

Sulphur Springs Depot: A Brief Introduction

History of Site before Structure was Built

- Located along railroad property adjacent to Temple Terrace Highway, now Busch Boulevard. Sulphur Springs was a northern suburb of Tampa at the time.
- Although built many years after the Orange Belt Railway arrived along the Pinellas peninsula in 1888, this station signifies the importance of the Orange Belt, as well as the contributions of Henry Flagler, Henry Plant, and other railroad operators during the late 1800s and early 1900s to settlement along Florida's peninsula.
- Even with the arrival of the Orange Belt, people demanded direct rail service between Tampa and Tarpon Springs by September 1890.

Construction Information

- Only major structure at Heritage Village that originally was built outside the boundaries of present-day Pinellas County.
- Constructed at a time (early 1920s) when railroad transportation was an easy way for many visitors to come to peninsular Florida. The “good roads movement,” tin can tourist camps, and the creation of automobile clubs encouraged travel after World War I and fueled the land boom.
- Work on rails to Sulphur Springs extension began May 1908.
- Tampa and Gulf Rail Line opens by 1910.
- This 1155 square foot station reflected the architecture found in many early Florida depots. Rail travel reached its peak during the 1920s, the period that this station (identical to the Yulee station in design) received its heaviest traffic. Emphasis was placed on utilitarian purpose rather than aesthetic design.
- The station also reinforced social customs and traditions of the period, as noted by separate waiting rooms and facilities for white and “colored” patrons.

Significant Events/Activities at the Structure and in the Surrounding Community

- The arrival of the railroad increased migration to the Pinellas peninsula by connecting many small communities to one another and to the outside world.
- Before the railroad, land routes proved difficult to travel (especially during wet summers) and most delivery of goods and services occurred through water transport between Tampa, Cedar Keys, or Key West.
- Before 1912, a lack of adequate transportation funding from Hillsborough County officials emboldened many residents along the Pinellas peninsula (then known as Western Hillsborough) to seek independence. While this station served residents after Pinellas became a separate county, the earlier battles over “good roads” and better transportation continued to dominate headlines.

Moving of the Structure to Heritage Village

- Park administration worked with other governmental agencies and outside organizations—including the Tampa Bay chapter of the National Railway Historical Society—to acquire and move the Sulphur Springs Depot.

Sulphur Springs Train Depot and Caboose

Overview

The Sulphur Springs Train Depot and nearby caboose allow visitors to appreciate the importance of railroad travel along the Pinellas Peninsula between 1888 and the mid-twentieth century. Built circa 1924 by the Tampa and Gulf Coast Railroad, the depot served passengers in Sulphur Springs, a community north of Tampa near the Hillsborough River. The building occupied a site along Busch Boulevard (once known as Temple Terrace Highway). Although this building did not arrive in Pinellas County proper until the fall of 1978—long after its service for rail passengers had ended—the Sulphur Springs depot did play a role in the history of transportation along the Pinellas Peninsula. The building included dedicated telephone/telegraph relays to Pinellas cities and offered an important stopping point for trains from Tampa to Pinellas County at the Gulf Coast Junction that brought railroads to Clearwater and St. Petersburg. Various rail lines operated the depot during its five decades of service. The Seaboard Air Line Railroad acquired the Tampa and Gulf Coast Railroad, and in 1967 Seaboard merged with the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad to create the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad.

The Orange Belt Railway arrived along the Pinellas Peninsula in late 1887 and early 1888. Originating at Sanford, the rail line passed through Winter Garden, Oakland, San Antonio, and other destinations before reaching Tarpon Springs. After reaching the Pinellas Peninsula, the Orange Belt generally followed the path of the present-day Pinellas Trail through Sutherland (now Palm Harbor), Dunedin, Clear Water Harbor (now Clearwater), Largo, Seminole, and, finally, St. Petersburg. Financial troubles placed the Orange Belt in jeopardy by the mid-1890s, until Henry B. Plant's enterprises took over the operation and renamed it the Sanford and St. Petersburg Railway Company. By the early 1900s, the route became part of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad. Service continued along most of the line until the early 1980s, when Amtrak decided to terminate regular passenger rail service along the Pinellas Peninsula. After a debate about the possible use of this corridor, members of the Pinellas County Commission transformed a substantial portion of the right-of-way into the Fred Marquis Pinellas County Trail, an

excellent example of a “rails-to-trails” program that promotes recreation in a crowded, urbanized setting.

The Sulphur Springs Depot serves as a symbol of the impact of railroads to the West Coast of Florida. Iron horses transformed the economic climate and accommodated a substantial influx of visitors, new residents, and commercial and industrial growth. The rail system helped improve business opportunities by providing a much more efficient means of transportation to get sponges, citrus, various agricultural crops, and other commodities to distant markets. Soon after the railroad system entered St. Petersburg, that community quickly surpassed Tarpon Springs in population and developed into a booming city. While St. Petersburg became the dominant city on the Pinellas Peninsula after the Orange Belt arrived, the story of the railroads must consider how these iron horses transformed the entire region, not just one city.

The adjacent caboose also commemorates the importance of rail travel to Pinellas County. Former curator Donald Ivey’s research on the origins of the word “caboose” notes that it originates from the Dutch word “cabuys” meaning “cook’s quarters.” A train’s caboose served as crew quarters on freight trains. Dutch immigrants often referred to a small cabin as a “cabuys,” and the word eventually became “Americanized” into train lingo. The Buffalo, Corning, and New York Railroad first used the word “caboose” to describe the “rolling headquarters of the train crew” in 1855. Usually the last car on a freight train and seldom used on passenger trains, the caboose allowed trains to travel four or more days at a time without stopping by offering a living quarters for the conductor, engineer, fireman, and front and rear brakemen.

Caboose interiors usually contained two sections. The first housed the stove and icebox, two beds, and folding tables. The other section included the commode, two beds, more folding tables, flare boxes, and a desk for the conductor. Pipes ran overhead and along the walls so that the workers had something to hold onto when the ride became rough. A cupola or perch above the living quarters permitted crew members to watch for trouble over the train cars. As noted by Ivey, the Akron, Canton, & Youngstown Railroad first installed a window in a caboose to see the side of the train in 1923. Many railroad lines have started to phase out the caboose, with the Florida East Coast Railroad one of the first to discontinue its use. As an alternative, large locomotive cabins now contain

electronic devices that allow crew members to contact the conductor or engineer if any problems arise.

