

Williams Park Our Town Square

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Before there was our glorious Waterfront Park, there was Williams Park. It was named after John Constantine Williams, one of the three founders of our city. The other two founders were his wife Sarah Williams and Peter Demens. Sarah helped negotiate the agreement to bring Peter Demens' railroad to this place. Of course Demens could not do anything without the help of his railroad workers, many of whom were African Americans.

Early History

Williams Park was established in 1894, six years after the city was founded and platted. The land, a whole city block, was donated by John C. Williams in 1888. From 1888 until 1893 the park remained in its frontier state with oaks, pines, and palmetto bushes. Early settler John Freeman Murphy even recalled shooting a deer and wild boar there. Along its northern side was a natural ditch which carried off the overflow waters from Mirror Lake. At that time it was mainly used for picnics.

In 1893 the Park Improvement Association was formed as a non-governmental volunteer group. One of its members was Sarah Williams, John Williams' widow. Williams had died in 1892. A "Park Day" was declared by Mayor David Murry to clean up the park. A fence was built to keep out hogs and cattle. The first bandstand was erected in 1895. Later care for the park was taken over by the Woman's Town Improvement Association (WTIA), another voluntary organization. The WTIA President wrote about the group's park endeavors. Magnolias, water oaks, and date palms were planted. "Little by little, Williams Park became a place of beauty....Walks were installed, a fountain installed in the center, benches scattered about." In 1910 the City assumed care of the park. A new bandstand was erected in 1920 at a cost of \$10,000.

Originally the park was simply called City Park. But some years later, as other parks were established throughout the city and given distinctive names, it was renamed after its benefactor John Williams.

Architecture

The park was to become the city's town square. Surrounding the park at its height were such buildings as First Methodist Church (where Governor Crist was recently married), St. Peter's Cathedral, First Baptist Church, the Princess Martha Hotel, the Open Air Post Office, the Women's Town Improvement Association's Headquarters, the Dennis Hotel, and much later Maas Brothers Department Store (now partially replaced by the new Progress Energy Building). Some of the city's finest architecture may be found

among these buildings—Neoclassical, Florida Gothic, Gothic Revival, Beaux Arts, and Mediterranean Revival.

Sports Center

The Sunshine Pleasure Club came to Williams Park in 1912, taking over the southeast corner. Horseshoes (known as “Barn Yard Golf”) and quoit lanes were laid out under the shade trees. Benches and tables were added for chess, checkers, and dominos. Later, several croquet courts were built. These organized activities sponsored by local clubs became so popular that the park became overrun with people. In 1922 the John C. Williams family heirs objected to any club having exclusive rights to use any portion of the park and went to court over it. They contended the park was given to the city with the understanding it would be open to the public at all times, and no individuals or groups should have special privileges. They were successful and got a court injunction to stop the Pleasure Club and other associations from using it. The injunction ended Williams Park’s use as a sports center. Clubs using Williams Park moved on to Waterfront Park and Mirror Lake.

Social & Cultural Center

The City engaged the Royal Scotch Highlanders Band to play in the park for the winters starting in 1917. The concerts helped to attract thousands of people during the winter months and the park became famous throughout the country. It was also regularly used as a venue for city celebrations. In 1918, some 4,000 to 5,000 people gathered in Williams Park on what was to become Armistice Day to celebrate the end of World War I. In 1924 the park was the site of a major celebration for the opening of the Gandy Bridge. In the 1930s the comic actor Buster Keaton, who was making films at nearby Weedon Island, was presented with the key to the city in the park. African American children from Davis Academy performed singing and recitation programs there. Here’s one for you--in 1930 10,000 people attended a “soft-water jubilee” at the park celebrating the city’s new water system! In the 1960s “Love-ins” were held. And then there were the political candidates, including future Presidents of the United States. Jimmy Carter held a town hall meeting at the Princess Martha Hotel, across the street from the park. Ronald Reagan held a rally from the park bandstand. George Bush Sr. later did the same.

