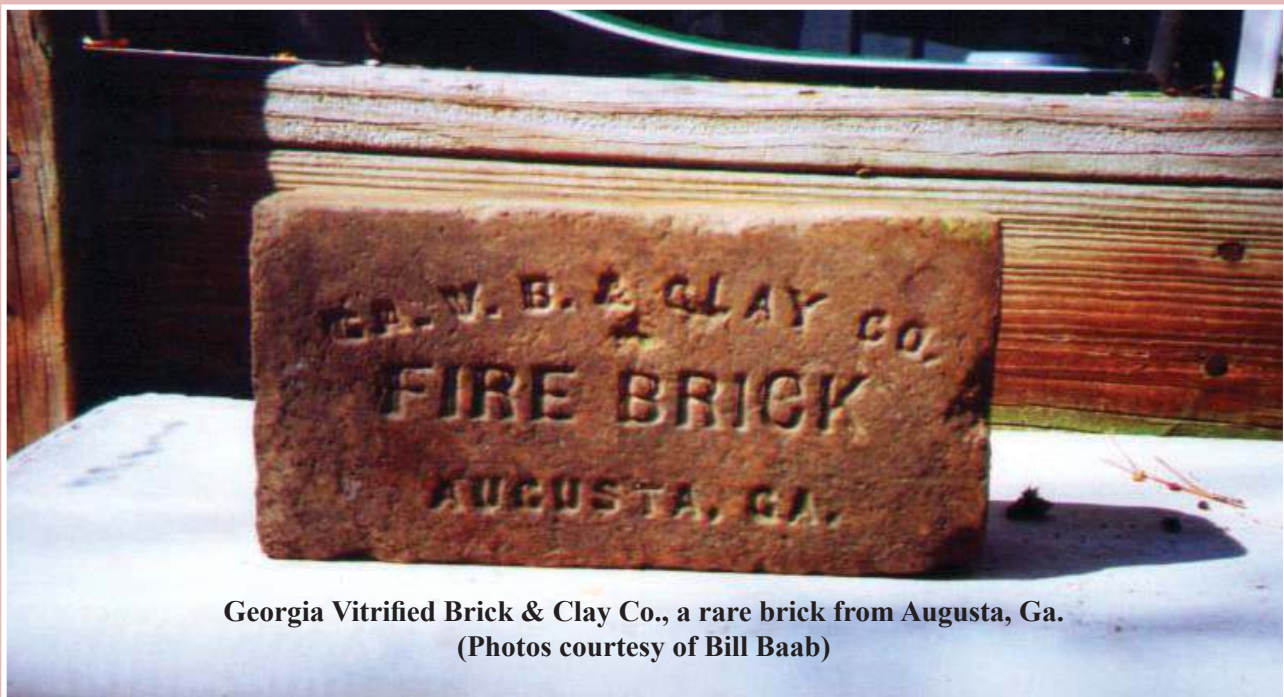
Georgia Vitrified Brick & Clay Co., a rare brick from Augusta, Ga.
(Photos courtesy of Bill Baab)

admitted that nothing would likely be done until 1904.

Strength tests were conducted on the company's brick and that of another firm. The latter broke in two under a 12-ton pressure, but the Georgia brick did not yield until placed under 25 tons' pressure. The first brick crumbled into dust under 45 tons' pressure, but it took 50 tons to shatter the Georgia brick, according to newspaper accounts.

Mayor Richard E. Allen succeeded Phinizy and took office in January 1904, promising that the resurfacing of Broad Street would begin soon.

The Georgia Vitrified Brick & Clay Co., won the contract and notified the press that work would begin June 15 after the city had signed the necessary contracts. Local contractor William Fairbanks Bowe's company did the preparation on the street for the reception of the bricks.

An anti-brick man named Fisher filed for an injunction to prevent the work from starting, but Judge Henry C. Hammond dissolved the injunction and work finally began in early August.

Bowe said that after paving the 700 block of Broad, he would continue the work on down to Centre (5th) Street and on up the north side to McIntosh (7th) Street. He expected the entire project to be finished by Nov. 1, weather permitting, according to newspaper stories. However, once work was completed, it took the city several months to pay the bill, according to news accounts. The city finally settled its past due account with the brick and clay company when it sent a check for $24,000 on May 20, 1905.

Many other Augusta streets were paved with vitrified brick from the Campania plant, including streets around the Forrest Hills-Ricker Hotel on The Hill starting in 1927. Those include Buena Vista Road, Walton Place, Park Avenue, Comfort Road and parts of Bransford Road, Pine Needle Road and Cardinal Drive. Drive over them today. The streets have 2-1/2-inch-thick brick laid on a sand foundation with an asphalt filler and have held up for more than 80 years.

