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A Brief History of USF St. Petersburg
Remarks by James Anthony Schnur
Associate Librarian, Poynter Library
At New Faculty Orientation, DAV 130
13 August 2012

[TITLE] Dear colleagues, welcome to the University of South Florida St. Petersburg. I am Jim Schnur, a member of the library faculty and special collections librarian at the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library. For the next twenty minutes, I have the honor of sharing with you a brief overview of our history and traditions at USF St. Petersburg. Just as the University of South Florida transformed the landscape of higher education as Florida’s first metropolitan public university and the “first new institution of its kind to be conceived, planned, and built in the United States in the twentieth century,”¹ USF St. Petersburg had its beginnings as the first branch campus in Florida’s state university system and the pioneer of Florida’s two-plus-two articulation agreement between public junior colleges and universities.

(SEAL) People sometimes ask, why South Florida? Why not Tampa Bay University, or University of Central Florida, since we are not in the southern portion of the state? Actually, at the time of USF’s creation in 1956, the other three universities were UF in Gainesville and FSU and FAMU in Tallahassee. We were the only institution south of Gainesville!

Once chartered, there was a little battle over the location of the first campus. Sites considered in Hillsborough were the present campus [OLD MAP] that was the site of a former military installation known as Henderson Air Field, and a site near Tampa International Airport. Nelson Poynter, editor of the St. Petersburg Times (now the Tampa Bay Times) pushed for a site at the current location of Eckerd College near the Skyway or another site in northern St. Petersburg. [FOWLER] Ultimately, Tampa interests prevailed, and since the only thing near the present USF campus at the time was a recently opened brewery, Poyntner and others in St. Petersburg sometimes referred to the school as “Bottlecap U.”

The Tampa campus opened in September 1960 and within a few years could no longer handle the influx of students. Under President John S. Allen, the University of South Florida took possession of the original facility along Bayboro Harbor on 1 July 1965. This site, now the home of the USF College of Marine Science, had previously served as the United States Maritime Service Training Station (4 SLIDES) (1939-1950) and the provisional campus of Florida Presbyterian (now Eckerd) College (1959-1963). Before USF gained occupancy, the original campus also became the headquarters for the Florida Institute for Continuing University Studies [FICUS], one of the university system’s earliest continuing education/distance education initiatives. Although FICUS was disbanded by the Florida legislature in 1965, the commitment to distance education and metropolitan learning along Bayboro Harbor has remained strong ever since.

On 7 September 1965, classes began for 260 freshmen who stayed in the old Maritime Service barracks due to a lack of space in Tampa. They enrolled in classes here as well as at USF’s home in Tampa. Regular shuttles took students to and from Tampa at a time before the interstate highway reached south of Ulmerton Road.

Allen established a presence in St. Petersburg without receiving permission from the Florida Board of Regents, the governing body for public universities. After the first academic year, Peace Corps volunteers occupied the dorms during the summer of 1966. Another wave of freshman came that fall. However, as new residential facilities opened in Tampa, the future of the Bay Campus site became uncertain by January 1967. An overflow facility for freshman was no longer necessary in St. Petersburg, yet Allen did not want to abandon the Bayboro site even though he lacked a legislative mandate to keep the facilities open.

.COLOR BROCHURE AERIAL Allen’s desire to maintain a footprint in Pinellas was pragmatic and strategic: He did not want another university to claim Pinellas or to sever it from USF’s assigned service area. As the freshman returned to Tampa, Allen found a way to maintain a presence at the “Bay Campus” when three members of the faculty in Tampa talked with him about converting the site into a marine research facility. Soon, the USF Marine Science Institute—forerunner to USF’s College of Marine Science—took shape. During the late 1960s, the Bayboro location also became the home of USF’s Center for Continuing Education, an early distance education initiative within Florida’s university system responsible for credit and noncredit offerings as far away as Lee County (Fort Myers) and Brevard County (Melbourne). USFSP would not offer freshman-level courses again until the “Learning Community” initiative began in fall 1998.

.TWO MEN Knowing that residents of Pinellas County wanted access to a public university, USF President John S. Allen devised a plan to turn the Bay Campus into a branch of USF that offered commuter students access to upper-level undergraduate and limited graduate programs. During the summer of 1968, Allen directed his staff to develop upper-level course offerings at USFSP. (SITTING ON STEPS) The “Bay Campus” became the “Bayboro Campus” in July 1968. Allen feared that if he waited too long to establish a permanent presence in Pinellas, the local business community and members of the Pinellas County legislative delegation might act in a way that would be harmful for the university.

