

# **DRAFT**

## **The Belmont and DeVilliers Historic District**

### **West Side of Town**

First, the Belmont-DeVilliers (B-D) Neighborhood gets its name from the streets: DeVilliers for a Spanish soldier Marcos DeVilliers and Belmont was connected to the Panton-Leslie Trading Company near Government and Spring St. in Old Pensacola, the Tan Yard. The term Belmont was from the prominent family, the Bells (Images in Black, 2006). The area consists of 35 blocks or 100 square acres North West of downtown Pensacola, FL. According to historian Martin Lewis, Belmont-DeVilliers area was a white neighborhood, originally. During the 1850s, mainly a few homes existed, then. Prominent Black Pensacolians like Dr. M.S. Glasgow Abbot, the earliest Black doctor and John Sunday, Jr. Mr. Sunday was a mulatto son of a White and Black union, a former freed slave who served in the Union army, worked at the Old Navy Yard and became a carpenter and builder, a former Florida State Legislator(1874) and city alderman(1878). Both of these outstanding men helped the Belmont-DeVilliers area grow. John Sunday, Jr. Amassed considerable wealth(+ \$125,000) as a builder, as reported by Booker T. Washington in his book: The Negro in Business(1906). Mr. Sunday also owned several properties and commercial buildings in 1875 in the area (Images in Black, 2006).

The Belmont-DeVilliers neighborhood grew steadily as a Black-owned commercial/business center from 1890s-1940s. The area was a hub (West Hill) of Black-owned stores, restaurants, pharmacies, cleaners, doctors' offices, a Black hospital(Viola's), churches, ice cream parlor, grocery stores, shoe makers, barber shops, insurance companies, beauty shops, flower shops, a lawyer office, cigar manufacturing, newspapers, funeral homes, and tailor shops to mention several. This area contained numerous shops, and businesses, all Black-owned and operated for over 80 years. For example, Dr. Henry G. Williams, Sr. (former slave) started his medical practice and pharmacies in 1890s. He owned and operated the

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Phoenix and the Pensacola Drug Company. He even apprenticed several other doctors – Dr. A.S. Magee, Dr. J. Lee Pickens and Dr. James Polkinghorne, Sr. Dr. M.S. Glasgow Abbot, a minister and physician who practiced medicine from his home at 7 North Coyle St. Dr. Polkinghorne started his own pharmacy (The Palace Pharmacy) with home delivery. Other Black doctors practiced medicine (Dr. C.V. Smith, Dr. C.S. Sunday, Dr. Sinclair Thomas) during this time (The History of Black Doctors of Pensacola, 2002 Unpublished).

The large real estate and rental firm was led by James and Thomas C. Watson. William Plummer was vice-president of the People Co-operative Building and Loan Co. He helped blacks finance homes and businesses in the 1890s. Arthur H. Alembert operated a dry good store in 1885-1895 and served as City Tax Collector. William Bennett was the Superintendent of the African-American Insurance Co., later the Afro-American Life while Matthew M. Lewey, was the owner/operator of the “Florida Sentinel newspaper” and lived in the Belmont-DeVilliers District in 1905-1911. Musicians, publishers, composers, teachers, etc. lived in the Belmont-DeVilliers community (Images in Black, 2006).

In 1912 when Booker T. Washington visited the city prior to his Florida barnstorming tour, he stood at the intersection of Belmont and DeVilliers Streets and proclaimed that “Pensacola was one of the South’s most progressive cities” in his book *The Negro in Business* (p.172, 1907). His visit would also help lead to the establishing of the first Black public high school in the city: Booker T. Washington HS in 1913 (History of the Colored or Negro Public Schools: 1885-2008).

From the 1940s-1980s, Belmont-DeVilliers prospered in spite of the 1905 Jim Crow laws and segregation. These laws in the 1920s forced many of the Black and mulatto businessmen to the Belmont-DeVilliers District. It was like throwing the “rabbit to the briar patch.” Many of these businesses were located on Palafox and Tarragona Streets previously.

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In the 1940s-1980s this district became an entertainment mecca. It supported the Chitterling (Chitlin) Circuit. Black soldiers wanted respite (USO) and a good time. They came to Blocks" as it was called for this good time, food and entertainment.

