

Vox Magazine

Remembering Sharp End Neighborhood

Columbia's forgotten black neighborhood rekindles conversations about urban renewal

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In the early 1960s, Third Street Market provided groceries to residents of the Sharp End neighborhood. The downtown store was located across the street from Douglass High School. Third Street was later widened and renamed Providence Road. - Photograph Courtesy of The State Historical Society of Missouri.





The west side of North Sixth Street was once dotted with small businesses, such as the Columbia Co-operative Warehouse. Now rows of houses line the downtown road that stretches north of Jefferson Junior High School. - Photograph from The State Historical Society of Missouri





Workers clear the land and prepare to build public housing in what was the Columbia Sharp End neighborhood. According to a 1962 progress report from the city, a house serves two functions: providing shelter and symbolizing dignity, and “a shack in the slums can provide neither.” - Photograph Courtesy of The State Historical Society of Missouri

Barbra Horrell walks out of Second Missionary Baptist Church at the corner of Broadway and Fourth streets, gazes north and shakes her head as she remembers her neighborhood before the city turned it into housing developments and commercial buildings.

“We had our own city within a city,” Horrell says of Sharp End, a center of business and culture during an era when blacks were unwelcome in white-owned businesses.

She went to the popular Tiger Club theater on Fourth Street to see movies. Her family owned the funeral home down the block, and Horrell was a member of one of the last segregated classes at Douglass High School in 1960.

On Walnut Street between Fifth and Sixth was the Busy Bee Barbershop, known to locals as Phillips Williams, named after the men who owned it. Merle Slater’s restaurant sat next to the barbershop, and the smells of fried chicken and fried fish filled both businesses. On the opposite end of



Barbra Horrell models for a fundraiser in 1975. Right: Horrell, in 2012, gathers with other members of the last segregated classes at Douglass. Left photo from The State Historical Society of Missouri Right photo by Carrie Durkee

Walnut, Dick Tibb's Pool Hall invited revelers to come in off the street and play a game or two. Upstairs was Elks Hall where civic organizations hosted events with a bring-your-own-booze policy.

Along Third Street, now Providence Road, a little shack called Uncle B's Ice House provided ice for the whole neighborhood. Jenny Taylor's Tavern and Grill served hot dogs, hamburgers, fish sandwiches and soda pop in glass bottles. Two blocks down at Third and Ash, the barbers at McQuitty's gave Horrell her first haircut.

When she talks about the old neighborhood, she sounds wistful and troubled.

Where jazz musicians used to play soulful tunes, an eight-story city-owned parking garage now juts into the skyline. The Tiger Club is gone, too, bought up by the Tribune Company years ago. Barbershops and restaurants have been replaced with public housing, parking garages and a post office, while the businesses that once flanked Providence are now the Columbia Housing Authority and apartments that many in the neighborhood call "the projects."

Only the churches and the historic-but-empty J.W. "Blind" Boone Home remain as they were.

In 1954, the city began a systematic destruction of Sharp End in the name of urban renewal. It was the same year the Supreme Court struck down school segregation but a decade before the Civil Rights Act.

The government decided the neighborhood needed revitalization, so it declared the area substandard and started building from scratch. The self-sustaining, thriving center of black business and culture was gone, left only in memories.

In her ethnography, *Successful Black Entrepreneurs in Columbia, Missouri*, Alisa McDonald-Warren described what happened: "The federal Urban Renewal Program allowed property where black businesses were located to be condemned as 'slums' and then bought by white business owners and 'redeveloped.'"

Today, the effort to bring physical improvements and jobs to the center of Columbia through property tax incentives and a blight designation is drawing comparisons to the destruction of Sharp End.

After an outcry, the City Council voted this month to let citizens decide whether the government can use the power of eminent domain to acquire property in an area designated as blighted. The proposed amendment to the city's charter on the election ballot in April would prohibit the use of eminent domain when "the property will ultimately be transferred to another person or entity to be used for private purposes."

More than half of Columbia has been declared blighted or has conditions that lead to blight in order to qualify for development tax breaks, but some residents of the blight zone and those who remember Sharp End see the city's work as more of a curse than a blessing.

Just as in the case of Sharp End, the city hopes to alleviate poverty and create more opportunities for businesses to thrive.

But in Sharp End, that isn't what happened, at least when it came to the displaced business operators and homeowners who became renters.

