

CHAPTER THREE

ST. PETERSBURG

THE BOOM AND BUST YEARS 1970 - 2003



The 1970s

St. Petersburg became increasingly popular as a retirement destination for people from midwestern cities, leading to a significant population increase. However, despite its sprawling waterfront parks, wide sidewalks, historic craftsman bungalows, and Central Avenue (originally known as 6th Avenue), downtown St. Petersburg experienced steep declines in the 1970s.

St. Pete's in-town population cratered while the suburbs boomed. Residential hotels closed and tourists fled to the beaches. Demographics and changing tastes doomed the cafeterias. The lure of the recently opened Tyrone Square Mall, with its ample parking and air-conditioned shops, left downtown St. Pete in freefall.

The iconic St. Petersburg Pier, featuring an inverted pyramid design, opened January 1, 1973, replacing the old Million Dollar Pier. The innovative structure became a popular public gathering place and tourist attraction for four decades. The pier housed restaurants, shops, and exhibits, attracting millions of visitors annually.

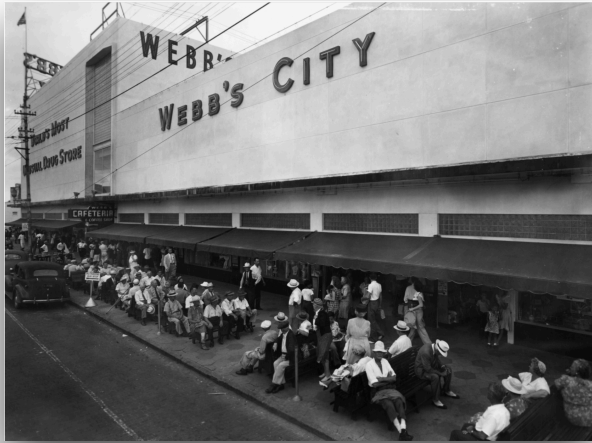


However, just a half mile to the north the iconic Vinoy Hotel fell into disrepair, with reports of a collapsed roof. It was shuttered in 1974. The St. Petersburg Times reported “the hotel now stands vacant, except for the drunks and vagrants who regularly check in. High schoolers sneaked in to drink beer and play kickball among the ruins of the main dining room while the homeless camped out upstairs. Rancid, standing water was a breeding ground for mosquitoes.”



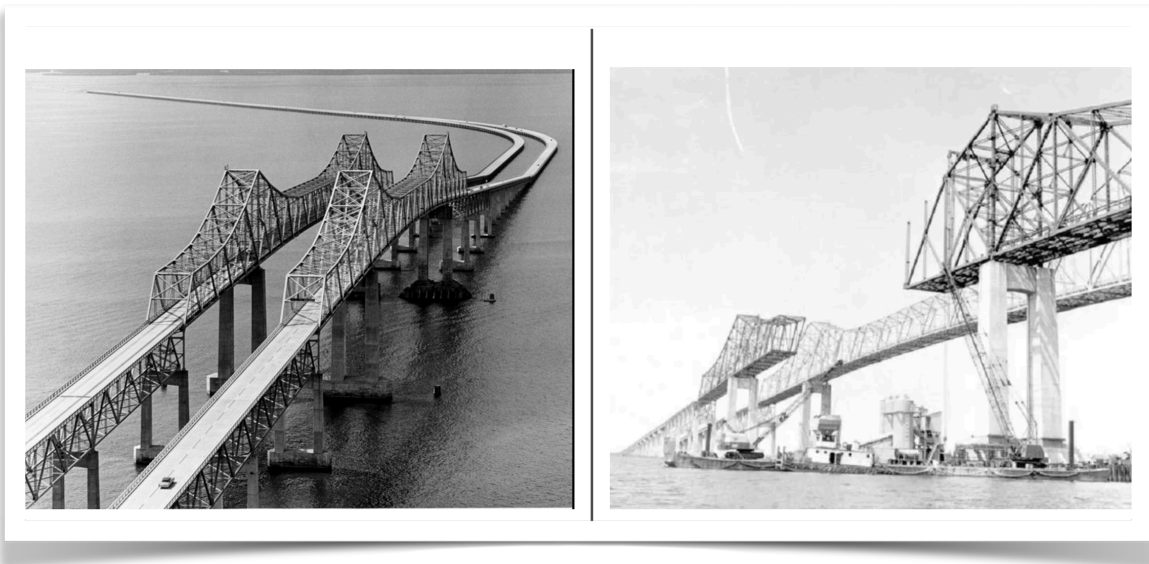
Edgar Watson was a teenager.

“I walked around extensively as a teen when I would skip class @ SPHS. That Waterfront was dead & the Vinoy was a haunted building that I went into many times with friends & smoked pot and explored. The downtown area ... sidewalks rolled up @ 5pm.”



Webb's City in downtown St. Petersburg officially closed its doors on August 18, 1979. This marked the end of a 54-year run as the “World's Most Unusual Drug Store” and sprawling retail bazaar. The suburbs and fast food establishments were luring people and customers.