Though cabooses may soon become a passing memory in railroad history, the 1967 model at Heritage Village preserves their legacy for the park's many visitors, especially young children. This caboose, once part of the Seaboard Coast Line's fleet, came to Heritage Village in May 1983. Members of the National Railway Historical Society (NRHS) completely refurbished the caboose, assisted with the relocation of the Sulphur Springs Depot, and developed many of the exhibits located in that building.

A Difficult Road to Travel

The earliest settlers to the Pinellas Peninsula in the 1800s arrived by foot, buggy, horse, or boat. During the mid-nineteenth century, many residents settled on lands close to the water so they could travel to nearby towns (such as Tampa), or more distant communities (especially Cedar Keys or Key West). Joshua Boyer and members of the Meares and Lowe families of the Anona area originally came from the Bahamas by way of Key West. Many families with sufficient funds took the railroad to Cedar Keys or another coastal port then completed their journey to the Pinellas Peninsula by boat. Others followed established roadways and trails in the more populated areas of northern Florida and the Panhandle, then took their chances along the primitive paths south of Ocala and along the interior of the St. Johns River. Though settlements such as Brooksville appeared on the landscape before the Civil War, overland travel to the Pinellas Peninsula remained a difficult and foreboding challenge.

The insular nature of early settlements and farmsteads hindered roadway development along the Pinellas Peninsula. Early paths and trails tended to "follow the line of least resistance" as travelers went around obstacles, such as trees and bodies of water. As ruts in sandy roads inhibited traffic, Pinellas pioneers often "repaired" the roads by using a commodity in great abundance: pine straw and needles. Dunedin historian William Lovett Douglas claimed that whenever a tree fell along the road near that community, settlers often chose to create a detour rather than remove the tree. With few signs along the narrow paths, Douglas noted that overland travelers to the Pinellas Peninsula needed "a compass, rope, and block and tackle equipment." Although Florida's

Territorial Legislative Council had passed laws regarding road construction as early as 1822, such regulations had little effect during the early settlement of Punta Pinal. Homesteaders under the Armed Occupation Act of 1842 had little incentive to connect their acreage to distant overland paths—with the possible exception of routes to Tampa—when they could instead travel a shorter path of “least resistance” to Tampa Bay, the Gulf, or other navigable waterways. Smaller boats could carry commodities to Tampa, where farmers and entrepreneurs could have their wares transferred to steamboats or larger vessels.¹

Most transportation between coastal settlements occurred by boat until the early 1880s. For example, an 1882 map of the Dunedin area contains only two substantial roads leading from that settlement: A southeast path that headed towards Safety Harbor and Bay View, and another overland route that took travelers towards the Oldsmar area and ultimately Tampa. No direct and improved road existed between Dunedin and other nearby communities, including Clearwater, Seaside (present-day Crystal Beach), Yellow Bluff (Ozona), or Tarpon Springs. Indeed, the quickest “land” route from Dunedin to Clearwater required travelers to ford across Stevenson Creek. Those who made the journey learned how to predict high and low tides and planned their schedules accordingly.²

The Iron Horse Follows the Orange Belt to the Pinellas Peninsula

Many Florida historians, amateur and professional, have described the arrival of the railroad to state’s peninsula. Rail lines constructed before the Civil War served plantations in Middle Florida and the Panhandle, and did not connect with railroad networks in other states. Though many Southerners condemned their “carpetbagging” Northern brethren during Reconstruction (1865-1877), some soon embraced the infusion

¹ William L. Davidson, *Dunedin thru the Years, 1850-1978*, 2d rev. ed. (Charlotte: Delmar, 1988), 37-38. For a discussion on early regulations governing internal improvements in Florida during the 1800s, see: Joe Knetsch, “Inventing the Infrastructure: A Study of Road Building in Florida” (Unpublished paper delivered at “Florida: A Sunshine State of Mind” symposium, University of South Florida St. Petersburg, 9 March 1995). For James Covington’s discussion of the use of steamboats in Tampa Bay between the Second Seminole War and the late 1800s, as well as other brief essays on the importance of these ships during this period, see: Edward A. Mueller, and Barbara A. Purdy, *Proceedings of a Conference on the Steamboat Era in Florida, Silver Springs, Florida, March 24, 1984* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1984).

² Davidson, *Dunedin thru the Years*, 38.

of capital that occurred in the South after the dispute of the Samuel Tilden-Rutherford B. Hayes presidential election in 1876 led to a compromise ending Reconstruction. By the early 1880s, Florida teetered on brink of insolvency. Other speculators took notice when Hamilton Disston, a Philadelphia entrepreneur, acquired four million acres of Florida lands for one million dollars. The ensuing frenzy brought new capital and resources to many areas of Florida, including Disston's extensive holdings along the Pinellas Peninsula. These isolated lands required reliable transportation, and railroads soon appeared on the landscape. The Sunshine State's golden age of railroad development came in the 1880s, long after the locomotives of the Union Pacific had established regular transcontinental trips. Most histories of Florida focus on the "big three" railroad networks: Henry Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway that ultimately spanned the islands towards Key West, the Henry B. Plant system that transformed nearby Tampa, and—to a lesser extent—William D. Chipley's Louisville and Nashville line on the Panhandle. Disston, Flagler, Plant, Chipley, and others soon crafted business agreements with local landowners and others that reshaped settlement patterns in Florida and marked an early land boom. Along the West Coast of Florida, many settlers monitored the growing battles between Disston and Plant, struggles that had the potential to keep the railroad from selecting one community instead of another, thus sealing their fate as a place "off the beaten track."³

