

Be a Part of Creating Asheville's African American Heritage Trail

Start here!

What is the African American Heritage Trail?

Initiated by River Front Development Group, a local African American community development organization, the project is conceived as a walkable trail in and around downtown Asheville that will honor and preserve the rich heritage of the local Black community. Sites and stories will range from well-known landmarks visible in the community today to the unsung heroes and underrecognized achievements and contributions by the Black community in the past.



Artist renditions of proposed trail markers.

How is the project being funded?

The Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority (BCTDA) is funding the project with occupancy tax revenue collected from visitors staying in Buncombe County lodging as part of its Tourism Product Development Fund grant program. The trail markers will be installed and maintained in perpetuity by the BCTDA.

How will it be decided what sites and stories become part of the trail?

Input is being gathered from community engagement efforts including online surveys, focus group discussions, and listening session workshops. Additionally, an advisory committee will be established in late 2021 with the support of Equity Over Everything.

Will the trail also be available online?

Yes, there will be an accompanying website that will include a map of the trail as well as additional information such as photos, videos, and oral history recordings.

Will the trail be expanded outside of Asheville?

The current phase of the project is focused on creating a walkable trail in and around downtown Asheville. Additional sites may be included in the digital version of the trail.

When will the project be completed?

The project is expected to be completed in late 2022. Upon completion, the BCTDA will promote the trail on Explore Asheville's marketing platforms to preserve, share, and amplify the stories to a broad audience.

How can I get involved?

Share your feedback – fill out the paper survey or use the QR code below to access the survey online. Submit your contact information in the survey form to receive email updates on the project and invitations to future community input sessions.



Learn more at:
AshevilleCVB.com/AAHT

Learn About the Development Process

What did we learn in the first round of community input?

A series of community engagement efforts have been conducted since the project began in 2019 including online surveys, focus group discussions, and listening session workshops. Efforts also included participation in the *African Americans in WNC and Southern Appalachia Conference* at UNC Asheville and hosting a “Telling the Whole Story” talk by thought leader Dina Bailey at the YMI Cultural Center. Through this outreach, several themes, or types of stories, arose when people talked about the history they felt should be included in the trail. Most of these fell into the following four themes that are shaping the project:

**Accomplishments
& Contributions
of the Black
Community in
Asheville**

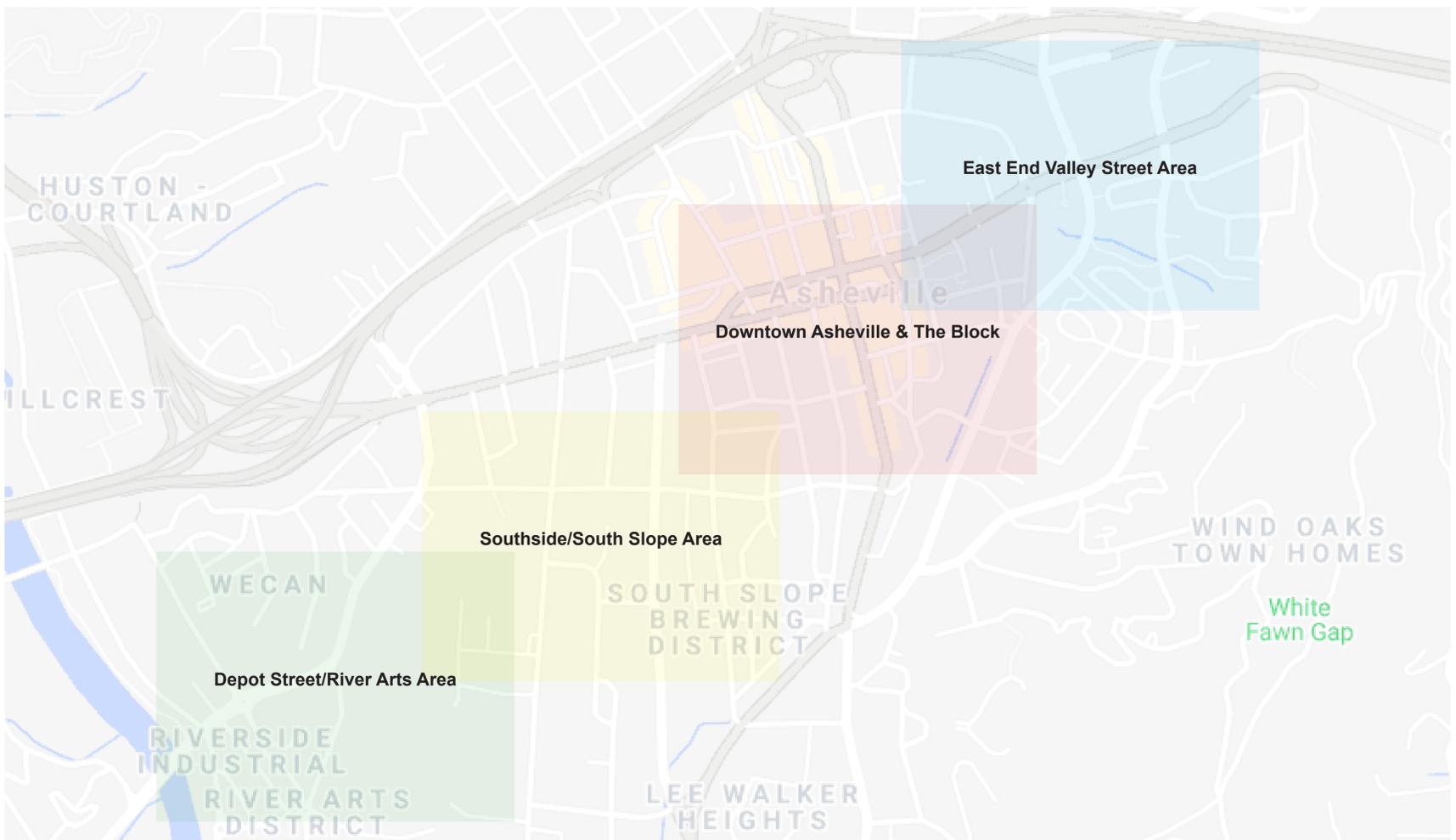
**Highlighting
Groups That
Supported the
Community**

**Agency & the
Capacity to Express
Individual
Power**

**Combating
Misconceptions
& Preserving
History for Future
Generations**

Proposed Route

Some sites and stories are well known; others have received less attention through the years. This trail aims to represent a broad range of history including renowned landmarks and leaders such as the YMI Cultural Center on The Block and James Vester Miller to the unsung heroes and underrecognized achievements and contributions by the Black community in Asheville as shown in this collection.



Share your thoughts!

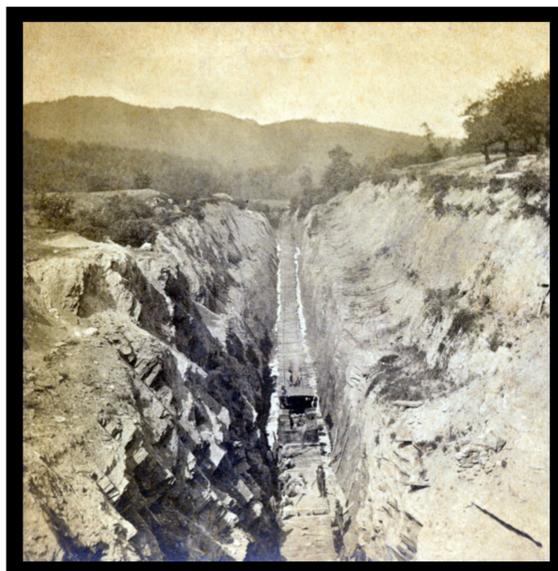
This collection of story samples is intended to honor, inform and inspire awareness of local Black heritage. Please review and provide your feedback to help shape the project!

