

Williams Park Bandstand Replica: A Brief Introduction

History of Site before Actual Structure was Built

- Early visitors to the area (those who lived in the area before the arrival of the Orange Belt Railway) remember the site of Williams Park as an area where many animals, especially wild deer, could be found. This site was named in honor of “General” John Constantine Williams, Sr., an early landowner in the region who worked with Peter Demens to secure the arrival of the railroad in 1888.
- The square block occupied by Williams Park appeared as parkland on the town’s original plat in August 1888.

Construction Information for Original Structure

- Though the park appeared on the original town plat, it remained largely untouched during the first few years. Work on improving the park began in 1893.
- Constructed in mid-1890s by Park Improvement Association.
- The Woman’s Town Improvement Association (WTIA) hoped to improve on the progress made by the Park Improvement Association. The WTIA lobbied and raised funds for enhancements in and around Williams Park.
- A substantial shipment of rock for use in park walkways arrived in 1902
- By 1904, the WTIA had an asphalt sidewalk constructed around the park for \$563.

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

- The creation of the bandstand and improvements to Williams Park during the city’s early years serve as a credit to the creative labors of local women.
- Site of many ice cream socials, public lectures, musical events, and other community activities. The number of programs offered at Williams Park increased during the period when seasonal residents visited the area.
- Lawn parties with Japanese lanterns; “megaphone” men giving oratory or making announcements; and the sales of fudge, cake, and other treats brought many to the park.
- Political gatherings also occurred at the original bandstand, such as when Governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward spoke there during a September 1906 political rally. Two years later, proponents of independence from Hillsborough County held a meeting of the “Pinellas County Club” at this site.
- The WTIA turned over the operation and maintenance duties of Williams Park to the city by 1910.
- The city’s Board of Trade sponsored regular Sunday band concerts by 1913. As more visitors came to the area during the winter months, tourist societies (and state societies) held meetings or special events at Williams Park. Regular meetings of the “Sunshine Pleasure Club” and other organizations led to many afternoons filled with games of chess, checkers, croquet, horseshoes, etc.
- In the years immediately following World War I, the city experienced a new and frenzied land boom. As the city passed from adolescence to adulthood, the 1895 bandstand seemed quaint and out-of-place. By August 1920, the city’s Park Board moved forward with plans to construct a new bandstand and move the older

pavilion to a waterfront park near Bayboro Harbor. This structure was most likely destroyed in the 1921 hurricane.

- By late 1923 the city planned to add 400 new benches to the 1000 already at Williams Park, an important sign of the city's growth and the expansion of programs and concerts at the Park.

Creation of the Replica at Heritage Village

- Construction of the bandstand replica began in mid-1980 with the assistance of the Seabees, a large naval reserve construction unit. Work on the bandstand continued into 1981.
- The replica at Heritage Village offers a popular gathering spot for performances and ceremonies.
- Differences between the original structure and replica due in part to budgetary constraints, donated labor, and the lack of "old-fashioned" designs.

Williams Park Bandstand

Overview

Williams Park, located in the heart of St. Petersburg, became the first organized and platted park on the Pinellas Peninsula.¹ Although the site appeared on the original August 1888 town plat of St. Petersburg, improvements to “City Park” did not occur until leading women of the community established the Park Improvement Association in 1893. Within two years, Association members had secured funds to construct a bandstand in the northern portion of the park. For the next twenty-five years, this structure offered a community meeting place and the first place where musicians entertained residents of the town.

The establishment of the Woman’s Town Improvement Association in 1901 brought many improvements to Williams Park. For the next nine years, the women of this organization conducted a variety of fundraisers to improve the park and sustain programs for those in need. By 1910, the Association turned over its duties to maintain Williams Park to the city. Municipal authorities created a Park Board, expanded the 1895 bandstand, and prepared the venue for bigger concerts and a larger array of public events. By the summer of 1920, officials decided to replace rather than remodel the original bandstand. As workers constructed a new bandstand at the northern edge of Williams Park, a contractor moved the 1895 pavilion to Waterfront Park along Tampa Bay. Violent winds and waves from the October 1921 hurricane destroyed the original structure.

Heritage Village re-created the 1895 pavilion, similar to its original form, as a gathering place at this open-air museum. Members of the U. S. Navy Seabees Reserves assembled this replica in 1980-1981 with Victorian decorative friezes around the roofline that attempted to recapture the woodwork of the original structure. Frequently used for weddings and performances at Heritage Village, the structure was officially dedicated during the Pinellas County Historical Society’s annual Country Jubilee in October 1981.

¹ For a general overview of the history of parks in Pinellas County, see: Trudi Wood, “Guardians of Paradise: The History of the Pinellas County Park System” (Unpublished seminar paper, University of South Florida, c. 1992).