Smaller and spur lines connected some communities not covered by the larger rail networks. For example, by 1885, workers constructed rail lines in the area near Lake Apopka in Orange County for a recently chartered narrow-gauge locomotive enterprise known as the Orange Belt Railway Company. An 1850 native of Russia who came to the United States by 1881, Pyotr Dementyev had moved to Longwood, Florida, in the early 1880s and operated a sawmill near the railroad. Dementyev, who had anglicized his name to Peter Demens after arriving in America, profited from supplying lumber for railroad ties and buildings. When railroad officials could not pay him for his ties, Demens and his three partners (Henry Sweetapple, Joseph Henschen, and A. M. Taylor) assumed control of the Orange Belt charter and continued construction towards the

³ Raymond O. Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888-1950* (Norfolk, Va.: Donning, 1988), 52.

southern shores of Lake Apopka. Soon Demens and his associates met with James Speer, an Orange County judge who persuaded them to direct the railway through a small settlement along the southern shore of Lake Apopka known as Oakland in exchange for 200 acres of property along the lake. With the route completed to Oakland in late 1886, Demens soon moved his Orange Belt Investment Company to the small town. Numerous accounts note that Demens wanted the settlement named “St. Petersburg” in honor of the waterfront Russian city where he came of age, but Speer and others vetoed this idea and kept the settlement’s earlier name. Although presently a small town between Clermont and Winter Garden near the line separating the counties of Orange and Lake, during the late 1800s Oakland became “the industrial and social hub of Orange County . . . the center of Orange County’s social and economic life with people of wealth and fashion.”⁴

Peter Demens soon brought the Orange Belt Railway to the Pinellas Peninsula. Hamilton Disston, with his extensive landholdings, found it impossible to negotiate with Henry Plant. Their public feud encouraged Disston to pay a visit to Demens in Oakland in early December 1886. Demens, who had built the Orange Belt barely one step ahead of his creditors, certainly welcomed an opportunity to extend the locomotive route towards a destination on the Gulf Coast. Seeing Demens and his narrow-gauge as the only possible railroad to connect to his Pinellas holdings, Disston pledged generous land grants and other incentives if Demens quickly brought his Orange Belt to Punta Pinal. Demens received an amended charter that allowed him to construct an extension of approximately 120 miles from Oakland to Mullet Key along a path to the southern Pinellas Peninsula. Demens also asked for additional land grants from trustees in Disston’s Florida Land and Improvement Company. Although that company denied his request on 18 December 1886, Demens remained determined to bring the Orange Belt to Pinellas, even if it meant bypassing Disston City.⁵

Events during December 1886 and January 1887 forever altered the urbanization patterns of southern Pinellas. Despite his stalemate with Demens about the Russian’s request for additional land, Disston still believed the railroad would proceed to his planned megalopolis near present-day Gulfport. To Disston, any plans to extend the rail

⁴ Ibid.; “Oakland History,” located at <http://www.town.oakland.fl.us/information/history/index.html> (20 December 2003); Albert Parry, *Full Steam Ahead!* (St. Petersburg: Great Outdoors, 1987), 12.

lines elsewhere amounted to an expensive bluff and futile folly. In search of another terminus, Canadian native and Demens's associate Henry Sweetapple met with "General" John Constantine Williams, Sr., and his wife, Sarah, owners of substantial land parcels in and around present-day downtown St. Petersburg. Sweetapple and fellow Canadian native Sarah Williams held many conversations that ultimately took shape as a 24 January 1887 agreement between the Orange Belt Railway and John and Sarah Williams. Between January 1887 and the early months of 1889, Demens oversaw the construction of the Orange Belt extension that opened the Pinellas Peninsula to commercial rail travel. Demens and his partners soon ran into financial difficulties, with early loans from H. O. Armour and Company and a syndicate of Philadelphia companies keeping the project alive. By late 1887, long before the railroad arrived on Williams's property, the settlement received its present name, St. Petersburg. Unable to meet the original deadline of 31 December 1887 to complete construction of the railroad to a wharf along Tampa Bay, Demens and his partners did get the railroad to the edge of the Williams tract by 30 April 1888. The first train arrived at the terminus on 8 June 1888. The Orange Belt had taken a left turn and left Disston City in the dust.⁶

Nearly all histories of St. Petersburg and Pinellas County describe the arrival of the Orange Belt. While space does not permit an extended discussion of the historiographic differences between authors, narratives generally fall into two categories. Earlier accounts—usually proffered by amateurs or non-academicians—often described the city and railroad's "founding fathers" in hagiographical terms and added dramatic elements. For example, some chamber-of-commerce histories regurgitated false tales about the naming of the city: By coin toss or drawing of the straws, Demens and Williams allegedly decided who would name the city after their "hometown." Researchers who have examined Demens's prolific writings never uncovered proof of such a contest, of course, but the legend persisted. Some accounts, noting that Orange Belt interests had constructed the Detroit Hotel, claimed that the hotel was named in Williams's honor simply because he had lost the contest to name the settlement. Such exaggerated statements fit well with the early boosterism of the Sunshine City, an image-

⁵ Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, 52-53.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 53-57, 60; Parry, *Full Steam Ahead!*, 20.

conscious community that one 1926 narrative claimed should be known as “The City that Advertising Built.”⁷ Later narratives offered a more balanced, accurate, and scholarly approach. Albert Parry’s *Full Steam Ahead!*, a biography of Peter Demens that discussed his Orange Belt enterprises, and Raymond Arsenault’s *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream* offer excellent and thorough discussions of Demens, Williams, and the arrival of the Orange Belt.

Reconstructing Early Accounts of the Orange Belt’s Arrival

Newspapers throughout Florida paid great attention to the construction of railroads along the peninsula. Unfortunately, bound or microfilmed copies of these papers, if they do exist, provide only scattered and incomplete coverage. Some publications have completely disappeared. For example, the *Oakland Sun* documented the progress of the Orange Belt as it approached the Pinellas Peninsula. However, a thorough search of union catalogues revealed no existing copies of this newspaper in libraries or archives. In this situation, researchers must consult other sources that help to reconstruct the documents that no longer exist. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, before the rise of widespread newspaper syndication or the proliferation of electronic broadcast media, newspapers liberally excerpted stories from one another. The *Weekly Floridian*, a newspaper published in Tallahassee during this period, attempted to offer statewide coverage of events by including vignettes from a number of local newspapers.

