

6-1-1985

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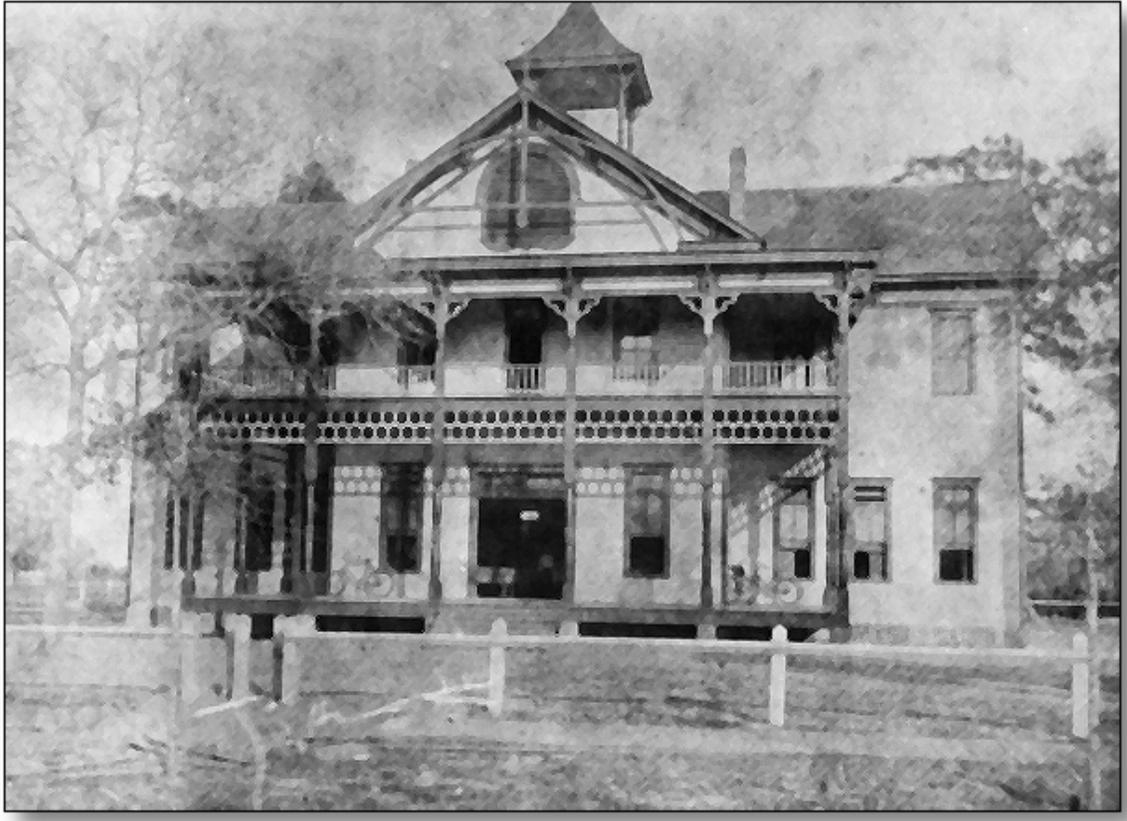
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Recommended Citation

Camp, Paul Eugen (1985) "St. Petersburg's First Public School," *Tampa Bay History*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol7/iss1/7>

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St. Petersburg's first public school building.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

ST. PETERSBURG'S FIRST PUBLIC SCHOOL

Introduction by Paul Eugen Camp

The 1890s were a pivotal decade for the development of public education in Florida. Throughout the state, communities began to bend their energies toward providing improved schools for their children. Although it had only been incorporated in 1892, the growing community of St. Petersburg was no exception to this great educational stirring.

At that time a part of Hillsborough County, the town of St. Petersburg had provided a school for its children as early as 1888, but no publicly owned school house was available before 1894. In that year, local voters passed a \$7,000 bond issue to build the town's first real school building. The school house resulting from this initiative opened for classes in December, 1894. It was a

handsome two-story wooden structure located on the southeast corner of Second Avenue North and Fifth Street, and it contained seven class rooms, a library and an assembly hall.

In 1983, the University of South Florida Library acquired an interesting collection of manuscript documents shedding light on this key period in St. Petersburg's educational history. The core of the collection consists of four original record books for the city's first publicly owned school, covering the period from 1890 to 1900. The collection also contains a later record book for the 1932-33 school year, together with numerous teachers' reports and printed school ephemera. Accompanying the collection are two original photographs, one showing the 1894 school house, and the other showing an early class mustered in front of the building.

Although the rather discouraged-looking bundle of worn ledgers and yellowed papers is not visually impressive, it contains a wealth of invaluable historical data relative to St. Petersburg's early schools and scholars. Perhaps the most interesting item in the collection is a manuscript entitled, "History of School No. 83 at St. Petersburg." This account of the city's first public school was written in 1894-95 by Olin King, the school's first principal. In narrating the history of his community's educational institutions, King illustrated in passing many of the problems faced by nineteenth-century Florida educators, ranging from community opposition to educational reform to inadequate funding and facilities. His account provides an illuminating window into a major element of St. Petersburg's historical experience.

