

# Student Voices



The Dr. Carter G. Woodson

# African American Museum:

**A Community Anchor and Voice Amplifier in South St. Petersburg**

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As part of my Cultural Heritage Institutions and Libraries course at the University of South Florida, my classmates and I selected museums for historical site visits. I chose the Dr. Carter G. Woodson African American Museum, located at 2240 Ninth Avenue South in St. Petersburg, because my son attends school less than a mile away and February was Black History Month. Part of my role as a future librarian requires me to understand nearby history in order to make connections between existing cultural heritage institutions and libraries, so I set out to learn more about Black history where I live.

## A Brief History of South St. Petersburg

Serving as the historic voice of the African American community in St. Petersburg, the Dr. Carter G. Woodson African American Museum is part of the designated St. Petersburg African American Heritage Trail<sup>1</sup> in the Deuces neighborhood, also known today as “Midtown”. The first African Americans arrived in St. Petersburg in 1868, many to work on the Orange Belt Railroad.<sup>2</sup> Because the area was segregated, African Americans lived in designated neighborhoods in the city like the Gas Plant (south of Central Avenue) and Methodist Town (on the northside near downtown). These “born of necessity” neighborhoods were composed of people who looked out for one another; “stores, services, and entertainment spots [were] owned or operated by African Americans” and the community thrived.<sup>3</sup> Integration of African Americans moved families and businesses off Twenty-Second Street and into other parts of St. Petersburg, disengaging neighbors and decimating the community.<sup>4</sup>



Looking North Towards the Interstate from the Crossroads of 9th Avenue South & 22nd Street South

When I-275 and I-175 were built in the late 1970s, the interstates further crippled the historic African American community and its business district by isolating them from downtown.<sup>5</sup> The destruction of the predominantly African American

Gas Plant neighborhood and subsequent construction of Tropicana Field on that site further led to the area’s deterioration.<sup>6</sup> This is a story that has happened over and over again in cities across America. As it sits just south of the interstate, without direct highway access, the Woodson tells this tale of intentional separation, uplifts stories of those who came before, and gives a voice to the people who live and thrive in south St. Petersburg today.

## About the Woodson Museum

A two-fold mission underlies everything the Woodson seeks to accomplish. First, it preserves, presents, and interprets African American history while engaging diverse visitors.<sup>7</sup> Second, it seeks to promote an understanding among communities within St. Petersburg to foster respect and equal rights.<sup>8</sup> The

Woodson is a member of the Florida African American Heritage Preservation Network (FAAHPN), which is a professional association serving as an “informational and technical assistance resource” for Florida’s African American culture.<sup>9</sup> The museum is currently closed to visitors due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it continues to host virtual programming with book clubs, political discussions like its “Coffee in Common” program for white women and women of color to discuss race and politics, and conversations with Black men to continue the discussion around their struggles for racial equity and equality as part of its “Brothers Begging to Breathe” series.<sup>10</sup>

## My Visit to the Woodson Museum

Upon arrival at the Woodson, I spent some time with its Black Lives Matter (BLM) mural. Murals are important pieces of public art in St.

Petersburg and are seen throughout the city. The city has a designated mural

festival – Shine –

where artists are commissioned to add to the city’s rich mural arts scene. But the BLM mural is incredibly special, even amidst the other ones. Seventeen local artists came together to create change through art and its outcome is the mural’s powerful statement of unity and the African American experience.<sup>11</sup> My favorite section is the final letter “R,” which features a young person marching off to the future holding a sign reading “Future Equality.” I love how it ties the other letters together, as they represent past and present aspects of African American life in this country.

This backdrop led me to the museum itself, housed in the former office space of the Jordan Park Housing Complex. Unfortunately, since the space was not originally intended to serve as a museum, no historical documents or objects are on regular display for preservation reasons, and all archival materials are stored offsite. An employee let me to the main exhibit space to see St. Petersburg’s Black Lives Matter quilt, which was created by community members of all ages – some



Looking East Along 9th Avenue South with the Woodson’s Black Lives Matter Mural Leading the Way

statements written on it include “I’m a young black King MY LIFE MATTERS,” “Enough,” and “Hate is a choice choose love.” Portraits of African American heroes line the walls of the gallery, too. Both the quilt and the artwork demand the viewer recognize their existence and their importance; I definitely did.



## Observations Along St. Petersburg’s African American Heritage Trails

I took a self-guided walking tour of St. Petersburg’s African American Heritage Trails and noticed a few themes. Designated signs are posted at key historic sites, some of which are still standing and others that have been demolished



On the the St. Petersburg African American Heritage Trail - Jordan Elementary

ages ago. These signs remind the viewer of the once-thriving community full of economic prosperity, life, and real connection between neighbors. Remnants that exist today include Jordan Elementary

which recently housed Head Start offices, the rebuilt Manhattan Casino, the Royal Theater, which now doubles as space for the Boys and Girls Club, and many places of worship. Interspersed between these landmarks are empty fields, local businesses, a St. Petersburg College campus, and homes.

