

## Recovering History of Blandtown

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Blandtown is one of the first Black owned neighborhoods in Atlanta, Georgia. Yet, few know the full context of its history. Much of what is known can only be found through archival data from research on surrounding neighborhoods, census data, and property data. However, taking the time to uncover this hidden story is vital to the legacy and history of Atlanta and our understanding of community development post-slavery. The loss of this history gives insight into the effects of zoning and gentrification on cultural legacies.

Today, Blandtown is located between Huff Road, Howell Mill Road and Marietta Blvd. It is more popularly known as West Midtown, an area burgeoning with industrial and residential development. But the story of Blandtown's heart began on just 4 acres of land north of today's Huff Rd, Booth St, and N. Ashby St.

On October 2, 1872 Samuel Bland (1821-1899), a Black man ("mulatto" according to the 1880 census), purchased 4 acres of land for \$200 from Francis A. Kimball who owned 26 acres in that area. Just 7 years after the emancipation of the slaves, this freedman garnered enough money as a plasterer to own and build his own home on Huff Road. In 1873, Samuel willed the land to his wife, Lavinia "Viney" Bland (1821 – 1914; "mulatto" according to 1880 census). The small plot of land sat between A. K. Seago and F. A. Kimball's lands. It is written that the Bland family was thought of highly by their white neighbors and "Aunt Viney" was the midwife for many of the white children's births (Pickert, 1956). Viney retained the complete 4 acres until 1892.

During the reconstruction era there was an influx of industrialization in the area. In 1891, Viney invested in 12 stocks of the Southern Mutual Building and Loan Association, but she requested an advance on her shares prior to their maturity, thus losing a portion of the land for payment on the stock-backed loan. In 1892, Viney sold a portion of the land to the Northern Railway Co. for \$800 and she lost a portion to the Southern Mutual Building and Loan Association. Though her census's mark her as having no education and an inability to read or write, the deed transactions that occurred in 1892 show that she was running and managing the land and property. Prior to the loss of a portion of their land to the Southern Mutual Building and Loan Association, Viney's son Felix bought another 1/8<sup>th</sup> acre of land from a Black land owners adjoining the lot owned by Samuel Bland.

In 1901, Felix Bland (1844-1941) purchased a portion of the land from his mother for \$90. And Viney Bland had a deed drawn up willing the land to her children Felix Bland,

Richard Bland, Cherry Osborn, and Charlie Bland. A continued search of deeds and Atlanta Journal Constitution articles, finds that the children eventually deeded the majority of the remaining acres to their brother, Felix. And he held on to the land until about 1916 when he sold it to R.A. Sims. His sister, Cherry Osborn, sold some of her property to R.A. Sims and the trustees of the Blandtown Christian Church in 1916 and 1918 respectively. Other documents show that at some point Felix Bland came to organize a church, the Rocky Mountain Christian Church (Pickert, 1956). He was the Reverend, but the church stopped operating in 1951. It is unconfirmed whether Blandtown Christian Church and Rocky Mountain Christian Church were the same place. However, at the time that Felix Bland sold the land to R.A. Sims, Booth St. crossed Huff Rd. and connected to a short block named Bland St. As recorded by the Atlanta Constitution, a fire in 1938 caused much of Samuel Bland's town to burn, including a church, 15 homes, and 2 restaurants, leaving 75 people homeless.

By 1956, there were two churches and a school. We know from former indigenous Blandtown resident Johnny Lee Green that one of the churches was Methodist and the other Baptist. The Greater Bethel Methodist Church was led by Reverend K.E. Bland, Dr. J.A. Hatley, and Deacon James Irwin. They organized the Methodist church in 1913. St. Peter Missionary Baptist Church was located on Booth Street and Huff Road. The church started in 1918. Reverend D.D. Green was the first pastor. The Blandtown school started in 1921 in St. Peter's. In 1924 the community built a two-room frame school with money from parents and businesses. In 1934, they added one and a half room to the building. By 1956 the enrollment was 138, and there were 5 teachers (Pickert, 1956).

This timeline suggests that for nearly 50 years, the Bland's maintained a mostly Black community in Atlanta, in the midst of harsh racial atmosphere and environmental conditions. One of the first, free Black settlements in Atlanta continued to thrive despite the influx of industrialization until the 1960s (in which the town had 370 residents, mostly Black). However, in order to burden the Black residents into giving up their homes and dilute their voting power, the area was zoned as Industrial. The switch of zoning from Small Single Family Residential to Heavy Industrial, subjected long-term blows to the residents. The industrial zoning stipulated that residents could not repair their homes if the damage to them was above 50 percent of the property value. In addition, any new residential construction was prohibited. With surrounding businesses, like the Nottingham Chemical Company, misleading the community and representing themselves in city meetings as "the neighborhood," Blandtown had been given a death sentence. From 1960 to 1990 the population dropped by 71.9 percent and the number of owned homes dropped from 30 to 25, rentals dropped from 52 to 19. The few homes that remained, including the original location of Samuel Bland's home, had homeowners that attempted to fight back against the city and get it rezoned as residential. But their efforts failed (Keating, 2001).

Today, artist Gregor Turk, owns a portion of the lot in historical Blandtown and recognizes it with a billboard in front of his art studio that reads "Welcome to the Heart of Blandtown." The neighborhood is almost completely gentrified as the zoning was changed from Industrial to Planned Development and developer Steve Brock of Brock Built began creating a new community. New businesses and developers have made efforts to change the branding of the area from Blandtown to West Midtown. Turk, members from the

neighborhood association, and former indigenous residents are working to keep the memory and name of Blandtown alive.

#### References

Pickert, M. (1956). History of Cook's District in Fulton County, Atlanta, Ga.

Keating, L. (2001). Atlanta: Race, Class and Urban Expansion. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.