A glance at the *Weekly Floridian* between the fall of 1887 and the late spring of 1888 illustrates the excitement that the construction of the Orange Belt brought to many communities. In 20 October 1887, an account in the *Oakland Sun* reprinted in the *Weekly Floridian* announced “the most encouraging aspect” of work on the railroad tracks as crews approached the Pinellas Peninsula. The contract called for the placement of all iron along the proposed route by 1 January 1888. To meet this tight—and certainly unrealistic—deadline, railroad officials procured five schooners loaded with a total cargo of nearly 2,000 tons of iron and other building materials for a sixty-six mile extension of

⁷ Frank Parker Stockbridge and John Holliday Perry, *Florida in the Making* (New York: de Bower Publishing, 1926), 262. See also the early chapters of Rita Slaght Gould, *Pioneer St. Petersburg, Life In*

the rail lines through Pasco into Tarpon Springs. A reporter noted that settlements along the railway route, “especially the coast towns,” expressed excitement “over the prospect of having a means of rapid and reliable transportation in time for the coming season.” By October, workers graded the road bed between Odessa and Tarpon, three camps of tie cutters prepared and placed the bedding ties at an astonishing rate of nearly two miles per day, and other crews finished the 470 foot-long bridge across Salt Lake, about 1½ miles east of Tarpon. Before the end of the year, residents of Tarpon Springs celebrated the arrival of the railroad.⁸

Movement south along the Pinellas Peninsula, generally following the present-day Pinellas Trail, continued during 1888. The *Weekly Floridian* quoted stories appearing in the *Oakland Sun* to note that track placement south of Tarpon “in the direction of St. Petersburg,” not Disston City, continued at a quick pace by early February 1888. By early March, writers for the *Sun* enthusiastically proclaimed that the Orange Belt would “doubtlessly reach” St. Petersburg by the end of the month. A more realistic assessment appeared in an April 5 edition of the *Floridian* when a *Sun* columnist wrote that laborers had placed tracks to a point about ten miles south of Tarpon, about six miles from Clear Water Harbor and twenty-two miles from the St. Petersburg settlement. This April column stated that the crews had enough iron to get the tracks to Clear Water, but left the reader assuming that the Orange Belt authorities needed additional supplies to meet their contractual obligations to bring the railroad to St. Petersburg.⁹

The Orange Belt became an important conduit long before the rails or trains reached St. Petersburg. Passenger service began at the Clear Water station to destinations north and northeast by late April 1888. A drought hit parts of central Florida during the spring of 1888. The *Sun* reported that farmers in and around Oakland expected to lose nearly half of their crop due to the dry spell. Despite this situation, the correspondent saw a glimmer of hope along the new iron rails: Farmers along open segments of the Orange Belt (Clear Water to Sanford at that time) shipped “[v]ast quantities of vegetables,” proving that the line was “already reaping a golden harvest.” Meanwhile, “train loads of iron” passed through Oakland each day to allow workers to finish the tracks south of

and Around 1888 “Out Near the Back of Beyond” (St. Petersburg: Page Creations, 1987).

⁸ *Weekly Floridian*, 20 October 1887.

Clear Water. With fewer than ten miles separating the work crews from the isolated outpost at St. Petersburg, the reporter expressed his confidence that the trains would arrive there by May 1.¹⁰

Just as newspapers celebrated the May 1869 completion of the transcontinental railroad at Promontory, Utah, nineteen years later the Orange Belt commemorated its arrival at the “promontory point” of St. Petersburg. The *Cedar Key Gulf View*, as quoted in the *Weekly Floridian*, announced to its readers the “completion of the Orange Belt line to St. Petersburg.” By this time, the Orange Belt had acquired the steamer *Mary Disston*, once used in and around Tarpon Springs, to bring goods from Manatee to the Pinellas Peninsula. Readers in the Cedar Keys region had a vested interest in following the railroad. With tracks completed between Sanford and St. Petersburg, fewer settlers to the Pinellas area would elect to transfer from train to boat in Cedar Keys when they could travel directly by iron horse.¹¹ An excerpt from the *Oakland Sun* described the occasion by proclaiming:

The last spike in the construction of the Orange Belt Railway was driven on Monday afternoon last, and the road is now completed to its Gulf terminus at St. Petersburg. All that remains to be done is to surface up the track for the sixteen miles between Clear Water and the end, and a regular schedule will be put in force.¹²

To accommodate passengers, Orange Belt workers constructed a small but attractive depot near the intersection of Second Street and First Avenue South. Compared to Dunedin’s first depot—a railroad car parked on siding—the St. Petersburg structure seemed quite ornate.¹³ The unmistakable Russian architecture offered evidence of Demens’s legacy, as did the naming of St. Petersburg and of Odessa in Pasco County.

⁹ Ibid., 9 February 1888, 8 March 1888, 5 April 1888.

¹⁰ Ibid., 26 April 1888.

¹¹ Ibid., 10 May 1888.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Davidson, *Dunedin thru the Years*, 41.

Railroads and Regional Rivalries

The writer incorrectly noted that St. Petersburg became the rail's Gulf terminus rather than its ending point at Tampa Bay. Nevertheless, in the excitement gripping settlements from Oakland to the Pinellas Peninsula in May 1888, the Orange Belt's arrival along Tampa Bay certainly created an opportunity for St. Petersburg to play a large role in shipping crops and materials between central Florida and other ports along the Gulf of Mexico. Even before the first train arrived on 8 June 1888—in what may be the first recorded salvo of one-upmanship and braggadocio between Tampa and St. Petersburg—a *Tampa Tribune* article reprinted in the May 24 *Weekly Floridian* reported that:

prospects for the erection of that \$250,000 hotel at St. Petersburg are said to be good, and we sincerely hope they are. We understand that the Armours are interested in the scheme(,) which assures ample capital.¹⁴

As previously mentioned, Armour's interests provided substantial loans to Demens and his partners. Arsenault noted that these loans had ballooned to nearly \$900,000 by early 1889.¹⁵ While a palatial hotel of such magnitude did not occupy St. Petersburg's shoreline until much later, one can certainly argue that the message of a potential competitor across Tampa Bay was not lost on Henry Plant or his interests. Plant's Tampa Bay Hotel, built between 1888 and 1891 and now the main building on the campus of the University of Tampa, became the most palatial facility on the West Coast during the 1890s.

