

St. Petersburg Central High School
2501 5th Avenue
HPC #86-09 - Designated August 1986



Built in 1926, St. Petersburg Central High School is a Mediterranean Revival building and is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984. The building was designed by William Ittner who was a prolific designer of school buildings and plied his trade throughout the United States. Ittner is also responsible for executing the design of the St. Petersburg Mirror Lake High School in 1918 and the St. Petersburg Junior High School (now the Tomlinson Educational Center).

Central High was the fourth high school in the St. Petersburg high school system; three of these buildings remain as local or national historic properties. The school system's first building was the Domestic Science and Manual Training School built in 1898 with funds given by Edwin Tomlinson. A bond issue was passed in 1909 giving \$30,000 to construct new schools. The new high school was completed in 1911 at the corner of 5th Street and 2nd Avenue North. (It was demolished in 1947 to construct the Pinellas County Administration Building, which was demolished in 2001.) Between 1913 and 1918 the city school enrollment increased by 46 percent forcing the city to pass a \$175,000 bond issue in 1917 allowing the construction of St. Petersburg Mirror Lake High School. St. Petersburg launched a vast school building spree in 1923 which lasted until 1928. During these five years twenty new schools were erected. This was in response to the phenomenal growth of the city during the "boom" era. During this period Central High School was constructed.

Central High is built of brick, hollow tile and poured concrete with a stucco exterior finish. The building is rectangular in plan with two interior courtyards flanking the central auditorium. The exterior is highlighted by the arcade along the first floor of the main facade, the red clay barrel tile roof, the entrance pavilion and surrounds, casement windows, corner towers and stair towers. Significant interior areas include the auditorium and library.

The school is built over a continuous poured-in-place concrete footer; a crawl space below the concrete slab floor allows room for the heating system. The walls are stucco over brick, hollow tile, and poured-in-place concrete. The roof is covered with red clay barrel tiles with copper flashings and gutters. The auditorium roof is flat, of built-up tar paper and gravel construction. The southern facade is two stories in height, the east and west facade is two story with attic, and the north facade three story. The auditorium is two and one-half stories. The main (south) facade has strong horizontal lines which are broken by a central two story entrance pavilion and two projecting gable and wings at the corners of the facade. These three projecting vertical elements are linked by a first floor open arcade of sixteen bays. Sixteen wood casement windows (4/4/4 per case) are on the second floor centered over each arch.

GREEN BENCH MONTHLY

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Today, St. Petersburg High School is a bustling campus of nearly 2,300 students. It is well known for its stately building, its many peculiar traditions, and the students' fierce pride and school spirit. The school's extensive history began with the history of St. Petersburg itself. Though today the city of St. Pete is large and diverse, it was once just a little settlement by a railroad stop, with small a fishing industry.

The school humbly began in 1888 with 29 students in a rural, one-room schoolhouse referred to only as School Number 83. Through increased use of the railroad and the growth of the fishing industry, St. Petersburg became an official town. By 1892, the tiny school taught a student body of 74 in its location near Central Avenue, between 9th and 10th Streets.



Photo Credit: James G. Howes, Wikimedia Commons

As St. Pete's population grew and grew, the school needed to expand, as well. In December of 1894, a new \$7,000 facility debuted. The facility, initially called the Graded School, was a two-story building with seven rooms. It officially became St. Petersburg High School in 1898; and

by 1901, the school had graduated its first student, Annie Bradshaw. Her graduation spurred St. Pete High's lasting school spirit.

The school soon adopted its colors of green and white in 1908, and began to offer more sports to athletes in the following years. Additionally, the school's football team (formerly the Saints) adopted today's name of the Green Devils. After Executive Director of the Pinellas County Historical Commission Ralph Reed yelled, "Go, you green devil, go!" at a player clad in green and white, the school's mascot was born.



Photo Credit: Ebyabe, Wikimedia Commons

Stories like this have helped to cultivate St. Pete High's lively personality from the early days of the school. Even *The Palmetto and Pine*, the school's student newspaper, often featured quirky jokes, such as, "*Save your pity, I have a dog that growls, a parrot that swears, a lamp that smokes, and a cat that stays out late at night. So, what do I need a husband for?*"

The student body loved to promote its sense of community as well. Students even created the Bobbed Hair Club and the Lard Head Club in the early 1920s to show off their favorite trends of the era. The '20s also brought about a physical expansion of the school. In 1926, a one-million dollar school facility, designed by William B. Ittner, was opened and dedicated, thanks to the efforts of the Superintendent of St. Petersburg Public Schools George M. Lynch. *The Palmetto and Pine* stated after the building's opening, "It is an inspiration to walk toward it...to see the sun on the red-tiled roof. Inside, one is almost lost at first." The now-famous Green Devil pride continues to thrive in this beautiful, Mediterranean-style structure on Fifth Avenue North and 27th Street today.



SPHS Photo Credit: Ebyabe, Wikimedia Commons

The new facility opened up many opportunities for students. The tennis courts, baseball field and football field created official homes for the athletic programs. The “enormous auditorium with a stage as large as those in the greatest theaters in the world” hosted productions such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* from the Public Speaking Club and *Successful Calamity* from the Drama Club. By 1928, the school’s musicians had composed the Alma Mater. The lyrics were written by a former teacher, Margaret Sue Burney, and speak to the school building itself and its generations of students in the words, “*Time will not change you; your spirit will never die.*” The Alma Mater’s words remain true to 2017’s St. Pete High. Students still avoid stepping on the image of their Green Devil mascot on the floor of the main hallway. The student body still proudly sports its colors of green and white at football games. Many enjoy lunch in the Junior and Senior Courtyards, with underclassmen traditionally remaining in the Junior Courtyard and upperclassmen in the Senior. Students’ birthdays are celebrated with laundry baskets of junk food that they carry through the halls. Teachers, with the help of upperclassmen, pass along infamous ghost stories of the building.

From its humble beginnings as a one-room schoolhouse to the large campus it encompasses in 2017, [St. Pete High](#)’s history lives on through tradition and pride in the school that was born with its city.