There is the story of one prominent political candidate who found his speech being interrupted by prolonged bell ringing at nearby St. Peter’s Cathedral. An assistant was sent to stop the ringing only to be told a funeral was in progress, and the tradition of the church was to ring the bell once for each year of the 70 year-old deceased’s life.

Monuments

There are many memorials at the park. Of course there is a historic marker for John C. Williams himself. Interestingly, this was erected by the Princess Hirrihigua Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1936. (This was the Princess who saved Panfilo de Narvaez expedition survivor Juan Ortiz from being burned at the stake.) A war memorial was erected after World War I by the American War Mothers to

commemorate those city residents who died in the Great War, as it was called. The inscription reads, “God gave us sons. We gave them to our country, and our country gave them back to God.” There are names of sixteen soldiers, including two African Americans. The word “colored” is affixed after the names of the African Americans. Historian Raymond Arsenault wrote that this suffix provided “future generations with a haunting reminder that the city of sunshine was also the city of shadow.”

Later monuments were added for World War II, Korean War, and Viet Nam War veterans. There is one for Merchant Seamen. There is a full-size statue commemorating Polish Revolutionary War hero Thaddeus Kosciuszko erected by the American Institute of Polish Culture. Another memorial is for William A. Kenman for bringing “keen enjoyment and clean entertainment” to the bandstand of the park. There is one for former City Councilman Horace Williams, Jr. A small memorial was erected in 1980 to celebrate Esther Wright, renown as “The Bird Lady of St. Petersburg.” In addition to the pigeons in the park she fed thousands of birds, and many stray cats, throughout the downtown.

Park Revitalization

Williams Park has been in decline in recent years. However, vigorous efforts are now underway to again make it a vibrant city venue. The Downtown Neighborhood Association (DNA) has chosen to “adopt” Williams Park, much as did the WTIA of years past. DNA has formed the Friends of Williams Park. The Friends seek to reestablish Williams Park as an exciting urban town square. Recent park improvements include fountain repair, tree lighting, availability of WIFI, and rest room renovations.

New recent programming includes “Art in the Park” on Saturdays from 10AM to 3PM. City Councilperson Leslie Curran led this effort. There is a Wednesday Midday Market from 11AM to 2PM. And a new “Last Friday” concert series is underway. Saint Petersburg Preservation (SPP) has recently received a grant from the City to place historic markers in the vicinity of Williams Park. SPP conducts historic tours of the downtown, including Williams Park, on the second Saturday of each month during the season. The tours begin at 10AM from the Detroit Hotel at 215 Central Avenue.

The next meeting of the Friends will be Wednesday, January 14, 3PM, at St. Petersburg College’s Downtown Building, 244 Second Avenue N. in the Community Room on the second floor. The public is invited. Help us revitalize our wonderful Town Square!

Will Michaels, Ph. D., is former Executive Director of the St. Petersburg Museum of History and a current Museum Trustee; President of Saint Petersburg Preservation; leads a seminar on “Turning Points in St. Petersburg History” at St. Petersburg College; and is Vice President of the Board of the Carter G. Woodson African American Museum. Will is available to speak at community groups and may be reached at 727-420-9195. For more information about Saint Petersburg Preservation, the St. Petersburg Museum of History, or the Woodson Museum go to www.stpetepreservation.org; www.spmoh.org; or www.woodsonmuseum.org.

Sources used in this article include Raymond Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888-1950*; Rick Baker, *Mangroves to Major League: A Timeline of St. Petersburg, Florida*; Walter P. Fuller, *St. Petersburg and Its People*; Karl H. Grismer, *The Story of St. Petersburg*; Scott Taylor Hartzell, *Remembering St. Petersburg, Florida, Vols. 1 & 2*; *St. Petersburg: An Oral History*; St. Petersburg, Florida; the *St. Petersburg Times*; and communication with Marilyn Olsen, President of the Downtown Neighborhood Association.
