

## **REDISCOVERING THE LOST CITY OF BRONZEVILLE**

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Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history.

Dr. Carter G. Woodson

History is a people's memory, and without memory, man is devoted to the lower animals

Malcolm X

### **Abstract**

This article is part of a larger effort to excavate, document and preserve the history of a storied Black city within the city of Columbus, Ohio. Bronzeville, once a bustling enclave, was governed by a Black mayor and all-Black cabinet. Unfortunately, this is a history that is unknown by many and underappreciated by others. This article chronicles a community's effort to rediscover a lost story and in the process put Bronzeville in its proper cultural and political place in history.

**Keywords: Bronzeville, preservation, lost Black communities, historic, Columbus, Ohio**

### **Introduction**

Founded eight months into the War of 1812, the city of Columbus was named in honor of the explorer Christopher Columbus. Not only is Columbus the state capital, making it the seat of power, but one of the largest and oldest major cities in the Midwest. Despite the paucity<sup>1</sup> of scholarly literature on the presence of Blacks in Columbus, the history of African Americans in this North Central Ohio city is a long one. At the time of the city's founding there were less than 100 African American<sup>2</sup> residents. Nearly sixty years later; by the close of the Reconstruction era (1877), the number of African

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<sup>1</sup> Compared to Cleveland and Cincinnati, the literature on Columbus is scant.

<sup>2</sup> The words African American and Black are used interchangeably according to sound and context and to avoid repetition.

American residents surged. It was not until the start of the first great Black migration, however, when thousands of Blacks, in an effort to escape the hostile environs of the perilous south, that the numbers of Black Ohioans begin to mushroom. All told, from 1910 to 1970 approximately six million African Americans migrated to cities in the Northern, Western and Midwestern regions of the United States (Wilkinson, 2011; Lehmann, 1992); one of which was Columbus, Ohio. In 1910, Columbus was comprised of 12,739 Black residents; by 1920 that number rose to 22,181, and by 1930, the number shot up to 32,774<sup>3</sup> (Census, 1910; Population 3, p. 418; Census, 1920; Population 3, pp. 797-809; Census 1930: Population 3, pp. 535-36). Many of the newcomers hailed from Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky and West Virginia. Migrants came by way of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, the Southern Railway, or boats on the Ohio River. The result of this influx was the building and settling of numerous Black enclaves throughout Columbus, many of which have since vanished.

Currently, Columbus, Ohio is one of the fifteenth largest cities in the United States; and although it does not have the name recognition or cache as other Midwestern cities such as Chicago, Detroit or Cleveland for that matter, Columbus is rich in tradition and lore. Like many other major American cities, Columbus has its share of historic African American<sup>1</sup> communities; unfortunately, they have not garnered the attention they deserve either from the scholarly community or by those who are in a position to feature these communities in the city's marketing campaign. Some Midwesterners, both within as well as outside of the city of Columbus, are more familiar (albeit superficially) with

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<sup>3</sup> An author writing early in the 1940s claimed that a significant number of Blacks who migrated to Columbus during the period discussed above were from North Carolina, but we were unable to corroborate that assertion. See J.S. Himes, Jr.(1942). Forty Years of Negro Life in Columbus, Ohio. *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 27, 133-154.

Harlem in New York, and Black Wall Street in the Greenwood section of Tulsa, Oklahoma, than they are with Bronzeville, arguably Columbus' most storied and vivacious Black enclave. To say that the history of Bronzeville has been lost is an understatement. In fact, the history has been so deeply buried, that even among some of the city's Black octogenarian and nonagenarians to whom we have spoken over the years, Bronzeville is a faint memory.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Mysterious Lost City and Relevant Literature**

This article is part of a larger archaeological effort to excavate and document in bold relief this historic Black city within a city. Academics have always played an important role in the reclamation of the lost, forgotten or marginalized aspects of the human condition. One of the earliest scholarly efforts to rediscover the human condition that is the lost city was Frederick A. Ober's 1888 article *Ancient Cities of America* (Ober, 1888). Seventy one years later British historian Basil Davison did what many European and white American intellectuals considered blasphemy; he placed Africa at the center of analysis and highlighted the development of rich kingdoms and lost cultures beyond Egypt—fifteen hundred years before European ships first sailed to Africa's shores (Davidson, 1959). Since Davidson's award-winning book *The Lost Cities of Africa*, many writers have taken on similar projects. David Hatcher Childress, for example, has devoted two books on the subject of lost cities—one that explores lost civilizations in China, Central Asia and India (1991), another that examines lost cities in North and Central

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<sup>4</sup> Over the course of three years, conversations have been initiated with more than twenty residents who are in their eighties and nineties and only a few of them recall anything about Bronzeville. It is for this reason that we refer to the history as lost. While a few of our subjects did recognize the name Bronzeville, only two of them really proved helpful. Unfortunately, over the past year and a half, one of the individuals has succumbed to the debilitating effects of dementia, thus undermining our ability to communicate with him. Most people who were of age during Bronzeville's apex are deceased.

America (1998). Until recently, however, lost and/or forgotten Black cities (in America; that is) were given short shrift. Yet, the stories of lost Black towns, communities and cities deserve a broad hearing.

Eager to live and prosper as a free people, African Americans have long established their own communities and towns in America as far back as the Colonial era. Among those Black-run towns that have been relegated to the back pages of history include the Freedman's Village, Virginia, Buxton, Iowa, Blackdom, New Mexico, Nicodemus, Kansas and Freedman's Town, Texas. Unfortunately, these towns have been all but forgotten. Undaunted, a number of scholars, including Norman L. Crockett, Nell Irving Painter, Sundiata K. Cha-Jua, Charles Thomas and Hannibal Johnson, have over the last twenty five years, sought to reclaim the history of lost cities by devoting book-length treatments to some of them; and in doing so, have produced a growing and important body of work (Thomas, 2012; Johnson, 2003; Cha-Jua, 2002; Hamilton, 1991; Rooney, 1985; Crockett, 1979; Painter, 1976). This article builds on, yet goes beyond these works, as our research not only uncovers a spectacular story about an historic, but forgotten city, it touches on a community's efforts to preserve the landmarks that helped make it historic.

Tales of lost communities and cities have, for centuries, captured the imaginations of both young and old; and served as story-lines in science fiction movies, History Channel documentaries, dime store novels; and literary fiction for the sophisticated reader. These mysterious and elaborate yarns give context (no matter how superfluous) to creative minds that envision old sunken naval vessels or pirate ships with treasure chests overflowing with gold coins, rubies, emeralds, pearl strings and other valuable trinkets.

