

URBAN RENEWAL AND THE
END OF BLACK CULTURE IN
CHARLOTTESVILLE,
VIRGINIA

An Oral History of Vinegar Hill

by

JAMES ROBERT SAUNDERS
RENAE NADINE SHACKELFORD



McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina, and London

15. This large section of Vinegar Hill had been left vacant as late as the early 1980s 78

16. Federal courthouse under construction in the early 1980s 79

17. Teresa Price and William Jackson (Courtesy of the Charlottesville Department of Community Development) 81

18. Thomas Inge (Courtesy of the Charlottesville Department of Community Development) 92

19. Inge's Grocery Store (Courtesy of the Charlottesville Department of Community Development) 93

20. Rebecca McGinness (Courtesy of the Charlottesville Department of Community Development) 98

21. 1920 photograph of Jefferson School teachers (Front row: Maggie Terry, Maude Gamble, and Cora Duke. Second row: Ella Baylor, Rebecca McGinness, Peachie Jackson, Kathleen Chisholm, Carrie Michie, and Gertrude Inge. Third row: Nannie Cox Jackson, Marian Wyatt, Jane C. Johnson, and Helen Jackson) (Courtesy of the Jefferson School) 99

22. The new Jefferson School, now a day-care center for four-year-olds 99

23. Ironic sign, erected on Vinegar Hill after renewal, steering tourists away from the Hill toward an historic district consisting of a courthouse, old buildings, and statues that reflect a distinctly Eurocentric culture 108

24. A major intersection created by urban renewal on Vinegar Hill 108

25. Diagram showing standard and substandard housing on Vinegar Hill before renewal 120

INTRODUCTION

Pre-Civil War legends abound concerning how Vinegar Hill, a 20-acre segment of sloping land at the center of Charlottesville, Virginia, actually got its name. One legend is that it was named by a group of merchants and hotel owners who prospered there during the early part of the nineteenth century. According to that account, those businessmen were Irish immigrants who, in dedicating the area, named it after the spot where an agrarian revolt had occurred in their homeland.

A different tale claims that vinegar itself was involved in how Vinegar Hill received its name. People hauling wagon loads of items had a difficult time ascending the hill. It was not unusual at all for one or more of such items to fall from the horse-driven vehicles used in that era to transport goods and passengers. As legend would have it, on one of those occasions, a cask of vinegar fell off, broke open, and drenched a whole section of the hill, leaving a pungent odor for a considerable period of time.

Another story makes mention of a cider-vinegar distillery that once existed in the area, a distillery that regularly released powerful fumes. Still another tale asserts that "vinegar" was merely a code name for the liquor that would later be produced and sold by bootleggers who made the Hill their base of operation. Now no one is certain which of the legends is closest to the true story of how Vinegar Hill, the neighborhood that grew to become the center of culture for blacks in the town, got its name.

The issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 caused a great influx of blacks from their rural environments into various cities and towns. As the migration continued, Vinegar Hill became a focal point for black residential and social life. With segregation still intact, black businesses evolved to satisfy a rising demand on the part of blacks for a varied assortment of goods and services. By the 1920s these black-owned businesses constituted "The Prime of Vinegar Hill," an era of black prosperity that neither hitherto nor henceforth has been achieved by the black citizens of Charlottesville.

In 1954 the United States Supreme Court issued its famous *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, holding that segregation in public schools violated black entitlement to equal protection under the Constitution. The Court — after analyzing data concerning quality of equipment and buildings, salaries of teachers, and curricula — concluded that school segregation deprived black children of equal educational opportunity. That holding was to form the foundation upon which integration would be built in American society, though for years after *Brown*, the struggle for equality continued. “Jim Crow” laws, which reflected the general attitude of southern whites toward blacks, slowly began to be appealed. Blacks organized protest marches and sit-ins to bring the reality of the *Brown* case to southern localities. As a country we witnessed the deaths of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and John and Robert Kennedy, all of whom gave their lives in the battle to eradicate America’s system of racial hypocrisy. One hundred years after slavery had ended, and 95 years after the 15th Amendment to the Constitution allowed black Americans the right of suffrage, southern localities effected the means to deny black citizens the right to vote. Fifteen years after *Brown* had mandated that public facilities be integrated, blacks still confronted “colored only” and “white only” signs.

