

# Heritage Mercantile: A Brief Introduction

## History of Site before Structure was Built

- Located along southern boundary of original (August 1888) town plat of St. Petersburg.
- Land once owned by “General” John Constantine Williams, Sr.
- Part of “Williams Grove” on original town plat.
- Land was subdivided and sold in parcels after Williams’s death in 1892.
- Former Williams House (built in 1891) later became Manhattan Hotel, a nearby source of customers for the business. The Williams House presently resides on the campus of the University of South Florida St. Petersburg.
- Improvements to nearby Bayboro Harbor and Salt Creek brought more settlers, as did the creation of Charles Roser’s subdivision, Roser Park.

## Construction Information

- Built in 1915 at the southeast corner of Sixth Avenue South and Fifth Street in St. Petersburg.
- One-story wood frame vernacular building.
- Two addresses associated with structure: 468 Sixth Avenue South (smaller area), 470 Sixth Avenue South (larger area).

## History of Use

- Larger area was known as H.C. Smith Grocery and South Side Grocery (through mid-1930s), Harrod’s Bake Shop and Deli, Herman Boehm Grocery, Sixth Avenue Food Shop (or Meat Market, though mid and late 1940s), and Bill’s Grocery (through 1955).
- Smaller area was a butcher store and a residence for the many proprietors of the larger store through the mid-1950s.
- City directories indicate both areas as ‘vacant’ during much of the period between 1956 and the mid-1980s, with occasional mention of seasonal residents or other uses (including an Amway Products wholesale outlet in 1974). This is misleading, however, because the Preston family used the larger area for storage and the smaller area as a rental space for seasonal residents during much of this time.

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

- Well-positioned during early years to serve residents and tourists in the areas just south of downtown St. Petersburg.
- Development of Fourth Street corridor (especially after opening of Gandy Bridge and beginning of the Bee Line Ferry) placed the store in a visible, high traffic area through the 1940s.
- Nearby competition, including an A&P store at 824 Fourth Street South, and the emerging Webb’s City shopping complex, steered traffic away from older, smaller merchant stores by the late 1940s and early 1950s.
- Suburbanization and new transportation corridors (notably the shifting of US 19 to 34<sup>th</sup> Street in St. Petersburg) opened up new communities as residents and visitors moved to other locations.

- By 1970s and 1980s, the neighborhoods surrounding Mound Park, Bayboro, and Roser Park suffered loss of longtime residents and problems associated with short-term rentals and transients.
- The University of South Florida St. Petersburg (Bayboro Campus), established in 1965 along Bayboro Harbor, expanded during early 1980s, but still needed additional space.
- By mid-1980s, city officials in St. Petersburg started to acquire parcels for the expansion of USF St. Petersburg. The Preston family, owners of the mercantile and adjacent properties since the 1930s, sold the store and land to the city.

#### **Moving of the Structure to Heritage Village**

- The building arrived “pretty much intact,” except for the floor, in early 1988.
- Hexagonal blocks used for floor resembled those frequently found on St. Petersburg sidewalks and in some similar buildings from the period.
- Building restored to resemble a 1920s-era grocery, garage, barber shop, and post office through the efforts of park staff and associated groups (including Pin-Mar).

# Heritage Mercantile Store

## Overview

Built in 1915, the mercantile store originally faced north at the southeast corner of Sixth Avenue South and Fifth Street in St. Petersburg. This one-story wood frame vernacular building with a flat roof and parapet front had many proprietors and occupants during its four decades as a grocery store between 1915 and the mid-1950s. On some occasions, the store's smaller area served as a separate business, such as a butcher shop. At other times, the operators of the grocery lived in the smaller space; by 1955, seasonal residents rented this area while the larger space served as storage for the property's owners. In an era before air-conditioned shopping centers and supermarkets, mercantile stores provided groceries and other necessities to people in nearby neighborhoods. This store opened for business at a time when the Bayboro district, the Mound Park neighborhood, and nearby Roser Park enjoyed prosperity as new areas of development.

