Erin Daniell

POLS 374

April 28, 2014

State of Black Asheville Culture

There is both the scholarly and cultural assumption (outside of Asheville, but even within the city as new residents move in by the droves) that black culture in Asheville is not significant or even, has never truly existed. This is a major misconception caused by the disenfranchising nature of the processes of city wide desegregation and urban renewal. Black Culture in Asheville, North Carolina is grounded by a complex interweaving of inspired and dedicated individuals who have founded and led institutions and businesses that are guided with purpose. Two specific trends link black culture from decade to decade in Asheville.

The first trend results from a constructive force of unelected, but dedicated and hardworking leaders in the community guiding the culture and sharpening the focus of the African American community through their multitude of interests in innovative business, social organizations and events. As research was conducted, certain names were found to be mentioned over and over again in newspaper articles, photo captions and other various documents having to do with an amazing variety of subjects. These individuals, not well known (especially outside of Asheville), have left inspiring legacies by instilling commitment to progress in future generations resulting in the betterment of their community.

The second cultural trend springs from a destructive force caused by a continuous cycle of reaction to recurrent cultural violence against the black community of

Asheville. These cultural oppressions range from subtle actions such as honoring the memory of former slaveholders (i.e. Patton Ave) and the Civil War Era governor (i.e. Vance Elementary) in the naming of public institutions to eras of cultural oppression such as Segregation, Desegregation, and Urban Renewal to undermined progress from the defunding of major and successful Afrocentric programs like Kipp Academy.) Responding to this unremitting cultural violence is the main purpose of many of the institutions established by the types of individuals who have served as a constructive force in the black community of Asheville. It is important to note, the people and institutions of black Asheville were creating, not just reacting. Andrea Clarke, The Cabin Kids and Stephens-Lee High School are important examples of the immense creativity flowing in and out of the African American community.

Black Institutions of Asheville (a cyclical story)

The Young Men's Institute

The Young Men's Institute (YMI) is one of the oldest (possibly *the* oldest) African American cultural centers in the United States. The institution was established in 1892 (YMI). According to a history the YMI provides on its website, "Mr. Isaac Dixon and Dr. Stephens approached George Vanderbilt in 1892 to provide an institution for the black construction workers employed at the Biltmore Estate to improve the moral fiber of the black male through education focusing on social, cultural, business and religious life" (YMI). Mr. Vanderbilt agreed and lent $32,000 to the construction of the YMI. The 18,000 square foot building was designed by one of the architects that helped to design the Biltmore Estate which is why the YMI building looks so similar architecturally to the Biltmore Estate (YMI). In 1905 according to Johnny Grant a writer for the *Urban News* "a

group of 41 black men—undertakers and educators, business owners, doctors, and others—raised $10,001 and bought the building from Vanderbilt; from then on, Asheville's black residents not only had a home, but owned it as well." According to *Urban News*, "The YMI was created as an economic model of self-sufficiency, with street-level stores spurring community development and the rent they paid helping pay down the debt in the building." The YMI was founded with the intentions of working with the community socially, educationally, culturally and economically by providing programs. The most important feature of the YMI is the institution provides a space, a place, a physical representation of the dedication and capabilities of the black community of Asheville.

From the years of Isaac Dickson's first involvement, the institution has served the black community of Asheville through a grand multitude of programs and service. The YMI housed the first black public library, after school programs, art and historical exhibits, a community gymnasium and, as the above quote indicates, a myriad of black businesses(Urban News). The YMI is a cyclical institution, in that the organization has gone through cycles of productively providing services to its community in all facets mentioned earlier and then falling on difficult and tumultuous times where the presence of the YMI is not as powerful within the community it intends to serve. The cycle begins once more with the community making major efforts to restore the YMI to its former glory. Each cycle of the YMI seems to last about one generation, the first lasted from 1906 to 1929, the next from 1946 to 1979, and finally the current incarnation has lasted from 1980 to today (Urban News).

