Historical Reflections along Mirror Lake

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“Historical Reflections along Mirror Lake”
Remarks Delivered at the October “Speaking of History” Program
Pinellas Room, Heritage Village
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OPENING SLIDE Welcome to the October “Speaking of History” program, one of a series of lectures and conversations sponsored by the Pinellas County Historical Society at Heritage Village that examines our area’s history. Florida is a peninsula surrounded by water, and Pinellas County—as a peninsula on the west coast of Florida—also finds itself defined by the water that surrounds it, including Tampa Bay, the Gulf of Mexico, and the many other bays, creeks, and lakes that have sustained human populations for millennia. When the earliest humans arrived here thousands of years ago, the salt and brackish estuaries nourished them by providing an unlimited source of seafood. However, they obviously lacked the technology to make the waters from the bays and the ocean potable. Thus, fresh water lakes and creeks served an important purpose.

1888 MAP Mirror Lake, located directly north and northwest of the heart of downtown St. Petersburg, became the early reservoir for the small settlement in the late 1800s. This 1888 plat map, created just as the Orange Belt Railway arrived on the sparsely populated frontier at the new town, reveals that Mirror Lake—then known as Reservoir Lake—fell within the original limits of the settlement later incorporated as St. Petersburg.

OLDER MAP The significance of Mirror Lake predates the existence of St. Petersburg, however. No doubt, pre-Columbian Indians saw the fairly round lake as a beneficial source of water long before the Mississippian period of approximately one-thousand years ago. MANY LAKES At that time, there were many freshwater lakes along the Pinellas peninsula, including a few shown in the area north of downtown, near the northern boundary of the Allendale neighborhood and looking towards Sawgrass Lake, in this soil map from the early 1900s. Although
most of these lakes were drained, over-used, or covered over as part of the
development and mosquito abatement programs that hit full force in St.
Petersburg and lower Pinellas during the twentieth century, they served a vital
purpose to the first human residents of our county.

**1777 MAP** A fairly accurate 1777 English map showed the Pinellas coastline from
approximately Redington Beach southward, differentiating between “Espiritu
Santo” (lower Tampa Bay) and “Tampa Bay” (now old or upper Tampa Bay).
Expeditions along the land made note of a fresh water reservoir (Mirror Lake)
near downtown St. Petersburg. **FLIPPED MAP** A better view of the area, shown here
with the direction of north at the top of the screen on the same map, illustrates
the presence of the “Fresh Water” lake that is, indeed, Mirror Lake. **VIEW OF LAKE**

H. A. Weir acquired forty acres near Mirror Lake in 1876, a dozen years before the
arrival of the Orange Belt Railway. For awhile, this body was known as Weir Lake.
A native of Indiana named David Moffett arrived in the early 1880s, and later
acquired Weir’s lands. After Weir left, people referred to it as Reservoir Lake since
it provided the drinking water for St. Petersburg during the early years.

**SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR** During the Spanish-American War in 1898, troops flooded
the area in frenzied fashion, overwhelming the hotels and infrastructure of
Tampa. **TENTS** Some troops, though not usually members of Roosevelt’s Rough
Riders, were dispatched from Tampa and the many campsites nearby to collect
water from Mirror Lake and bring it across Tampa Bay.

**WELCH** One of the teenagers who collected water on this side of the bay was David
Sewall Welch, an 1880 native of Iowa who had enlisted for service in the Spanish-
American War and, upon arriving in the Tampa Bay region, was given the task of
fetching fresh water from Mirror Lake. Welch’s early taste of the “Florida dream,”
along the sparsely settled Pinellas peninsula, brought him back once again from
Iowa when he came to the Oldsmar area in 1913 to work with Ransom Olds **ON A
RACING VEHICLE**, developer of the Oldsmobile and the north Pinellas community of
Oldsmar **OLDSMAR**.
Welch later moved to St. Petersburg, became involved in the real estate speculation of the 1920s, established the Lone Palm Corporation, MITCHELL/MITCHELL BEACH bought land from Noel Mitchell’s failed experiment at Mitchell Beach along Johns Pass, and developed Madeira Beach. WELCH CSWY The original 1926 bridge out to Madeira, the first free bridge to the central Pinellas beaches, was named “Welch Causeway” in his honor. Welch came here as a young man, tasted the potential of Mirror Lake, and made a lasting impression in Pinellas County.