The lack of a direct rail connection around Old Tampa Bay between St. Petersburg and Tampa certainly added fuel to the rivalries that developed long before the boom era. The Orange Belt represented the longest narrow gauge rail line in the country, but poor construction and financial limitations hindered operations during the late 1880s and early 1890s. By 1889, Demens and his partners failed to meet interest payments to Armour and members of the Philadelphia syndicate. After Demens and his associates sold their interests, the Russian transplant left St. Petersburg for good. Armour's investors hoped to increase passenger traffic, but soon realized that failing locomotives,

¹⁴ Ibid., 24 May 1888.

faulty rail construction, and freezing citrus made their position untenable. With trains rarely operating “on time,” the luxurious hotel mentioned by the *Tribune* never appeared. Trains traveled at a crawl, rarely faster than twelve miles per hour, to prevent them from jumping the tracks. Some residents of Dunedin conjectured that if the Orange Belt hit twenty miles per hour, passenger would probably fly from their seats and hit the ceiling. Jokes about the railway soon proliferated among Pinellas residents. For example, some pundits in Dunedin called the Orange Belt a tri-weekly train because “it goes up one week and tries to get back the next.” Terrible freezes during the 1894-1895 winter killed many citrus trees, as well as hopes for sustained profitability over the next few years. The syndicate soon lost interest in the project, and decided to lease the railroad to Henry B. Plant in 1895.¹⁶

Plant’s control of the Orange Belt led to swift changes along the rail line and exacerbated the regional rifts of bayside boosterism. Plant renamed the line the Sanford and St. Petersburg, and by 1897 his workers converted the tracks from narrow to standard gauge. With Demens and Disston out of the picture, Plant hoped to develop enterprises in Western Hillsborough under his tight controls. The 1889 railroad pier extending into Tampa Bay at Demens’s Landing had served as a popular recreation and gathering spot during the Orange Belt era. After 1895, however, Plant charged other boat operators docking fees to use the pier. Angered by locals who failed to sell him waterfront property on favorable terms, Plant sought to punish townsfolk in St. Petersburg by placing his swank hotel in Belleair. The admiration once given to General Williams and Peter Demens became animosity directed at Plant. While members of the Plant family—most notably his son, Morton F. Plant—continued to play an important role in the history of Pinellas, the battles between Henry Plant and early St. Petersburg leaders continued until Henry Plant’s death in 1899. Plant’s interests soon purchased the railroad outright, and the Plant System merged with the Atlantic Coast Line (ACL). His elegant Belleview Biltmore hotel in west central Pinellas offered spectacular accommodations that early St. Petersburg venues could not match. At one point, Tampa newspapers even discouraged tourists on the *H. B. Plant* steamship from getting off the boat while it docked at the

¹⁵ Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, 60.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 60-61, 80; Davidson, *Dunedin thru the Years*, 40-41.

small settlement of St. Petersburg. Tampa boosters thought such activities were a waste of time. Meanwhile, St. Petersburg critics wasted no time in criticizing the new ACL depot constructed in 1905 and 1906. Hampton Dunn reprinted an editorial appearing in the 11 February 1905 *St. Petersburg Times* about the depot in his photographic history, *Yesterday's St. Petersburg*. The writer, probably *Times* publisher and civic booster William L. Straub, described the new depot as follows: "The building will be—just plain wood—with probably a tin roof—which will be a great disappointment to the people of St. Petersburg, and we think ourselves the company (ACL) should have treated us better." If cries of "we deserve better than this" filled the streets of St. Petersburg when the new depot opened in 1906, at least they had regular service at their doorstep.¹⁷

By comparison, the fortunes of Oakland, Cedar Keys, and other smaller communities declined as the developments along the West Coast bypassed them. A descendant of one pioneer family in Oakland noted that "the railroad was a major influence. They built almost everything in Oakland. The people from the railroad were the officials of the town." The freeze of 1894-1895 had devastated crops around Oakland. After Plant assumed control of the line, the Orange Belt offices closed, as did many stores and shops. A fire in the late 1890s further damaged the local economy and any aspirations of a large city appearing on the south shores of Lake Apopka. Meanwhile, the Cedar Keys area also suffered decline, due in large measure to new southern rail routes, a decision to snub a business proposal by Henry Plant, and natural resource depletion. While David Levy Yulee's Florida Railroad—in operation by 1859—provided an important east-west route for agricultural commodities across Florida's peninsula during the mid-1800s, this line could not compete with the larger Plant and Flagler networks that connected peninsular cities like Tampa and Miami to northern markets. Lacking the deep-water port found at Tampa, leaders sealed the community's fate when they denied Henry Plant railhead facilities in Cedar Key. Clear-cutting of cedars, pines, cypress, and other trees denuded the landscape, while over-harvesting of shellfish, fish, turtles, and sponges drained nearby waters of their economic harvests by the end of the 1800s. Soon,

¹⁷ Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, 79-81, 144-145; Hampton Dunn, *Yesterday's St. Petersburg* (Miami: E. A. Seemann Publishing, 1973), 48.

newcomers to Pinellas and Plant's locomotives bypassed the Cedar Keys area on their way to southern destinations.¹⁸

