

# A walk around The Block

Community keeps memory of historic African-American district alive

By Stan Bumgardner  
For Daily Mail WV

In the downtown Charleston of today, it may seem hard to believe, but there was once a thriving business district on the north side of Washington Street.

A few exceptions still exist, such as the Preston Funeral Home and Charleston Bread. The Chow Thai restaurant is located on Shrewsbury Street in the Anderson Brown Building, built and named for a prominent African-American realtor. And a few cultural reminders remain: First Baptist Church, Simpson United Methodist Church and Garnet Career Center.

Before public places started becoming racially integrated in the 1950s, though, this area was bustling with restaurants, stores and hotels — run by African-Americans for African-Americans. It was referred to as “The Block” because it was centered around a square block bounded by Washington, Shrewsbury, Lewis (now John Norman Street), and Broad Streets (now Leon Sullivan Way, renamed for a minister and a business and civil rights trailblazer who grew up and attended schools there, and went on to become the first African-American board member in General Motors’ history).

That section of town began to develop right after the Civil War, when newly freed slaves arrived from the South, primarily Virginia. Some may have relocated only 10 miles — migrating from the salt furnaces in Malden to Charles-

ton, a relatively small city of about 2,000 at the time. While no longer enslaved, they still lived in a different world, forced by our state constitution to attend separate schools from whites and restricted by our city codes and deeds from living in certain neighborhoods.

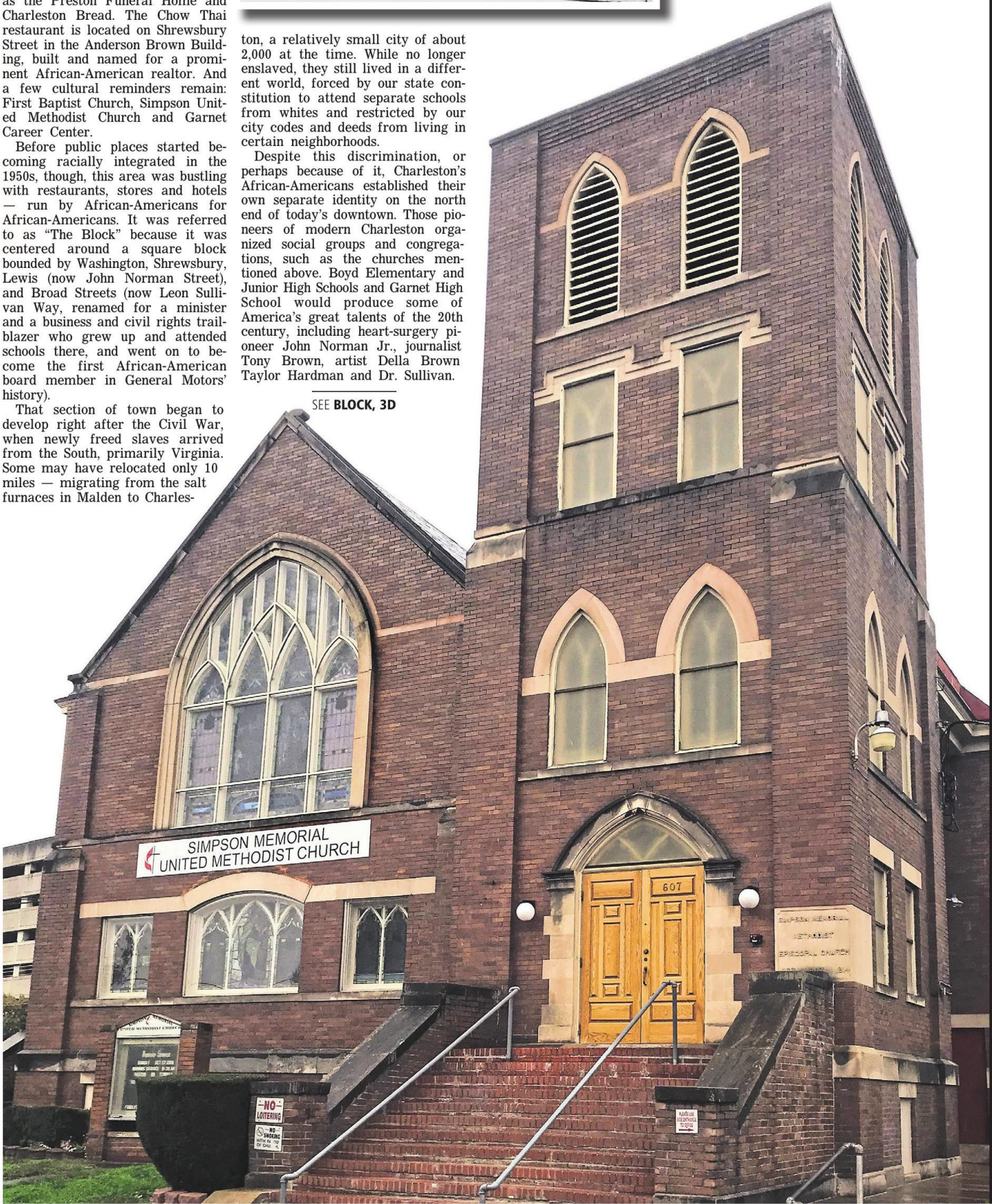
Despite this discrimination, or perhaps because of it, Charleston’s African-Americans established their own separate identity on the north end of today’s downtown. Those pioneers of modern Charleston organized social groups and congregations, such as the churches mentioned above. Boyd Elementary and Junior High Schools and Garnet High School would produce some of America’s great talents of the 20th century, including heart-surgery pioneer John Norman Jr., journalist Tony Brown, artist Della Brown Taylor Hardman and Dr. Sullivan.

