

The Early Years



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... A yacht club as its centerpiece.



In the 1920s, this was the official burgee of the club. Gidge Gandy designed the present club burgee in the 1930s. SPYC ARCHIVE

As though a footnote to history as well as a slogan, for years St. Petersburg Yacht Club stationery has carried a tag line at the bottom of the page: "On Tampa Bay — Sailing Capital of the South." Today few would dispute the claim, and for good reason. At a meeting every June, Tampa Bay area sailors go through the calendar on a week-by-week basis, scheduling sailing events, trying to avoid conflicts. Year after year, only Christmas week offers a respite from a full regatta schedule.

It wasn't always so. At the turn of the 20th century, pleasure craft on Tampa Bay were few. The U.S. Census counted only 1,575 residents in St. Petersburg in 1900, but the decade was one of growth. In 1905, business leaders in the city including W.L. Straub, then owner and editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*, and developer C. Perry Snell, adopted a plan to transform St. Petersburg's waterfront east of Beach Drive from a muddy strip of commercial activity into

a chain of parks and three yacht basins.

In January 1909, the city had acquired from Snell, Roy S. Hanna and A.F. Bartlett water lots that included the future site of the St. Petersburg Yacht Club. On the night of Oct. 29, 1909, at a meeting held in the Marine Supply Co. in downtown St. Petersburg, Straub and other civic leaders met to form a yacht club. At this initial session, the officers selected were Dr. M.H. Axline, commodore; W.R. Jones, vice commodore; Straub, secretary; Tracy Lewis, treasurer; and George Presstman, measurer. Directors named, in addition to the flag officers, were Lewis, Walter Robertson Howard, George Waller, and W.H. English. The fledgling club held its first outing on Dec. 26, 1909, with 20 boats carrying approximately 100 members and guests to Blind Pass. This event was followed on March 6-7, 1910, by an 11-boat cruise to Bradenton and back. It is apparent from what took place in the next seven years that not only were these



Waterfront at the turn of the century: City fathers' vision included open parks, with a yacht club, and not the hodgepodge of buildings, commercial wharfs and derelict boats. The power plant, right, was built in 1899 over the water at the site of SPYC's present parking garage. A plaque in the sidewalk on Central Avenue commemorates this historical fact. CITY OF ST. PETERSBURG

early leaders determined to transform the waterfront, but also they wanted a yacht club as its centerpiece.

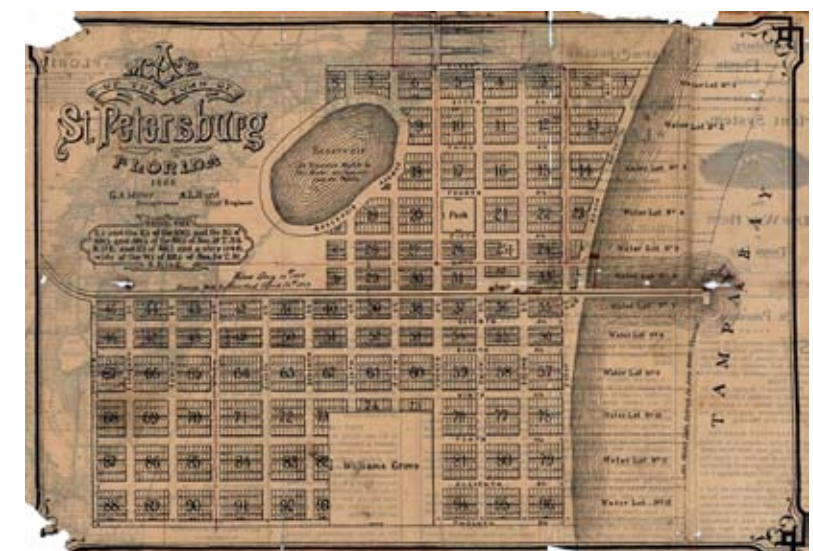
By early 1916, the filling of land east of Beach Drive and construction of the bulkhead line for the new Central Yacht Basin was complete. It was two newspapermen, A.T. Roberts, a city editor at the *St. Petersburg Times*, and Lew B. Brown, publisher of the *Evening Independent*, who called a meeting on the evening of May 30, 1916, to reactivate the Yacht Club. Seven men heeded the call: Straub, (former owner and still editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*), Lewis, C.W. Springstead, Arthur L. Johnson, Frank C. Carley, Roberts and Brown. A finance committee was chosen, a membership drive proposed, and a re-organization meeting scheduled for June 23, 1916.