The Tampa and Gulf Railroad Connects Sulphur Springs with Pinellas

Although the Orange Belt Railway opened the Pinellas Peninsula to settlement, residents soon clamored for more reliable service. A September 1890 issue of the *Tampa Tribune* reprinted a blurb from the *Tarpon Springs Truth* claiming that “the people of the West Coast are as anxious as Tampa to build the rail road from Tampa to the West Coast. If the people of both sections go to work they can build the road this winter. Let them delay no longer, but build it. Talk does not count, but work will.” By the early 1900s, after the appearance of standard gauges on the former Orange Belt, regular rail service to distant cities was supplemented with shorter runs, such as the twice-daily “Toonerville Trolley” train that ran from St. Petersburg to Trilby (in Pasco County) and later as far as Tarpon Springs. An early version of a “commuter rail,” the slow-moving Toonerville often stopped along the rail lines, away from terminals, where passengers flagged it down. Railroad officials reduced service during the summer months, however, making it difficult for Tampa residents to get to Tarpon Springs. Even as late as 1908, many Tampanians took the steamer to St. Petersburg and boarded the train in the Sunshine City for Tarpon Springs. A lack of regularly scheduled service angered members of the Tampa Chamber of Commerce. In May 1908, ACL officials acknowledged that their economic measures delayed the mails and passenger traffic between Tampa and Tarpon. As a result, by May 18 the rail line offered a coach car that left the St. Petersburg wharf at 9:35 a.m. and returned from Tarpon by 5:20 p.m., allowing Tampa residents sufficient time to catch the afternoon boat ride back to Tampa. Given the rush hour traffic that clogs bridges and roads between Pinellas and Hillsborough today, this compromise showed the difficulties commuters faced nearly a century ago. Before the end of 1908, residents of Tampa and Western Hillsborough celebrated plans to construct a line known as the

¹⁸ “Oakland History,” located at <http://www.town.oakland.fl.us/information/history/index.html> (20 December 2003). Nick Wynne’s chapter on the 1910s discusses events in the Cedar Keys area and how they affected the local economic outlook. See: James J. Horgan, and Lewis N. Wynne, *Florida Decades: A Sesquicentennial History, 1845-1995* (St. Leo: St. Leo College Press, 1995), 109-118.

Tampa and Gulf Coast Railway with a connecting point at Gulf Coast Junction, also known as Sulphur Springs.¹⁹

Construction on the railroad continued during 1909, with service between Tampa and Tarpon beginning in March 1910. Originally organized as a line to haul logs and lumber, the Tampa and Gulf Coast Railway offered its inaugural service on 22 March 1910. A delegation that included members of the Tampa Board of Trade traveled north then west to meet fellow Board of Trade members in Tarpon Springs. Sulphur Springs became a junction between the Tampa and Gulf Coast heading towards the Pinellas Peninsula and the Tampa Northern rail line that operated between Tampa and Hernando County. Work on the Tampa-Sulphur Springs route had started by the spring of 1908 after officials received a right-of-way franchise from council members for a route along Nineteenth Street between Second and Eighth Avenues. Manager L. Brill predicted that passengers would enjoy “first class car accommodations” by the end of 1908. A postcard printed by 1912 colorfully depicts the railroad bridge across the Hillsborough River in Sulphur Springs, just a short distance from the Gulf Junction. While a depot existed at this site by the spring of 1910, the structure at Heritage Village represented a later structure; it is unknown whether the Sulphur Springs Depot includes materials saved from the smaller, original building, or if it was an expansion of the original facility.²⁰

The Sulphur Springs Depot served the booming community north of Tampa. By the summer of 1921, the legislature had approved the charter of Sulphur Springs and permitted its incorporation as a municipality. Meanwhile, construction crews designed the station at Sulphur Springs as a copy of a depot designed in 1915 and built the following year at Yulee, a Nassau County town a short distance from Fernandina Beach. Similar to other Florida depots of the period, the stations at Yulee and Sulphur Springs emphasized functionality rather than finesse. The building followed the No. 3 company design, with hardwood construction, found in many contemporaneous terminals built by

¹⁹ *Tampa Tribune*, 4 September 1890; Davidson, *Dunedin thru the Years*, 41; *St. Petersburg Times*, 20 May 1908. Excitement occurred again when rumors swirled around St. Petersburg that the Seaboard Air Line planned to bring its operations into Pinellas County. See: *St. Petersburg Times*, 8 October 1912.

²⁰ *St. Petersburg Times*, 22 March 1910; F. R. Schwartz, National Director, National Railway Historical Society, to Ken Ford, 20 March 1978; *Tampa Weekly Tribune*, 28 May 1908. Even NRHS director Schwartz admitted in correspondence to Heritage Village administrators that “(d)etailed records and information concerning the station itself seems to be almost non-existent.” See image PC4419, Florida Photographic Collection, State Archives of Florida, Tallahassee.

the Seaboard Coast Line during the early twentieth century. Piers and wooden pilings support the depot's offices, passenger areas, and freight platforms. The stationmaster's office, telegraph/telephone relay area, and waiting rooms presently resemble their appearance during the height of passenger rail travel through Sulphur Springs from the 1920s into the early 1930s. Following Jim Crow laws of the time, the station had separate white and "colored" waiting rooms and ticket windows to prevent the racial integration of passengers. The station manager's office behind the ticket counter currently includes a telegraph, telephone, paper work, a scale locomotive, and luggage and trunks from the period. A photograph from the impressive Burgert Brothers archive shows improvements along the tracks between the station and the bridge across the Hillsborough River. Other railroad depots in the region also emphasized simplicity and often lacked amenities. For example, ACL authorities did not add electric lights until the spring of 1914 or dispatch plumbers to install restrooms until early 1917 at the Largo station.²¹

The Tampa and Gulf Coast reached St. Petersburg by September 1914. The line introduced regular passenger service to Clearwater, the "Sunset City," in mid-April. The first train to arrive in Clearwater, beautifully decorated and full of riders from Tampa, enjoyed an ensemble of musicians from Clearwater, Pinellas Park, and St. Petersburg. The ceremonies included a telephone call between railroad general manager Charles H. Lutz and President Charles H. Brown, then in Tampa recovering from an illness, as well as refreshments including sandwiches, hot fish, pickles, and steaming coffee. According to an article in the 23 April 1914 *Largo Sentinel*, "after the white people had been served till all were satisfied, the tables were then turned over to the negroes (sic), colored help taking charge and serving their people in the same manner and with the same kind of picnic that the whites had enjoyed." The Tampa and Gulf Coast service extended to Largo in mid-June. Three months later, the fifty-four mile line came to an end in St. Petersburg, where carloads of boosters came by rail from Pinellas Park, Seminole, Tampa, and other communities to celebrate. G. E. Noblit and S. S. Coachman participated in the ceremonies at the Ninth Street terminus. Led by loud and proud bands from Clearwater and Pinellas Park, nearly 1,500 people then walked from the railroad

