



NORTHEAST JOURNAL

Good People ∞ Good Places ∞ Good Things Happening

St. Petersburg, Florida

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Est. September 2004



Murawski lab members spent a lot of time organizing samples post-fire.

Courtesy of Layne Leggett

After the Fire: USF Marine Science Community Comes Together

Abby Baker

As smoke rose over downtown on Saturday, May 2, marine science graduate student Layne Leggett stood in the Al Lang stadium watching a fire she didn't yet realize would change her future.

By the end of the night, the University of South Florida's Marine Science Laboratory in downtown St. Petersburg was destroyed.

Two months later, the community has come together to raise more than \$500,000 and relocate the people and samples displaced in the fire.

What Happened?

On Saturday, May 2, dozens of media outlets documented the massive fire at the Marine Science Laboratory at USFSP. More than 60 emergency units and over 200 firefighters came to fight the fire, one of the biggest in recent memory, which was visible across the bay. For hours into the night, crews battled the flames.

USF had sent an emergency alert instructing people to evacuate the building and avoid the area while first responders arrived. Miraculously, no one was hurt and none of the

surrounding buildings were damaged.

According to USF officials, a lightning strike was reported around the time of the fire and is the wildly accepted catalyst for the blaze. In the end, most of the roof burned away, and the fire caused structural damage throughout the building.

There is no clear plan yet for what will happen to this site. Whether they move or rebuild depends on the financials, which are still up in the air.

More than 100 students, researchers, and USF staff lost their workplace, research, and equipment that day.

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What Her Grandfather Built How M.B. Welch Shaped St. Pete

Laura Flint

During the 1920s land boom, St. Petersburg expanded at a pace that reshaped the city almost overnight. Across that growing landscape, contractor M. B. Welch was at work, building not just in one area but throughout the city, converting plans into places people would live, gather, and invest in. The Old Northeast holds one important concentration of his surviving homes, but his reach extended well beyond it – to Downtown St. Pete, Grenada Terrace, and Crescent Heights, to St. Pete Beach, Disston Heights, Crescent Lake, and the Pink Streets. Most notably, it was recently discovered by

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Amy Walker in front of Snell Home, one of the many historic homes in St. Pete built by her grandfather, M. B. Welch.

Augusta Block: Following St. Pete's Red Brick Road

Will Michaels

Following the red brick roads, most paved with Augusta Block, will not get you to the land of Oz. But it will lead to an enchanting walk in



time back to early St. Petersburg. That's what Polita Glynn does with her recent film, *The Brick Roads of St. Petersburg*.

Glynn is a documentary filmmaker, screenwriter, and creative storyteller, with a background in American studies and history. Glynn says she has "always been drawn to the past," and is "enthusiastic about storytelling as a way to get people to see our community and city with different perspective." She studied film and television as a way to tell those stories.

Along with director and cinematographer Devin Rice, Glynn has produced and directed

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several documentaries about Florida history, most recently, *Brick Roads*. This short film focuses on a signature historic and cultural feature of the city – and particularly of the Old Northeast – mixing rich visual imagery with archival images, period newspaper articles, historic maps, and animation. The film recounts the story of the 92 miles of remaining brick roads found in our historic neighborhoods, downtown, and other places. The film was partially supported by a grant from the non-profit Florida Humanities.

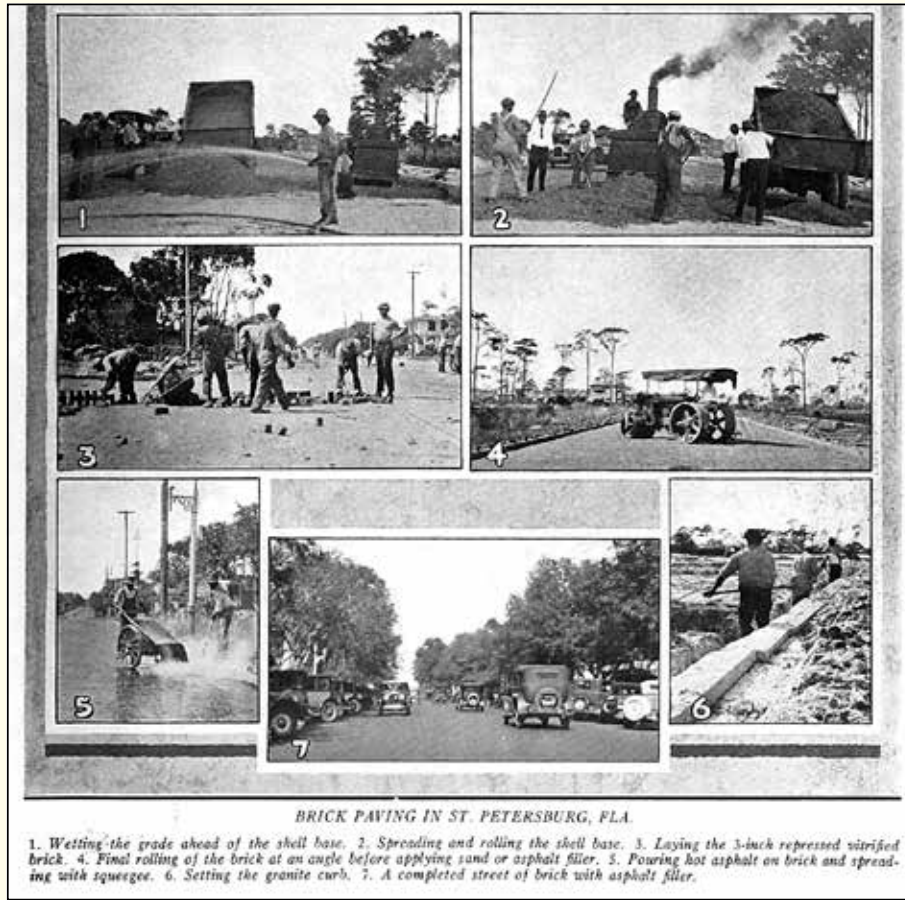
Narration from Polita Glynn's *The Brick Roads of St. Petersburg*:

St. Petersburg, Florida has more surviving brick streets and alleys than almost any city in America. Over 100 years old, they are rippled by more than a century of travel, expanding tree roots, and shifting foundations. On their uneven surface, you watch your step, slow your car, and maybe think about earlier times.

In 1903, St. Petersburg, Florida incorporated as a city with a population of 1,500 people. Seeking to modernize, civic leaders wanted to upgrade the rutted dirt roads into orderly grids of smooth wide street, mounds, and middens.

But when the mud persisted, they turned to brick. With only enough funds to pave a few blocks, the first brick roads were laid in 1904 along Central Avenue. Each year, more money was allocated to expand the brick roads. Block by block and mile by mile, the paving continued. In 1910, the St. Petersburg City Council passed a resolution to pave 75 miles of streets with brick. Subsequent resolutions added 48 city blocks and then another 16 miles.

By 1910, the Georgia Engineering Company emerged as the main recipient of city contracts to manufacture the bricks, transport them to St. Petersburg by railroad, and



From Contractors and Engineers Monthly, May, 1928.

install them in designated areas. A subsidiary of Georgia Vitrified Brick and Clay Company, the company manufactured the "Augusta Block" paving bricks in Campania, Georgia, near the city of Augusta. They consistently offered the lowest cost in their bids for the city contracts to manufacture, transport, and install brick streets. The company was soon producing over a million bricks a month.

While building bricks are made from surface clay, road bricks need to be stronger and are made with shale. Shale is a type of clay found beneath the surface, which compacts to a rock-like texture from the weight of the ground above it. Georgia Vitrified mined weathered phyllite or shale from the Belair pits next to its factory.

They combined the shale with local clay to create a mixture, which was cut into bricks. The bricks were partially vitrified, fired at such high heat that the clay began to fuse like glass, and then over days at a lower temperature. The result was a tough and durable brick that was hard but not brittle. They more than met the "rattler test," which evaluated the quality of the brick by the clear ringing sound produced when two bricks are struck against each other.

Augusta bricks were transported by train along the Atlantic Coast Railway from Georgia to St. Petersburg. Before installing the brick, roads were graded, and the sand or shell base was compacted and leveled with a roller. Work crews installed the bricks by hand, and the brick durability was tested with a five-ton roller. Any broken brick was removed and replaced.

We may never know the names and stories of the people who mined the shale, shaped and fired the bricks, loaded them onto trains, and installed them in the city of St. Petersburg. Records are scarce about the labor for the Georgia Vitrified Brick Company and the road crews in St. Petersburg. We can only speculate that the conditions were harsh. In the early 1900s, convict labor was used in Georgia brick manufacturing and in Florida road construction. Arrested for petty charges such as loitering or vagrancy, convicts were leased to private companies or forced to work.

Bid by bid, contract by contract, streets changed from dirt to brick. By 1928, there were 213 miles of vitrified brick street in St. Petersburg. By the end of the early 1930s that number was reported at over 300 miles of paved roads in the city. By that time, the era of big brick street building projects had come to an end.

The expansion continued every year until the 1940s. That was the peak of brick production. Brick

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 (THEY FURNISH PROOF TO THE MOST SCOTTICAL THAT THE PRACTICAL
 PAYING FOR HIGHWAYS IN THIS SECTION IS AUGUSTA BLOCK.)

