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A Visit to the Old Village of Stumptown

Discovering Stumptown, Part 2

Jenny Wilker

The earliest documentary evidence I've found of Stumptown is an 1891 map that shows a clearing in the woods below Pearson Drive between West Chestnut Street (now Gay Street) at the northwest and Courtland Avenue at the southeast. Although you can't see any of the stumps that gave Stumptown its name, you can count at least 30 houses.

Maps from 1912 and 1914 depict a developing grid with two streets—Madison and Morrow—running parallel to Pearson, and others—Gay, Richie, Gay, and an extension of Morrow—driving straight down the steep hill toward Riverside Cemetery. By 1925 the grid had filled in with several short horizontal streets and one more up-and-down street—Jersey. The 30 acres of Stumptown, one of a handful of African-American communities in Asheville, had essentially been developed.

By the 1950s (the focus of this story), an estimated 120 households lived here in single and two-family houses as well as in small two and three-story apartment buildings. The map on this page shows the neighborhood as it was in that era. Most of the modest homes had been built in the 1920s or somewhat later.

Daily Life in Stumptown: The 1950s

People still used "warm morning" stoves to chase away the morning chill and smoothing irons (flat irons) as footwarmers at night. Many still had ice boxes, and roughly half the homes had telephones. Gray Street was nicknamed Rich Street, mostly because it was the first to be paved. Richie, Morrow, Gay, Madison, and Jersey remained dirt roads until late in the 1950s.

Most adults worked nearby for Riverside Cemetery, the wealthy homes of Montford, hotels and restaurants, the railroad company, downtown businesses, and the Highland or Mission Hospital. If they could, mothers stayed home with their children.

Stumptown residents met most of their needs within or near the community. They could pick up milk and bread at a little store on the corner of Morrow and Jersey, for groceries they hiked up through the woods to Bates at 39 Pearson. There were also several businesses right in Stumptown. Alex Gaston fixed appliances on Richie; William Howard sold ice cream, cookies, and a bit of stronger stuff at his Sweet Shop at the corner of Madison and Gay; Alonzo and Blandie Carson had a coal, wood, and ice business on Morrow (there was another coal yard on

Madison); Mary Moseley, on Jane, was the neighborhood midwife; and George Holmes, on Jersey, made a living delivering fruits and vegetables from Lexington Market with his mule.



GEORGE HOLMES AND HIS MULE, 45 JERSEY STREET. PHOTO BY ANDREA CLARK, COURTESY ANDREA CLARK COLLECTION, NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, PACK MEMORIAL LIBRARY, ASHEVILLE.

A Safe, Secure Place to Grow Up

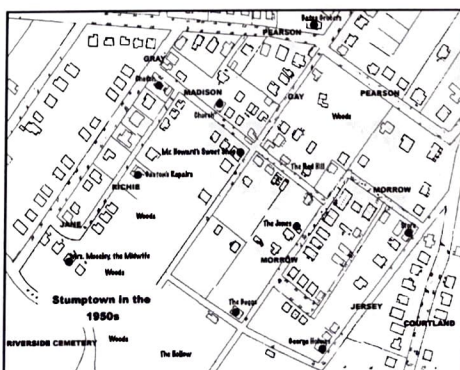
"Everybody got along real well," notes Mrs. Dorothy Wallace Ware, who moved to Jane Street when she was twelve. Many extended families lived here. Take, for example, Lettie Wilson Polite, who grew up on Madison Street. Her mother's mother lived on Gray, and her mother's three sisters also lived in the neighborhood. *continued on page 14...*

Principal Alida Woods Leaves a Legacy at Isaac Dickson Elementary

Peggy Brooks

Montford resident Alida Woods has just retired as principal of Isaac Dickson Elementary School, but she leaves an educational spirit and legacy that will remain a vibrant part of our Montford neighborhood school.

In 1991, in an era of exciting change for Asheville City Schools, parents and teachers such as Alida Woods, Susan Shillcock, Dee Cash, and others from the Asheville Alternative School worked to bring the experiential values of alternative education to the public sector. Isaac Dickson Elementary School, named after one of Asheville's prominent African American educators (1831-1918), was born in the old Hill Street School facility. *continued on page 10...*



STUMPTOWN IN THE 1950s

Stump town - 3C

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Stumptown

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Clara Jeter lived with her mother while she raised her five children on Morrow, with her cousins living nearby.

Neighbors acted like family as well. While Mrs. Jeter's mother was in the hospital, neighbors brought over dinner every day. If someone needed something, and you had it, you shared. "There was a lot of love here," says Mrs. Jeter.

