Communities In Changing Times: The Story of the Main Line's African American Neighborhoods

Penny L. Washington

Whether the change occurs in large cities populated with colorful hipsters or the change takes place in the suburbs and small towns populated with everyday people pursuing their vision of what is left of the American dream, neighborhoods are changing. Nationwide, neighborhoods that were places of refuge for generations of African Americans are experiencing a sense of dismay and disruption in the wake of this ongoing cultural phenomenon.

Gentrification is occurring on the Main Line. Issues of race, class, and access to economic resources, as well as questions of whose values prevail when matters of shaping the future of a community, can all be better understood by a thoughtful examination of the subject of gentrification.

The term gentrification means different things to different people. Urbanist Alan Ehrenhalt in his book *The Great Inversion* offers a classic definition of the term. He reports that the term refers "to the changes that happen in an individual neighborhood, usually the replacement of poorer minority residents by more affluent white ones." Ehrenhalt comments on the origins of the term. He notes that British sociologist Ruth Glass invented the term to describe the invasion of working class urban neighborhoods by the wealthy.

Older African American Main Liners may not know the word gentrification but they are astute observers of the changing environment. They take note of homes no longer occupied by the next generations of a family. They remark on the homes lost to high taxes and the cost of upkeep. They express compassion in their understanding of a neighbor's plight in not being able to do the physical work of caring for their homes. They see increasing numbers of White newcomers settle into their enclaves.

"Once upon a time" are familiar words to all of us. These words most often signal the start of a tale of daring deeds and the adventures of heroic men and women. The story of African American Main Liners is in danger of being lost as the process of gentrification takes hold in communities.

Once, a husband and wife were seated at their dining room table. Their family gathered around them. The enticing aroma of a meal made with love and care would be consumed. The rituals of engaging in conversation, the heartfelt exchange that occurs with people who share a home regularly took place. Once, children played in the safety of front yards. Once, women gathered at local beauty shops. They took the time to care for their hair and they would mend their weary souls in the process. Once, men gathered at local bars. They would hold conversation about women, sports and politics. Once, people would go to work, knowing that efforts would make a life. Once, humble men and women would go to church and find comfort, strength, and grace in the teachings of the Lord. Once, people lived in separate communities and took pride in their ability to support one another. Once, generations of African Americans lived on the Main Line. They have lived in Berwyn, Ardmore and Bryn Mawr. They have lived in Howellville, Quigley Town and Mt. Pleasant.

According to the pamphlet entitled *The African Americans in Pennsylvania,* the first people of African origin lived in the Delaware River Valley as early as 1639. Philadelphia became the leading port in the Commonwealth for the arrival of Africans. A plantation economy did not take hold in Pennsylvania as it did in Southern states. Indentured and slave individuals mostly worked alongside their White masters. Blacks labored as sail makers, iron workers, farm hands and domestics. Resistance to the institution of slavery was voiced by some Whites. In 1758, Pennsylvania passed a Gradual Emancipation Act. Historian Charles Blockson in his book *Pennsylvania's Black History* reports on local connections to anti-slavery efforts. He notes the Wilberforce Anti-Slavery Society was founded in 1831 by residents of Berwyn and Wayne. The early communities of the area benefited from the labor of Black people and the society found little support. The Black population in the early days of the nineteenth century may have been small but there was enough of a presence in the area to form Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church located in Devon.

The nearby city of Philadelphia saw the signs of its population increase. The city became a flourishing center of Black autonomy. Blacks would participate in the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. During the Progressive Era, Blacks would create their own churches, schools and businesses. They would also buy homes. Employment allowed African Americans to save money to buy and care for homes. Most African American males on the Main Line

found work in the industrial sector or as chauffeurs and gardeners. Most African American women on the Main Line worked in domestic service, were childcare providers, cooks, and were laundry workers. A relative few among the race were teachers, ministers, and entrepreneurs. Those few African Americans who were able to take advantage of family connections and educational opportunities secured higher incomes and thus became members of a small middle class. However, the majority of African Americans living on the Main Line were members of the working class. Regardless of whatever class Main Line African Americans found themselves in, all members of the race faced discrimination in areas of education, public accommodations, housing and cinemas. Movie theaters in Berwyn and Wayne had segregated seating. Berwyn's African American community succesfully fought a failed attempt at school segregation in the 1930s. [For more information, see Roger Thorne's well-researched article "Segregation on the Upper Main Line: The 'School Fight' of 1932–34" in the *History Quarterly* Vol. 42 No. 1, p. 3].

In spite of challenges, African American Main Liners established their own institutions. Important institutions included Second Baptist Church of Wayne, Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church of Devon, the Robinson-Wellburn Elks Lodge of Berwyn, the Maple Grove Inn of Devon, and the Witney & Sons Realty Company of Bryn Mawr.