Further proof that brick paving is the only practical paving to afford in the fact that the Hills
 here necessary Commencement are contemporary asphalt road from the brick roads in that county.
 Florida county will have more than 25 miles of brick roads. Already a brick highway is con-
 structed from Jacksonville to St. Augustine over which thousands of motor vehicles are riding each
 day. Other communities in Florida are following this example. When these roads are completed
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Room 101 Central National Bank Building, St. Petersburg, Florida.

Ad appearing in the St. Petersburg Times in 1916

installation began to decline as asphalt and cement offered a more cost effective and efficient solution. New roads were built with this material. And miles of old brick streets, which needed repair, were paved over. By 1960, only 113 miles of brick roads remained.

Recognizing their value as an historic asset, in 1992 the City of St. Petersburg passed preservation policies to protect the historic bricks and prevent any further paving of brick streets and alleys or removal of granite curbs. The remaining 92 miles of brick roads and alleys are now protected by this policy.

The Boom and Bust in Bricks

Given this history of the Georgia Vitrefied Brick and Clay Company and its extensive paving of St. Pete's streets with Augusta Blocks, what specifically brought about this huge demand for brick-paved roads, and what were the implications of this massive construction effort?

Replacing sand roads with a more durable and tractable surface such as brick was essential infrastructure to accommodate the growing number of tourists as well as residents purchasing their first car.

Prior to 1920, about 80% of tourists would arrive by train and 20% by boat and car. They used local transportation – still including carriages mixed with early automobiles – and trolleys to get about the city and nearby areas of interest. St. Pete's trolley system



Polita Glynn, director and producer of The Brick Roads of St. Petersburg. Glynn is now working on the documentary, Maximo Hernandez and the



began in 1904, and by 1915 it had an amazing 25 miles of track.

However, with the development of the Ford assembly-line production of cheap Model T Ford cars, availability of automobiles skyrocketed in the early 1920s. By 1927, the Ford Company alone had produced over 15 million cars. As both local and visiting car owners increased, "good roads meets" of automobiles were organized to demonstrate for better, more durable roads, and bricks were the preferred material.

In 1920 an influx of tourists with cars saturated available accommodations. The new city publicity genius John Lodwick, who had been sending hundreds of stories and photos about St. Pete's paradise to hundreds of newspapers across the nation, likely was a significant player in this. To accommodate those who could not find lodging, the mayor established "Tent City," a small parcel of land set aside for them with utilities provided. Some tourists stretched a tarpaulin alongside their cars and others pitched tents. St. Pete soon became awash with cars.

The Gandy Bridge opened between St. Petersburg and Tampa in 1924 to facilitate and shorten car travel between the two cities and nearby areas. In December 1924, its first month of operation, 60,573 cars crossed the bridge. By December 1925, traffic nearly doubled, increasing to 113,666. After just a year's operation, plans were underway to double the width of the bridge to

eventually accommodate 24,000 cars a day, thought the bridge was not actually widened until 1956. Later, a second span added. (For perspective, in 2019, the bridge accommodated 37,500 vehicles a day.)

At the other end of the city, the Bee Line Ferry opened between St. Petersburg and Bradenton in 1926, transporting 1,500 cars across the bay daily. However, the growing tourist trade by car, and the growing number of residents buying them, were

not the only reasons for new brick roads.

Another significant contributor was development. In the 1920s the city was undergoing a real estate boom – one historian called it "money madness" because of the thousands of lots being sold and repeatedly flipped at ever higher prices. It is estimated that at the peak of the 1920s boom there were nearly 6,000 real estate salesmen in St. Pete, a city of a mere 14,000 people. Many of the brick-paved streets were in developments with unsold lots.