A “General” History of the Park’s Namesake

A native of Detroit born in 1817, John Constantine Williams arrived in Florida in 1875. His father, John R. Williams, had served as Detroit’s first mayor in 1824 and had a hand in establishing the *Detroit Free Press*. Before his death in 1854, the elder Williams also speculated in business ventures on the lower peninsula of Michigan and served as a general in the Black Hawk War of 1832. The younger Williams, often referred to with the complimentary title of “Colonel Williams” or “General Williams,” hoped to follow in his father’s successful footsteps. He considered the Florida frontier a suitable venue for speculation, visiting numerous small towns before happening upon the Pinellas Peninsula in 1875. By early 1876, he had acquired approximately 1,600 acres of land from the State of Florida and from W. F. Spurlin, an agricultural investor who had purchased land around Big Bayou and Bayboro in 1873 but failed to harvest successful cash crops. Williams returned to Detroit for awhile before reappearing on the peninsula by early 1879. Tampa’s *Sunland Tribune* announced his return to the region in early February: “He had brought out quite a variety of agricultural implements new to this country. . . . He has also sent down quite a lot of the finest kind of poultry.” Williams came to Tampa with stocks and wagons overland from Gainesville, while some of his personal effects arrived by steamship. He brought along a “Sulky Cultivator,” a sophisticated plow excellent for preparing the land for crops. Reinforcing racial stereotypes of the time, the *Tribune* article noted that “a darkie who was standing on the outskirts of the crowd” allegedly made this contemptuous remark: “The white people never thought of making a plow for the plowmen to ride on until after the niggers were freed.” The *Tribune* claimed that Williams visited Tampa in late February for a few days of rest before heading to “Point Pinellas” where he planned “to enclose a considerable quantity of land with a wire fence.” He had acquired “several tons” of wire for cordoning off his acreage. Similar to Spurlin, “General” Williams initially had little success with crop cultivation in this remote region. In June, “Col. J. C. Williams” visited Tampa to purchase sheep for his lands along the Pinellas Peninsula. By the late summer of 1879, the *Sunland Tribune* announced that “Col. J. C. Williams and daughter, Miss Emma, of Point Pinellas left Tuesday for . . . Detroit, their former home.” Although he retained his Florida land

holdings, Williams decided to return to Detroit once again by 1881 and divorced his wife by the end of that year.²

Hamilton Disston's purchase of four million acres of Florida land for \$1,000,000 excited speculators and fueled an early land boom. Disston had appeared on the horizon at a time when the State of Florida teetered on financial insolvency. Although his deal with the state's Internal Improvement Fund supposedly covered only marginal swampland, in reality he also acquired numerous excellent and elevated tracts throughout Florida. Historian Raymond Arsenault notes that his purchase included in excess of 150,000 acres along the Pinellas Peninsula. Disston and others soon established a settlement at Tarpon Springs. By 1884, this entrepreneur had formalized plans to create a substantial community—later known as Disston City—along the shores of Boca Ciega Bay in the area of present-day Gulfport. Over the next two years, Disston worked with Russian immigrant Pyotr Dementyev (Peter Demens) to bring the Orange Belt Railway to the Pinellas Peninsula.³

Disston's presence in lower Pinellas encouraged Williams to return to the area and capitalize on his extensive land holdings. He brought along his new wife, a Canadian widow named Sarah Craven Judge. Her heritage proved helpful in negotiations with Demens and his Canadian partner and project treasurer, Henry Sweetapple, after Demens's original agreement with Disston had soured. John and Sarah Williams brokered a deal that turned the Orange Belt Railway away from Disston's planned megalopolis and towards their substantial holdings in present-day downtown St. Petersburg. By early 1886, "General" Williams learned that some of the acreage he had acquired from Spurlin included encumbrances that he had to settle. Although "General" John C. Williams passed away in April 1892, his widow remained active in community affairs for many years. She married Bartow transplant Capt. James A. Armistead on 10

² Raymond O. Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888-1950* (Norfolk, Va.: Donning, 1988), 44-45; Rick Baker, *Mangroves to Major League: A Timeline of St. Petersburg, Florida (Prehistory to 2000 A.D.)* (St. Petersburg: Southern Heritage Press, 2000), 36; *Sunland Tribune*, 8 February 1879, 1 March 1879, 19 June 1879, 4 September 1879. Arsenault's excellent discussion of "General" Williams's arrival to the Tampa Bay region places his activities within the broader social context of late-nineteenth century Florida history. Some earlier newspaper sources refer to John C. Williams as "Colonel Williams." His legacy along the Pinellas Peninsula certainly earned him a promotion to "General" in the eyes of many early residents.

³ Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, 44-47, 52-53.

