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A Small Story of a Commercial Building in St. Augustine, FL

Stephanie Giordano

The Florida Master Site Files all tell a significant and unique story through the history and architecture sections of the files. I picked the file of 50-54.5 Washington Street to develop a story out of because the commercial building outlined how significant little things can be like how a commercial building was used as an outlet for business owners and industrialization to prosper in the oldest city. The commercial building of 50-54.5 Washington Street was used for a myriad of things such as a grocery store, restaurant, saloon, dry goods store, and real estate offices. This implies that there were a lot of different business owners occupying the space over the years. These business owners all came with their own secret stories that feature their "open wounds" of hardships and "unassimilated experiences".

50-54.5 Washington Street looked like a magnificent building to set roots down. It holds its charm as being one of the few surviving wooden Victorian commercial structures. The commercial building has seen and experienced an abundance of turmoil in its days. Such as, problems of deterioration, abandonment, vandalism, and demolitions of buildings along Washington Street. However, within its one-story Masonry Vernacular commercial structure it provided an ample of space to conduct various business opportunities. These businesses would provide outlets for "secret stories" to develop around the building. The commercial building would go on to flourish within being used as a grocery store, restaurant, saloon, dry goods store, and real estate offices. Many distinct characters walked the building which added to its character. The walls of the commercial building new many owners that impacted the community's history.

Starting in 1905, J. Herman Lynn was an important St. Augustine merchant who operated saloons throughout the streets of St. Augustine with his son Joseph. Mr. Lynn also was vice-president of the Commercial Bank of St. Augustine. This information helps develop the connection between businesses and owners. The commercial building continued to be occupied with businesses such as Jacob Tarlinsky's New York Bargain Store. Many people from the community could be seen going in and out of Mr. Tarlinsky's store as everyone loves a good bargain. Then by 1924, Butler, Smith, and Reddick took over the commercial building to form the most lucrative real estate business. Everyone trusted these three Black businesspeople to help with their real estate needs. These business owners with their distinct businesses shaped the St. Augustine community through their efforts in building a successful environment to live in and conduct business. The voices, stories, and actions impacted the community of St. Augustine with the help of 50-54.5 Washington Street. The street and commercial building was an attractive outlet for the community to grow and develop its "secret stories" that will stay within the walls and community for years.

It was 1905 when myself, Joseph and my father found an abundance of opportunities in St. Augustine, Florida. My father, J. Herman Lynn owned the commercial building at 50-54 ½ Washington Street because he felt like it a wonderful opportunity to allow businesses to occupy the spaces. We were drawn to the one-story Masonry Vernacular wooden commercial structure that provided endless possibilities of what could occupy the spaces. My father was an important merchant and we operated saloons on two other streets in St. Augustine. The year of 1905 was a peculiar time in St. Augustine as there were an ample of characters that came through the saloons and that wanted to use the commercial building. I remember when Jacob Tarlinsky's New York Bargain Store opened in the building. My father thought it was such a wonderful opportunity

because there was an abundance of low-income families in St. Augustine. The bargain store was filled with anything you could imagine that was invented in 1905. The Tarlinsky family was genuinely nice when I would go into their bargain store as they always remembered my name and we would chat about anything and everything. The father and I loved to talk about business and St. Augustine. I was sad when they had to close their bargain store after several years developing a relationship with them. By 1924 though three Black businesspeople took of my father's commercial building to open a Service Realty and Investment Agency. You might recognize them as Frank B. Butler, Robert E. Smith, and J.G. Reddick. These men were heavily involved in the development of St. Augustine into the city it is today. These leaders made sure that St. Augustine thrived in a way that accommodated all walks of life that came through the city. For instance, I remember my father telling me how Mr. Butler offered furnished rooms at his home. That showed me how kind and generous he was to the Black community. 50-54 ½ Washington Street continued to be occupied by people operating a grocery store, restaurant, saloon, dry goods store, and real estate offices. In the next few entries, I will illustrate the “secret stories” of that these folks brought with them.

In 1905 there were various uncertainties in regards to being an entrepreneur. I remember a conversation I had with my father, J. Herman Lynn about moving to St. Augustine, Florida. He thought it was a lucrative business opportunity to own the commercial building at 50-54 ½ Washington Street. I on the other hand was skeptical even with St. Augustine is the oldest city and had the clear potential for exponential growth in the area.

“Have you thought about the types of businesses that would occupy your building?”

“Yes, there is an abundance of business owners that need this space. They feel the same as me about the potential of setting up shop in St. Augustine. You know that I have researched

and talked to many business owners myself about investing in 50-54 ½ Washington Street. Why are you having qualms?”

“I just feel that it is old and run down. There are not many communities in St. Augustine for business owners to be able to break even easier. The turnover of businesses occupying 50-54 ½ Washington Street will be horrendous.”

“Have some faith, Joey. I hear that there are many Black business owners that are trying their hardest to turn St. Augustine into the lucrative city I know it can be. Look, we are going to invest in the beautiful Victorian commercial building to bring new opportunities for the citizens of St. Augustine and the diligent entrepreneurs. Just think of all the unique people we are going to be able to interact with and hear their stories.

“Okay, father. I trust your business decisions and will help you out with whatever you need.”

This was the conversation that sparked the two intelligent and hardworking businesspeople to have the courage to take risks within their investment in the commercial building. This allowed them to become stronger as father and son, as well as business partners.

It was finally the month in 1905 when J. Herman Lynn and his son Joseph took the plunge and became the owners of the commercial building at 50-54 ½ Washington Street. Every businessperson knows it is a nerve-racking feeling to risk your hard-earned money into an investment that has the potential to bring about positive or negative results. However, the two businesspeople held an optimistic attitude while interviewing potential tenants that would occupy their building. They wanted to be able to connect with their tenants in a professional and friendly manner and this is how they went about choosing the ‘right’ tenants. During the interview,

Joseph remembers a particularly peculiar interaction with Jacob Tarlinsky that solidified that he was going to be his favorite tenant.

Over time, I developed myself as a reputable businessperson in St. Augustine, Florida. It took me an abundance of time to save enough to buy the Lorillard Villa on St. George Street after many struggles as a business owner in the early 1900s. The villa cemented that I had the fortune and means of being successful as a businessperson. When in the early 1900s many businesspeople tried their hand at being an entrepreneur, but many failed.

At first glance, I noticed that the two businessmen were very uptight and nervous when I arrived. Thus, I entered the room and immediately made them relax with a light-hearted joke. This was the right move as our conversation flowed like I was talking to two old friends.

After the greetings and small talk, I explained to the two gentlemen how the Victorian commercial building was centered in a prime spot in St. Augustine. I have heard through the grapevine that the commercial building is at the center of momentous changes that will alter the structure and operations of the community of St. Augustine.

I knew something that J. Herman Lynn and Joseph did not know about this building and surrounding areas. I knew that Frank B. Butler, Robert E. Smith, and J.G Reddick were in the works of making the whole city of St. Augustine an opportunistic and industrious place to set up shop. This means that the community also has the potential to thrive in a positive direction.