No lost city has greater name recognition than the city of Atlantis. And while some have argued that the story of Atlantis was first documented by Egyptian priests 200 years before Plato, few can deny that the legend of Atlantis was first popularized in the West via Plato's, the "Timaeus" and the "Critias," written approximately 330 B.C. (Plato, 2010; Jowett, 1871). The Atlantis described by Plato, however, was not the underwater kingdom envisioned by the average Pollyanna, but rather a morally bankrupt evil empire hell-bent on ruling the world by force. For eons, scholars, explorers and others have doubted its existence, while others have debated its location. Some say that Atlantis sunk off the coast of Spain while others claim that the city lies somewhere beyond the Pillars of Hercules in the Strait of Gibraltar. Still others have previously proposed that Atlantis was located on the Greek Island of Santorini, the Italian Island of Sardinia or on Cyprus.

Despite the lack of evidence that Atlantis ever existed, it still finds itself the subject of rigorous scholarly inquiry and million dollar maritime expeditions by highly reputable explorers (Howard, 2011). Needless to say, the subject of lost Black cities, towns and communities has not enjoyed a similar level of fanfare. Despite the fact that there is little debate as to whether or not these lost Black towns and communities ever existed, they existed; some even flourished, one of them was Bronzeville.

### **Significance of research**

Why is this research important? It is important because Bronzeville is as much a story about Blacks in Columbus as it is about Blacks anywhere in the world. In other words, Bronzeville is a story of self-determination, promise, failure and triumph. There are valuable lessons to be gleaned from this story that may prove useful as plans to redevelop the area are formulated. Second, the Black experience has historically been

consigned to an inferior place in the world's archives. In *The Racial Contract*, Philosopher Charles W. Mills argues that whites have entered into a contract whereby they have agreed not to recognize Blacks as equals (Mills, 1997). Some whites have been so vigilant in their effort to honor said contract, that for centuries, they have refused to acknowledge Black people's agency, going so far as to promulgate the notion that Africa had no history. In their minds, Africa was a continent where men by their own efforts had never raised themselves much above the level of beasts (Davidson, 1959). Africans had never evolved civilizations of their own; if they possessed a history, it could be scarcely worth telling. Consequently, the excavation of and permanent documentation of Bronzeville in scholarly form, firmly establishes it as an important piece of Columbus lore that can no longer be ignored, denied or dismissed.

Third, it is important that Bronzeville's history is made accessible to those who are charged with demolishing many of the area's landmarks. When one is unaware of the historic significance of people, places, events and buildings one may be apt to make decisions that may not only adversely impact those characters, but themselves as well. Finally, it is equally important to expose this history to those who reside in the area. When one understands the value of the community in which he or she lives, one is more likely to take pride in it; he or she may even walk more erect and thus, feel compelled to treat it with the respect it deserves. As Carter G. Woodson maintained "those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history" (Woodson, 1933; 2005).

Few American cities (comparatively speaking) boast an African American community that is as rich in its history as Bronzeville; yet Bronzeville has not been the

subject of a scholarly book, journal article or book chapter. Much of what exists about Bronzeville appears in newspapers that have long been defunct. In order to fully appreciate Bronzeville's uniqueness and extraordinary pageantry, it is essential that we situate the founding of Bronzeville within America's great Black migrations and other key developments of that era. The result is a much-needed and robust portrait of this lost city within a city.

### **The Making of Bronzeville**

After World War I broke out, industrialized urban centers in the North, Midwest and West faced a paucity of laborers, as the war brought an end to the steady tide of European immigration to America. With war productions kicking into high gear, factories, shipyards and plants lured Blacks north. The Black press, namely the *Chicago Defender*, the *Crisis Magazine*<sup>5</sup> and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, widely considered the industry's most reputable Black media, published advertisements touting the opportunities available in the country's great metropolises, along with first person accounts of prosperity. One editorial in the *Chicago Defender* (as quoted in Campbell and Johnson, 1991) stated:

The Defender invites all to come north. Plenty of room  
for the good, sober, industrious man . . . come join the ranks  
of the free. Cast the yoke from around your neck. See the  
light. When you have crossed the Ohio River breathe the fresh air  
and say, "Why didn't I come Before?"

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<sup>5</sup> The Crisis magazine, edited by W.E.B. DuBois, was for many years, the official voice and media organ of the NAACP.



In 1916, as the first phase<sup>6</sup> of the great Black migration got underway, a factory wage job in the urban North was approximately three times more than what Blacks could make working the land in the rural south. Although the cost of northern living was undoubtedly higher, nullifying in some instances, the actual wage advantage that newly arrived southern migrants had initially imagined the psychological lift of landing a higher wage paying job was sufficient enough to entice Black laborers from the South.

As World War I drew to a close in 1918, James Weldon Johnson, noted author and co-composer of the National Negro Anthem, posed a question that was undoubtedly on the minds of many Blacks: Would Blacks' support of the war effort in the battlefields of Europe and in the factories of the U.S. translate into improvements in the "status of the Negro as an American citizen?" No doubt, the end of the war created high hopes within African American communities as Blacks fought and died in "defense of Democracy." Yet despite the heroics of such units as the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (aka the Harlem Hell Fighters) and the 92<sup>nd</sup> and 93<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Divisions (aka the Buffalo Division Infantry), when Black soldiers returned to the U.S. they encountered a racism that was no less entrenched than before heading off to war. In 1919, for example, there was widespread violence against Black communities nationwide, a summer so sweltering and repressive that it became known as the Red Summer of 1919<sup>7</sup> whereby a total of twenty six anti-black "race riots" occurred. Millions of lives were disrupted, and hundreds, perhaps even thousands of lives were lost (McWhirter, 2011). Thousands of Blacks fed-up with the promise of improved living conditions as well as the wonton violence of psychopathic

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<sup>6</sup> The first Black migration occurred roughly from 1910 to 1940, with the second following 1940 to 1970.

<sup>7</sup> Although that period in 1919 is known as the Red Summer the violence actually occurred over a longer period—from April to November of that year.

whites fled to what they believed to be safer, if not, greener pastures. Some escaped to Columbus.

As the Black population in northern cities swelled exponentially throughout the 1920s, competition for employment was keen; and finding affordable and adequate housing was a premium. Despite the reportedly less harsh climate of the North, Blacks still found it difficult to get hired in any capacity other than as a janitor or custodian. There were some mechanical and manufacturing industries in Columbus, however, that did take on Blacks as shop-floor laborers and in other areas: Winslow Glass, Jeffery Manufacturing, Columbus Iron-Steel, Buckeye Steel Castings, and Carnegie.