September 1894 and certainly took a strong interest in community affairs during his tenure as mayor from 1896 through 1898 and again in 1900.⁴

Building the Infrastructure and Planning for a Beautiful City Park

Even after the arrival of the Orange Belt in 1888, St. Petersburg remained—according to Karl H. Grismer—a “primitive place” into the early 1890s. Grismer notes that the first documented public improvement in the small village occurred when women joined together and raised funds for the construction of a wooden sidewalk along Central Avenue (originally platted as “Sixth Avenue”). Tired of negotiating sand hills and mud puddles along this walkway, town women held picnics and socials, while selling ice cream, lemonade, and other treats to raise funds for the sidewalk. This effort allowed for the extension of a sidewalk originally started at Ninth (Dr. Martin Luther King) Street in 1889 and later abandoned. By 1891, residents could walk the wooden plank between Ninth Street and the Detroit Hotel. Similar in form to shoreline boardwalks in many present-day parks (such as Boca Ciega ‘Millennium’, John Chesnut Sr., and Sawgrass Lake parks), this early wooden sidewalk provided an elevated bridge over a deep swale between Second and Third streets and other obstacles. As advocates of an early City Beautiful movement, the women also planted shrubs and grass around the settlement; unfortunately, the persistent appetites of cows, hogs, and other wildlife complicated efforts to beautify the city until officials banned the free-range roaming of such animals.⁵

Despite its service on a regular railroad schedule, the town of St. Petersburg in the early 1890s resembled the remote Florida frontier of the 1820s with its lack of internal improvements. Formalized rules governing the construction of roads in Florida appeared in one of the earliest acts passed by the Territorial Legislative Council during its 1822 session in Pensacola. In the sparsely settled Florida of the 1820s, the local Justice of the Peace could select most free white males and able-bodied slaves under the age of forty-five for compulsory service to build and maintain roads. Through such oversight and obligations a network of roads connected towns, farms, plantations, and other settlements across Florida by statehood in 1845. Nearly forty-six years later—in 1891—impassible

⁴ Ibid., 53-55; Karl H. Grismer, *The Story of St. Petersburg: The History of the Lower Pinellas Peninsula and The Sunshine City* (St. Petersburg: P. K. Smith, 1948), 237, 272; *Tampa Guardian*, 17 March 1886.

dirt streets and ruts caused by horses and wagons prompted A. C. Pheil to scatter dust from his mill on St. Petersburg's streets to create the "saw dust trail." By 13 September 1892, the town council enacted a provision requiring "all able-bodied males" between twenty-one and forty-five (except clergy and town officials) to perform occasional work to improve public streets. While Grismer claims that town officials probably did not enforce this provision, the ordinance shows how difficult transportation remained even after train service brought passengers to town. By 1894, Chancey W. Springstead—later a vice-president of the city's First National Bank—agreed to use shells from nearby Indian mounds to provide a base pavement along the city's busiest intersections. More extensive road improvements, such as the paving of Central Avenue with a pebble and phosphate mixture, did not occur until the summer of 1897.⁶

With work on sidewalks and infrastructure underway, women leaders focused their efforts on improving City Park by 1893. These women created the St. Petersburg Park Improvement Association (PIA) in that year and solicited funds for wooden sidewalks and a bandstand at City Park. In late 1893, Mayor David Murray issued a proclamation for "Park Day." While some women served beverages, cake, and ice cream, others in the audience commemorated this event by clearing the palmetto scrub and establishing walkways in the park. Women had to carry the burden of much of the work in 1893 and subsequent years because men lost interest in the project as Park Day faded into memory. By 1894, the Park Improvement Association sponsored the construction of a fence in an attempt to keep stray animals—especially hogs and cows—out of the park. Nina Hill Blocker helped to plant the first grass in Williams Park in 1894, a year after she had moved to the area as a young bride of John C. Blocker, an engineer on the Orange Belt Railway. The following year, the women of PIA raised sufficient funds to begin construction of the bandstand. During much of this time, women leaders in the PIA often met the Orange Belt as it arrived to direct visitors to the Hotel Detroit, then the village's

⁵ Grismer, *The Story of St. Petersburg*, 84-86.

⁶ *Ibid.*; 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); Arsenaault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, 179.

only hotel. W. L. Straub noted that in time, however, the Park Association “dropped out of existence” by the end of the decade.⁷

The 1895 bandstand, a wooden structure with ornamental effects, sat along the northern boundary of City Park, equidistant between Third and Fourth streets and approximately fifty feet south of the park’s boundary with Second Avenue. The one-story structure included an octagonal elevated platform on the west with a rectangular extension that projected east towards Third Street. An April 1904 Sanborn insurance map of St. Petersburg shows improved pathways crisscrossing the four corners of Williams Park, a cleared area in the center of the park where the fountain would later reside, and a bowed walkway between the northeast and northwest corners of the park that passed just to the south of the bandstand. Aside from the bandstand itself, all of the improvements appearing on the 1904 Sanborn map occurred after the turn of the century.⁸

The Women’s Town Improvement Association and Williams Park

Laws and customs excluded American women from most political and many civic activities during the late 1800s and early 1900s. As the first women’s organization in St. Petersburg, the Park Improvement Association offered an opportunity for women to take a leadership role in community projects. During this period, women also engaged in public discourse through organizations such as the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU, founded in 1874), the national General Federation of Women’s Clubs (established in April 1890), and its Florida Federation of Women’s Clubs affiliate established in Green Cove Springs in February 1895. Throughout the Progressive Era, these organizations and similar groups encouraged reform in areas such as child labor, temperance, literacy, and improved living and working conditions. Women in these organizations often advocated “quality-of-life” improvements such as parks and other recreational areas.

