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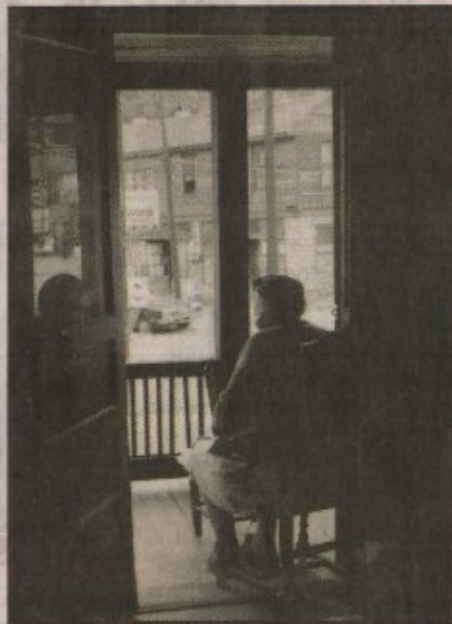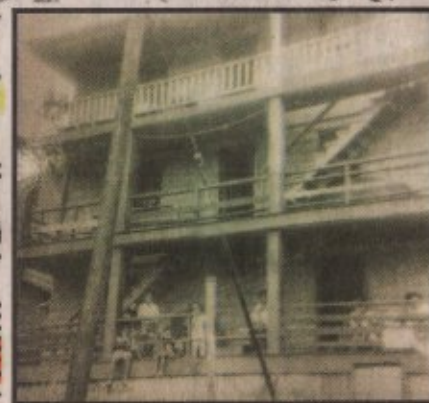Features Editor Bruce Steele, 232-5846 or bsteele@CITIZEN-TIMES.com

BLACK STREET: Its grocery store.
PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES

VALLEY AND EAGLE STREETS:
Josie McCullough on her porch, circa 1970.

SOUTH FRENCH BROAD AVENUE: Priscilla Ndiaye's former home at 477

VALIDATING THE PAST

A RESIDENT AND A MAPMAKER RE-CREATE THE SOMETIMES PAINFUL HISTORY AND STORIES OF ASHEVILLE'S LOST SOUTHSIDE NEIGHBORHOOD

By Rob Neufeld, Citizen-Times correspondent

You wish you had a photo of this: Several dozen African-American families, forced to leave their homes in Southside, carrying their belongings to the apartments that the city built for them on Erskine Street with urban renewal money.

"It was like a wagon train — without wagons," Priscilla Ndiaye, manager of Southside's Remapping Community project, says of the experience. She was 9 at the time.

"That would make it 1970," her 7-year-old grandson, C.J., calculates. "When disco started."

"He's an old soul," Ndiaye says of C.J., then continues with her story.

"We had to move our furniture from 477 South French Broad up through the trail to our new apartment. Everybody was carrying their furniture, dragging their furniture. We didn't have trucks.

"The only trucks that came around were the trucks with the people who told community members, 'Put your old furniture out. Don't worry about it. We'll come and pick it up for you.' And they did — and put it in the antique shops," Ndiaye says.

Priscilla Ndiaye sits outside the Walton Street Pool. She is working on a project looking at the impact of urban renewal on the Southside neighborhood and collecting its stories and history for an interactive mapping project.

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BACKGROUND MAP
BY BETTY MURRAY

See REMAPPING, Page D6

REMAPPING

"I remember that. I was dragging chairs, too, up through the path."

40 years later

The project in which Ndiaye is involved — to compile Southside's stories and history and make them available through an interactive map — has coalesced from a number of influences.

Two years ago, Richard Marciano, professor of library and information science at UNC Chapel Hill, came to UNC Asheville to present his new way of creating a "road map" of neighborhood change, utilizing state-of-the-art computer software, citizen input and materials found in archives.

He'd first been clued into Asheville history by Helen Wykle, then director of Special Collections at UNCA's Ramsey Library. She'd attended a 2008 WebWise conference on Libraries and Museums in the Digital World in Miami and saw how Marciano turned 1930s California mortgage risk data into interactive neighborhood explorations.

Marciano was teaching at the University of California at San Diego at the time and pioneering digital humanities projects. He was subsequently hired by UNC Chapel Hill.

"Do you know," Wykle told him at the conference, "we (at UNCA) just received a number of boxes of photos and documents relating to urban renewal. We're trying to figure out how to make it all available to the public and create ways of greater access."

The idea sprang into Marciano's head that he could greatly broaden his effort — take Asheville's 1930s data, which documented how African-American communities had been "red-lined" by banks, and combine it with 1960s and '70s information about neighborhood clearance. The resultant views could then span the country as well as three generations.