**Complete the Survey Form
and drop it in the basket or
submit your
feedback online
using the QR
code >>>**



Unsung Builders of the Railroads

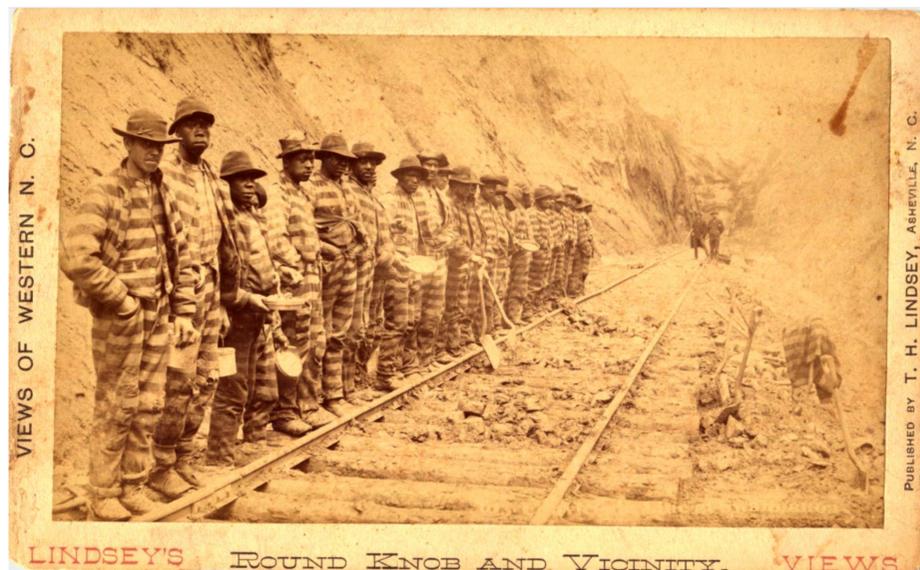
In 1879, hundreds of African American men completed a deadly task that took four years and changed Asheville forever. They used



View from summit of Swannanoa Tunnel. Circa 1878.
Courtesy of Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Library.

dynamite, strength, and teamwork to create the 1,832-foot Swannanoa Tunnel. They laid railroad tracks that rose 1,100 feet in less than three and a half miles. They pulled the first steam engine locomotive into Buncombe County by hand. It likely weighed 100,000 pounds (50 tons).

Their achievement—and sacrifice—laid the foundation for Asheville to become the world renowned destination it is today. By 1886, 30,000 tourists were visiting Asheville each summer, with most arriving by train. The city’s year-round population grew too, rising from 2,616 to 10,235 between 1887 and 1890. To service the growing demand, the Black population increased 37% as well during this time. Between the 1880s and 1970s, African American neighborhoods around the main train station on Depot Street prospered. Black men and women took jobs with the railroad, in hotels, and operated shops on Depot Street.



Convict laborers near Swannanoa Tunnel. Circa 1879. Photo credit T. H. Lindsey.
Copyright not identified.

The unsung founders of Asheville’s success were forced into labor by Black codes, restrictive Reconstruction-era laws that limited the freedom of African Americans while ensuring their availability for cheap labor. This criminalization created a steady pipeline of prisoners who were leased out for hard labor. Female convicts washed, mended, and cooked for the males who performed other work, including on the railroad. At least 125 men died working construction of the Swannanoa Tunnel. Their work song, “Swannanoa Tunnel,” was reinvented as an Appalachian folk song.

The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters First Black Union Helps Strengthen Local Community

By 1886, 30,000 people visited Asheville each summer, staying at dozens of hotels, inns, and homes for rent. For those arriving by train, The Pullman Company's sleeping cars offered comfortable rooms with beds. These private train cars were a luxurious option for passengers traveling throughout the United States from the 1880s through the 1970s. They were serviced by Black porters—including some living in Asheville's Southside neighborhood—who would carry luggage, shine shoes, clean, and service the needs of passengers. Their working conditions were arduous and the pay was meager, relying primarily on tips and the generosity of white travelers.



Pullman porter, unnamed, 1943. Photo by Jack Delano. Public Domain. U.S. Farm Security Administration - Office of War Information - Office of Emergency Management - Resettlement Administration

To address the long hours, low wages, and mistreatment from passengers, The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was formed in



Source National A. Philip Randolph Pullman Porter Museum website. Copyright not identified.

