

University of North Carolina at Asheville

**Making Congregation out of Segregation: the African American
Culture and Community in Asheville, early 20th century**

A Senior Thesis Submitted to
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Bachelor of Arts

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A street in Niggertown. One looks across at a ragged line of white-washed shacks and cheap one- and two-story buildings of brick. In the center is a vacant lot between the buildings. It is littered with rubbish, bottles, horseshoes, wagon wheels, and junk of every description.¹

From the description of the opening scene, a citizen of Asheville, North Carolina could recognize the area Thomas Wolfe describes in his fictional town of Altamont. The area, historically known as the cultural center of the African American population, “the Block” is the southern part of Pack Square downtown.² Thomas Wolfe wrote the play, originally titled “Niggertown,” while attending a theater workshop at Harvard in 1922.³ The play is a fictitious story concerning race relations and one town’s desire for progress in the early 20th century. His opening scene establishes the setting of the play in which the racism represents the attitude of the white South.⁴ He goes on to describe un-kept eating and entertainment establishments, and later, the people themselves as lazy, degenerate, and low class.⁵

From the description of people who actually lived, worked, and congregated in the segregated district, one receives a different impression of the neighborhood Wolfe degrades. Erline McQueen, an African American native of Asheville, remembers “the Block” in a very different way:

It was such a beautiful area...There were so many people on the sidewalks, all dressed up, going to restaurants, attorneys offices, the pool halls...There was always a sense of

¹ Thomas Wolfe, *Welcome to Our City: a play in ten scenes*, with an introduction by Richard S. Kennedy (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 11.

² Joseph and Julia Gunnels, “Hearing Our Voices, Visioning Our Future” (Asheville, North Carolina: Eagle/Market Streets Development Corporation, nd), 3.

³ Phyllis L. Huffman, “An Edition of “Welcome to Our City” a play by Thomas Wolfe” (Ph.D. diss., University of Greensboro, 1979), UMI Dissertation Information Service, Michigan, 1991, 13.

⁴ Richard S. Kennedy, introduction to *Welcome to Our City: a play in ten scenes*, by Thomas Wolfe (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

social mixed with business, because people would come down to do their shopping or get a meal, but also just to see their friends, see who was around.⁶

She also referred to the neighborhood as a safe haven for the entire community.⁷

Considering this description comes from a person of the community, McQueen's version contains more accuracy about the black neighborhood than descriptions in a play by a white man. However, each version comes from extremely different perspectives. This fact makes both perspectives significant when considering social circumstances for blacks during the early part of the 20th century in the white-controlled South.

The city of Asheville, North Carolina displayed much of the same attitudes towards the African American population as other southern cities. Wolfe's play exemplifies this attitude by dramatizing white superiority and hostility. The southern black community struggled with oppression, inhumane treatment, violence, and overall social and political disenfranchisement from the white majority. Through building strong social bonds among themselves, blacks pushed towards a better life. They resisted repression by relying on their own devices for progress in a racist world. Their efforts centered on the pursuit of building an interconnected sub-community within the larger, segregated one. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the town of Asheville illustrated the way the African American population built a strong community in spite of social adversity.

Studies of the social circumstances for African Americans under white social authority began with W.E.B. DuBois in 1899. In his book *The Philadelphia Negro*,

⁶ Erline L. McQueen, quoted in *Asheville Citizen Times*, undated clipping, found in *Erline L. McQueen* folder, Voices of Asheville Oral History Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville, OH-VOA M37Er. [Hereafter, the references from this collection will be referred to as OH-VOA.]

⁷ McQueen, quoted in *Greenline*, undated clipping, found in *Erline L. McQueen* folder, OH-VOA.

DuBois became the first to do a detailed sociological analysis of a black community.⁸ Beginning with this study, he collected information on every aspect of society, such as, employment, family background and structures, social organizations, relationships within the black community, relations in the white world, and the second-class citizenship of the black race. He analyzed his findings in regards to the position of blacks in America at the time. In the introduction to the 1967 edition of *The Philadelphia Negro*, E. Digby Baltzell contends that there has not been a study of black America without the use of this book's "empirical findings, the research methods, and the theoretical point of view."⁹ Dubois's research sought understanding of America's problems between the races, with the hope for gaining social equality for all.

Since then, countless researchers have conducted their studies of the African American condition based on the outline created by DuBois and his desire to find an understanding between the races. In the 1995 article "Toward a new African American urban history," historians Kenneth Goings and Raymond Mohl assert, "Individually, African Americans created and used notions about the past in understanding and locating their own lives in home, neighborhood, and community."¹⁰ Understanding the past creates understanding of present and future. For African Americans, life under difficult circumstances became a norm. Generations passed on coping skills for dealing with life under an inferior social classification. The experience helped to produce a people capable of living under oppression while maintaining a sense of self worth. This

⁸ E. Digby Baltzell, introduction to *The Philadelphia Negro*, by W.E.B. DuBois (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), ix.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl, "Toward a new African American urban History," *Journal of Urban History* 21, no. 4 (March 1995): 289.

happened through the development of coping skills taught by older generations, education in all its forms, and day-to-day experiences.

