

## The Pier—Can't live with it, Can't live without it

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Although there has been a bit of controversy over the proposed new St. Petersburg pier with some suggesting that the pier should not be replaced, piers have been an important part of the City's character, traditions and history. It could be said that the very existence of St. Petersburg was based on a pier. (Maybe wharf is a better term.) The wharf was the western terminus of the Orange Belt railway and was completed in 1889 before there was a St. Petersburg. Peter Demens, an immigrant from St. Petersburg, Russia, was the railway's owner and the city was named for his home town. He had expected to bring his railroad to Disston City, now Gulfport, which was owned by Hamilton Disston, but when they could not come to an agreement, he reached an accord with John and Sarah Williams who owned much of the land that is now downtown St. Petersburg. Some had expected the town to be named Williamsville. The railroad brought growth to the previously isolated area. The railroad extended out 2000 feet on the Orange Belt wharf to where a water depth of 12 feet allowed steamships and schooners to dock and transfer cargo to and from freight trains. The wharf, which was located at what is now Demens Landing Park, allowed fishing and included a bathing pavilion that was styled after the newly built Detroit Hotel, which was owned by Demens.

In 1895, Henry Plant, Tampa mogul, acquired the railroad and began charging a wharf docking fee to limit competition with his steamship line. In response D. F. S. Brantly, a boat builder, built a wharf at the foot of 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue North to support independent shipping which initiated the "Pier Wars." His pier included a 34 room bathing pavilion. In 1905, Frank Davis, who built the city's first electric power plant and constructed a trolley line along Central Avenue from the bay front to what is now Gulfport, purchased the Brantly pier and replaced it with the "Electric Pier." His trolley line was extended to the end of the pier which was illuminated by numerous electric lights. The pier was the St. Petersburg docking site for Davis' 500 passenger steamboat, *Favorite*, which made daily trips around Tampa Bay.

Most of the earliest piers were primarily commercial operations for the loading and unloading of freight and passengers, but recreational fishing and swimming use of the piers grew and became a component of the pier wars. Probably the first fully recreational pier was the Fountain of Youth Pier built by Edwin Tomlinson in 1900. It was located near a sulfuric artesian well at the end of Fourth Avenue South. To attract tourists, the well was dubbed the Fountain of Youth. But the original purpose for the pier was to provide a place for Tomlinson's father to fish. A well was drilled at the end of the pier to provide fresh water for cleaning fish. Water from the well still flows in the floor of the south yacht basin. Tomlinson, a wealthy philanthropist, designed and financed the city's first open-air post office, donated the land for the Yacht Club and funded the development of the Manual Training School in 1901. The two story school building is now the City Hall Annex and is located behind the City Hall.

The City's first municipal pier, which cost \$40,000, was opened December 15, 1915. It was originally intended as a commercial shipping pier, but became a recreation pier when the St Petersburg Times (now the Tampa Bay Times) urged the transfer of shipping operations to Bayboro harbor, allowing the waterfront to be used for parks and recreation which are now an important part of the city's character. Just north of the pier on the breakwater, the city built an air boat (seaplane) hanger for Tony Jannus' "St Petersburg-Tampa Air Boat Line."

The hurricane of 1921 destroyed most of the waterfront piers and pier structures except for the Henry

Hibbs Fish and Oyster Company (largest fish house on Florida's west coast) which was located on the Atlantic Coast Line Pier (originally the Orange Belt Pier). The Yacht Club, which was built in 1917 on the sight of the old Davis power plant, was surrounded by a seven foot high flood tide. Most of the municipal pier was deposited on Snell Island. The pier was repaired but the pilings were damaged and the pier's days were numbered.

Lew Brown, the editor of the *Evening Independent*, conceived the idea of replacing the pier with an iconic recreation pier to be a tourist attracting landmark. The new 1400 foot concrete pier with a two story Mediterranean Revival Casino building at the pier's end was called the The Million Dollar Pier.

The Casino housed an atrium trolley stop, a large outdoor ballroom which was later enclosed, an observation deck, studios for the city owned WSUN radio and later the city's WSUN television station. For the grand opening on Thanksgiving Day (1926), several thousand people danced the night away under the stars in the open air ballroom. Other pier features included Spa Beach, a bait house, parking along the pier and a solarium. The topless solarium building (without a roof) provided a place for hundreds of patrons to soak up the healing (thought so at the time) rays of the sun au-natural.

After the trolley line was discontinued, the atrium became the television studio for WSUN's local programming. In the early 1960's, a local version of American Bandstand was produced which I attended. WSUN (channel 38), which went on the air May 31, 1953 (final sign-off in 1970), was an innovative and progressive station having initiated several broadcasting firsts. For two years, it was the only television station in the Tampa Bay area. The WSUN call letters allegedly stand for Why Stay Up North.

The Casino building was demolished 1967 but the rest of the pier remained with a small park area at the end. A few years later the iconic inverted pyramid was built using the old pier's approach and adding new pilings (called caissons) to support the uniquely "top heavy" building. It was completed in 1973 and was demolished last year.

The process of building the new pier has not been easy for the city. Unlike our current pier project, the Million Dollar Pier was completed in a year and a half after a one million dollar bond issue was passed by voters in May 1925. Now for our proposed pier, we have argued, voted against and argued for more than ten years as well as spending five million dollars to design a pier that was rejected.

Now we all anxiously await our new Pier Park.

Information in this article came from [St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream](#), [Images of America: St. Petersburg's Piers](#) and [Historic Photos of St. Petersburg](#).