

The Soul of a City

Bronzeville:

An Early African American Neighborhood in Columbus, OH

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Alpha Hospital and professional building (1920). 17th and Long St.



Background

The boundary of the King-Lincoln Bronzeville neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio includes Broad Street to the south, 20th Street to the east, Atcheson Street to the north, and I-71 to the west, according to the City of Columbus and is part of the larger "Bronzeville" area. The King-Lincoln Bronzeville Neighborhood Association recently proposed that the King-Lincoln neighborhood be renamed to Bronzeville and its territory expanded to reflect its history. This history is an important part of the history of the City of Columbus which has been underrepresented. This piece will involve an overview of the origins, culture, economics and education of the predominantly African American neighborhood of King-Lincoln Bronzeville, Columbus, OH in the early 20th century.

Settlement

In the early 1900's the area just east of downtown Columbus was populated by Black residents who wanted to escape the areas prone to the flooding of the Scioto River. Also, this area became populated by those individuals fleeing the south during the Great Migration. The majority of southern Blacks that settled the east side of Columbus came from North Carolina for economic reasons, as well as political reasons (Himes, 1942). In 1890, it was recorded that there resided 5,547 Blacks in Columbus. By 1900, the Black population was 8,201. Due to the aforementioned factors, by 1920 the African American population in Columbus had reached 22,181 people. The majority of this population established the "East Long Street Community," also known as Bronzeville. This was a name coined by James Gentry, an African American writer in Chicago. He used the name Bronzeville when referring to an African American neighborhood in Chicago to be inclusive of Black men and women of all shades (Brown, 2009).

African Americans in Columbus adopted this name during the 1910's and settled an area larger than the City of Columbus recognizes today. The original Bronzeville neighborhood was bound by Woodland St. to the east, Cleveland Ave. to the west, the Pennsylvania Railroad (now I-670) to the north and Broad St. to the south.

Economic Prosperity

A specific economic factor that increased migration to Columbus from the South was the presence of The Ohio State University. This led to the Bronzeville community being comprised of a group of "college-bred" Blacks greater in proportion to the size of the population than is to be found in other northern urban centers (Himes, 1942). The community flourished and development escalated.

In the 1920's, due to the dramatic increase in the African American population, there existed a high demand for housing. The number of trained Black real estate agents tripled. In 1930, there were 18 Black realtors who were closely associated with mortgage granting companies and banks. In 1922, African Americans in east Columbus owned such banks as the Adelphi Loan and Savings Company and a mortgage granting company called Credential. They also established a Black insurance firm entitled Columbus Supreme life and Casualty Company in 1919. An influx of highly skilled southern migrants and college trained Blacks catalyzed the wave of construction which developed Bronzeville from 1915-1930. The heart of Bronzeville existed along a stretch of Long Street where Black residents of a segregated Columbus built a prosperous city (Vitale, 2009). Long St. was a residential corridor with commercial pockets, while Mt. Vernon St. to the north was the strong center of commerce (Brown, 2009).

The Church was at the center of social, economic and civic life in Bronzeville. The first African American church in Columbus was the St. Paul A.M.E erected in 1823. The 2nd Baptist church located on 17th St. in what would become Bronzeville was established in 1836 when the 1st Baptist Church would only tolerate African American members if they were to sit in the balcony. The 2nd Baptist Church was also the 2nd Black church erected in Columbus and was a stop on the Underground Railroad. These churches were built primarily through funds raised by the community which hosted fish and chicken dinners. The construction was also paid for by a hugely popular method of gambling called “The Numbers” (Brown, 2009).

By the 1920’s, in the Jefferson-Garfield blocks on E. Long St., there were 10 Black physicians, 6 dentists, 10 churches, 2 drug stores, 2 undertakers, and over 100 African American owned homes (Himes, 1942). The Bronzeville community was flourishing. On Long St. and 17th the first Black hospital was erected at a cost of \$23,000. The hospital was said to be “a thoroughly modern institution equipped with the latest scientific appliances.” This was known as the Alpha Hospital, and its remnants are now the “Urban Spirit coffee shop and Cultural Center.” Across the street the Empress Theater and Office Building was erected at a cost of \$50,000. This was the first building to be constructed on Long St. owned solely by African Americans. The Empress Theater was built by an entrepreneur in the neighborhood named Al Jackson; he is responsible for the construction of several buildings on Long Street. Jackson moved to Columbus during the Great Migration and began to earn money through the coal/heating business. Jackson’s brother was one of the important physicians in the area.

