African American Walking Tour

Since its inception, the city of Bloomington has maintained a deeply rooted African American history. Two African Americans, William Cooley and Aaron Wallace, purchased lots in the November, 1818 land sale. Literally, it was the second such sale of parcels in the city’s short history. No more information is available about these families, but census data from the 1860’s through the 1880’s document that the city attracted many African Americans primarily from Virginia, North and South Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, and Kentucky in the first waves of migration to the north. Although the Indiana State Constitution of 1816 outlawed involuntary servitude and African American citizens were free to live and work anywhere in the state, there were still those born into slavery in the south who fled to the north and were returned for bounty.

Bloomington’s citizens were active participants in what has come to be known as the Underground Railroad, a conduit of escape organized by citizens who opposed slavery and assisted in hiding individuals fleeing to freedom in the North. The path of escape led from Walnut Ridge, south of Bloomington, to northern stops in Martinsville, Morgantown and Mooresville. In 1917, Henry Lester Smith, the son of an abolitionist, recounted his relative’s stories of these harrowing times. Bloomington was also the destination of a generation of Scotch Irish Presbyterians from South Carolina who belonged to the Covenanter Church and settled here in the first half of the nineteenth century. Their houses, the Faris and Smith homes on the southeast side, are now landmarks along the trail to freedom. The stories of Lester Smith also recount the heroics of a Mrs. Myers, an African American who lived on the west side of town. It was on the west side, in a house that still stands at the corner of 7th and Rogers, where the local

Knights of the Golden Circle (southern sympathizers) purportedly met. Another prominent early resident, Robert Anderson, has a grave located in Covenanter Cemetery. Once an escaped slave, he chose to stay in Bloomington after emancipation. He joined the Presbyterian Church that supported his freedom and his heirs still reside on land near the cemetery at High and Hillside Streets.

African American community which flourished through the 1960’s and faded as broader opportunities appeared and the local culture of lodges, clubs and social organizations began to dissolve. The legacy that remains is a testament to this community’s achievement in the face of significant obstacles.

After the Indiana legislature passed legislation in 1869, “colored” students were required to be educated in public schools. Prior to this, the Bloomington’s Center School had been integrated and “colored” students occupied the upper floor. In 1874, “colored” students first began to attend a segregated grade school in Bloomington, in the same Center School building on the south east corner of 6th and Washington. White students moved to the recently completed “Central School” on South College. In 1881, there were 54 students under age 21 at Center School. T.C. Johnson, an eminent educator was the last principal of the Center School and first principal of the Banneker School which replaced it. He later went on to teach at Crispus Attucks High School in Indianapolis, now a National Historic Landmark. Elementary education in Bloomington remained segregated until 1951. Three early African American churches were founded in Bloomington, two of which date from the 1870’s. In the early twentieth century the congregations prospered and built impressive architect-designed limestone edifices on the west side of town. Taylor Chapel, which remained on the east side, closed in the 1930’s. The city’s African American community shifted from the east side to the west after the Shoover’s Brother’s Furniture Factory fire of 1884 and the relocation of the University to Dunn’s Woods from Seminary Square. An early urban neighborhood that was commonly called “Bucktown” was located in the area between Grant to Indiana and south of 10th Street to 8th Street. Many of the residents in this area rented. It was also where Hoagy Carmichael visited house parties near his childhood home and heard the indigenous jazz that proved so influential in his music. These lives, filled with hard work, play and striving for the future, were a catalyst for creativity. George Shealy, the left handed lead hitter for the Indianapolis ABC’s, lived in this neighborhood. Later, following an opportunity to purchase their own homes, many in the African American community settled into an area north of Kirkwood and west of College, occupied primarily by the working classes of Bloomington.