The daily life in the subjugated position helped African Americans to produce skills for acquiring support from the sources available to them. Native North Carolinian Georgia Sutton explains, “You talk to just about anyone who grew up in a segregated situation, you’re going to find these people [were] readily adaptable to certain situations. You had to have strength in order to have survived.”¹¹ Part of the adaptability came from forming strong bonds among the entire black community. According to historian Earl Lewis, “any study of the Afro-American urban experience must consider the culture blacks constantly recreated, a culture bound to one another, even while it distinguished the working class from the elite.”¹² This statement illustrates his point of how the black community created “congregation in a segregated setting.”¹³ While oppressive and unjust, the segregated circumstances became a way for the black culture to grow into a strong social order. This segregated sphere made it possible for blacks to live a normal life in spite of a larger social oppression.

Lewis’s findings in Norfolk, Virginia of the segregated black sphere explore the methods the black community used to handle life in the Jim Crow South. Lewis focused on the separate black neighborhood becoming a safe environment for individuals to create a worthwhile position for themselves in the community, rather than be the stereotype given to them by the white community.¹⁴ Though forced upon them, the segregated sphere left people an opportunity to develop themselves as a culture. They

¹¹ William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad, ed., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans tell about life in the Segregated South* (New York: the New Press, 2001), 128.

¹² Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests* (California: University of California Press, 1991), 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 91-2.

created their own institutions based on the needs of a community denied the proper necessary facilities, such as, doctor clinics, lawyer services, drug stores, funeral homes, and more. Under a segregated and unsupportive white-empowered system, the black community developed support networks for themselves.¹⁵

A belief of strong morality stimulated the development for a supportive network in the community. Exemplifying this condition of mutual support within the black community in her article, historian Sarah Judson reveals the ways that black clubwomen in Atlanta, Georgia organized and operated different events and facilities to promote a self-supportive, moral, and productive community.¹⁶ Elsa Barkley Brown also writes of a famous black clubwoman, Maggie Lena Walker and her work “to affirm and cement the existing mutual assistance network among black women and within the black community by providing an institutionalized structure for these activities.”¹⁷ The different activities included outlets for wholesome recreation. These authors show how black clubwomen represented the community in working toward the goal of moral standing to achieve social equality.

The emphasis on moral behavior within the black community developed largely through the influence of the church. Discussing the historiography of the black community in the South, one historian claims, “The stress put on the character and conduct as building blocks of the black manhood and womanhood reflected a strong

¹⁵ Joanne M. Martin and Elmer P. Martin, *The Helping Tradition in the Black Family and Community* (Silver Springs: National Association of Social Workers, 1985), 61.

¹⁶ Sarah Judson, “‘Leisure is a foe to any man:’ The Sexual Politics of Citizenship and Leisure in World War I Era Atlanta,” (unpublished manuscript, 2002), 9.

¹⁷ Elsa Barkley Brown, “Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke,” *Signs* 14 (1989): 212.

religious orientation, even in tax-supported schools.”¹⁸ Lewis describes this point, “At the hub of every black community sat the church...it represented black independence.”¹⁹ The encouragement of character-building and strong moral development came from Christian teachings. This grew in part from the need for the black individual in the South to build a good name for his/her self and the race. Thelma Caldwell from Asheville remembered her father, “taught us that no one was better than any of us as long as our behavior was desirable.”²⁰ Blacks surmised that their good character in the community would elevate them as citizens in the eyes of the whites.²¹

Along with the aim toward good citizenship and stress of Christian morals, the black community strove for social respect through education. The aspiration for social advancement through education required the entire community to be a part of the learning process. In the famous article “The Talented Tenth,” Dubois wrote on the emphasis of learning to elevate the individual: “human education is not simply a matter of schools; it is much more a matter of family and group life- the training of one’s home, of one’s daily companions, of one’s social class.”²² Mabel R. Worthy, an African American from Asheville, illustrated this in her story from the oral history book *Angels Unaware*, “I was raised in an average Christian family in the early 1900’s...In those days, the church and

¹⁸ Raymond Gavins, “The Meaning of Freedom: Black North Carolina in the Nadir, 1880-1900,” in *Race, Class, and Politics in Southern History: Essays in Honor of Robert F. Durden*, ed. Jeffrey J. Crow, Paul D. Escott, and Charles L. Flynn, Jr. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 189.

¹⁹ Lewis, 23.

²⁰ Helen Mosley-Edington, *Angels Unaware: Asheville Women of Color* (Asheville: Home Press, 1996), 19.

²¹ Jenette Thomas Greenwood, *Bittersweet Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 83-92; Lewis, 24; Jeffrey J. Crow, Paul D. Escott, and Flora J. Hatley, *African Americans in North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1992), 97; John Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 39.

²² W.E.B. DuBois, “The Talented Tenth,” in *African-American Social and Political Thought 1850-1920*, ed. Howard Brotz (New Brunswick: Transaction Publications, 1996; originally published by Basic Books, Inc., 1966), 528-9.

school were the main activity places.”²³ Education represented for blacks that which the white population took for granted: social freedoms and personal respect. Historian Raymond Gavins summarizes, “education meant liberation.”²⁴ It meant progress for the entire African American race, a sure way to achieve a better position in the white world, more control in politics, and more validity to the fact that blacks were not inferior but capable to live as equal citizens.²⁵

African Americans applied themselves to developing high personal goals, working hard not only to achieve a healthy sense of self-worth but also to achieve equal social status. Research in black Richmond by Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg D. Kimball concluded, “Each visible evidence of progress...was part of a ritual of memory, struggle, and hope.”²⁶ In the research of black communities and their social progress since slavery, historians have found these main factors of education, the church, and communal cooperation contributing to this group of people finding their place in a world opposed to their equal right for humanity.

