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A FERVENT ALLY

William Walker Jr. fought to keep CNU's campus location in the hands of black families. Now, the university plans to recognize him.



BY MATT JONES
Staff writer

NEWPORT NEWS — Christopher Newport University plans to unveil a new historical marker Sept. 20 on its campus for William Walker Jr., a former member of the Board of Visitors who died in 2004.

If the Newport News City Council had listened to Walker in 1963, there might not be a university there at all. Walker and other activists fought the council for years over the tract of land that eventually would become the school's permanent home.

Previously, it had been home to a small, tight-knit African American community, and Walker had another idea for it.

Phillip Hamilton, a history professor at CNU, stumbled across Walker's complex relationship with the school while writing a book on the university's history.

"In my view, it was clearly an effort by the city of Newport News to prohibit Walker from developing a middle-class, suburban neighborhood for African Americans," Hamilton said.

His research, city records and archival materials from the College of William and Mary show how the city chose Shoe

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Lane in midtown Newport News for the school, which opened in 1961 as an extension of William and Mary.

It went with the 59.7-acre site over a similar site less than a mile away — and half the cost.

By forcing property owners to sell, the city displaced families that lived there for decades, now surrounded by mostly-white subdivisions. It also stopped Walker's dream of turning it into a subdivision for middle-class black families.

"To me, it's an open-and-shut case as to why the city wanted it," Hamilton said.

72 Shoe Lane

Black families lived in what is now midtown Newport News before the shipyard opened in 1886, before the city incorporated in 1896 and before Warwick County and it consolidated in 1958.

First Baptist Church Morrison, which historically had a mostly black congregation, started meeting in a schoolhouse nearby in 1882 in what was then Warwick County. It moved in 1933 to just north of the intersection of Warwick Boulevard and Shoe Lane.

The 1940 Census counted eight black households on Shoe Lane, with a handful of other families living nearby on Warwick Boulevard. The African American men who lived on Shoe Lane mostly worked in the shipyard; a couple owned small farms.

They generally made less money than their white neighbors. The highest paid of the Shoe Lane residents was Thomas Hudgins, a 52-year-old museum helper. He made \$910 in 1939 — about two thirds of the average annual income nationally.

By the early 1960s, a few older farmhouses and buildings remained in the mostly undeveloped Shoe Lane area, according to Daily Press archives. But the half-dozen black families that lived there found themselves increasingly surrounded by white subdivisions.

The Hiden family started the Hiddenwood subdivision north of Shoe Lane in the 1950s. James River Country Club, which opened in 1932, also attracted wealthier residents to the area.

All that development targeted the white population. The country club didn't admit Jewish members until 1989, according to Daily Press reports, and at that time still hadn't admitted a single black member.

Meanwhile, what had been Newport News before the merger became increasingly black as white residents moved to the suburbs, according to Hamilton.

"You did have some African Americans moving out of Newport News proper, but there was in essence a wall at Hilton Village," Hamilton said.

Some middle-class black families did relocate to the Shoe Lane area around this time. In letters and City Council testimony, many said it was the only suburban option available.

James Robertson, a resident of 4221 Marshall Ave., wrote to the William and Mary board after Newport News started looking at Shoe Lane in spring 1961. He said he'd already bought land there so he could move out of southeast Newport News.

Three families who lived on Prince Drew Lane — including prominent dentists Conway Downing and his brother-in-law James Shavers — also wrote to the board explaining why the land needed to stay available.

It'd taken years for them to find landowners who'd sell land that could be zoned residential to black buyers. Shoe Lane was one of the few suburban areas with black residents already, and it was relatively affordable.

"Most efforts on the part of Negro citizens to create communities for living which measure up to high standards suffer a stillbirth or die by subtle abortion, because of the complexities surrounding segregation," they wrote.

William Walker Jr. was familiar with segregation on the Peninsula. He was born in Newport News in 1911, son of lawyer William Walker Sr., and graduated from Howard University in 1932 with degrees in civil engineering and business.

