

Historic Markers Project

Leaders from the historically African American neighborhoods of Shiloh, Burton Street, East End, and Stumptown are partnering with the Asheville-Buncombe African American Heritage Commission (AAHC) on the installation of historic markers in their neighborhoods.

The goal of the historic markers project is to recognize, celebrate, and maintain the culture and accomplishments of African Americans in Asheville and Buncombe County. Creatively memorializing these stories can help tip the scales towards positive outcomes for people in our community. A committee is currently in the planning stages of this significant undertaking. The funding for this project is an investment by the City of Asheville and Buncombe County Government to ensure that the contributions of our African American residents are recognized as part of the story of our community's success.

DeWayne Barton, of Hood Huggers, the Burton Street Community Association, and the AAHC, emphasizes the importance of this project. "There are a lot of African American historic buildings that have been torn down and there isn't any record, there's no monument, no marker, no acknowledgement," he says. "We put a painting of E.W. Pearson on the Burton Street Community Center a few years ago, but there also needs to be an historic marker for him. There are important locations throughout the city that need to be marked."

"Everything's being destroyed so quickly," concurs committee member Andrea Clark. "They even tore down the Colored Hospital... So I think it is important to get these markers before the building's gone or the house is gone, which we're seeing all the time."

This sense of urgency led Clark to take the initiative to get a marker for her grandfather, James Vester Miller,



Andrea Clark and James Miller, III stand in front of Asheville's Municipal Building where a marker recognizing James Vester Miller is installed. Photo: Urban News

placed on the Municipal Building. Born the son of a slave, Louisa, and her master in 1860, Miller grew up to become a respected brick mason in Asheville, known for building many of the city's churches and civic buildings.

For AAHC Chair Sasha Mitchell, the historic markers project is also about equity. "Asheville has an aura of a progressive, diverse, inclusive city," she says. "The reality is that we are a segregated city with extreme racial disparities... There is a great divide between this reality and the rhetoric about Asheville. When people walk around the city, they see monuments to Thomas Wolfe and various confederate figures, veterans, and the sculptures of pigs and geese. They see those things, but they don't see our very rich African

American history."

"That is part of our task," says Barton, "to acknowledge destinations and bring voice to the invisible."

The positive impact of having African American markers throughout the city will be multi-faceted. "The historic markers will help black people who are from here feel a greater sense of belonging," says Mitchell. "We also have black families who come to Asheville to visit, and they want to see this history too." Mitchell and the other members of the committee see the potential economic benefits of using the markers to draw people to historically African American neighborhoods.

"By putting historical markers in neighborhoods, we hope to build momentum towards a larger marker in downtown Asheville," says Barton. "That's what Isaac Coleman wanted. Isaac was on the African American Heritage Commission, and we discussed starting in the neighborhoods first to help push for a monument downtown."

Perhaps most importantly, the historic markers can have a transformative impact on young people. "It's a great opportunity to involve youth, for them to learn history—they will be surprised at some of the history, even about their family members here," says



James Vester Miller, a respected brick mason, built many of Asheville's churches and civic buildings.



E.W. Pearson owned and operated a grocery and confectionary store in West Asheville.

Rasheeda McDaniels, Community Development Specialist for Buncombe County.

"We had some strong leaders growing up—Oralene Simmons, my grandmother Annette McDaniels, and of course Johnny Hayes," recalls McDaniels. "They really pushed the history... We have to continue that legacy by showing the history, so we can tell children, 'you come from greatness, your ancestors helped make this community what it is.'"

For more information on our community's African American history, visit <http://bit.ly/2ir5cAn>



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Members of the planning committee discuss ways to honor the many contributions of Asheville's African American residents.

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