Being a southern town, Asheville, North Carolina contained much of the same racial problems for blacks as other places, though certain elements made it different. Compared to other cities, blacks and whites lived somewhat harmoniously together throughout the period of severe racism in the South. In the September 28, 1867 issue of *Harper's Weekly*, an illustration of Asheville post-Civil War shows blacks at the voters'

²³ Mosley-Edington, 94.

²⁴ Gavins, 196.

²⁵ Crow, Escott, and Hatley, 97-118; Dittmer, 180, 145-147; James E Blackwell, *The Black Community: diversity and unity* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975), 69-70; Robert C. Kenzer, *Enterprising Southerner* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 125; Greenwood, 212-224; Frank Hollowell White, “The Economic And Social Development of Negroes In North Carolina Since 1900” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1960), 3-4.

²⁶ Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg D. Kimball, “Mapping the terrain of black Richmond,” *Journal of Urban History* 21, no. 4 (March 1995), 316.

registration line.²⁷ The scene looks more like a street party with a black man in the forefront dancing to another man's banjo playing while two white soldiers look on quietly with disdain. Although this scene is not exclusive to Asheville and the southern racism remained prevalent there, it demonstrated white tolerance of the black population becoming empowered at the time. Tolerance did not negate the unequal, unfair treatment blacks received in Asheville but lessened harsh circumstances and opened opportunities for them to create their own thriving community there.

The small population of African Americans in Asheville factored greatly into the more liberal condition. North Carolina farmers did not own many slaves and the black population remained low throughout the 19th century.²⁸ Many North Carolinian blacks lived as free citizens.²⁹ The U.S. census in 1840 recorded Buncombe County's slave population as 1,199 and 87 free blacks out of a total population of 10,084.³⁰ In 1880 even with the growth of the black population to 3476 out of the total population 21,909, the percentage was still significantly low compared to other southern regions.³¹ Because of the low numbers of slaves and blacks in general, many whites either felt ambivalent to the minority group or disregarded them as an unnecessary part of the general population. People did not have as much use for them, and therefore in the white perspective, the racial issues mattered less than in other parts of the South.

²⁷ George B. McKinney, "Southern Mountain Republicans and the Negro South, 1865-1900," in *Appalachians and Race: The Mountain South from Slavery to Segregation*, John C. Inscoe, ed. (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 201.

²⁸ Lenwood G. Davis, *The Black Heritage of western North Carolina*, ed. Milton Ready, (Asheville: University Graphics, UNCA, 1986), 12-15; Milton Ready, *Asheville: Land of the Sky*, (California: Western North Carolina History Association and Windsor Publishing, Inc., 1986), 53.

²⁹ Ready, 53.

³⁰ Census Data, Geospatial and Statistical Database-Collections, historical census browser; available from University of Virginia Library, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>.

³¹ Ibid.

This low number attributed to the fairly good race relations that continued into the early 20th century. Before the strict impressments of Jim Crow segregation, black business owners even shared space with whites. A black man named B.J. Jackson owned a fruit and vegetable stand located in the city market along with the white tradesmen from the turn of the century to 1904.³² With low numbers, blacks seemed less threatening to white authority, which in turn led to loose control over the minority population. Because of the historically lower population, white culture seemed to expect less from them. Annie Harrison of Asheville remembers, “The laws said separate but equal. Many times we were not equal, however...race relations were somewhat good because nothing was expected of blacks.”³³ Although, white control remained apparent and caused problems for blacks in Asheville, the situation was more optimistic for black social mobility in light of a general white ambivalence.

In Asheville, the more liberal, republican background of late 19th century politics laid a basis for a more sympathetic white authority throughout the period of Jim Crow. For the most part, political issues were non-racial.³⁴ The politics of this town differed from the majority of Buncombe County. Asheville was Republican, whereas Buncombe County along with the majority of the state supported the Southern Democratic Party. A chart from an 1899 issue of *The Home Journal* illustrated Buncombe County Democrats winning the popular vote in the landslide victory for the Democrats in the 1898 elections of North Carolina. The city of Asheville remained the one section of exception.³⁵ Their

³² Handwritten copied papers found in John Baxter’s folder, Black Highlanders Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville, bhcm77.10.4.8.2. [Hereafter referred to as BHColl.]; Davis, 21.

³³ Mosley-Edington, 54.

³⁴ Ready, 53; McKinney, 213-14.

³⁵ Helen G. Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina, 1854-1901* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 152.

continued support for the Republican/Reconstruction Party created an odd pairing of white and black coalition in politics.³⁶ The tradition carried into the new century politics of the town. Minnie Jones remembers the Asheville city government in the 1920s and '30s talking to the black community and listening to their concerns about poor housing conditions.³⁷ The political orientation of Asheville added much to its liberal position.

Though the Republican Party in North Carolina needed the black vote, “This biracial alliance proved to be more pragmatic than idealistic.”³⁸ Political associations of mountain Republicans supported good relations, but stipulations for maintaining white authority kept high priority. At the turn of the century when they had the majority control in the state, the Democrats pressured Republicans to support the disenfranchisement of blacks from the political arena.³⁹ This made the black influence in the Republican Party practically obsolete. With the social instillation of Jim Crow by 1900, segregation became institutionalized in all parts of the South. Though the race relations in Asheville remained peaceful, the separate but certainly not equal situation took a strong hold. Asheville may have been a liberal town but it was still a southern town.

