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Jonesville descendants reunite at WKU

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Descendants of notable former Jonesville families Leonard Bailey (right) marker on the corner of WKU's Avenue of Champions and University Bl community before it was destroyed for the expansion of Western Kentuc cousins and a group of other Jonesville descendants met last month with by WKU President Timothy Caboni in the spring 2022 semester to approve the Jonesville neighborhood, as they seek additional markers throughout

as additional ways to honor the neighborhood like adding a course about scholarships in the neighborhood's memory and the possibility of setting

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Prior to the 1960s, Virgil Bailey, along with other Black residents of Bowling Green, owned a vast swathe of the land in a neighborhood known as Jonesville. Community members knew it as tight-knit and self-sufficient, with businesses such as barber shops, beauty salons and drug stores. Then – in a campaign of urban renewal that would sweep the nation – Jonesville was destroyed so Western Kentucky University could expand.

Last month, the late Virgil Bailey's great-grandson, Leonard Bailey, returned to the center of the former neighborhood. Standing beside WKU's Downing Student Union, he turned to other descendants of Jonesville residents – people who, with him, are seeking a place to mark their families' histories.

“That's it,” Leonard Bailey said, pointing to a small courtyard across from the student union. “That's the place. That's the heart of Jonesville.”

In July, 13 Jonesville descendants accepted an invitation from WKU for an informal gathering of residents and descendants from the neighborhood. In the hourslong gathering, they recounted their family stories and discussed ideas for markers on campus that will honor the neighborhood and a location for it. And, they stood in the area that was once the neighborhood – a 34.7-acre space that spanned the modern-day soccer and softball fields through the water tower and Diddle Arena, according to WKU’s website.

“I never set foot in Jonesville because it was destroyed in the decades before I was born,” said Akisha Townsend Eaton, whose mother, Angela Townsend, was born where Diddle Arena now stands. “But it’s very much alive in the stories that have been passed down and the records that we’ve kept.

“So, for me, it’s really about being able to bring those stories to life and being able to connect with people so those stories don’t get lost.”

Currently, the only on-campus location that mentions Jonesville and has permanence is a marker near the intersection of University Drive and Avenue of Champions, erected in 2001, denoting that the neighborhood existed.

Leonard Bailey said he suggested placing a miniature of Jonesville at the spot he stood earlier.

Alice Gatewood Waddell, whose family grew up in the neighborhood, said descendants pitched additional ways to honor the neighborhood. These included adding a course about Jonesville in WKU's academic curriculum and creating scholarships in the neighborhood's memory.

Attendees also discussed the possibility of setting up an annual meeting among descendants.

Gatewood Waddell said that while WKU's Jonesville Reconciliation Workgroup, established more than two years ago, can be continuous, she recommends "some form of action being taken as swiftly as possible.

"I'm not saying that that's not going to happen. I'm just saying that that's my hope for the work that's being done."

When she was younger, Gatewood Waddell would visit the neighborhood almost every Sunday evening for recreational family time. She would only visit as a kid; the city demolished it when she was old enough to understand what she saw but too young to realize the impacts of dismantling homes.

"I remember mostly the family gatherings that were celebratory times," she said. "The community was almost like a big family – a welcoming community, and people knew each other very closely."

Family from inside and outside of Bowling Green would celebrate annually or more often at the house of her great-grandmother, Florence Bailey.

"That was the homecoming place," she recalled.

When the property was dismantled, those gatherings stopped as community members were forced to relocate, Gatewood Waddell said. Some residents stayed in Bowling Green, while others left.

“But there was never a place that gave us the feeling of really having a family gathering like Jonesville,” she said. “It dismantled and really had an impact on the way that the family could stay connected.”

The workgroup

WKU President Timothy Caboni established the Jonesville Reconciliation Workgroup in the spring 2022 semester, an action made possible by the Naming and Symbols Task Force he formed two years prior.

