

LOCAL

Boyle column: Time to rethink my image of Shiloh

John Boyle Asheville Citizen Times

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I'm not proud of this, but usually when I think about the Shiloh neighborhood, my first thought is crime.

Over the years, we've done a lot of reporting about shootings and other crime in the neighborhood that lies between Hendersonville Road and Sweeten Creek Road in South Asheville. Just in mid-August, we had this headline: "Witness critical of Asheville Police investigation into two shootings in Shiloh."

It began, "One man is in the hospital in critical condition after being shot 10 times while on the front porch of a Shiloh Road home — marking the second shooting in just over two weeks in the South Asheville community."

Two decades ago, when I delivered pizzas to make extra money, we were warned about certain areas in Shiloh — keep your doors locked, be extra aware.

Lost in all of this is that Shiloh is a real neighborhood, a traditionally Black neighborhood with deep roots in Asheville, and generations of residents who deeply love this community.

I attended a virtual presentation in mid-August about Shiloh's history and its present and future challenges, put on by the Western North Carolina Historical Association, the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute and the Shiloh Community Association.

Anita White-Carter, a native of Shiloh who moved away, then returned to raise her son there, gave a wonderful presentation about the community's history.

Beforehand, I was vaguely aware that Shiloh originally was located on the Biltmore Estate and had moved to its current location, but beyond that I knew very little. White-Carter's presentation was fascinating, and a real eye-opener for me in terms of making me think about the generations of people who've called this area home.

History dating to post-Civil War

White-Carter explained that after the Civil War, freedmen settled on what would become the Biltmore Estate in an area called Shiloh (the name comes from the Bible and means peace, the peaceful one or peaceful area). After George Vanderbilt bought the land, Vanderbilt and his agent helped relocate the Shiloh residents to the area in South Asheville that still exists today, White-Carter said.

The relocation was "mutually agreed on," she noted, although not all of the African American freedmen agreed to move. Vanderbilt opened his 250-room mansion in 1895.

"For a number of years, Charles Collins, a resident of Old Shiloh, refused to sell his cabin, and an adjoining tract of land," White-Carter said. "The cabin was located about a half-mile from the estate mansion and remained there for several years after the mansion was completed. He finally sold to Vanderbilt in 1907."

News: Asheville reparations architect Keith Young criticizes city's \$366,000 outside contract

The Biltmore Estate still has a road sign today that reads, "Old Shiloh Road" and identifies the location of the Old Shiloh community.

White-Carter showed a photo of Old Shiloh AME Church, established in 1874 on the future estate lands, noting that Vanderbilt bought it in September 1889 for \$1,000, with the promise to build a new church. The new church, dedicated in 1890, was not only larger and nicer but furnished with stained glass windows, pews and a bell provided by Vanderbilt, White-Carter said.

It was destroyed by fire in December 1890. After the fire, Vanderbilt gave residents another church, which was moved to the the "New Shiloh" area.

The Rev. William "Uncle Billy" Logan, who died in 1921, helped relocate the church and the surrounding grave sites to the new location, White-Carter said, noting that many of his descendants still live in Shiloh.

"In fact, this photo was given to me by his great, great granddaughter," she said.

It's hard to imagine now, but in the late 1800s, "New Shiloh was a rural area with dirt roads and small family farms," White-Carter said. "The earliest inhabitants lived on West Chapel Road, White Avenue, Shiloh Road and Brooklyn Road."

Those streets, off Hendersonville Road, still define Shiloh, along with others. Rock Hill and Petersburg, nearby African American neighborhoods, were already established at the time residents from Old Shiloh moved into the area.

3 keys to Shiloh

"New Shiloh grew and prospered around three central community foundations: the churches, the school and the people," White-Carter said.

Three churches have been key, she said: Shiloh AME Zion Church, Brooklyn Mission Fire Baptized Holiness Church (1917), and Rock Hill Missionary Baptist Church, first established in the late 1800s in small log building on Rock Hill Road but relocated in 1925 to Caribou Road. The churches still exist today.

In the 1920s, burgeoning Shiloh had a greatly overcrowded elementary school. The Buncombe County School Board "finally approved the construction of a new Rosenwald school for Shiloh, which opened in September of 1927," White-Carter said. "This school was built with public money and a grant from Julius Rosenwald, the CEO of Sears, Roebuck and Co."