The YMI was hit hard economically by the Great Depression and World War II, and was subsequently sold to the YMCA. This was the end of the first generational cycle and the

beginning of the second. The YMCA ran the YMI building from 1945 to the late 1970s. In 1977, the YMI building was condemned and closed by the City of Asheville for not meeting city inspection codes. There was talk of having the then 84-year-old institution demolished. The community balked at the idea of having a cornerstone of black culture in Asheville lost forever and so a group of nine churches banded together to raise the funds to buy back the building and restore it. The 1982 YMI annual report states, "We were born out of the heritage of black churches who are accustomed to view all areas of community life as part of their mission." At the time the annual report was written the YMI had raised 43% of their goal. Their goals were eventually achieved. In 1980, the YMI became the Young Men's Institute Cultural Center (YMICC) establishing the institution as a nonprofit and allowing the YMICC continue to serve the Asheville community.

Recently the YMICC has again had to face major challenges. This cultural institution has fallen into major debt and has been publicly criticized for being mismanaged. The nonprofit is no longer led by a paid executive director, but by the Board of Directors.

At the Annual Meeting held in 2012, the public came out in droves to hear and respond to what the leaders of the YMICC had to say. Robert Grant, a community member who attended the meeting, told *Urban News* "It is my opinion there's something very sinister about this whole piece, and part of a bigger picture," says Robert Grant. "When you can't get specific answers to questions; when people remain mute or quiet, or can't speak to purpose, and don't supply you with answers – you have a tendency to believe there's a cover-up going on. Is another urban renewal process in the making, taking the last stronghold of the local African American community?" He continues saying, "My heart of hearts tells me something, or some 'bodies' don't want the YMI to survive as an African

American legacy for this community. This is what happened when past urban renewals slapped us in the face with the unexpected and we were blind-sided by that process, and you'll be blind-sided by this one too! Think about it." he said. "Somebody needs to prove that I'm wrong!" mused Grant" (Urban News).

The *Urban News* criticized the YMICC writing, "Without education programs, a generation of youth will be deprived of knowing about their forebears and their community's past; without exhibits, valuable artworks and cultural artifacts will gather dust, deteriorate, or be lost; without programming that brings the public inside the historic building to participate in maintaining and furthering a community's soul and spirit, the YMI as an institution will lose touch with the people it serves and lose access to the revenue it needs to rebuild." The public, and the community are again left with continuing questions about the future of the YMICC. Will a major and historic institution be lost? What will that mean for the cultural story of the black community of Asheville? Or will the community once more come together to save and recreate the YMICC and the presence it deserves to have in Asheville, North Carolina?

Stephens-Lee High School

Stephens-Lee High School was built in 1923, on a site just above the former site of Catholic Hill Elementary School. For several decades Stephens-Lee was the only black public secondary school serving the greater Western North Carolina area. Students attended the school and were bussed in from five different counties.

The lack of resources and support from local government created major limitations for the students and faculty, as with almost every other facet of black life in

Asheville. However, Stephens-Lee High School fostered an immense capacity for creativity and learning in its student body over the 43 years the institution existed.

Bennie Lake, a Stephens-Lee alum and co-author of *The Mighty Heroes of Stephens-Lee,* credits the teachers. He says "We had some fun times in the athletic department [and] with the band, but I think what really stands out were the teachers," he recalls. "They had something that today is not there as much, I feel. They cared what happened outside of class. They came to our houses, they talked with our parents, they made sure we studied" (Mountain X). Almost all of the teachers had masters degrees, some even had PhDs.

Stephens-Lee was well known for excellence in music and athletics. Clarence Moore, Stephens-Lee coach, was inducted into the NCHS Athletic Association Hall of Fame. Ralph Roberts remembers that the marching band "totally dominated parades." A few alumni even went on to play with Marvin Gaye and James Brown (Mountain X).

Excellence was pursued in many other areas outside of music and athletics though. Stephens-Lee held classes in all typical areas of study, but also provided classes in dance, industrial arts, photography, home economics and beauty culture, radio repair, play production, welding, drama and manual training to name a few (Black Highlanders Collection).

Nicknamed, "The castle on the hill" Stephens-Lee provided an outstanding education to the children of the black community. In 1965, the Asheville City School System began to desegregate. Stephens-Lee students were first moved to South French Broad High School and then finally to a desegregated Lee Edwards High School now renamed Asheville High. The entire process of desegregation in Asheville placed the burden of desegregation disproportionately on the African American community (With All Deliberate Speed 5). All

black elementary schools were closed, and the former students had to be bussed to the white schools. Cultural insensitivity was rampant at the new Asheville High. For example, a cosmetology class that was taught only focused on the grooming of white hair (With All Deliberate Speed 6). Few Stephens-Lee teachers were hired to teach at Asheville High, and as a result, black students lost the strong role models they once had in the classroom. Possibly, most hurtful to the black student body was the lack of representation of all the accomplishments Stephens-Lee had attained in the trophy case. All the Lee Edwards trophies were present in the school. The erasure of prominence and loss of sense of history and pride created a student body festering with anger.

