

Another Piece of Black History Bites The Dust

By Patricia Smith-Deering
Phoenix Managing Editor

Anytime we, as Black people, let even one of our traditions die, it is a time of sorrow and mourning. That just happened when, on March 25, the bulldozers razed a structure that had been, during the '50 and '60s, St. Anne's Academy.

With both the bang of the bulldozers and the whimper of those who might have saved this piece of history, the former school for college-bound students turned domicile for senior citizens became little more than the rubble of bricks and mortar that had sustained a host of students during the better days of 14th Street. The saddest part of all is that so few people knew about the fate about to befall the old Kyle mansion.

As a member of St. Anne's Class of '62, I remember fondly the days my friends and I spent there under the strict tutelage of the Sisters of Saint Francis and the Franciscan priests. Although some of the views of the nuns were somewhat limited in societal and racial issues, the discipline and education netted doctors, professors, teachers, nurses, writers, classical singers and musicians and a wealth of other talented professionals.

But, time always brings about a change in the usefulness of people and places. St. Anne's, which was an early '50s adjunct to the elementary school around the corner on Hattie Avenue - St. Benedict the Moor - succumbed to the exodus of students flocking to the newly-integrated Bishop McGuiness in the '60s. The main building, facing 14th Street, had served as the convent for the nuns. It eventually became a housing facility for senior citizens. The two buildings behind the convent, formerly housing the academy classrooms and dormitory students, were converted to serve similar utilitarian purposes.

When my friends and I were attending St. Anne's, few of us were aware of its history back then. The academy's buildings had belonged to A.M.E. Zion Church Bishop Linwood K. Kyles, affluent and stylish with a staff of servants. The area around the Kyle mansion was surrounded by other affluent Black professionals and was a far cry from the deteriorated, crime- and drug-infested neighborhood that now exists. What we remember was an era where education reigned supreme, and we were daily challenged to be the best that we could be.



Kyle Heights was a failed attempt at low-cost housing for senior citizens. It was leveled on March 25, and Charlotte diocese has no immediate plans for the property.

So, why the nostalgic cry over a school that closed when my sister's class of '63 graduated and in later years suffered the ravages of time and neglect? The reason gets to the very core of what has gradually happened over the years in East Winston. Too many of the symbols of Black history have fallen beneath the wrecking balls of progress.

Talking recently to Carl Russell, Jr., who - along with several of his brothers and sisters - attended the Catholic elementary school on Hattie Avenue, he made a profound observation. Black businesses and other sources of pride have been consistently eradicated. He noted that streets like 7th Street, where Russell Funeral Home had its original location and where few remember now that Katie B. used to be, have been greatly changed from what they once were, and not always for the better. "They are trying to erase any presence of Black people doing anything worthwhile other than going to the projects or going to work for them," he surmised.

Few attempts were made to save what had been the historic Kyle mansion beyond one to put it to commercial use. The East Winston

Restoration Association and the Interfaith Housing Alliance joined forces in 1982 to lease the three buildings, owned by the Roman Catholic diocese in Charlotte, and convert them into housing for senior citizens. But, for whatever reasons, it was not a profitable investment. Little was done, however, to preserve the buildings for their historical value. Razing the site was preferable to raising the half million dollars it would have taken to renovate and restore the Kyle mansion.

None of the concerns matter any longer because the house, built by the Kyles in 1916, exists no longer. Few of the alumni of St. Anne's know that our old high school was in danger of demolition, and I don't know whether there would have been money to support any promises to help with any restoration effort. What I do know is that one more piece of our history in East Winston has gone with virtually no protest. Like anything else that has played a significant role in a person's life, the barren site leaves an equally barren spot in the hearts of those of us who remember.



St. Anne's Academy was in its heyday in the late '50s and early '60s, finally closing in 1963. (Photo from 1957 high school yearbook, *The Annette*.)

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