

DESEGREGATION

Integrating Public Spaces

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- :19 St. Petersburg's Central Avenue was famous for its green benches. They were a symbol of relaxation and spoke a message of welcome for the city, but like many other public spaces, the message to African-Americans was much different.
- :33 Although the labor of African-Americans was significant to the growth of St. Petersburg, their presence was not wanted. As the black population grew, so did the enforcement of Jim Crow laws, racial and social segregation were strictly enforced and at one time, St. Petersburg was one of the most residentially segregated cities in the country. The benches were only for the enjoyment of white people. The benches were off limits to African-Americans as were most of the recreational amenities. Lunch counters, theaters and in many instances, the public restrooms in places of business. In 1954, Dr. Robert Swain, Jr., a dentist, civil rights activist, civil leader, and owner of the Robert James Hotel in Methodist Town and other properties in the city challenged the redline policy which prevented African-Americans from living or operating businesses on the south side of 15th Avenue. Swain crossed the line and opened a dentist office and a small apartment building originally intended to house black baseball players on the southwest corner of 22nd Street and 15th Avenue South. The city initially refused to issue building permits, but backed down when Swain threatened to sue.
- 2:18 On November 30, 1955, the day before Rosa Parks effectively launched the Montgomery bus boycott, black leaders in St. Petersburg sued to integrate downtown's Spa Beach and Pool. The episode ignited more than a decade of spirited desegregation efforts, which included the picketing of segregated movie theaters, a strike by black sanitation workers and a suit against the city by black police officers for equal treatment.
- 2:44 Ralph M. Wimbish, physician, civil leader and civil rights activist served as president of the St. Petersburg chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP, during a time of strife, turmoil, and relentlessness in challenging the city's segregation laws. During the struggle for civil rights, Reverend Enoch Douglas Davis worked to end busing, school segregation and employee discrimination, to win voting rights for blacks, and to open the city's beaches and public pools to the black community. He also led his share of sit-ins at lunch counters and theaters. When the Freedom Riders came to Florida in the late 1950s to protest interstate segregation laws, Reverend Davis allowed them to stay in his home and to use the church as headquarters and with the help of his brother, the police, and several neighbors, he offered them protection from agitated segregationists. He earned several threats on his life for this and other civil rights work.



When black garbage workers marched during a 116-day strike against the city in 1968, Davis marched with them. His work in civil rights earned him 11 honors. Today, the Enoch Davis Center, a multi-purpose community center with a library and science center, a 250-seat auditorium, and office bears his name.

4:40 In St. Augustine, in 1964, black people tried to integrate a whites-only hotel by swimming in its pool. A dramatic news photo of the hotel owner dumping acid in the water horrified the nation and encouraged President Lyndon Johnson to sign the Civil Rights Act the next day. Even when laws changed, defacto segregation, discrimination, harassment and threatening behavior continued as common practice.

5:10 In 1965, black police officers were only allowed to patrol predominately black neighborhoods and had no authority to arrest white citizens. The Courageous Twelve were 12 of St. Petersburg's 15 black police officers who sued the city for the right to patrol white communities and arrest white people the same as their white counterparts. Adam Baker, Freddie Crawford, Raymond DeLoach, Charles Holland, Leon Jackson, Jr., Robert Keys, Primus Killen, James King, Johnnie B. Lewis, Horace Nero, Jerry Styles, and Nathaniel Wooten.

On May 11, 1965, a year after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law, the group, led by Freddie Crawford and represented by Attorney James Sanderlin, filed a lawsuit against the city in federal court. On August 1, 1968, the officers won their case. Their courageous act opened the door for black police officers in this city and throughout the nation. As of 2020, Leon Jackson, Jr., the first black officer assigned to an all-white neighborhood is the last surviving member of the Courageous Twelve. A plaque in the group's honor hangs in the St. Petersburg police headquarters and soon a monument dedicated to them will be included in the makeover of the old headquarters.

7:02 Joseph E. Savage, a sanitation worker, spearheaded a movement leading 211 to 300 of his fellow workers to walk off their jobs in May 1968. This was just a little more than a month after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. Dr. King was in Memphis to support and bring attention to a strike by more than 1300 of the city's sanitation workers. Dr. King's brother, Reverend A.D. King came to St. Petersburg in support of the workers here as did Reverend Ralph D. Abernathy. The strike, for better pay and working conditions, lasted 116 days, during which racial tensions exploded in various ways. The strike is seen as a milestone in local civil rights history. The following year, C. Bette Wimbish, the first black council member, was elected. And a few years later, James B. Sanderlin, the young lawyer who represented the striking workers, would be elected the first black judge in Pinellas County.