History Of School No. 83 At St. Petersburg
by Olin King

In the latter part of the year 1887 in a thinly settled neighborhood, and in an almost unbroken forest, St. Petersburg was located by the O.B. RY. Co.¹

Within a year a sufficient population had gathered there to organize a public school. Accordingly an appropriation for a four months term was secured, and a school with 29 pupils was opened by Miss Mamie Gilkeson as teacher, in a house built by the people, under the directions of the trustees of the Cong'l Church of St. Petersburg.² This school was opened on the 26th of Nov. nearly three months later than the other schools of the county.

At the end of two months Miss Gilkeson resigned her charge, and Miss Olive Wickham was installed as teacher and completed the term. On the 2nd of Sep. 1889 Jacob Keagy opened a school with 32 pupils enrolled, and taught without interruption the entire term of six months, having an average attendance of 26.

Sep. 1st 1890, Mr. Keagy having again been chosen by the patrons of the school³ received the appointment and opened with 40 pupils in attendance.

Average daily attendance for the term of seven months, 31.

Term of 1891-2. The number of pupils in the neighborhood having increased so much that two rooms were necessary to accomodate them, the difficulty in securing rooms adapted to the

purpose delayed the opening of the school to the 21st of Sep.⁴ The same teacher was continued in charge with Mrs. Keagy as assistant, and the school was opened under auspicious circumstances. 60 pupils were enrolled the first month.

Total enrollment for the term 74. Length of term, 7 months.

During this term the bitter opposition of a few patrons was aroused by the improved methods of teaching introduced into the county by the Superintendent. But this opposition was without apparent effect and the school flourished to its close.

Adverse political influences being at work the beginning of the term of 1892-3 found the town still without a school-house and again the public school was not opened until Sep. 26th, and then in a most trying situation, being in close proximity to rail-road and noisy machinery.⁵

Notwithstanding the difficulties the school was continued by Mr. & Mrs. Keagy, to the close of a seven months term—but with results less satisfactory than might have been expected under more favorable conditions.

Scholastic Year 1893-1894

The St. Petersburg Graded School opened Sept. 13th, 1893 in a building known as the *May Building* with the following teachers: Olin King as Principal, E.C. McPherson, Intermediate, and Mrs. E.J. Orr, Primary. The teachers immediately after opening the school set about grading the same, and the result was, seven regular grades were established. The school moved along nicely the first term which closed a short time before Christmas. Two weeks were spent in vacation—one week of same the teachers attended the State Association which was held at Gainesville—after which school reopened with the usual attendance and was continued till April the 27th 1894, with an average attendance gratifying to both patrons and teachers. A closing exercise was held in Clark's Hall—the schoolhouse not being sufficiently large—consisting of songs, recitations, etc.

The municipal authorities defrayed the general expenses of the school—rent of house, etc.—thereby rendering a valuable aid to the patrons, and dispensing with much annoyance [sic] that has hitherto attended the management of the school by the supervisor.

The supervisor—Mr. D. Moffett—has visited the respective rooms of the school once each month during the eight months session.

April 25, 1894

Scholastic Year 1894-95

To write a history, or rather to pen successive events in a manner both correct and attractive, is not an inviting undertaking. Yet to write a history of any nature other than that of a school would be more inspiring, for what teacher has not at times been almost overcome by the monotony

attendant upon the daily duties of school life, and what pupil has not often wished the idea of schools had never been conceived? However, teachers continue to teach and schools are still maintained; and since they both are conducive to the formation of history as well as character it can not possibly be of evil to commit to these pages for future reference some of the happenings relative to the St. Petersburg Graded School during the scholastic year 1894-95.

Be it remembered that the school was conducted previously to the year just mentioned in just such a building as the Supervisor could rent, hence there naturally grew in the minds of the school public a desire for a good school building. Many plans were suggested for obtaining a suitable building, but none was executed until the year 1894. In the early part of this year the municipal authorities of the town took hold of the affair, and issued City Bonds to the amount of \$7000.00 for the erection and completion of a commodious house, to be, when completed, the exclusive property of the town. During the summer of this year a large frame building, two stories high, containing seven rooms, was built near the central portion of the town. The structure is finished throughout, and stands today an ornament to the thriving, prosperous town to which it belongs. In point of fact it would be deserving of praise were it the property of a city of thousands of inhabitants. The furniture purchased at a cost of \$1000.00 is handsomely finished and adds much to the appearance of the interior, as well as to the comfort of the occupants.