1925, becoming the nation's first all-Black labor union. The group's efforts led to the first-ever collective bargaining between a union of Black workers and a major U.S. company in 1935, and resulted in middle-class wages for Pullman Porters—a landmark shift that helped fuel a new Black middle class in America.

In Asheville, that meant that John Gilliam, Gus Davis Morrison, Will Burgan, and many other African American men were able to own homes and invest in the community by opening businesses in the Southside neighborhood.

Asheville's main train station on Depot Street was demolished in 1968. Service ended in 1975, coinciding with Urban Renewal projects that destroyed the homes of thousands of Black Ashevilleans.

One Man's Relentless Fight

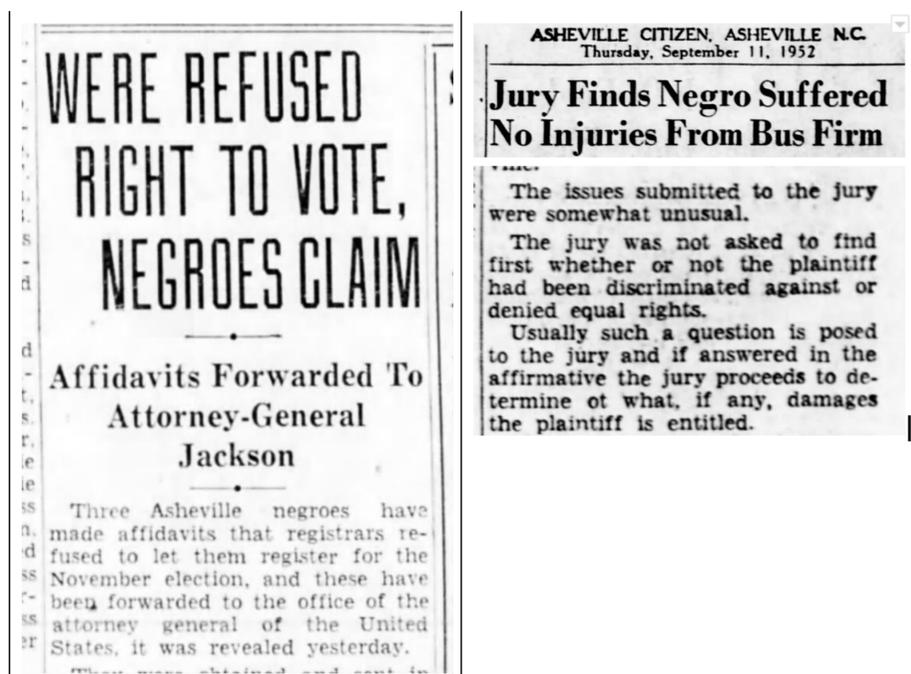
W. R. Saxon of Southside Never Gave Up

Four years before Rosa Parks made history, 75-year-old Asheville insurance agency owner W. R. Saxon refused to give up his seat to a white person on a bus.

Ticket in hand, Saxon boarded the bus in Atlanta, on his way home to the Southside neighborhood in Asheville. The driver instructed Saxon to give up his seat and move to a bench at the back of the bus. The police were called. Saxon relented, saying he moved only because he needed to get home to his wife, who was ill.

In 1951, Saxon filed a lawsuit in Buncombe County Superior Court, seeking \$15,000 in damages from Smoky Mountain Stages, Inc. The news was reported throughout the United States. The jury sided with the bus company. Saxon's wife, Hattie, died the following year after her long illness.

But this was not Saxon's first fight for equal rights. He was active in the Asheville NAACP, and served as Secretary and then Vice President of the statewide chapter. Saxon was refused the right to register to vote by Buncombe County officials in 1941. He documented it in an affidavit provided to the U.S. Attorney General, an action that also made headlines.



Reporting on voting rights. Asheville Citizen. 1941. Reporting on bus lawsuit. Asheville Citizen. 1952.

Saxon lived to see the Civil Rights Act adopted in 1964. That law intended to protect voting rights and outlaw discrimination in public accommodations including buses.

