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100 years of Black St. Petersburg

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FOR MANY YEARS, John Donaldson and his wife, Anna Germain, were the only black people on the peninsula which is now St. Petersburg. The ex-slaves came here in the late 1800s with their employer, Louis Bell Jr., after the Civil War. They purchased 40 acres on Tangerine Avenue South and became successful farmers. Like the Donaldsons, many black pioneers—early settlers as well as contemporaries—played a significant role in the settlement of St. Petersburg.

1900-1920 Census records show that by 1910, the population of the city totaled 4,127, approximately 26 percent of whom were black.

The large black population was ignored in pamphlets and other promotional material distributed nationwide by city officials and the local Chamber of Commerce. The building boom of 1912-1914 gave evidence to the growth of a city largely dependent on tourism and service-related industries. During the mid-teens, many hotels, boarding houses, private residences and businesses were built, and the labor for this construction was largely supplied by black men recruited from Georgia and other areas of the South. Workers from this second influx of blacks also laid the brick for city streets while others were employed as stevedores and hotel bell-hops. The first black businesses were born during this period of enormous growth. Smith's Cafe, located at 3rd Avenue and 14th Street South, provided box lunches and weekly meal tickets for working men.

As the black population expanded and the city itself became more settled, St. Petersburg adopted Jim Crow segregationist attitudes and laws that were commonplace throughout the South. Black neighborhoods were clearly defined and easily identifiable. Many blacks settled in Pepper Town, located around 3rd and 4th Avenues South, between 8th and 9th Streets. Others took up residence west of 9th Street and north of Central Avenue in Methodist Town, so named because of the African Methodist church (Bethel A.M.E.) located on the neighborhood's edge.

The 1920s In the early 1920s, St. Petersburg experienced a building boom even bigger than that of the preceding decade. The majority of black workers were employed as construction laborers or domestics and cooks and lived in abject poverty. However, by 1920 a small but notable black middle class began to emerge comprised of teachers, apartment building owners, land-developers, restaurateurs, and insurance agents. There were two black doctors and a black dentist.

Among the best remembered early black-
Carter's public petition forced those in the white power structure to acknowledge dissatisfaction within the black community.

Another remarkable man, Noah Griffin, challenged the status quo in the 1930s. Griffin, the principal of Gibbs High School in 1937, filed suit against the school system that same year in demanding equal pay for black teachers. Griffin lost the suit and was subsequently dismissed from his position at Gibbs and blacklisted throughout Florida. But the courage he displayed in confronting injustice, including a severe beating at the hands of police breaking up a black picnic in Shore Acres, encouraged others to continue to fight the battle he “lost.”

The 1940s During the war years, St. Petersburg was host to some 20,000 military troops who occupied the city’s hotels and performed daily military drills along downtown streets. With St. Petersburg’s dependence on tourism, the city’s economy would have suffered greatly during the early 1940s had it not been for the influx of federal troops and munitions.

During the 1940s, blacks and whites continued to live in segregated neighborhoods and to follow the mandates of Jim Crow. While white residents danced to the sounds of the big bands at the downtown Coliseum, black residents could hear the likes of Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Buddy Johnson at their own Manhattan Casino on 22nd Street S. The Casino, reportedly built by the Jordan family, also provided facilities for Gibbs High School proms and dances before that school had its own auditorium.

As elsewhere in the nation, civil rights activities began to evolve in St. Petersburg during the 1950s. Individual blacks as well as organized groups began challenging racial barriers, generally in a peaceful and lawful manner.

The 1950s The local movement for desegregation entered a new stage in August 1955, when seven blacks attempted to buy tickets to swim at Spa Pool on the Municipal Pier. They were denied entrance and six blacks filed suit against the city for abridgment of their constitutional rights. The case—Alsup vs. the City of St. Petersburg—made it as far as the Supreme Court, and in April 1957 the Court denied the city’s appeal. City attorneys had argued that the city would lose white patronage and thus money if blacks were allowed to swim with whites.

A year later, in June 1958, City Manager Ross Windom ordered the closing of Spa Pool an hour after eight blacks entered the pool. While white swimmers had not objected to the presence of the blacks, the city was attempting to evade the Supreme Court order which mandated integrated swimming facilities.

The pool opened and closed a total of four times during the summer of 1958, each time a black attempted to swim. But the city’s strategy backfired. White tourists and local residents were also inconvenienced by the closing of the Spa facilities, and soon even local businessmen complained that the city’s...
burg, three activists (one white and two blacks) were arrested as they attempted to enter a whites-only dining center at an Ocala bus stop. The remaining freedom riders arrived in St. Petersburg without further incident and were welcomed at Rev. Enoch Davis’ Bethel Community Baptist Church.

Local blacks also began to make inroads in political circles. In 1968, Frank W. Peterman Sr. became the first black to win a primary election for the state Legislature in Pinellas County. Peterman did not win the general election—that year saw a Republican landslide—but his candidacy set a precedent. C. Bette Wimbish ran unsuccessfully for the school board in 1960, but did secure a seat on the city council in 1969. Wimbish ended her term as vice-mayor. It was also in the 1960s that Alvin Downing became the first black to serve on the St. Petersburg Housing Commission.

The 1970s and 1980s In the late 1970s, blacks living in the heavily populated area surrounding the old Gas Plant saw their homes and numerous neighborhood businesses and churches razed to make way for a proposed industrial park that would presumably give jobs to many of the area’s unemployed. At one time the neighborhoods had been a thriving center of economic and social activity for the black community, but by the 1970s it had become blighted. Although the city altered its redevelopment plans for the area—Tropicana Field now sits on the land parcel that had initially been targeted for the industrial park—residents were still forced to move.

While many relocated residents did indeed find the better housing promised them by the city, others found that they could not afford to pay higher rents or mortgages on new homes and apartments. Many more residents were dislocated as I-275 wound its way south through the black community beginning in the mid-1970s.

The 1970s also saw the beginnings of the first interracial neighborhoods, although in 1988 residential patterns remained heavily segregated. Evidence of economic and racial prejudice continued to surface with issues such as site locations for public housing.

In 1971, Pinellas County, while one of the last counties in the state to integrate its schools, became the first Florida school district to employ busing to achieve integration of county schools. When the plan was implemented, there were isolated incidents of violence at Dixie Hollins and Boca Ciega high schools, but the majority of parents and students acquiesced peacefully to the integration plan. In the 1980s, school zones were continually monitored to assure compliance.

In 1987, after much debate, 9th Street was renamed Martin Luther King Street in honor of the slain black civil rights leader. And in 1988, Bethel A.M.E. Church became the first historic structure of significance to the black community to be designated a local historic landmark.