Some changes made in the school law by the Legislature of 1893 concerning the appointment of teachers created not a little disturbance in this place. For some time school matters were the chief topic of conversation, especially among those who were wont to express their opinions often, freely, publicly, and oftentimes vociferously. To an uninterested mind such niggardly actions would certainly indicate that submission to the law had ceased to be a cardinal virtue, and that attempts were being made to initiate personal feelings and prejudices as controlling factors in the management of legal affairs. Notwithstanding the many nefarious vituperations uttered by persons not less vile than anxious to perpetrate such, and notwithstanding the many uncharitable influences exercised against the execution, as well as the executors, of the law, yea, notwithstanding many other hinderances too puerile to mention sound judgement and reasons were the prevailing influences that led to at least a reasonable measure of success.⁶

The school was, however, not permitted to open at the appointed time—Sept. 17, 1894. This delay was caused in the main by not having desks for the new house. The desks were ordered from another state and were to arrive here not later than Oct. 1st, but when even the 1st day of Nov. had come the desks were still not here. This state of affairs continued to test the patience of many untill [sic] Dec. the 1st found the desks in the house.

On Monday Dec. 3rd the school opened with nearly a hundred pupils who perhaps had waited anxiously for the first day in the new school building. The following teachers, Olin King, Prin.; Mrs. Chas. Weihman, Miss Susan Abercrombie, and Mrs. H. Bomford, having been appointed by the Board of Public Instruction, assumed their duties which owing to the loss of time appeared multitutinous [sic].

After some deliberation the teachers concluded that the school could be classed into eight grades, following as far as practicable the arrangement made by the teachers of the previous year. The Board had granted permission for the teaching of some of the higher studies, viz.;



St. Petersburg public school students and their teachers, circa 1900.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

Algebra, Physical Geography, Rhetoric, etc.⁷ These studies were consequently pursued by a few pupils, a much less number than was desired, during the whole term. The teachers realized the impossibility of crowding into five months the work that naturally requires eight months; yet it was their unanimous hope to as far as possible make up the time necessarily lost at the beginning of the term. This loss of time just mentioned rendered it almost impossible for the pupils as a whole to complete satisfactorily the work in the different grades; although this fact is prominent it seems that the present mode of grading, with a few exceptions, is as nearly perfect as could be expected under similar circumstances. To pursue it would its merits or defects disclose.

For several reasons, the teachers decided that no public entertainment would be given at the close of the term. This conclusion was announced with some degree of sadness on the part of the teachers who realized that school entertainments are a source of some profit to pupils, also of enjoyment to patrons and the school public. It was much hoped that environments of a different nature would render it both pleasant and possible to have at the close of each succeeding year an entertainment worthy of praise.

Again it is pleasant to note that the municipal authorities of the town defrayed the petty expenses of running the school this year. These expenses, though small, are necessarily incurred, and this defrayal of same bespeaks much in favor of the authorities of the town.

'Twould be almost a sign of non-appreciation to finish this task without noting the interest that the Supervisor, Mr. David Moffett, has manifested in the welfare of the school. He has visited the rooms as often perhaps as his business could reasonably permit, and has all the time and under all circumstances exercised his best efforts in behalf of the school and its teachers. In the opinion of this writer it would be a job of no little magnitude to find a person better suited to the overseership of this school than that found in the person of Mr. David Moffett.

In conclusion it would not be out of place to say that the enrollment this term was some larger than it was last year, but there were many boys and girls of school age in this district who ought to have attended school. The average attendance this year was some larger than last; yet for the most trivial reasons imaginable many would remain at home, often to the extent of a week's time. Or when will parents ever learn how to send their sons and daughters to school?⁸

This closes the statement of just such facts as seemed best to write. The St. Petersburg Graded School has just really begun to exist. There are yet great possibilities for her. May the time soon come that will witness true, noble, educated young men and women leaving her walls to take positions in the battle of life beside the best warfarers [sic] of their day and generation.

April 26, 1895

¹ Orange Belt Railway Company.

² This was a small wooden structure located between Ninth and Tenth Streets near Central Avenue. Hampton Dunn, *Yesterday's St. Petersburg* (Miami: Seemann, 1973), 20.

³ The school trustees were E.R. Ward, J.C. Williams and David Williams. Karl Grismer, *The Story of St. Petersburg* (St. Petersburg: P.K. Smith, 1948), 217.

⁴ According to Grismer, the town rented a three-room structure located adjacent to the railroad tracks near Eighth Street. *Ibid.*, 217.

⁵ Grismer quotes teacher Jacob Kreagy as writing, "Confusion created by the distracting noises of trains, lumber cars and novelty works, so near the school rooms, renders teaching almost an impossibility." *Ibid.*, 217-18.

⁶ The law in question, Chapter 4192, *Laws of Florida* (1893), extensively reformed the state's teacher certification rules and, most significantly, provided for a system of uniform teacher examinations. The law provoked a great deal of opposition, both from many teachers and from certain elements of the public. Thomas Everette Cochran, *History of Public-School Education in Florida. Bulletin 1921, No. 1* (Tallahassee: State Department of Education, 1921), 188-89.

⁷ Florida did not adopt a state-wide law prescribing the curriculum for public elementary schools until 1919. *Ibid.*, 118-19.

⁸ The first Florida compulsory school attendance law was not passed until 1915. This was a local option law. The first state-wide compulsory school attendance law was passed in 1919. *Ibid.*, 114.