An example of this on-going dualism in Asheville comes from a 1924 editorial in the *Asheville Citizen*. Assuming the unknown author is white (since the paper is white), the article about the repercussions of newly segregated water fountains illustrates the difference of opinions the white community had about race relations. The story related the plight of the black population in this developing Jim Crow era. Not realizing the

³⁶ McKinney, 199.

³⁷ Mosley-Edington, 67.

³⁸ McKinney, 199.

³⁹ Edmonds, 140-148.

water fountain on the downtown square was suddenly off limits to them, blacks bending over for a drink were immediately “yelled at, abused and driven away...not told that there are fountains for them across the floral area.”⁴⁰ The author criticized the situation by pointing out the inhumanity of people embarrassing the black citizens for recreational purposes.⁴¹ The criticism also pointed out the possible damage to Asheville’s progressive reputation in the eyes of tourists who long supported the city’s economy.⁴²

The nature of Asheville from the late 19th century and on pointed toward the attraction of tourists and their growing economic influence. This emphasis on growth and prosperity required laborers for development and service for the influx of tourists. The tourist industry of Asheville supported a large portion of working blacks.⁴³ Looking over this growing southern town in an 1890 photograph from the view of Town Mountain, the scene encompassed a beautiful horizon of mountains and hopeful expansion for the small structures of culture and commerce.⁴⁴ The prosperity came to the town with the rich men who became the town fathers. Names like Patton, Vance, Coxe, Pearson, and Vanderbilt became street and monument names for the men who developed the “Land of the Sky,” as it was called for its beauty and healing energy.⁴⁵ The initial increase of Asheville’s small black population came with the Buncombe Turnpike

⁴⁰ “Color Line on the Square: Negroes Baited for Using Wrong Fount,” *Asheville Daily Citizen* (Asheville) 20 July 1924, from Pack Memorial Library Vertical File Collection, vol.1, files 1-4. [Hereafter, newspaper clippings from this collection will be referred to as the Pack Collection along with the name of the newspaper and article.]

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Mr. and Mrs. Ernest McKissick, interview by Dr. Lewis D. Silveri, 2 August 1977, Silveri Oral History Collection, D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville. [Hereafter, oral histories from this collection will be referred to as SOH along with the name of the person interviewed and the date.]

⁴⁴ Thomas H. Lindsey, “View from Town Mountain, 1890,” as reproduced in Stephen E. Massengill, *Images of America: Western North Carolina, A Visual Journey through stereo views and photographs* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 1999), 2.

⁴⁵ Bob Terrell, *Historic Asheville* (Alexander, North Carolina: WorldComm, 1997), 100; Ready, 35.

opening in the 1830's, and then working the construction of the railroad in the 1880's.⁴⁶ The designated black area settled where it did with the help of George Vanderbilt in the 1890's.⁴⁷ Vanderbilt, after visiting Asheville and falling in love with the mountains, used many black laborers to build his castle in the French Broad River valley.⁴⁸

The construction of Biltmore Estate began in 1892 and ended within five years, giving much needed employment to many people, black and white.⁴⁹ During this time, the black community grew larger to the point of necessitating a central place to socialize in the non-working hours. Edward Stephens, black leader and school principal, sought the answer to the need for a social institution for the growing black community. He held the first assembly of the "Colored YMCA" in 1890 at the house of another well-known black leader, Isaac Dickson.⁵⁰ When Vanderbilt arrived with jobs and money, they approached him to build a facility.⁵¹ His financial support of this undertaking helped to create a center for the blacks to expand their community and begin work for a good life in Asheville.

Vanderbilt hired his builders of the estate to build the facility in 1892. The black community leaders named it the Young Men's Institute.⁵² The black laborers of Biltmore along with the whole black community created a facility worthy of Vanderbilt's financial backing, as well as the praise in the pages of the white newspaper. A letter dated 24

⁴⁶ Terrell, 118-19; Ready, 53.

⁴⁷ Davis, 66; John Preston Arthur, *Western North Carolina: A History (from 1730 to 1913)* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Edwards and Broughton Printing Company, 1914), 444; "Three Years in the Institute: anniversary reunion of the Y.M.I.," *Asheville Daily Citizen* (Asheville) 13 February 1896, Pack Collection.

⁴⁸ Terrell, 151-4; Ready, 46.

⁴⁹ Terrell, 151-4; Ready, 46.

⁵⁰ "Colored Y.M.C.A.: the first meeting well attended and very promising," *Asheville Daily Citizen* (Asheville) 1 September 1890, Pack Collection.

⁵¹ Arthur, 444.

⁵² McKissick, SOH.

October 1895 acknowledged, “It was the original intention that the income of the building...should be devoted to paying Mr. Vanderbilt back...the cost of the building and ground.”⁵³ The black leaders rented the YMI from their proprietor until in 1906 they made a deal with him to pay back the debt at the bargained price of \$10,000.⁵⁴ Vanderbilt agreed to the contract and the black community secured the title to the incorporated organization. The *Asheville Daily Citizen* commended the event, “The payment is the result of hard work and good management on the part of the Y. M. I. association.”⁵⁵ This progressive endeavor produced much more than originally intended.