As I walked the trail, I saw the historic buildings, and imagined those no longer present, but what I noticed most was the people living and working in this community today. It remains a predominantly African American neighborhood full of mothers walking with toddlers, students holding classes outside at the college, folks waiting for the bus, and people working in restaurants and other businesses along the main streets. The historical markers helped me understand what the area looked like pre-interstate construction, and introduced me to the people who lived there during that time. My favorite marker described Dr. Ralph M. Wimbish and C. Bette Wimbish, a couple who settled in St. Petersburg and became an assistant city physician and city councilwoman.<sup>12</sup> As an activist, Dr. Wimbish worked to end segregation at city owned sites.<sup>13</sup> Mrs.

Wimbish fought to desegregate public schools and was elected to the St. Petersburg City Council and later appointed Florida’s Deputy Secretary of Commerce; she became the highest-ranking woman in Florida government.<sup>14</sup>

## Lynching Memorial

I also visited the newly-unveiled lynching memorial at the corner of Second Avenue South and Ninth Street South. As part of the Equal Justice Initiative and several years in the making, this memorial remembers the three men known to be murdered via lynching in St. Petersburg.<sup>15</sup> One man, John Evans, was lynched at this intersection in 1914; the other two – Parker Watson (d. 1926) and John Thomas (d. 1905) – were murdered elsewhere in the city.<sup>16</sup> This part of our shared history must be



documented and displayed to remind people that these atrocities happened here and to generate difficult but necessary conversations on race. Personally, viewing the memorial made me feel uncomfortable, but it is a discomfort I can live with because knowing is more important than ignoring the past. Nearby history means we learn about how things used to be where we live and inspire us to create a better world from our new understanding.

## Nearby History’s Challenge to Cultural Heritage Institutions and Libraries

Learning our nearby history challenges us to take our past and make it part of our present.<sup>17</sup> The City of St. Petersburg intentionally disrupted and destroyed African Americans’ support systems as part of its overall economic progress; it must do better moving forward not only by addressing its history but also by utilizing discussions with African Americans to build on the current community. Dr. Evelyn Newman Phillips, an anthropologist who has studied African Americans in St. Petersburg using an ethnohistorical analysis, describes historic markers as part of the Midtown rebranding of the area in order to increase its appeal towards gentrification.<sup>18</sup> Without going into her entire article, I understand her concerns with the markers serving as an extension of the city’s displacement of African Americans and their sense of community. Having historical markers is a good start, but if nothing more is done to help sustain a community much will be lost.

I see this as an entry point for the Woodson Museum to lead by giving a voice to the people in the heart of their community. It

serves as an anchor for connection through programming, lifting up African American voices through its exhibits. I cannot wait to see the future it builds, starting with its new facility. The Woodson recently revealed renderings for its future museum.<sup>19</sup> The new facility will house and display its archive and will include gallery spaces, classroom spaces, a sculpture garden and spaces to host community conversations.<sup>20</sup> Rosalie Peck and John Wilson end their book about this region with a vision of its future, a vision the Woodson encompasses:

A powerful spirit holds 22nd Street. You feel it at sultry midday in the clatter of workman's hammers. You feel it at silent midnight at 22nd and 9th Avenue, the crossroads where it is so still you think you could hear a blues note bending on a breeze and laughter riding a cloud. But the silence is about to change. A path cut from a forest continues to be a community's strength and spine. Its people stood against the world. They earned victories. Their resolute souls have moved on, but perhaps not so far away. You can feel them at work as a new dream rises. In this place called home, the spirit of 22nd Street survives.<sup>21</sup>

As a future librarian, local historian, and hopeful community connector, I must remain curious, asking questions that allow me to view history in different, yet truthful, lights. I am taking up the challenge of accessing our past and encouraging patrons to interpret their histories, letting them see and understand the people who came before them, and building up a stronger community because of that shared understanding and willingness to grow, especially when it creates difficult conversations. I hope you will join me.