⁷ Baker, *Mangroves to Major League*, 62; Grismer, *Story of St. Petersburg*, 87; William L. Straub, *History of Pinellas County, Florida: Narrative and Biographical* (St. Augustine: The Record Company, 1929), 148; *St. Petersburg Times*, 2 March 1960. Grismer and Straub list the officers and some early members of the Park Improvement Association.

⁸ Sanborn Map Company, *Fire Insurance Maps: Florida* (Teaneck, N.J.: Chadwyck-Healey, 1983), April 1904 map, microfilm reel 13.

The Women's Town Improvement Association (WTIA) formally came together on 7 May 1901. Twenty-eight women met at the Detroit Hotel to organize the community service organization. Isabelle Weller, the WTIA's first president, was married to Arthur P. Weller, manager of the city's electric light plant and cousin to entrepreneur Frank A. Davis. Other early members included Sarah W. Armistead—the widow of “General” Williams—and Katherine Bell Tippetts, a passionate conservationist who arrived by 1902. Armistead, also a leader of the local WCTU chapter, maintained her active involvement in the WTIA until her death on 15 December 1917. Sarah's involvement continued ever after the death of Captain Armistead in August 1907; reflecting the civic boosterism of the time, the *Tampa Weekly Tribune* credited Armistead as “contributing his best talent to the upbuilding of that little city” of St. Petersburg. Many WTIA members—such as Sarah Moore Straub, the organization's original first vice-president and president after Isabelle Weller—had husbands or relatives involved in business or real estate interests in the growing city. While census figures from 1900 showed that few women in the community listed an outside occupation, the domestic connections of prominent women offered them lobbying opportunities in the days before they could legally visit the ballot box. Seasonal visitors, as well as permanent residents, participated in the Association's events. In addition to their work to improve City Park, many WTIA initiatives also supported William L. Straub's vision of an extended waterfront park along the downtown shores of Tampa Bay. During their first year, WTIA members met at the Detroit Hotel and occasionally at the home of Isabelle Weller.⁹

Although the bandstand offered a public gathering place, Williams Park remained—in the words of W. L. Straub—“an untrimmed jungle [and] convenient hiding place for truant boys and cows” in the years after 1900. One account of park's condition shortly after the turn of the century came from Mattie Lou Boswell Cherbonneaux, who remembered traveling to the park with her father on his horse-drawn carriage. Her father hitched his horses to one of the trees near Williams Park, and she saw “woods full of

⁹ Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, 120-123; Ellen Babb and Milly St. Julien, “A Study of Women in 1900 St. Petersburg” (Unpublished seminar paper, University of South Florida, 1984), 4, 13; Grismer, *Story of St. Petersburg*, 272-273, 277, 296; Straub, *History of Pinellas County*, 128, 146; Baker, *Mangroves to Major League*, 77; *Tampa Weekly Tribune*, 15 August 1907. Ida, Arthur and Isabelle Weller's daughter, married Horace Williams, an 1884 native of the Pinellas Peninsula and grandson of

scrub oaks, patches of palmettos, pine trees, wax myrtle, and other trees and bushes. There were cows grazing here and there.” Despite the park’s rustic condition, Straub—who certainly witnessed the efforts of wife Sarah on the WTIA’s behalf—credited the Association’s members for transforming the site into a true park “mostly with their own hands.” Articles about the WTIA’s meetings, events, and social activities frequently appeared in issues of the *St. Petersburg Times*, a newspaper that Straub had purchased in 1901 and edited until his death in 1939.¹⁰

Isabelle Weller, Sarah Straub, Sarah Armistead, and other WTIA members devoted their energies to improving facilities at City Park. In early meetings, the Association membership established a Park Commission (a WTIA subcommittee) that monitored plans to improve the park. On July 4, less than two months after its members had first assembled, the Association sponsored a cake and ice cream fundraising event. Other programs in 1901 included a series of lectures and a day-long steamboat trip. Before the end of 1901, the WTIA had agreed to preserve the pine and oak trees of the park, plant grass to replace the plentiful sandspurs, paint the park benches, and survey and enhance the walkways in the park and around the bandstand. A November 1901 “Arbor Day in the Park” brought additional funds and support, as well as an anonymous donor who pledged 5,000 rosebushes for the park. The wooden bandstand along the northern edge of the park served as the focal point for many of these events.¹¹

The WTIA funded substantial improvements at Williams Park during the first decade of the twentieth century. By April 1902, members had acquired shells and rocks to spread around the walkways of the park. With fences keeping large livestock out of the park, the WTIA membership gathered by 1903 to establish a committee that would lobby the city council to enact an ordinance preventing chickens from “running at large.” At this same meeting, the treasurer reported net proceeds of \$204.50 for winter entertainment programs and a balance of \$214.95 in the treasury. Throughout 1903, the women removed weeds and undergrowth. On 8 August 1903, a six-foot wide asphalt sidewalk around three sides of the park opened for pedestrian traffic. The WTIA had

“General” John C. Williams, on 1 May 1907. Straub also notes that the WTIA was initially known as the Women’s Village Improvement Society.

