

# A Celebration Of The City

## Hargett St: A Mecca For Blacks For Decades

The African-American presence in downtown Raleigh was commercial, as well as residential. Few African-Americans operated businesses in postwar Raleigh, but they dominated selected ones. Hargett Street was an example and a mecca for entrepreneurs and shoppers.

Today Hargett Street is lined with a few businesses and offices, parking lots, some vacant storefronts and pedestrians, many of whom work in the downtown area during business hours Monday through Friday.

But from the 1920s to the mid-1960s, East Hargett Street from South Wilmington to South Blount was the business and social center for African-Americans in Raleigh and Wake County.

Earlier, in 1891, all but two of the 22 barbers in downtown Raleigh were black, and African-Americans enjoyed a longtime monopoly in running "eating houses" and huckster stalls. Their businesses also included boarding houses, meat and

fish markets, and a variety of skilled trades, such as shoemaking, blacksmithing, and upholstering.

During the decade before Jim Crow laws were enacted, these businesses and others that African-Americans operated served both races in Raleigh. Consequently, they were located throughout the heart of the business district. In 1886, for example, as the number of downtown African-American enterprises peaked in the 19th century, 19 were situated along Wilmington Street, nine on Hargett Street, and 20 others were dispersed along other streets that crisscrossed the business district.

As the 19th century drew to a close, Raleigh's African-American community reflected both antebellum and new, postwar characteristics.

On the one hand, numerous blacks continued to live throughout the city, often on the property of former masters. Furthermore, as before the war, many continued to

hold traditional "Negro jobs" as laborers, servants and barbers. In 1896, barely two percent of working blacks were professionals. Most blacks remained illiterate and victims of disproportionately high death and crime rates.

One of the major new developments in the landscape of early 20th-century Raleigh was the emergence of the African-American business district. The "Negro Main Street," a place devoted to African-American oriented commerce, has been an integral part of American urban geography in this century.

Hargett Street, west of Moore Square, was to become and remain for decades this focal point.

Between 1900 and the mid-1920s, the number of African-American operated businesses on this street soared from nine to 50, more than twice the number of white establishments. Only two businesses run by African-Americans remained on other downtown streets.

The Arcade Hotel, built in 1921 at

120-122 E. Hargett St., was considered the finest hotel for African-Americans between Florida and New York in the days of segregated accommodations.

Big-name entertainers such as Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway and Count Basie stayed there, whether they were performing there or anywhere else in eastern North Carolina.

The street became a center for African-American business largely because turn-of-the-century Jim Crow laws prohibited African-Americans from using public facilities with whites.

Hargett Street, east from 137 Fayetteville, had barber shops, grocery and clothing stores, restaurants, furniture stores, jewelry and cigar stores, and various business and professional offices.

The street also boasted the Mary-Ellen Tea Room and the Yellow Rose Tea Room. Mechanics and Farmers bank, built on East Hargett Street in 1927, made it through the Great

Depression when many local banks failed.

Down the street, at what is now known as Moore Square and was once called Baptist Grove, was another meeting place for African-Americans who just wanted to sit and chat or eat lunch.

African-American businessmen were "pushed" as well as "pulled" onto Hargett Street. Although Jim Crow laws did not legally restrict African-Americans from operating businesses elsewhere in the commercial district, white property owners stopped leasing space to African-American entrepreneurs, and a growing number of whites ceased patronizing African-American establishments.

During this period whites began seeking out white-operated enterprises, many of which had been formerly virtually monopolized by African-Americans. Barbershops owned by African-Americans closed up along Fayetteville and Wilmington streets, as they lost their trade

to white competitors.

Between 1900 and 1915, the proportion of Raleigh's African-American operated barbershops fell from 82 percent to 67 percent, and by 1925, only half of the barbershops were run by African-Americans.

Blacks were "pulled" to East Hargett Street for many reasons. First, historically African-Americans had operated businesses and institutions on this street. The Colored Odd Fellows Hall, for example, had been located here since 1881.