Bronzeville Entertainment

In the 1920's, jazz greats such as Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, and Cab Calloway played the Jazz clubs which lined the area. Bronzeville had four important theaters that attracted these aforementioned stars and other important musicians as well: the Lincoln and the Empress Theaters, located on Long St., and the Cameo and the Pythian found on Mt. Vernon St. The Pythian has been renovated and is now a part of the King-Arts Complex.

As mentioned previously, a very popular method of gambling thrived in Bronzeville. This form of entertainment had originated in Harlem and was simply called "The Numbers." It was based on horse track betting and odds. "The Number's Establishment" which collected the profit from the bets, eventually became a banking and loan institution. Many buildings erected in the early Twentieth century in Bronzeville, and other Columbus neighborhoods, were funded this way (Brown, 2009).

African American Education

In 1871 prior to the golden age of Bronzeville, the Columbus City School District deemed a dilapidated building at the corner of 3rd and Long St. the "colored school." The Columbus Board of Education established only this one school to meet the needs of all African American children in the city. There were six teachers and two-hundred students. It was named the "Loving School" after Dr. Starling Loving, an advocate of equal rights and a Columbus City school board member at the time. The Loving School was educating 20% of Black children in Columbus (Randolph, 2009). Efforts to desegregate in Columbus caused the school to close in 1882.

In 1909 the Champion Ave. Junior High school was erected in Bronzeville and is noted as being an entirely African American school. Blacks in Columbus were not segregated at the time, most attended the schools closest to their homes. From 1910 to 1950 children in Bronzeville attended Felton or Garfield Elementary, Champion or Mt. Vernon Junior High, and East or Central High School. In early 20th century Columbus, there existed four African American principals and eighty African American teachers, comprising the largest professional group in the city.

Neighborhood Breakdown

During the 1930's Bronzeville had experienced a golden age and maintained this momentum until after the Second World War. This is illustrated in the documentation of the "Ms. Bronzeville" competitions lasting from 1932-1955 (Brown, 2009). The first cause of any decrease in the population and economy of Bronzeville occurred just after desegregation, when African Americans were taking their business elsewhere. The second destabilization of the neighborhood came in the late 1950's with the ratification of the Highways Act. The construction of Interstate 71 demolished many important residences and structures in Bronzeville.

The final and most destructive blow to this once flourishing community came in 1963 with the "Urban Renewal" initiative enacted by Eisenhower. Columbus received many funds from the federal government to rehabilitate residential areas deemed in need. This resulted in the demolition of over 100 acres of residences in north Bronzeville. These were slowly replaced with a strip mall and cul-de-sac subdivisions. Bronzeville, a neighborhood where 68,000 people thrived in the 1940's, declined over the decades to a place where the average income has left

families in poverty, where only 25% owned homes and where the residential population has withered to only 16,000 people. A major revitalization program headed by the Bronzeville Neighborhood Association and the City of Columbus is underway. Much history has been saved.

African Americans have made multifaceted contributions to the growth and expansion of Columbus, Ohio. This illustrates a minute percentage of the impact that neighborhoods such as Bronzeville have played in shaping the history of the City of Columbus, Ohio.

Classroom Activities

Activity I

Students will investigate copies of Columbus City Maps and will layout the boundaries of the original Bronzeville area. A discussion will be facilitated about their prior knowledge of the neighborhood and its relationship to the city of Bexley (their residence).

Dispatch articles about the recent revitalization of the neighborhood will be read in groups and discussed and then shared with the class to provide a hook. See links to the articles below:

http://www.dispatch.com/live/content/local_news/stories/2009/10/12/bronzeville.ART_ART_10-12-09_B1_JPFB57M.html

http://www.dispatch.com/live/content/local_news/stories/2009/08/25/centenary.ART_ART_08-25-09_B3_A3ES9GJ.html?type=rss&cat=&sid=101

http://www.dispatch.com/live/content/local_news/stories/2009/02/23/SAVECHURCH.ART_ART_02-23-09_B1_UQD05CC.html?sid=101

columbusalive.com/live/contentbe/EPIC_shim.php?story=alive/2008/0703/u-city.html

Activity II

As an introduction to the legacies left by the neighborhood of Bronzeville students will complete an internet investigation using the following website of the Historical Marker Database:

<http://www.hmdb.org/Marker.asp?Marker=16963>

Questions will be answered based on 7 historic markers found in the King Lincoln Bronzeville neighborhood. The markers are as follows: The St. Paul's AME, The Lincoln Theatre, The St. Clair Hospital, The Second Baptist Church, Elijah Pierce, The King-Lincoln Arch and The Mount Vernon Avenue plaques.