From its beginning, this communal association led to more progress for the neighborhood forming around the YMI in the Eagle/Market Street area. Not only did it become a social outlet for the men of the community, but also a resource for a number of different needs for the entire community. Ernest McKissick, a longtime resident of Asheville and one of the influential black leaders now deceased, affirmed the importance of the YMI: “the YMI was the focal point, the center for Negro culture in Asheville, ‘way back when it started.”⁵⁶ He told how the organization held events for everyone. There were church events, entertainment events, a community jazz band, a kindergarten, and housing/bath facilities.⁵⁷ It also housed sports events, community meeting rooms, a drugstore, real estate firm, an undertaker, cabinet shop, the colored city library, beauty and barbershops, doctors, dentists, lawyers, and a shoe store.⁵⁸ The versatility of the YMI helped it to become the cultural center of the community. Many blacks of Asheville

⁵³ Arthur, 444.

⁵⁴ “Y.M.I. Pays Mr. Vanderbilt \$10,000 and Secures Title,” *Asheville Daily Citizen* (Asheville) 12 June 1906, Pack Collection; McKissick, SOH.

⁵⁵ “Y.M.I. Pays...” Pack Collection; McKissick, SOH.

⁵⁶ McKissick, SOH.

⁵⁷ “Three Years in the Institute,” Pack Collection.

⁵⁸ Ready, 57.

in this early period of the 20th century spent as much time at the YMI as McKissick spent there.

Ernest McKissick spent much of his life in the entire Eagle/Market street area. He lived in and around the area since he came to Asheville as a child in 1901 or 1902.⁵⁹ His first job required driving the horse and buggy for Dr. J.W. Walker, whose office was located in the YMI building like most of the other black doctors.⁶⁰ McKissick's next job kept him in the YMI drug store, where he worked on and off while also working in the hotel service industry.⁶¹ He attended church services at the YMI for three years while the Hopkins Chapel was under construction after a fire, and recounted the importance of his church experience:

The church had a great influence on me. Because they helped me, and they guided me, and they directed me...Any time any church didn't have anywhere to go,...they held services at the YMI... We had a week of prayer at the YMI every year...different churches would preach every two or three nights...that's where...I confessed religion [and was] baptized in that building...it's part of me.⁶²

McKissick's story of attachment to this establishment exemplifies the part it played in making a strong sub-culture for the African Americans of Asheville. He is only one out of many who grew up closely connected to his community.

The segregation laws made establishments outside of the designated black area difficult to patronize, and therefore, kept blacks interconnected with their community. The YMI started the growth of the Eagle/Market street area.⁶³ It exemplified the positive perspective taken in reaction to the exclusion. Vera Harris told about her and her husband's work behind the drugstore counter there. They sold many different items and

⁵⁹ McKissick, SOH.

⁶⁰ Ibid.; "1919-1920 Scale of Rents YMI," Baxter folder, bhcm77.10.3.8, BHColl.

⁶¹ McKissick, SOH.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Gunnels and Gunnels, 3.

residents crowded the place to the point of people standing; “children and young adults gathered at the YMI Drugstore to socialize, meet friends, and snack.”⁶⁴ The YMI, along with the surrounding neighborhood, provided the location for blacks in Asheville to live a life without constant subjugation.

The 20th century began with the black neighborhood centering in that downtown spot. As segregation spread wider everywhere in the South, black residencies as well as business and club organizations settled on the underside of what is now Biltmore Avenue. By 1920, about 25% of the population in Asheville was African American and lived and congregated in separate areas from the whites.⁶⁵ Not all the population lived in the area around the YMI, but in the words of Lenwood Davis it “was the hub of social, cultural, civic, business, and religious life of the Black Mountaineers.”⁶⁶ The black community remembers “the Block” in great fondness as a safe haven from the often cruel reality of the external society.

The expansion of the black neighborhood evolved out of necessity, as there was generally no other venue for what a community requires. White establishments refused service in many cases, or they made it undesirable. Mary Howard of Asheville described the situation: “Black people were served at the lunch counter in the Kress store at the back of the store, while whites were served at the front of the counter. Black people had to wait a very lengthy time until all the white people coming in were served first.”⁶⁷ This treatment from whites typified occurrences of the entire south. Many black people tell stories such as this and worse.

⁶⁴ Mosley-Edington, 51.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 63; Davis, 30; John Baxter, 5 August 1975, SOH; McKissick, SOH.

⁶⁶ Davis, 67.

⁶⁷ Mosley-Edington, 63.

The black population in Asheville along with the entire South experienced a great deal of the racism such as Ms. Howard described. Violence and lynching occurred occasionally. Other effects of racism happened within the system of daily living. Marian Fortenbury, a white native of Asheville, remembers growing up with her black servants taking her to the segregated white park. Her mother gave instructions to the servants not to separate from young Fortenbury as they might invite trouble from other whites for being there.⁶⁸ A black native related the same experience; as the nanny for a white family, she was instructed to stay next to the white child so she would not “get assaulted.”⁶⁹ Sadie Chisolm of Asheville pointed out other unsafe, unfair conditions under Jim Crow: “If blacks wanted to swim they did so in unsanitary ponds or lakes.”⁷⁰ Segregation made life for blacks challenging to move beyond the negative outlook of their social circumstance.