As was the case with other southern states, there were powerful opponents to the process of integration in Virginia. *Brown* stipulated that desegregation of public schools should occur with “all deliberate speed.” It was assumed that government officials and responsible citizens would not tolerate violation of the Constitution. Yet in September 1958 Virginia governor Lindsay Almond ordered that the all-white James Lane High School and Charles Venable Elementary School, both in Charlottesville, be closed to prevent racial integration. This act marked the culmination of a statewide series of events aimed at stopping blacks from gaining access to public facilities designated “white.” In fact, such action, also known as “massive resistance,” delayed the execution of the *Brown* mandate for as long as a decade in some parts of Virginia.

But blacks in Charlottesville had a resistance plan of their own. Parents of black students who had been selected to integrate the Charlottesville white schools refused to return their children to all-black city schools. They arranged instead for the children to receive academic instruction at home through the assistance of special tutors and retired school teachers, or at the school board main office where several levels of education were taught in a single room. Meanwhile, white students, because their schools had been closed, attended private tutoring sessions at churches, in individual homes, and at other locations throughout the city. This stalemate finally ended in January 1959, when the pressure to integrate intensified. Under extreme pressure the white public schools finally reopened, and the process of integration resumed.

With this as an historic backdrop, a Charlottesville referendum was conducted on June 14, 1960. Voters were asked to determine whether it was necessary to redevelop the Vinegar Hill area. At the time, prospective voters were

required to pay a \$1.50 poll tax. Many buildings on the Hill were deteriorating, particularly the nineteenth-century frame houses and clapboard structures that still lingered in certain sections of the neighborhood. “A country-style slum” was how some regarded the area, and it was not unusual to see outdoor privies, outdoor water spigots, and grassless yards filled with abandoned toys and debris. Some residents raised farm animals, including pigs and chickens; others attempted to maintain fruit and vegetable gardens. So in essence, by the 1950s this 20-acre tract of land combined both rural and urban elements, all meshed together in the center of a developing city.

But as mentioned before, the Hill was by then also the center of black social life. It was the locale for organizations such as the Odd Fellows, the Masons, the Elks, and Eastern Star. For decades it was the site of the city’s only black school. Black churches were on the Hill, and on Saturday evenings the Blue Diamond Nightclub hummed the strains of the latest jazz tunes.

In January 1954 the Charlottesville City Council had adopted a resolution stating that “unsanitary and unsafe inhabited dwelling accommodations exist in the city” and “there is a shortage of safe and sanitary dwelling accommodations in the city” and “such condition can best be overcome by the establishment of a Housing Authority.” That same year a referendum was held on the question: “Is there a need for a Housing Authority to be activated in the City of Charlottesville?” The voters who favored having a housing authority numbered 1,105; those against it totaled 1,069. Subsequently, on June 23, 1954, the mayor appointed the authority’s first members. Then after years of resolutions, recommendations, and special General Assembly charter amendments, the June 14, 1960, redevelopment referendum was passed by a very narrow margin.

Just prior to that latter referendum, newspaper advertisements offered lists of the advantages and disadvantages of urban renewal on the Hill. The advantages were presented as being much more profound, including higher property values, better stores, wider streets, new apartment buildings, elimination of slums, and federal assistance amounting to as much as two-thirds of the net project cost. The disadvantages listed were not so numerous. Only two negative prospects were elaborated upon at any length. One disadvantage of urban renewal as planned for the Hill was that the federal government could intervene in local policies related to the project. The other cause for apprehension was that redevelopment might have meant the shifting of slum conditions from one section of the city to another.

