

making SPACE

Part 3: Cultivating Community Amidst Adversity by Chasity Gunn

During the late 18th century and through the 19th century, Elgin continued growing, and new homes were built across the City. However, housing discrimination constricted where African American and immigrant families could live. The Settlement was one area they were allowed to live. The community stretched across Freemont, Hickory, Dundee, and Ann Streets. It is also the area where Newsome Park is. By 1880, nearly 250 families lived there. On a typical day, children played hopscotch and jumped rope in the city streets. Neighbors played Monopoly on tables set up in yards. On Sundays, residents worshipped outdoors until churches were built.

In the 20th century, many of Elgin's African Americans who had been born in enslavement continued making an imprint on the community. Benjamin Downs was one of those individuals. Born in enslavement in Baltimore, he escaped when he was a child and fled to Canada. He remained there until the end of the Civil War. He lived in New York and Pennsylvania and married Annie Newsome in 1876. They migrated to Elgin in 1881. Like all African Americans of his day, he faced employment discrimination that limited his work opportunities. He was the only African American employed by the Elgin National Watch Company. But he was not allowed to be a watchmaker; instead, he was hired as a janitor. He worked in the National House, which was the boarding establishment for the watch company's employees. Downs worked there for 32 years and was a charter member of St. James A.M.E. Church. He died of illness in January 1914.

Robert Garrett was another Elgin resident who was born in enslavement. In 1860, he was born in Pride's Station, Alabama (an area near Corinth, Alabama). He was brought to Elgin with his parents when he was two years old. As an adult, he worked at *Elgin Advocate*, a weekly publication, and was a member of Second Baptist Church. There, he served as a trustee and Sunday School superintendent. He had three children: Joseph, Robert, and Maytio.

It was also during this time period that Elgin's African Americans began opening businesses. In the 1870s, Carrie Washington opened a hair salon, and Martha Washington sold hair products. In 1881, Hall Barbar Shop opened. And Lewis and Mary Wheeler opened a hauling firm.

In 1913, Jacob A. Downs opened a prosperous reupholstery shop. In 1936, Daniel Broadnax Sr. opened a shoe repair store. Broadnax Sr. was the father of Ernie Broadnax, a living Elgin historian. Broadnax Sr. was born in Arkansas, but his family eventually moved to Pittsburgh. One day while walking along the main streets, he saw a large sign in a glass

window of a shoe repair store. For three days, he stood outside of the shop for about two hours, watching the owner working on shoes and interacting with customers.

Broadnax Sr. later worked as the man's apprentice for years before moving to Elgin and opening his own business. He and his wife, Mildred, lived in The Settlement and had eight daughters and six sons. Broadnax Sr. ran his business for nearly 50 years.

The African American community also had a social space within The Settlement Center. The Fremont Center began in the basement of Second Baptist Church and moved to the house of Drusa Pryde at 442 Hickory Avenue and then 486 Fremont Street. The center served an average of 50-60 children with its services. They learned woodworking, etiquette, cooking, and baking. On weekends and evenings, children played basketball.

In 1967, the center changed its name to Fremont Activities Association. The house on Fremont Street was torn down in 1970. Fremont Activities Association was reorganized as New Birth Community Development and Information Services. It served as a social services organization. It was funded by United Way until 1978. One year later, the organization dissolved.

Adellia Green served as president of the Fremont Activities Center, and she was a business owner. She had a restaurant called Green's Fried Chicken for many years. She lived in Elgin for 42 years and attended First United Methodist Church. She died in 1982 at 81 years old.