Second, though East Hargett was not one of the city's premiere thoroughfares, which were the first choices of white merchants and businessmen, it was readily accessible to these streets, and was itself a main artery through the heart of the city.

Third, African-American enterprises in the Moore Square area of East Hargett Street provided a commercial link between African-American neighborhoods directly to east and south, and to major white-owned establishments to the west.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, as influential African-American entrepreneurs and professionals began occupying spaces on the street, others followed suit.

In 1911, black businessman C.E. Lightner opened a funeral parlor and real estate office in an "old shop" at 125 E. Hargett St. Soon other black entrepreneurs, such as saloon operator and restaurateur Charles Hoover, opened businesses nearby. Within little more than a decade, the 100 block of East Hargett Street was the focus of black commerce and entertainment, symbolized by Lightner's new, three-story brick "Arcade" that commanded the center of the block. Lightner himself would later sum up the commercial importance and cultural vitality of this area. "Every Negro who wanted to go into business in Raleigh wanted to be on East Hargett Street because we had built it up," he stated. "Everybody who came to Raleigh felt he hadn't been to the city until he had been to East Hargett Street."

Raleigh's black commercial district was supported by a growing African-American population. By 1920 there were more than 8,500 blacks in Raleigh, which had grown to more than 24,000. The total population had risen from 13,643 at the turn of the century, and reflected the city's emergence as a regional

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## Raleigh The City Of Oaks

In the year 1671 an itinerant British preacher, who came to America via Jamaica, Florida, and the Chesapeake, noted in his journal, "Afterwards, it being upon me, I traveled to Carolina and two Friends accompanied me, it being all Wildernesses, and no English inhabitants or Path-ways, but some marked Trees to guide People. The first Day's Journey we did pretty well, and lay that Night in the woods as we often used to do in those Parts." Those Parts, though they remained a wilderness for another 60 years or so, were to become the environs of North Carolina's Capital City.

Raleigh's location, however, was not born, like Athena, whole-made without adversity. By 1744 nearly every promising community in North Carolina was contending for the honor of the site. Among them were Edenton, Halifax, New Bern; and not even a regional coalition could sway the majority in the assemblies between 1744 and 1790.

When Wake Cross Roads or Wake Court House, as the place was often called, was considered, its detractors argued that the capital should not be "situated" in a lonely grove of oaks, inland from any port, a place without populace, amid thorn and briar with nothing to recommend it but a courthouse, an inn, two or three scattered residences, the best of which having only a plain gambrel roof. Further, it made no difference that this inn was on the stage road connecting Petersburg to Charleston. The high road also went through other competing localities, Fayetteville for one; and as for Wake Cross Roads being a "sentinal" location in the State, so, give or take a few miles, was Smithfield.

The fight continued as the General Assembly carried its records from town to town by oxcart, wagon, coach when a session was called. And when records did arrive, it was found that when the appointed day came for the meeting, there was not a quorum of solons for processing legislation. Nor had all the documents arrived intact. Exasperated at this point, the Convention of 1788 decided that a permanent seat of government must be settled upon. And on Dec. 5, 1791, sitting in New Bern, the representatives acted upon the earlier decision. That resolution had not specified the capital's exact location except to admonish that "... it shall be left to the discretion of the General Assembly to ascertain the exact spot, provided always that it shall be within ten miles of the plantation whereon Isaac Hunter now resides, in the county of Wake."

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# Raleigh Two Hundred! 1792 1992

## Black Neighborhoods Reflect Traits

BY RICHARD MATTSON

The black neighborhoods of Raleigh express in their geography and architecture the development of the African-American communities in this Southern city. The changing patterns of distribution of blacks at once reflect Raleigh's particular physical and economic characteristics, while being typical of cities throughout the region.

Similarly, the building types and institutions in the black community embody local and quite personal choices, tastes, and constraints, as well as much broader cultural and regional traits. The setting, of course, is a tumultuous and controversial one, including slavery and Jim Crow, generations of sedulously defined legal and customary racial segregation, and an unprecedented "farm-to-factory" migration.

