

## BLACK ROANOKE: OUR STORY -February 3, 2014

It is virtually impossible to express the importance of an African-American Henry Street without first providing an historical glimpse of Black Roanoke and understand why the City of Roanoke felt the annihilation of Roanoke's Historical Black Communities were so crucial and why was the City's utter destruction of Roanoke's Black Commercial and Entertainment District (Henry Street) so severely preeminent.

In the City of Roanoke, Virginia, there once existed in theory and in practice, an accepted law where people of Black and White races lived in a forced racially segregated environment. Despite the fact that Roanoke's White population and communities were the majority and dominated the overall economic and social existence of the city, there was however an ever present energy of equal enthusiasm, by Roanoke's Black independently owned commercial businesses. What the Black side of town lacked in the same quantity as White folks, they made up for it in quality.

It is virtually impossible to adequately have anyone understand the outcome of exactly what is being expressed until a beginning of sorts can be established. As a matter of record (Roanoke), 'Developing into a small community in 1834 at the intersection of today's Interstate 581, Orange Avenue and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue Northeast,' Big Lick was created. The following year Big Lick adopted the name (the Town of) Gainesborough and 'by the time of the Civil War, the original Town of Gainesborough became inhabited by African Americans...According to the 1860 census, 155 free Blacks were residing in the Old Lick area.'

As Blacks moved into Gainesborough, its White population disassociated itself from its African-American neighbors by creating two racially distinct sides of town. The White side of town maintained the name 'Big Lick,' while the Black side of the original part of Big Lick would be renamed 'Old Lick.' As the White population moved southward to Gilmer Avenue and (the now) downtown area, Blacks moved along Peach Road (now Gainsboro Road) establishing and sustaining their businesses. Twelve years after the 1860 census, in 1872, African Americans created their own first school, 'a log building on Dasher Hill (later called Diamond Hill Northeast) naming it 'Old Lick School.' Three years later another school for Blacks was built on the site of a colored cemetery. The name of that school was Gainesborough School, (the old Booker T. Washington Jr. High School and presently the Roanoke City School Administration Building).

In 1882, the Town of Gainesborough became the Town of Roanoke and two years later the town became the City of Roanoke. Black people were establishing more and more businesses, churches and schools thorough out their community and by 1893 Black people were living in most of Northeast (Commonwealth and Kimball Communities), and as far as establishing their Gainesborough School on Gainesborough Road and Rutherford Avenue Northwest. During the 1890s the spelling of Gainesborough was shortened to Gainsboro. Ten years later Black people had moved along Gainsboro Road across Gilmer and on to Henry Street (or First Street Northwest).

Despite the fact that White Roanokers had four hospitals, the City did not provide one for its Black citizens. Nevertheless, a two room hospital for Black people was established in 1913 by Black physician, Dr. Samuel Medley at 104 Henry Street (before turning the corner down from the old Dumas Hotel),

named the Medley Hospital. A couple of years later, in 1915, another hospital would open up across from the Tribune News, on Henry Street with ten beds named Burrell Memorial Hospital. In 1921, the hospital was relocated to McDowell Avenue Northwest, to a building that had three floors and provided space for 50 beds and 40 rooms. By 1950, the doctors of Burrell Memorial Hospital came to the realization that due to an ever growing population and medical demand of Roanoke's Black Folks, including those living in surrounding areas, there was a need for the construction of a more modern medical facility, equipped with the latest advanced medical technology. The construction of the new hospital began in 1953. It is important to note that during this same period, the African-American congregation of the Mount Zion Church located in the Kimball Community of Northeast, felt that their wooden church (built in 1908) needed to undergo not just some renovations but that an entire new church be constructed. So in following the example of the doctors of Burrell Memorial, by 1955 the brick construction of a new Greater Mount Zion Church stood on a rising hill in the Commonwealth Community of Northeast as was the newly constructed Burrell Memorial Hospital and could also be seen on a hill in Northwest. Both buildings were representative of beacons of progress for and by African-Americans in a City, State and Country where Black people were by law not recognized as equal citizens, nor included as an active part of the City of Roanoke.

Nevertheless, before 1955 what was recognized by European social, government and merchants of the City of Roanoke, that a change or economic transformation was about to occur within the African-American Communities. And it was a change that was unacceptable. Take into consideration that in 1955, when a newly designed African-American Church and Hospital built in separate African-American communities opened their doors for business, on Henry Street's four (4) short blocks, there were forty-five (45) legitimate African-American businesses in operation out of the sixty (60) available business spaces on Henry Street. This is not to mention the number of businesses peppered throughout the African-American Communities of Kimball, Commonwealth and Gainsboro. What was being recognized was the beginning of self-rising initiatives to renovate and construct and established new and improved African-American businesses. More importantly it was because Roanoke's African-Americans were beginning to acquire access to out of state resources and these resources were begin utilized to assist in their endeavor to advance or make marketable improvements, without their have to engage in any economics connect with Roanoke's established European businesses. Perhaps there was the growing concern that other Black business owners may in all likelihood follow suit. Whether it occurred today, tomorrow, next month, next year, the results would ultimately be the same.... the uninterrupted economic growth and independence of Roanoke's African-American Communities. As each Black owned business undergoes redevelopment, reconstruction, reinventing of themselves, following one business after another until the face of Henry Street and the African-American Communities of Kimball, Commonwealth and Gainsboro would undergo the kind of upward commercial changes that would possibly stagger one's imagination.