Although segregation was purportedly illegal in the North, anti-black sentiment was pervasive. Indeed, in the years following the 1915 release of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, the Ku Klux Klan, previously in decline, experienced a revival throughout the Midwest. The KKK's resurgence was especially strong in Ohio, where in Summit County, for example, the Klan claimed to have more than fifty thousand members.<sup>8</sup> Some of the county's officials were Klan, including the sheriff, Akron's mayor, several judges and county commissioners, and most members of Akron's school board. The KKK was also entrenched in Licking County, where the group held its 1923 and 1925 national conventions, attracting more than 70,000 attendees to the popular resort of Buckeye Lake.<sup>9</sup> By the early 1930s, another white supremacist group, the home grown Black Legion sprouted up on buckeye soil. The group captured headlines in the mid to late 1930s when a dozen of its members were found guilty of kidnapping and murdering a

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<sup>8</sup> See Ohio History Central at [http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Ku\\_Klux\\_Klan](http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Ku_Klux_Klan)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

worker with the Workers Progress Administration.<sup>10</sup> Like the KKK, the Black Legion believed it to be its duty to guard against Black infiltration of white neighborhoods, plants and factories; and of course, schools.

At any rate, after the U.S. Supreme Court declared racially based housing ordinances unconstitutional in 1917, some residential neighborhoods enacted covenants requiring white property owners to agree not to sell to Blacks; these would remain legal until the Supreme Court struck them down in 1948. As a result of housing tensions, many Blacks ended up building their own enclaves thereby creating a new urban African American way of life for themselves. In fact, some of these all-Black districts possessed many of the characteristics of a city; populations in the tens of thousands and a range of modern urban institutions, economic, social, and cultural in nature. Indeed, these factors combined with the influx of southern Black migrants who trekked to Columbus in search of war-time employment opportunities, along with those who moved to Columbus in order to escape the repressive violence of the Red Summer of 1919, may have prompted the founding and building of a strong Columbus chapter of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association; the heyday of which spanned the 1920s and 1930s (Christian, 2004).

With the stock market crash of 1929, the economic boom of the roaring twenties came to a screeching halt, ushering in a tsunami that was the Great Depression. In the mid 1930s, as the Great Depression raged on, ravaging communities in its path, some African Americans took solace in the scintillating and improvisational sounds of jazz.

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<sup>10</sup> Formed in 1935, the WPA was the largest New Deal Agency, employing millions of unemployed people (mainly men) to carry out public works projects such as the construction of public buildings and roads.

Indeed some have argued that during that period, jazz had come as close as it ever has to being America's most popular music genre. It was an explosive development and unleashed in some an unbridled determination to persevere in times of adversity. Despite the fact that the Great Depression had pushed more than 15 million men and woman onto the unemployment lines, creating the worst American crisis since the Civil War, some whites took solace in Milton Alger and Jack Yellen's *Happy Days are Here Again* while Blacks basked in Duke Ellington's *Caravan* and Billie Holiday's *I've Got my Love to Keep me Warm*. Meanwhile a group of Columbus Blacks, unrelenting in their purpose, came together and employed a unique brand of Black Nationalism as a way of dealing with this brutal economic storm while at the same time heightening racial pride. Their nationalism possessed vestiges of both Garvey's UNIA, Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam and later Oscar Brown, Sr.'s effort to form a 49<sup>th</sup> state just for African Americans. At the same time, what Columbus' visionaries had in mind was appreciably different than what had heretofore occurred in Columbus. In 1936, they carved out a two mile area between the boundaries of Woodland Avenue (East), Cleveland Avenue (West), Broad Street (South) and the Pennsylvania railroad tracks (North) and named it Bronzeville.<sup>11</sup> By pooling their resources (both human and financial capital) they formed their own independent and self-sustaining colony where racial pride, Black entrepreneurship and Black governance were on public display.

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<sup>11</sup> The name Bronzeville was appropriated from James Gentry in Chicago, who first coined the term. An editor for the Chicago Bee, and later the Chicago Defender, Gentry came up with the name as he believed it best described the Black residents of a certain Chicago community who were of varying hues. The term Bronzeville was intended to be a unifier of Black people, a sharp departure from such silly developments as the brown paper bag test and the like.

Two of the area's major through-fares were Long Street and Mount Vernon Avenue. They were at the heart of Bronzeville. Long Street was a residential thoroughfare, dotted with Black-owned commercial ventures and businesses; Mount Vernon Avenue to the North was Bronzeville's economic engine. If one was to categorize the establishments found along both Long Street and Mount Vernon as well as those in close proximity, they would fall squarely within four broad categories: culture and entertainment (the Ogden Theatre, Phythian Theatre, Empress Theatre, and the Belmont Club) dining and lodging (the Novelty Food Bar, the Yacht Club Bar, the Barnett Hotel, the Garden Manor, the Plaza Hotel, the Macon Hotel, and years later, the Hotel St. Clair, the city's swankiest Black hotel), insurance, grocers and wellness (the Supreme Life and Casualty Insurance Company, Atlanta Life Insurance, Domestic Life Insurance, Dunbar Life Insurance, Fireside Mutual Aid Association Inc, Carl L. Brown's Fresh Fruits and Vegetables and the famous Alpha Hospital and Professional Building,<sup>12</sup> out of which W.A. Method, M.D. and R.M. Tribbitt, a dentist conducted business) and business and finance (the Adelphi Savings and Loans) (Giffin, 2005; Allen, 1922).

At one point, there were few establishments on either Long Street or Mount Vernon that was not Black-owned. Tommy Campbell who first began working on Mount Vernon Avenue in 1948 "admits that in some instances whites were eager to back Black business ventures . . . by making sure that Blacks got loans and licenses that meant that

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<sup>12</sup> Built in 1920 by Drs. Method and Tribbitt, the building was initially constructed as a private practice and named the Alpha Hospital. In 1922, when Method and Tribbitt realized that their creation could be eligible for financial aid from the city's charitable funding agencies, they reorganized it as the Alpha Hospital Association with Method serving as Chief of Staff. It then served as a public hospital and social service agency. The Hospital Association conducted a nurses' training school; "the only place in the city where any girl of good moral character and education may complete a course in nurses' training." As the entity expanded even more, it became the Alpha Hospital and Professional Building and in subsequent years, the Method Building.

they didn't have to worry about Blacks coming downtown to white establishments” (Campbell, 2013). Still over the years, Black-owned businesses and establishments were consistent employers of African Americans. For example, in 1932, Black-owned businesses employed at least one thousand persons (Minor, 1936). In addition to being home to five Black-owned hotels of varying quality, the Bronzeville area was also comprised of several of the city's oldest and most prominent Black churches, a few of which were stops on the Underground Railroad.