When Southside Was The Place to Be

African Americans traveling the South didn't need a Green Book to know that Southside in Asheville was the place to be. From 1947 through the 1970s, Rabbit's Motel and Cafe was renowned for hosting African American sports stars and entertainers, and was a starting



Courtesy of Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Library.

point for exploring the food, fun, and nightlife available to Black folks in the Southside neighborhood and downtown on The Block, the city's historic Black business district.

In its prime, Southside was a local destination for more than 20,000 Black Ashevilleans to enjoy in segregated Asheville. Black entertainers on the Chitlin' Circuit, organized by African American entertainment agents, visited often. Musicians and comedians performed at the Booker T. Washington hotel near present-day Ralph Street beginning in 1928. The hotel was renamed the James Keys Hotel and operated until 1973.

Billie Holiday performed at the Carolina Pavillion on Valley Street near present-day Charlotte Street. Other staff entertainment spaces for Black performers included the original Orange Peel and The Strand (present-day Fine Arts Theatre) on Biltmore Avenue; Savoy, The Kitty Cat Club, and the Del Cardo on Eagle Street; and the upstairs lounge at Rabbit's.

BILLIE HOLIDAY
 America's No. 1 Song Stylist
 Winner Esquire Poll 1944-45
And Her New Orchestra
 With JOE GUY and his
 Golden Trumpet in
 Something New
 in DANCE MUSIC
Carolina Pavilion
 Valley St.
THURSDAY, SEPT. 6TH
 9 P. M. 'til 2 A. M.
 Advance Tickets \$1.25
 At Door \$1.50
 White Spectators 75c
 Prices Include Fed. Tax
MASO BOSTON, Promoter

Advertisement for Billie Holiday concert.
 The Asheville Citizen Times. 1945.

Black Residents Rely Upon Each Other for Medical Care

Asheville was renowned for its “fresh air cure” for tuberculosis. The completion of the Swannanoa Tunnel in 1879, which was constructed by hundreds of Black laborers, enabled passenger train service to Asheville’s sanitoriums in the 1880s. Yet African Americans were denied care for the airborne disease that killed millions of people around the world. African Americans united to change that by opening and staffing hospitals, running a half dozen hospitals in Asheville between 1910 and the 1950s, providing TB treatment as well as surgeries, emergency, and complex care.

The YMI, located in Asheville’s historic downtown Black business district known as The Block, housed professional medical practices, including doctors and pharmacists, since the 1880s. In 1910, Dr. William Green Torrence opened his home on Eagle Street as Asheville’s first African American hospital: Torrence Hospital. Dr. John Wakefield Walker, a pulmonologist who began his schooling in Asheville’s African American public schools established by freedman Isaac Dickson, treated African American tuberculosis victims at Circle Terrace Sanitorium in 1912.

Dr. Reuben Bryant helped found Blue Ridge Hospital on Clingman Avenue in 1922, which also offered a nursing school to train Black women. Three graduated in its first class in 1925 including Flossie Metz, Lula Long, and Kathleen Wills. By 1929, all three hospitals had closed and Asheville’s Black community went without care until the fourth hospital for African Americans opened.



First graduates of Blue Ridge Hospital nursing school, Flossie Metz, Lula Long, Kathleen Wills, 1925. Photo credit D.H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville.

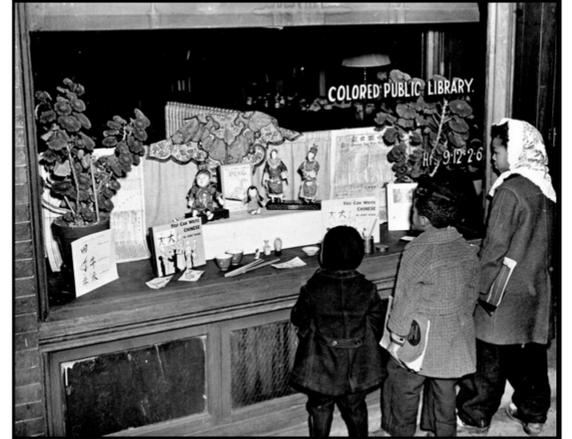
Asheville native Dr. Mary Shuford started Shuford Clinic, a nine-bed hospital on College Street, in 1935. Shuford later co-founded the Asheville Colored Hospital (ACH) with African American community leaders in 1943 at the former home of Dr. Bryant, near the present-day intersections of Biltmore and Southside avenues and Charlotte Street. ACH was Asheville’s fifth African American hospital. It operated until 1951, staffed mostly by African Americans.