Though commonly known as H. C. Smith's grocery during the 1910s and 1920s, the merchants in this building operated under other names at different times. City directories reveal that merchants also sold commodities in the building under the names South Side Grocery, Sixth Avenue Food Shop, and Bill's Grocery. The Preston family purchased this structure in 1935 and owned it for over fifty years. The building's use as a grocery came to an end by the mid-1950s, possibly due to the presence of larger stores nearby (especially Webb's City), post-war trends of suburbanization, and changes in consumer shopping patterns as customers preferred chain supermarkets over smaller merchants. The city's plans in the mid-1980s to acquire land for the expansion of the nearby University of South Florida St. Petersburg campus jeopardized the building's existence. After discussions between owner Richard Preston, city officials, and the leadership at Heritage Village, Roesch Housemovers transported this structure to Heritage Village in early 1988. Once renovated, the former H. C. Smith's became known as Heritage Mercantile.

## Development of the Surrounding Neighborhoods

This store once sat upon land near the southern boundary of the original town plat of St. Petersburg. Completed in August 1888, this plat described lands approximately from Fifth Avenue North to Seventh Avenue South, and from Beach Drive (then actually along the bay) west towards Reservoir Lake (now Mirror Lake) and south of the Orange Belt Railway towards Twelfth Street. Much of the section south of present-day Fourth Avenue South to about Seventh Avenue and west of Fourth Street appeared on the first plat as part of “Williams Grove.” This land belonged to “General” John Constantine Williams, Sr., and wife Sarah. The elder Williams, considered “the father of St. Petersburg” by many early residents, first arrived in the area in 1875 and purchased much of the land appearing in this original plat. In 1890-1891, Williams constructed a large Queen Anne mansion on the northern area of his grove that, according to historian Raymond Arsenault, “gave St. Petersburg its first touch of Victorian decadence.” The efforts of Williams and Peter Demens to bring the Orange Belt Railway to southern Pinellas had put this small settlement of St. Petersburg on the map.<sup>1</sup>

During the city’s early years, most of the development took place north and northeast of the “Williams Grove” area. The village’s population soared from 273 in 1890 to 1,575 in 1900. By 1920, as the land boom began to explode on the Pinellas peninsula, over 14,000 residents lived in St. Petersburg. Early hotels such as the Hotel Detroit and the Manhattan Hotel accommodated a growing number of seasonal visitors. The three-story Manhattan Hotel, constructed in 1905, actually existed as an addition to the original Williams House. This structure, less than two blocks from the site of the mercantile store, provided a regular stream of customers who would have enjoyed the convenience of visiting the nearby market after it opened in 1915. The land later occupied by Heritage Mercantile appeared in the Hillsborough County plat books by 30 June 1905. Records denote the site as block seven, north 1000 feet of Lot Nine,

---

<sup>1</sup> Raymond O. Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888-1950* (Norfolk, Va.: Donning, 1988), 59-60, 70. The University of South Florida St. Petersburg received a special category historic preservation grant that allowed that institution to move the John C. Williams House from the 400 block of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue South to its present location along Second Street South in March 1995. Later additions to the structure, including the wooden, three-story Manhattan Hotel room buildings attached to the Williams House in 1905, could not be saved and were demolished in the spring of 1995.

Benjamin's Fourth Addition to Mound Park Addition. An indenture filed on 29 January 1913 by E. Frazier and Kate M. Frazier covers this mercantile site.<sup>2</sup>

Soon after the Manhattan Hotel opened, developers started to envision subdivisions at nearby Bayboro Harbor and Salt Creek. The War Department had given permission to dredge a channel at St. Petersburg by April 1906, though federal engineering officials rejected subsequent plans for a commercial harbor in 1907. Upset by this decision, city leaders lobbied for a deepwater port and Governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward supported their efforts by May 1908. Some dredge-and-fill operations around the harbor began by 1910, the same year the Bayboro Investment Company regularly advertised lots for sale in the *St. Petersburg Times*. Predicting a busy tourist season in late 1910, the Trolley Company even secured a lease with the Bayboro Investment Company in October 1910 to erect "several scores of tents, at once, to care for the overflow from the hotels and boardinghouses." With a large dining room planned at the site, this tent city would also include "a complete sewerage system, water, and lights." Emphasizing its cleanliness, Trolley officials noted that "no persons having any kind of disease will be permitted to secure homes there." Officials thus considered the Bayboro tent city a better alternative than turning away the overflow of seasonal visitors. By 1913, extensive dredging and channeling of Bayboro Harbor and Salt Creek occurred. This flurry of commercial and tourist activity certainly would benefit nearby businesses, such as the mercantile store.<sup>3</sup>