Four factors helped put Bronzeville on the map. First, it became incorporated<sup>13</sup> in October 1936; second, on March, 3, 1937, Bronzeville's 40,000 residents elected a mayor, the 44 year old Rev. Dr. N. L. Scarborough of Trinity Baptist Church.<sup>14</sup> When word of Scarborough's election spread, the white-owned *Ohio State Journal* (1937) acknowledged this important development, but wrote condescendingly:

Election of a minister of the gospel as “mayor of Bronzeville” is a clear indication that the colored citizens of Columbus have respect for law, order, good morals and religion.

It is gratifying that the individuals and groups that represent the lower element had no part in the election . . . of course Dr. Scarborough lacks legal authority, but his influence, together with that of his cabinet and supporters, unquestionably will be for good.

The colored citizens certainly are to be congratulated for their exceedingly wise choice.

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<sup>13</sup> Although Bronzeville was incorporated and referred to as a city by its residents, it was actually a community and not a city by the legal definition of the word.

<sup>14</sup> Rev. N. L. Scarborough was pastor of Trinity Baptist Church from 1927 until his death in 1949.

At Scarborough's inauguration, at which more than 1700 people attended, he offered the following acceptance speech (Jackson, 1938):

The big thing my folk need is better housing.  
But first my cabinet and I must consolidate  
them. All the factions must be brought  
together and our big aim will be to help  
them educationally, politically and civically.  
Being a minister I must I must also help them  
Religiously.

Longtime resident Sheldon Lee remembers Scarborough as a strong leader. Said Lee: "Scarborough had the biggest congregation around . . . to show you just how well-respected a leader he was: upon his death the mayor of Columbus invited Scarborough's wife to have the funeral at Memorial Hall, but she elected to, understandably so, have the services at her husband's church."<sup>15</sup> Third, after Scarborough's inauguration, two weeks after the election, (at which Mayor Myron Gessaman of Columbus gave the opening address) Scarborough established an all African American cabinet to address Bronzeville's social, political and economic needs. Bronzeville residents were apparently so pleased with Scarborough and the work of his cabinet that they reelected him the following year.

Scarborough's cabinet was comprised of eight positions: president, Departments of Education, Public Welfare, Finance, Public Relations, Legal Affairs, Better Business

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<sup>15</sup> Sheldon Lee, interview with Judson L. Jeffries. Columbus, Ohio, 2 June 2013.

Relations, and the Department of Recreation.<sup>16</sup> A close inspection of Scarborough's cabinet suggests that he took special care with his selections. This governing body was a distinguished collection of legal minds, managers, bureaucrats, funeral directors and physicians—professions that not only required special skill sets, but strong people skills as well. One of the cabinet's more impressive members was Attorney Charles W. Warfield, a Republican influential and a senior member of the law firm of Warfield, Walters and Curtis. An Alpha man, Warfield also came from a family of college graduates; his father having been a professor at historically Black Storer College in West Virginia (Warfield, 2013). A more intrusive background check reveals that several of Bronzeville's cabinet members were well-connected, politically; such as Elmer Burns, who was closely aligned with Roy Wilkins who would later become executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Fourth, was the advent of the wildly popular Miss Bronzeville Swim Suit competition. This event attracted some of the city's most beautiful contestants, garnered tremendous media interest.<sup>17</sup> The swim suit competition more than any single event kept Bronzeville in the public glare.

Soon after Scarborough was elected, his sense of urgency was evident. Against the backdrop of Joe Louis' historic eighth round knockout of James "Cinderella Man" Braddock to win the heavyweight title; Scarborough called a special meeting of the Bronzeville cabinet just days after the fight. No doubt buoyed by the Brown Bombers'

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<sup>16</sup> Dr. Henry W. Dyer, DDS served as president; Elmer Burns as head of the dept. of education; Anna Allen as head of dept. of public welfare; Pompey Davis as head of dept. of finance; E.L. Nix as head of dept. of public relations; Charles W. Warfield was in charge of the dept. of legal affairs; George Mays as head of dept. of better business relations and James Madison directed the dept. of recreation.

<sup>17</sup> Years later, the Bronzeville Swimsuit Competition gave way to The Ohio State News Annual Bathing Beauty Revue.



impressive performance, Scarborough and his cabinet endeavored to conference with local insurance companies, managers and agents; the objective of which was to discuss “The Value of Supporting Race-Owned and Race Operated Insurance Companies.” Scarborough’s timing was genius as the Black community was still reveling in the afterglow of Louis’ victory. And while we have no hard evidence, it is plausible that Scarborough and his cabinet sought to capitalize on the residual frenzy left over from Louis’ epic win (McLaren, 2002). The euphoria that erupted on the night of Louis’ historic feat was captured in a local newspaper. The article read: East Enders went “absolutely nuts” shouting and yelling to the tops of their voices, pulling down trolley lines, singing, kissing and riding through downtown with horns at full blast (Dyer, 1937). Scarborough was perhaps hopeful that he could channel the rambunctious and destructive inhibitions of some in ways that might benefit the race.

Interestingly, the same year that Scarborough was elected mayor of Bronzeville, Nimrod B. Allen, a respected community leader and the Urban League’s executive secretary, founded *Frontiers of America, Inc.* (later *Frontiers International Inc*), a national club that focused on developing leaders. Years later, Allen offered, “the community desperately needed an organization that could speak and act thoughtfully and without restraint on behalf of Negro citizens” (Johnson and Bethels, 1991). What is not clear is whether or not Scarborough and Allen joined forces at some point. What is apparent, though, is the importance both men placed on strong Black leadership.

As the 1930s came to a close, Bronzeville underwent a major development as the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA) tore down the Blackberry Patch to make way for Poindexter Village, an expansive two-story thirty five brick building

housing complex that stretched over 27 acres. As the years passed, the Blackberry Patch began to resemble a shanty town, in an underdeveloped country, as many of its dwellings were without indoor plumbing, and saddled with pot-bellied stoves in order to keep warm in the winter. It is worth noting that despite the fact that, for a time, CMHA barred Blacks from all federal projects except Poindexter Village (VL Hits, 1944), “for many who lived in squalor,” Poindexter Village<sup>18</sup> “was a godsend” (Ferenchik, 2013). Once Poindexter Village was built, it served as home to some of Columbus’s Black working class and low income residents; it also was a hub to newly arriving southern migrants looking to capitalize on the war-time industry jobs that availed themselves during the 1940s.