The membership drive to obtain 100 members (dues \$25) was oversubscribed and resulted in 150 members. Articles of incorporation were drawn up and filed with the Circuit Court of Pinellas County, Fla., on June 23, 1916. The founders were: Brown, D.W. Budd, Abbott G. Butler, Carley, Robt. S. Carroll, T.A. Chancellor, Wm. M. Davis, J.G. Foley, H. Walter Fuller, George S. Gandy, G.W. Greene, Roy S. Hanna, John D. Harris, Johnson, A.T. Roberts, C.M. Roser and Straub. The following officers were duly elected: Carley, commodore; Butler, vice commodore; Budd, rear commodore; Roberts, secretary, and Harris, treasurer.

On Oct. 2, 1916, the city and the club entered into a 30-year lease (\$1 per year) with two important provisos: an option to renew for an additional 30 years and a clause stating that if the club ceased using the property as a yacht club the lease was terminated. The confidence of these club founders was extraordinary as they proceeded with construction of the



An idealized vision of the pre-yacht club era waterfront was captured on a postcard, circa 1900. FRANK PETERS COLLECTION



An 1888 plat of St. Petersburg's waterfront along Tampa Bay. It names A.L. Hunt chief engineer and G.A. Miller as draftsman. UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA (USF) TAMPA LIBRARY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS



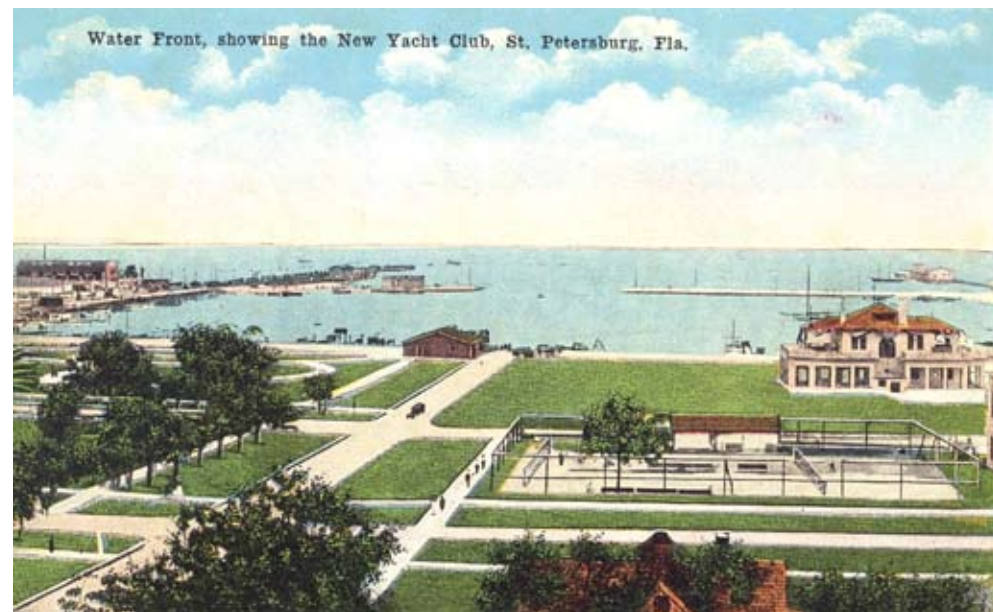
Dedication of the new St. Petersburg Yacht Club facility drew throngs of people on June 15, 1917. SPYC ARCHIVE

Previous pages: The SPYC clubhouse, 11 Central Ave., as seen from the southwest about 1919. SPYC ARCHIVE

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A view from the First Avenue South railroad pier shows the clubhouse about 1919. FRANK PETERS COLLECTION



A postcard circa 1917 shows the Tampa Bay waterfront that includes the new SPYC building. Building to the left is Home Line Freight House. FRANK PETERS COLLECTION

clubhouse in the face of a legal opinion that the lease to a private club of city-owned waterfront property was void. A special act by the 1917 Florida Legislature declaring the lease valid cured that problem. All officers were re-elected in 1917, and an elegant clubhouse was formally opened June 15, 1917, on the northwest corner of Bayshore Drive and Central Avenue. Bonds of \$20,000 were issued to reimburse members for loans used to fund the construction. George S. "Dad" Gandy, of Gandy Bridge fame, succeeded Carley as commodore in 1919.