In the 1950s, white public hospitals added “colored” wings to their facilities and hired African American doctors and nurses.

Student Activism Accelerated Desegregation

Black students in Asheville played pivotal roles in ending legal segregation for people of all ages throughout Western North Carolina.

When students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) held peaceful sit-ins at segregated lunch counters in 1960, their patriotism and bravery earned worldwide acclaim. They inspired students at the segregated Black public school Stephens-Lee High School and the Allen School, a private school, to form the Asheville Student Committee on Racial Equity (ASCORE).

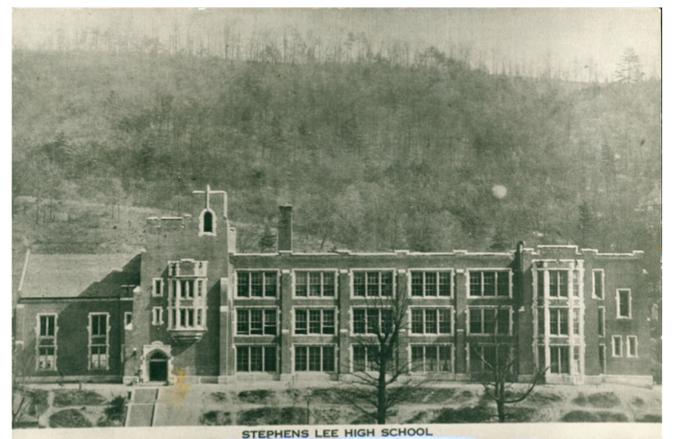


Colored Library ca. 1945-1951. Market Street. Courtesy of Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Library.

In an early and substantial victory in August of 1961, the City of Asheville Library Board consented to a request by Oralene Graves Simmons of Stephens-Lee and Viola Jones Spells of the Allen School to desegregate the main branch of Pack Memorial Library.

Later that year, Simmons became the first Black student at Mars Hill University in her native Madison County. ASCORE co-founder and second president Etta Mae Whitner Patterson of the East End neighborhood in Asheville was the first Black student at Asheville-Biltmore College (now UNC Asheville) in 1961.

ASCORE faced setbacks. In 1965 the Asheville School Board responded to demands for integration by closing Stephens-Lee, a source of regional pride for generations. Students were moved to underfunded segregated facilities and the majority of the teachers, all Black and most of whom held master's degrees, were fired. However, Asheville began integrating elementary schools in 1967 and high school in 1969.



Stephens-Lee High School. Photo credit E. W. Pearson, Jr.. Courtesy of Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Library.

ASCORE's members continue their community service. Their first president, James Ferguson, became a civil rights attorney. Member Al Whitesides became the first African American to serve on the Buncombe County Commission in 2016.

Baseball Fan E.W. Pearson Builds Asheville Royal Giants Team, Park, and Stadium

The home stadium of Asheville's first Negro league team was built near here in 1914 by E.W. Pearson, Sr. The Asheville Royal Giants players each worked full-time jobs in the tourism industry and held blue-collar jobs when they weren't practicing and playing to packed mixed-race crowds.

Pearson was a baseball fan. The Burke County native grew up on a farm, worked in mines in Tennessee, served honorably in the U.S. Army, and attended the Chicago School of Law before moving to Asheville in 1906. Here, he found success through operating an insurance company, running a mail order business, investing in real estate, and handling real estate transactions. Pearson is most famous for founding the Burton Street community and agricultural fairs.



Edward W. Pearson. Courtesy of Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Library.

