

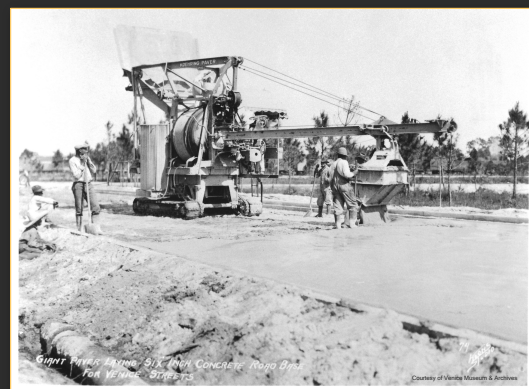
Detail of Harlem Village, part of Nolen's plans for Venice, 1926



John Nolen Bridging the Racial Divide



Roof tile production, Venice Tile Co., circa 1927



Paving Venice streets, circa 1926

- In the 1920s, preeminent city planner John Nolen designed a series of model cities in Florida. Central to his agenda was investing in African American communities.
- The Harvard expert spent his formative years in an orphanage and, as a city planner, he advocated allocating public resources to a wider populace.
- Nolen confronted Jim Crow laws early in his career, writing in 1907 that, "for every reason—economic, sanitary, aesthetic, humanitarian—active steps should be taken to radically change" living conditions in the South's segregated black neighborhoods.

African American work force in Venice, Florida, circa 1926



Racism also curtailed Nolen's 1922 plan for West Palm Beach, where the city council wanted to relocate blacks into three "concentrated zones" between the railroad and the Everglades. "We are trying to put them in such locations as they will most congenitally be situated to their places of labor and fulfill the needs of the white people," Mayor Garland Biggers announced. Nolen responded, declaring, "It is not possible legally to set aside such districts and restrict them to any one race or color." Dumbfounded by the intensity of Florida's racism, Nolen decided to pursue private commissions where profit—not race—was the defining issue.



John Nolen's Harlem Village plan for Venice, 1926

During the 1920s in the South, using tax dollars to improve the plight of the African American community was highly controversial due to racism and segregation. Despite setbacks, Nolen continued to attempt to inject an element of equality into African American life through his plans and came to Florida with high expectations. It was fast becoming the most urbanized state in the South, and tourism was its lifeblood. Hired to design an American Riviera in St. Petersburg and West Palm Beach, he believed that building a world-class tourist destination entailed raising living standards in the neglected African American communities.

In St. Petersburg, Nolen's plan drew the ire of Lew Brown, editor of the *St. Petersburg Independent*. Brown claimed that the "majority of Negroes are of the low order of intelligence, are not physically clean, and lacking in moral perception." Rather than improve their living conditions, he favored replacing African Americans with immigrants from the agricultural sections of England. A referendum was held, and only 13 percent of St. Petersburg voters supported implementing Nolen's plan, Florida's first comprehensive city plan.

Harlem Village, Venice, Florida

In 1926, John Nolen was hired to plan the new town of Venice. Providing for the black "population is an issue of great importance" but "not well solved," he informed his client. A 230-acre site was allocated to house 3,000 African Americans.

Using his standard template, Nolen's plan for "Harlem Village" aligned bungalows and apartments on tree-lined streets. A business district and high school centered the community, while parks and churches were sited within walking distance of residents.

A small army of laborers, more than half African American, went to work building Venice. Nolen pleaded with his client, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, to "speed up plans for Harlem Village," but it was a priority for Nolen, not his employer. The proposed site was never built.

By R. Bruce Stephenson and Caroline Arrigoni