Stumptown children were kept safe under the watchful eyes and ever-present discipline of all neighborhood elders. As Mrs. Jeter says, "If somebody saw a child doing something they shouldn't, they spoke to the child, and then the child got reprimanded once again at home."

Once they reached school age, Stumptown children usually walked through the woods to the segregated Hill Street School (by 1952, to a new building that now houses the Isaac Dickson School). Teenagers walked even farther to one of two highly regarded African-American high schools. Lettie Polite went to Stephens-Lee High School, and Dorothy Ware went to Allen Home High School.

In the '50s, the students had a pleasant walk. There was no crosstown expressway (built in 1958) and no I-240 (built in the early 1970s) separating Montford from town.

Children spent a lot of time playing outside, skating down paved Gray street, riding bikes down the "Red Hill," and playing ball or horseshoes in the "Hollow." They took walks in the cemetery, hunted 'possum in the woods, got in trouble for chasing Dora Greer's ducks, sneaked some of Reverend Moseley's plums, and maybe had a ride on George Holmes' mule.

Time for Church and also for Parties

There were lots of parties and festivities too: street dances in front of the Dawkins, house parties at the McFees, church-sponsored picnics in the field at the top of the hill, and William Howard's all-night Fourth of July pig roasts. Mrs. Adeline Jones used to tell ghost stories on her porch at 35 Morrow, and at least once offered a frank lecture on birth control to a group of teenage boys on her front steps.

The Buggs at 59 Morrow had one of the first tiny televisions, and teenagers would pile in to watch sitcom reruns together. When "J.C." Bugg got that 1941 Chevrolet, it was sheer pleasure for teenagers to escape the neighborhood on hair raising rides down to Old Fort or Gastonia.

Sundays were spent in church. While some families went out of the neighborhood to worship, there were two churches in Stumptown in 1950. There was the Welfare Baptist Church at 27 Madison, at this time led by the Reverends Pettway and Ware, and Reverend Mason's Church of God at 13 Gray. Bishop Perkins's original Church of God had been on Morrow. Mrs. Jeter says her family spent nearly the entire day at Welfare Baptist: Sunday school, Sunday morning service, and the evening BTU (Baptist Training Union), ending up with another service. Many others remember doing the same.

A Village that Turned Out Successful People

Whether it was the example of caring adults, the strict discipline, or the church going that shaped them, many strong, community-oriented men and women have come from the "village" of Stumptown. To name only a few, there were Phyllis Jones Sherrill (Morrow Street), who served on the Asheville-Buncombe Community Relations Council as well as the United Way, YWCA, and Minority Involvement Council; Clara Jeter, who did her child-rearing here and continues to work with the Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry, ABC Community Relations Council, Community Action Opportunities, and Martin Luther King Committee; and Lettie Polite (Madison Street), who taught math and organized libraries in many Asheville schools.

We should also mention David Jones, Jr. (Morrow Street), executive director of the Housing Authority of Asheville from 1976-2005; Doris Dawkins (Gay and Morrow Streets), active in the Neighborhood Housing Services Board; Dr. John Bugg (Morrow Street), pastor and prison chaplain in Essex County, New Jersey; Herbert J. "Watt Daddy" Watts (Morrow Street), who worked 26 years for the Asheville Police Department, retiring as sergeant of the Juvenile Division, and the namesake of the Herbert J. Watts Park; and Alvin Mills (Gay Street), the WLOS - TV 13 photojournalist and cameraman who was Professor Bop on WLOS radio.

Urban Renewal Shatters the Neighborhood: The 1960s and 1970s

The sixties brought an end to a way of life. The Stumptown population aged as young people began to move away in search of work. Many homes were in serious need of repair, and rental properties were left to deteriorate, mainly because the future of the neighborhood was uncertain. An article in the *Citizen-Times* from April 1968 describes a city council meeting attended by a "noisy delegation from Stumptown" (led by Phyllis Sherrill), asking for the removal of 50 abandoned cars in the neighborhood. There were also water and sewage problems, inadequate solid waste disposal, and no playgrounds.

City planners hoped to solve the problems of Stumptown by removing substandard housing and putting in new housing or possibly a park. This process had begun when the city hired Ray Kisiah as director of Asheville Parks and Recreation in 1971. Kisiah managed to combine several federal grants from such programs such as Model Cities, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and the Community Development Fund to pay for a million-dollar plan for the Montford Recreation Park—without having to spend "a dime" of city money.

