

Beck Cultural Exchange Center Historical Corridor

The Beck Cultural Exchange Historical Corridor project is aimed at creating a physical connection to African American history in Knoxville, TN. Much, if not most, of Knoxville's African American history, culture, business success and accomplishments have been buried under the bulldozers of Urban Renewal aka Black Removal.

The idea for the Historical Corridor began about seven years ago. The effort has been led by the Beck Cultural Exchange Center and its Executive Director, Rev. Renee Kesler. There is currently a Historical Corridor Committee consisting of University of Tennessee educators, community leaders and historians and a Tennesseans for Historical Justice Board Member supported by Beck staff, UT students and volunteers.

The goal is to create a physical trail or "corridor" across Knoxville offering a learning experience for Knoxvillians and visitors alike. The belief is that with Knoxville's rich African American history, the Corridor will become a major tourist destination.

The Corridor has been made especially critical because of Urban Renewal. Three times Knoxville (and many cities across the country) has used federal funds and the Federal Housing Act of 1949 to demolish Black communities and remove African Americans from prime development land which was then transferred to White controlled local governments and White owned businesses.

The public face of Urban Renewal was to remove blighted buildings and there were enough such structures to show to the public as justification. However, as sad as some of these structures were, they were homes that real people, 2,500 families-70 % African American, lived in. Knoxville paid "fair market value" for these homes. However, fair market value was determined by the Knoxville government, and it should surprise no one that fair market value was not enough money to buy anything outside of the decimated neighborhoods. Of course, "Red Lining" and other housing discrimination further frustrated Black home buyers. What was ignored by the government and the White community was the number of churches (15) and businesses (107) that were also destroyed under the power of Urban Renewal.

The Historical Corridor will provide a visual and audio tour of the neighborhoods impacted including River Front Willow (The Bottom), Mountain View and Morningside. By the time of Morningside, the African American community had enough of Urban Renewal and had organized, actually had Black elected officials, and challenged the plans saving important features of the Black Community including the Ethel and James Beck home that is now the Beck Center.

Current plans are for the Corridor to begin at the Alex Haley monument in Haley Square in the Morningside Heights community and travel through former neighborhoods to and including the home of Maurice Mays and the site of the murder of Bertie Lindsey that he was alleged to have committed. Maurice Mays was convicted of this murder in spite of the evidence including the recantation of testimony by the only witness. The allegations

and arrest of Mays sparked the Red Summer attacks by a White mob on the Knox County jail and then on the African American business district at Central and Vine.

The mob was joined by the National Guard with its machine guns. One White rioter was killed by “friendly fire” when he ran in front of a machine gun. There is no reliable count of the murdered Black citizens who were killed. Reports range from a few to citizen reports of wagon loads of Black bodies being carried out of town to secret burials or to be dumped into the Tennessee River.

Other stops along the Corridor will mark the sites of destroyed churches, businesses, community centers and the homes of prominent Knoxvilleans including internationally acclaimed artists Beauford and Joseph Delany, the current Delaney Museum, Mabry-Hazen House Museum and Beck Cultural Exchange Center. The Beck Historical Corridor Committee plans to erect physical markers and link the Corridor to an app also providing an audio guide.

Beck is working to ensure that the history of The Bottom is shared as a major focus of the new Smokies Baseball Stadium being built on the site. A significant part of Beck’s effort is to ensure that Black owned businesses, history and culture are a part of the total development of the Stadium and immediately surrounding area. This will be a small step toward restitution for the intentional harm of Urban Renewal. If successful, the Stadium and surrounding area can stand as “Hope” on the Black Historical Corridor and maybe as a guide for others as a statewide effort is envisioned. The Corridor is an expensive project and financial support is critical. For more information go to beckcenter.net