²¹ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 17 June 1921; F. R. Schwartz, National Director, National Railway Historical Society, to Ken Ford, 20 March 1978, 18 April 1978. See image RC14071, Florida Photographic

terminus to Williams Park to enjoy a barbeque coordinated by Noel A. Mitchell. An afternoon baseball game and evening carnival along Central Avenue rounded out the events of the day. By May 1915, the Tampa and Gulf Coast line planned construction of a railroad spur between Anona and Indian Rocks Beach to facilitate travel for Tampa residents who had built summer homes along the waterfront.²²

Good Roads and Railroads

Just as poor roadways along the Pinellas Peninsula hindered early settlers, poor transportation funding by Hillsborough County administrators in Tampa fueled demands for the creation of a new county. When commissioners balked at road improvements in Western Hillsborough, including the construction of a bridge at Long Bayou, residents of the Pinellas Peninsula demanded answers. An article in the 6 May 1910 *St. Petersburg Times* supporting the construction of a “Tampa Short Route” roadway proclaimed that “St. Petersburg could not possibly make a better investment than to build that road. St. Petersburg people have some \$40,000 or \$50,000 invested in automobiles, and spend large amounts in their upkeep, and all are large tax payers.” The article proposed two routes. The first, “a hard surfaced road of the best kind,” would connect St. Petersburg to Johns Pass by crossing Long Bayou near Seminole, then continue to Largo, Clearwater, Dunedin, Sutherland, and Tarpon Springs partially on a route that corresponds with present-day Alt. U.S. Highway 19. This route, built piecemeal, included many obstacles along the way. A second rock road would bridge Clearwater, Green Springs (now Safety Harbor), and Tampa, with cheaper pine straw roads offering other routes. The newspaper noted that Pinellas residents had already raised nearly \$2,600 to support the construction of the Long Bayou bridge. Another article referring to gaps along the Clearwater-Largo rock road in the 28 March 1910 *Times* claimed to look forward to the day “when Pinellas County shall be permitted to run her own business and spend her own money in her own way.” Even after Pinellas County gained its independence in 1912, a Taxpayers’ Good Roads Association met during the early 1920s to discuss road improvement projects, such as improvements to Haines Road and the construction of a roadway near the Gandy

Collection, State Archives of Florida; *Largo Leader*, 23 April 1914, 18 January 1917.

²² *Largo Sentinel*, 23 April 1914, 25 June 1914, 24 September 1914, 27 May 1915.

Bridge. The arrival of “tin can tourists” by the 1920s encouraged further road improvements and strengthened the resolve of George S. Gandy to build a bridge across Tampa Bay that opened in November 1924. Rail service remained important, however, as noted by J. N. Craig, ACL station agent at Tarpon Springs, during preparations for the 1921 Pinellas County Fair. Runs of the *Pinellas Special* allowed attendees from all parts of the county to travel by way of train. Indeed, railroad representatives from the Seaboard Air Line and Atlantic Coast Line regularly traveled along Pinellas routes before tourist season to assure the quality of railroad services and facilities before the influx of seasonal visitors.²³

A Railroad Less Traveled

New avenues of motor vehicle transportation altered railroad service in the years following World War II. Americans, hungry for consumer goods after the austerity measures of the Second World War, purchased automobiles in record numbers. Roadside attractions, motels, and small “mom-and-pop” establishments dotted state roads and U.S. highways 1, 19, 27, 41, 92, 301, and 441 throughout the Sunshine State. The throes of the Cold War led President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the United States Congress to approve a massive public works project that forever redefined transportation patterns: the creation of the Interstate highway system. As railroad traffic continued to decline, the new superhighways also threatened the economic livelihood of smaller attractions and communities “off the beaten path.” Specific incidents also threatened the railroad industry in the postwar years. For example, coal shortages and labor unrest in the mining industry led to a substantial reduction of rail service in January 1950. The Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) required the passenger rail service to reduce by one-third in early January. To comply with this edict, the Seaboard Air Line discontinued its *Palmland* route between downtown St. Petersburg, Clearwater, and Safety Harbor. With the *Palmland* only coming as far south as Tampa, Seaboard officials reassured ticket

²³ *St. Petersburg Times*, 28 March 1910, 6 May 1910, 28 January 1923, 2 April 1923; Arsenault, *St Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, 196-197; *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 14 January 1921; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 30 November 1926.

holders that busses between St. Petersburg, Clearwater, and Tampa would honor railroad tickets to cover the fare.²⁴

Passenger rail service came to an end in downtown St. Petersburg in June 1963. By the early 1960s, the City of St. Petersburg hoped to rejuvenate its downtown with planned projects such as the new municipal marina and the Bayfront Center. However, the ACL station occupied valuable downtown real estate along First Avenue South and regular rail service caused congestion along a corridor that spanned from the Webb's City shopping complex to the area just west of Al Lang Field. To accommodate downtown redevelopment and improve railroad service for south Pinellas residents, city officials acquired a twenty-three acre tract of land south of 38th Avenue North near 31st Street for \$629,981. The city then oversaw construction of the \$412,000 station. Approximately 300 city leaders, ACL executives, and members of the public attended dedication ceremonies at the new station in mid-June, where they heard ACL Railroad President W. Thomas Rice boast that the building represented "the most beautiful passenger station in the United States." This cooperative effort may have fostered new life downtown, but it merely kept the railroad industry on life support as Pinellas County continued to embrace "car culture."²⁵

The move of the station from downtown St. Petersburg coincided with other efforts to refine transportation, commercial, and residential patterns. Just as the opening of the Sunshine Skyway and the construction of the Thirty-Fourth Street corridor redirected many vehicles away from the city core, the construction of Central Plaza and other "suburban" shopping centers served residents in new developments. Soon, subdivisions sprouting up west of U. S. Highway 19, in the Lakewood area of southern Pinellas, and in areas adjacent to Lealman and Kenneth City signaled a demographic explosion in St. Petersburg. Local and federal officials constructed new facilities to meet the needs of this growing community. For example, the city's public library along the eastern shore of Mirror Lake became a "branch" as the system opened its main building along Ninth Avenue North at Thirty-Seventh Street by 1964. Also, the 1916 United

²⁴ *Clearwater Sun*, 8 January 1950. For a discussion of how Florida's roadside attractions flourished during the mid-twentieth century and declined after the opening of Interstate highways and Walt Disney World, see: Ken Breslauer, *Roadside Paradise: The Golden Age of Florida's Tourist Attractions, 1929-71* (St. Petersburg: RetroFlorida, Inc., 2000).

