



The Saga of the Racially-Offensive Mural in the St. Petersburg City Hall

The city of St. Petersburg has a particularly racist history characterized by events such as:

- The lynching of John Evans in 1914.
- Allowing Blacks to live in only designated sections of the city.
- Clearing Blacks out of designated neighborhoods to build the Tropicana Field sports arena.
- Allowing only White people to sit on the green benches throughout downtown.
- Prohibiting Blacks from entering certain parts of the city without proof of their employment in that area.
- Barring Blacks from specific beaches.

Public pressure began to reduce St Petersburg's systemic racism in the late 1950s, when a lawsuit and protests forced the integration of Spa beach. The sanitation workers' strike in 1968 led to less racist employment practices. Riots in 1996 after St. Petersburg Police killed TyRon Lewis, an unarmed Black youth, alerted the wider community to the South St. Petersburg Black community's seething anger at policing practices. A diverse group of Pinellas County citizens, the Community Remembrance Project, has been working with the city of St. Petersburg and the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, AL to acknowledge John Evan's lynching. A plaque will be installed soon at the lynching site near Tropicana Field. [Sources: Arsenault, Ray (1996) *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream 1988-1950*, University Press of Florida; Peck, Rosalie and Jon Wilson (2008) *St. Petersburg's Historic African American Neighborhoods*, The History Press.]

The culture of a city is reflected in its public art, which can reveal insidious racism. In 1945 the city of St. Petersburg hung two murals by George Snow Hill in the first-floor stairway landing of City Hall. One of the murals, *Picnicking at Pass-a-Grille*, a portion of which is shown above, portrayed stereotyped Black musicians entertaining White people at the beach. For years, the Black community in particular appealed to city leaders to take the extremely offensive mural down. Finally, in 1966, several Black men, including Joe Waller (now named Omali Yeshitela), took the matter into their own hands. They ripped the canvas off the wall, and marched with it down Central Ave. This act is seen as a crucial part of the Civil Rights Movement in St. Petersburg. Yeshitela was convicted of grand larceny and imprisoned for two-and-a-half years. In 1972, he founded the International People's Democratic Uhuru Movement and continues to be a leader of Black resistance. The wall where the mural hung has remained blank and been the center of an ongoing, often heated, debate over how to best acknowledge the racist history it represents. Gwendolyn Reese, president of the African American Heritage Association, made formal proposals to the city for adding a plaque in that space describing these events. This solution was finally accepted by the St. Petersburg Community Planning and Preservation Committee in June 2020, although they rejected the use of Joe Waller's current name of Omar Yeshitela. [Sources: [Tampabay.com/news/st-petersburg/2020/01/23/a-half-century-later-plaque-could-replace-mural-in-st-pete-city-hall/](https://tampabay.com/news/st-petersburg/2020/01/23/a-half-century-later-plaque-could-replace-mural-in-st-pete-city-hall/) ; <https://stpetecatalyst.com/tag/picnicking-at-pass-a-grille/> ; <https://www.tampabay.com/news/st-petersburg/2020/06/11/blank-wall-in-st-pete-city-hall-to-get-plaque-recounting-history-of-offensive-mural/>]

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