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Panel 09: Nelson Poynter: Advocate for Higher Education in Pinellas County (1903-1978)

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Nelson Poynter: Advocate for Higher Education in Pinellas County (1903-1978)

Nelson Paul Poynter came to St. Petersburg at a young age. His father Paul had moved the family from Indiana after purchasing a controlling interest in the St. Petersburg Times in 1912. That same year, the Times became a daily newspaper.

Young Nelson attended college, traveled, and briefly worked at the Times in 1927-1928 as assistant general manager. The collapse of the Florida land boom had forced many businesses to scale back their advertisements. Nelson’s efforts helped to restore the paper’s financial solvency and reputation at a pivotal point in its history. With this mission accomplished, Poynter spent the next decade perfecting his skills at other newspapers.

Nelson Poynter returned in the spring of 1938, beginning his forty-year tenure as editor of the Times. During this period, the Sunshine City and the Tampa Bay region experienced phenomenal growth. And Poynter dispatched his reporters and photographers to cover nearly every moment of it. A tireless champion of St. Petersburg and Pinellas County, Poynter regularly used the newspaper’s editorial page to remind lawmakers and inform readers about this area’s potential. Where others expressed sadness at the closing of the U. S. Maritime Base along Bayboro Harbor, Poynter saw new opportunities.

He worked with city leaders on plans to develop an institution dubbed “Sunshine University.” He hoped to encourage politicians to place a new college—his Sunshine University—in the unused barracks at Bayboro soon after the city took possession of the site in 1954. He also labored behind the scenes—unsuccessfully—to bring the then-unnamed institution that later became the “University of South Florida” to the Pinellas side of the bay.

In 1956 leaders in the Florida Synod of the Presbyterian Church debated the merits of creating a new college. Florida was the only state of the forty-eight that did not have a Presbyterian-affiliated college at that time. And, as Poynter would tell anyone who would listen, St. Petersburg was the largest city in Florida that did not have a senior college or university. Could they work together to make this dream a reality?

By August 1957—nearly nine months before the Synod had even decided to establish a college—Poynter lobbied Presbyterian leaders to create their school, place it on land in southern Pinellas, and use the former Maritime Base as an interim campus. The Florida Synod voted to establish the school in May 1958.

Throughout the summer, Poynter worked with city leaders to tout the benefits of a permanent campus near the Sunshine Skyway. Their efforts paid off. The site selection committee chose St. Petersburg as the location for Florida Presbyterian College in a meeting that September.

As Florida Presbyterian—now Eckerd College—prepared to move to its new waterfront setting, Poynter focused his energies on bringing a public university to Pinellas. Thrilled with the creation of USF’s Bay Campus in 1965, he devoted countless columns and editorials in support of USF St. Petersburg’s expansion.

At a June 11, 1978, commencement ceremony on USF’s Tampa campus, Poynter received an honorary doctorate for his public service. Four days later, on June 15, he participated in the long-awaited groundbreaking for the Phase I expansion of USF St. Petersburg. Later that day, he passed away.

In recognition of Nelson Poynter’s efforts on behalf of the University of South Florida, the library at USF St. Petersburg bears his name. It also serves as the permanent repository for many of his papers. In addition, the St. Petersburg campus posthumously awarded Poynter the “Dean’s Citation Award” on April 20, 1991, in recognition of his efforts to transform the harbor into a premier center for higher learning.