The effects of segregation and maltreatment resulted negatively in numerous incidents, but the congregation of the black community epitomized the positive perspective. The black community reacted to the exclusion of the larger society by forming productive ways in which to live under the domination of hatred. Discussing the Jim Crow laws, Chisolm commented, “We didn’t like the unfair laws, but we learned to live with them.”⁷¹ African Americans found coping skills within the Christian faith and created a viable source for drawing the positive out of a difficult life.

Many blacks in Asheville found their peace with the white oppression through the church. O.M. Reynolds explained it like many others:

⁶⁸ Marian C. Fortenbury of Asheville, interview by author, 23 July 2003, Asheville.

⁶⁹ Mosley-Edington, 15.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Having a strong faith in God and attending church regularly gave black people a desire to forgive and forget. The church showed that there was hope during these hard times. To hate others does not make people feel good about themselves.⁷²

Many people followed this sentiment rather than letting the injustice of the situation produce resentments. The church helped people live under the restrictions of the South. The community incorporated the church into their everyday lives for survival of their peace of mind and heart. Lucy Mae Harrison, another black native of Asheville, asserted, “The church has been the foundation of the Asheville black community.”⁷³ She went on to relate how she and others of the community believed that any progress made came through the church.⁷⁴

Many churches of different sects influenced the black community of Asheville. According to a census by the Chamber of Commerce in 1927, the two most popular forms of the Christian faith in the African American community were Baptist and Methodist.⁷⁵ These sects each had nine churches, whereas Adventist, Episcopal, Holiness, and Presbyterian had six altogether. Each of these churches had great influence on the community in small or large proportion. The Hill Street Baptist Church in 1915 had a daycare for working families and facilitated leisure activity for the congregation.⁷⁶ The importance of these facilities in the community carried much weight. The Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist church was originally planned for facing away from the neighborhood

⁷² Ibid., 90.

⁷³ Lucy Mae Harrison, OH-VOA.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ *Asheville Handbook: A Condensed Summary of Important Facts and Figures Reflecting the Resources and Development of Asheville and Buncombe County*, vol.2, compiled by the Industrial Department (Asheville, North Carolina: Asheville Chamber of Commerce, 1927) 25; found in the vertical files of local history in UNCA-Special Collections.

⁷⁶ Ready, 55.

it served but ultimately built to face “the Block.”⁷⁷ The church held the key for the community to bond together.

Education in all its forms also led to social progress for African Americans. People believed that being educated promoted the race and the right for equality, a sure way to achieve a better position in the white world, more control in politics, and more significance to the fact that blacks were not inferior but capable to live as equal citizens.⁷⁸ Three African American women of Asheville confirmed this in saying they were all taught, “to tolerate racial hostility through education [which made them] able to overcome and become proud people.”⁷⁹ Education ranging from the public to the private helped support and connect the black community.

The public schools for blacks had less to offer than the white schools, but the community encouraged individuals to attend for the sake of opposing the unfair system. Black residents of Asheville felt that the importance of the schools equaled the importance of the church for their community to prosper.⁸⁰ The first public school for blacks in Asheville opened on Beaumont Street in 1888 with 300 students, and the number of eager students only grew from there.⁸¹ Isaac Dickson, the first black man on the city school board, instigated the development of the first black high school in 1891, the Catholic Hill School.⁸² A tragedy for the entire community occurred in 1917 when this school burned to the ground killing seven students with more injured.⁸³ Historian Milton Ready described the course of action the community took, “In its ashes rose

⁷⁷ Harrison, OH-VOA.

⁷⁸ Crow, Escott, and Hatley, 97-118; Dittmer, 180, 145-147; Blackwell, 69-70; Kenzer, 125; Greenwood, 212-224; White, 3-4.

⁷⁹ Mosley-Edington, 41, 75, & 90.

⁸⁰ Baxter, SOH.

⁸¹ Terrell, 137.

⁸² Ready, 53.

⁸³ Ibid, 54.

Stephens-Lee, [which] became a center for black culture and education throughout the mountains.⁸⁴ Stephens-Lee promoted the knowledge of skills applicable to life along with knowledge of high education.⁸⁵ The life skills taught there and at other industrial schools prepared students for experience in the world. As one industrial school proclaimed in their pamphlet, “Success is largely the result of qualification.”⁸⁶ The black people of Asheville made success by giving themselves quality of life within their community.

Excluded from any white social facilities, the black neighborhood provided the people with decent institutions the community required. Businesses developed not only to profit but also to work in direct opposition to the unfair segregation. Sadie Chisolm, along with her husband, owned a general grocery in the downtown area on Grail Street, which catered and supported the black community.⁸⁷ Many black businesses on “the Block” and all over the South opened to thrive and endure for years with vast success.⁸⁸ J. Wilson began a barbershop in 1901 located near “the Block.”⁸⁹ Henry Pearson worked at the city market as a butcher that same year.⁹⁰ Noah Murrough opened the first black funeral home in 1910 on Main Street.⁹¹ The first colored public library opened on the corner of Eagle/Market Streets in 1927.⁹² Arthur Porter had a grocery in the 1920s and it

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ “Normal Industrial School and Collegiate Institute,” (Clinton, North Carolina: privately printed, 1909), 5; found in BHColl.