Students will plot the locations of the historic markers on their maps from above.

Activity III

Students will organize their information gathered from the historic markers database and display their research in an organized timeline. Students will now have a basic understanding of the richness of the culture and framework of the African Americans who comprised the King Lincoln Bronzeville neighborhood.

Students will answer the following critical thinking questions:

- 1) Why do you think African Americans established a separate community at this time?
- 2) What facets of culture played big roles in this community?
- 3) What types of occupations can you surmise supported the community?
- 4) Was education important in this community? Could you tell by the historical significance noted in the markers?
- 5) Why are these locations important to the City of Columbus?
- 6) What historical events occurred that altered this once prosperous Columbus neighborhood?

Activity IV

Students will examine several primary and secondary sources from the Columbus Dispatch and various African American newspapers published from 1900-1960 such as The Ohio State Monitor, The Ohio Sentinel (published in Bronzeville) and the Ohio State News. This investigation will allow them to compile a Historic record of the attributes of the economy, politics, education and religion of the people of Bronzeville from 1900-1950.

Activity V

The resources used in the aforementioned activity will have been collected by the Bronzeville Neighborhood Association. Willis Brown, the Associations President, has a breadth of knowledge gained from decades of periodical and human research about the community in which he resides.

Students will have completed their historic record of organized materials and will be asked to generate questions to ask Mr. Brown. In this activity, Mr. Brown will be asked to visit as a guest speaker and provide some background about the evolution of the neighborhood. He will be asked to share his involvement in the revitalization projects that have recently occurred and were discussed briefly in Activity I.

Activity VI

After meeting with Willis Brown, students will have gained a better understanding of the history and legacies of Bronzeville as well as the current status of the neighborhood. A recent Columbus City council meeting involved the Bronzeville Neighborhood Association submitting a proposal to redefine the name and boundary of the neighborhood to reflect the original Bronzeville territory and nomenclature.

For their culminating activity students will participate in a mock city council meeting where a decision must be made about the Bronzeville proposal. The entire class of 24 will be assigned roles in which they will be given time to do a bit of research and preparation to understand their perspectives. Students will be required to write a brief position paper to defend their stance on the issue. Such roles will include: Representatives from the Bronzeville N. A., Representatives from the Olde Towne East Neighborhood Association, as well as Rep.'s from the Woodland Neighborhood Association. Others may include: City Council Members, civil engineers, the Mayor and Columbus community members etc.

Bibliography

Brown, Willis. President of the Bronzeville Neighborhood Association, Interview, 11/27/2009.

Griffin, William Wayne. African Americans and the Color Line in Ohio, 1915-1930. The Ohio State University, 2005. p. 89-110.

Himes, J.S. Forty Years of Negro Life in Columbus, OH. *Journal of Negro History* 27(2), (Apr., 1942) 133-154.

Randolph, Adah Ward. The Loving School and the African American Struggle for Education in Columbus, 1831-1882. *The Sage Handbook of African American Education*. 2009.

Vitale, Robert. "King-Lincoln Leaders want to Restore the Neighborhood's Historic 'Bronzeville' Name" *Columbus Dispatch*. 12 Oct 2009.

King-Lincoln Bronzeville statistics, www.city-data.com/neighborhood/King-Lincoln-Bronzeville-Columbus-OH.html

King-Lincoln Neo-Renaissance. [//www.urban-spirit.com/historical_tribute.php](http://www.urban-spirit.com/historical_tribute.php)

The Ohio Historical Society, The African-American Experience in Ohio 1850-1920. www.dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/

The Historical Marker Database: <http://www.hmdb.org/Marker.asp?Marker=16963>

