An Overcast Forecast in the 'Sunshine City': Segregation and Inequality in St. Petersburg, Florida, before 1960

James Anthony Schnur
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OPENING SLIDE AND BOOM-ERA VIEWS A longtime retirement mecca and fun-and-sun destination, St. Petersburg grew rapidly during the Florida Land Boom of the 1920s and, again, during and after the Second World War. Known for its popular green benches and beaches in adjacent coastal communities, the “Sunshine City” also abided by the customs, traditions, and practices that required racial segregation in nearly all activities. African Americans could not sit upon those green beaches, swim along most of the Gulf Beaches, or patronize many of the popular establishments without facing arrest or the threat of violence.

CONTEMPORARY VIEWS My presentation focuses on the growth of St. Petersburg, a geographically southern city that reinvented itself with successive migrations of African Americans primarily from the Deep South, white Southerners, New Englanders, Midwesterners, and—most recently—Hispanic, Southeast Asian, and Eastern Europeans who migrated to Pinellas County’s largest city. Most histories of St. Petersburg celebrate the city’s subtropical climate and popularity as a tourist destination, but many of the earlier accounts do this by ignoring an unpopular and difficult topic to discuss: a racial climate predicated on separate-and-unequal communities from earliest settlement into the twenty-first century. While time limitations make it impossible to provide a full history of two distinctly different St. Petersburgs, I will do my best to introduce you to an important chapter of the city’s history that we must never forget.
**DONALDSON** John Donaldson, a former slave from Alabama, came to the area near Lake Maggiore in 1868 to work with a homesteader named Louis Bell, Jr. He soon met Anna Germain, a woman of mixed racial heritage who also worked on Bell’s land. In time, Donaldson married Germain, they moved away from the Bell’s property, and acquired a homestead of their own in 1871. Though other freedmen living in the South faced hostility during the Reconstruction and Bourbon eras of the late nineteenth century, Donaldson gained the respect of his white neighbors along the sparsely settled frontier because of his many agricultural talents. The Donaldson children attended school with white children, something largely unheard of after Reconstruction and an activity prohibited under Article XII, Section 12 of the 1885 Florida Constitution, more than a decade before the United States Supreme Court’s May 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision strengthened the resolve of white Southerners to enforce provisions requiring racial segregation.

**ORANGE BELT** With the arrival of the Orange Belt Railway in 1888, other African American families arrived in lower Pinellas in search of opportunities. More than 100 African American workers and their family members settled in the area after their labors brought the iron horse to the peninsula. South of the tracks and west of Dr. Martin Luther King (Ninth) Street, Leon Cooper owned land that became an early settlement known as Cooper’s Quarters. **METHODIST TOWN** In November 1894, the first African American congregation in St. Petersburg met in the village and established Bethel African Methodist Episcopal. The settlement around the church became known as Methodist Town. **COOPER** By the early 1900s, other small settlements for blacks began to take shape as Cooper’s Quarters grew into distinct communities including Peppertown, and the Gas Plant community near the Municipal Gas Plant that rose above this area in the 1910s.

**GAS PLANT AND AFRICAN AMERICAN RESIDENCES**

**EARLY 1900s CITY** As St. Petersburg entered the twentieth century, the small village grew into a city with an expanding downtown, a streetcar line, and a waterfront that transformed from unpleasant industrial use to public parkland. That story appears in many narratives. However,  

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1 Many of the events mentioned in this lecture are documented by the author in a substantial chronology of Pinellas County history that he began to develop in 2011. Currently at more than 200 pages, this working document will be made available to researchers at a future date.
by this time, customs and traditions required that African Americans live in segregated communities away from the waterfront, but near the coal gas plant, municipal incinerator, and industrial enterprises that kept the city operating. **BOOM ERA** As new hotels took shape along the skyline, sometimes on land dredged from Tampa Bay just a few years earlier, a substantial part of the community could not enjoy the amenities that became popular tourist destinations.

Every morning, a silent parade workers left their homes in Methodist Town, Peppertown, and the Gas Plant to work in the hotels, restaurants, and other commercial facilities that sustained the city and allowed the land boom to thrive. At day’s end, they quietly returned home, hoping to avoid the incessant harassment and threats of violence that defined life in the South during the Jim Crow era.

One challenge in telling this story is that African Americans rarely appeared in the ‘traditional historical record.’ Most early histories of St. Petersburg and Pinellas County either ignored or marginalized the area’s black residents. Though they might occasionally mention a notable “Negro” citizen, they rarely touched the social fabric that nurtured the community. For example, Karl H. Grismer’s 1924 *History of St. Petersburg, Historical and Biographical* devoted only a couple of paragraphs to Cooper’s Quarters, a place where “property values remained low . . . with a court in the center where the negroes (sic) could wash their clothes.” Typical of the ‘Chamber-of-Commerce’ publications that defined the Boom Era, Grismer allocated nearly a third of his 1924 text for biographical vignettes of leading developers and entrepreneurs but nothing of note about those who actually performed the manual labor. His *Story of St. Petersburg*, published in 1948, included approximately three pages devoted to the history of blacks in St. Petersburg that mostly claimed that many blacks had “drifted in” during the land booms of the 1910s and 1920s and, as a result, soon “slum districts developed which were a disgrace to the community.”