SEE BLOCK, 3D



West Virginia State Archives photos

TOP LEFT: Employees Kathryn Burks (left), Leona Price, Nannie Williams, Della Barksdale Burley, L. Bernidean Brown, Eunice Price, Montell Pitts Gibson and Richard Sanders pose in front of the Ferguson Theater in 1939. RIGHT: An undated photo taken at the Old Annex barber shop Hattie and Twin. BOTTOM LEFT: The Ferguson Hotel in the 1960s.



ROBERT SAUNDERS | Gazette-Mail

Simpson Memorial United Methodist Church on 607 Shrewsbury St. was formerly known as the Simpson Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church. The structure was built in 1914 and served as an anchor of Charleston’s African-American community.



BLOCK

FROM PAGE 1D

A thriving business district

The people who lived in The Block formed personal bonds that seem almost nonexistent in today's technologically connected but interpersonally disconnected world. Former Charleston police officer Richard L. James once told me, "Everybody was watching out for everyone else. When I was a kid, if you did something wrong, your mother knew about it by the time you got home."

The Block developed its own society and business community out of necessity. It helped that a new railroad, the Kanawha & Michigan, would cut right through the area in 1884, giving business owners an easy way to receive and ship merchandise.

By the mid-20th century, business in and around The Block was booming. There were barber and beauty shops, dentists and doctors, Smoot Construction, and Robin's Grocery. Anderson Brown's son, Willard, was a much sought-after attorney. Eateries included the West Virginia Restaurant; the Harlem Cafe; the White Front Inn, where boxing champ Joe Louis once ate; The Palace, known for its barbecues; and "Doc" Gravelly and Pat Hawkins' Gem Pharmacy, where young folks rushed after school for chocolate sodas.

When talking to former residents, one restaurant always comes up: the M&S Pharmacy at the corner of Washington and Shrewsbury. It was operated by doctors Leo Solomon and Thomas Mitchell, who apparently knew how to make the best hot dogs around. In the early 2000s, Chlorine Grisby-Carter opened a restaurant, Clo's Uptown Eatery, on Washington Street. She made great soul food — delicious fried fish, barbecued ribs, collard greens, and some of the best hot dogs I've ever had. A few years back, I asked her about those hot dogs. She told me she reached back into her childhood memories from The Block and tried to "make my sauce as close to the M&S as I could."