### **A Grocery and Mercantile Store on a Busy Corner**

The store presently known as Heritage Mercantile opened for business at an opportune time. Sitting on the southeast corner of Sixth Avenue South and Fifth Street, this 1915 structure served the new and booming subdivisions in the area. Charles M. Roser had launched Roser Park in the summer of 1913, with its brick streets and "every other city convenience" just south of the city limits along Booker Creek. Within a few

---

<sup>2</sup> Research by Ernie Dibble, located in the Heritage Village Library and Archives, includes ownership history of the parcel once occupied by Heritage Mercantile.

<sup>3</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, 27 September 1910, 7 October 1910; For more information about early activities at Bayboro Harbor, please consult: *Pinellas County Newspaper Index: WPA Project*. (Clearwater: Pinellas County Board of Public Commissioners, 1939).

years, Roser Park—later incorporated into the city—had nearly sixty new and fancy homes located just a short stroll away from the grocery store. The opening of Mound Park Hospital in the early 1920s and the continued construction of homes and small businesses in the Bayboro area encouraged commercial activities in the district. The 1923 Sanborn fire insurance map reveals many residential dwellings in close proximity to the store. Improvements to the regional transportation infrastructure certainly helped business. Traffic started to use the Gandy Bridge and its associated causeways that connected St. Petersburg to Tampa in November 1924. In addition, the Bee Line Ferry’s regularly scheduled service beginning in February 1926 offered motorists a quicker route between the southern tip of the Pinellas peninsula and Manatee County for the next twenty-eight years until replaced by the first Sunshine Skyway bridge in 1954. Thus, by the mid-1920s, the Fourth Street corridor became an important north-south artery through the Sunshine City. With its location one block west of Fourth Street, this store probably received more than its fair share of business.<sup>4</sup>

The mercantile store actually had two mailing addresses, and at times different proprietors used the separate parts of the store. The smaller room recreated as a barber shop, post office, and telephone exchange carried the address of 468 Sixth Avenue South. The grocery and garage area appeared in city directories as 470 Sixth Avenue South. During the mid-1920s and early 1930s, Edward Fisher operated a butcher shop and meat market out of the smaller store. Directories from the time refer to the occupant as “Edward Fisher, Meats.” By 1931, Edward and his wife, Maude Fisher, lived at 1304 Fourth Avenue North in St. Petersburg. By 1918, Henry C. Smith established a grocery store in the larger portion of the building. In 1926, a grocer named Jos. Q. Watson and wife, Emma L., took control of the grocery; they may have lived in the store for awhile. By the end of the decade, the Watsons changed the name of the store to South Side Grocery and lived in a separate dwelling. By 1929, Henry C. Smith reacquired his interest in the property and changed the store’s name back to H. C. Smith’s. While operating the store, Henry and Bertha Smith lived at 1904 Seminole Boulevard South, in

---

<sup>4</sup> Rick Baker, *Mangroves to Major League: A Timeline of St. Petersburg, Florida (Prehistory to 2000 A.D.)* (St. Petersburg: Southern Heritage Press, 2000), 103-104, 140, 152; Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream*, 196-197, 199; Sanborn Map Company, *Fire Insurance Maps: Florida* (Teaneck, N.J. : Chadwyck-Healey, 1983), 1923 map, microfilm reel 13.

