

Elder Jordan: A Pioneer That Helped Build a Florida City

By Evangeline Baldwin

Elder Jordan Sr. was born into slavery in 1848. Despite the hardships of his early life, he became an important figure in the African American community of St. Petersburg, Florida during the Jim Crow era. Through his hard work and determination, he helped create a self-sustaining Black community, and to this day, is a role model of business prowess and self-made success. His efforts laid the groundwork for the city's growth and continue to impact future generations.

At just 15 years old, Elder Jordan purchased his freedom. He started his journey by selling fruit door-to-door, later owning his own livery stable. His sharp business sense earned him the respect of both Black and White communities in a time when racial segregation and tension were widespread. Between 1901 and 1904, Elder Jordan moved to St. Petersburg, joining his wife, Mary, who had relocated there two months earlier. Together, they raised a family of at least five children: Columbus, Elder Jr., Osha, Harry, and McKinley.

One of Elder Jordan's most significant contributions was the creation of the Jordan Dance Hall, built with the help of his sons. This venue, later renamed the Manhattan Casino, became a cultural center for African Americans, attracting artists such as Louis Armstrong, Ray Charles, B.B. King, and eventually James Brown. This establishment provided a space for Black entertainment and cultural expression during a time when such opportunities were rare. Elder Jordan also played a vital role in the development of St. Petersburg's infrastructure, including the construction of homes, the establishment of a bus line, and the creation of a beach for African Americans during the era of segregation. He also donated land which would eventually become a housing development and school, which are named after him.

A statue of Elder Jordan now stands at the Manhattan Casino, commemorating his many contributions to the city. "This great man, born into bondage but never enslaved," former deputy mayor Kanika Tomalin stated. As a tribute to his resilience and determination, the statue serves as a reminder of Elder Jordan's remarkable achievements, including the building of the Jordan Dance Hall in 1925, his donation of land which would lead to the building of Jordan Park Housing Development, the establishment of a bus line, and a beach for African Americans in a time of segregation in St. Petersburg. His vision for a strong, united Black community in St. Petersburg has influenced countless individuals and continues to shape the city to this day.

Sources

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