He directed Lester Tuttle, a faculty member in the College of Education, to build Florida’s first regional campus at a public university, do it quickly, and make it a success. At this time, Allen still lacked legislative authority to offer classes in St. Petersburg on a permanent basis, but that did not stop him and Tuttle from moving forward with the “two-plus-two” programs that served as a model for other articulation agreements throughout the State of Florida. In addition to the program in marine science, courses in other areas (elementary education, engineering technology, English, psychology, history, and engineering administration) were offered in the former barracks. Additional degree offerings in accounting, management, general business administration, social science education, political science, geography, and criminal justice appeared by the early 1970s.
John T. Ware, a Pinellas lawmaker, was an early advocate for the Bayboro Campus. He wrote the enabling legislation (Chapter 69-363, Laws of Florida) that created the campus of “University of South Florida—St. Petersburg” during the 1969 session. A year after the Bayboro Campus started its permanent existence as a campus of the USF System, it finally had legislative legitimacy.

Soon thereafter, early questions about the proper role of the Bayboro Campus became a regular topic of discussion on both sides of Tampa Bay. By late May 1971, some newspaper articles even called for greater autonomy or even independence from USF Tampa. As programs grew during the early 1970s, alternative sites were even considered for a larger campus since, at the time, much of the land north of the peninsula where the College of Marine Science currently resides (including much of the present campus) remained in private hands. The University examined sites throughout Pinellas, including north county locations near Countryside. In a February 1975 referendum, voters in Clearwater rejected a measure that would have allowed for city leaders in that community to donate 200 acres for a USF campus in central/upper Pinellas County. This failed referendum was a successful wake-up call for leaders in St. Petersburg.

By 1976, with growing levels of community support, the condemnation and acquisition of lands near the original campus began. Nelson Poynter joined other business leaders in supporting this effort. Soon, due to Poynter’s incessant lobbying and the vision of other leaders, the city purchased lands for campus expansion and a new sense of enthusiasm washed upon the students and faculty then crowded into the moldy and termite infested old barracks along Bayboro Harbor.

USF St. Petersburg’s phenomenal growth during the 1970s set a standard for other branch and regional campuses in Florida. By the mid-1970s, courses offered at the Bayboro Campus ranged from traditional liberal arts offerings to professional programs in nursing, engineering, and marine science. Although Tuttle had served as the first Dean of the Bayboro Campus between 1968 and 1975, he also led the USF Fort Myers campus that began to offer classes in September 1974. Modeled on the regional campus two-plus-two undergraduate track that USF had successfully implemented in St. Petersburg, USF Fort Myers took shape in the early months of 1974 as the USF’s second "branch campus." Another branch campus took shape at New College, formerly a private institution near the Sarasota/Manatee county line that became a part of USF in 1974. Although the Fort Myers programs later became part of Florida Gulf Coast University and New College of Florida is separate from the USF Sarasota/Manatee programs, we must remember that the success of these institutions grew out of the model shaped here at USF St. Petersburg.

Similar to the ongoing debates over Tropicana Field and the Tampa Bay Rays, city officials in St. Petersburg feared that they would lose the Bayboro Campus and USF course offerings if they did not partner with the university and secure adjacent lands for the expansion of the campus. Construction reshaped the areas along the north shore of Bayboro Harbor from 1978 through 1981. The first two structures opened during Phase I expansion were the new library (named in honor of Nelson Poynter) now renamed Bayboro Hall and the “original” Bayboro Hall that is now named in honor of Lowell E.
Davis. **Coquina Hall** opened in the spring of 1984 as a “student services” building with classrooms and a dining center. **(1986 MEET USFSP)** Many of the offices and facilities that had been headquartered in the old barracks moved into present-day Davis and Coquina halls by the mid-1980s. As the other academic programs left the original structures, the Department of Marine Science, then an academic unit within the USF College of Natural Sciences, expanded into that space. **(20th ANNIV)**

**Lowell Davis** arrived as the new campus executive on 1 August 1986. A biologist by training, Davis became a strong leader and forceful voice for the campus. Just a few months prior to his arrival, the St. Petersburg City Council had voted to acquire additional land for the expansion of USF St. Petersburg.