St. Petersburg. By 1934-1935, Alma Harrod established Harrod's Bake Shop and Deli in the larger portion of the building.<sup>5</sup>

Charles E. Preston purchased the building in 1935 for \$3,000, a substantial price at the height of the Great Depression. He delivered a \$1,000 down payment to State Adjustment Company of St. Petersburg on January 26 and closed on the property by February 5. Shortly after Preston acquired the property, the larger store became a delicatessen known as the Sixth Avenue Food Shop (or Herman F. Boehm, Grocer) and the smaller room served as an apartment for the store and delicatessen manager. During some of this time, Charles Preston used the rear area of the building as storage for his nearby rental properties; he often kept his 1931 Ford automobile in the area presently used as a garage.<sup>6</sup>

A market operated out of this building through the mid-1950s. Herman F. and Elizabeth M. Boehm lived in the smaller area of the building from at least 1936 through 1946, while they ran the Sixth Avenue Food Shop, also known as the Sixth Avenue Meat Market. This name remained associated with the grocery store through the 1948 edition of the R.L. Polk city directory, though different proprietors did live in the smaller area. In 1946-1947, Herman and Elizabeth Boehm turned over the operation of the Sixth Avenue Food Shop to Gus and Mary Kostis. The Kostis family lived in the store during 1947, but sometime in 1948 they moved into a trailer near their new store, Aloha Grocery Gardens, a market once located at 2200 Tyrone Boulevard. In 1948 John and S. Addele MacDonald lived in the smaller room while the Sixth Avenue Food Shop operated in the larger area. By 1949, William and Catherine A. Williams occupied the structure. They lived in the smaller area while the market remained open in the other part of the building. This store, Bill's Grocery, operated until the mid-1950s, with an entry last appearing in the 1954 city directory. As a child growing up in the Roser Park neighborhood, former-park director Kendrick Ford regularly visited this store while delivering copies of the *St. Petersburg Evening Independent* on his newspaper route.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> An examination of R.L. Polk's *St. Petersburg (Pinellas County, Fla.) City Directory* provided useful information about the occupants of this structure.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

### **Competition, Suburbanization, and an Empty Storefront**

City directories between 1955 and 1971 generally refer to both portions of the building as “vacant.” While the building’s owners did use the structure for storage or as a dwelling for occasional tenants during this period, post-war changes in the region’s demographic and commercial landscapes—as well as ever-changing consumer expectations—rendered the building inadequate as a grocery store. In the mid-1920s, James Earl “Doc” Webb had opened a small apothecary that soon mushroomed into Webb’s City, the “World’s Most Unusual Drugstore.” By the end of the Second World War, Webb’s City occupied numerous structures and many city blocks. With a hub located at Ninth (Dr. Martin Luther King) Street and First Avenue South, this nearby business and its retail grocery operations certainly harmed smaller markets in the vicinity. Jim Rosati’s suburban Tyrone Gardens shopping center (Tyrone Boulevard at Ninth Avenue North), the substantial Central Plaza shopping center (34<sup>th</sup> Street at U.S. Highway 19), and other venues that began to appear in the mid-1950s served the needs of a growing number of suburban residents. The presence of these shopping centers also enticed other residential developers to craft new communities, such as Meadowlawn, Harshaw Lake, Maximow Moorings, and Lakewood, to name a few. As people flocked to new suburbs and their air-conditioned commercial outlets, fewer customers visited smaller stores in downtown St. Petersburg or the Bayboro district.<sup>8</sup>

New transportation routes affected traditional traffic patterns throughout Pinellas County by the early 1950s. The realignment of U.S. Highway 19 to 34<sup>th</sup> Street in St. Petersburg and the opening of Central Plaza and the Sunshine Skyway enticed many residents and tourists to look at property in southern and western St. Petersburg, Gulfport, Kenneth City, Pinellas Park, and other areas of lower Pinellas. While St. Petersburg’s main north-south traffic artery moved west from Fourth Street to U.S. 19, in north county communities like Tarpon Springs, Palm Harbor, Dunedin, and Clearwater, the newly opened segments of U.S. 19 redirected traffic flow eastward away from the centers of those cities. Just as the construction of Interstate highways doomed many mom-and-pop businesses and roadside attractions as motorists selected the expressway rather than the

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.; Interview of Ken Ford, former director of Heritage Village, by Stephanie Ferrell and Jim Schnur, 3 May 2003, Heritage Village, Largo.

back roads, small stores like the former H. C. Smith's seemed too small and off-the-beaten path to match the competitors in suburban communities or along recently improved roads. The presence of other nearby markets, such as the well-stocked A&P grocery store at 824 Fourth Street South, also discouraged the continued existence of a market in this building.

