

Rehabilitating Raleigh’s “Black Main Street”

Jenny Parker / Technical Preservation Services, NPS

Like many early 20th-century American cities and towns, Raleigh, North Carolina, became an increasingly segregated city. Ordinances and housing covenants created de facto segregated areas in many cities across the nation. After 1900, businesses serving Raleigh’s black community were slowly displaced from more prominent downtown locations along Fayetteville and Wilmington Streets. During these decades, however, black entrepreneurship thrived in a small enclave along East Hargett Street, the only location that welcomed black businesses. This section of town was so successful that it became known as “Black Main Street” and it served as the hub of the black community until the 1960s.

During its heyday in the 1920s, the area was home to grocery stores, clothing companies, drug stores, insurance companies, fraternal orders, a popular hotel, a printing company that served the entire state, a bank, and a real estate company, all located along the 100 block of East Hargett Street or nearby. So successful were these enterprises that the Raleigh Times stated in an article in 1925, “Whatever the Raleigh of tomorrow may be, the Negroes

will play a part in its making.” Unfortunately, the Raleigh of tomorrow included a period of sharp decline for this important commercial district. Following the exodus of the black population to the suburbs in the 1960s, this district languished with a mix of moderately successful businesses and vacant properties.

Beginning in the 1980s, individual rehabilitation projects began to slowly revitalize this area using the Federal Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit Program, which provides a tax credit equal to 20% of the cost of the project to historic commercial property owners. In combination with the federal credit, rehabilitations also qualify for a 20% North Carolina state tax credit. Since 2002, investment in this neighborhood has dramatically increased as five of the buildings along the north side of Raleigh’s Black Main Street were rehabilitated by Empire Properties, a development company that specializes in the rehabilitation of historic commercial buildings.

One of the premier projects was the rehabilitation of the 1913 Odd Fellows Building located at 115-117 East Hargett. Historically, the upper floors of the building housed the

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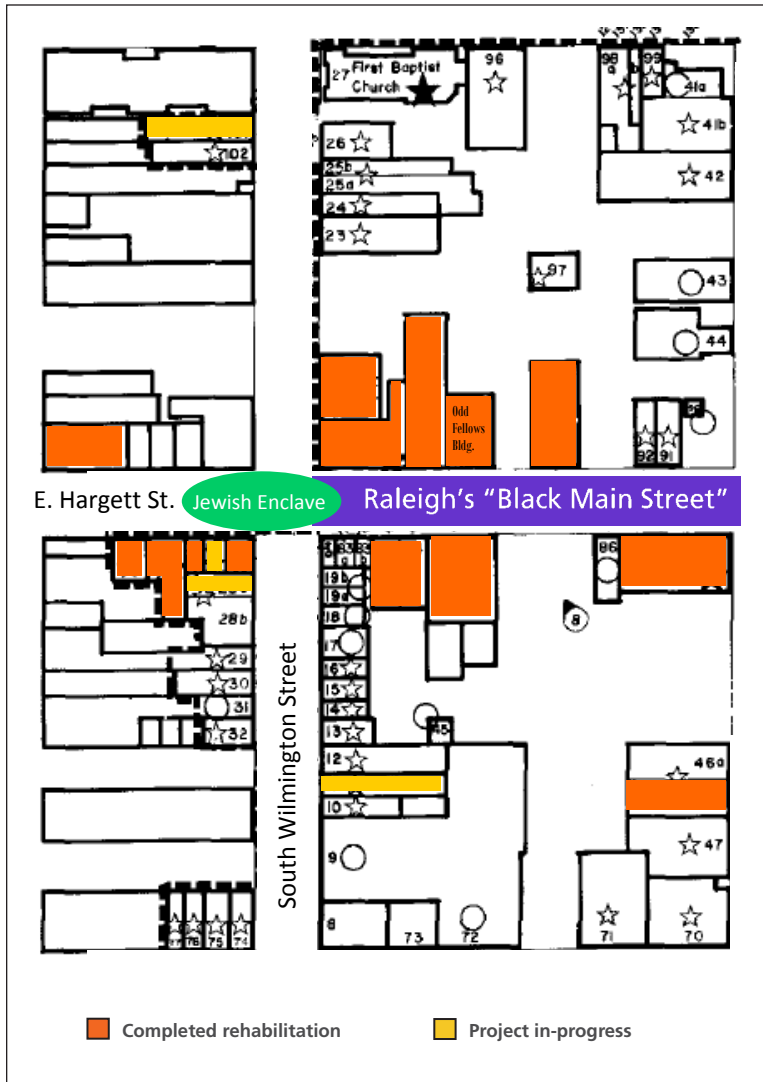


Many of the buildings along the Black Main Street in Raleigh have been rehabilitated, breathing new life and economic growth into this part of North Carolina’s capitol city. Courtesy of North Carolina Historic Preservation Office.

Not only were historic features preserved, such as original board ceilings and a vintage barber chair and sink, but the developers also retained the Capitol Barber Shop, one of the anchors of the community, as a tenant.



The rehabilitation of the historic Odd Fellows Building included the retention of the Capitol Barber Shop. Even the vintage barber chair and sink remain. Courtesy of NPS Tax Act Program.



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local chapter of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, which was an African American fraternal organization founded both to pay for the proper burials of servicemen who fell during World War I and to care for their widows and children. The commercial spaces in this building served the black community of Raleigh as beauty salons and office space for law practices. One of the most prominent long-time tenants was Fred Carnage, a well-respected attorney who served as a member of Raleigh’s school board during desegregation.

In rehabilitating this building, not only were historic features preserved, such as original board ceilings and a vintage barber chair and sink, but the developers also retained the Capitol Barber Shop, one of the anchors of the community, as a tenant. The business has served generations of Raleigh’s black community and provided a gathering place that survived the neighborhood’s decline. The financial assistance provided by the Federal and state tax credits has been one of the primary factors in the success of these projects. According to Jenny Harper of Empire Properties, “There is absolutely no question that these projects would not have happened without the tax credits. The credits have not only made the retention of these historic resources possible, but have also allowed us to subsidize rents where possible.”

In subsidizing the rent in order to keep businesses like the Capitol Barber Shop in their historic location, Empire Properties demonstrates how preservation (and tax credit programs in particular) can make real impacts in stimulating local economies while maintaining a community’s identity. In this case, the building and its connection to the historic African American community are preserved and provide valuable services to the community. The incentive of the state and federal tax credits has translated to \$16.5 million in investment in this neighborhood over the years.

The Federal Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit Program is jointly administered by State Historic Preservation Offices, the National Park Service, and the Internal Revenue Service. ❖

i For more information about this program, please visit www.nps.gov/hps/tps/tax.