This resulted in two little known race riots in Asheville, North Carolina. First, on September 29, 1969 black students walked out in protest of the problems mentioned above (With All Deliberate Speed 7). The police were called and in the midst of the chaos, damage was inflicted on the building. The school was shut down for a week and a citywide curfew was established in response to the race riot. The Asheville City Council met with student organizers and heard their list of demands and agreed to some changes. Secondly, on October 18, 1972 a race riot broke out over an interracial couple. Eight students were hospitalized in the fight between black and white students (With All Deliberate Speed).

Stephens-Lee was torn down in 1975, all that remains of this important institution is its gymnasium, an alumni group and the stories the members have to tell. The legacy of Stephens-Lee High School is an important one to remember for it had great impact of the black community during and after its existence.

YWCA

The black YWCA of Asheville started as an "Employment Club" 1913 (YWCA). The club first met in the Young Men's Institute and was dedicated to helping women of color in the community to find jobs (YWCA). In September of 1921, the Phyllis Wheatley Branch officially opened on College St (YWCA). In 1938, the building was renovated extensively and began to provide new residence and communal space along with a new gymnasium to serve the greater African American community of Asheville. According to an official history provided on the YWCA website "The Phyllis Wheatley branch at 360 College Street was one of the primary centers of Negro social activity in Asheville for almost forty years" (YWCA). The space provided a home to the Red Cross Auxiliary, The Flower Guild, the annual dance for NC Association of Black Educators and all African American schools in the city used the gymnasium for intramural sports, concerts, plays, dances, and prom. From College st, the Branch moved to Asheland Ave and then finally to South French Avenue in 1962 (YWCA).

In 1965, Elvia Thelma McRae Caldwell was hired as the executive director of the central YWCA branch giving her jurisdiction over both the white and black YWCA branches (YWCA). Mrs. Caldwell was the second African American to be hired as executive director in the country and first in the South. According to the history of the institution provided on the YWCA website, "Mrs. Caldwell believed that White adults would be more accepting of integration if it started with children. Therefore, the Committee began by integrating children's swimming lessons at the White facility and paired White members of the Public Affairs Committee with Black children for these lessons." By the time of the official merge in 1971 white women were already using the South French Broad Avenue branch in "significant numbers" (YWCA). In a biography of Ms. Caldwell she acknowledges that in

the process of merging the branches some white memberships were lost (Angels Unaware). However, ultimately the branch merge was a successful transition into a new age of race relations. This was likely one of the only desegregation transitions of an institution in Asheville led by an African American. The YWCA still thrives today striving to eliminate racism and empower women.

In 1965, Elvia Thelma McRae Caldwell was hired as the executive director of the central YWCA branch giving her jurisdiction over both the white and black YWCA branches. Mrs. Caldwell was the second African American to be hired as executive director in the country and first in the South. According to the history of the institution provided on the YWCA website, "Mrs. Caldwell believed that white adults would be more accepting of integration if it started with children. Therefore, the Committee began by integrating children's swimming lessons at the white facility and paired white members of the Public Affairs Committee with black children for these lessons." By the time of the official merge in 1971 white women were already using the South French Broad Avenue branch in "significant numbers" (YWCA). In a biography of Ms. Caldwell she acknowledges that in the process of merging the branches some white memberships were lost (Angels Unaware). However, ultimately the branch merge was a successful transition into a new age of race relations. This was likely one of the only desegregation transitions of an institution in Asheville led by an African American. The YWCA still thrives today striving to eliminate racism and empower women (YWCA).