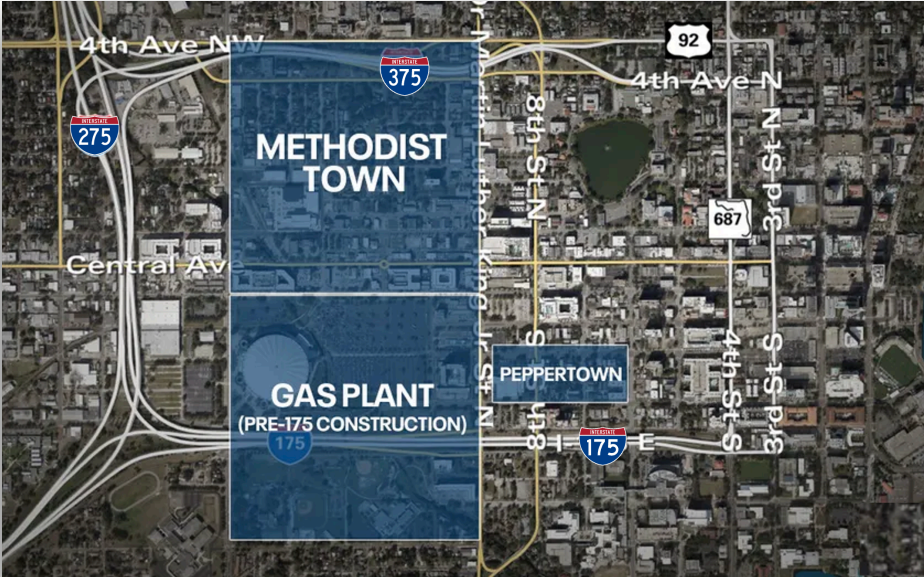
The second span of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge opened in 1971. It carried southbound traffic, while the original 1954 span shifted to carry northbound lanes. A steel cantilever truss design defined the bridge's distinct mid-century engineering.



But a second major transportation project would deepen the racial divide in St. Petersburg. The construction of I-275 in the late 1970s and early 1980s physically and socially fractured the city. Two interstate spurs, I-175 and I-375, sliced through the urban landscape, reinforcing long-standing racial segregation and isolating Black residents in the city's south side. These roadways formed a concrete barrier around once-connected historic neighborhoods.



I-175 cut directly through the heart of the Gas Plant District and was completed in August 1980. Its construction—and that of the broader interstate system—displaced thousands of residents from St. Petersburg's original Black neighborhoods: Methodist Town, Gas Plant, and Peppertown. The highways also divided and weakened the thriving cultural corridor known as The Deuces.



The city's initial Gas Plant Redevelopment Plan promised commercial growth and an industrial park that would bring hundreds of jobs to the area. It also pledged new housing for more than 1,000 displaced residents. However, in 1983, the city amended the plan to include construction of a multipurpose stadium.

The Bayfront Tower opened for occupancy on August 1, 1975 as downtown St. Petersburg's first high-rise condominium building.

In 1976 the city demolished the original Al Lang Field (built in 1947) and erected a revamped concrete grandstand. Architectural enhancements included a distinctive cantilevered overhang shading the spectators and offering sweeping views of the waterfront. In 2011 the stadium converted for soccer use by the Tampa Bay Rowdies.

The 1980s

The nation's eyes turned to St. Petersburg on May 9, 1980, when the MV Summit Venture struck the Sunshine Skyway Bridge during a thunderstorm, causing a 1,200-foot section to collapse into Tampa Bay. The original bridge was actually two separate spans. The freighter collided with a support column of the southbound span. The collision resulted in the deaths of 35 people as vehicles plunged into the water.



It was two years before construction of a new bridge began and five years to complete. The new Sunshine Skyway Bridge opened in 1987. Today, its estimated that 65-thousand vehicles cross the bridge daily..

The original Dalí Museum opened in St. Petersburg on March 7, 1982, in a repurposed marine warehouse after community leaders rallied to bring the 1,500 works by Dalí collected by A. Reynolds and Eleanor Morse to St. Petersburg. It served as a single-artist museum before that concept was common in the U.S. The warehouse was later purchased by USF St. Petersburg and renamed Harbor Hall.



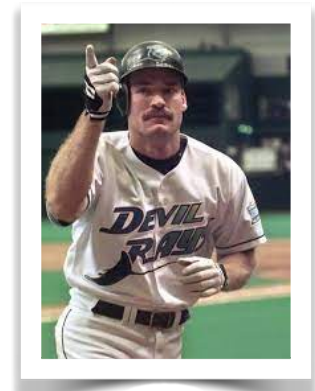
The City of St. Petersburg demolished 14 homes in Roser Park, a 1920s-era streetcar suburb that by the 1980s was staring down highway expansion and the growth of a nearby hospital. With help from Preserve the 'Burg, the 270-acre district neighborhood was designated as the city's first local historic district in 1987.



The USF Bayboro campus expanded in the 1980s with the original Poynter Memorial Library building, Coquina Hall and the Activities Center. The campus expanded its academic offerings to include education, criminology, business, psychology, and journalism.