Because Pearson was Black, he was denied entry at the games of the all-white baseball team, the Tourists. So he built Oates Park and its stadium near the present-day intersections of Asheland Avenue and Southside Avenue, and soon after, started a minor-league Negro team, the Asheville Royal Giants, in 1916. In 1921 he founded the Blue Ridge Colored Baseball League, which included teams in Asheville, Charlotte, Gastonia, Concord, and Winston-Salem, NC, and Rock Hill, Spartanburg, and Anderson, SC. It wasn't until 1947 that white leagues began accepting Black players, and by the 1960s, most Negro leagues closed.



Stephens-Lee High School. Photo credit E. W. Pearson, Jr. Courtesy of Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Library.

Average attendance at the Royal Giants games was more than 4,000 people. In 1929, Negro teams began playing at the white stadium, McCormick Field. Oates Park remained the site of carnivals, festivals, and community sporting events for decades.

Early Political Victory by Freedman N. Shepard

Newton Shepard made history in 1882, when he became Asheville's first African American to be elected to the city's Board of Aldermen—a precursor to today's City Council. He won re-election again in 1883.

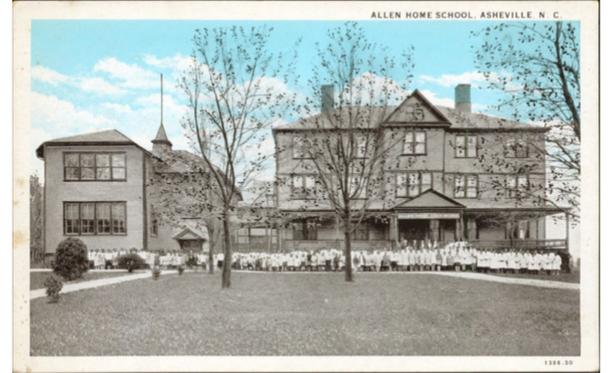
Shepard was born into slavery in 1841, freed by the United States Army's victory in the Civil War, and elected on May 2, 1882, as an Alderman of Western North Carolina's largest city. Shepard's Hill Street neighborhood was part of the majority white voting district. Shepard, a Republican, was re-elected on May 8, 1883.

During his two 12-month terms, Shepard voted to appoint Henry Saxton as Asheville's first Black police officer, improve infrastructure, and add more hotels to accommodate the surge in tourism. Shepard is buried in the Black section of Riverside Cemetery.

In 1969, Ruben Dailey became the second African American to lead the city as an elected member of council. Like Shepard, Dailey earned re-election. Dailey, a Democrat, served two consecutive two-year terms.

National Treasures Attended Asheville's Allen School for Girls

For nearly 100 years, Black girls and young women in North Carolina coveted a seat at the Allen School in Asheville. Founded in 1887, the Allen School offered day school and boarding for female students with aspirations and talent, and provided evening literacy and skills training for adults. The school began before public education was offered for most Black students in the South and continued to thrive prior to school integration of the 1960s.



The Allen School and students. no date. Courtesy of Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Library.

Alumni include national treasure Nina Simone, celebrated singer and philanthropist Roberta Flack, and NASA scientist Dr. Christine Darden. Simone was recognized as a musical genius early in her life. She attended The Allen School in the 1940s on a scholarship. Simone became a world-renown lyricist, singer, and activist. Her songs addressed racism, oppression, and beauty standards for Black women. She advocated for Civil Rights and performed after many historic events including the Selma to Montgomery March. Simone's childhood home in Tryon is being preserved as a historic site.

Flack was born in nearby Black Mountain in 1937. Her biggest hit was "Killing Me Softly" in 1973. She later founded the Roberta Flack School of Music at the Hyde Leadership Charter School in the Bronx. Flack was honored by North Carolina Musicians Mural Project with a mural in Black Mountain in 2020.

Darden is one of the brilliant women who worked for NASA's Langley Research Center as a human computer during the US-Russia space race. She is featured in the book *Hidden Figures*. Darden became an aerospace engineer and dedicated 25 of her 40-year career to studying and writing computer programs to analyze sonic booms.



Christine Darden. Photo credit NASA.