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If early historians ignored the African-American community, journalists did not perform much better in their stories written during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many articles contained racially offensive terms and placed quotes by blacks in a caricatured language. Newspapers such as the *St. Petersburg Times* (now *Tampa Bay Times*) and *St. Petersburg Evening Independent* rarely mentioned African Americans in news stories before the 1930s unless a crime or other terrible event had occurred. **EVENING INDEPENDENT/LEW BROWN** The *Evening Independent*, under the editorship of Lew Brown, was often celebrated for the “Sunshine Offer” that gave free copies of the newspaper whenever the sun failed to shine for a day up until the paper went to press. **BROWN** Brown fashioned himself a proud promoter of the Sunshine City in a book of poetry he published in 1928, but much of what we find also shows how the man who shaped the afternoon paper’s editorial policy was an unabashed white supremacist.3

The morning paper’s record of documenting the city’s black residents was not much better before World War II. White readers generally encountered articles involving local blacks only if a crime had occurred, or if the reporters portrayed blacks in an inferior way. But, even here, we can learn of moments when white demands for absolute segregation of the races might receive a temporary reprieve. **JITTERBUG** For example, this October 1939 article describes a “jitterbug” competition and includes an advertisement celebrating the performance, with blacks from Methodist Town squaring off against those from Peppertown, even though the contestants had to be out of the building when the matinee movie started later than evening.4

Ironically, also in the same month of October 1939, the *Times* finally launched its weekly “Negro News Page”—distributed only in black neighborhoods—as a chronicle of school events, social gatherings, weddings, and other important happenings. From October 1948 until its demise in the 1960s, editors made this page a daily rather than weekly part of the paper. Although most of the news about African Americans remained segregated on that page during

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4 *St. Petersburg Times*, 8 July 1935, 15 October 1939.
this period, we can today examine microfilm editions of the *St. Petersburg Times* to reconstruct events rarely noted or mentioned in the larger community.

**MAP** By the late 1920s, as developers platted new subdivisions throughout the expanding city, the segregated communities at Methodist Town and Peppertown/Gas Plant suffered from overcrowding, a lack of basic sanitary facilities, few paved roads, and privies in close proximity the areas where cooking and laundry functions took place. **POOR HOMES** These images capture views of Peppertown during this period of time. **DAVIS SCHOOL** Until this time, a single school—Davis Elementary—served all of the black children in St. Petersburg. Finally, in September 1925, Jordan Elementary opened on land donated in part by Elder Jordan, a noted business leader in the black community. **JORDAN SCHOOL** To give you a sense of the overcrowding that Davis faced, when Jordan Elementary opened, this building had over 1,100 students. **GIBBS HIGH** Black students could not continue their education at the high school level in a publicly funded secondary school in Pinellas County until Gibbs High School opened in 1927 in a building originally planned as a white elementary school.

**JORDAN BUST** Elder Jordan, represented by this bust that is presently a part of an exhibit at USF St. Petersburg, became a powerful and positive force in St. Petersburg’s black community. At a time when public transportation options to locations outside of Pinellas were limited, he offered bus service to Tampa. **WHITE BATHERS** At a time when blacks were prohibited from swimming along the city’s downtown Spa Beach or places such as Pass-a-Grille along the Gulf of Mexico, in 1927 he secured a remote site the near present-day St. Petersburg/Clearwater International Airport where blacks could swim in Tampa Bay without harassment. **BOAT** White leaders knew about this beach and recreational area, and quietly supported its existence as a preferred out-of-the-way site for blacks to swim. When discussion took place about creating a Jim Crow beach on the southern portion of the beach near Gandy Bridge, the local Protection League group opposed the creation of any other bathing area since Jordan Beach was available. By 1940, plans were made to allow African American Boy Scouts to camp there as well.

While Jordan’s efforts were appreciated by some, others simply wanted the black community to disappear. **BAYBORO** By 1929, members of the Southside Improvement and Protective
Association—an all-white group that wanted to restrict blacks from any additional areas in southern St. Petersburg, targeted Lester Harvey, a St. Petersburg developer, when Harvey allowed for the operation of a "Negro" beach on the southern end of Bayboro Harbor. By the 1930s, city planners debated plans to create a “segregated district,” while some officials carefully tracked the movement of blacks into areas bordering white residential districts. In July 1936, the city council designed a plan to create a so-called “Colored Zone,” hoping to deny blacks mobility outside of designated areas by refusing to approve any building permits for non-whites in white residential areas. This scheme continued into the 1940s.

**HOMES BEFORE JORDAN PARK** Something had to give, because conditions in the segregated residential areas had deteriorated to the point that they became a public health hazard to the entire community. Even most ardent segregationists agreed that some improvements should take place. Federal legislation during the New Deal created a window of opportunity. These images reveal the homes that people lived in during the late 1930s in Peppertown and the Gas Plant district, the present-day site of Tropicana Field, as well as adjacent areas where blacks had moved into by the early 1920s. As you examine these images, think of the postcard views of the Million Dollar Pier and opulent hotels I showed you at the beginning of my talk, and realize that these structures were no more than three miles away from the city’s downtown.