He struggled to find a job in civil engineering on the Peninsula. He interviewed with Newport News City Manager J.C. Biggins, who told him he wished he could hire the young black man.

"But if he did, he would lose his job," Walker told the Daily Press in a 1990 interview.

Instead, Walker taught math at all-black Huntington High School. In 1936, he was hired as superintendent of Aberdeen Gardens in Hampton, the first federal housing community built for African Americans, where he lived with his wife Jean and their children.

He later started a real estate and insurance agency and served as president of the Newport News NAACP. He and his wife helped integrate the Sears and Roebuck



COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Aberdeen Gardens community manager William Walker Jr., right, talks to one of the applicants for a house in Aberdeen Gardens.



The old First Baptist Church Morrison, which had served the black community on Shoe Lane, was torn down to make way for expansion at Christopher Newport University.

lunch counter on 28th Street and Washington Avenue. In 1957, he co-founded Community Federal Savings and Loan to help black Newport News residents get mortgages.

The Walkers built their 2,500-square-foot home at 72 Shoe Lane in the late 1950s, city property records show. Their ranch-style home resembled those of other black families that had recently moved to the area and those in the surrounding subdivisions.

Walker hoped to continue the trend of African Americans moving there by creating a black-friendly subdivision. According to City Council minutes and Daily Press reports, several landowners had indicated they would work with Walker.

To me, it seems a racial question'

Although William and Mary ran Christopher Newport College in its early years, the city of Newport News was in charge of finding a home for it, something bigger than the renovated elementary school it held classes in when it first opened.

Besides Shoe Lane and a tract near an industrial park, the City Council was also looking at a 59.9-acre site near Roys Lane, roughly where Todd Stadium is today. It was less than a mile on Warwick Boulevard from Shoe Lane, and city staff estimated it'd cost \$121,600 — almost half of the Shoe Lane site's tax value of \$235,000.

About 100 black citizens, including Walker, showed up to the first public meeting about the choices in April 1961. They were led by the Morrison Property Owners Association, a group of homeowners from the area, and two prominent black Peninsula attorneys.

W.Hale Thompson and Phillip Walker, his law partner and William Walker Jr.'s younger brother, had a long track record of fighting desegregation. They had helped desegregate the city's libraries, organized black voter registration drives and tried to integrate city schools.

Phillip Walker told the council at a later meeting, according to minutes, that the landowners up until that point thought they were safe. Although the city had talked

about buying the land a few years prior, a later report by city staff recommended against using the area for education for recreation.

The City Council and William and Mary Board of Visitors had received dozens of letters for and against the site that spring.

"It appears to be clear that two or three councilmen are coldly determined to take this area from our people, some of whom are members of families that have lived on it for generations," William Walker Jr. wrote in a letter to the Board of Visitors, "and that they are more interested in the taking of the land than in any use which they can find for it."

Robertson, who already had a building permit for his new house, wrote to express his concern.

"To me it seems to be a racial question to get the Negroes to move out when it has been in Negroes' hands 80 years," Robertson wrote to the board.

Proponents said race wasn't a factor. The site was closer to U.S. 17, The Mariners' Museum, nice housing for faculty, city services and existing bus routes. The tract under consideration also didn't include the new homes that Walker and others built, although it would run up to their backyards.

The Times-Herald, the Daily Press's morning counterpart, published an editorial calling Christie and others hypocrites for opposing the Shoe Lane tract. They had supported an expansion to Huntington High in southeast Newport News that had displaced more black families than Shoe Lane.

Some citizens were explicit about wanting to stop Walker's subdivision. Emma Mast, a white woman who lived four doors down from William Walker Jr., suggested to the City Council that it buy the new homes black families had built for faculty and married student housing, too.

"The prospects of a housing development in the Shoe Lane area as proposed by some is of grave concern to me and to others living in the Riverside and Hiddenwood Area," another Riverside resident, whose signature was cut off in council records, wrote to the City Council.

