Panel 04: An Active Harbor for a Growing City (1920-1939)

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An Active Harbor City for a Growing City (1920-1939)

Florida’s land boom in the early 1920s brought new vitality to the Bayboro district. A land pier extended along the south shore and a variety of businesses opened their doors along the north shore. A walk along the present-day site of Davis Hall, Bayboro Hall, and Poynter Library would offer a remarkably different view: Boat repair shops, a tile and cement plant, machine shops, a metal works company, tin scrap-heaps, a soda bottling facility—even a potato chip business—crowded the harbor during the 1920s and 1930s.

Numerous simple and fancy homes, apartments, and rooming houses sat along Second and Third streets and Sixth Avenue South. This vibrant neighborhood featured gas stations, grocery stores, and the rickety Hotel Richelieu on parts of the present campus.

The United States Coast Guard established a base at Bayboro Harbor in 1927 with high hopes of catching bootleggers and rumrunners during Prohibition. The following year, city leaders approved the creation of Albert Whitted Airport. Dredges soon carved runways out of sand pumped from the bottom of Tampa Bay.

Despite these developments, Bayboro’s deepwater port failed to meet the expectations of those who had dreamed that it would rival or even surpass Tampa’s facilities. The Great Depression of the 1930s stilled the local economy. Even the Coast Guard sailed into the sunset for a few years after Prohibition came to an end. However, distant war clouds would once again bring new opportunities to the area.

A Tale of Two Houses . . . Lost . . . and Saved

Two historic homes once sat along Second Street South at the present site of the Florida Center for Teachers building. The Potter House, once located at 557 Second Street, was built in 1895 by Cramer Potter, a businessman involved in the development of the Bayboro area. Just north of this structure was the Black House, at 549 Second Street, a large home built in 1912, the year that Pinellas County gained its independence from Hillsborough. The custom-built home boasted rusticated block walls and a four-foot high foundation.

The city bought the houses in 1986 as part of St. Petersburg’s commitment to provide land to expand the USF campus. That same year, the Potter House won a listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Although officials planned to sell the homes for $1 each and provide funds to assist with their relocation, their size and architecture made moving them next to impossible.

A plan was even floated to place them on a barge and send them to the Old Southeast neighborhood. But there were no takers. Despite intense lobbying by members of the campus and local historic preservationists, the homes met their unfortunate demise by way of wrecking ball in the late 1980s. Even a National Historic Register designation could not save the Potter House!

Under Dean H. William “Bill” Heller, the campus took bold steps to preserve other historic structures in the area that faced similar fates. With assistance from the Florida Department of State and numerous friends in the local community, USF St. Petersburg moved and restored two notable structures.

The 1904 home of C. Perry Snell—an early St. Petersburg developer and namesake of Snell Isle—came to USF in August 1993 from its original location at Second Avenue NE and First Street. This restored residence now serves as headquarters for USF St. Petersburg’s Florida Studies Program of Distinction and Honors Program.

In March 1995, the Queen Anne mansion built by John C. and Sarah Williams—co-founders of St. Petersburg—was placed alongside the Snell House. Constructed in 1890-1891, this opulent structure certainly stood out on the sparsely settled landscape. Subsequent owners added an annex and transformed the home into the Manhattan Hotel during the early twentieth century.

Although the Potter and Black houses have disappeared, the University’s commitment to historic preservation remains strong to this day.

Harborside Happenings

May 1922: War Department approved a plan for a land pier extending into Tampa Bay on the south shore of Bayboro Harbor.

May 28, 1924: Bond referendum for city project included bond ordinances for a variety of improvements in the Bayboro Harbor district. Voters supported these measures by a strong majority.

Fall 1924: Construction completed on utility plant building operated by Florida Power. This is presently the 1200 Bayboro Station building partially leased by USF St. Petersburg’s College of Business.

1937: The United States Coast Guard opened a base known as “Section Base 21” at Bayboro Harbor.

October 12, 1928: City Council planned to develop a municipal airfield that would later become Albert Whitted Airport.

1933: The Coast Guard abandoned its anti-bootlegging operations after Prohibition came to an end.

September 1933: President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed bill providing funds for the creation of the Coast Guard Air Station at Albert Whitted.

1935: The Works Progress Administration, a New Deal agency, added structures to the United States Coast Guard Air Station at Bayboro Harbor.

April 1936: Local politicians lobbied Congress for the creation of a Coast Guard training academy in St. Petersburg. This never occurred, but the Coast Guard did pledge to bring some ships to Bayboro for gunnery training during the winter of 1936-1937.

August 1937: Passage of the federal River and Harbor Act provided additional funds that allowed for the dredging of a deep and wide channel from Bayboro Harbor into Tampa Bay.