Imagine as it was then in 1955, standing on the corner of Wells Avenue and Henry Street in the early morning, with your back toward North Jefferson Street. Whether you looked to your right or left, you would witness the hustle and bustle of Black people on the sidewalks, conducting and transacting business at Harvey's Mens Shop at 104, The Palace Hotel at 204, Reeves Studio Photographer at 105

Horseshoe Café at 210, Norvella Beauty Supply at 13, Henry Street Confections at 321, Day & Night Taxi at 205, Brook's Pharmacy at 221, The Tribune Paper at 312, Prunty & Prunty Cleaners at 318, Economy Shoe Repair at 11, Dentist-Theodore Banks at 401, Physician-Justin Plumber at 407, JCW Medicine & Cosmetics at 101, Dumas Hotel at 108 and that's just fifteen (15) of the legitimate businesses on Henry Street. As the evening came, Roanoke's downtown area was relatively emptied and quiet while Henry Street and Gainsboro Road were filled with Black people who were enjoying the night life that entertainment on Henry Street and Gainsboro Road offered virtually nonstop. On Henry Street alone, especially on Friday and Saturday nights there was virtually no driving through Henry Street- everybody walked to Nick's Restaurant at 209, Star City Auditorium at 310, Dell's Restaurant at 324, Atlantic Sandwich Stand at 111 about three or four Pool Rooms, any number of drinking- dancing-music establishments and a couple of gambling spots found in the remaining twenty (20) places of the sixty (60) available for business. Black people came from the surrounding areas of Bedford, Lynchburg, Martinsville and Danville, Rocky Mount, Pulaski and Christiansburg. Some Black folks even came from as far away as Norfolk and Richmond, Washington D.C. and Greensboro, North Carolina just to be absorbed in the sights, sounds and experience of Henry Street.

It must be clearly understood that from a human position, "the make- up of a human beings self-esteem, self-image and self-concept is not only based on one's family history but it's also based on one's racial history. So when you look at the self-esteem of Black people or Black children, you can rest assure that at least 50% of how high or how low it is, is contingent upon positive information they know or don't know about who they have been in racial history."(-Dr. Umar Johnson, psychologist and a Nationally Certified School Psychologist) Therefore what Black business owners and licensed professional practitioners on Henry Street and Gainsboro superimposed upon the minds of Black people, in and outside of Roanoke, adults young and old in general but especially Black children in particular is that they too could be a dentist, a physician, an accountant, a restaurant owner, an attorney, a store owner, the owner of a trucking company, construction company or contractor, hotel and club owners or an elementary/middle/high school teacher or college professor, etc., etc., etc. The list was as endless as the possibilities to emulate any one of these people, whom they saw, ate, danced, drank, got hair cuts at the same barber shops and got their hair washed, pressed and curled at the same salons either on a day to day basis or weekly. The realistic impact on African-American adults and especially children was that these professional Black people were recognized as reflections of themselves. Despite the fact that Blacks were not welcomed "across the tracks or across the bridge" but on the Black side of town, whether you lived in the City of Roanoke or were visiting, Black People were always welcomed, day or night on Henry Street.

From an economic standpoint, Henry Street represented inaccessible Black Consumer Dollars and as long as Henry Street existed, more and more money would be lost to the City's present and future European-American merchants and professional people. What was even more economically life threatening to Roanoke's European dominance was the very likelihood that Blacks might continue their quest to utilize more and more out of town, out of region and out of state assistance instead of turning to or depending on Roanoke (City or County). In 1950 when the Black Doctors of Burrell Memorial Hospital decided to seek and utilize sources and resources outside of the City of Roanoke for the

construction of a new modern hospital in Northwest, during this same period, the congregation of Mount Zion Church in Northeast felt it was time to modernize their church built in 1908. And both structures were completed in 1955. If it is said that capitalism demands as an economic system, that people are always trying to rise to the higher position in their competing and competition fuels capitalism. Then the doors were open for the redevelopment and advancement of Roanoke's African-Americans and the communities in which they lived. Out of state businesses could be brought in and established within Kimball, Commonwealth and Gainsboro. As well as establishing partnerships between out of state businesses and those Black owned businesses on Henry Street, Gainsboro Road, Eleventh Street and those that existed throughout Commonwealth, Kimball and Gainsboro. In other words, Roanoke's African-Americans would be able to generate, harness and drive Black Consumer Dollars by Blacks and for Blacks thus minimizing their spending across the tracks or across the bridge and in the process creating, developing and strengthening a strong Black Economic and Political Voice.