The Preston family held title to the property until the late 1980s. Charles Preston rented the apartment to seasonal visitors and generally used the larger area for storage. Winter resident Clara A. MacKenzie leased the small apartment area in 1972 and N. P. Alcala stayed there in 1981. For many years during the 1970s and 1980s, however, the city directory lists 468 Sixth Street South as "vacant." This may have occurred because agents for R. L. Polk visited or contacted the location at a time between renters, or after the snowbirds had returned home. After the death of Charles Preston, his son Richard took control of the building. The estate of Charles Preston granted Richard I. Preston control of the building by 30 April 1973. Richard rented the larger space to an Amway distributor during 1974 and also a non-denominational church. In 1974, Ronald Preston occupied the smaller area of the building. During this period, the Prestons held other nearby real estate properties, including the Preston Apartments that once sat next to the grocery with a mailing address of 460 Sixth Avenue South.<sup>9</sup>

### **An Expanding Campus and a Market on the Move**

As Bill's Grocery closed its doors in the mid-1950s, educators and lawmakers debated the future of higher education in Florida. Decisions by legislators in Tallahassee and city officials in St. Petersburg between 1956 and the early 1980s brought new opportunities to the Bayboro district and—for a time—cast an uncertain shadow over the future of the grocery building. Enrollment increases at Florida's other public universities encouraged lawmakers to approve the creation of a new public institution of higher learning in 1956. With plans to locate the campus in west central Florida, a political dogfight ensued between Pinellas and Hillsborough County political leaders, as well as other officials, as all parties searched for a suitable location. After much deliberation, the

---

<sup>8</sup> Baker, *Mangroves to Major League*, 149, 206-207; *Arsenault*, 309.

state secured a large site that had once served as part of a former army air field along Fowler Avenue, north of Tampa. Construction and planning immediately began on this site, often referred to as Temple Terrace University (among other names). As buildings appeared among the sandspurs and anthills, the state officially christened this institution the University of South Florida (USF).

While USF began offering classes in the Temple Terrace area by 1960, students also enrolled in a new college with facilities temporarily located in the Bayboro Harbor district. Florida Presbyterian College, a private liberal arts institution later named Eckerd College, scheduled its earliest classes in the former barracks and offices of the United States Maritime Service (USMS). As war clouds loomed on the horizon in the late 1930s, the government had constructed a USMS Training Station along the bayside rim of Bayboro Harbor. Decommissioned in the mid-1950s, the station later became the site of classes offered by Florida Presbyterian (Eckerd) College and—by the summer of 1965—the University of South Florida. USF St. Petersburg, fondly known by many as the “Bayboro Campus,” expanded by the late 1970s and early 1980s as community leaders (including longtime *St. Petersburg Times* publisher Nelson Poynter), lawmakers, and local officials secured parcels adjacent to the original site on the Bayboro peninsula.<sup>10</sup>

Plans for a new round of campus expansions threatened the future of the Heritage Mercantile structure. During the early 1980s, USF St. Petersburg hoped to acquire additional land for classroom space, other structures, and parking facilities. Federal Aviation Authority regulations limited the vertical growth of campus structures because of airplane flying patterns used at the adjacent Albert Whitted Airport. When city officials decided against closing or modifying Albert Whitted in July 1984, they offered to pledge their financial support to acquire nearby properties so the campus could grow. Using approximately \$9.8 million in utility bonds, council members voted to budget nearly \$12 million to acquire land for the university’s growth. City officials also agreed to pay property owners up to fifteen percent above the appraised value of their properties as a way of encouraging them to sell the land. Between 1983 and September 1986 the

---

<sup>9</sup> Information obtained from various annual issues of R.L. Polk’s *St. Petersburg (Pinellas County, Fla.) City Directory*.