It was no accident that the move by Scarborough and his associates to form an all-Black governing body coincided with the burgeoning mood of the American Black----a mood that was best captured in the works of such writers as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright who wrote of the emergence of a New American Negro, spawned by the harsh realities of America’s economic and cultural isolation. The Bronzemen (as they called themselves) employed an iteration of Black Nationalism that incorporated not only the best of Garvey, Muhammad and Brown, but W.E.B. DuBois as well, who maintained that Blacks should develop a separate ‘group economy’ of ‘producers and consumers cooperatives’ as a way of counteracting economic discrimination and poverty.

James Madison, a 101-year-old resident of Maryland, is the only living member of the Bronzeville cabinet. Raised in Columbus, Madison is a product of East High School, later graduating from The Ohio State University in 1934. A former OSU track

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<sup>18</sup> Poindexter Village is named in honor of Rev. James Preston Poindexter, longtime pastor of Second Baptist Church and first Black elected to the city council (1880).

star, Madison headed the Department of Recreation as a member of the Bronzeville cabinet and later served as Poindexter Village's first resident manager. In 2011, four of the six authors travelled to Maryland by car to attend Madison's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party. During the visit, the first author asked Madison a number of questions about Bronzeville. At one point Madison noted that "anything you wanted you could get without going outside of Bronzeville, we had everything . . . Black-owned dry cleaners, grocers, haberdasheries, banks, doctors, dentists, you name it, we had it . . . Bronzeville was a city within a city" (Madison, 2011). The interview with Madison was videotaped for posterity and proved invaluable for a number of reasons, two of which, because it enabled us to visualize Bronzeville and its goings-on and it helped us put the history of Bronzeville in its proper context. Documenting living history accomplishes a key research goal. Bruce C. Berg speaks to the importance of this in his book *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Berg says that documenting such stories "assures that the real-life experiences and memories of people cannot be so easily omitted, edited, shredded, or swept away" (Berg, 1995).

By the late 1940s to early 1950s, Bronzeville seemed to fizzle out for reasons that are not entirely clear. Since that time, a number of different names have been used to refer to the area or parts of the area, such as the eastside, the Near Eastside, NOBO (for North of Broad Street) and the Mount Vernon Avenue area. Many city officials refer to the area now as the King-Lincoln district.<sup>19</sup> Assistant Development Director Cynthia Rickman said "the King-Lincoln name was chosen during the creation of a neighborhood

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<sup>19</sup> City officials define the King-Lincoln District by much smaller boundaries—I-71 to 20<sup>th</sup> Street, Broad to Atcheson.

development plan in 2002” (Vitale, 2009). Several community historians and local preservationists have taken issue with the city’s attempt to marginalize Bronzeville’s history by ignoring its rich heritage altogether. They argue that the name King-Lincoln is not historically consistent with the area’s lore: nor the spirit in which Bronzeville was founded. Instead, the name King-Lincoln is an amalgamation of two cultural institutions: the Lincoln Theatre (formerly the Ogden until 1939) on Long Street and the King Arts Complex (formerly the Phythian Temple) on Mount Vernon Avenue.<sup>20</sup> The recently renovated Lincoln Theatre, originally named the Ogden Theatre in 1929 when it was founded, played an important role in the lives of Bronzeville’s residents. The King Arts Complex, while the crown jewel of Mount Vernon Avenue today, was renovated and reopened in 1987 under its current name, more than thirty years after Bronzeville fizzled out.

### **By Ignoring Bronzeville’s history, it lies in peril**

In 2012, the city celebrated its centennial anniversary; punctuated with year-long commemorations of varying kind that included festivals, musical productions and artistic expressions. Neighborhoods that are home to some of the city’s most prominent ethnic groups were featured in local documentaries, newspapers articles and other popular venues. Unfortunately, the history of Bronzeville was conspicuously absent. What’s more, the name King-Lincoln was displayed prominently and continues to appear in the city’s promotional and marketing materials. Years earlier, a towering arch that bears the

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<sup>20</sup> A non-profit organization named in honor of Dr. Martin L. King Jr. that was established to promote, preserve, and foster the artistic and cultural contributions of African Americans.

King-Lincoln name, was erected on Long Street, which continues to remain one of the area's major thoroughfares.

Other than the local activists and historians who take pride in Bronzeville's history, few expressed disappointment with such a glaring omission. Within activists and preservationist circles, some argue that the reason city officials did not give the history of Bronzeville the recognition it warrants is because to have done so may have sparked a strong desire on the part of community residents and other potentially interested parties to excavate and preserve the history, thereby opening up a proverbial "can of worms" and in the process undermining the city's plans to redevelop the area, which includes wholesale demolition of historic structures.

The area once known as Bronzeville is at the epicenter of the city's plans for redevelopment, consequently some residents are of the opinion that certain city officials, namely, the mayor (a Black man) is pandering to white downtown corporate interests. Others argue that he avoids acknowledging Bronzeville's history so as not to alienate the white business community, which may include partners who may be reticent about the idea of investing in an area that was once controlled by Blacks. Whether or not these claims are true remains to be seen. However, ascertaining the merits of these hypotheses is not within the purview of this article.

Over the past several years, residents have witnessed the razing and bulldozing of houses, buildings and other structures that some community preservationists argue were of historic import. The authors of this article maintain that when one is versed in the history of people, places and things they may be more likely to harbor an appreciation for that history, and thus may be interested, not only, in learning more about it, but

preserving it as well. Conversely, if one is unaware of the historical significance of people, places and things, one may be inclined to make judgments and decisions that may not only adversely impact that history, but eradicate it altogether. Therefore, the authors of this article decided to invite the public to participate in a bus tour of the neighborhood. The goal was to make people aware of the neighborhood's history and cultivate in residents a sense of civic pride that might inspire them and others to demand that city officials and private developers maintain the integrity of this historic area as they consider ways to redevelop Bronzeville in the name of progress.

### **The Bronzeville Bus Tour: Where the idea originated?**

Specifically, the idea of a tour was born out of the spring 2010 History of Black Columbus Conference; an annual event held at the African American and African Studies Community Extension Center<sup>21</sup> (CEC) at The Ohio State University, located in the heart of the African American community on Mount Vernon Avenue, one of Bronzeville's major thoroughfares.

The annual History of Black Columbus Conference is a day-long affair and its purpose is to bring together members of the Columbus community to discuss and celebrate the robust history of African-descended peoples in the city of Columbus and to spotlight the contributions Blacks have made in all areas of city life. Each conference has

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<sup>21</sup> The African American and African Studies Community Extension Center is the outreach arm of the Department of African American and African Studies. The CEC offers a range of programs and activities intended to enhance the life chances of Columbus' residents generally. Among the programs are a math-science program for kids in grades 4-12; a 10-week leadership program for young professionals, a lecture series, summer programs designed to prepare youth for college and computer literacy courses for senior citizens.

a different theme. Typically, an out of town speaker--an expert on the subject matter--gives the opening address, thus setting the tone for the remainder of the conference. The 2010 theme was *Back to the Future: From Bronzeville to Vision 2012*. Using the Black past to inform Columbus' future was the conference's theme. In other words, any plans on the part of the city or private developers that involve redeveloping the area in which Bronzeville is located would do well to consider Bronzeville's past.