Most of the black-owned businesses in the area closed and never opened again. They had nowhere else to go. Within a decade, the center of black culture in Columbia was gone.

Beginning the end

In 1865, the heart of what would become Sharp End was owned by two black men, Gilbert Akers and John Lang. The neighborhood became a black enclave in the late 1800s. It was an undesirable area of town, located in the floodplain where Flat Branch Creek was used as an open sewer. The roads were unpaved, and there was little access to plumbing. When freed slaves began looking for a place to call home, their only option was the Hinkson and Flat Branch Creek bottom, away from the dwellings of more affluent white people.

Nevertheless, Horrell describes Sharp End as a great place to grow up. She can still picture her parents and grandparents dressed in their finest to go out dancing on the weekends at one of the neighborhood dance clubs.

Sehon Williams was born in Columbia in 1922, and he also remembers Sharp End as “a place to go on the weekends and unwind and dance.” Even with his graying moustache and newsboy cap, Williams looks decades younger than his 90 years, and he can recall businesses in Sharp End as if they existed last week. He spent time at the Greentree Club and played trumpet while people danced. When the musicians took a break, the jukeboxes would take over, and the festivities would continue into the night.

“Sharp End was a place for black people to go just like the white people had places to go,” Williams says.

The people who lived in Sharp End were proud of the neighborhood their ancestors had built from the soggy ground up, so when the city moved in to revitalize in 1954, they were hesitant to leave the homes and businesses they had worked so hard to own.

The city cited a need for “decent, safe, and sanitary dwellings,” and it was correct in noting that Sharp End didn’t always fit that description. The area was muddy from Flat Branch Creek, and most houses didn’t have indoor plumbing. A whole row of small wooden homes would share a single outhouse. Few homes had electricity, so it was freezing indoors during the winter and muggy and hot during the summer. To the city, it was an eyesore. But for those who lived there, it was home.

“We all had private homes,” Horrell says. “We’d never heard of projects. We didn’t know what projects were until (the city) came in with this whole thing called urban renewal.”

First, homes and businesses in the area were leveled. Where children played, bulldozers rumbled down the streets and covered foundations with mud and splintered wooden siding. Then the two creeks in the area were deepened and forced underground. Third Street was widened, paved and renamed Providence. Wealthy business owners bought up land, according to McDonald-Warren’s research, and built low-income housing. The black families who could afford to move elsewhere did, and those who couldn’t settled into the projects and watched their neighborhood fade away around them.

Will History Repeat?

The goal, according to a 1962 Progress Report from the city, was to “remedy the unsafe and insanitary housing conditions, and the acute shortage of decent, safe, and sanitary dwellings, for families of low income, in urban and rural nonfarm areas, that are injurious to the health, safety, and morals of the Nation.” Many felt that removing the less desirable houses and businesses in Columbia would make the city a more beautiful and inviting place. Many people still feel that way.

In early 2012, the City Council began to bring up the notion of blight. If an area is declared blighted, it could qualify for Enhanced Enterprise Zone status, which grants new developments at least 50 percent property tax abatements. While the blight declaration provides beneficial tax incentives, it could also open the door for the city to declare eminent domain.

In August, the state issued a revised statute that defined blight as an area that “retards the provision of housing accommodations or constitutes an economic or social liability or a menace to the public health, safety, morals, or welfare in its present condition and use.” The new definition is an eerie echo of the justification for Sharp End’s demise.

Because most of the businesses in Sharp End were owned by blacks, the disintegration of the neighborhood caused a steep drop in the number of black-owned businesses in Columbia. McDonald-Warren’s study determined that the percentage of black-owned businesses in 2010 was about a third of the percentage of the city’s black population. U.S. Census Bureau data for Columbia omits the percentage, and Don Laird, president of the Columbia Chamber of Commerce, says that the chamber does not document that information.

Tyree Byndom, a local entrepreneur, says the city’s move to declare areas blighted was met with fierce negativity from community members who are opposed to the boundaries and definition of blight. He says the general perception is that the Enhanced Enterprise Zone revitalization of Columbia is a veiled attempt to push low-income residents out of the city’s prime real estate, predominantly black areas. He says the people who live there need to speak up.

According to Byndom, the tragedy surrounding the lack of activism in Columbia’s black community isn’t that the members don’t care what’s happening to them, it’s that it cannot be a priority in their everyday lives. They need to pay the bills and support their children. He says, it’s difficult for members of the black community, as well as other minority groups, in Columbia to devote much energy to taking a stand for the future.