Teenager Harvey Parke arrived in St. Petersburg in 1919, fell in love with the area and sailing, and two years later built a 16-foot sprit-rigged "Cricket" sail-boat designed by George S. "Gidge" Gandy Jr. Parke loaned the boat to a fellow junior sailor when he went north for the summer, admonishing him to "keep an eye on it."

Parke returned two days after the Great Hurricane of October 1921 to find that the clubhouse had been flooded and the deck of his boat was on one side of the basin and the bottom on the other, an experience shared by all too many club members.

In spite of the hurricane, membership grew so rapidly that it became evident a larger building was needed. Plans were made to extend the clubhouse to the north. Bonds of \$60,000 were sold to retire the earlier bond issue and to finance a \$42,000 addition, which opened formally on Dec. 21, 1922.

The ballroom in the expanded clubhouse was the scene of many brilliant social events, and the club came into its own as the social center of St. Petersburg. Many internationally famous figures who visited the city aboard their yachts were entertained by members of the St. Petersburg Yacht Club. The paired strengths of the club as a social center and as promot-



Flooding surrounds the clubhouse in 1921 after a hurricane. SPYC ARCHIVE



Many vessels suffered damage during the 1921 hurricane. The Spa Pool building appears in the background. FRANK PETERS COLLECTION

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Gidge Gandy in 1932.



Lew McMasters in 1937.

er and supporter of yachting began with the club's earliest years.

The St. Petersburg Yacht Club grew and prospered with the rest of the nation during the Roaring '20s but during the Great Depression of the 1930s, it fell to its knees with the rest of the country. At one period, it almost failed to survive. Commodore Lew McMasters met several payrolls out of his own pocket. At one point the club's Board of Directors met and were deadlocked on whether to turn the club and land back to the city. E.C. "Robby" Robison, who had been working late in his photo lab, arrived just in time to cast the swing vote for survival.

Major credit for getting the club back on its feet is given to Al D. Strum, with strong support from J. Shirley Gracy and the other members of the board. Strum enlisted new members from the Junior Chamber of Commerce at a \$25 a year membership fee. The strategy was doubly brilliant; not only did the treasury receive a badly needed infusion of funds, but also the club got an infusion of badly needed "young" members. Through Strum's efforts and those of Gracy, A.B. "Babe" Fogarty, Eugene Bennett, A.L. and "Gidge" Gandy, Leon D. Lewis, L.L. McMasters, Paul V. Reese, Tom S. Pierce and Robison, the club was saved.

Having survived the Great Depression, the yacht

club ran into a depression of another making: World War II. As members set sail to serve their country in the "war-to-end-all-wars," most yachting activities, including the popular St. Petersburg-Havana Race, were grounded. The Vinoy, Soreno, Princess Martha, Suwanee and other downtown St. Petersburg hotels were taken over by the military. Many SPYC members supported the war effort in their own way. It was common practice for Ray Dugan and "Double A" Rabe, among others, to go out and round up 10 to 15 soldiers and sailors and march them back to the club.

When the drinking, dining and dancing were done, the young men had a few bucks stuffed in their pockets and were dispatched with the thanks and gratitude of the SPYC etched in their memories forever.

With the return of peace, however, came a return of yachting with a vengeance. There seemed to be an air of lost time to be made up. Members returning from the armed services and newly arrived residents gave a fresh impetus to the St. Petersburg Yacht Club. Many of the new settlers were veterans who had been exposed to the beauty of the Tampa Bay area while stationed at Drew Field (now Tampa International Airport), MacDill Air Force Base, the Maritime Service Training Station and the St. Petersburg Coast Guard Base at Bayboro Harbor during the war. The future appeared bright.

Helping the war effort:

Maritime Service trainees march past the yacht club (obscured, left, behind trees in the parking lot), down Central Avenue, returning to the Training Station at Bayboro Harbor in 1943. Hundreds of sailors for the Merchant Marines were trained in St. Petersburg and the yacht club helped them run rowing and sailing races.

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