States “open air” Post Office became a quaint if beautiful branch of the larger postal facility constructed along First Avenue North and Thirty-First Street.

Railroad service witnessed declines in other communities, including Largo. Demolition of Largo’s Atlantic Coast Line Railroad station took place in July 1967. Shortly after municipal workers disconnected the water and sewer lines, a local contractor named Lyle R. Holland brought in a crew to raze the structure. Holland’s contract with the city allowed him to take all of the bricks from the structure and paid him \$1,100; in this agreement, the city kept the timbers and lumber from the building. Before the end of July, the workers had nearly finished removing the roof, interior walls, and floors from the terminals. Photographs in the July 20 and July 27 editions of the *Largo Sentinel* clearly documented the workers’ progress. Holland planned to save as many of the bricks as possible so they could have a second life as decorative bricks in new homes under construction. Newspaper articles from the mid-1960s through the early 1980s often told a similar story: Funding shortages threatened railroad service, with some routes preserved and others reduced or eliminated.²⁶

Direct Amtrak rail service came to an end in Pinellas County in early 1984. Similar to the suspension of the *Palmland* routes to St. Petersburg in January 1950, Amtrak officials pledged to implement an express bus system. In spite of outcries from local leaders and elected officials, the departure of Amtrak’s *Silver Star* marked the end of passenger service from St. Petersburg and other West Coast stations. To compensate for a deficit in operational funds, Amtrak replaced the *Silver Star* and *Silver Meteor* with express bus service beginning 1 February 1984 from St. Petersburg, Clearwater, and Sarasota/Bradenton. In an ironic attempt to promote the express bus service, Amtrak officials claimed that the bus routes shaved as much as seventy-five minutes from the travel time to Tampa when compared to the “slower” rail service.²⁷

The Sulphur Springs Depot: Not at the End of Its Line

The glory days of Sulphur Springs—and its railroad station—had disappeared by the 1970s. No longer a separate political entity, Sulphur Springs joined West Tampa, Port

²⁵ *St. Petersburg Times*, 13 June 1963.

²⁶ *Largo Sentinel*, 20 July 1967, 17 July 1967.

Tampa, and other formerly autonomous areas as another neighborhood within the City of Tampa. Demographic shifts and urban sprawl placed the depot in an undesirable area for passenger railroad service, as best illustrated by a July 1972 Florida Department of Commerce photograph showing the well-worn structure and tracks alongside unattractive buildings, a dirt parking area, and poor landscaping. Passenger service at the Sulphur Springs station had ended before the 1967 merger of the Seaboard Air Line and Atlantic Coast Line into the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad.²⁸

After the opening of Heritage Village, Director Kendrick Ford sought either a former depot or funds to construct a replica to symbolize the importance of railroads to the Pinellas Peninsula. Other depots had moved to different locations and served new clientele as railroad service declined. For example, workers relocated the Tampa and Gulf Coast terminal in New Port Richey in 1944 so it could become a meeting hall for veterans of the Spanish-American War. The structure moved again in June 1963—the same month the ACL pulled out of downtown St. Petersburg—to a parcel on Pine Hill Road in Pasco so that its buyer could remodel the old depot into a private residence. By early 1978, he corresponded with representatives of the Tampa Bay chapter of the National Railway Historical Society about the Sulphur Springs building. In a letter to Ford, F. R. Schwartz of the NRHS claimed that after examining all of the remaining depots within a 100 mile area around Tampa, the Sulphur Springs depot offered “the last available station in central Florida” that did not require extensive repairs or expensive reconstruction. The Seaboard Coast Line had donated the station to the NRHS, on the condition that the structure would be moved from the railroad’s right-of-way. Lacking land for the structure, Schwartz and NRHS members offered to present the depot to Heritage Village. Fearing the demolition of this structure, Schwartz urged Ford to accept this building within the window of opportunity that existed: Officials with the Seaboard Coastline wanted the building removed by October 15 of that year. At a March 1978 meeting, the Pinellas County Historical Commission (PCHC) discussed this matter. PCHC member David Carr agreed that the station possessed historical value, but claimed the depot lacked an aesthetic appearance. Ford replied that most Florida depots focused on

²⁷ *St. Petersburg Times*, 1 February 1984.

²⁸ See image C681147, Florida Photographic Collection, State Archives of Florida.

functionality rather than beauty. Chair Dorothy Edmunds recalled that original discussions of a “pioneer village” motif included a train station at the park, and added that children would enjoy such a structure, especially if “railroad trains may soon become extinct.” Noting that a replica of a train station may cost upwards of \$150,000 to build, PCHC members considered a rough estimate of \$10,000 to move an authentic depot a much better bargain. The PCHC approved an agreement with the Seaboard Coast Line and the NRHS to accept the building and fund its move to Heritage Village.²⁹

The Sulphur Springs Train Depot arrived in October 1978. The NRHS assisted with the restoration of the building and provided many of the items located in the station. That organization helped to transform the shipping storage room into a railroad history museum. Members of the Pinellas County Historical Society also “helped the staff immensely” with work at the Sulphur Springs Train Depot, according to a September 1979 PCHC report. By November 1982, Ford told members of the Historical Commission that the Seaboard Coast Line planned to discard over thirty cabooses. As a non-profit agency, Heritage Village could acquire a caboose for free, but would have to cover moving charges and construct a rail line adjacent to the station.³⁰ The 1967 caboose arrived shortly thereafter. In addition, outside the depot, a switch stand, three speed limit notices, a wigwag (signal), and two floats enhance the historical replication of the depot.

²⁹ Records of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo, 8 March 1978, 19 April 1978; F. R. Schwartz, National Director, National Railway Historical Society, to Ken Ford, 18 April 1978; *St. Petersburg Times*, 12 June 1963.

³⁰ Records of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo, 19 September 1979, 17 November 1982.