Tyree Byndom, host of a KOPN radio talk show, revived the Douglass Park Neighborhood Association in 2011 to address community issues. Photograph by Greg Kendall-Ball

In an effort to keep history from repeating, Byndom is trying to bring blacks and whites in Columbia together through his fledgling group, the Douglass Park Neighborhood Association. He brought it back to life after 15 years of inaction with the help of the association’s former leaders. The association seeks not only to repair the rift that has quietly festered between the white and black communities, but also the division within the black community itself.

“I’m doing my part now,” he says. “And I could do more. But at this point, it’s not about me. It’s about what we can do as a community.”

Lingering Racism

For many, Sharp End was a safe haven away from the segregated downtown area. Horrell remembers being a victim of racism once she crossed Broadway into the areas frequented by white people.

Every Saturday, her grandfather and his friends would get dressed up and go to F.W. Woolworth's lunch counter on Broadway where American Shoe, Envy and Broadway Brewery are today. Week after week, they would sit at the soda fountain hoping to be served. They never were.

Even today, Horrell is hesitant to patronize some businesses that treated her or her family unfairly when she was younger. She recalls that Central Dairy on Broadway would not allow her to sit inside and eat ice cream because she's black. Her family wasn't welcome in many clothing stores downtown, so they would travel to Kansas City or St. Louis to shop.

She still doesn't eat anything produced by Central Dairy, and she still buys most of her clothes outside of Columbia.

"This is Columbia, Missouri," she says firmly. "This is 2012. Racism doesn't go away. ... People see color first, and then they see the rest of you."

MU professor emeritus William E. "Gene" Robertson, a leader in the black community who writes editorials for the Columbia Missourian, didn't grow up in Sharp End. However, he's well aware of its impact on the community. Robertson has also noticed the lingering racism in Columbia, particularly when it comes to the effort to create more black-owned businesses in the city.

He tells the story of Nathaniel Goldston, chairman and CEO of Gourmet Services Inc., a food service provider once located in Columbia. Goldston moved to Atlanta because even as an established business owner, he could not get a substantial loan from local banks. Today, he's a major food service provider for the Atlanta airport and a number of historically black colleges.

Still, both Robertson and Horrell acknowledge that the black community has at times played a role in its own troubles. Robertson worries that all people — black or white — don't speak up for themselves as much as they should anymore. He points to the civil rights movement as an example of a pervasive attitude that made change happen, but he worries that these days, people are unwilling to deal with important issues, such as racism.

"We all play a part in it," Robertson says. "It's not something whites do to blacks. The outcome is the absence of a reduced number of African-American businesses. And it's even worse when people don't discuss it, and when nobody says anything."

Horrell agrees and adds that one of the worst things a person can do is believe that he or she is a lesser individual. Nobody, she says, should have to be a victim.

BUSINESSES BY THE NUMBERS

11.1

The percentage of black citizens in Columbia. The percent of black-owned businesses is harder to find. The U.S. Census Bureau data omits it, and Columbia Chamber of Commerce President, Don Laird, says the chamber doesn't document it.

3.7

An MU graduate dissertation by Alisa McDonald-Warren reports that there were 123 black-owned businesses, or 3.7 percent of all businesses in Columbia, in 2010. In Missouri, 4.9 percent of businesses were black-owned in 2007, according to the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center.

1

In a 2011 *Columbia Business Times* editorial, MU professor emeritus William E. "Gene" Robertson estimated the current number of black-owned businesses at less than 1 percent.

Sharp End Today

When the Sharp End neighborhood was taken over by the city, Horrell moved across town to a new subdivision south of Stadium Drive. She only returns to the area to attend Sunday morning service at Second Missionary Baptist Church. Beyond the church, Sharp End no longer has anything to offer her.

Williams no longer sees the area as Sharp End. It's been so long since the neighborhood was dismantled that he's no longer nostalgic for what's been lost. "It's not weird to go back there anymore," he says. "That old stuff is long gone."

The barbershops and dance halls have disappeared, but from inside the church on a Sunday morning, it's easy to imagine how boisterous and welcoming Sharp End was in its heyday. Music reverberates through the old sanctuary and outside onto the street. It echoes through the projects and up to the top of the garage where black musicians once sang songs in jazz clubs and pool halls.

"There's a bright side somewhere," the congregation sings. "Don't you rest until you find it. There's a bright side somewhere."

