



Neighborhood's history is one to be proud of

By MELVIN WILLIAMS
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AFRICAN-AMERICAN history is one of many untold stories. They are stories that should be passed from generation to generation but, sadly, are often times forgotten. The city of Hattiesburg is not without its share of such stories, especially ones untold to the younger generation of African-Americans growing up in our city today.

Less than 50 years ago, in many Southern cities large and small, there were sections of town that had their own unique personalities and livelihood. These areas were the center of the commercial universe for African-Americans. There, you would find the heaviest concentration of businesses that catered to, as well as being owned by blacks. Some were born out of necessity and others were a matter of pure convenience.

In those days, there were not two or even three cars per family as in modern America. Back then, most people rode the bus or used their God-given mode of transportation to get around town...they walked. These neighborhoods, born of necessity became, in effect, cities within a city.

In these neighborhoods, you would find scores of restaurants, cafes, beauty and barber shops, shoe shine parlors, medical offices and funeral homes.

Do you know where this "downtown" for blacks was located in Hattiesburg? Its history is taken for granted and not talked about enough but it should never be forgotten.

Out of the aforementioned necessity, African-Americans had to create their own places to belong. In those days, they had to endure the indignity of using separate restrooms or drinking from water fountains with a sign over them reading "Colored Only".

They were not allowed to eat in most restaurants. There were no drive-through windows in those days. But there was often a separate window, in an alley, perhaps, where blacks would have to go to order a burger or sandwich to eat.

A thriving neighborhood

Black people needed a place in their lives where they felt like real men and women and were not treated as less than human because of the color of their skin.

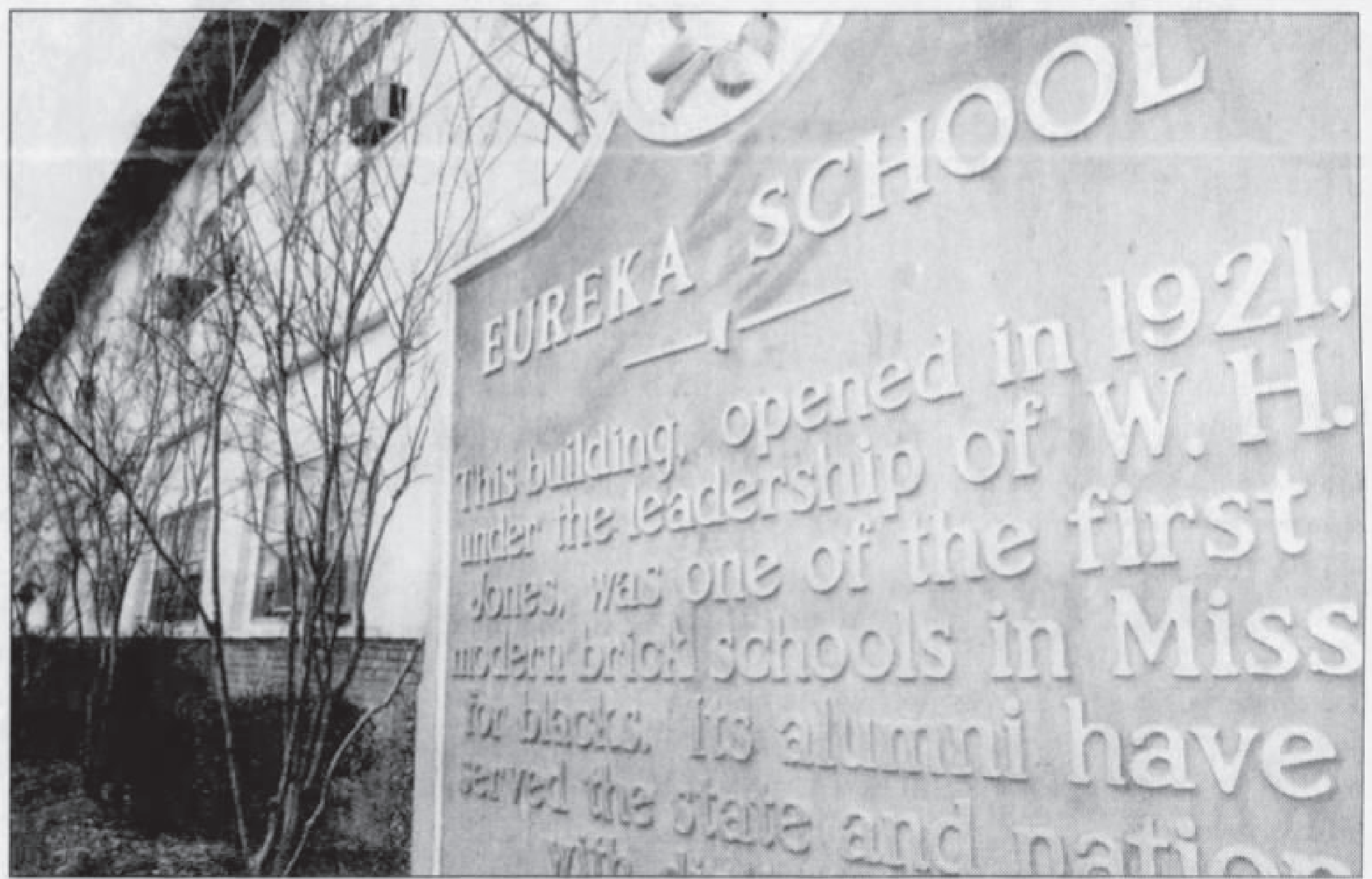
In Hattiesburg, this neighborhood was considered the place for blacks. It was said, at the time, that "You could find anything you wanted on that street."