⁸⁷ Mosley-Edington, 22; Baxter folder, BHColl.

⁸⁸ White, 91-106.

⁸⁹ Baxter folder, BHColl.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ “History of Wilkins-Hart Mortuary, Inc.,” copied paper found in M77.10.3.4, BHColl; Davis, 28; Baxter folder, BHColl.

⁹² Davis, 34.

endured to the '50s.⁹³ Mrs. Cordelia Stewart began the Stewart's School of Beauty Culture around that same time and it lasted into the mid-60s.⁹⁴ The neighborhood presented the black community with ample amount of resources that the white community withheld from them.

“The Block” held many meaningful memories for black people due to the intimate relations attained through the supportive nature of the neighborhood. Ms. McQueen as well as Ms. Harrison told about the different places available to them in the community owned by the black society. There was the movie house, a candy shop, and a dress shop where even wealthy white people shopped at their prerogative.⁹⁵ As an adult, McQueen co-owned the well-known restaurant The Ritz located on the corner of Eagle Street.⁹⁶ She related how her patrons came from all over the country for the 32 years she ran the establishment.⁹⁷

Many people tell stories of growing up in that district, working there, or playing and visiting. Ms. McQueen remembered her father bringing his children with him to town in the early 1920s. While he sold vegetables on Lexington Avenue, the children went to Eagle/Market Streets and spent their days there at the restaurants, cafes, or at friends' houses.⁹⁸ This area kept the children occupied and in a safe, friendly environment, as opposed to segregated Lexington Avenue. On “the Block,” as in other black neighborhoods, the adults present watched and cared for all the children as an understood agreement.⁹⁹ The children received discipline or care from any parent when

⁹³ Baxter folder, BHColl.

⁹⁴ Copied newspaper photographs from BHColl.

⁹⁵ McQueen, OH-VOA; Harrison, OH-VOA.

⁹⁶ McQueen, OH-VOA; Harrison, OH-VOA.

⁹⁷ McQueen, OH-VOA; Harrison, OH-VOA.

⁹⁸ McQueen, OH-VOA.

⁹⁹ Mosley-Edington, 85 &107.

needed since people “believed a safe community was built on strong family values and cooperative neighbors.”¹⁰⁰ This belief became an important factor in the culture of African Americans. It made the neighborhood a viable place for people to support and be supported.

“The Block” gave people a sufficient amount of reasons for supporting it in this age of Jim Crow. Since the culture of the black community centered in this area, the people appreciated it deeply. The residents patronized the eateries, businesses, and functions, and in turn, the people benefited. Residents frequented the barber and styling shops to gather and share information with neighbors along with paying for a haircut.¹⁰¹ Black shop owners set lower prices, “the storekeepers knew there was very little money available...and they took care of the black community; helping each other.”¹⁰² The business owners, knowing times were often hard on their neighbors, helped the clientele, and as a result the people kept returning.¹⁰³ The black community supported itself in the times when the larger community left them to fend for themselves.

The black neighborhood provided not only for the local black population but also for travelers who could not go anywhere else to sit, eat, and sleep with dignity. Throughout the South, traveling proved difficult for African Americans. Many of the black women in the book *Angels Unaware* related the frustration and difficulty of not being allowed in to restaurants or bathrooms while traveling.¹⁰⁴ Virginia Daniels from Asheville remembered living at more than one residence with different family members, but not understanding the reason until she became an adult; “I know now that my father

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 85.

¹⁰¹ Chafe, Gavins, and Korstad, 136.

¹⁰² Ibid., 128.

¹⁰³ Ibid.; Mosley-Edington, 51.

¹⁰⁴ Mosley-Edington, 14 & 35.

was making it possible for others, during those days of deep seated segregation, to have comfortable lodging in our home. Each time we moved papa would choose a house bigger than the previous one.”¹⁰⁵ This kind of helpfulness within the black community made it possible to maintain mobility and at least a fair amount of freedom. More well to do African Americans attained even more freedom in being able to afford the black hotels. On South Main Street in Asheville, now South Biltmore, the Royal Victoria Hotel advertised in a paper from 1904, “Modern and up-to-date. Caters to the best class of colored people. Lunch counter in connection.”¹⁰⁶ This sort of luxury along with the more affordable lodging offered blacks a chance to live above the degradation the white culture offered.

Other opportunities to rise above the second-class status came from the women’s organization down the street from the YMI, the Phyllis Wheatley Branch of the YWCA. The first building the black YWCA occupied opened on Eagle Street in the 1920s under Adela Ruffian.¹⁰⁷ This opened more opportunities for the black female population of Asheville, such as education, job connections, housing, and social functions. Lucy Harrison shared her experience, “My teenage days were spent in play at the YWCA... Good grooming, social graces and housekeeping were stressed.”¹⁰⁸ The YW taught good behavior and high morality in the spirit of Christian values. Harrison spoke of the Girls’ Reserve Corp providing job connections for young women, and activities for learning and fun for girls.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 26.

¹⁰⁶ “The Colored People: Here and Elsewhere,” newspaper unknown, 16 February 1904, Pack Collection.

¹⁰⁷ Harrison, OH-VOA.

¹⁰⁸ Mosley-Edington, 55-57

¹⁰⁹ Harrison, OH-VOA.

