

The Alexander Hotel
535 Central Avenue
HPC #86-01, Designated August 1986



Built in 1919 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Alexander Hotel is significant for its association with the changing character of the hotel and lodging industry in St. Petersburg. During the second decade of the twentieth century, lodging in the city evolved from small scale, mainly frame boarding houses and hotels built before the World War I era to the large, masonry hotels built in the boom years from 1921 to 1926. Hotels built in St. Petersburg before 1920 were small, with usually less than 50 rooms, and entirely financed by their owner-operators. The first hotels built after the war in St. Petersburg -- the Alexander, Ponce de Leon and the Cordova, the latter two built in 1921 -- showed a change to masonry construction and architectural sophistication but remained small in size. This shift in hotel type was a reflection of the growing wealth of the American economy in this period and the increased popularity of Florida as a winter tourist destination.

One of only two buildings in St. Petersburg designed by Neel Reid, the Alexander is also significant for its association with Neoclassical Revival architecture as signified by its three bay, symmetrical facade with a three-tiered veranda, the roofs for which are supported by paired Tuscan columns. The pergola spanning the space between the east and west wings also is supported by Tuscan columns. Flanked by two common storefront units is the formal Palladian entryway, replete with four pilasters breaking the entry into three parts, each capped with a fanlight. Surmounting the doorway is a broken pediment with an entablature that caps the three bays and unifies the Palladian entry.

Robert Lee Ely and Jacob Alexander were responsible for the development of the hotel. Ely was the owner of Bob's Cafeteria, established in 1915 and reputed to be the first cafeteria style restaurant in St. Petersburg. Alexander, a native North Carolinian where he served in the state house of representatives (1898-1900) and senate (1915 to 1917), began acquiring property in St. Petersburg soon after arriving. Not only did Alexander finance the construction of the hotel (which he turned over to Ely on a ten year lease) he also founded the Alexander National Bank in St. Petersburg in 1924 at the southwest corner of 4th Street and Central Avenue. (The bank was designed by Neel Reid, who was also responsible for the Alexander Hotel.) Alexander died in 1925 and the bank bearing his name was absorbed by the First National Bank of St. Petersburg in 1927.