Segregation in American society was once an all-encompassing reality for the nation's African American citizens. Segregated housing was a significant factor in the lives of African Americans. Those in positions of power in the White community employed restrictive covenants to keep African Americans from owning homes in certain neighborhoods. The Federal Housing Administration, established in 1934, refused to insure home mortgages in neighborhoods that had a high percentage of African Americans living there. The practice referred to as "red lining" meant banks adopted discriminatory practices in issuing money for the purpose of buying a home. Most African Americans had trouble securing loans from White banks. They relied heavily on their own family and community resources.

Mildred and Charles Burruss are representative of working class people on the Main Line. This couple purchased a home on Hearn Avenue in Berwyn in the 1940s. The two story older house was a source of pride for the family. When interviewed, Mildred Burruss recalled the neighborhood as being an African American one. She spoke of it as being warm and caring, a place where people looked out for each other. She said "you must accept what you can't change" of the Whites who moved into the neighborhood.

Change became an indication of time moving forward and people and places do not remain fixed in time. Roger Simon has written a book entitled *Philadelphia: A Brief History*. He notes how the city of Philadelphia has shaped our Main Line. He reports that as early as 1830, middle class families were interested in settling in areas on the edge of industrial sections of growing cities. These families wanted more spacious homes that offered the latest amenities. Initially, these people rode horse-drawn omnibuses and streetcars to meet their transportation needs. Later on, advances in transportation technology came about and people began to use electronic trollies, the 'el' and the subway. These inventions brought larger tracts of open land ripe for development within convenient traveling distance. These streetcar neighborhoods, as they came to be known, were confined within city borders. Railroad towns along the Main Line became the preserve of the wealthy. Roger Simon also notes that starting in the 1920s, automobiles would affect life on the Main Line. Individuals who had the means to purchase cars did so. They were no longer tied to urban transportation systems. Subsequently, vast amounts of inexpensive land in Bucks, Chester, Delaware and Montgomery Counties proved to be attractive to commercial and residential developers. Large expensive homes were built to cater to upper middle class White car and home owners. The year 1930 saw the department store Strawbridge & Clothier open its suburban doors in Ardmore, and by the 1950s, all local department stores of note had locations in the suburbs.

Race became a factor in housing patterns on the Main Line. Zoning laws banned large scale apartment complexes such as those found in cities where a large population of African Americans had lived. Large expensive homes were favored. In the years following the Civil War, wealthy Whites went about the business of creating enclaves of privilege in places like Chestnut Hill and the Main Line.

The Main Line exists in part because monied Philadelphians wanted to live outside the city. African Americans have lived in the area that would later be known as the Main Line for generations.

The Great Migration period in American history saw an influx of African Americans settle on the Main Line. Many of today's family members can point to loved ones who migrated from Alabama, Arkansas, the Carolinas and Virginia.

The opportunity to earn wages higher than what could be had in the South drew many North. The migrants mixed with African Americans whose roots in the area extended back to the antebellum period.

The community of Mt. Pleasant has been a Main Line African American neighborhood for generations. This neighborhood is emblematic of the challenges associated with gentrification. Older working class African Americans value their homes, families and neighbors. Younger middle class White newcomers value the older homes they view as prime candidates for restoration and renovation. They do not see their presence as disruptive.

Today, the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood, located in the suburbs of Philadelphia, is experiencing a demographic change. Joe Shipman, a longtime resident of the neighborhood states, "Mt. Pleasant has been a Black neighborhood for years. Now Whites want it. It is close to transportation, colleges, everything." Joy Oliver, like Joe Shipman, has ties to Mt. Pleasant. She states "In many cases older African Americans don't have the money to stay and maintain homes, and young people moved away for opportunities."

Developers find that Mt. Pleasant neighborhood's close proximity to revitalized downtown Wayne makes any potential development there a strong selling point. Alan Ehrenhalt again offers insights. He contends that finances will shape the makeup of changing suburbs. Those who can afford to do so will choose to reside in revitalized urban centers. Those who cannot afford these prices will live on the periphery of cities. These individuals want to live in communities that emulate as closely as possible the amenities of downtown living. They want their coffee houses, bike trails, and wine bars. They want the perceived safety that is associated with suburban living. These gentrifiers will also be attracted to non-traditional housing options. The architectural richness found in older homes appeals to these creative young people. These are the very homes older African American Main Liners are having difficulty keeping.