Ferguson Hotel

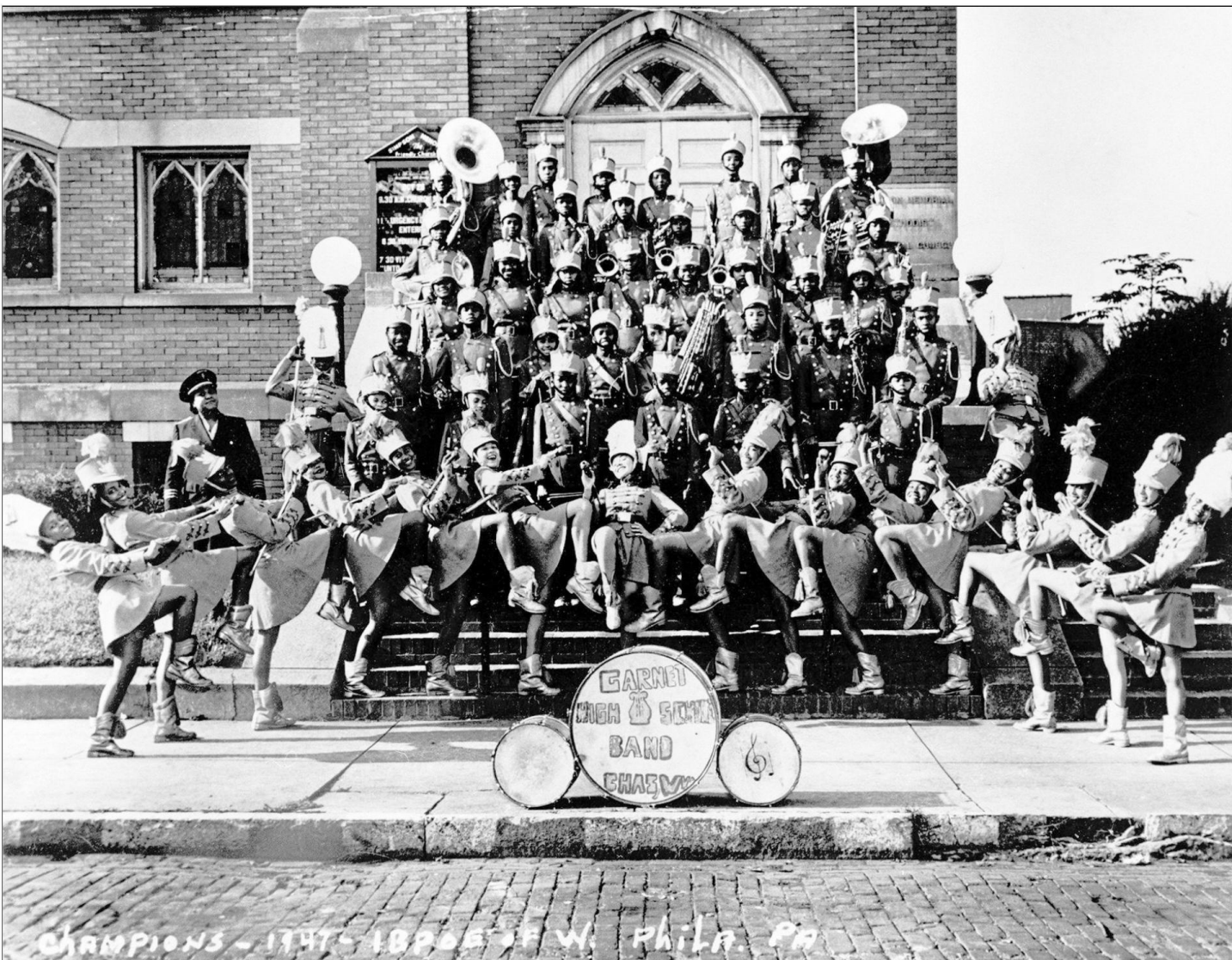
The centerpiece of The Block was the Ferguson Hotel. Gurnett "Cap" Ferguson, a Fayette County native, was a black officer in World War I and founded West Virginia's first black American Legion post. He opened an opulent hotel in 1922 at the corner of today's Leon Sullivan Way and Washington Street. It cost \$200,000 (nearly \$3.4 million in 2019 money) and included 72 rooms. It was designed by our state's first African-American licensed architect, John C. Norman Sr., who drew up plans for many houses on the West Side as well as the old Staats Hospital, now being renovated in the Elk City district.