1899 MAPS Others tasted the water as well. In fact, most residents of the entire village of St. Petersburg did. A waterworks pumped water to city residents by 1899. 1904 MAP Five years later, on the southeast shore of Mirror Lake, a ‘normal’ high school had taken shape along the present-day site of the Pinellas County judicial complex near Second Avenue North and Fifth Street. The site of the current St. Petersburg City Hall served as a home of another early school, as well. We will talk more about these institutions shortly, but first, let’s look at some other Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps. (Describe purpose of Sanborn maps and how knowing of sources of water was an important determinant of property insurance rates).

1908 MAP By 1908, development had started to encircle the entire lake. Moffett’s addition was developed north of the lake. 1913 MAPS The city acquired the land around the lake as a public park in 1909. (Describe development east of lake in 1913 map, as well as the St. Petersburg Municipal Water Works facility near the current Sebring Building).

1918 MAPS The 1918 Sanborn map describes Mirror Lake as the source of “emergency water of inexhaustible supply” as the city’s boundaries continued to spread in all directions. By 1918, the new St. Petersburg High School building, then under construction, had moved from the southeast corner of Mirror Lake to a prominent site north of the lake, where it would open in 1919. Also appearing on the map at this time is the Carnegie Library on the eastern shore of Mirror Lake, a building we will discuss in greater detail near the end of the lecture.
A 1919 road map in an early automobile tour book reveals that the Mirror Lake area had developed into a center for recreation and education just as the Florida Land Boom began to gather steam. Four years later, in 1923, the boom was in full force. One last view of Sanborn maps from this period reveals the extent of the city’s development over the quarter century since the first map I showed you from 1899. (Describe growth of city). The physical plant of the Municipal Water Works has expanded substantially. The old high school, still on the site of today’s judicial complex, now served as the “graded school,” with the other old school that once sat on the current city hall site now used as a teacher’s dormitory. Along the north side of the lake, the five year-old high school is already feeling growing pains that will make its tenure as the city’s high school a short one, while the parkland to the immediate east of it will soon become home to shuffleboard and lawn bowling, and the small wooden structures along the north side of Fourth Avenue North have only a short time remaining before the Coliseum would replace them.

Let’s talk in detail about some of these places: the schools, the recreational centers, the Coliseum, and, of course, the Carnegie library facility that will celebrate its centennial in 2015.

**SCHOOL INFORMATION**

Formalized public education along the Pinellas peninsula began when we were still part of Hillsborough County. Pinellas County became a separate political entity on January 1, 1912. The original “graded school” sat on the site of the present-day city hall, on the southeast corner of Second Avenue and Fifth Street. Across the street, on part of the courthouse complex on the west side of Fifth Street, another school took shape in 1902. Known as the St. Petersburg Normal and Industrial School and also the Normal and High School, it would later become Central Primary when the newer high school opened in close proximity. The structure served educational purposes for children in the downtown area until after World War II. After its use as an educational facility had ended, the structure was moved slightly along the block and became an early home for the Pinellas County Health Department by 1948.
Not to be confused with the high school building on the north side of Mirror Lake, this structure, also on the site of the current courthouse complex by Fifth Street, served as St. Petersburg High School, then—after the 1919 structure opened—as St. Petersburg Grammar School. Although planned as early as 1906, it opened in 1911. Later, from 1927 until the early 1940s, it took on an older student population as the home of St. Petersburg Junior College.

St. Petersburg Junior College, now known as St. Petersburg College, begin in 1927 and was a private institution in its early years, though one closely linked to public schools in Pinellas. The city even did its share by chipping in $15,000 annually during the first few years. SPJC became accredited in 1931. In an early decision, the founders, including city school superintendent “Captain” George M. Lynch, realized that the limited resources made it best to create a two-year institution rather than a four-year college without appropriate resources. Although a third-year (junior) program was briefly offered during the mid-1930s, a decision was made in 1938 to revert back to a lower-level college curriculum took place because of the costs involved. A second decision in 1938 laid out plans for the expansion of the college, now surrounded by the proliferation of homes and buildings downtown and with limited space to grow. With almost $100,000 of funds raised by the community, SPJC began to build a new campus on 25 acres of land overgrown with tall grass and weeds along Eagle Lake, at the intersection of Fifth Avenue North and 66th Street, a site with ample room to grow and that has subsequently been expanded. This campus is known today as the “St. Pete/Gibbs” campus of St. Petersburg College to honor the legacy of Gibbs Junior College, a separate and segregated institution at Gibbs High School created by public officials as a way to stall plans to integrate SPC. A plan was made to transition to a four-year institution when sufficient resources existed, a move that came in the late 1990s.