Like the YMI, the YWCA also offered a place for community functions. Ruffian moved the facility to a larger house on College Street between 1924 and '25, and then added a large gymnasium.¹¹⁰ Ruffian achieved this move by petitioning the white leaders to help provide the blacks with a proper environment for multiple purposes in the community.¹¹¹ After she succeeded in funding the addition, she reported of the effects it had on public black education, "Negro principals enriched their curriculum... School attendance improved and school pride increased."¹¹² The gymnasium made the YWCA the only place with a substantial facility for blacks to hold school sporting and academic events, and community dances and recitals.¹¹³

The establishment of yet another venue for the black community gave people great pride in what they achieved. From a YWCA report in December 1925, Adela Ruffian expressed her excitement:

Our new building is proving itself a means of educating the public. Men, especially, come every Sunday, look it over, ask questions and, for the first time, are told that the "Phyllis Wheatley" exists. Others... are quickened in their interest because, their questions elicit information on the extent of our program.¹¹⁴

The new organization established ties between itself and the rest of the community, including other community-based institutions. In an annual summary from 1929, the YW reported impressive numbers of attendance to their programs: Girl's Work-4073, Vesper Services for girls-292, Vesper Services for the public-1400, Religious Meetings-3625, Parties for girls-477, Recreational Use of the Gymnasium-9812, and

¹¹⁰ Adela Ruffian, "Our Building" (Asheville: Phyllis Wheatley Branch Young Women's Christian Association, 1925, photocopied), from YWCA Archives, D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville. [Hereafter, this collection will be referred to as YW-A.]

¹¹¹ Mosley-Edington, 94.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ruffian, YW-A; Mosley-Edington, 93-94.

¹¹⁴ Ruffian, YW-A.

Housing/Employment Placement-139.¹¹⁵ This amount of use from the general public showed the necessity of this type of organization within the black community. The aid people received came from the communal values the black culture created in this time period. Between the YMI, the YWCA, and other important black supported services located in the segregated downtown area, the African American people of Asheville created an efficient, self-sustainable community.

To return to the perspective of Asheville's Thomas Wolfe-- a writer who focused on his perspective of the town where he spent his youth-- the black community for him seemed completely incapable of living as equals in white early 20th century society. In writing his theatrical version of Asheville's race problems, Wolfe represented the general opinion of whites towards blacks and their way of life. During the time of his playwriting at Harvard, he wrote in a letter, "Negroes do not possess the imagination necessary to envision a cause outside their own creature-comforts and, therefore, resist all efforts at organization and self-improvement."¹¹⁶ This opinion, though the general one at that time, historically carries no truth. Blacks organized a strong, connected community for the purpose of not only self-improvement, but also improvement for the entire race.

During this period of creativity and cultural improvements within a society opposed to their humanity, African Americans developed a powerful resistance to oppression. They resisted simply by creating a community based on how they defined themselves rather than how white culture defined them. Vera Reid Harris of Asheville related her personal experience for finding ways through the oppressive nature of the South:

¹¹⁵ Ruffian, "Phyllis Wheatley Branch-Y.W.C.A.; 1929," YW-A.

¹¹⁶ Huffman, 19-21.

In an age of discrimination, segregation, Jim Crow laws and second class citizenship for black people, I was taught to get as much education as possible. Ku Klux Klan activity did not stop our desire to become good citizens. My mother told us to ignore unjust activity because state laws upheld these actions...My religious faith helped me to ignore unfair laws and forgive those in authority...I believe we are a strong race of people both physically and mentally or we would have become extinct by now.¹¹⁷

Harris learned that the Christian value of forgiveness best suited living in a segregated, deplorable society that labeled her inferior. The black community bonded together to forgive and love their oppressors.¹¹⁸

The problem today comes from the distrust between blacks and whites. The general feeling exemplified by Wolfe's attitude still lingers in white society, although more or less hidden from the public eye. Black culture still strongly connects people within the community, but not so much outside of it. The separateness still lingers in the larger community, even though the federal government outlawed segregation many years ago. The lack of trust causes blacks and whites to keep to their traditional social circles while simultaneously maintaining an unspoken rift between the two.

DuBois gave mention to this rift in his prose written in 1897, "Beyond the Veil in a Virginia Town." He pointed out a feature of American society many wish to ignore even today:

The great veil—now dark, sinister and wall-like, not light filmy and silky, but every[where] a dividing veil running throughout the town and dividing it... It is two worlds separate yet bound together like double stars that, bound for all time, whirl around each other separate yet one.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Mosley-Edington, 51.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 26, 51, 85, & 91.

¹¹⁹ W.E.B. Dubois, "Beyond the Veil in a Virginia Town (1897)" in *Against Racism: Unpublished essays, papers, addresses, 1887-1961*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 49.

His point rings true today. People of different races stay separate out of hurt, fear, traditional norms, hatred, and all sorts of other reasons.

Understanding the history behind the racism, the conditions that put it there, and how the subjugated people responded to their situation helps to heal the racism that communities hold onto today. The black community strove to live above the trappings of racism while in its midst of racial oppression. Through understanding of each side of the story, people may begin to feel the empathy required to open up for true equality. In the end, history will prove that the social circles must coincide on a deeper level if society wants the peace between them to continue and prosper. Perhaps the interconnected devotion within the African American culture can incorporate the entire American culture, and eventually the entire world culture. People are all different, and diversity is a thing of beauty, not to be feared.

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