Root shock

Marciano connected with Southside via a few more providential steps.

He called Shelley Crisp, director of the N.C. Humanities Council, which had funded a project called "Twilight of a Neighborhood: Asheville's East End, 1970," a look at an African-American neighborhood decimated by urban renewal.

That put him in touch with its project manager, Karen Loughmiller of West Asheville Library and familiarized him with Asheville's dubious distinction as the most thoroughly "renewed" city in the Southeast.

Although it was the stated intention of urban renewal "to improve so-called blighted areas of cities," UNCA professor Sarah Judson wrote in the council's summer 2010 issue of Crossroads, "in practice, many rich and vibrant communities of color were flattened throughout the United States."

"Root shock" is the term that Mindy Fullilove, guest speaker at a "Twilight" program, used to describe what displaced residents have felt long after the loss of their homes and heritage.
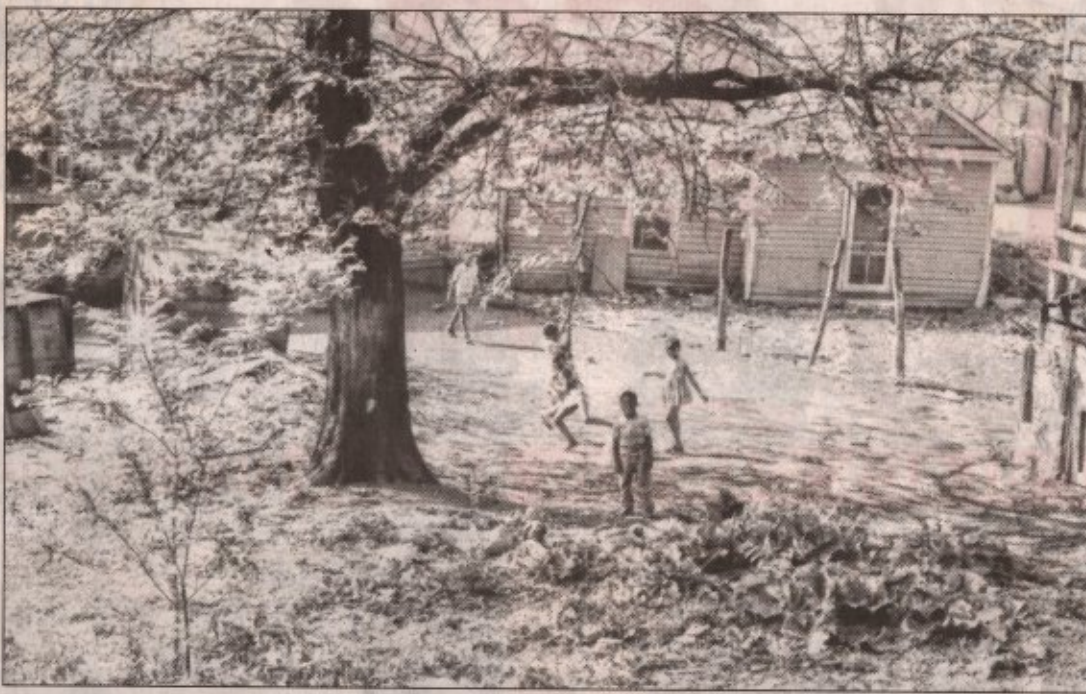
Belief in the realness of root shock involves belief in the meaning of history. When people have their heritage wiped out, should they just look only forward, like Lot? Or should they write their people's testament?

"Today, there is serious discussion of urban revitalization in Asheville that likely will include many more voices than in the mid-1970s," Harlin Gradin, former Humanities Council program director, said in his "Twilight of a Neighborhood" essay.

Asheville now finds itself looking back on the rubble of African-American communities, and finding its voice about them.

"Beginning with the Hill Street neighborhood in 1957," Judson wrote in Crossroads, "and moving on to Southside, Stumptown, Burton Street and East End, the fabric of each of these historic African-American communities was torn apart."

"Twilight" began the process of neighborhood recreation — in a conceptual way. Andrea Clark presented stunning photos — family portraits brimming with youthful hope; images of the architecture of community; richly cultural street scenes — which she had

taken in East Riverside before its clearance.

Betsy Murray of Pack Memorial Library created maps of the communities, with keys that identified public and commercial structures.

"In the East Riverside Area," the late Rev. Wesley Grant, a Southside preacher, told city officials at a Dec. 21, 1978, meeting, "we have lost more than 1,100 homes, six beauty parlors, five barbershops, five filling stations, 14 grocery stores, three laundry mats, eight apartments, seven churches, three shoe shops, two cabinet shops, two auto body shops, one hotel, five funeral homes, one hospital, and three doctors' offices."