The conference started at 9:00 am and lasted until 3:30 pm. The conference attracted people from all walks of life including elected officials, longtime residents, faculty from OSU and other nearby schools, college students, clergy and others. One of the topics of discussion was the disrepair into which some of the area's buildings and structures had fallen. Another equally spirited panel lamented the destruction of the neighborhood (over the years) through the demolition of buildings, houses and other important structures--some of tremendous historical and symbolic significance, such as places of worship that hold important meanings and memories for many Columbus residents, especially those of a certain age. In March 2010, the city tore down a 100-year-old commercial building to clear the way for a seven-unit condominium at 1072 E. Long Street. From 1944 to 1952, that building housed the Burns Memorial Funeral Home, a Black-owned, husband-and-wife operation that included the only licensed woman embalmer in central Ohio. Patterned in the mold of the California style of architecture, the funeral home was striking in appearance. Said Willis Brown, president of the Bronzeville Neighborhood Association: "everyone's in a hurry to tear stuff down . . . we don't want a plaque. We want a building" (Vitale, 2010).

Two months later a private developer demolished the then 82 year-old Centenary United Methodist Church igniting an even greater uproar. Some nearby residents had hoped the church could be preserved. Kathy Mast Kane, executive director of the Columbus Landmarks Foundation, called it “a missed opportunity” (Ferenchik, 2010). There seemed to be a feeling among some conference attendees, that before long, many of the buildings and their unique architectural design would be destroyed by private developers or city entities resulting in the obliteration and the erasure of the neighborhoods’ important and distinctive history.

Among the conference attendees was then longtime City Councilwoman Charleta Tavares. Toward the end of the conference, Tavares suggested that the Community Extension Center arrange a tour of the Bronzeville neighborhood to a) introduce this robust, but hidden history to those who were unaware b) allow citizens to re-familiarize themselves with the historical nuances of the community c) to view the historic structures of Bronzeville and d) to establish, from a community perspective, the future preservation efforts of the historic Bronzeville community. Conference attendees insisted that it was important that the integrity of the buildings and the unique features that are particular to certain edifices be preserved and maintained if the neighborhood is to retain its illustrious history and reinsert itself as a Mecca of Black cultural, social and economic preeminence.

### **Planning the Tour**

Weeks after the conference, the Community Extension Center’s Director, Judson L. Jeffries, reached out to Willis E. Brown, a teacher at Bexely Middle School and



president of the Bronzeville Neighborhood Association,<sup>22</sup> to discuss the idea of a tour. At this initial meeting the two agreed to partner on this important endeavor. In July, Jeffries and Brown met again to flesh out some general details. They agreed that it would be best to wait until The Ohio State University resumed classes in the fall before going ahead with the tour, as students and faculty are scarce during the summer months.

In early September, a forum, unfortunately, prompted by the demolition of the Charles Building at 905 E. Long Street, was held at the Community Extension Center with community residents, (the majority of whom had attended the conference the previous spring) to plan the Bronzeville Community Tour. Some residents were vexed after witnessing the demolition of yet another historic structure in the span of a few months. Originally, the 80- year old Charles Building had been owned by Dr. W. A. Method who, reportedly, named it after his son. City officials reported that they received an emergency order from their own Dept. of Building and Zoning Services to fix or raze the building.

Initially, the city-owned building had been slated for a federally funded renovation by the Affordable Housing Trust for Columbus & Franklin County. The architects, however, informed city officials that it would cost \$2.1 million to renovate and \$1.5 million to tear it down and begin anew. Cynthia Rickman spokesperson for the Columbus Department of Development, said “We worked hard to preserve that building” (Vitale, 2010). When the chairperson of the Near East Area Commission was told of

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<sup>22</sup> The Bronzeville Neighborhood Association is a fledgling local nonprofit civic association dedicated, among other things, to uncovering and documenting and preserving the history of Bronzeville.

Rickman's response she replied, "ask me if I believe that . . . the desire to help us save some of our history is not there . . . it's really disrespectful" (Vitale, 2010).

Some of those at the forum were visibly upset and took the opportunity to vent their frustration with the indifference shown by certain city officials. Once tempers subsided attendees were handed sheets of paper and asked to jot down suggestions that might give the organizers of the bus tour an idea of what the tour might look like and entail; and how they envisioned the preservation of this historic community might proceed. Approximately fifteen to twenty minutes later, Jeffries engaged the audience in an hour long discussion about the comments they had written down. Everyone agreed that the tour should produce a report and that it should be presented to the Columbus City Council for its consideration.

After much deliberation, the assembly also believed it was important to conduct the tour on a weekend to maximize participation. Sundays were deemed impractical as many of Columbus' Black communities are highly religious, hence Sundays were eliminated, because it was believed that many would be preoccupied with various church activities. Eventually, residents agreed that a Saturday would be the ideal day. However, residents thought it important to select a Saturday that did not coincide with an Ohio State University home football game. Again, the thinking was to select a day and time that would maximize attendance. Having it on a Saturday on which an OSU football game was scheduled might undercut attendance. Days after the forum, a well crafted letter, explaining the purpose and objective of the tour was sent out via email as well as regular mail to everyone on the Community Extension Center's mailing list.

Additionally, press releases were sent out to various media at approximately the same time.

Over the next several weeks, members of the Community Extension Center's staff fielded phone calls from people interested in taking the tour. Not surprisingly calls continued to trickle in after the deadline, forcing the CEC's staff to create a waiting list that swelled to eighteen.

### **The Tour**

The tour occurred on Saturday, October 2, 2010 from 10:00 am to 12:00 noon. Forty-one people participated in the tour, filling up the two busses booked for this endeavor. A twenty-five seat bus was secured from The Ohio State University's motor pool while a sixteen-seat bus came from the Neighborhood House Inc., a local settlement house. Riders were asked to arrive at 9:45 am to receive the day's instructions. Between 9:30 and 9:45 am, riders filed into the Community Extension Center in anticipation of the tour. At 9:45 am, Jeffries and Dana Moessner<sup>23</sup> gave tour instructions and primed riders on what to expect over the next two hours. Before boarding the busses, Jeffries and Moessner gave each rider a survey to be completed during the tour. The purpose of the survey was to collect and document the viewpoints of the participants on how to revitalize and preserve the historic Bronzeville community. Writing utensils and clipboards were provided once all riders were seated on the busses. Each bus was accompanied by a tour guide as well as a community historian. During the two hours, tour guides (Brown and Moessner) treated riders to a robust history filled with stories of

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<sup>23</sup> Dana Moessner, a Caucasian gentleman, is an elected official who serves on the Near East Area Commission; he is also a friend of the Community Extension Center.

famous people and the places they frequented. Numerous riders admitted to being unaware of much of the history that was shared, while some confessed to never having heard of Bronzeville until they attended the History of Black Columbus Conference the previous spring. Photos were taken throughout the day by B. Malone Ridgill, while John Ray videotaped the proceedings. The photos and videotape were later catalogued and archived at the Community Extension Center as part of a larger research project.

