

Detroit Hotel
201-15 Central Avenue
HPC 09-04/09-90300006 – Designated March 2010



The Detroit Hotel, located at 201-15 Central Avenue, was built in 1888 by the Orange Belt Railway Company. On July 14, 1888, John C. Williams and the Orange Belt Railway entered into an agreement concerning the construction of a hotel. As part of the agreement, John C. Williams agreed to pay the Orange Belt Railway \$5,000 upon the completion of the construction of the hotel by the railway company, and the hotel would cost “not less than ten thousand dollars.” Williams included a clause that the railway would be required to pay for the materials, the contractors, and the workmen (which were largely African American railroad workers) in full before he had to pay the railway his \$5,000 interest, which he paid in full in February 1889. The hotel was completed by the time the original city plat was officially filed in 1889 which placed the hotel on Lot 1 of Block 25.

As the first hotel in the City, the Detroit Hotel was constructed in conjunction with the railroad depot to encourage the settlement and growth of the new community. By providing lodging for prospective residents, the hotel supported the early growth of the city. It served as the only hotel from 1888 to 1890 during which time the population grew from less than 50 to 273 residents. A number of the new residents likely stayed at the Detroit when they first visited the city and while awaiting the construction of a residence. Even in 1905, the Detroit was one of only nine hotels in the city.

Supporting not only the settlement of the community, the Detroit played a significant role in the development of the tourism industry. A stop at the Detroit for refreshments was part of the first seaside excursions offered by the Orange Belt Railway in 1889. Until the construction of the hotels in the 1920s, the Detroit served as the central hub of social life in St. Petersburg where significant events were celebrated. For example, residents marked the 1897 introduction of electricity in the town with a day of celebration culminating in a grand ball at the Detroit Hotel. The Detroit also housed some of the city's most active businesses and was associated with some of the most significant members of the community including John C. Williams, Bainbridge Hayward, Frank Fortune Pulver, and Hubert Rutland. In a 1992 article, Historian Ray Arsenault stated that the Detroit Hotel was “really the most significant building in the city historically. There’s no question about that....It was the coming of the railroad and the hotel that really created St. Petersburg....It’s truly a landmark. (Caldwell 1992).”