¹⁰ Straub, *History of Pinellas County*, 128; Rita Slaght Gould, *Pioneer St. Petersburg: Life In and Around 1888 “Out Near the Back of Beyond”* (St. Petersburg: Page Creations, 1987), 45.

arranged to pay for this \$562.56 project over a two-year loan. By January 1904, less than six months later, Straub's paper noted that "these remarkable lady financiers" had paid \$390 of this loan, and owed only \$112.56. Straub himself probably penned the paragraph celebrating the WTIA's "perseverance and good management that would do highest credit to any organization or business concern in the county. St. Petersburg owes much to and should be immensely proud of the Woman's Town Improvement Association." Indeed, their creative labors benefited people as well as the park: At a 5 December 1903 business and social meeting, Association members voted to set aside five percent of their organization's receipts "for the relief of the needy sick of St. Petersburg."¹²

Popular events at Williams Park often focused on widely recognized holidays, tourist activities, and political events. Easter egg hunts, celebrations commemorating George Washington's birthday, and similar programs brought crowds to the park and its bandstand. While the women of WTIA operated the park and paid for its monthly maintenance, men often coordinated these events. For example, a February 1910 Lincoln Memorial Celebration included a full agenda of male dignitaries expounding on Abraham Lincoln's virtues, and those in attendance learned that real estate booster Noel Mitchell took full credit for the grandstand decorations. Many clubs, associations, and state societies congregated on the lawns for picnics and concerts. A photograph of a Michigan Society picnic shows at least sixty members crowded along and around the bandstand. Arsenault notes that the city's Board of Trade welcomed these state and regional societies and tourist clubs, the first of which appeared by January 1902. Speeches by public officials always attracted crowds. When Governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward delivered a talk at the flag-draped pavilion on 14 September 1906, residents congregated along the rows of benches just to the south of the bandstand, as well as all other corners of the octagonal platform. An even larger gathering occurred on 28 April 1908, when "several hundred voters and their ladies" attended a rally sponsored by the Pinellas County Club to debate the possibility of separating from Hillsborough County. John S. Taylor, Don C. McMullen, and other notable leaders explained their position on division while standing on the bandstand's platform. In the years before radio, television, and

¹¹ Babb and St. Julien, "A Study of Women," pp. 13-16.

computers, locations such as the bandstand served as the “information commons” for the community.¹³

The WTIA continued its oversight of Williams Park through the end of the decade. Monthly meeting minutes appearing in the 15 April 1908 *St. Petersburg Times* provide insight into the Association’s fundraisers, expenditures, and activities. With a balance of \$87.40 in the WTIA’s general account on February 4, the treasurer noted that dues, banquets, and refreshment and donation booths had netted over \$420 by April 7. Expenditures during this period included a salary of \$20 per month to J. W. Jackson for his work in maintaining the park. In addition, the Association paid \$12.80 for fountain repairs and \$9 for the services of a dance orchestra. The Association maintained a separate “sick poor” fund of nearly \$110 to provide assistance to the ill and indigent. A WTIA “lawn fête” in mid-April included sweet music, sweeter fudge, assorted cakes and ice cream, “many twinkling Japanese lanterns,” and a “megaphone man” that announced the various attractions. Another party at the end of April offered snowbirds one last opportunity to enjoy cake and ice cream before returning home. As the tourist season came to an end, WTIA members gathered for their annual meeting on 5 May 1908. At the assembly, Sarah Armistead agreed to lead efforts to prevent park and bandstand visitors from using shortcuts through the grass rather than staying on the paved walkways. The women also discussed their purchase of two watering troughs for horses for \$85.19, additional lights for the park, and the recent construction of a fountain in the center of Williams Park at a cost of \$143.07. Aside from the fountain, the July 1908 Sanborn fire map shows no substantial changes had taken place to the pavilion or the park since April 1904.¹⁴

A New Caretaker

By the fall of 1910, members of the WTIA decided to turn over care and upkeep of Williams Park to the city. Alongside a front page article announcing the return of

¹² *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 4 April 1902, 10 December 1903; *St. Petersburg Times*, 30 January 1904, 16 May 1933; Grismer, *Story of St. Petersburg*, 243.

¹³ Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, 146; *St. Petersburg Times*, 29 April 1908, 8 February 1910. See images N027011 and N040129, Florida Photographic Collection, State Archives of Florida, Tallahassee.

