

Present Problems

Story by CANDACE SIPOS

Part Of Past

Panel Discussions Focus On History Of Harrisonburg

Henry Whitelow fondly remembers visiting his grandmother's house on Mason Street when he was a child.

Decades after he last set foot in the home, Whitelow can still describe the cookies she always had ready and waiting for her pint-sized visitors.

He reminisces about the fun he had playing outside with the other kids in the neighborhood, about trips to his uncle's farm to help take care of the cows and chickens, and about the general sense of warmth in the area.

Whitelow, 69, still a Harrisonburg resident, grew up in the Newtown community, an early settlement area for freed slaves that's now considered the city's Northeast neighborhood.

"It was like one big family," he said of Newtown. "You knew your neighbors, and they were always interested in you and were going to provide and care for you. That's not so much what it is today."

Today, the 7-11 on Mason Street marks the spot where his grandmother's home once stood. The house was stripped from the family during the urban renewal initiative called "Project R4."

During the 1950s and 60s, Harrisonburg and other com-

munities across the nation used federal redevelopment funds for large-scale revitalization projects. Locally, city officials secured money to expand Mason Street and develop the area, tearing down homes and other buildings deemed "blighted" in the process.

While the city reimbursed homeowners for their property and built new housing projects for family relocation, many residents felt slighted.

"I didn't see anything wrong with [my grandmother's] house," Whitelow said.

Not only did Whitelow watch the family home make way for a 7-11, but his uncle's farm was also lost to provide land for what is now Harris Gardens.

"It was unfair that people had to move just to make way for businesses like that, especially when it was a well-rounded community," he said. "Really, there was not a whole lot [the residents] could do. They did have their opinions, and they felt that they were being displaced for no real legitimate reason."

Though Project R4 is huge in

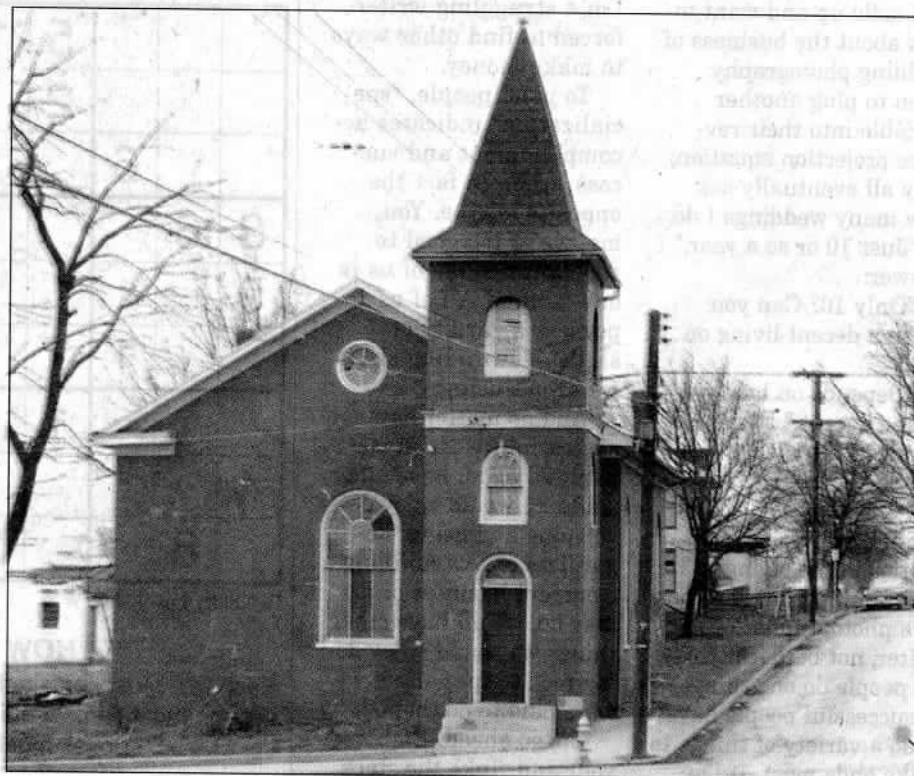


Photo Courtesy of Harrisonburg Redevelopment and Authority Housing

A Baptist church once stood at the corner of Wolfe and Mason streets facing north. Now, the space is occupied by the right, northbound lane of Mason Street.

terms of Harrisonburg's history, many local residents have likely never heard of it.