In North Carolina as in the entire South, slaves and free blacks (some referred to as "non-slave" blacks) lived and labored in cities long before the great Northern migration in the 20th century. In 1860, blacks comprised 20 percent to 40 percent population in the typical Southern city. Usually, they were confined to menial and low-paying work—"Negro Jobs" they came to be called—such as unskilled mill and railroad labor; domestic service; and road gang employment.

However, through diligence, apprenticeships, and some luck, it was

possible for slaves to earn enough money to buy their freedom, and for free blacks to gain economic security and, occasionally, even middle-class status as enterprising barbers, draymen, carpenters, brick masons, stone cutters, and harness makers.

In Raleigh, slave Lunsford Lane, for instance, purchased his freedom as well as a house and town lot working as a tobacco merchant, janitor, and messenger. Yet, Lane's growing wealth and status also made him enemies, and he was effectively run out of Raleigh in 1841, before he was able to buy the freedom of his family and friends.

Neither slave nor completely free (thus the term "non-slave"), free blacks held a peculiar status in the antebellum South. They were "a caste within a caste," in the words of John Hope Franklin. During the early 19th century, as the fear of slave insurrections mounted among whites, Southern legislatures enacted laws that intruded upon virtually all aspects of free black life.

In the 1820s, and especially following the Nat Turner uprising in 1831, the state of North Carolina passed legislation that, among other prohibitions, stripped free blacks of the right to vote, to preach, carry firearms, marry whites or slaves, and even to do business with slaves. Moreover, a strong public sentiment arose opposing the for-

mal education of free blacks.

Against this backdrop of white distrust and discrimination, black residential areas developed in and around antebellum Raleigh. A census conducted in 1807 recorded 33 free blacks, 270 slaves, and 423 whites living in the city's three wards. The most populous East Ward contained the vast majority of free blacks (28), as well as 11 slaves and 197 whites. To be sure, such ward data fail to show the distribution of the two races within each ward; and one can only speculate about the existence of black districts outside the city's bounds. It is thought that Oberlin had a black community prior to the war.

However, the census suggests a residential pattern that would become more and more distinct over time; and one which was common to cities across the antebellum South. While blacks were interspersed among whites across the city, free blacks, in particular, also tended to live in small enclaves reflecting segregation along racial, as well as economic, lines.

This spatial arrangement would become more fully developed in Raleigh as the city grew in the early 19th century. By 1860 its population had reached 4,780, including 466 free blacks and 1,621 slaves (44 percent of the total population). These figures reflected the city's slow but steady commercial expansion, given impetus by the completion of the Raleigh and Gaston Railroad in 1840, the construction of a second rail line (the North Carolina Railroad) in 1854, and the rebuilding of the state Capitol between 1833 and 1840. Consequently, small foundries, railroad repair shops, and other assorted industries appeared around the tracks skirting the fringe of the city, and the fledgling central business area assumed a more sophisticated air. Raleigh's antebellum expansion was capped by the annexation of 1857, which extended the original grid by one-quarter mile in each direction. The capital city was now a neat square mile in size.

Enslaved blacks, according to contemporary accounts of both

blacks and whites, lived across this landscape, where 152 white families owned them. They resided within slaveholders' houses—in separate wings, basements and upper stories—as well as in detached dwellings behind the main house.

For example, Charles N. Hunter, a former slave of Raleigh's William Dallas Haywood, recounted living with other slaves on the Haywood family lot. Bertha Lane, as a slave and domestic worker for Gov. Charles Manly, occupied a two-story, three-room frame house on his South Street property.

Reflecting upon his childhood in antebellum Raleigh, John H. Winder (who was white) described slave quarters behind the J.H. Bryan home on Blount Street. And, in his 1937 memoir, Judge Robert Watson Winston wrote in a patronizing way of ex-slaves who were so content with their pre-war accommodations in the masters' residences, that they "never left the premises and scarcely knew that they had been set

(See NEIGHBORHOODS, P. 8)

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