Johnnie Grant, publisher of Asheville's Urban News, grew up in East Riverside, moved to Southport with her husband for career reasons and returned to Asheville, after urban renewal, to attend the Goombay festival.

She discovered that her family's homes were gone. "Sometimes," she says, "I just get a mental block in order not to deal with urban renewal."

Last woman standing

Ndiaye was already deeply involved in preserving Southside's structures, history and traditions when Marciano arrived. She was a member of the Southside Community Advisory Board, formed to guide the Housing Authority of the City of Asheville in its renovation of the community's W.C. Reid Center, which it has purchased.

Working with Green Opportunities and funded by a $4.3 million HUD grant, the authority has saved the 1927 building from demolition and is looking to create a Green Jobs Training Center.

Marciano, in presenting his "Big Data" project to Southside and Asheville leaders, had a tough sell. He showed his audience how his California interface worked — zoom in on a map, click a location and get a list of links to data, images, stories and search fields. But bridging the world of computer technology and neighborhood sharing was a leap.

Furthermore, residents and former residents of urban-renewed communities have an entrenched distrust of civic improvers.

Today, Ndiaye notes, Southside, which lost nearly half of its 4,000 homes and businesses

in the early '70s, is undergoing gentrification, with the non-African-American population having doubled in recent years.

"I know it's flipping," Ndiaye says of her community. "Public housing is going to be gone. Some people are saying, 'They're coming to finish us off.'"

She fears that people whom the housing authority has noted are "not of good standing" will not be relocated, and will become homeless.

"When my grandmother had her spot," she says of the old days, "everybody came in. You never had to be hungry, you never were homeless. You had a place to sleep even if it was on the floor or the couch. But the new rules were, 'If you get in trouble, you're out.'"

Attendance at Marciano's follow-up visits to Asheville dwindled. "Finally," Ndiaye recounts, "I was the last person standing, as he put it. 'Priscilla,' Marciano said, 'this is your community. If you tell me to go away, I'll go away.' So I stood up and said, 'Dr. Marciano, let's do this.'"

For a year, she worked with him, digging into files. One day, she came across one of the photos that Reed Fornoff, a Mountain Housing Opportunities intern, had found in the city archives.

"Oh, my God," she exclaimed. "This is the house I grew up in! I called my mom. 'Guess what? I found the house that I grew up in!' This here (on the porch) is Frances — I could see my auntie on there, her big forehead."

She also found the house in which she'd been born and the records of her grandfather's rental agreement. "I really got sucked in then," she says.

Seeing for oneself

Marciano and his team unveiled the first phase of their Southside Citizen-Led Crowdsourcing Roadmap Saturday, gathering feedback from community members on how to bring the map of Southside to life.

"Crowd sourcing" is not Marciano's preferred term, as it historically has referred to information-gathering from anonymous online participants.

Marciano favors the term "citizen-sourcing." Input is via computers, but relationships are personal, and connect to a geographic community in-

worker) wasn't one of them. She had family elsewhere, and left Asheville.

"Miss Littlejohn was like one of the mothers in the neighborhood," Austin says. "She didn't have children and took care of everyone else's children. She would cook, (as did) another lady there, Louise Moore — she was a great cook."

She would bake cakes, pies and cookies for the children in the neighborhood. "You never would go to her house when she didn't have something on top of her stove. She was always making sure that everybody was fed.

"It takes a village," Austin says. She recalls how, on summer nights, her parents, Herbert and Bessie Sherard Robinson, left the doors to the outside open for ventilation and shared what they had with neighbors in need.

Austin went to Livingston Street School (the W.C. Reid building), where many of the teachers were Southside residents, and never got below a B grade. When she was 15, she conceived her daughter, Priscilla, whom she named after Priscilla James, a best friend — the kindest person she knew, she says.

You couldn't continue in school if you were a pregnant teen. But Austin took night classes at Lee Edwards High School and got her GED.

She feels that Ndiaye got some of her curiosity and drive from her, but as Austin told her physical therapist, "She always talks about how I be running all the time, but I don't know how in the world she does it."

The future of community

Ndiaye stayed with her grandparents, whom she called Mama and Daddy, when Austin moved to Florida with her husband and younger children.

Austin returned to Southside in 1969, and when the demolition and relocations started a year later, the housing authority put Ndiaye's grandparents in Erskine, and her mother in the Walton Street apartments.

Ndiaye, who went with her mother, says, "I cried like I don't know what because I wanted to stay with Mama and Daddy."