"It would be a shame and tragic thing to ruin two of the best resi-

dential areas of our city by allowing such a housing development to become a reality."

The first meeting ended with the City Council putting the decision to May so they could meet with the William and Mary board, which said it was OK with either option.

When the May public hearing came, the City Council's chambers were completely filled, leaving some people to stand in the hallway and listen, according to minutes. In between citizen speakers, the council did a quick tally of supporters.

A slight majority, a mix of white and black attendees, favored Roys Lane. Everyone who favored Shoe Lane was white.

"Ifrace has nothing to do with it, what keeps you from buying the Roys Lane site?" Thompson asked the council when he spoke, according to Daily Press archives.

Minutes and Daily Press reports don't give a clear answer. At the end of the meeting, the City Council voted 5-2 for Shoe Lane.

But the saga didn't end there — it took two more years to buy all the land.

All of the city's initial offers were rejected, according to minutes. The city hired an outside appraiser to come up with another number that owners were likely to accept. He pegged the value at \$363,390, a more than \$120,000 jump. The City Council directed Biggins — the same city manager who turned William Walker Jr. down for a job during the Great Depression — to hire more appraisers. It eventually settled on a value of \$290,555.

Although the Walker brothers and Thompson continued pushing for more money, according to minutes, city officials refused to go back on the site choice. Biggins said it'd be wrong to retract offers already made, and the William and Mary board said if they changed sites, they'd have to wait two years for the next state budget cycle to build.

In March 1963, the council voted to start condemnation proceedings; only one-third of the properties had sold. Deed books show over a dozen acquisitions made after the April 1 deadline for negotiations.

The land was given to William and Mary in August.

Rediscovering William Walker Jr.

William Walker Jr. retired from his real estate and insurance agency in 1984, after his wife died in 1983.

He remained active in the community after his retirement, working with a number of local groups. Walker was first appointed to the Christopher Newport College Board of Visitors in 1978, according to college records, and served three terms before stepping down in 1990.

His home remained 72 Shoe Lane for several more decades as the neighboring campus expanded; he sold it in 1994, according to city records. He died Feb. 26, 2004, at the age of 92 in Bethesda, Maryland.

The university acquired Walker's former house in 2006, city records show. It was later torn down to make way for the Gregory P. Klich Alumni House, which opened in 2017.

Current CNU president Paul Trible asked Hamilton to write a book about the university's history in advance of its 50th anniversary. As part of writing it, Hamilton spoke to Christopher Newport College's second president, Jim Windsor.

During an interview, Hamilton asked Windsor, who died in 2016, about the college's location.

"You might to tread lightly on this one," Windsor told him.

Hamilton said he didn't understand what he meant.

"Well, there was some controversy about where to put the university, but it all settled down pretty quickly," Windsor said.

This piqued Hamilton's curiosity. Hamilton dug through Daily Press and Times-Herald archives, searched through microfilm at the city clerk's office downtown and asked the handful of people still alive for information.

He turned the information he compiled into a paper in The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography that was published in 2011.

Hamilton also created a presentation that he gives on occasion for classes and other groups.

Brian Puaca, an associate history professor and former faculty senate president, thought of Hamilton's research after Heather Heyer was killed by a white nationalist in 2017 during clashes between protesters near the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

Afterward, there was a movement at universities across the country to recognize the influence of racism. Puaca thought it might be time to do something to recognize Walker.

"I don't think most faculty frankly had any idea before I said something about it on stage a little while back in front of the faculty," Puaca said.

Trible agreed to support a marker on the lawn where Walker's house once was after Puaca approached him. It'll look like the one where the original First Baptist Church Morrison stood before it was torn down to make room for the Ferguson Center for the Arts in 2003.

The marker is scheduled to be unveiled Sept. 20 at a CNU board of visitors meeting. The stretch of grass where Walker's house stood will be named Walker's Green in his honor.

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