Rosenwald teamed with Booker T. Washington, the country's pre-eminent African American educator, to improve education for African Americans. Between 1913-1925, the Rosenwald fund helped build more than 4,000 rural African American schools across the South, White-Carter said.

"This school was the pride of Shiloh," White-Carter said. "The Rosenwald model required the buy-in of African American communities, as well as support of white governing bodies."

The Black community had to match the Rosenwald grant, and members of the community were tasked with constructing the school. By doing so, the Shiloh community members "developed a strong sense of ownership in the school and the education of their children," White-Carter said.

More reparations? Asheville City Schools has its version of making amends

"Think about the times – this was in the 1920s," White-Carter stressed. "So, raising local Black money for Rosenwald schools was no simple task among poor neighborhoods, not just Shiloh."

Shiloh Elementary lasted from 1927-79, although an addition built in 1952 remains and continues on as part of the Linwood Crump Shiloh Recreation Complex, continuing to host community events, White-Carter said.

I loved this little nugget White-Carter added about the school's financing.

"Financial support for the school also came from a program that allowed Black (Biltmore) Estate workers who lived in Shiloh to have a portion of their pay automatically directed to the school," White-Carter said. "Those who did not have pay automatically directed were reminded by their supervisor to do so."

I'm sure they were "reminded" quite vigorously.

Working hard, playing hard

Much like "The Block" in downtown Asheville, Shiloh was a thriving African American economic district for decades, Shiloh, too, was "a vital, self-sustaining area" that had numerous mom-and-pop businesses, grocery stores, in-home beauty shops, a blacksmith shop, a golf course, a dry cleaners, and in later years a Black-owned nursing home, White-Carter said.

"Shiloh was a community of strong and hardworking folks," White-Carter said. "In the early years, many residents worked as laborers on the Biltmore Estate or as domestics in Biltmore Forest. Shiloh was also home to farmers, businessmen, dental and medical professionals, a funeral director, teachers and ministers."

Scouting was hugely popular in Shiloh, White-Carter said, showing a picture of her and her sister in Girl Scouts, along with a shot of kids in Boy Scouts.

She said folks in Shiloh worked hard but played hard, too.

In the early 1930s, E.W. Pearson, secretary of the Buncombe County Negro Agricultural Fair Association, announced plans for a recreation park on a 7-acre tract. Plans included a baseball diamond and small golf course. Hundreds attended the opening in 1932.

"There was also a few social clubs and juke joints scattered throughout the neighborhood, and I have had heard some wonderful stories from some elders about some of those places," White-Carter said. "Neighborhood festivals and fish fries were frequent events."

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For decades, Shiloh remained this tight-knit, hard-working, fun-loving community.

The Shiloh Community Association was established in 2000 and started a community garden in 2005 that remains very popular in the neighborhood.

White-Carter acknowledged that Shiloh, still a largely African American community, faces its share of problems today, including crime.

But she also listed multiple youth programs active in the community, for younger kids and teens, aimed at boosting education, keeping kids involved and promoting healthy activities.

“We are really trying to focus on youth in the neighborhood, so they will come to love the neighborhood like so many of the old-timers do,” White-Carter said.

Shiloh has established community garden program for youths so they can learn about food and planting, as well as financial literacy and writing. Shiloh also boasts Project Lighten Up, a summer day camp and after-school program that blends education and recreation into daily activities.

Serious concerns about gentrification

Here's one problem you might not have associated with Shiloh: gentrification.

The neighborhood features mostly smaller, one-story homes, and in Asheville that translates to somewhat affordable, or at least not extravagantly priced. It's also not far from downtown, and it's in the heart of thriving South Asheville, making it attractive to homebuyers and developers.

Neighborhood residents want to see revitalization, White-Carter said, versus gentrification. Revitalization means investing in the existing neighborhood and reinforcing social networks, neighborhood services and local businesses, while gentrifying a neighborhood "means community transitions to an exclusive community inaccessible to those who call it home," she said.

“Now, gentrification is a controversial and divisive issue, and it’s a sore point among traditional residents in Shiloh,” White-Carter said. “The term is often inter-mixed with efforts to revitalize the physical environment and social networks of the neighborhood.”

