

The Studebaker Building
600 Fourth Street South
HPC #86-12- Designated October 1988



Built in 1925, the Studebaker Building is historically significant for its association with the Florida Land Boom of the 1920s and the relationship of the automobile industry and suburbanization. The role of the family automobile in expanding Florida tourism after the First World War I cannot be overstated. St. Petersburg in particular was the destination of middle class winter tourists who came by car and were abetted in their efforts through the ambitious road building programs of Governor Martin and the completion of the Gandy Bridge in 1924, which encouraged the influx of "tin can tourists" into the city. Finally, the building symbolizes the importance of the Studebaker automobile within that industry in the 1920s, particularly the Peninsular Motor Company of southwest Florida, the fourth largest Studebaker dealer in volume in the country by 1925.

The Studebaker Building was the largest and most expensive automobile showroom/garage built in St. Petersburg before the Second World War. The economic boom of the 1920s saw frenzied growth in all areas of commercial construction, including automotive related structures. A review of the St. Petersburg newspapers and city directories from 1920 to 1926 shows phenomenal growth of the automotive business. The Studebaker Building was built in 1925 and occupied by December of that year. It was principally financed by investor Frank C. Lyon of St. Petersburg who spent \$115,000 on the construction of the building and retained ownership, giving a long term lease to the Peninsular Motor Co. of Tampa which had the Studebaker franchise for southwest Florida.

The Peninsular Motor Company of Tampa was incorporated in 1921 by Saul Jacobs, President, and Sam Bloomberg, Secretary/Treasurer. The rapid expansion of the company is typical of the Boom Era economy of Florida. In 1922 a franchise was opened in St. Petersburg at 691 Central Avenue, with four employees. When the Studebaker Building opened in December 1925, the company was the fourth largest Studebaker dealer in the world. The franchise covered 14 counties in southwest Florida, with showrooms in Tampa, Lakeland, Bradenton, Sarasota and St. Petersburg. In 1925 the Peninsular Motor Company provided employment for 300 people, with 56 working in St. Petersburg's showroom. However, by 1926 the Peninsular Motor Co. went bankrupt as a result of the collapse of the boom, and the Studebaker Building was closed.

Very few structures remain in St. Petersburg that relate to the early years of this emerging automotive economy. Several badly altered service stations, and a much remodeled Nash-Overland dealership on Central Avenue are the only survivors in addition to the Studebaker Building. Many car dealerships operating on vacant lots in the 1920s also contributed to the scarcity of such buildings. While the Studebaker Company recovered and survived until its final demise in 1967, the Peninsular Motor Company did not. The Studebaker Building stood vacant from 1927 until 1930; at that time the Marble Savings Bank remodeled the interior and leased space on the ground floor to an A&P Grocery Store.