The Ferguson Hotel included a theater, ballroom, restaurant and poolroom, as well as shops and business offices. Over the years, the Ferguson attracted some of the century's greatest entertainers, such as Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Nat King Cole. (You can read more about Cap Ferguson and his hotel in the Spring 2017 issue of Goldenseal magazine.)

The area in and around The Block also had a less glamorous business aspect. Fry's Alley was Charleston's best-known red-light district, frequented by African-Americans and Charleston's white community. Some nightclubs in that area became the only places to go for jazz and blues music as well as to buy bottles of liquor (under the counter) in the days when liquor could be legally purchased only by the glass in bars. One such place had what amounted to an early drive-thru window where you could, somewhat discreetly, acquire bottles served in brown paper bags.

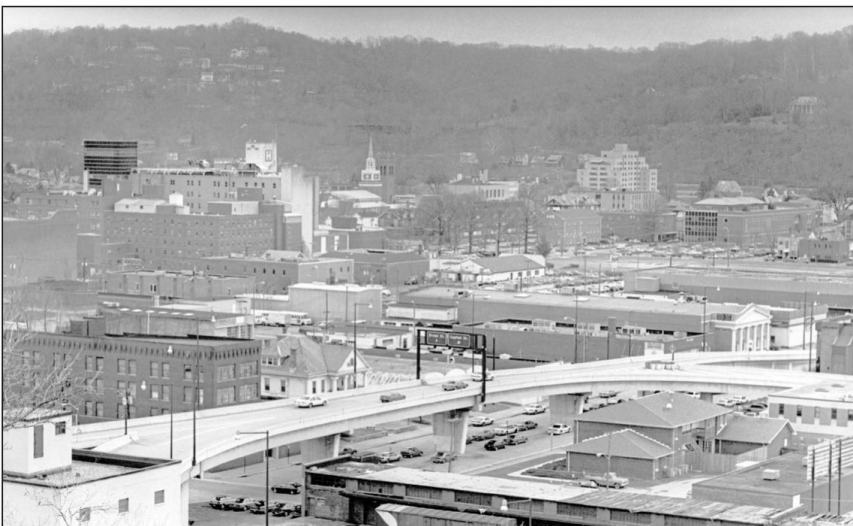
Integration & urban renewal

So what happened to the African-American section of town? If you go there today, you'll see a few structures but mostly empty parking lots. The decline started, ironically enough, with integration. When African-Americans could begin shopping and eating at historically white establishments on Capitol Street, such as The Diamond (the last of Charleston's big businesses to integrate its lunch counter), black-owned businesses suffered. In talking to folks who lived through this transition, I've heard various versions of the same story. In essence, the downtown shops had more vari-



James Randall Collection, West Virginia State Archives photo

This 1947 photo shows the Garnet High School band in front of the Simpson Memorial Methodist (now United Methodist) Church.



Gazette-Mail file photo

The Broad Street (now Leon Sullivan Way) interstate exit ramp slices through Charleston's Block neighborhood. Construction of the interstate system in part contributed to the decline of the capital city's once thriving African-American business district.

ety and were generally cheaper.

But many businesses remained open until the late 1960s. That's when Charleston's city leaders followed the lead of larger cities and implemented urban renewal. The stated goal was to clean up the city's more blighted areas and reinvigorate the economy. Some downtown firetraps were demolished, but the policy all but wiped out Charleston's historic African-American section.

Urban renewal took out nearly the entire Triangle District, which extended east for several blocks and west to Elk River, forming a triangular shape. Historically, "The Triangle" had been home to blacks, immigrants (many from Eastern Europe and the Middle East) and Jews, who also had been restricted from living in other sections of town.

Even Cap Ferguson was pressured to sell his once luxurious hotel property, which would make way for the Heart O' Town Motor Inn. Looking back at the areas targeted by urban renewal, it doesn't take long to recognize that the policy discriminated heavily against poorer residents and African-Americans, in particular.

Urban renewal was instituted relatively quickly, at least in government terms, and the new interstate system did in most of the remaining structures. The moves came so quickly that many residents had nowhere to turn. Old deed restrictions still banned African-Americans from living in certain neighborhoods. As a result of the Civil Rights Movement and the necessity for housing, those barriers began to fall.