The 1990s

A decade after thousands of residents in St. Petersburg's original Black neighborhood were displaced by the construction of interstate highways, a multipurpose stadium was completed in the Gas Plant District and named the Suncoast Dome. The city made numerous attempts to attract tenants to the new stadium, before Major League Baseball gave St. Petersburg a franchise in 1995. The Tampa Bay Devil Rays played their first professional baseball game there in 1998.



As St. Petersburg continued to grapple with growth and change, deep social divisions once again surfaced. On October 24, 1996, a city police officer shot and killed 18-year-old Black motorist TyRon Lewis after a traffic stop for speeding. The incident sparked unrest that left eleven people injured, twenty arrested, and several buildings damaged by fire. A state of emergency was declared, with total property losses estimated at \$5 million. When a grand jury later ruled the shooting justified, a second wave of riots erupted.



The Bay Plaza Redevelopment Project had been launched in the mid-80s with the goal to transform 40 acres of underused downtown St. Petersburg land into a massive \$1 billion mixed-use complex. The project fell apart by the early 1990s, due in part to a recession and competition from suburban shopping centers.



On October 2, 1991, the Mass Brothers' store ended nearly 43 years of operation. The St. Petersburg store had been a major shopping landmark downtown, offering multi-floor retail, a coffee shop, and even a restaurant. Located at the corner of 1st Avenue N and 3rd Street N, it was fondly nicknamed "The Sunshine Corner"

As that downtown fixture was closing, the Vinoy Hotel was undergoing a massive restoration and re-opened on July 31, 1992. New York developer Fred Guest paid \$30 million and convinced two banks to join him. The hotel underwent several ownership changes until 2018, when Bryan Glazer, owner of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, bought The Vinoy Resort & Golf Club; the 362-room hotel, the golf club and a 74-slip marina.



Meanwhile, at Carlton Towers

Mrs. Jill Stern Capron moved into Carlton Towers in 1995. The 80 yr. old widow from New York was a popular tenant when she moved into Apartment 310. A noted author, she wrote four books, including *Best Time for Love*, described as “an insightful novel that bravely captures old age.”

“Jill was just charming. a naturally nice person,” remembered a fellow resident. “And incredibly social, she was regularly at the front desk talking with people.”

When they first came to St. Petersburg. Mike and Jeannette Harrison were scouting for a home to spend the winter months.

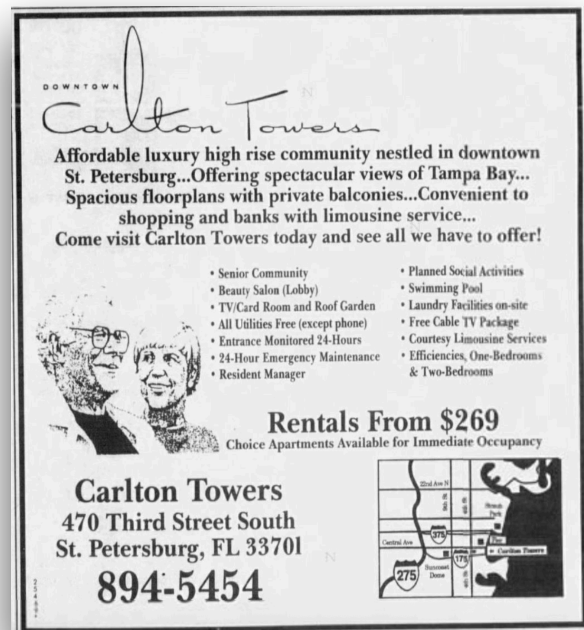
“I came down to Florida, to Miami, Orlando, Jacksonville,” explained Mike. “And I came to St. Petersburg, known back then as the town where you went to die. But it had a museum, the Florida International Museum that was featuring an exhibit of the Titanic and “The Art of the Motorcycle: A Celebration of Design,” a gigantic display of Harley Davidsons.

“When I went back to Vermont, I told Jeannette that I liked Marco Island and St. Pete. I also noticed that the St. Petersburg Times had an ad promoting Carlton Towers.

“We came and looked around (at Carlton Towers) and saw old, old people. But we only planned to be here six months a year so we rented an Apartment 912. That was November of 2001.”

Earlier that year, USF St. Petersburg had hired Dr. Deby Cassill as the first full-time biology professor at the university. She needed to find somewhere to live.

“Carlton Towers was walkable to work. I could look over the campus from my studio apartment on the ninth floor (#915). I loved my little apartment.” proclaimed the energetic teacher and researcher.



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And then, only a year and a half later, John and Heidi Marling announced they had purchased Carlton Towers. They planned to convert the building into condominiums and offered tenants incentives to stay, if they would buy a unit in the building. It was buy a place or move out. Most tenants began moving out as their leases ended.

Would Mike and Jeannette, Deby, and Jill choose to stay? Who would buy condos in the Beacon on 3rd Street? But first, Carlton Towers Partners, LLC had a big job ahead, converting 40 year old apartments into inviting modern condominiums.

What they did — and didn't do — coming up in Chapter 4.