This collection of black institutions barely scratches the surface (in terms of the institutions mentioned and the many many others in the city). I chose the YMICC, Stephens-Lee and the YWCA because I wanted to trace the cultural cycles they each went

through over the course of many decades. There are several more institutions that could be analyzed in this manner that I could not get to over the course of this semester. Being a part of the first culture group in the State of Black Asheville class, was an amazing but daunting experience. My group and I spent hours upon hours every week of the semester in the Special Collections of Ramsey Library, the North Carolina Room in Pack Memorial Library and on various websites pouring over information, photos, newspaper articles and other primary sources. There is an immense amount of information on black culture that has yet to be harnessed and published. Much of our time was spent in absolute awe of what we were finding, but struggling to grasp it wholly. And so I wanted to take some time to mention areas of further study and cultural patterns I noted, but could not write about. The list is as follows: black civic groups (ex Negro Civic Group) through the decades and their effectiveness on positive change, black sororities and fraternities and their presence in Asheville, the entire process of desegregation in Asheville City Schools, the NAACP and its presence in Asheville, the effects of Urban Renewal on black culture, the effect of desegregation on black culture, black community leaders (Isaac Dickson, E.W. Pearson, Lucy Herring-to name a few) and their impact on black institutions, the Allen School, Experiment I, Project Aware, the Royal Giants, the Onyx Club, The Mountain Gleaner and The Enterprise, and The Asheville State Summer School. While this list may seem long, it is just the beginning. Black culture in Asheville has too long been overlooked by historians and researchers.

In my research I found that many community members today are creating their own collection of history. This is fantastic, but few of the projects seem to be connected with one another in one place. An African American Historical Society should be founded in

Asheville to provide a sense of unity to everyone's projects in order to build on and learn each other's information.

Hopefully, after reading this paper thus far one has the beginning of an understanding of how destructive unremitting cultural violence like segregation, desegregation and urban renewal have been to black culture in Asheville. In many cases such violences have literally erased the physical presence of black culture. One can walk through the streets of the River Arts District and not have any clue of the once thriving black community that was rooted there since the end of slavery. Many a tourist or local may go on several guided tours of Asheville and never hear the YMI mentioned. In order for black local history not be lost on the younger generations of Ashevillians, I propose a curriculum be created for local history classes in city schools. Hopefully, with the launch of the SOBA website, a resource for such a curriculum could be created.

Bibliography

Moseley-Edington, Helen. *Angels Unaware.* Asheville: Home Press, 1996. Print.

Daniel, G.. "The Y-Teen Program." *YWCA Programs* : n. pag. Print.
"The "History." *YWCA of Asheville.* YWCA, 1 Jan. 2007. Web. 1 Jan. 2014. http://www.ywcaofasheville.org/site/c.7oIEJQPxGeISF/b.8083977/k.C677/History.htm

YMI Cultural Center, Inc 1982 Annual Report." : 1-12. Print.

"History." *YWCA of Asheville.* YWCA, 1 Jan. 2007. Web. 1 Jan. 2014. <http://www.ywcaofasheville.org/site/c.7oIEJQPxGeISF/b.8083977/k.C677/History.htm>
.

"History of the YMI." *YMI Cultural Center.* N.p., 1 Jan. 2014. Web. 9 Apr. 2014. <http://www.ymiculturalcenter.org/about/history/>.

"The Urban News » Putting YMI on the Map: The YMI Cultural Center History Project." *The Urban News.* The Block Gazette , 16 Apr. 2007. Web. 15 Apr. 2014. <http://theurbannews.com/our-town/2007/putting-ymi-on-the-map-the-ymi-cultural-center-history-project/>.

"The Urban News » What's Next for the YMI?." *The Urban News.* N.p., 12 Apr. 2012. Web. 16 Apr. 2014. <http://theurbannews.com/our-town/2012/whats-next-for-the-ymi/>.

Grant, Johnnie . "The Urban News » Does the YMI Cultural Center Face a Questionable Future?." *The Urban News.* N.p., 16 Dec. 2011. Web. 16 Apr. 2014. <http://theurbannews.com/our-town/2011/does-the-ymi-cultural-center-face-a-questionable-future/>.

Forbes, David. "Stephens-Lee Remembered." *Mountain Xpress.* N.p., 13 Feb. 2008. Web. 17 Apr. 2014. <http://mountainx.com/news/community-news/021308stephens/>.

"With All Deliberate Speed." *Center for Diversity Education.* N.p., 31 Oct. 2005. Web. 14 Apr. 2014. <http://www.diversityed.org/exhibits/with-all-deliberate-speed/>.