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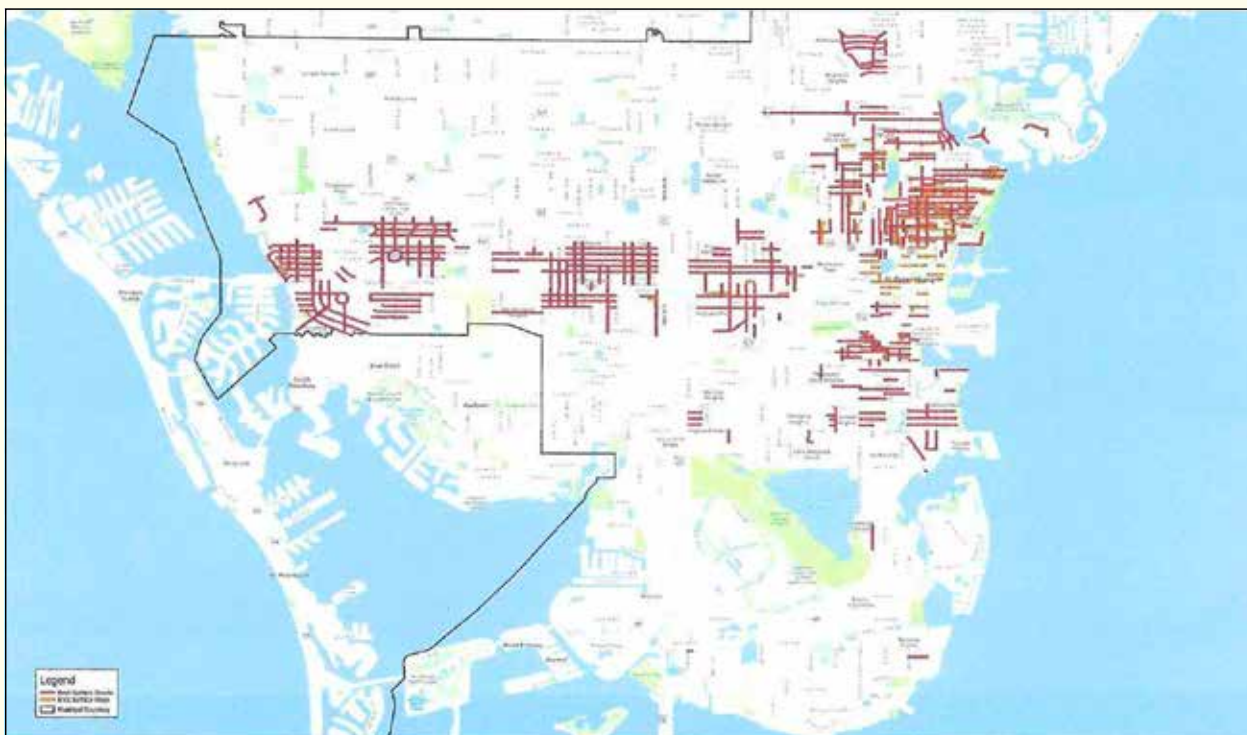
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Typically, at that time, developers platted the neighborhood, arranged for roads and other infrastructure, then sold lots. The lot buyer then built the home. As recounted by historian Walter P. Fuller, the brick roads in a great many of the developments were provided by the city, at no or sometimes partial cost to the developer. During the early and mid-1920s the city spent more than \$12M (approximately \$470M now) backed by bonds for road paving. As historian Raymond Arsenault noted, this was “a staggering sum for a community that had been satisfied with roads of rutted dirt or crushed shell 15 years earlier.”

The Great Depression hit St. Petersburg in 1927, before the 1929 stock market crash. Aside from the tourist influx, much of the city's economy depended on the sale of lots and construction. In 1925 the value of building permits peaked at \$25M. The following year this fell to \$15M and in 1927, \$3M. By 1931 it was less than \$1M. The property tax generated by lot sales and construction fell proportionately. Businesses failed, mortgages defaulted, and property values plummeted along with city revenue. As Arsenault wrote, “Unreimbursed spending on streets and other public improvements left the city in a precarious financial position.”

In 1930 the city defaulted on its bond payments and declared bankruptcy. Bond payments were not resumed until 1937. Eventually the city's investment in the brick streets was partially recovered as the largely vacant subdivision became populated. But it took many years.



Map of brick streets and alleys in St. Petersburg.

Courtesy of the City of St. Petersburg

Telling Our History

While Augusta Blocks predominate St. Pete's brick streets, other block types may also be found. These include Rockmart (found especially in the Snell Isle neighborhood) from Monarch Brick Company/Rockmart Shale Brick & Slate Co, Rockmart, Georgia; Graves, from Birmingham, Alabama; Copeland and Ingles, also from Birmingham; Southern Clay Manufacturing Co. (imprinted with a diamond shape); and wire-cut carrying no signature imprint. In addition to brick streets, historical pavers include sidewalk hex blocks. These are also protected by city ordinance.

St. Petersburg's brick streets greatly add to our city's rich sense of place and charm, and have their story to tell. One viewer of *Brick Roads* commented, “I never looked at brick streets the same after I saw the film.” No greater compliment could be paid to filmmaker Polita Glynn.

Glynn is currently working on another documentary, *Maximo Hernandez and the Fishing Ranchos of Tampa Bay*, featuring Maximo Hernandez, after whom Maximo Point and Park are named. Hernandez was perhaps the first non-Native American settler at Pinellas Point and established a fish rancho in the vicinity of Maximo Park. Polita expects the film to debut in February at Eckerd College – right

next to Maximo Park. Previously, Glynn produced *Underground History*, a documentary film and poetry visualization project that explored connections between the Tampa Bay region's diverse cultural history and emerging community efforts to better acknowledge and understand lessons of that past in charting the future. You can learn more about these histories, and watch *The Brick Roads of St. Petersburg*, at Glynn's website, merfolkmedia.org. ●

Will Michaels is former director and trustee of the St. Petersburg Museum of History, and author of The Making of St. Petersburg and the Hidden History of St. Petersburg. Reach him at wmichaels2222@gmail.com.

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