Therefore an unconditional war was declared and waged against Roanoke's African-American Communities as a whole and the Black Businesses of Henry Street in particular. The over-all plan was to use whatever means necessary to move people out of their houses. It is important to note that before the City of Roanoke began to implement their plans of urban war against its African-American population, every Black man, woman and child in the City lived in houses. In 1950, there were absolutely no housing projects or apartment complexes such as Lincoln Terrace, Kennedys, Caru, Hurt Park and all of the others built specifically to corral, impound, enclose, imprison and intern those Blacks who would be forced out of their houses and led into isolation areas designated to warehouse innumerable amounts of Black people in particular.

It appears (as it happened) that the City's strategy was to demolish every house and building in the Black communities of Commonwealth and Kimball, however, what occurred can only be recognized as over kill extermination. Originally the City blanketed African-American residents of Commonwealth and Kimball with assurances that not every house will be demolished. Blacks living in the Commonwealth Community were assured that only those properties located in the immediate Interstate 581 construction area would be demolished. What happened was the complete obliteration of the Commonwealth Community geographically until not even a blade of grass remained. The City's tactical approach to Black people living in the Kimball Community was slightly different. Black Families were promised that only those houses that were dilapidated, beyond repair or abandoned would be demolished and that the City planned to build new houses and apartments and the residents would be able to move back. In reality, the Kimball Community was likewise completely erased geographically and not one residential house was built. Although in 1964 the City had designed addition plans to bulldoze every house and building from North Jefferson Street to Tenth (10<sup>th</sup>) Street and from Shenandoah Avenue to Orange Avenue in Northwest. But not all of the houses in the Gainsboro Community were immediately needed to be targeted for demolition because the primary strategy was to completely destroy any and all of the immediately anticipated areas that could support the relocation and reconstruction of the soon to be decimated buildings on Henry Street. Therefore only those African-American residential and business properties along the Gainsboro Road Corridor were made the similar promises by the City that only properties that were unrepaired, beyond repair, dilapidated and

abandoned would be subject to demolition. The outcome was every African-American home and properties along the Gainsboro Road were geographically altered (wiped out).

Black businesses on Henry Street had begun to move out whether because they were caught up in the turmoil due to their homes and families being uprooted in Commonwealth, Kimball and Gainsboro, or they did not want to believe the same false promises that the businesses on Henry Street will not be affected by any of the redevelopment projects going on in Gainsboro. The City immediately condemned all available closed business space on Henry Street to prevent any other proprietors from opening up future businesses. So that by 1979, there were only seventeen (17) legitimate businesses on Henry Street. By the mid-1980s and after the City's proposed targeted areas had been obliterated, the City of Roanoke turned its full attention to their initial target, Henry Street until the visible image of what it once represented was no more. Except for the dusting up (a deal made by the City of Roanoke to persuade the Coca Cola Bottling Company not to move out of Roanoke), African-American properties along Wells Avenue, High Street and Center Avenue to Fifth Street Northwest were the last portion of targeted Gainsboro area to be laid to waste. Mission Accomplished.

It took 60 years for Black Roanokers to create the communities of Kimball, Commonwealth and Gainsboro and a self-sustaining commercial and entertainment district whose businesses and services were made available thorough out Southwestern Virginia and welcomed any Black person, family or group passing through, especially when Blacks were not permitted anywhere else in the region. It only took the City of Roanoke 30 years to eliminate its visible historical existence and soon the historical significance of Roanoke's African-American history may be erased from memory. There is a Biblical scripture, (Psalm 83:2-5), that embodies what happened to Roanoke's Historical Black Communities and to Henry Street explicitly when it may as well have been written '...they that hate thee have lifted up their head. They have taken crafty counsel against thy people and they have said, Come and let us cut them off from being a community of proud independence until the name of Commonwealth, Kimball, Old Gainsboro Road and Henry Street may be no more in remembrance. For they have consulted together with one consent: they are confederate against thee.'

Our-Story (Our Black Story) existed parallel of His-Story (European Story) due to the 1896 Supreme Court Ruling- THE SEPARATE BUT EQUAL LAW. It permitted states to segregate PEOPLE OF COLOR from European-Americans. In the process, Black people created, sustained and enhanced their own commercial districts like Roanoke's Henry Street, while maintaining other economic businesses throughout their communities like Roanoke's Commonwealth, Kimball and Gainsboro. However today Our History as well as Our Story are in danger of extinction due to the continued systematic demolition of Black historical buildings and communities that still remain relatively Black. Just like Roanoke's Black Communities of Commonwealth, Kimball and Gainsboro where thousands of African-Americans lived were destroyed by the City of Roanoke. Our History and Our Story are as equally important as their History. Nevertheless, if we do not do all that we can to preserve it and Keep Our Story Alive then our place in His-Story will show African-Americans as once being slaves who worked for their European-American Masters and since the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 freed us from slavery. The powers that be have seen to it that there are virtually no tangible or physical evidence that the freed African-Americans have accomplished essentially nothing except being hired employees who work for their

European-American Bosses (Boss is a Dutch word which means Master). It is the responsibility of every African-American to keep Our-Story Accurate and Alive by telling our story to our children and grandchildren before the only stories they will be told are those stories about our place or position in HIS-(European-American)-STORY.

Your Brother In Our Struggle For Life- John Davis