

**The Swain Dental Office  
1501 22nd Street South  
HPC #97-02 - Designated June 1997**



The Swain Dental Office, built in 1954, is significant for its association with Dr. Robert James Swain, Jr., an African-American dentist born in St. Petersburg who was prominent in the 1950s and 1960s struggle against segregation in the City. The building is located in the 22nd Street South neighborhood which was the heart of the African-American community during the civil rights era. The 22nd Street South area was a thriving community which included shopping, recreational areas and residential development. The corridor is the home of the Seaboard Coastline Building, Swain Apartments, Manhattan Casino and Mercy Hospital, the primary medical facility for the City's African American community. Many of the commercial buildings were vernacular in design and two stories tall with stores on the ground level and apartments above with large overhanging porches. Interspersed with these commercial buildings were single family residences.

Swain was a pioneering oral surgeon who led drives to break down racial segregation barriers, most notably for African-American major league baseball players. He graduated from Gibbs High School, Florida A & M University, and Howard University School of Dentistry. Swain was an Army veteran of World War II and the Florida National Guard, from which he retired as a Major. He was also a member of Mount Zion Progressive Baptist Church and Omega Psi Phi . Dr. Swain began practicing dentistry in St. Petersburg in 1947, and built the first African-American dental clinic in St. Petersburg in 1954. Swain's first noted action against local segregation was his challenge to Section 3 of the City Charter which established separate residential limits or districts for whites and African Americans. The site on which he eventually built his clinic lay just south of the line delimiting where African Americans could live and work.

Swain's second and most noted contribution to the advancement of desegregation was related to the construction of the Swain Apartments in 1956, which would house African-American major league baseball players denied housing with their white teammates during spring training from 1957 through 1961. In 1961, Swain, along with others, would provide the catalyst toward desegregation of major league baseball's spring training sites. He would sell the dental office building and the apartment building in 1975, and would continue practicing dentistry in St. Petersburg until his death in 1996. Today, the building remains in commercial use.