The Black radio station, "WBOP" lit up the airways. The Savoy Ballroom, Doc Green's Pool Hall and later Abe's 506 night club, overflowed with Soul music. Later the Saber Club, Newton's Bunny Club, the Blue Dot Barbeque Café, local package stores prospered, also. Gussie' Record Shop above which WBOP daily blasted current Black artists as they reigned supreme. Taxi stands (numerous ones) brought customers to and fro to the "Blocks" for 40 years. Artists like Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke, James Brown, Ray Charles, Ray Price, Sarah Vaughn, Billie Exstein, Joe Tex, the Temptations, Ike and Tina Turner, Drifters and B.B. King could be seen and heard for a nominal fee. During WWII, Black soldiers from as far away as Eglin Air Force Base, and sailors visited the USO and Belmont-DeVilliers area with gusto! This area was like the "Grand Central Station" of N.Y. It hummed and flowed all night long on weekends.

In 1961, prior to integration a "solemn note" was struck! The first city mall was opened as the Town and Country Plaza about 5 miles north of Belmont-DeVilliers Historic District. It was located at the corner of Fairfield Dr.(Pottery Plant Road) and "O" Street(Pace Boulevard). It was the new wave of the future! For more than 80 years Black businesses and entrepreneurs flourished. According to Tony McCray, Sr. from 1920s-1980s, some 60 businesses existed in this area, many with white support, too. Coming integration meant that of the 5,000 Blacks that were served by Belmont-DeVilliers(B-D), white businesses (The Mall) would do what Jim Crow laws and segregation could not do: that is kill B-D, and create onset decline and decay! Many Black businesses closed. Black doctors died out and/or moved to the suburbs. The entertainment mecca died: Abe's 506, closed. WBOP moved out of the neighborhood. The Sunbeam Bakery(white business) of the 1960s which hired Black drivers/delivery men, closed. The turmoil of the 1960s and mysterious fires resulted in the closing of several other white businesses (Van Meters, Taste-O's) in the Belmont-DeVilliers area. Preer and the Jones Pharmacies closed, too.

The area which hosted 7 -10 Black doctors and dentists, now hosted 1-2 doctors who were left in the neighborhood. Black newspapers: The Pensacola Courier and The Colored Citizen were all closed along with newsstands were gone by 1970. Black insurance companies closed like the Afro-American and Central Life, Singleton's Ice cream parlor, Gulf cleaners, tailor shops, grocery stores, and flower shops were all gone. Black-owned gas stations and restaurants all suffered the same fate. Many barber shops were under new management while funeral homes remained for over 100 years. Many of these businesses did not survive for a variety of reasons, no one knows for sure. The decline of Belmont-DeVilliers neighborhood continued through the 1980s to the late 1990s.

In the 1990s-2000s, thus a new revitalization of the area was undertaken, The City of Pensacola, along with a local Black architect, Eddie Todd, Jr., and the local remaining black business owners pushed for Historic District status(tax/funding) for the once prosperous neighborhood. A new neighborhood association was activated and rallied for the community restoration (Founder, Dolores Musselwhite Curry). The City's CRA (The Community Redevelopment Agency) poured \$million into the Belmont-DeVilliers Historic District. In 2006 new restaurants emerged (The Five Sisters Blues Cafe ).

The old Savoy Ballroom/old Escambia furniture store was converted to a modern high rise complex, new businesses (Studer, Inc.) have moved in, along with the University of West Florida, too. The old area church buildings were converted to usable spaces. New lighting and paved streets were added. The demographics of the area were 67%(Black), 30%(White), 3%(other) in 2004 are changing. Many old buildings are renovated, new construction has resulted. A more diverse population has resulted, too. A new cultural and performing arts centers have replaced the old Sunbeam Bakery and Bunny Club. A new spirit of ownership has occurred (Truth for youth, Inc.). The Local Deep Water City Lodge has been upgraded, the Deltas (Delta Sigma Theta, Inc.) have moved into the neighborhood at the Old Dr. Charles Augustus Office on Coyle St. The love of the history of the area has percolated and been encouraged by local historians: Martin Lewis,

Georgia Smith, Georgia and Johnny Blackmon, Robin and Lloyd Reshard, and Dr. Marion Williams and Visit Pensacola.

More festivals and events have returned to Belmont-DeVilliers. The Mississippi Blues Trail Marker has been added, too. Art and cultural events are reoccurring venues and are staged regularly now. The future of this historic area seem bright and promising.

Submitted by Marion Williams, Ph.D., ret./Local Black Historian/ Oct. 22, 2020

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