



MEMORANDUM

LEGISLATIVE REFERENCE BUREAU

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To: The Bronzeville Advisory Committee
From: Luke Knapp, Legislative Fiscal Analyst
Date: March 7, 2019
Subject: Bronzeville Neighborhood History

Recently, you requested that the Legislative Reference Bureau provide a detailed history of Milwaukee's Bronzeville neighborhood. This neighborhood's unique history is detailed below. Much of the information below comes from "Milwaukee's Bronzeville" by Paul H. Geenen, and "Bronzeville: A Milwaukee Lifestyle" by Ivory Abena Black.

Introduction

Milwaukee's Bronzeville neighborhood is bordered by North Avenue on the north, State Street on the south, Third Street on the east, and 12th Street on the west, with Walnut Street historically the economic hub of the neighborhood. The name Bronzeville is in fact "a generic term given to an area in a city in which the majority is populated by African Americans or people of African descent." Between 1910 and 1950, many of these African-American communities emerged in northern cities. Northern employment opportunities, southern segregation and Jim Crow all prompted the "Great Northern Migration" from the South. Confined to a specific neighborhood in most northern and Midwestern cities, these areas were referred to as "Black Metropolis", the "black belt", or, most commonly, Bronzeville.

Despite the economic and social struggles for those who inhabited these emerging communities in the early-20th century, a sense of vibrancy prevailed in these areas. In a 1993 op-ed in Milwaukee Magazine, Dave Lührssen recalls of Milwaukee's Bronzeville - "It was a ghetto in the sense that walls of prejudice enclosed its residents, but it wasn't a slum." Similarly, community activist Paul Geenen notes that "times were hard, but the community was tight." Anthropologist Ivory Black describes the area as a "city within a city", and columnist Richard Carter echoes this sentiment of self-identity and sufficiency by saying the area even had its own (unofficial) mayor. A vibrant commercial corridor that met the needs of its residents, a nightlife scene that drew patrons across racial lines, numerous churches and community institutions to instill collective values – all combined to form a framework for a neighborhood with strong social capital and collective efficacy. Despite the economic hurdles and racially-charged policies aimed at suppressing this community, the area thrived socially, up until its unceremonious destruction in the name of urban renewal in the 1960's.

The Great Migration

1905 to 1935 was a significant period of migration into Milwaukee by African Americans. World War I changed the landscape for African-Americans, and hinted at opportunity in

the North. The war decreased the heavy concentration in the South by opening up industrial jobs in the urban manufacturing centers in Northern cities. This migration largely followed the railroad tracks which led to Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and Milwaukee. Between 1916 and 1918, nearly 400,000 African Americans, or about 500 a day, rode the railroads north to escape southern prejudice and find strong-paying jobs. Before World War II, African Americans constituted just 1.5 percent of Milwaukee's population. By 1950 this number had risen to 3.5 percent, still a minority but an increase illustrative of the growing presence of African Americans in Milwaukee.

Milwaukee life remained difficult for African Americans at the onset of the Great Migration. Banks refused to give housing loans outside certain boundaries, and societal prejudice forced African Americans to be confined to what became the Bronzeville neighborhood. First to feel the impact of the Great Depression, the perceived better life that drove African American's to move north was not reality. Paul Geenen notes, "in 1940, 51 percent of African American men were unemployed, with 29 percent of them actively looking for work, compared to the 13 percent of white men seeking work." Despite the economic hardships, the African American population in Milwaukee grew significantly during this time, from 8,821 in 1940 to 21,772 in 1950.

Businesses and Nightlife

The optimism that fueled the desire to move north proved to be realistic at the onset of World War II, however. Still confined to the Bronzeville neighborhood, many African Americans used the labor shortage at manufacturing businesses during this time to ascend into the middle class. Culturally, Milwaukee's Bronzeville experienced a renaissance during this time. Chicago would be the successor to Harlem's mantle as the black capital of the United States during the 1940's; however, Milwaukee still experienced a parallel, albeit more subtle, flourishing during this time. Milwaukee appealed to many who traveled further north than Chicago, as its city life was not so fast as Chicago, and traversing the smaller city environment was viewed as more manageable.

With black Milwaukeeans unable to patronize white-only restaurants and taverns, Bronzeville became a self-sufficient economic community with renowned nightlife entertainment. Walnut Street became such an essential artery of Milwaukee nightlife that it transcended racial divides and welcomed white and black patrons alike at the "black and tan" clubs, with the white dollars significantly helping the starved Bronzeville economy. While local bands would play on weekdays, world-famous musicians came to Bronzeville to perform (Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, etc.) on weekends, drawing in crowds from the Bayside, Whitefish Bay, and Shorewood suburbs. By 1953, there were 87 social clubs listed in "the Negro Business Directory".

After World War II, African-American workers were often replaced by returning white workers, forcing them to pursue jobs in service industries, reducing their average weekly income from \$44 to \$20. Forced to make ends meet on this reduced income, an underground economy of gambling and bootlegging "funded the growth of taverns, nightclubs, and restaurants."

Church, Education, and Sports

From 1869 to 1900, there was just a single African-American church serving the Bronzeville community, but by 1920 at least three more had opened and begun supporting clubs and other social outlets for the poor families emigrating from the South. These churches became a linchpin for the social bonds that connected this community. Activist Paul Geenen writes, "Doctors and lawyers lived in the same neighborhood and went to the same churches as laborers and the unemployed. Even after open housing laws enabled those who could afford it to move elsewhere, many of the more affluent professionals continued to attend and support their home churches where their families had been for generations."

Just as segregation suppressed African Americans into living in this single community, likewise their children were limited to 10 neighborhood schools. These schools were predominantly African American, taught by white women. However, the entire community collectively looked over and took care of its youth. Chuck Holton, a former resident of Bronzeville, wrote in 2006 that he remembers "smoking a cigarette with a friend on Walnut Street and being scolded by his mother for it by the time he got home."

The Urban League would sponsor baseball, basketball, and football teams, as well as boxing events. These competitive leagues sponsored by the area's up-and-coming businesses would be fiercely competitive and provide structure for the neighborhood youth. Boxing was the first prominent sport to cross the color line. Lightweight champion of the world, Baby Joe Gans, was a hero in the Bronzeville community and trained young boxers at the Urban League. Dick Bartman, the only white boxer who trained in Bronzeville, continues to referee boxing matches today.

Urban Renewal

The fondly remembered, bustling Bronzeville neighborhood met its untimely demise in an ironic attempt at urban renewal. After Congress passed the Housing Act of 1949, the City of Milwaukee targeted rundown housing in Bronzeville for redevelopment, rebuilding fewer, more expensive, homes to replace the "slums." Simultaneous with this redevelopment, Interstate 43 was built directly through the heart of the neighborhood, effectively the final nail in the coffin for what had come to be known as the Bronzeville neighborhood. More than 8,000 homes were demolished, with Walnut Street essentially eliminated. Former Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel in 1998, "Urban renewal was really urban destruction ... it did damage beyond just the economic damage." The economic engine of the African-American community had a figurative spear driven through its center by redevelopments and the Interstate construction, and the population that lived there was then scattered throughout Milwaukee.

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