The first home of SPJC was demolished shortly after World War II, when the county board of commissioners acquired the land from the school board and prepared it to serve as a site for county buildings.
DOM SCIENCE (2 SLIDES) Just east of the current city hall, in the building now known as the city’s Business Assistance Center, the Domestic Science and Manual Training School first held classes in 1902. Cadets line up outside of the school in one image, and other view and current view show how the structure has changed over the years. Originally, according to the fiftieth anniversary history of Pinellas County schools, the first floor of the structure had a manual training area, 27 benches for students to work from, each equipped with tools, a lathe and jigsaw occupied the work area as did an engine that ran on kerosene. The second floor offered an area where cadets would train. TOMLINSON Edwin H. Tomlinson founded this institution and equipped it at a cost of $10,000 in 1902.

JACOBS Tomlinson’s legacy is also enshrined on the west side of Mirror Lake, in a 1924 building originally constructed for about $150,000 as St. Petersburg Junior High School. When St. Petersburg High moved out to Fifth Avenue in Kenwood in 1926, Mirror Lake Junior High took over the SPHS campus and became the girls’ junior high, while St. Petersburg Junior High became the boys’ school. This lasted until 1931, when SPJHS became the city’s vocational high school for white pupils and Mirror Lake Junior High became coeducational. In May 1935, the vocational school was renamed to honor Tomlinson for his many contributions to the city. The facility has had many names over the years, including Tomlinson Technical Institute (in 1945), Tomlinson Vocational School, and Tomlinson Vocational High School. Today, most refer to it as Mirror Lake/Tomlinson.

Now for a little history of the origins of St. Petersburg High School, well documented by the Tradition of Excellence 75th anniversary history of the Pinellas County Schools edited by Patricia Perez Costrini: Plans for a “School Number 83” within the Hillsborough County system began by 1888, with a school constructed in 1893 that became the Graded School I had mentioned earlier. By 1898, Edwin Tomlinson and his father funded some expansion of the programs here, and formal high school classes were first offered in 1899. A three-year high school curriculum was in place by 1901 and the first official high school graduate, Annie Bradshaw, was the only member of the graduating “class” of 1901. BRADSHAW Here she is shown, standing, in a 1950 photograph—the first Green Devil, I guess you could say. At a time when laws and customs denied women so many
opportunities, I find it wonderful—and wonderfully ironic—that the first and only graduate was a woman!

According to historian Walter Fuller, twelfth grade was added in 1907, and a four-year high school program was in place. An organized SPHS football team came together in 1915, though there probably were squads that played occasional games earlier than that. When they had to play a championship game against Hillsborough High School across the bay a year later, in 1916, the fastest way to get across Tampa Bay, since there were no bridges, was by boat. They were exhausted by the time they arrived over in Tampa, and the St. Pete squad lost the match. In the fall of 1919, the new high school opened on the north side of Mirror Lake.

Although the 1919 school was substantially larger than its predecessor, the booming real estate economy of the 1920s made it a short-term solution. Just a few years later, plans were made to construct the “Million-Dollar” high school building along Fifth Avenue North in the then-remote but starting-to-develop area of Kenwood.

Another site for intellectual enrichment, perched between the old high school and Tomlinson, is the Mirror Lake Lyceum, a 1926 building that also served as a church on the northwest corner of the lake.

While exhibition baseball games attracted large crowds at Waterfront Park and, later, Al Lang Field for the annual spring training season, residents and tourists also engaged in their own sporting competitions. Shuffleboard came to the north shore of Mirror Lake after World War I. Officially organized on January 24, 1924 on two courts north of Mirror Lake, the St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club became a popular attraction an entity that claimed to be “the largest tourist sports club in the world, with an average membership of 6,500” by the early 1930s. In 1931, the city constructed a stadium area for shuffleboard players with seating for 350 at the site near the St. Petersburg Lawn Bowling Club.

By the late 1940s, lower Pinellas sported more than 150 courts, mostly in St.
Petersburg, and the city hosted international shuffleboard tournaments. Also, for many of us growing up in the area, seeing regulation shuffleboard courts painted on driveways in carports was something familiar.

**LAWN BOWLING/CHESS** Located east of the Shuffleboard Club and southeast of the Coliseum, the St. Petersburg Lawn Bowling Club began in 1915 and enjoyed its own clubhouse by 1928, alongside the St. Petersburg Chess Club, established in 1931. Earlier chess matches frequently took place on the southeast corner of Williams Park, across the street from the old Maas Brothers department store.

