First incorporated in 1903, the City of St. Petersburg is celebrating its centennial in 2003, but its history goes back even further when General John Williams from Michigan purchased 2,500 acres of land on the southeast portion of what is now Pinellas County with a vision of beautiful parks and broad streets. His dreams would be realized in 1888 when Peter Demens, a Russian aristocrat from St. Petersburg, extended his Orange Belt Railway to Williams’ property. Legend has it that the two men flipped a coin to see who would name the new town. Demens won and named the new city after his hometown; Williams, as a consolation, name the first hotel in St. Petersburg, “The Detroit”, after his birthplace.

Unlike many American cities rising during the nineteenth century, St. Petersburg developed without first creating an industrial base. From the beginning its growth depended on selling itself as a destination. This effort was aided early on by the praise issued at the 1885 annual convention of the American Medical Association by Dr. W.C. Van Bibber, who pronounced “Point Pinellas” as the perfect location for a “Health City.” For years, St. Petersburg booster Frank Davis would reiterate these claims in medical journals his company published; newspapermen W.L. Straub, editor of the St. Petersburg Times, and Lew Brown of the St. Petersburg Independent also vigorously promoted the region.

In relying on natural and recreational amenities, St. Petersburg took strides to plan for and preserve these features. Supporting businesses and hoteliers met an increasing demand from winter visitors. Early boosters, particularly W.L. Straub were sympathetic to the civic improvement of the city and protecting the waterfront. Between 1908 and 1923, from his bully pulpit, Straub pontificated, cajoled, and aroused citizens of St. Petersburg to protect their waterfront which they did by backing bonds worth over $1.3 million for acquisition and development. The city dredged a channel for recreational craft, constructed a twenty-nine acre yacht basin, and a fifty-acre park and seawall while diverting all water commerce to Bayboro Harbor ten blocks south of downtown. In 1918, St. Petersburg gained title to the remaining waterfront holdings; in the early 1920s, Perry Snell would donate a mile of waterfront property north of the Vinoy Park Hotel.

This planning foresight would set the stage for the growth of the city which leapt in number from 1,575 persons in 1900 to 14,237 in 1920. The Roaring Twenties brought an invasion of land speculators and tourists who arrived by boat, auto, and railroad, as well as permanent settlers. St. Petersburg was caught up in the speculation of the Florida Land Boom that began in 1920 and peaked in 1925, when city building permits for the year totaled $24 million in construction and local banks held $46 million in deposits. By 1924 an estimated twenty-six thousand people lived in St. Petersburg, a figure that would grow to 40,425 by 1930. Hotel rooms increased from 675 in 1905 to 7000 in 1925 after the construction of ten major new hotels in St. Petersburg and its environs. The influx in capital also brought public improvements including the 1924 opening of the Gandy Bridge which cut in half travel time to Tampa. The period also left as a legacy the Mediterranean Revival architectural style which still influences architectural design today.

All this would grind to a halt in the mid 1920s. The real estate boom crashed between 1926 and 1927 in St. Petersburg and construction virtually ceased, although the tourist trade continued unabated until the 1930 season. By 1930, there were over one-hundred and forty hotels in St. Petersburg. The Great Depression would take its toll, however, as no major hotels would be built in lower Pinellas from 1926 to 1939 until Harry Playford built The Tides at Redington Beach. Nevertheless, St. Petersburg would continue to grow, as the permanent population reached 60,812 in 1940, filling the vacant structures and lots created during the boom era.

War restrictions imposed after Pearl Harbor destroyed tourism, but the local economy was saved from complete disaster for a period of some eighteen months, beginning in mid-1942, when empty hotels such as the Vinoy, Soreno, Princess Martha and practically every available room in the city were converted into military barracks. Only the Suwannee Hotel was available for non-military visitors, set aside by common consent for the thin stream of commercial people who still came to town. Between 1942 and 1943 more than 100,000 military personnel passed through St. Petersburg. In addition, the U.S. Coast Guard Station on Bayboro Harbor was used as a training base.
After the Second World War, St. Petersburg, Pinellas County and the Gulf Beaches grew rapidly, spurred on by several factors. First, the pent-up demand caused by wartime frugality and saving was unleashed in a postwar boom unrivaled by the 1920s. Furthermore, many soldiers who had trained in the area returned with their families to settle down. Finally, social security payments and private retirement pensions would provide steady sources of income which enabled numerous retirees to emigrate to Pinellas County.

The convergence of these factors unleashed the most spectacular growth in the history of Pinellas County during the 1950s with many of the servicemen who trained here returning to work in the construction and service industries. By 1950 St. Petersburg’s population had reached 96,836; twenty years it would exceed 216,000 mainly comprised of retirees who built cottages in the vast subdivisions platted in the 1920s boom. Downtown would begin to lose its tourists to the new motels along the nearby Gulf beaches and retail shops moved to suburban shopping malls. During the decade Pinellas County and St. Petersburg established its reputation as a retirement haven. By 1960, 93,162 persons over the age of 65 - one quarter of its population - resided in Pinellas County. Thereafter until 1990, the county’s elderly population would remain above 28 percent of the county population.

The population growth of the 1950s also unleashed a period of dredging and filling along the Gulf Beaches and western St. Petersburg to meet the demand for waterfront property. Land size increased significantly with Treasure Island doubling in size and the creation of Tierra Verde and Vina del Mar east of Long Key in St. Pete Beach. The dredging operations would have adverse consequences on Boca Ciega Bay for years to come as dredging, filling and channeling destroyed thousands of acres of sea grasses and their fisheries. Eventually, conditions declined so that the State of Florida created the Boca Ciega Bay Aquatic Preserve Act in 1969.

Other important changes were occurring in the region that would hasten the pace of life in Pinellas County and St. Petersburg. In 1954, the first span of the Sunshine Skyway opened, connecting Pinellas with Manatee County and replacing the quaint but out-dated Bee Line Ferry Service at Pinellas Point in southern St. Petersburg. The Howard Frankland Bridge opened in 1960, connecting Hillsborough County with Pinellas County. Finally, in 1962, the Pinellas Bayway connected mainland Pinellas with the beaches at its southernmost point, and opened for more intensive development many of the “finger” fills of land created during the dredging of Boca Ciega Bay in the 1950s.

The 1960s brought new development to St. Petersburg, such as the construction of the Municipal Marina, the Museum of Fine Arts, the Main Library, and the Bayfront Center. In the 1970s the concerns over environmental issues were raised in the city due to the dramatic population growth of the previous two decades, leading to the adoption of a comprehensive plan in 1974 and land development regulations in 1977. As one response to those concerns, St. Petersburg developed the largest reclaimed water system in the United States, and today, continues to lead the region in conserving water resources.

From the 1980s to present, St. Petersburg has continued to develop and revitalize the unique community that has been created. Downtown has risen like a phoenix, garnering over $1.6 billion in construction investment. The result is a truly mixed-use urban center with new residential, office, retail, cultural and entertainment uses. Over ten million visitors come to over nine-hundred downtown events each year. St. Petersburg’s Gateway area has become home to major corporations that are fueling the City’s economic growth, including Raymond James, Franklin Templeton, Home Shopping Network, Jabil Circuit, PSCU, Bright House, Danka, Catalina Marketing and Avaya. At the center of St. Petersburg’s renaissance is the revitalization and growth of the City’s neighborhoods and the 103 associations and civic groups that represent them in partnership with the City government. St. Petersburg has changed significantly over the years, and will continue to do so as people discover the economic prosperity, livability and beauty of St. Petersburg - “The Sunshine City.”