Noel A. Mitchell—the debonair “Sandman”—the 11 October 1910 *St. Petersburg Times* announced that the ladies of the WTIA had voted to transfer maintenance duties to municipal officials. During the previous nine years, women in the organization had tended to the park, planted trees and shrubs, and funded general improvements. With the city assuming the day-to-day responsibilities of Williams Park, the Woman’s Town Improvement Association could direct its support towards other community causes and, by 1913, acquire a meeting hall directly across the street from Williams Park on First Avenue North.¹⁵

Municipal ownership brought changes to Williams Park. In the short term, Grismer noted that weeds and unattractive scrub replaced the well-tended lawns around much of the block. By 1911, the city council appointed its first park commissioner and provided funds to build numerous green benches and other improvements, including an expansion of the bandstand. Recreational groups, including horseshoe players and others known as the Sunshine Pleasures Club, arrived by 1912 and were soon followed by others engaged in all forms of competitive games, from chess and checkers to dominoes and croquet. A photograph from 1913 or later appearing on pages 156 and 157 of Arsenault’s monograph illustrates the changes to the park and bandstand after 1911. By 1913, visitors to the park noticed many additional rows of green benches between the fountain in the center of the park and the bandstand to the north. A panoramic view of crowds at a concert, probably taken from the bandstand and appearing in the 15 October 1913 *Times*, shows how swarms of thousands had replaced the smaller assemblies of yesteryear. These photographs and a September 1913 Sanborn map confirm modifications to the 1895 pavilion. Crews had elevated the original structure and poured a cement floor as a basement area under the rectangular walkway on the eastern end. The basement area included comfort stations, with the original floor serving as a roof for these facilities. Another extension and stairs jutted south from the octagonal section towards the benches.¹⁶

¹⁴ *St. Petersburg Times*, 15 April 1908, 9 May 1908; *Tampa Weekly Tribune*, 30 April 1908; Sanborn Map Company, *Fire Insurance Maps*, July 1908 map, microfilm reel 13.

¹⁵ *St. Petersburg Times*, 11 October 1910.

¹⁶ Grismer, *The Story of St. Petersburg*, 244; Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, 156-157; *St. Petersburg Times*, 15 October 1913, 2 October 1956; Sanborn Map Company, *Fire Insurance Maps*,

Additional improvements to the bandstand occurred during the mid-1910s. The July 1918 Sanborn map indicates a large band shell extending from the southeast, due south, and southeast portions of the original octagonal structure approximately thirty to forty feet towards the green benches. A new stage connected to the previous extension provided a platform suitable for large bands or performances. Washroom facilities remained under the 1895 rectangular walkway on the eastern end. A cross-shaped thatch structure provided shelter for the chess club, while croquet grounds and two smaller buildings occupied the southeast corner of the block. The arrival of the popular Royal Scotch Highlanders Band and other performers required a larger stage and brought in bigger audiences. As Americans rallied against the Axis in World War I, Williams Park and its expanded bandstand provided a venue for patriotic demonstrations and mass meetings, including a large gathering on the evening of 12 April 1917. On a similar note, a parade and “monster mass meeting” sponsored as part of the United War Work drive took place in early November 1918, about one week before Armistice Day.¹⁷

Setting Up a New Stage

As the real estate boom soared and the city grew, the quaint Williams Park bandstand—even with its recent additions—seemed out of place. The wooden pavilion harked back to a simpler era. By the mid-1910s, architects and developers started to replace smaller wood frame buildings in the downtown area with elaborate Mediterranean Revival structures (including the open-air post office) and multistory buildings (such as the Hotel Alexander, opened in 1919). Soaring real estate values, growing crowds of seasonal visitors, spring training baseball games, and other transformations of the “Sunshine City,” encouraged members of the Park Board to replace the wooden pavilion with a large and fancy bandstand suitable for a growing metropolis.

During the summer of 1920, members of the city’s Park Board approved plans to construct a new bandstand. The board originally had hoped to remove the old bandstand

September 1913 map, microfilm reel 13. See an image from Ian Boyer’s collection located in: Hampton Dunn, *Yesterday’s St. Petersburg* (Miami: E. A. Seemann, 1973), 19.

¹⁷ Sanborn Map Company, *Fire Insurance Maps*, July 1918 map, microfilm reel 13; *St. Petersburg Times*, 12 April 1917, 6 November 1918; Grismer, *The Story of St. Petersburg*, 244.

in mid-1919, but material shortages and escalated labor costs forced officials to postpone their plans for a year. By 3 August 1920, W. F. Smith—chair of the Park Board—and other members sought bids to build a new pavilion while keeping the price under the \$10,000 in bond funds available. They expected the successful bidder to have the new bandstand available for use no later than 15 December 1920 so that it could accommodate concerts during the 1920-1921 tourist season. During the first week of August 1920, the Park Board reviewed at least three bids on the project: John S. Silas at \$10,265; Beard & French at \$13,097; and John C. Wright at \$13,218. By August 8, Smith and contractor John S. Silas reached an agreement wherein the board decided to perform the excavation work for the new bandstand in exchange for Silas reducing his bid by \$200. With John Silas's bid near the \$10,000 bond limit, W. F. Smith brought the matter before the city commission to request a small appropriation to cover the difference.¹⁸