An issue not given nearly enough public consideration was the commercial value of the Hill. By the time the demolition part of urban renewal had been completed in 1965, 29 businesses had been disrupted. They consisted of black restaurants and grocery stores, as well as furniture stores, barbershops, antique shops, an insurance agency, a clothing store, a shoe repair shop, a drugstore, and a hat-cleaning establishment. The city of Charlottesville

reported in a 1960 survey that the 29 businesses had a combined gross income of \$1.6 million for the preceding year. Several of the smaller shops had been experiencing financial difficulty as a result of increased industrialization and the broadened competitive market. Yet they had continued their operations in what was, for most, the only section of town in which their businesses could have thrived. The proprietors of those businesses were paid fair market value for their buildings and also compensated for costs involved in moving stock and equipment.

Individual homeowners were also compensated fair market value for their buildings. Furthermore, they were paid an additional \$5,000, as well as reasonable moving expenses. So dilapidated buildings were not the only structures destroyed. Well-maintained homes with indoor plumbing, gas heat, and other modern conveniences were demolished during the renewal project.

Of the 136 renters who resided on the Hill at the time of renewal, 119 were black. All of the renters were allowed compensation to aid them in moving to the public housing complex built as part of the renewal plan. That low-income housing development, built in a different section of town, was given the name "Westhaven" as a tribute to one of Charlottesville's early black entrepreneurs. Still, though the housing project may initially have been attractive to some of the tenants who were relocated from the Hill, the Westhaven housing project has since taken on characteristics typical of other such inner-city housing projects. Most tellingly, its overcrowded conditions represent a density nearly three times that of the rest of the city. One of the most feared potential disadvantages of urban renewal had come to fruition; one slum area indeed had been substituted for another.

Questions remain concerning what the ultimate effects of urban renewal have been. More than the two-thirds federal assistance originally projected, the whole Vinegar Hill project by the mid-1960s had actually involved the use of \$2.4 million in federal funds and \$608,000 in local tax monies, quite a bargain if you look at it from a local governmental perspective. But from a different point of view, urban renewal as it took place on the Hill has profoundly tragic implications.

As demolition crews worked to level this significant portion of the central city, 600 individuals were uprooted. Most were hesitant to move; they viewed the move with uncertainty and anticipation. Some were bitter over their sense of helplessness as the city exercised its prerogative of "eminent domain." Two elderly individuals died during the process of relocation, and several others succumbed soon after displacement. Now, one might say that these elderly people were destined to die soon anyway. How do we know that urban renewal was to blame? The fact of the matter is that we do not know for sure, but it is important to consider whether being uprooted from their homes caused some, especially the elderly who had been there for generations, enough psychological suffering that they no longer wished to live.

The then director of the Charlottesville Redevelopment and Housing Authority, Gene Arrington, maintained that many residents of Westhaven expressed appreciation for their improved living environment. For some, the move to the newly constructed project had meant first-time exposure to such conveniences as hot running water, indoor toilets, and electricity. However, since those initial years of the renewal project, Westhaven has become just another economically depressed and isolated black community. Teenage boys see no hope in the educational system. Teenage girls become pregnant in numbers disproportionate to those in the overall city population. The neighborhood as a whole is flooded with young mothers whose children will never experience what many of us regard as a normal childhood.

There is an old saying: "A nigga's between heaven an' hell, jus' like anybody else, an' still catchin' the short end of the stick." That adage holds some legitimacy as one considers the general condition of blacks in America as compared to their white counterparts. Boards of corporations as well as other enterprises continue to be run disproportionately by whites. Political entities have yet to resolve the dilemma of racial discrimination, a discrimination that perhaps can best be perceived with a glance at the unemployment rates. The percentage of blacks out of work is double that of unemployed whites. Some might argue that the problem is historic, that time will eradicate the vestiges of slavery that remain. Yet one is at times still inclined to ponder whether real integration has ever been the goal or whether another obscure exercise has been at the heart of the matter. And circumstances surrounding the Hill's redevelopment raise the very issue of just how much power blacks in America have had over their own destiny.

As late as 1982 seven acres of the Hill remained vacant. Twenty years after residents and businesses had been removed, redevelopment was still substantially incomplete. Currently, thirteen acres include two large office buildings, a supermarket, a restaurant, a fast-food franchise, and several small businesses. The ownership of these enterprises is overwhelmingly white. Could some of the black businesses that once existed on the Hill have prospered with selective renovation? Have the individuals who once lived there advanced comparably as the city has improved, or were they merely pawns in the game of progress?