“Many of the traditional residents fear they may be eventually displaced by newer residents who are buying some of the more expensive houses that are being built, seemingly on every little spare piece of property that can be found,” White-Carter continued. “The Community Association is working in collaboration with a number of groups and the city to revitalize the area and resist the pressures of gentrification.”

They also have concerns about increased development, higher values of new homes, and increased tax assessments.

“The character of the neighborhood is changing,” White-Carter said. “The population is increasing, along with an increase in residential density. Again, there’s concern about possible future displacement of current lower-income inhabitants.”

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Shiloh is zoned residential, with the largest number of homes zoned single-family, and that will help maintain its character, she said. But residents still worry about the neighborhood sliding into gentrification.

“Developers are purchasing single-home lots and subdividing them, so that a lot that once held one house may now have two, three and in some cases more,” White-Carter said. “Some of this is happening because when some of the old-time homeowners die out, their children or heirs no longer live in the area and are selling these properties to these developers.”

A 'sense of invincibility' from growing up there

One of those younger people with Shiloh ties hoping to carry on its sense of place is Maria "Ria" Young, who grew up in the community. She played basketball at T.C. Roberson and got a scholarship to Limestone College in South Carolina.

Young brought Shiloh with her, or more precisely, "the sense of invincibility" that growing up in the community gave her, she said during her presentation, which followed White-Carter's. Young noted that her grandmother has lived on Shiloh Road for over 50 years, in the house where Young's parents grew up.

“I played with my friends and grew up on the same streets that Miss Anita (White-Carter) was talking about,” Young said. “My aunts and uncles actually attended Shiloh School. Just

being able to grow up in this community has been one of the biggest blessings of my life.”

When she graduated college in 2014, Young came back to Shiloh. She is now a playwright and the author of the book, "Lost in a Game."

“I just felt like my calling was here, back home,” Young said, noting that she was active with a youth team.

In February 2021, Young released her first short film, titled, “The Power of Our Village.” It was, she says, a way “to pay homage and show appreciation for the area that made me.”

The film, played during the presentation, shows the Shiloh neighborhood, depicting lots that have been redeveloped but were once home to traditional Shiloh residents.

“The point of ‘The Power of our Village’ is to show everyone that, regardless of how you change Shiloh – the imagery of it and what it looks like – you can never take away the pride and the power that’s being cultivated from the people,” Young said, adding that much of her work links directly to Shiloh’s founding pillars of schools, churches and the people. “It takes a different face and a different generation, but it’s ultimately the same thing.”

Wanting the great-grandchildren to be know the story

During the question-and-answer part of the presentation and wrap up, White-Carter said one of her biggest worries is "our great-grandchildren won't know at one time it was a thriving, self-sustaining neighborhood in terms of our history. It's more than houses," she said. "It's a feeling of community."

In the 1950s and '60s, the height of segregation, White-Carter said, Shiloh was "like a village," where everyone knew you and no one worried about locking doors. They never felt disadvantaged, she added, but they did feel happy in their neighborhood.

Asked what her fondest memory of growing up there was, White-Carter said there was a real buy-in from residents in Shiloh, "a feeling you had to do better just to get ahead. That was drilled into us as we were coming up." She also cited poetry contests and Scouting.

And, "To be in an area where there was so much love. I always felt so loved in Shiloh," White-Carter said.

She wants people to remember, too, that Shiloh, "first of all, it was a Black Neighborhood." It worries her that future generations may forget that.

Asked what she wanted people to take away from the presentation, Young said, "the legacy and true foundation of what Shiloh is." She also wants people to understand that complex history and recognize the community is changing, with a duel forming between revitalization and gentrification.

"I hope that everybody leaves here a little more educated, a little more aware of the spaces we inhabit and that subsequently you're moving into," Young said.

I think she and White-Carter accomplished that mission. At least I know I'll look past the negative headlines more when I think about Shiloh. For that, I thank them both.

The presentation is available in its entirety on YouTube here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfpe85Cn158 It's well worth your time.

This is the opinion of John Boyle. Contact him at 828-232-5847 or jboyle@citizentimes.com