The primary purpose of the workgroup, according to the WKU website, is to “assess the best way(s) to appropriately address the issues that remain from the dismantling of the Jonesville neighborhood.” The WKU president appoints members, who – in addition to Jonesville descendants – include WKU

employees, WKU alumni and others from the Bowling Green and Warren County communities.

The administration initially charged the workgroup with two aims, which are its current focuses: adding “honorific naming of spaces on campus after Jonesville” and hosting “an annual reunion/conference for Jonesville residents/descendants and WKU community.” While the group has regular meetings, last month’s was a more informal gathering.

“The workgroup continues to engage in productive discussions and generate ideas to appropriately honor Jonesville’s residents and their descendants,” WKU said in a statement to The Daily News. “The university looks forward to continuing to collaborate with workgroup members on various initiatives to celebrate the legacy of Jonesville.”

One aim of the workgroup is documenting Jonesville’s descendants. Leonard Bailey recalled a woman at the last gathering who

said her mother lived in Jonesville but wasn't on the roster of its residents.

Among the challenges of tracking descendants is the difficulty in finding those who did not own property. Leonard Bailey noted that his great-grandfather Virgil Bailey would rent out houses for \$15 to \$20 a month, which meant that those residents were not named on house deeds.

Gatewood Waddell, a longtime organizer and advocate for other descendants, said that in her discussions with other descendants, the idea of reparations has come up repeatedly. This, she said, prompted her to ask Caboni early in the workgroup's inception if "any type of monetary reparations is possible."

Gatewood Waddell said she had asked so that when she was connecting with other descendants, she could tell them upfront if the option wasn't on the table. She said Caboni at the time had responded that it had not been considered as an option.

For Jonesville's descendants, it's common knowledge that families received unfair compensation when their property was destroyed.

In preparation for condemnation proceedings to seize five Jonesville properties, a law office wrote to WKU officials on Aug. 1, 1957, that the properties' appraisals were too high. It refers to the properties as "colored dwellings," "colored residential property" and "colored residences."

The Warren County Court document appraising the properties notes that the appraisals were conducted by a commission appointed to "faithfully and impartially discharge their duties" of assessing the damages the property owners would be entitled to.

"Of course, by all practical purposes as it now stands, this is simply colored residential property. I do not know what value other real estate men in Bowling Green might place upon the property but in preparation for trying the case out before a jury, we would have to secure witnesses with some experience in dealing in real estate in Bowling Green who

would place a much lower value on the property,” wrote the Law Offices of Coleman, Harlin & Orendorf to then-WKU president Kelly Thompson.

WKU records also show that the Rev. J.H. Taylor, a fervent Jonesville advocate, in the 1960s wrote to WKU’s Thompson that \$21,750 had been offered, via urban renewal, for a church – far too little.

“We put a new top on our Church about six years ago, and the top alone the way the law made us do it cost almost as much as they are offering for our Church,” Taylor wrote.

That amount, he wrote, wouldn’t pay for the church’s foundation.

Angela Townsend, the mother of Akisha Townsend Eaton, said in a 2022 WKU interview that her great-grandparents “were barely out of slavery when they were able to purchase, work, and maintain the land which WKU usurped through urban renewal at almost no compensation.”

“We lost generations of wealth from the loss of property that ancestors were unfairly compensated for, and that loss could have been handed down from generation to generation, so if you want to make it up or reconcile, we could have some form of reparations,” Gatewood Waddell said.

Townsend Eaton, Gatewood Waddell and Leonard Bailey each expressed an appreciation for the workgroup and the meeting – along with the hopes that things will move forward.

“I’m looking forward to it – I think it’s past due, and I’m glad to see that it’s being done,” Gatewood Waddell said of the work so far. “And I hope it really serves the purpose of sharing the history of Western – in particular, how much the university benefited from the destruction of Jonesville and acquiring that land.”

— If you’re a descendant of Jonesville or know someone who is, you can contact Peggy Crowe at peggy.crowe@wku.edu to be added to the database of Jonesville descendants and give input.

David Horowitz