**TAXPAYER** A voter referendum and New Deal funds allowed for the construction of Jordan Park in the area between 9th Avenue South and 13th Avenue, west of 22nd Street, the Jim Crow business district. Although voters approved this measure, this flyer reflects the fear that some had: If you build better housing for African Americans, more blacks would come to St. Petersburg. **JORDAN PARK IMAGES** Construction began in 1939, and these images show the laying out of buildings in the area between Jordan Elementary School, the “Deuces” (22nd Street) business district, and the railroad line. Before the end of the year, delegates inspected the new development and residents began to move in by early 1940.

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5 *St. Petersburg Times*, 19 December 1935. See also: Jordan Park Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, Nelson Poynter Memorial Library, University of South Florida St. Petersburg.

6 Jordan Park Collection, USFSP.
to expand Jordan Park and improve other housing stock in segregated communities stalled by the summer of 1940, in part because of underlying racism and fears that more blacks would settle in St. Petersburg, and in part because distant war clouds had started to move in our direction.  

**MARITIME MARCHERS** During World War II, St. Petersburg became a hub of activity. The War Department commissioned nearly every downtown hotel for the more than 100,000 recruits who passed through here for training before fighting in distant battles. The United States Maritime Training Service station at Bayboro Harbor, later home to USF’s St. Petersburg campus, trained more than 20,000 men to protect ships on the open seas. **WEBB’S CITY** By this time, a small drugstore opened by James Earl “Doc” Webb on the boundary between black and white communities had grown into the “World’s Most Unusual Drug Store.” **3rd AVENUE BUSINESS DISTRICT** Yet, less than two blocks away from Webb’s City, another world existed: Whites may have walked within a half-block of this business district to sit on a green bench and wait for a bus, but they never bothered to patronize these stores.

The history of African Americans in St. Petersburg prior to the civil rights era is an important part of all of our history. Despite the gaps that do exist in primary sources, we have started to reconstruct parts of the story as new collections appear. Many of the images I have shared with you came to the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library at USF St. Petersburg in 2009 after they were found in a house being prepared for demolition. These images represent only a small sample of what we have saved.

**22nd STREET BUSINESS DISTRICT** We must preserve these records, but also enrich them with metadata and context. All too often, images such as those of Peppertown and the Gas Plant become caricatures in and of themselves of people who could do little during the Jim Crow era. Indeed, nothing is further from the truth: Black residents of St. Petersburg played an important role in the city’s development for its inception. The people who lived in Methodist Town, Peppertown, and other neighborhoods might seem anonymous in many of the records, but they were far from that in real life. Although much of the historic 22nd Street business district

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7 Ibid.; *St. Petersburg Times*, 21 August 1939, 10 July 1940, 16 July 1940.
no longer exists, the walls of the recently restored Manhattan Casino and the Royal Theater have great stories to tell.

The landscape has changed dramatically in the last half century. While inadequate housing and public health issues remained major challenges during the early years of the civil rights movement, a time when DDT still was considered a solution to cleaning up the vermin and rats in impoverished and often-ignored communities, new opportunities became available as blacks began to move into formerly all-white areas such as Bartlett Park, Thirteenth Street Heights, Lakeview, and later Childs Park. Unfortunately, persistent legacies of racism and blatant red-lining practices turned many of these all-white neighborhoods into areas that re-segregated as “white flight” occurred. Many of these areas are part of what the media and outsiders refer to as “South St. Pete” and places that public officials have started to rebrand as “Midtown,” areas that continue to suffer disparities today.8

GAS PLANT/TROP The Gas Plant itself no longer exists. By the early 1980s, this eyesore near the intersection of 3rd Avenue South and 12th Street came tumbling down. By the mid-1980s, the entire Gas Plant and Peppertown area—still a segregated community west of downtown—became the site where city and county leaders planned a major urban renewal effort in our quest for a Major League Baseball franchise. Churches, small businesses, and homes were purchased using eminent domain and other tactics, uprooting one of the oldest African American communities and dispersing residents so that this site could be cleared, as shown here, for the construction of the Florida Suncoast Dome, briefly named the Thunderdome when it served as the interim home of the Tampa Bay Lighting National Hockey League franchise and Tampa Bay Storm Arena League Football franchise. These then-and-now images document this transition of the site where the Tampa Bay Rays now play baseball.

At about the same time that the Gas Plant community had to relocate, the construction of Interstate 275 into southern St. Petersburg bisected the African-American communities during the early 1980s. Since the 1980s, residential patterns have changed. “White flight” occurs less

8 St. Petersburg Times, 23 February 1957, 10 June 1960.
often, and integrated neighborhoods now flourish, primarily in the area south of Lake Maggiore.

Through my presentation, I have provided a brief overview of the patterns of racial segregation during the early years of St. Petersburg. Although time limitations make it impossible for me to discuss the civil rights era in detail, I would be happy to answer any questions you may have at the conclusion of this session.

Thank you.