

The Economic and Cultural Importance of Preserving Jackson Square

By Kristian Carter, Historic Harrisburg 2019 Graduate Student Intern

Three historically Black-owned businesses rest on the 1000-block of North Sixth and Boas Street in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The three structures formerly known as the Jackson House, the Curtis Funeral Home, and Jackson's Barbershop are the last physical remnants of Harrisburg's historic Seventh Ward- which housed Harrisburg's African American middle-class and business district in the early-twentieth century. Though Central Pennsylvania historians have studied and written extensively about the sociohistorical aspects of Harrisburg's 'Old Eight Ward,' little has been documented about Harrisburg's historic-Seventh Ward and how this area reflected life for African Americans in Harrisburg during segregation, Black entrepreneurship in the early-twentieth century, African American culture in the early-to-mid twentieth century, and the economic and residential consequences that were caused by the post-World War II 'white flight' movement. Therefore, the revitalization of the three historic structures on the 1000-block of North Sixth Street is important for the public preservation of African American economic and cultural history, and for historians to further examine Harrisburg's place in American history.

Jackson Square and the Black Entrepreneurial Spirit

An important reason for revitalizing the historic structures on the 1000-block of North Sixth Street is that doing so will help Harrisburg residents become educated on the economic philosophy that African American entrepreneurs developed to combat the injustice of segregation. Because African Americans were not allowed to work for White-owned segregated businesses, the years of 1900 to 1930 saw an extensive rise of Black-owned businesses that were created to acquire financial prosperity, as well as create jobs that helped to establish economic

development in segregated Black communities.¹ One of the businesses that was important during this period of segregation was the hotel. According to a 1927 article in the *Harrisburg Telegraph*, German Jackson purchased the property on 1006 N Sixth Street for \$9000.² The son of a Virginia sharecropper turned entrepreneur; German Jackson invested in this property because African Americans who visited Harrisburg were not allowed to stay in segregated residencies such as the famed Penn Harris Hotel.³

Beside the Jackson House resided Jackson's Barbershop at 1005 North Sixth Street. In an interview with *Highmark Blue Shield's Living Legacy Series*, Calobe Jackson Jr.- the son of the owner of Jackson's Barbershop- recalled that his father had also invested in his own hotel titled Jack's Hotel. According to Jackson Jr., his father foresaw the economic wave that would occur following World War II and decided to invest in a hotel on the near-by 1200-block of Sixth Street.⁴ With this, Jackson Jr. described the booming African American business district that resided in the historic-Seventh Ward. According to Jackson Jr., the Seventh Ward was an area that held numerous Black-owned businesses that include pharmacy and drug stores, barbershops, grocery stores, cleaning services, and entertainment halls.⁵ Though one cannot excuse that fact that these businesses were started due to the injustice of segregation, preserving the three structures that reside on the 1000-block of North Sixth Street will preserve the legacy of those

¹ Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship. Twayne's Evolution of Modern Business Series*, (New York: London: Macmillan Library Reference USA; Prentice Hall International, 1998.) 196.

² "City Property Transfers," *Harrisburg Telegraph*, August 31, 1927, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/40930684/?terms=German%2BJackson> (accessed September 2, 2019).

³ Calobe Jackson, Jr. (Harrisburg_1), interview by Julie McKenzie, 03/18/2009, *Highmark Blue Shield Living Legacy Series* (Harrisburg, PA). Story 9, Calobe Jackson, Jr., talks about his father and segregation. <http://www.idvl.org/HarrisburgLivingLegacy/iCoreClient.html#/&i=265>

⁴ Calobe Jackson, Jr., Story 9, Calobe Jackson, Jr., talks about his father and segregation. <http://www.idvl.org/HarrisburgLivingLegacy/iCoreClient.html#/&i=265>

⁵ Calobe Jackson, Jr., Story 7, Calobe Jackson, Jr., describes the African American community in the 1950s. <http://www.idvl.org/HarrisburgLivingLegacy/iCoreClient.html#/&i=263>

who used entrepreneurship to fight against the racial and legal injustice placed upon African Americans during the early-twentieth century. While historic Seventh Ward hotels such as the Jackson House is an example of Black entrepreneurship in Harrisburg's historic Seventh Ward, The Jackson House became a prevalent place for African American culture in Harrisburg, as visiting guests and performers frequently stayed in this hotel while visiting Harrisburg.



(Photograph 1).⁶

Stick and Move: Jackson Square and African American Entertainment

As stated above, when African Americans visited Harrisburg in the early-to-mid twentieth century, segregation forced African American visitors to stay in hotels such as Jack's Hotel and the Jackson House. This policy was also placed among famous African American athletes and entertainers. The most famous athlete to check-in to the Jackson Hotel was the great boxing Heavyweight Champion Joe Louis. Calobe Jackson Jr. describes in his *Highmark Blue Shield's Living Legacy Series* interview that Joe Louis stayed at the Jackson House when he was the guest referee for a Harrisburg Golden Gloves tournament.⁷ According to an article in *The*