With a contract approved for building the new structure, workers began to dismantle the 1895 bandstand by mid-August. Laborers first removed pipes and plumbing in the rear (northeast section) of the old band shell. Officials planned to save some lumber from later additions for use in the new 1920 structure. As demolition continued, Park Board members awarded a contract to George Burnett to move the core of the original 1895 pavilion in one piece from Williams Park to Waterfront Park. By the fall of 1920, laborers moved a Home Line storage shed from the Waterfront Park to the Bayboro Harbor area, and placed the intact pavilion at or near the original shed site. Once at its new home, city leaders planned to repair the 1895 pavilion's roof.¹⁹

Work progressed quickly on the new bandstand during the late summer and fall of 1920. Laborers built the new bandstand much closer to Second Avenue North, only about three feet from the sidewalk line, in an effort to provide more seats to the south of the stage. Mayor Noel Mitchell and J. G. Shoemaker, the city's plumbing inspector, secured additional funds to reconfigure the comfort stations by the end of August. Meanwhile, pupils at the city's Manual Training School built at least 200 benches in August and September. At one point, students set a school record by assembling a bench in eight minutes and thirty-five seconds. These benches included three standards rather than the

¹⁸ *St. Petersburg Times*, 3 August 1920, 8 August 1920, 17 August 1920.

¹⁹ *St. Petersburg Times*, 8 August 1920, 20 August 1920.

two used on earlier benches as a way of providing a stronger foundation and extra support. Although the construction project moved smoothly during this period, a brief controversy erupted when Silas and Shoemaker engaged in a punching match along Third Street and Central Avenue in late September. Soon wounds and egos healed, as all parties returned to the project and tried to meet the December deadline.²⁰

As officials dedicated the pavilion, the original 1895 bandstand stood at its new perch along the waterfront. However, this structure occupied its new home for only one year before meeting its demise. On 25 October 1921, a hurricane with wind gusts in excess of 100 miles per hour slammed into the Pinellas Peninsula. This storm, the strongest since the “great gale” of 1848, exacted substantial damage along the coastal areas. Bridges to Pass-a-Grille and Seminole disintegrated under the force of wind and waves, while boats and buildings along St. Petersburg’s waterfront also suffered the storm’s wrath. The last surviving portrait of the 1895 bandstand probably appears in a photograph taken along Waterfront Park in October or November 1921. This image, originally held by the St. Petersburg Historical Society and appearing on page 200 of Raymond Arsenault’s *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, clearly shows the roof of a pavilion identical to the original bandstand. Although the roof generally maintained its form, all of the supporting arches had collapsed or washed away. The once proud structure that graced Williams Park for a quarter of a century now sat as debris along the waterfront.²¹

The 1920 bandstand served the maturing community from the boom years through the early 1950s. Roy Smith’s Royal Scotch Highlanders continued to play to large crowds between 1917 and 1927, with the exception of the 1920-1921 year, when Weber’s Cincinnati Band entertained at the park. Other musicians—including Joseph Lefter—brought their performances in subsequent years. In a thick 6 September 1954 edition of the *St. Petersburg Times* that commemorated the dedication of the Sunshine Skyway bridge, longtime *Times* and *Evening Independent* writer Paul Davis wrote a retrospective article celebrating Williams Park as a “cool oasis” in a busy downtown. In this article, Davis claimed that a young Orson Welles (1915-1985) first spoke at the

²⁰ *St. Petersburg Times*, 20 August 1920, 26 August 1920, 29 August 1920, 26 September 1920.

²¹ For an image of the damaged pavilion, see: Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, 200.

bandstand as a childhood prodigy circa 1921. Later, becoming an actor, Welles returned to Williams Park to campaign for Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Other notable speakers and performers at the Park mentioned in Davis's article included temperance advocate Carrie Nation and conductor John Phillip Sousa. To meet the growing regimen of programs, the Park Board ordered 400 new benches in late 1923 and issued a contract to Aero Spray Company to paint these new benches—along with 1000 older benches—the city's trademark green hue. By December 1923, the Park Board had also funded renovations to the band shell, its basement toilets, and a new practice room for the Royal Scotch Highlanders.²²

Indeed, the popularity of Williams Park fueled a heated controversy in the early 1920s. Plans to construct shuffleboard courts and expand other park activities overtaxed the park and angered members of the Williams family. The General's heirs sought an injunction against the city in the spring of 1922 to prevent any group from exercising exclusive rights over any portion of the city block. Williams Park remained a public and popular gathering place. By 1952-1953, city leaders paid architect William Harvard to install a "modernistic bandstand" that replaced the 1920 structure.²³