The city's African-American population began shifting toward



KENNY KEMP | Gazette-Mail file photo

Anthony Kinzer is founder and director of the West Virginia Center for African-American Art & Culture. The center's purpose is to raise awareness about black heritage in West Virginia in general, including The Block.

Charleston's East End and West Side. At the same time, many white residents in those sections of town began moving to the suburbs that were popping up around the exits on I-64, I-77, and I-79.

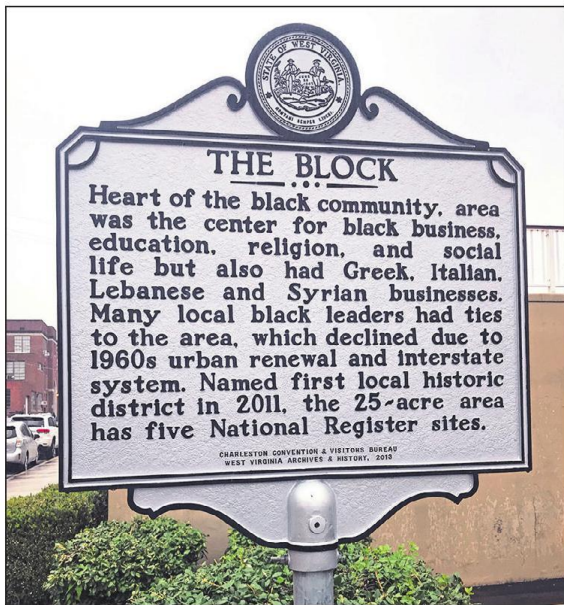
Raising awareness

The Block was largely forgotten over the years, except in the memories of its onetime residents. Then, in 1989, James D. Randall and Anna E. Gilmer published a book of photos and stories called "Black Past." While it didn't get the public notice it deserved at the time, it did attract the attention of Anthony Kinzer. Inspired by all the brilliant minds who emerged from Garnet High, Kinzer formed the West Virginia Center for African-American Art & Culture to raise awareness about black heritage in our state in general, and specifically about The Block.

Kinzer organized tours of Kanawha Valley sites related to African-American heritage and called upon people who used to live in The Block to guide that portion of the tour. Through their memories, those businesses, torn down long ago, came back to life right in front of your eyes.

He also led an effort to have The Block recognized as a Charleston historic district. Due to the mass demolition of Urban Renewal, there wasn't enough of The Block left to include the district in the National Register of Historic Places. Although, five individual buildings are listed on their own: Garnet High, the Elizabeth Harden Gilmore House, the Mattie V. Lee House, the Simpson United Methodist Church, and the Samuel Starks House.

In addition, Kinzer worked with the West Virginia State Archives to install historical



ROBERT SAUNDERS | Gazette-Mail

A historical marker on the corner of Shrewsbury Street and Washington Street East gives a brief history of the area.



ROBERT SAUNDERS | Gazette-Mail

Libby Chatfield is the owner of Charleston Bread on 601 Capitol St., a business flourishing in one of the historic buildings that survive from the days of The Block. Chatfield said you can still see the outline of a drive-up window on the side of the building where people would buy bottles of liquor.

markers at the site of the former Hotel Ferguson and by the Methodist church, and he led an effort to place commemorative bricks at the Ferguson site, First Baptist Church and Anderson Brown Building.

I recently asked Kinzer what's driven him for so long. He attributes his commitment to the cause to the "lifelong bond" he's seen "among the families who lived within The Block, during good and difficult times. They drew strength from one another, and for those still living, that bond still exists today."

He underscored what Officer James said to me years ago, "The common denominator in

The Block was a disciplined atmosphere at home and in the social arena. The lessons those people learned from their parents, grandparents, and community members were passed along to the next generation, and that it is the real cultural heritage of The Block."

Kinzer's goal is to erect additional signage commemorating the five sites listed in the National Register. Anyone who would like to contribute to the signage project can contact Kinzer at 304-346-6339.

Stan Bumgardner is the editor of Goldenseal magazine and author of "Charleston" (Arcadia Publishing, 2006).