Due to time constraints the tour was limited to six stops.<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that the six sites were agreed upon by the principal organizers of the tour<sup>25</sup> in consultation with residents, local historians and preservationists in advance of the tour.

The sites and their locations are:

- 1) Australian Alley and E. Long Street-Edna Building<sup>26</sup>
- 2) 91 Miami Avenue-Garden Manor
- 3) 1220 Arthur Place, Apt. A-Poindexter Village
- 4) Taylor Avenue and Mount Vernon Avenue-1890s Structure<sup>27</sup>
- 5) Atcheson Street and Winner-Maryland Pool
- 6) N. 18<sup>th</sup> Street and Mount Vernon Ave-19<sup>th</sup> Century  
Commercial Building Row<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Although the riders were treated to a rather substantial tour of Bronzeville, there were only six occasions where riders were asked to step off the bus in order to get a better visual of a building or structure.

<sup>25</sup> The primary organizers of the tour were Judson L. Jeffries, Willis E. Brown and Dana Moessner.

<sup>26</sup> Built in 1920 and named after the owner's wife, the Edna building is a three story brick structure making it one of the oldest architecturally sound buildings on Long Street. At its apex, the building was home to a Kroger's supermarket on the first floor, a ballroom on the second floor and apartments on the third level.

<sup>27</sup> Site number four is a massive four story building of gothic style. Its stone arches make the building stand out. During the 1930s the building was home to an earlier version of the Boys and Girls club.

<sup>28</sup> This row of buildings was once the offices of some of the city's most prominent Black businessmen and physicians.

These six sites also happened to be among some of the neighborhood's most historic structures. For example, site number two was once a hotel that catered to famous entertainers such as Fats Waller, Count Basie and other Black luminaries. Site number three was once home to James Madison, Poindexter Village's first resident manager and one of Scarborough's cabinet members. Including this site as part of the 2010 tour was fortuitous as the twenty seven acre Poindexter Village Housing Complex, one of the oldest public housing units in the country, is currently slated for demolition by the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority (which, incidentally is also headed by a Black man), as part of the city's plan to redevelop the area.<sup>29</sup>

A coalition of concerned citizens has and continues to resist efforts to level the sprawling two-story thirty-five brick building complex, by going through the courts, staging protests, writing letters to the newspaper, and holding press conferences. The Maryland pool is another neighborhood gem. Built in 1929, it was presented to the city of Columbus as a gift from the *Columbus Dispatch*. One could make the argument that the gesture was made not so much out of a sense of benevolence, but rather to discourage Blacks from attempting to integrate the city's white swimming pools. The Maryland Pool was, for many years, the site of the Miss Bronzeville swim suit competition.

At these six stops, riders dismounted the bus and were invited to visually take-in a building or residence that was the tour guides' focus at the time. Tour guides offered short presentations about the structures' history; again, sometimes accentuated with interesting vignettes about famous people or events. After a short question and answer

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<sup>29</sup> To be accurate, the city of Columbus has joined forces with the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority and The Ohio State University to form an organization called PACT (Partners Achieving Community Transformation). This entity is driving the redevelopment that is to occur on the Near Eastside, which encompasses Bronzeville.

period, riders were asked to re-board the bus and resume the tour. At each site, participants were asked to evaluate said site by selecting yes or no to three close-ended questions.<sup>30</sup> They were:

- A) Should this building be designated as Architecturally Contributing<sup>31</sup> and/or Historic Landmark?
- B) Does this building/structure need Protection (i.e. mothballing<sup>32</sup>)?
- C) Should this building be Demolished?

Some respondents asked if they could wait until the tour ended before filling out the survey. Respondents were encouraged to answer all questions during each stop or immediately thereafter while the information presented by the tour guides was still fresh on their minds. Each survey provided respondents with ample space for discursive comments. If certain site visits required additional moments of reflection or comment, riders were invited to do so upon returning to the Community Extension Center.

Both busses returned to the Community Extension Center at shortly after 12:00 noon where lunch awaited the riders. Midway through lunch, a discussion (facilitated by

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<sup>30</sup> The three questions were designed by Dana Moessner.

<sup>31</sup> In historic preservation law, a contributing property is any structure within the boundaries of a historic district that adds to its historic value, architectural qualities or archaeological qualities. Another key aspect of a contributing structure is historic integrity. Significant alterations to a property can sever its physical connections with the past, lowering its historic value. A property listed as a contributing member of a historic district meets National Register criteria and standards, thus qualifies for benefits afforded a property or site listed individually on the National Register.

<sup>32</sup> When all means of finding a productive use for a historic building have been exhausted or when funds are not readily available to put a deteriorating structure into a useable condition, it may be necessary to close up the building temporarily to protect it from the weather as well as to prevent it from vandalism. This process, known as mothballing, can be a necessary and effective means of protecting the building while planning its future, or raising money for a preservation, rehabilitation or restoration project. If a vacant property has been declared unsafe by building inspectors, stabilization and mothballing may be the only way to protect it from demolition. See Sharon C. Park, *Mothballing Historic Buildings*. Old House Web: Ideas & Advice for Old House Enthusiasts. <http://www.oldhouseweb.com/how-to-advice/mothballing-historic-buildings.shtml>.

the tour guides) arose where upon some of the riders took the opportunity to express in words what they had conveyed on paper. Others elected to use the extra time to elaborate on their written answers. Although participants enjoyed a substantial tour of the historic Bronzeville neighborhood, they were asked to comment in writing on only those six sites that appeared on the survey.

## **Results**

The riders varied in age, race, and gender resulting in a nice cross-section of the Columbus metropolitan area. Sixty five percent of the riders were female while thirty five percent were males. This is interesting, if for no other reason, because the gender demographics of many social, religious and cultural organizations within Black communities throughout the U.S. are often heavily female; the Black church is perhaps the most widely documented example. The majority of the riders were African American, but there was a smattering of both Caucasian and African participants. According to the surveys, riders ranged in age from sixteen to eight five. This is somewhat misleading, as the majority of the riders were in their forties, fifties, and sixties. Several were, or had been residents of Bronzeville at one time, but many lived outside the area as far away as Blacklick, Gahanna and Pataskala.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, residents were sufficiently curious about this thing called Bronzeville that they elected to spend part of their day touring the neighborhood and listening to stories about the famous people who either visited, lived or performed in the area.