city had purchased ninety-nine parcels. Officials quickly worked with landowners and their representatives to acquire the remaining forty-three lots in this tract, including the site of Preston's mercantile garage.<sup>11</sup>

Meetings between Richard Preston, park staff, and members of the Pinellas County Historical Commission spared the mercantile store from the wrecking ball. Ken Ford and members of the commission had envisioned the addition of a country store as part of the open-air museum as early as March 1980. The acquisition of an old store ranked second highest on an 11 June 1980 list of priorities for future park structures. In early 1981, Ford reported that he had examined the 1915 store as a possible candidate for relocation; though the owners had not yet agreed to the move, they did tell Ford that they had no immediate plans for the structure. Predicting a tight budget in the forthcoming fiscal year, Ford considered the mercantile store as an exhibit space that "could produce revenue for the Park and the County." As the city began to purchase parcels for the expansion of USF St. Petersburg, Ford and Preston continued their discussions about the store. Preston sold the property to the city in 1988, and Ford immediately contacted Roesch Housemovers, Inc.<sup>12</sup>

The City of St. Petersburg donated the building to Heritage Village in early 1988. According to Ford, the building arrived "pretty much intact," though without its original floors. Through the cooperative efforts of the Pinellas Model A Restorers (Pin-Mar) Antique Auto Club and some creative work by park staff, this structure was fashioned to resemble a 1920s local grocery, with garage, service station, barbershop, telephone exchange and post office. Pin-Mar pledged to donate an old gas pump and to develop displays in the garage area of the structure. Meanwhile, Ford acquired the hexagonal blocks used on the floor from a representative of Terra Excavating in St. Pete Beach. Ford considered the hexagonal blocks an appropriate choice for the floor at the building's

---

<sup>10</sup> Clippings and other archival materials related to the history of the United States Maritime Service Training Station at Bayboro Harbor and the USF St. Petersburg campus may be consulted at Special Collections and Archives, Nelson Poynter Memorial Library, USF St. Petersburg.

<sup>11</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, 19 November 1985, 23 May 1986; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, 5 September 1986.

<sup>12</sup> Records of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo, 19 March 1980, 11 June 1980, 18 February 1981, 19 November 1986, 17 February 1988. Park leadership set aside \$25,000 for the possible relocation of a mercantile store to Heritage Village during the early 1980s.

new location given the history of using similar blocks on sidewalks and within certain structures in St. Petersburg. When the store building arrived on site, Ford also contacted the Navy Seabees for their assistance in renovating the structure. During the 1988 Country Jubilee, the open space of the larger room provided an excellent venue for the flea market. Park staff constructed the counters and shelves. Labels copied from *Kovels'* catalogues and similar sources provided a cost-effective way to recreate period pieces for the store.<sup>13</sup>

The mercantile store contains a variety of artifacts dating from the early 1900s, as well as many replicas of period pieces. Although the exhibits and artifacts do not correspond with the exact layout of the store as it existed, they do portray historical elements commonly found in such structures at the time of the store's heyday. The 1925 Model T Ford truck in the rear garage, household appliances, canned goods, old catalogues, and cold soft drinks for sale make the Heritage Mercantile store a popular place to visit.

### **One Final, and Ironic, Note**

Heritage Village obtained the mercantile store because the City of St. Petersburg sought land for the expansion of the USF campus along Bayboro Harbor. While negotiations saved this building from possible demolition, most structures on other parcels obtained during this phase of expansion faced the wrecking ball. Many small cottages and a few larger homes, all within walking distance of the former H. C. Smith's grocery, disappeared from the landscape as the university expanded its boundaries during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Two notable structures—the Potter and Black houses—sat along the western side of Second Street South between Fifth and Sixth avenues. By the time the city had obtained these properties—sites of historic significance—the homes had deteriorated beyond repair. For a few years after the demolition of the Potter and Black houses, these parcels became a parking lot for the Campus Activities Center at USF St. Petersburg. In an ironic turn of events, the land once occupied by these signature homes of the Bayboro district later served as the site of the Florida Center for Teachers building and headquarters of the Florida Humanities Council.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 17 February 1988, 18 May 1988, 17 November 1988; Ken Ford Interview.