**COLISEUM**

Perched on the north side of the 500 block of Fourth Avenue North, the Coliseum opened on November 20, 1924 to a crowd of thousands who did the foxtrot and enjoyed vaudeville performances. For nine decades, St. Petersburg’s Coliseum has hosted dances, musical performances, conferences, and other public events in its stately building just a little more than a block north of Mirror Lake. Built at a cost of $250,000, this structure – dubbed the “Palace of Pleasure” on opening night – became a gathering place for locals, seasonal residents, and tourists.

**VARIOUS IMAGES** Mirror Lake is an incredibly beautiful area, and one with a long and important history of serving as a gathering place, whether for students in school, shuffleboard players and lawn-bowlers, those dancing at the Coliseum, or seniors at the Sunshine Center near the large banyon tree. We have one more stop on our journey to Mirror Lake, one that infuses education, recreation, and cultural heritage, at a building that’s a century in the making.

**CARNEGIE LIBRARY**

Under the chairmanship of Arthur Norwood, the St. Petersburg Reading Room and Library Association began in July 1905 with 122 inaugural members. The library’s collection moved to various buildings downtown as plans took shape to find a permanent facility. William Straub, local publisher and library board officer,
traveled to New York to get a $17,500 grant from Andrew Carnegie’s foundation. 

**EARLY LIBRARY IMAGES** Construction of the Carnegie library building east of Mirror Lake occurred in 1914-1915. The library opened on December 1, 1915 with 2,600 volumes.

The library’s value to the community grew, just as the downtown area grew around the library. As early as 1921, conversation began about the need to expand the Carnegie Library. Nothing happened, however, until nearly thirty years later when the city council allocated $50,000 for an expansion on the southern side of the library in November 1950. During the 1930s and 1940s, books filled the compact facility, while, **DICKSON LIBRARY IMAGES** in May 1937, a statue of Venus bequeathed to the library was placed in front of the building. Here are images from Susan Dickson, one of my former students and a librarian in the St. Petersburg system. **CLIPPINGS** Some of you who are old-timers may remember that wing, one that I remember from my visits during the 1980s. This expansion was heavily needed during the 1950s. The new wing became the home of a new reference and circulation desk, the reading room for many collections, and a cataloging area. Even with the expansion of the building, the library had a difficult time serving the ever-expanding population. The Junior League of St. Petersburg gave the city a bookmobile in 1949 to assist, while new branches opened at Glenoak in the Glenoak School at 11th Street and 19th Avenue South, and other locations. During this time, racial segregation remained the law of the land, so the Carnegie Library—along with the schools and recreational facilities around Mirror Lake—remained off-limits to African Americans. The first library devoted to serve the needs of the African American community, the James Weldon Johnson branch, opened in 1947 at 10th Street and 3rd Avenue South.

By the late 1950s, despite the expansion of the original structure, conversations began about the possibility of either replacing the library facility at Mirror Lake or searching for a site for a new headquarters. By this time, the expansion of the city’s population west of 34th Street and in all other directions had created the need for many branch libraries, but no single building was large enough to serve truly as a “main” branch.
Planning to create a new “main” library structure took place in the early 1960s, with many starts and stops in 1961 and 1962, including a court battle regarding the funding and development for the library. The city council had approved the plan for a new headquarters in July 1961 and architects held discussions and developed plans in the fall of 1961, but legal challenges in late 1961 and July 1962 slowed things down. Despite delays, things finally moved forward with the construction of the Main Branch at the intersection of Ninth Avenue North and 37th Street taking place throughout 1963.

**NEW LIBRARY** The edifice at Mirror Lake served as the primary library until the current “main branch” opened in February 1964, with the dedication of the new library’s headquarters taking place on February 23. Indeed, just as the Mirror Lake branch celebrates its centennial next year, the Main Branch just enjoyed its half-century celebration.

**MIRROR LAKE LIBRARY LATER** During the last half century, the Mirror Lake branch has continued to serve the community. The library went through a renovation after the new Main Branch opened, and retained a loyal following. During the 1970s and 1980s, the collection grew and reflected the changing needs of the downtown community. By the early 1990s, discussions ensued about the need for additional renovations, since the building had become a bit worn and tired. Resources allowed for the demolition of the ugly 1951 expansion in the mid-1990s, and for its replacement with a new addition that allowed access to the entire building while returning the entire structure’s aesthetic to something similar to its appearance in 1915.

**CLOSING IMAGE** Well, that is the story of Mirror Lake. Before closing, I would like to give a special note of thanks to Patricia M. Landon, one of my graduate students, for her excellent work in assisting me with photographic research. Thanks, everyone, for coming this afternoon. I do have time for questions.
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