Citizen input for the park project was asked for and received by Oralee Simmons, who worked for the local Model Cities environmental branch and later became director of the Community Center. Land for the park was acquired between 1968 and 1973, groundbreaking for the Center occurred in summer 1977, and the new building was dedicated in fall 1978.

This well-intentioned plan had some powerful negative effects. All properties on Morrow and Jersey and most of those on Gay and Madison were bulldozed, and around 80 households lost their homes. Some people moved to housing projects such as Hillcrest (just built in 1959) or Erskine-Caldwell senior housing (built in 1970), others purchased or rented homes elsewhere in town, and still others moved away altogether. A deeply connected and vibrant community, even more real than the buildings themselves, was lost forever.

Stumptown's Role in a National Tragedy

Stumptown's story is a tiny but extreme example of a national tragedy. During this era, as many as 1,600 African-American neighborhoods—including Asheville's Hill Street, Burton Street, East End, and Riverside/Southside neighborhoods—were diminished or destroyed by highway construction and urban renewal projects.

To understand the story of urban renewal in Asheville, read "Twilight of a Neighborhood," *Crossroads* (Summer-Fall 2010), a North Carolina Humanities Council publication available online. The Special Collections at Ramsey Library, UNC Asheville, have huge archives on urban renewal in Asheville. For a moving account of how urban renewal affected African Americans nationwide, see Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do about It* (One World/Ballantine Books, 2005).

Stumptown Lives On

Stumptown is not lost, however, from the memories of the people who lived there. Phyllis Sherrill started the Stumptown reunions in 1993. Perhaps the biggest one occurred in 1997, a two-day affair with over 50 attending. Next time you're in the Montford Recreation Center, take a look at the wonderful group portrait of these former residents and their families. Another big reunion was held in 2001 honoring the memory of Mrs. Sherrill, who had just died.

Clara Jeter is keeping the reunions going; the last gathering was held in late 2010. If all else fails, residents get together in a big conference telephone call. Reunion booklets, available in the North Carolina Collection at Pack Library, are rich with loving stories about the neighborhood.



CLARA JETER AND HER DAUGHTER PAT MCAFEE, LOOKING DOWN THE STREET WHERE THEY ONCE LIVED

Stumptown has a way of pulling you into its story. This certainly happened to Pat Fitzgerald, who published a richly illustrated story about Stumptown in 2001 ("Growing Up in Stumptown," in Robert S. Brunk, ed., *May We All Remember Well: A Journal of the History & Cultures of Western North Carolina*, volume 2). About the same time, Alida Woods' fifth-grade students at Isaac Dickson School discovered some artifacts in a nearby area that led them into an exciting archeological study of the neighborhood (see her article, "Continuing to Unearth Stumptown," in the *Montford Newsletter*, February 2002). Alida is retiring as Dickson's principal this month.

And now an Asheville newcomer like me has had the great privilege of exploring this neighborhood's history and meeting many wonderful people. This afternoon I spotted clumps of daffodils popping up along the path where Mrs. Witherspoon's yard on Morrow Street used to be. My own yard is full of what must be Mary Moseley's daffodils.

Small remembrances of times gone by.

This story couldn't have been written without the help of former residents Clara Jeter, the current president of the Stumptown Association; her daughter, Pat McAfee; Lettie Wilson Palite; Dorothy Wallace Ware; and Dr. John C. Bugg.



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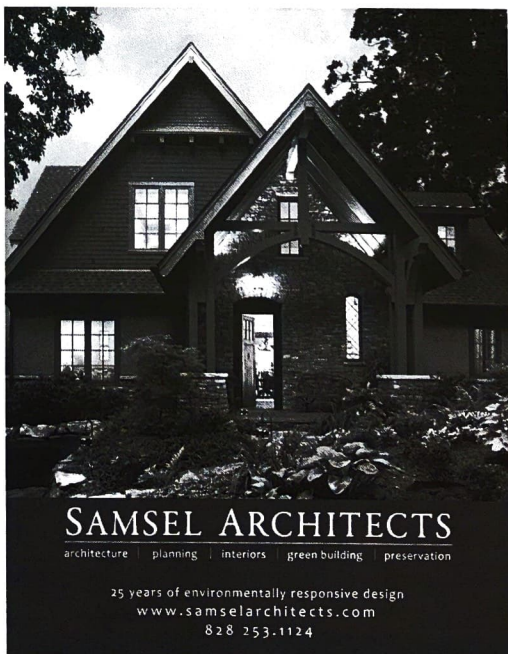
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