

Prototype Study, 'Remembering Black Main Streets,' Set in Motion

This Project Represents One of Several Early Components of the SOHP's "Long Civil Rights Movement" Initiative

Greensboro's East Market Street, Savannah's West Broad Street, and Jacksonville's Ashley Street are examples of thriving black business districts that once anchored black communities across the segregated South. Today, few traces of these bustling hubs of African American economic, political, and social activity remain. During the 1950s and 1960s thousands of black-owned banks, restaurants, insurance companies, funeral homes, barbershops, theatres, and other businesses disappeared, victims of urban renewal and shifts in consumer activity encouraged by the dismantling of segregation.

Although the business districts of Greensboro, Savannah, and Jacksonville, like those in other Southern cities, are now mostly gone, the memories of local residents remain very much alive. During the past year, SOHP research assistants Angela Hornsby and Kerry Taylor completed thirty-five interviews in these communities, devoting attention both to the costs to black communities of the loss of these commercial centers and the ways in which public policy has been implicated directly and indirectly in their demise, as well as to the advantages afforded by civil rights gains. Taken together, these interviews preserve the history of a central but little documented aspect of African-American life in the period when Jim Crow at last gave way to desegregation.

Recalling the heyday of these commercial areas, some interviewees emphasize a golden age of black business success and community cohesion that partially shielded blacks from the demeaning effects of segregation, others the backdrop of racial oppression that severely constrained black opportunity. Mr. Leroy Beavers Sr., a barber in Savannah for fifty years, noted that West Broad Street's thriving black-owned businesses accommodated every need of the city's African-American community. "From Broughton all the way to Henry Street was black business: black undertakers, black taxi service, black theaters, black hotels, black restaurants, black bars. We didn't need to go to Broughton Street [the primary white business thoroughfare].... We'd go there maybe to pay a light bill, maybe. I never did go to Broughton." Ms. Rose Vines, who operated dry cleaning, grocery, and sewing shop businesses on Greensboro's East Market Street, recalled an ethic of service that reflected the burdens of segregation and poverty: "We had one family to live in the back of our cleaners. They were living in a chicken coop, [so] we moved them in." For Vines, East Market Street businesses were the glue that held the community together, socially as well as economically.

Explaining the demise of black downtowns, most interviewees cited the combined effects of urban renewal – known to many as "Negro removal." For Savannah mayor and newspaper publisher Mr. Floyd Adams Jr., the benefits of the city's renowned urban renewal and historic preservation efforts largely bypassed African Americans. Many black business owners who attempted to relocate with federal assistance



SOHP interviewee and Savannah businessman William E. Fonvielle Jr. Reprinted, by permission, from *Black America Series, Savannah Georgia*, © 2000 by Charles J. Elmore, 83.

Prospect Cleaners, a component of Jacksonville, Florida's once vibrant black business district, c. 1948. Reprinted by permission from *Images of America, African-American Life in Jacksonville*, © 1997 by Herman "Skip" Mason, Jr.



failed, Adams remembered, because they were separated from their local clientele and discriminated against by local banks.

Though some interviewees remembered relatively little black resistance to local urban renewal schemes, others described fierce battles to preserve key black businesses and other institutions. Savannah pharmacist Mr. William E. Fonvielle, who ran a family-owned business founded in 1917, recalled the heroism of an elderly neighbor who fought city efforts to condemn her property for an interstate highway ramp. "They needed to take some of her backyard. Matter of fact they wanted to take the house. She said, 'My husband built this house for me. I'm not giving up.' They had the bulldozers out there. She stood right there in front of the bulldozers. There's a little black lady that at that time was eighty years old maybe saying, 'Run over me!' So she negotiated, and they paid her a handsome little sum to take some of her backyard." Environmental activist Ms. MaVynne Betsch led campaigns to preserve the city's black heritage and homes in Jacksonville and American Beach, a black ocean resort established in 1935 by leaders of the Afro-American Life Insurance Company (and the subject of Russ Rymer's eloquent study, *American Beach: A Saga of Race, Wealth, and Money* (1998)).

By devoting close attention to the processes by which these business areas have been transformed over the past forty years, this project aims to inform ongoing urban redevelopment debates and struggles. With this in mind Hornsby and Taylor worked closely with local community-based preservation and redevelopment organizations in the three communities, and the SOHP is depositing copies of all tape recordings and transcripts not only at UNC-Chapel Hill's Southern Historical Collection but at Greensboro's North Carolina A&T University, Savannah State University, and Jacksonville's LaVilla Museum, which preserves and celebrates the city's African-American heritage and culture. ■