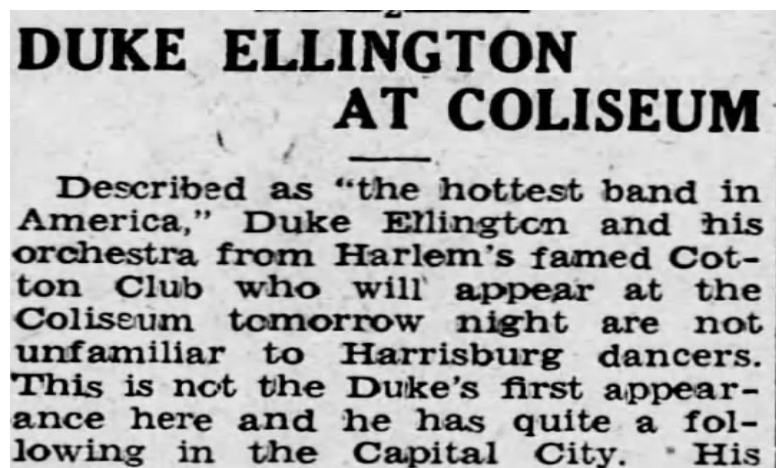
⁶ *The Evening News*, November 25, 1946, 9.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/58556993/?terms=Jack%27s%2BHotel> (accessed September 2, 2019).

⁷ Calobe Jackson, Jr., Story 6, Calobe Jackson, Jr., talks about Joe Louis and the Penn Harris Hotel.

<http://www.idvl.org/HarrisburgLivingLegacy/iCoreClient.html#/&i=262>

Harrisburg Telegraph, Joe Louis- who is described with great fortune, fame and boxing technique- participated as a guest referee for the Harrisburg Golden Gloves tournament that was held at the Madrid Hall on December 27, 1940.⁸ Based on the date of the Golden Gloves tournament, it is estimated that Joe Louis stayed at the Jackson Hotel in late-December 1940. Jackson Jr. details local fans of Joe Louis flooding the area outside of the Jackson House with excitement to see the Heavyweight Champion.⁹ While athletes such as Joe Louis checking-in at the Jackson Hotel made an impact on Harrisburg residents, the Jackson Hotel and the Seventh Ward was also visited by numerous legendary Jazz performers during the early-twentieth century.



(Photograph 2).¹⁰

When one looks at the memorial that is painted on the side of the Jackson House, one witnesses the legendary Jazz performers who stayed at the Jackson House during the period of

⁸ "Golden Gloves Start December 27," *Harrisburg Telegraph*, November 30, 1940. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/43585631/?terms=Joe%2BLouis%2BGolden%2BGloves> (accessed September 2, 2019).

⁹ Calobe Jackson, Jr., Story 6, Calobe Jackson, Jr., talks about Joe Louis and the Penn Harris Hotel. <http://www.idvl.org/HarrisburgLivingLegacy/iCoreClient.html#/&i=262>

¹⁰ "Duke Ellington At Coliseum," *Harrisburg Telegraph*, Harrisburg, PA, January, 4, 1932, 11. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/41496404/?terms=Duke%2BEllington> (accessed September 2, 2019).

segregation. As Jazz was the most popular artform to play and dance to in the early-twentieth century, Harrisburg was a popular place for Jazz artists to perform while traveling through the east coast market.¹¹ Among the legendary performers who have stayed at the Jackson House are Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Pearl Mae Bailey, Cab Calloway, Count Basie, and Louis Armstrong. As both famous and local Jazz performers stayed specifically at the Jackson Hotel, and with Harrisburg's geographical location allowing the city to become a 'hot-spot' for Jazz performers, the Seventh Ward was the epicenter of African American business and culture in the early-twentieth century. Yet in the late-twentieth century, economic and social policies caused the business and residential landscape of the Seventh Ward to change.

Rebuilding Jackson Square

In the 1950's, the Pennsylvania State Government decided to extend the Capital Complex. One of the projects involved in this was the construction of the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry building. In order to do this, the houses and businesses in the Seventh Ward were torn down and replaced with the new State building- causing the African American residents to relocate to the areas of Uptown and Allison Hill.¹² With the businesses gone and the houses replaced with State buildings, the rich African American culture found in the Seventh Ward disappeared- yet the story of the Seventh Ward is a complicated one to tell. The Seventh Ward was an area where legal discrimination forced African Americans to live in houses and shop in businesses that were segregated due to the color of one's skin. Yet, the Seventh Ward was also a place with a strong African American business district that allowed

¹¹ Michael Barton, *To a Harmony with Our Souls: A History of Jazz in Central Pennsylvania*, (Harrisburg, Pa.: Benchmark Group Media, 2005.) 10-12.

¹² Calobe Jackson, Jr., Story 11, Calobe Jackson, Jr., describes the capitol expansion.
<http://www.idvl.org/HarrisburgLivingLegacy/iCoreClient.html#/&i=267>

entrepreneurs such as German Jackson to gain financial prosperity and become a place that was rich with African American entertainment and culture.

The three historic structures that stand on the 1000-block of North Sixth Street are physical reflections of a time in Harrisburg's history that was with both filled with inequality and prosperity for African Americans in Harrisburg. The revitalization of these three structures will allow future generations to learn about the rich African American cultural and economic history in Harrisburg during the early-twentieth century, as well as inspire historians to further document this almost-forgotten neighborhood and time in Harrisburg's history.

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