With the help of various city officials, one James Madison University professor is trying to change that.

Discussions To Be Held

Dr. David Ehrenpreis, art history professor and director of the Institute for Visual Studies, has planned three panel discussions to be held over the next several weeks featuring city residents, civic leaders and elected officials.

The first, "Remembering

Newtown," is scheduled from 6:30-8:30 p.m. Sept. 19 at the Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center; "Remembering Downtown" and "Creating Our Town" will follow in October.

Harrisonburg City Council member Charlie Chenault; President of the Northeast Neighborhood Association of Harrisonburg Karen Thomas; Harrisonburg Redevelopment and Housing Authority Executive Director Michael Wong, and Harrisonburg resident Sarah Sampson are scheduled

M and S Restaurant once stood on North Main Street in Harrisonburg. Many Newtown — now known as the Northeast neighborhood — properties were deemed "blighted" and slated for redevelopment during Project R4.

Courtesy Photo



Forum On Past Established To Shape Future Of Harrisonburg

Newtown

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to sit on the first panel.

In light of recent debate surrounding the renaming of Cantrell Avenue to Martin Luther King Jr. Way, Ehrenpreis believes a series exploring the city's past may help local residents shape its future.

"It became clear to me that both sides of this argument, both the people who wanted Cantrell renamed and the people who wanted to save the name, had the same basic problem," Ehrenpreis said. "That was the past."

Driving the frustration on both sides was the sentiment that a portion of the past had been taken away or was on the chopping block, he explained.

During those discussions, he saw a picture of Newtown that he had never before seen, and he began putting pieces together in his mind.

"I heard that the African American community had been slightly displaced," said Ehrenpreis, who points out that about 60 percent of Newtown's population was black and roughly 40 percent was white. "I knew nothing about the scale. ... I have lived here since 1998, and I knew nothing about this. And I'm a historian."

Ehrenpreis came upon a series of photos taken for value assessment purposes shortly before the Newtown buildings captured in the pictures were destroyed.

The album had been held by the Harrisonburg Redevelopment and Housing Authority for the past 50 years. Project R4 was one of the authority's first endeavors, according to Wong.

The photos elicit a "painful nostalgia, because not one building that you look at still exists," Ehrenpreis said. "[These buildings] are not very slummy. In fact, most of them are quite beautiful."

The pictures will be displayed at the Remembering Newtown event. JMU Libraries has digitized the entire album, and the original photos may be added to Special Collections for safekeeping.

"The idea of learning about Newtown is not to say, 'This is so awful ... [but] what can we learn from this?,' " he said, noting that he believes the Harrisonburg community has come a long way since Project R4, evidenced in part by local residents' desire to repurpose the city municipal building instead of tearing it down.



Photo Courtesy of Harrisonburg Redevelopment and Authority Housing

An aerial view of Harrisonburg focuses on the once well established Newtown community after development projects claimed properties to make way for revitalization efforts, including the widening of Mason Street.

But the forum is also meant to promote healing among people who grew up during the Project R4 era, when an integrated Newtown was divided, black and white families were sent to live in separate housing and segregation was reinforced, Ehrenpreis says.

"How can we use these images both to illuminate the past but also to heal wounds," Ehrenpreis wonders.

That's what he's trying to find out.

Breaking The Silence

The panelists lined up for Remembering Newtown are confident that the event will draw a crowd.

"I believe it is going to bring out a lot of discussion and probably a lot of emotion, but it needs to be talked about, because that silence has always been there," said Thomas of the Northeast Neighborhood Association.

Many local residents remember the Newtown neighborhood, even if they didn't live there.

Councilman Chenault grew up on Gay Street, just a few blocks from Newtown. He had a paper route on Wolfe Street and often visited friends in the area.

"It was a relatively safe and established neighborhood," Chenault said.

It was similar to other area neighborhoods, except for one major difference.

"It was more fully developed from a housing and commerce and educational standpoint," Chenault said. "Most of the other neighborhoods were just residential."

The father of Gary Martin, Whitelow's cousin, was the one who lost his farmland, which is now part of the Harris Gardens footprint.

Still a Harrisonburg resident, Martin remembers receiving mail from his aunt while he was serving in the military in Cuba.

In it was a picture of her home. It had been burned down to make way for development.

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— DR. DAVID EHRENPREIS,

PROFESSOR OF ART HISTORY, JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY