

surprise. Designing parks to encapsulate picturesque views tied Nolen to the genius of Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. What separated these two landscape architects was Nolen's desire to design a state of interconnected garden cities.

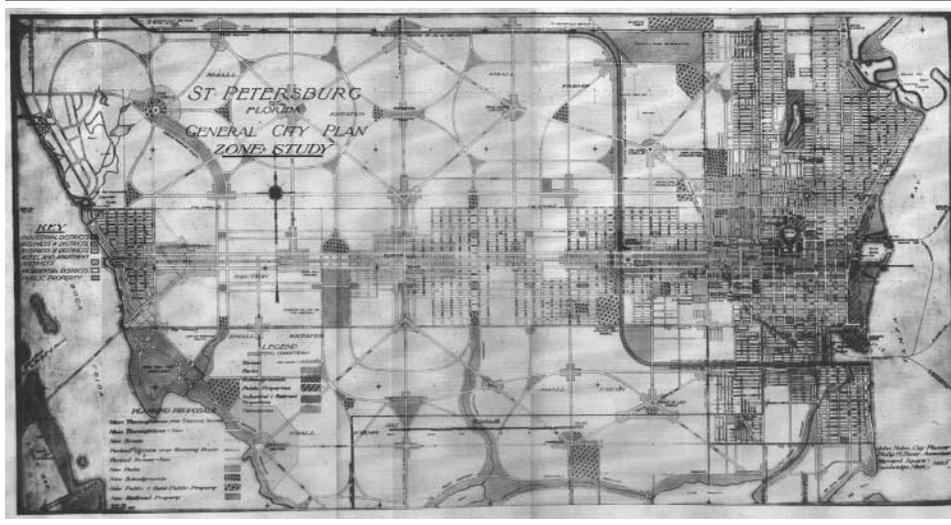
### John Nolen's Florida Planning Laboratory

After his initial success with Mariemont, Nolen found a site to test his designs on a grand scale: Florida. A burgeoning land boom had turned this "last frontier," Nolen wrote, into "a great laboratory of town and city building."<sup>55</sup> In 1922, he contracted with St. Petersburg to create Florida's first comprehensive plan. The city, he found, occupied a "site blessed by a benevolent Nature" and possessing "the same characteristics as that of southern France."<sup>56</sup> After signing the contract, Nolen wrote an associate, "This seems to be an opportunity to do rather more than we have ever been given the chance to do before."<sup>57</sup>

In St. Petersburg, Nolen held a much wider canvas than in Mariemont. While the Ohio site presented an excellent rendition of the garden city suburb, in St. Petersburg, Nolen envisioned a true garden city. In March 1923, Nolen completed an ambitious plan to imbue this "resort city" of fifteen thousand with a "form and flavor unlike that of other places." The plan marked Nolen's most comprehensive adaptation of garden city principles in America. A greenbelt of preserves and parks encircled the lower third (forty-five square miles) of the Pinellas Peninsula, setting the city's natural boundaries and creating a lure for tourists. He also presented plans to improve traffic connections and establish a civic center. Mixed-use neighborhood centers were clustered to prevent the unsightly spread of commercial uses and traffic problems along city thoroughfares. A system of parkways united the city, providing pedestrian access, in white and black neighborhoods, to parks and local neighborhood centers with "store groups, churches, and public buildings" (see Figure 1).

Nolen refused to incorporate racial zoning in his plan.<sup>58</sup> Instead, he concentrated government's police powers on the "adequate control of private development." He proposed a series of land use controls to ensure that development followed the efficient outlay of public facilities rather than the outline of speculative desires in the hinterlands. Without these regulations, Nolen was hardly sanguine about the city's future. "It has been said and with reason," he wrote, "that man is the only animal who desecrates the surroundings of his own habitation."<sup>59</sup>

In the midst of the great Florida land boom, the desire to make quick profits outweighed any lofty notion of city building. Moreover, the idea of investing public funds to improve the squalid conditions in "the colored section" found little sentiment in a place where an editor, who led the charge against planning, advocated replacing black laborers (17 percent of the population)



**Figure 1: Nolen's St. Petersburg Plan**

*Note:* In his plan, parkways linked white and black neighborhoods to parks and local neighborhood centers planned for store groups, churches, and public buildings.

*Source:* Courtesy of Rare Manuscript Collection, Cornell University.

with immigrants from the “agricultural sections of England.”<sup>60</sup> Racism in St. Petersburg was as virulent as anywhere in the South. In 1920, Florida had the highest lynching rate relative to its population in the nation.<sup>61</sup> In St. Petersburg, African Americans suffered lynching in 1905, 1914, and 1926.<sup>62</sup> In 1919, after the Florida justice system failed to secure convictions in the lynching of two African Americans, Dr. William A. Byrd, a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People official, claimed the “Anglo-Saxon ability to rule the South has been tested and found an ignominious failure. Civilization in Florida has broken down.”<sup>63</sup> Given the state of affairs in Florida, it is hardly surprising that Nolen’s vision of an enlightened, modern city received only 13 percent of the vote in referendum.<sup>64</sup>

The St. Petersburg experience disheartened Nolen, but he remained optimistic. His firm worked on fifty-four projects in Florida during the 1920s, and in 1925 he found in “Venice an opportunity better . . . than any other in Florida to apply the most advanced and most practical ideas of regional planning.”<sup>65</sup> Nolen planned Venice for the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLE), a labor union looking to capitalize on the land boom and the resort trade. The BLE, however, was also investing for the long term. BLE officials wanted a regional center for agriculture and light industry, “a place where the ordinary man could have a chance to get all that the rich have ever been able to get out of Florida.”

“Nature led the way,” and the plan, Nolen wrote, “followed her way.”<sup>66</sup> Greenbelts protected important natural features, and parkways extended from the hinterlands into Venice’s downtown (see Figure 2). A greenbelt bounded the town to the east and south, while Venice Bay marked the