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A restored Oldsmobile REO, thought to be the first car sold in Hillsborough County, is unloaded off a tow truck and into its permanent home at the Tampa Bay History Center on Tuesday. The \$52-million, 60,000-square-foot, green-built facility is a far cry from the center's small space on Franklin Street.

HISTORY TO COME ALIVE

The four-story Tampa Bay History Center opens Jan. 17.

BY ALEXANDRA ZAYAS
Times Staff Writer

TAMPA — The cigar roller mannequins are still shrouded in protective plastic. The Florida Crackers exhibit is streamed with yellow caution tape.

But in less than a month, the Tampa Bay History Center will open its \$52-million, 60,000-square-foot green-built facility overlooking the Garrison Chan-

nel.

Don't expect only pictures on a wall. Visitors will take virtual kayak rides along the Hillsborough River, exploring its banks from flora to fauna to college crew graffiti.

They'll dress up in pioneer-era costumes, rock on coil-bottomed horse saddles and find historic neighborhood
» See HISTORY, 6B



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A cow sits under wraps near the center's Cowmen and Crackers exhibit. With a magnetic touchscreen, visitors will be able to make their own branding irons and test them on the cow to see how their logos look.

Tampa Bay history about to come alive

“hot spots” on interactive maps equipped to e-mail them information.

Exhibits will tell the stories of the area's first American Indian inhabitants and its homegrown sports stars. They'll recall the racial integration of St. Petersburg Beach and wars fought from MacDill Air Force Base.

Come Jan. 17, visitors will finally see the product of two decades of quiet, meticulous planning.

It all grew out of a task force created by the Hillsborough County Commission in 1986 to collect the area's history and artifacts. For years, the Tampa Bay History Center inhabited a small space on Franklin Street. But that was always a preview center.

Board members spent years amassing endowment funds and pitching the plan to government and potential donors.

“Really, we were selling a dream,” said the center's president and chief executive, C.J. Roberts.

The county came through with \$17-million for planning and construction, with museum trustees pledging to raise an additional \$32-million. And the city and state donated the 2.4-acre tract of waterfront property.

Last year, the museum broke ground on what officials say will be the first Hillsborough County-owned building to gain a leadership in energy and environmental design certification.

This week, the four-floor museum is still a hard-hat zone. But construction is on schedule, said Roberts, as a tow truck pulled up carrying a 1908 REO Roadster thought to be the first car ever purchased in Hillsborough County.



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Still wrapped in plastic, visitors will see cigar rollers in a replica factory after entering a 1920s cigar store. Other exhibits include the area's native inhabitants, war and racial integration.

FAST FACTS

If you go

The Tampa Bay History Center is at 801 St. Pete Times Forum Drive, just east of the Forum. It's scheduled to open Jan. 17. For information, visit www.tampabayhistorycenter.org or call (813) 228-0097.



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C.J. Roberts, president and chief executive of the Tampa Bay History Center.

By opening day, the center will house 10 permanent exhibits that span about 12,000 years of human habitation of the huge 24-county chunk of central and northern Florida once known as Old Hillsborough.

Hanging from the lobby's atrium of thick glass, looking out at Harbour Island, 14 large art icons will dance with the neon images of regional history — a Tarpon Springs fisherman, a flamenco dancer, a streetcar.

Visitors will have access to theaters, a map center, a library, museum store and the Columbia Restaurant's cafe, which will serve 40 people inside and an additional 100 on an outdoor, channelside patio.

Meanwhile, in an upstairs room, historians will continue to catalog the museum's more than 50,000 artifacts, hoping that inspired visitors will go home, venture into their attics, open their cedar chests and find valuable relics to add to the collection.

Their hope, says Roberts: “Some of the best stuff is still out there.”

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