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<sup>33</sup> The cities of Blacklick, Gahanna and Pataskala are 21 miles, 15 miles and 29 miles, respectively from the city of Columbus.

Forty of the forty-one people who took the tour completed the entire survey. The variance among the responses was not great. Only one of the forty respondents believed that any of the six sites warranted demolition. There does, however, exist, some variance regarding whether or not a property needs protection in the form of mothballing and the like.

Ninety-seven percent (39 out of 40) of the respondents believed that site number 1 merited being designated as architecturally contributing and/or a historical landmark. Ninety-two percent (37 out of 40) also believed that site number 1 warranted protection of some kind.

Site number 2 elicited an even stronger response than site number 1. Forty out of forty respondents (100%) believed that Garden Manor should be designated as architecturally contributing and/or a historical landmark. A lower, but nonetheless, significant percentage of respondents (85%) believed that Garden Manor should be protected.

Site 3 followed a similar pattern as ninety-seven percent (39 out of 40) of the respondents indicated that Poindexter Village should be designated as architecturally contributing, and/or a historical landmark. Seventy-seven percent (31 out of 40) felt that the housing complex is in need of protection of various kinds.

Site number 4 elicited perhaps the strongest reaction. Forty out of forty respondents (100%) believed that the structure is architecturally contributing and deserves landmark status. Similarly, ninety-five percent (38 out of 40) believed that the structure warranted protection.



Site number 5 reveals that 97.5% of respondents (39 out of 40) thought the Maryland Pool is architecturally contributing and should be designated as an historical landmark. Only eighty-two percent (33 out of 40) believed that protection is necessary.

Site number 6 elicited an equally strong response from riders as ninety-five percent (38 out of 40) of the respondents believed that the commercial building should be given landmark status while ninety percent (36 out of 40) thought that the commercial row merited protection of some kind. Conversely, one rider indicated in writing that he or she believed the row should be demolished. No explanation was given, however.

Overall, nearly all of the respondents believed that each site needed to be preserved and bestowed landmark status. Below are excerpts from the surveys intended to give the reader a sense of the sentiments expressed by those who participated in the tour.

“This pool should be a landmark, because it is one of the first pools.”

“One of the last historical sites left on Mount Vernon, soon everything will be gone.”

“Wow! Beautiful! Under threat from OSU, because it is on Taylor.”

“The pool can serve as anchor for neighborhood development.”

“Is the only pool accessible to many Black kids.”

“Making the pool a landmark is a no-brainer.”

“This row is the cornerstone of this neighborhood.”

“This building is located in what could be a vibrant retail strip.”

“ Protect historic architecture, but more importantly, inspire businesses to occupy buildings.”

“No one with any sense of history should want to demolish this building.”

“Should be recognized as historic landmark; however measures should be taken to improve the complex, which would in turn lift the quality of life of its residents.”

The findings herein indicate [among the tour participants at least] a desire to preserve the six sites mentioned above. At least two of the respondents were reared in the area during the 1930s and 1940s and thus have fond, not to mention, vivid memories of a community that was once bustling and vibrant. The near unanimity of the surveys suggests that anyone considering altering the landscape in a way that deflects from its architectural uniqueness and historic import may do well to consult these data. This was, in fact, the message conveyed to members of the Columbus City Council by Brown and Moessner who, as a matter of record, provided each member with a copy of the survey results after addressing the seven member body in December 2010. On that night Brown and Moessner discussed the importance of embracing Bronzeville’s history as well as preserving the edifices, buildings and structures that helped make it historic.

## **Conclusion**

Until recently the history of Bronzeville had been all but dead, as the people who lived it, witnessed it or were told about it, either passed on or were at such an advanced age, that it was difficult for them to recall anything meaningful about Bronzeville. This

article is part of a larger public effort to preserve the history of Bronzeville, by among other things, putting Bronzeville in its proper cultural and political place in the annals of Ohio history and the United States. At its apex Bronzeville was a bustling hub of activity. As John B. Williams, a Columbus native and Buffalo Soldier recalled, “the streets were always full . . . there was always something going on” (Williams, 2013).

Even though Bronzeville was not officially a city, it possessed many of the criteria of a city; populations in the tens of thousands accompanied with wide ranges of services as well as modern urban institutions of an economic, cultural and social nature. Putting Bronzeville in its proper cultural and political place in history will serve as a point of pride for those who have a personal connection to the area. So often people read about faraway places with which they have little or no connection, but are unaware of the history of the communities in which they live, work; attend school, worship and fellowship. For some Columbus residents this work will help address that omission.

Columbus’ city fathers take pride in areas such as Italian Village and German Village<sup>34</sup> as is evident by the increasing amount of exposure each receives in the city’s promotional materials and the like, but the history of Bronzeville is not treated with the same accord. Within the last three years, WOSU, a PBS affiliate has embarked on a documentary series that historicizes several Columbus neighborhoods and their nuances; curiously Bronzeville received no more than a few mentions in the ninety minute documentary about Columbus’ Black communities. Inexplicably, some African

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<sup>34</sup> Heavy migrations of native Germans came to Ohio in the wake of the revolutionary disturbances in Europe in 1830 and 1848. The rapid industrialization of the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century encouraged migrations from southern and central Europe to new homes in Ohio’s cities—Greeks and Italians, Czechs and Hungarians, Russians and natives from all parts of Europe, and other parts of the world. See James H. Rodabaugh, *The Negro in Ohio*, *Journal of Negro History* vol. 31 1946: 9-29.

Americans (perhaps those who stand to gain financially from the city's redevelopment plans) have publicly refused to acknowledge its existence. It may be that the idea of a Black community with an all-Black cabinet is too much for some to comprehend. The Bronzeville bus tour was part of an effort, not only, to excavate, document and highlight the history of this rich Black experience, but to force those who would trample upon it with their bulldozers and backhoes to consider redevelopment plans that would both show an appreciation for history and honor the legacy of those people on whose backs that history was built.

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**B. Malone Ridgill** is an Engineer for The Ohio State University. He earned his degree in Construction Engineering at the University of Akron.

**John Ray** is a videographer and the president and owner of Fulray Productions.

**William E. Nelson Jr., PhD** (deceased) was Professor Emeritus in the Departments of African American and African Studies and Political Science at The Ohio State University.

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