Constructing a Replica at Heritage Village

Members of the Pinellas County Historical Commission discussed plans for a band shell or grandstand soon after the opening of Heritage Village. By June 1977, Dorothy Edmunds mentioned that such a structure might allow for concerts, barbershop quartets, and similar programs that reflected the "Gay '90s" theme that park administrators then sought to create. At their meeting the following month, members expressed enthusiasm about using the original Williams Park bandstand as a model. Commissioner David R. Carr moved for approval a motion that the site should include a band shell. At one point during the summer of 1978, the Junior League of St. Petersburg expressed interest in the project, though it remained on the planning boards through the late 1970s. When officers of the Pinellas County Historical Society decided not to

²² *St. Petersburg Times*, 15 December 1923, 19 December 1923, 6 September 1954, 2 October 1956. Rick Baker's *Mangroves to Major League* includes a photo of Welles speaking into a microphone for WSUN radio. Although the exact location of the speech remains uncertain, it may have taken place at the 1920s-era bandstand. See: Baker, *Mangroves to Major League*, 154.

undertake this project, Director Kendrick Ford solicited members of the United States Seabees (construction battalions) for assistance in building the structure. Under this arrangement, Heritage Village agreed to provide construction materials estimated to cost \$10,000 while the Seabees volunteered their labor. These funds had to come from the \$25,000 appropriation set aside for the relocation of historic structures. The county's Purchasing Department solicited bids for materials by June 1980. Lacking original blueprints or other documents that had the exact dimensions of the 1895 structure, Don Williams designed architectural plans for the replica after comparing three different photographic images of the original pavilion. In a retrospective interview, Ford asserted that differences between the original bandstand and the replica resulted largely from budgetary constraints, volunteer labor, and a lack of widely available "old-fashioned" designs and reproductions. Peter Brown Construction Company coordinated the project, while the Seabees offered sweat equity in exchange for fried chicken picnics and the gratitude of participating in a worthwhile project.²⁴

They Built More than a Bandstand: They Set the Stage for a Growing Community

John Constantine and Sarah Williams transformed a section of Point Pinellas into the city of St. Petersburg. An article in the 8 February 1879 *Sunland Tribune* succinctly summarized the importance "General" Williams's presence in the region nearly a decade before the arrival of the Orange Belt Railway: "Mr. Williams is a gentleman with abundant means, and will, no doubt, induce quite a number to settle in this country. These are the kind of settlers wanted to develop the capacities of this country—men of means who came prepared to do something." This encomium, however, ignores the important of early women leaders. When Williams returned to the region with his new wife, Sarah, he brought along more than a spouse: He had at his side a companion who not only changed the direction of a railroad, but also helped others in the WTIA transform one square block of wilderness into an important gathering place for the city.²⁵

²³ *St. Petersburg Times*, 6 September 1954; Grismer, *The Story of St. Petersburg*, 244.

²⁴ Records of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo, 22 June 1977, 20 July 1977, 16 August 1978, 19 September 1979, 28 November 1979, 23 January 1980, 11 June 1980, 20 May 1981; Interview of Ken Ford, former director of Heritage Village, by Stephanie Ferrell and Jim Schnur, 3 May 2003, Heritage Village, Largo.

²⁵ *Sunland Tribune*, 8 February 1879.

One cannot underestimate the importance of the WTIA on the shaping of Williams Park at a pivotal point in the city's development. For example, Straub's paper encouraged residents to support a March 1910 WTIA Tag Day fundraiser. Publicity for this event echoed other stories appearing in the *Times* that praised "this progressive band of women, who have bravely and untiringly worked for our beautiful city, overcoming almost insurmountable difficulties." The article notes that few tourists who visit Williams Park "know that only a few years ago it was a dense palmetto patch into which rubbish was thrown, until this noble band of workers took charge." Such praise continued long after the WTIA relinquished control of the park in the fall of 1910. In a 1 January 1922 *Times* article entitled "Williams Park is Memorial to Early Work of Few Women," a reporter effusively credited the "little band of women . . . who visioned in the sand spurs and the scrub palmettos and sand and more sand, the loveliness of Williams (P)ark today." The writer commends the women that "wasted little time with Robert's Rules of Order, or other formalities" and instead focused on creating a City Beautiful, tending to the sick and poor, and raising funds for worthwhile causes. Historians and urban planners rightfully credit visionaries such as John Nolen for their efforts to improve the aesthetics of the Sunshine City. However, one must also acknowledge the many women of early St. Petersburg who physically cleared the grounds of City Park and literally laid the groundwork for a City Beautiful movement long before the settlement could even claim to be a city.²⁶

²⁶ *St. Petersburg Times*, 11 March 1910, 1 January 1922. For an extended discussion of urban development in St. Petersburg, see: R. Bruce Stephenson, "Duel in the Sun: Competing Urban Visions in St. Petersburg, Florida, 1900-1985" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1985).