In 1931, the company was awarded a contract for 2-1/2 miles of brick paving on Highways 10 and 12 (now Highway 78) between Augusta and Thomson. ". . .brick paving will be laid from the intersection in the town of Harlem of the old Milledgeville Road (routes 10 and 12) with the Harlem-Appling-Lincolnton highway running east and by the plant of the vitrified brick company," a newspaper story said.

"The paving of the entire distance from the Richmond county line to Thomson, a total of 18 miles, is now beginning with the Davis Construction company of Atlanta having the contract for 16-1/2 miles. This paving will be of concrete, while the laying of a six-inch concrete base for the brick paving has been sub-let by the Georgia Engineering company to the Davis Construction company."

The Georgia Engineering Company was a wholly owned subsidiary of the Georgia Vitrified Brick & Clay Company.

Cost of the project was $436,000. A post card published by the brick company shows a "view of State Highway #12 in Columbia County between Augusta and Atlanta showing part of more than 1,500,000 Augusta Block" used during the paving project.

Here's an example of AUGUSTA brick

D.F. Jack, co-founder of the brick and clay company, died Sept. 28, 1917 at the age of 78. His partner, Frank R. Clark, its president since 1904, died March 18, 1936. A newspaper editorial dated March 22 said, in part, "Always a manufacturer, a creator, a builder, he (Clark) had spent the past thirty years in making the Georgia Vitrified Brick & Clay Company one of the great businesses of Augusta and the Southeast." The son of Clark's friend and partner, John Clark Jack, died in May of 1967 at age 86. "Mr. Jack was founder and owner of WRDW Radio in Augusta and was the developer and supplier of all bricks in Forest Hills streets," said a newspaper account. "He was president of the Georgia Vitrified Brick and Clay Co., at the time of his death," it continued.

In 1941, the U.S. government condemned more than 8,000 acres of land in Richmond and Columbia counties to be included in its new Camp (now Fort) Gordon. The Georgia Vitrified Brick & Clay Company lost a total of 108.42 acres and was paid $5,050, according to news stories.

The company renewed its charter of incorporation in 1942 and in 1945, moved its principal office from Augusta to Campania.

In a 1916 newspaper advertisement, the company touted the long-lasting effects of paving with vitrified brick and noted that 25 cities in the South had been beneficiaries of such paving. In a 1927 newspaper advertisement, the company boasted that "our annual output of 12,000,000

Augusta Block brick paved many streets throughout the Southeastern U.S. during first 50 years of 20th century

Standard Paving Brick has been laid in thirty cities of the South Atlantic States without a failure."

Here are state-by-state cities in which the author's research indicated roads were paved with

AUGUSTA BLOCK:

FLORIDA: Clearwater, Gainesville, Jacksonville, Lake City, Orange County (Orlando area), St. Augustine, St. Petersburg, Sanford, Sarasota, Tampa. (10)

GEORGIA: Albany, Augusta, Harlem, Washington. (4)

NORTH CAROLINA: New Bern, Wilmington. (2)

SOUTH CAROLINA: Aiken, Anderson, Charleston, Columbia, Greenwood, Kingstree, Newberry, Orangeburg, St. George. (9)

Total number of cities located are 25.

A resident of one Florida west coast city was proud..

"We feel like Augusta is almost a part of St. Petersburg," said an excerpt of a letter written by a Florida Rotarian to Augusta Rotarian W.J. Hollingsworth on April 30, 1922. "We cannot take a step without the words 'AUGUSTA BLOCK' staring us in the face. I think it is due St. Petersburg that when the time comes for the 1923 convention, every Rotarian in your good city should come down here and see the city which has more paved streets than any other town in Florida, all paved with 'AUGUSTA BLOCK!'"

"There were 110 miles of brick streets and alleys constructed from 1904 to 1935," said Jerry Fortney, supervisor of Paving, Signage and Striping for the city of St. Petersburg. He listed Central Avenue as among the first streets in his city to get the brick paving, the contract being awarded Oct. 12, 1904.

"There are 430 bricks to the square yard and, according to my figures, 48,682,000 Augusta bricks are still in existence. Probably five times that amount have been paved over. We have to replace some of the bricks every now and then for various reasons and we have a large stockpile of duplicate Augusta bricks."

He's told city employees that if they wanted to get fired, to go ahead and steal one or more of those bricks!

More than 730 Tampa streets were paved with the brick, according to the city's 2001 brick street survey provided by Melanie Calloway, an engineer with the city.

N.L. Willet, an Augusta druggist, wrote a regular column called "Talking It Over" in The Chronicle for years until his death. Here's the lead paragraph of his Feb. 16, 1922 column:

"Speaking about the 40,000,000 brick which (each showing the word 'AUGUSTA') have been worked into fine streets at St. Petersburg, Fla., and the other tens upon tens of million brick which the Georgia Vitrified Brick and Clay Co., has distributed throughout this section – would it not be grand if we could have 'Augusta' imprinted into all Augusta products?!"