So far, this article has looked at White participants in Main Line gentrification. This article has noted the sense of loss older African Americans experienced as a result of changing times. Louise Carter, a longtime Main Line resident, sums it up this way. She says, "All over the Main Line you see change. Things are not the same for our people." It must also be noted that there exists a small group of African American Main Liners who retain older homes. Maxine Washington, Carrie Barnes, and Louise Carter have seen many changes over the decades in their neighborhood but have been able to hold on to their homes. Members of Devon's Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church are working to preserve their rich history in a neighborhood that is changing.

One consequence of gentrification is the potential loss of documentation that accurately records the history of a community. Once, memorabilia were safely housed in the homes of African Americans. The photographs, newspaper clippings, programs, and booklets became items that may be thrown out when houses are cleared out due to death, illness, or relocation to smaller accommodations. Younger people may not realize the importance of these items. These items could provide historians with vital information. Howard Childs, Assistant Pastor of Wayne's Second Baptist Church understands the importance of these things. He says "our history is important, and we should save it."

Another consequence of gentrification is the loss and vitality of once thriving institutions within the African American community. The Robinson Welburn Elks Lodge, the Maple Grove Inn, and Powell's no longer exist on the Main Line. Second Baptist Church and Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church exist today but are struggling to maintain their presence. Institutions are facing challenges in part due to the fact that many young people left the area for better jobs. The workforce of a generation ago was tied to the area in ways that no longer exist.

Many older African Americans on the Main Line worked as domestics and this fact necessitated that they live in communities where they could easily get to their employers' homes. When people no longer reside within the bounds of the old neighborhoods, institutions that once thrived will at some point begin to decline. Critical mass has been lost in many places. Quetta Cunningham lived in Rosemont. She offers insight. "Older people died and a lot of younger people did not stay in the neighborhood. Education and opportunities took people away." Her husband had a military career and as a result she spent many years away from the Main Line. Education plays a part in the process of gentrification. A recent *Philadelphia Inquirer* article written by staff writer Jeff Gammage explores the subject of gentrification in the city. He reports that the trend is occurring all across the nation. He notes that often those who take over a neighborhood have a higher educational level than previous neighborhood residents. Many of the older residents of Mt. Pleasant do not have a working understanding of the complex reasons behind the changes occurring around them. Expanding educational and employment opportunities caused the next generation to leave their communities. The very people who have the training to offer solutions have been removed from the community.

The process of gentrification has been spurred in part due to an interest in historic preservation. The older homes located in long-established African American neighborhoods are often rich in architectural detail. These homes are appreciated for their beauty and White middle class educated potential home buyers will work with others

to preserve the character of desirable neighborhoods. This is a trend that has taken place in New York, Philadelphia, and Oakland. White middle class individuals have traditionally participated in historical societies, architectural review boards and historical commissions. Their participation in these organizations has given them opportunities to cultivate relationships with politicians. Politicians have reliable knowledge about local, state and national programs that incentivize the restoration of buildings and neighborhoods. Those individuals interested in community development have had decades of participation in activities that politicians know enhance community upkeep. The people who participate in these groups are often well educated, have a measure of free time to attend meetings and vote consistently. Politicians can offer information to groups that have a record of community engagement.

It appears that African Americans on the Main Line have yet to gain the collective wherewithal to halt the widespread gentrification of their communities. Perhaps the churches could spearhead such an effort. This has been an effective strategy in sections of Baltimore and Philadelphia. Local leadership would need to become educated in matters pertaining to financial incentives, code enforcement concerns, grant opportunities and the creation of heritage centers.

Neighborhoods are repositories of community achievement. African American neighborhoods are undergoing change. The places that once offered shelter and solace may no longer be the places they were. The memories of a people and a way of life may be all that remains of an important part of our shared Main Line history.

Materials Consulted:

Charles Blockson
Pennsylvania's Black History
Published by Portfolio Associates Inc.
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1975

Alan Ehrenhalt
The Great Inversion and the Future of the American Dream
Published by Alfred A. Knopf
New York, New York 2012

Jeff Gammage
Article Study: No Gentrification Wave
Published by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 20, 2016

Leroy Hopkins and Eric Ledell Smith
The African Americans in Pennsylvania
Published by Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Pamphlet no. 6, 1994

Roger Simon
Philadelphia: A Brief History
Published by Pennsylvania Historical Association
University Park, Pennsylvania 2003

Oral Histories:

Mildred Burruss
Louise Carter
Howard Childs
Quetta Cunningham
Joy Oliver
Joe Shipman

Author's Note:

The collected oral histories of the residents of the Mt. Pleasant enclave represent the individual experiences of the speakers and in no way reflect the experience of all African Americans. These experiences reflect a historical moment in time and should be studied with sensitive understanding.

Dedicated to:

This article is dedicated to my maternal grandparents Benjamin and Pearlie Lampkins, and also to the late Rob Lukens and my neighbors of the 100 Blocks of East Miner Street, West Chester PA.

"Because Black History Matters"