In 1983 work on a federal court building was completed at the site of Vinegar Hill. Formerly residents of Charlottesville had to travel to nearby cities in order to have federal appeals cases heard. The newly constructed federal court building makes the handling of such cases more convenient.

Also convenient is the gigantic Omni Hotel, completed in 1985, which has already served as an attraction for many national and international conferences sponsored by the illustrious University of Virginia. With these new developments it is apropos to consider which of Charlottesville's citizens have been inconvenienced the most. And considering the developing prosperity of this

rapidly growing town, it is critical to consider whether blacks who owned homes and businesses were adequately compensated for their loss of property in what now must be acknowledged as one of the city's prime real estate areas. If nothing else, one thing is certain. Neither black property owners nor renters were ever adequately compensated for the loss of their cultural center, a place that had somehow found a way to flourish in the midst of a citywide community that was repressive by its very nature of excluding blacks from important decision-making positions.

This book is a response to that repression, an effort to allow those who had no voice then to speak now with regard to how they felt about the urban renewal project and its impacts on the coming generations. Many of the respondents were interviewed in the early 1980s when much of the Hill remained vacant, 20 years after the initial demolition occurred. Quite naturally, some have concluded that a major objective of the city was to move the distinctly black neighborhood away from its place right beside downtown. Others have contended that the move was beneficial, providing modern facilities for many who previously had lived in a rudimentary rural fashion. This disparity of opinion provides the ultimate complexity surrounding this renewal project that took so many years to complete.

In our efforts to be as comprehensive as possible, we endeavored to record testimonies from as broad an array of people as possible: schoolteachers, businessmen, maids, and cooks, as well as quite a few others. What finally emerges is the picture of an American subsociety that functioned as an entity almost unto itself. Without access to secondary and higher educational institutions, many black parents sent their children out of town and sometimes out of the state to garner for them those advantages. As the struggle for integration grew into a national cause, the community banded together and pursued its own strategies against those who would perpetuate the status quo. The following is a testament to their determination against all manner of adversity and a tribute to what they were able to make of a community with severely limited resources in an era when equality was little more than a hollow catchword.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PRIME OF VINEGAR HILL

In her 1933 master's thesis — "Charlottesville: A Study of Negro Life and Personality" — Helen Camp de Corse described the extent to which economic vitality existed in a small black community adjacent to the downtown district:

The segment of Main Street lying between Fourth Street West and Preston Avenue, known locally as "Vinegar Hill," has forty-one buildings on the north side and sixteen on the south side. Of the latter only one is occupied by Negroes — the Paramount Inn catering to transients. On the north side there are both white and colored establishments. Here are barber shops, pool-rooms, stores for furniture, food and clothing, shoe repair shops, cleaning establishments, drug stores, fish markets, beauty shops, insurance companies, tailors, restaurants, etc. Much of this property is owned by Negroes. The largest building on the hill, the Coles Building, is owned by Charles Coles, a Negro building contractor, and occupied by a haberdashery, and a ladies clothing shop, a dentist, a physician, a life insurance company, a beauty parlor and a cafe. A number of other buildings are occupied by two or more businesses. Only one white establishment, a lunch room, is patronized by whites only, while one negro business, a barber shop, is patronized by whites only. All other white businesses are patronized by both races or by Negroes only. Some of the Negro businesses are patronized by both races and some by Negroes only.¹

Just one or two generations after slavery had been abolished, a substantial body of black businessmen thrived in a small southern town. In assessing the prospects for such a situation, historians Leonard Broom and Norval D. Glenn, conclude that "the Negro businessman has several unique disadvantages, whereas white owners of stores and of many service establishments cater to all races, Negro businessmen, with few exceptions, can hope to attract only a Negro clientele. The potential clientele of the Negro businessman is relatively small and relatively poor."² However, Vinegar Hill was somewhat different.