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American student life in the 20's, 30's and 40's. Dargan House, the Elms, and the now demolished “Do Drop-to all students. George Taliaferro, famed Indiana University served meals providing a kind of informal student union for university, but barred from its enrolled in the university. American male students east side to African American women, commencing as early as first private residence Dargan operated the hall for African American women, commencing as early as 1918. The Banneker School, but their petition to the school board failed. Instead the school was named for Benjamin Banneker, a free black man who had platted the nation’s capital. The school gymnasium was completed in 1941, using a New Deal program through the National Youth Administration. The surrounding dressed stone wall was built by the W.P.A. T. C. Johnson was principal at both the Center School on East 6th and the Banneker in its first years. At its height, the school served over 100 students in three, multi-graded classrooms. Mrs. Alice Evans and Mrs. Georgia Porter were long-time teachers. The school’s curriculum emphasized basic reading, writing, spelling, and mathematical skills. Graduates went on to Bloomington High School which was historically integrated. In 1955, the building was acquired by the city and renamed the West Side Community Center. In order to reclaim its historic significance, it was renamed the Banneker Community Center in 1994. Since its listing on the National Register of Historic Places, the Parks Department has completed a comprehensive building restoration.

3. Kappa Alpha Psi 425 East Kirkwood Avenue

Only one fraternity was founded on Indiana University’s campus and this is the Alpha Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi in 1911. Organized by a group of African American students in Mrs. Water’s building’s boarding house on East Kirkwood, Kappa Alpha Psi, later renamed Kappa Alpha Psi in 1915, has a significant national presence with over 550,000 members. Among the organizers was Elder Watson Diggs. He remained in the house when it moved to 830 West Kirkwood, the home of Professor Professor of local history and this was a northern campus. The fraternity moved to several locations in Bloomington during its tenure and is still active today. In 1961 the chapter moved to a site at 1469 East Seventeenth Street which was dedicated as Elder Watson Diggs Memorial house. An Indiana Historical Bureau marker was placed there in 2008.

4. Samuel Dargan House 316 North Grant Avenue

This house, and the last one at 315 North Grant, were owned by Samuel Dargan. The house was built in 1853, and Dargan operated the first private residence had by African American women, commencing as early as 1925. His own home was located behind the dormitory in a modest house. Dargan was Indiana University’s first African American law school graduate, acclaimed for his oratorical skills. He was immediately hired as curator of IU’s Law Library that dates from 1915. The school was sold to the library board for $12,000. According to statistical records of the time, the school building measured 40.5 feet by 26.25 feet and still had “dry closets” outside the building. Students remember that the older children were taught upstairs and the younger downstairs. Following the Civil War, Mattie Jacobs Fuller was indentured to an Indiana physician. Her labor was considered illegal. She was released when she was 4 years old and trained in Louisville as a beautician. After selling cosmetics for awhile she was able to open a beauty salon in The Allen Building was named by T.C. Washington for the school, but their petition to the school board failed. Instead the school was named for Benjamin Banneker, a free black man who had platted the nation’s capital. The school gymnasium was completed in 1941, using a New Deal program through the National Youth Administration. The surrounding dressed stone wall was built by the W.P.A. T. C. Johnson was principal at both the Center School on East 6th and the Banneker in its first years. At its height, the school served over 100 students in three, multi-graded classrooms. Mrs. Alice Evans and Mrs. Georgia Porter were long-time teachers. The school’s curriculum emphasized basic reading, writing, spelling, and mathematical skills. Graduates went on to Bloomington High School which was historically integrated. In 1955, the building was acquired by the city and renamed the West Side Community Center. In order to reclaim its historic significance, it was renamed the Banneker Community Center in 1994. Since its listing on the National Register of Historic Places, the Parks Department has completed a comprehensive building restoration.

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to church property, eventually becoming a member. Although there is a legend that the land was left to them, relatives say that land adjacent to the cemetery was purchased from the church, after the original brick building burned. Anderson, born into slavery in Kentucky in 1847, is buried here. Jared Jeffries, an NBA player born in Bloomington, is his great-great grandson. Relatives of Robert Anderson still make their homes on the land to the north.

Cover photographs clockwise:
Mattie Jacobs Fuller
Elizabeth Eagleson Bridgwaters
Rev. E. D. Butler