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<sup>14</sup>"African American Heritage Trail," African American Heritage Association, accessed February 26, 2021, <https://afamheritagestpete.org/index.php/african-american-heritage-trail/>

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Carter G. Woodson African American Museum, "Mission & Impact," <https://woodsonmuseum.org/about-us/#mission-impact> (accessed February 24, 2021)

<sup>3</sup>Rosalie Peck and Jon Wilson, *St. Petersburg's Historic 22<sup>nd</sup> Street South* (Charleston: The History Press, 2006), 43-44

<sup>4</sup>Rosalie Peck and Jon Wilson, *St. Petersburg's Historic 22<sup>nd</sup> Street South* (Charleston: The History Press, 2006), 86

<sup>5</sup>Rosalie Peck and Jon Wilson, *St. Petersburg's Historic 22<sup>nd</sup> Street South* (Charleston: The History Press, 2006), 88

<sup>6</sup>Margo Snipe, "Is St. Pete Really That Progressive? A Familiar Face Says Maybe Not." Tampa Bay Times (FL), February 24, 2021. <https://www.tampabay.com/news/st-petersburg/2021/02/24/is-st-pete-really-that-progressive-a-familiar-face-says-maybe-not/>

<sup>7</sup>Dr. Carter G. Woodson African American Museum, "Mission & Impact," <https://woodsonmuseum.org/about-us/#mission-impact> (accessed February 24, 2021)

<sup>8</sup>Dr. Carter G. Woodson African American Museum, "Mission & Impact," <https://woodsonmuseum.org/about-us/#mission-impact> (accessed February 24, 2021) Florida African American Heritage Preservation Network (FAAHPN), "About FAAHPN," <http://faahpn.com/about-faahpn/> (accessed February 24, 2021)

Dr. Carter G. Woodson African American Museum, "Exhibits and Events," <https://woodsonmuseum.org/exhibits-events/> (accessed February 24, 2021)

Maggie Duffy, Dirk Shadd, and Boyzell Hosey, "Meet the Artists Who Created St. Petersburg's Black Lives Matter Mural." Tampa Bay Times (FL), July 10, 2020. <https://www.tampabay.com/life-culture/arts/visual-arts/2020/07/10/meet-the-tampa-bay-artists-who-created-the-black-lives-matter-mural-in-st-petersburg/>

<sup>9</sup>Florida African American Heritage Preservation Network (FAAHPN), "About FAAHPN," <http://faahpn.com/about-faahpn/> (accessed February 24, 2021)

<sup>10</sup>Dr. Carter G. Woodson African American Museum, "Exhibits and Events," <https://woodsonmuseum.org/exhibits-events/> (accessed February 24, 2021)

<sup>11</sup>Maggie Duffy, Dirk Shadd, and Boyzell Hosey, "Meet the Artists Who Created St. Petersburg's Black Lives Matter Mural." Tampa Bay Times (FL), July 10, 2020. <https://www.tampabay.com/life-culture/arts/visual-arts/2020/07/10/meet-the-tampa-bay-artists-who-created-the-black-lives-matter-mural-in-st-petersburg/>

<sup>12</sup>St. Petersburg African American Heritage Trail, *Blazing the Way*, 2014.

<sup>13</sup>St. Petersburg African American Heritage Trail. *Blazing the Way*, 2014.

<sup>14</sup>St. Petersburg African American Heritage Trail. *Blazing the Way*, 2014.

<sup>15</sup>Leonora LaPeter Anton, "History of a St. Petersburg Lynching was Hidden. Not Anymore." Tampa Bay Times (FL), February 23, 2021. <https://www.tampabay.com/news/st-petersburg/2021/02/23/history-of-a-st-petersburg-lynching-was-hidden-not-anymore/>

<sup>16</sup>Leonora LaPeter Anton, "History of a St. Petersburg Lynching was Hidden. Not Anymore." Tampa Bay Times (FL), February 23, 2021. <https://www.tampabay.com/news/st-petersburg/2021/02/23/history-of-a-st-petersburg-lynching-was-hidden-not-anymore/>

<sup>17</sup>David E. Kyvig, Myron A. Marty, and Larry Cebula, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* (4th ed.), (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

<sup>18</sup>Evelyn Newman Phillips, "Rebranding Black Public Spaces in St. Petersburg: Economic Development for Whom?" *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 45, no. 3/4 (2016): 349-414, accessed February 25, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26384876>

<sup>19</sup>Margo Snipe, "St. Pete Completes \$1 Million Pledge to Woodson African American Museum." Tampa Bay Times (FL), February 4, 2021. <https://www.tampabay.com/news/st-petersburg/2021/02/05/st-pete-completes-1-million-pledge-to-woodson-african-american-museum/>

<sup>20</sup>Margo Snipe, "St. Pete Completes \$1 Million Pledge to Woodson African American Museum." Tampa Bay Times (FL), February 4, 2021. <https://www.tampabay.com/news/st-petersburg/2021/02/05/st-pete-completes-1-million-pledge-to-woodson-african-american-museum/>

<sup>21</sup>Rosalie Peck and Jon Wilson, *St. Petersburg's Historic 22<sup>nd</sup> Street South* (Charleston: The History Press, 2006), 93