Davis accelerated this process by establishing strong connections with civic, business, and governmental leaders. Davis made many friends in Pinellas County. He brought the campus a new level of vitality and visibility, but his efforts were cut short after he suffered a stroke on 23 August 1989. He died September 30. With greatness and a bitter sense of irony, he was buried on 5 October 1989, the same day he had planned to set the tone for a renewed effort at campus expansion and increased sovereignty. **(DAVIS HALL RENAMING)**

Even those who only considered USFSP nothing more than a “branch campus” would have to concede that the branch grew to new heights and greater significance during this period by the late 1980s. The **Campus Activities Center** became a popular gathering place for lectures open to the community. A vibrant student-run lecture series regularly brought in more than 100 members of the university community and general public for weekly lectures on Wednesdays at noon in this very room, DAV 130, and other programs throughout the year. Interdisciplinary programs such as USF’s Ethics Center took shape on the campus. **(VIEW TOWARDS HARBOR)** A renewed interest in research took place with the expansion of full and partial graduate programs in liberal arts, education, business, and marine science. Initiatives included partnerships with the United States Geological Survey (USGS selected USFSP as its site for a coastal research center in March 1988) and the Florida Comprehensive System for Personnel Development (an initiative for special education teachers), among others. **(DEMO/SCHEDULE)**

**(AERIAL)** Despite the growing emphasis on graduate studies and research, USFSP remained firmly committed to offering high-quality upper-level undergraduate curriculum and building partnerships based upon the “two-plus-two” articulation agreements it had helped to establish decades earlier. As the city approved a February 1993 plan to allow for additional campus expansion **(CITY EXPANSION)**, USFSP showed it was a good citizen by building new partnerships and securing grants that allowed for the relocation and restoration of the historic Perry Snell house (built 1904) and John C. Williams house (built 1891) during the 1990s.

By August 1996, the campus celebrated the opening of the new (present-day) **Poynter Library** and renovations on present-day Bayboro Hall took shape. Later that fall, as civil disturbances led to damage and destruction in southern St. Petersburg, the campus launched the Urban Initiative that built bridges with the communities of Midtown, an endeavor that continues to this day with the ties USFSP has fostered through programs such as the Neighborhood News Bureau.
Under Bill Heller’s leadership, USFSP took on an expanded role during the 1990s, starting new traditions and reviving ones long forgotten. Two innovative events took place in the fall 1998 semester. St. Petersburg Junior College began to offer courses and academic support services in the Piano Man building. The original “SPJC @ USF” cohort included nearly 300 students. In addition, USFSP welcomed its own crop of freshman students through the “Learning Community” initiative.

The landscape of higher education began to change by 1999. SPJC, now renamed St. Petersburg College, began offering its own baccalaureate programs in Pinellas County. Senator Don Sullivan, a close friend of the SPC president and a lawmaker who had ambitions of becoming a college president or university administrator after his time in the capitol building came to an end, publicly expressed his displeasure with USF’s offerings in Pinellas. Soon, Sullivan drafted legislation that would have severed all academic programs on the USF St. Petersburg campus (except for the College of Marine Science, by then a distinct academic unit under USF Tampa) and would have transferred them into an amorphous institution he dubbed “Suncoast University.”

Many people in Pinellas and throughout the USF family were alarmed by this proposal. Students with USFSP as their home campus worried about being bounced from a fully accredited research university into an unaccredited “Sunk U.” An October 2000 memorandum of understanding called for the USF System to provide for increased fiscal and curricular autonomy at USFSP, as well as new and expanded programs, and foster a move towards separate accreditation. By 2003, nearly fifty faculty members and deans of stand-alone academic colleges of Arts and Sciences, Business, and Education were hired. The director of the Poynter Library also became a dean. As the campus celebrated the groundbreaking for Residence Hall One in March 2005 and the new parking garage in May 2005, many members of the USFSP community also contributed to the ongoing preparations for the site visits and responses to the 2004 application for separate accreditation under the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). USFSP was awarded separate accreditation by SACS in 2006.

(USC CONSTRUCTION) During the last decade, our institution has experienced phenomenal growth. Enrollment has tripled, and we are no longer a commuter campus with most of its course offerings serving working adults who rush here in the evening for 6:00 pm classes. Our faculty and our academic treasures, such as the library, serve as the heart and soul of our institution. As we look back at our history, we can celebrate our pioneering spirit. USF and the USF System established a high standard for urban education in Florida. Similarly, USF St. Petersburg brought high quality academic programs to Pinellas County nearly fifty years ago. From our beginnings as an overflow campus to our present mission as a separately accredited entity within the USF System, we can take pride in this legacy. With your great work, we will continue to move forward into the future. CLOSING IMAGE

Thank you for allowing me to share our history. It has been my pleasure.