Many years ago, here are a few of the places you could have visited in that neighborhood:

There was a black-owned bank there. It was called People's Bank and was founded by Ed Howell, who was a successful entrepreneur who also owned a brickyard, clothing store and real estate agency.

There was a grocery store owned by Gathen Holloway who delivered groceries by horse and buggy along the romantically bricked streets. Later, Fountain's Grocery became a regular place for buying staple items for the home and where kids could spend a nickel and get a candy bar or a bag full of coconut cookies.

There were hotels owned by the Crosbys and



Woods families. Gamett Jones, owned a grocery store and filling station but his wife was noted for her guest house which welcomed many travel-weary guests visiting the Hub City.

There were cleaners such as High Class Cleaners and others owned by the Tyler, Williams and Watts families.

Beauty and barber shops were owned by Peggy Conner and Beatrice Ross. In fact, one of the first "colored" schools in this area was actually a beauty school and started here.

A few more facts

Do you know where you are yet? Just a few more facts so that you can be sure of your location.

There were places to eat such as Mac's Grill, (owned by my grandparents), the Green Door and Hunts Café.

The street was even its own little transportation hub. In the early 1900s, there was a street car line and two cab companies. Liberty Cab and Williams Cab called the street home. Of course, the bus line that ran this street carried many black women to the more fashionable parts of the city where they worked as domestics, cleaning the homes of well-to-do white citizens.

There were funeral homes owned by the Hall and Collins families. Universal Life Insurance Company also made its home here.

There were numerous health care providers, including Drs. Pikes, Love, Charles Smith and his two brothers. Dr. Herman Smith owned Smith's Drug Store. Smith's Drugs was a popular stop for school children to get an ice cream cone on their walks home from Eureka School. It was later to become Cohens' Drugs.

Last but not least, the street was an entertainment hub. At Loves Hall, there were dances and proms. The entertainment venues along the street were so well known that they attracted the likes of Louis Armstrong and Lionel Hampton. The Star Theater was where blacks

originally went to see moving pictures. The Saenger Theatre downtown was then a grand movie house. Black movie-goers were allowed to see movies there but they had to enter through a side-alley and sit in the balcony, while white customers sat on the main level.

Where are you? Well, you're on Mobile Street in downtown Hattiesburg, of course. In its hey-day, Mobile Street was truly that city-within-a-city. It was another downtown fulfilling the immediate needs of Hattiesburg's black community.

History must be shared

Sadly, a drive down present-day Mobile Street reveals very little of its bustling past. Many of the buildings have been replaced with, well ... nothing. But the history is still there. The next time you drive down Mobile Street, you should really reflect on that history.

For those of you who know it, you should share the history of this important street with younger African-Americans. They should know that Mobile Street has not always been the "Red Light District" or the "Wrong Side of the Tracks." Let them know that it was once a thriving area where African-American men and women owned and ran their own successful businesses.

Why is this history so important for young African-Americans in Hattiesburg?

Because they need to know that their history provides them with the incentive and motivation they may need to overcome their own personal obstacles.

Mobile Street's history is one of strong-willed and determined African-Americans. Their success did not come from what they did "on the streets." But their honest can-do spirits along with their self-made success built this street and its great history. A history that every African American, both young and old, should be proud of.

Melvin Williams is president of the Mobile-Bouie Neighborhood Association.