

Sunken Gardens
1825 Fourth Street North
Designated May 1998, HPC #98-03



Sunken Gardens is an important example of a 1930s Florida roadside commercial attraction. It offers a well-preserved example of old Florida in its lush tropical gardens. Sunken Gardens ranks as the oldest commercial tourist attraction on Florida's west coast, and one of the finest botanical gardens in the United States. Sunken Gardens is also significant in the area of architecture and landscape architecture. The original Sanitary Public Market Building was a fine example of Mediterranean Revival architecture later renovated in 1940 as the Coca-Cola Bottling Company by architect William B. Harvard, Sr. The renovation itself was exemplary in its use of Art Moderne stylistic details. Finally, the gardens are a significant example of landscape architecture. The garden's exemplary landscape architecture is recognized as one of the finest botanical gardens in the United States. The feature of the gardens lowered elevation coupled with the tree canopy above create a local tropical environment within a sub-tropical setting, which is truly unique to the State of Florida.

The origins of Sunken Gardens dates back to 1903 when George Turner, Sr. began to convert a five-acre tract of land into a botanical garden. Sunken gardens opened as tourist attraction in 1935 and eventually become one of Florida's top tourist attractions. From the 1950's through the 1970's Sunken gardens was ranked among Florida's top ten commercial attractions.

A plumber by trade, George Turner, Sr. was convinced to relocate to St. Petersburg from Jacksonville in 1901. He purchased land at 18th Avenue North and Fourth Street, deliberately choosing this parcel of property because there was a sinkhole and a shallow pond centered on the site. Turner's hobby was horticulture and he eventually used his property for planting fruit trees and vegetables to supplement his income. He also began to experiment with flowers and more exotic tropical plants. By 1926 Turner had opened a nursery and began selling fruits, vegetables, roses and other plants. In the fall of 1935 he fenced his garden and began charging an admission fee of 25-cents.

The Sanitary Public Market was designed by architect Albert Lee Hawes and constructed in 1926-27. The building, designed as a walk through arcade, was constructed of structural clay tile and steel. It was built in a Mediterranean Revival style with twin Moorish towers and an arcaded central entrance. It was ornamented with cast stone trim, wooden roof brackets and a Cuban tile roof.

Due to the financial downturn of the depression, the market closed in 1931 and the building was sold to the American Legion Post and renamed the American Legion Armory. For most of the next decade it was home to wrestling matches, home shows and Legion events. In 1940 the building was sold to the St. Petersburg Bottling Company and served as a Coca Cola bottling plant until 1967. In 1940, the new owners hired architect William Harvard, Sr. to renovate the building. His renovations to the west facade were in the Moderne style and removed or concealed the Mediterranean style of the original building. The new look was characterized by a horizontal emphasis to the facade utilizing glass block and simplifying the style of the twin towers.

In 1967 the Turner family acquired the building and added it to the adjacent gardens to utilize as a gift shop. A faux lava rock entrance with a fountain and pond was added to the south facade facing the parking lot. For many years the building was advertised as the world's largest gift shop.