"Everybody was displaced all over," Austin says, "and lost contact with each other …

"Urban renewal had its good points as far as modernization of housing is concerned. But as far as families and children are concerned, I believe it was a disaster, a breakdown that has led to people being noncaring. It would take a lot of work to get the feeling of community back," Austin says.

That's what Ndiaye is now dedicated to. After getting an accounting degree at Blantons Business College and moving to the West Coast to work for the Department of Defense, she returned to Asheville because, "the colors are all red and blue" out west.

Her sons would come out of a store and be jumped by Bloods or Crips, who would not allow an African-American male to refuse to pick a side.

In Asheville, Ndiaye got a business degree from Shaw University and a master's degree in administration from Montreat College. Her devotion to Southside includes her mission to educate her fatalistic neighbors about "using the process."

"How can you worry about the future when you're not gaining an understanding about what's getting ready to happen to you?" she says.

"It's clear that none of us are that far from victimhood," Loughmiller adds. "Discrete transitions, such as the evolving one in Southside, offer the opportunity to try our hands at crafting responses that nurture sustainable neighborhood communities."

Ndiaye advocates working within the system, and feeling empowered.

"Money is being put into the community for certain things to happen," she says. "What are the obligations of the agencies with the money; and, if they're not obligated, how can you advocate and make them be more responsible?"

For Ndiaye and Marciano, Big Data enables citizens to engage in government. Reclaiming the past means making claims on the future.

VALLEY STREET: Children play in a backyard, circa 1968. ANDREA CLARK/SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES

THE TEAM

» **The first phase** of the Citizen-Led Crowdsourcing Roadmap was funded through a federal grant from the National Science Foundation and the National Archives and Records Administration. The partnership was strengthened with world class researchers from Duke University: Cathy Davidson and Robert Calderbank.

» **A second phase** is about to start with funding from the Bass Connections initiative at Duke and the Information Initiative at Duke, with new partners, including the Data & GIS lab at the Duke Libraries under the leadership of Molly Tamarkin.

» **The Southside team** includes Priscilla R. Ndiaye (Asheville Southside Community Advisory Board); Dwight Mullen and students (UNC Asheville); Cathy Davidson, Mandy Dailey, Sheryl Grant and Kristan Shawgo of Humanities, Arts, Science and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory at Duke University; Jeff Heard of Renaissance Computing Institute; and Richard Marciano of UNC Chapel Hill.

Richard Marciano DAN SEARS/UNC CHAPEL HILL

LEARN MORE

» **See Dr. Marciano's** use of California's redlining documents at http://salt.unc.edu/T-RACES.

» **Read about Big Data** projects at http://ci-ber.blogspot.com.

» **Read the report,** "Twilight of a Neighborhood," by clicking on the "Summer 2010" issue of Crossroads at http://nchumanities.org/publications/crossroads.

» **See the Rob Neufeld's** multi-part "Southside Stories" at The Read on WNC at http://TheReadonWNC.ning.com.

The Southside neighborhood, after the bulldozers came through in the early 1970s. SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES

volved in realizing itself.

The project is also timeless. Community members will keep contributing memories, which they will add to demographic data that, initially, a team of Duke University students will add, under the leadership of Cathy Davidson, professor of interdisciplinary studies.

Once the project is completed — six months to a year from now — users will be able to find out, for example, where all people with the last name of Robinson lived or what particular properties were acquired by the city at a particular time.

They will also be able to go to the main map, a version of Google Earth, click on an address, and connect with oral history. The address 7 Graham Place, for instance, will pull up a story that Ndiaye collected in a talk with Bernell Swinson, who grew up in Southside.

"A few blocks down from Louie Hill," Swinson says of his home turf off of Depot Street, was Walton Street Park, where he learned to swim.

"I informed Big John Bureson, a father figure there," Swinson recalls, "that I was ready to try swimming across 9 feet (the deep end). He (Bureson) would always swim alongside anyone who wanted to try their first time in case they ran into trouble …

"If you made it, he would certify you, and submit your name to the American Red Cross, and you would receive a card with your name on it. I made it across the first time, and he certified me."

As an adult, Swinson had a long career in the Navy, and now lives in California.

Coming home again

As the mapping project develops, people will also be able to see animations — the past morphing into the present, with intimations of the future.

A view of Black Street, where several resident-owned, fine homes were once located, will conjure up mixed feelings.

"I remember when they tore down Miss Littlejohn's home," Ndiaye's mother, Shirley Robinson Austin, says. "Ooh, that was one nice home there on Black Street."

A few dozen people watched the demolition along with Austin, but Littlejohn (she was married to a railroad