

INCOME INEQUALITY

Building Everything But Wealth

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:18 The Orange Belt Railway came to St. Petersburg in 1888. Black workers built the beds and laid the rails. Some stayed to settle the city's first black neighborhood while white people rode the railway and brought the first wave of the growing resort town's tourist trade. Black labor was critical to the development of the city. Not only did black laborers construct the Orange Belt Railway, pave the streets, build the sidewalks, and dig the sewer lines, but they also helped to build some of the structures still in existence today.

:50 The first black settlers on the lower Pinellas peninsula were John Donaldson and Anna Germain. Donaldson, a formerly enslaved person and Germain, who would become his wife and the mother of his 11 children, came to the area in 1868 in the employment of Lewis Bell, Jr., a white homesteader. The Donaldson's purchased 40 acres of land near what is now known as Lake Maggoire. Donaldson worked as a truck farmer among other things to support his family and he served as the community mail carrier. Ed Donaldson, the son of John Donaldson and Anna Germain Donaldson, was noted as the oldest living native-born resident of St. Petersburg and as Pinellas first native-born black male when he died on November 13, 1967. The Donaldson's were the only black family until the influx of black workers to help build the railroad. Those settlers were not treated with the same respect as Donaldson. One black family was tolerable, but as more black people migrated to the area, attitudes changed.

2:13 Elder Jordan, Sr., born into slavery about 1850, came to St. Petersburg in 1904. Jordan was married to Mary Frances Strobels, a Cherokee who stood more than six feet tall. Strobels was from Rosewood, a community that was notoriously destroyed in 1923 during a massacre of blacks by whites. Jordan owned considerable property on the south side including a livery stable and a filling station on the corner of 5th Avenue and 16th St. Jordan and his sons built houses and helped open several businesses in the black community. He also opened a beach for African Americans and operated a bus line.

In 1925, he saw a need for a gathering place for the growing black community and built the Jordan Dance Hall, now known as the Manhattan Casino. He built his gathering hall on 22nd Street, the Deuces, where people of color could shop, socialize, and conduct business without the stigma of racism tainting every interaction or transaction. It became the venue for local black artists and was a significant stop in what was known as Chitlin Circuit. The Manhattan was to the black community what the Coliseum was to the white community. The building was designated a historic landmark by the city council in 1994.



In 1929, after the Stock Market crashed, Jordan was one of the few people in the community whose money wasn't in the banks. To help keep the city afloat, he loaned some of it to the city government. Jordan Elementary School and Jordan Park Housing Project are named for Elder Jordan and a monument in his likeness and honor stands at the southwest corner of the Manhattan Casino property.

4:39 The railroad laborers and other black workers who came after them were forced into circumscribed neighborhoods, settling in St. Petersburg. Often these neighborhoods were redlined by banks, meaning that mortgage loans could not be obtained or were available only at very high rates.

4:55 Black people were relegated to live in certain segregated neighborhoods, safely away from the tourists, white neighborhoods, and downtown businesses. Most African American communities in the city consisted primarily of dirt roads and unpainted shacks owned by absentee white landlords who were often indifferent to the property and the people who rented it. There were a few exceptions to living in the neighborhoods relegated to blacks. According to early city directories, several colored families lived in what were not traditional black neighborhoods. Over 100 black workers who helped build the Orange Belt Railway made their home in Pepper Town, located east of what is now Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr Street and Third and Fourth Avenues South. The area around Booker Creek, along Ninth Street, south of First Avenue South, was initially called Cooper's Quarters and later became known as the Gas Plant area. It was named for the two large cylinders housing the natural gas supply for the city.

6:12 There was a thriving business district in the Gas Plant area and it was the home of Davis Academy, the first black school in St. Petersburg. In 1894, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church was founded at 912 Third Avenue North. A 1912 Polk City directory listed the location as Third Avenue North and Williams Court. The third African American community of Methodist Town grew around it and was named for the church. It was on a side of town that was generally off limits unless you were white.

6:58 Most of the money earned by black workers went to white businesses outside their communities. The result was a damaged ability to build inter-generational family wealth. A study in 2018 revealed that three out of four neighborhood that were redlined 80 years ago continue to struggle economically. Today nearly 26% of St. Petersburg's African American population has income considered below poverty level.

