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The Jonesville Controversy

Jonesville was a small African American community in Bowling Green, founded by free slaves shortly after the Civil War. The earliest land deed dates back to 1881. The community was named after "Grandma" Jones who presumably owned a large amount of property. Jonesville itself was about thirty acres in size. These thirty acres were bordered by Big Red Way, Russellville Road, Dogwood Drive, and the railroad tracks.

Many of the former residents of Jonesville believed it to be a prosperous middle-class community. There were about sixty-five homes, many of them one story tall with large yards. Most families raised their own turkeys, ducks, chickens, hogs, and cows in the early 1900s. There were also several businesses in the community: beauty shops, dry cleaners, barber shops, a skating rink, and Hardin's sandwich shop (famous in Bowling Green for its barbeque) to name a few. Jonesville was home to rock masons, including the founder of Loving Stone Company. In addition to the self-employed, many of the women were cleaning ladies at Western Kentucky State College. When Western opened its doors to black students many of them rented apartments in Jonesville because the dorms did not integrate until the 1960s.

Two important parts of the Jonesville community were the elementary school and the church. The children in the community attended Jonesville Elementary School until they reached high school. Because there was no high school in the community, students enrolled in an all black high school in another part of Bowling Green. The school, built in the early 1900s, was a member of the Warren County School System. Mt. Zion Baptist church was also an important part of the community. On Sunday mornings the

community was able to come together to celebrate their religion. The church united the members of the community and was an integral part of their lives.

Jonesville may have still been in existence today had it not been for its location adjacent to Western Kentucky State College. After World War II the college's student population began to increase and showed no sign of leveling off. Also, the college was trying to attain university status. Kelly Thompson, president of WKSC, foresaw the need for expansion. Unfortunately, for Jonesville residents, he felt the need for the school to expand onto their property. In 1963 an Urban Renewal Project was proposed for the 34.7 acres next to the college that contained the Jonesville Community. All the buildings were to be destroyed except the Electric Plant Board Substitution. WKSC planned to construct sports facilities in that area to meet the needs of its growing student population. In the future the city would consider expanding Adams Street. The city also planned to install new street lights, expand the water system, improve storm drainage, and continue construction on the sewer system. The project cost was placed at \$1,094,874 (not including the Adams Street extension). Jonesville residents were expected to move to municipal housing on Ragland Lane. To help compensate for any losses that occurred certain residents would be eligible for special government loans amounting to \$10,500. The loans would have low interest rates and could be repaid over a forty year period. Needless to say, the Jonesville residents were shocked and furious.

Despite protests from the Jonesville community, the city moved forward with the project. On December 2, 1963, General Council gave final approval for the project. Two months later, Western Kentucky State College President, Kelly Thompson, announced the college's intention to build a football stadium, a baseball field, tennis courts, and

other facilities on the Jonesville property. He also made known his wishes to make Russellville Road a dead end street for the purpose of controlling traffic through the college campus. By law the college had top priority in purchasing land made available through urban renewal and it was expected that the school would have its way. A Jonesville resident, M. M. Blewett, protested, pointing out that the school had many old buildings in poor condition (or simply no longer used) that could be replaced by the new facilities without forcing Jonesville residents out of their homes. M. M. Blewett was also part of a newly formed committee called the Committee for Protection of Property Rights. Aaron Overfelt was the committee's attorney, Rev. J. H. Taylor (who had written many editorials and letters on behalf of Jonesville) was chairman, and Paul Brooks was co-chairman. In addition to the committee, a petition was circulated throughout the city to rally support to stop the urban renewal project.

On March 16, 1964, Jonesville was officially declared an urban renewal area. According to the city, federal reports revealed that 78% of the homes were deteriorating or dilapidated, qualifying the area for urban renewal. However, before the work could begin the city had to wait until September 1965 to receive approval from the regional director of the Urban Renewal Administration in Atlanta. The city received a \$614,753 grant and was given authorization to have public hearings for the purchase and resale of the Jonesville property. Also, the project did not require any financing by the city because its portion of the cost was offset by the need for improvement. The city was given thirty months to complete the project.

On the same day as that announcement approximately three hundred Jonesville residents protested to the city council. Unfortunately their protests fell on deaf ears.

Soon after the announcement Western began purchasing property. Some residents sold their property willingly and while they did not receive fair compensation, they were given enough money to move on with their lives. Others, however, held onto their property as long as they could and ended up receiving very little money for it because the university was running out of money to buy the property. On August 10, 1966 Western Kentucky State College (now Western Kentucky University) purchased the first piece of land: 8.05 acres of Jonesville. Kelly Thompson signed the deed for Western and Norman Lewis (chairman of the commission) signed for the urban renewal commission. By April of 1967 the acquisition was complete. Western paid \$191,750 for the Jonesville property. That same year the Mt. Zion Baptist Church was destroyed, signifying to many residents the end of Jonesville.

Although Jonesville no longer exists, the controversy surrounding the urban renewal project is still remembered by the Bowling Green Community, as many of the Jonesville residents and their families live in the city. Occasionally there will be an article about it in the College Heights Herald. Residents and alumni will return to the campus to find Dero G. Downing University Center on what was Will and Harry Taylor's property or to see Bates Runner Hall where Ida Belle Johnson's house once stood.

In recent years there have also been dedications to Jonesville. Ivan Wilson (a former art department head at Western) had created a collection of water color paintings called Jonesville. In February 1999 they were put on display in the Kentucky Building for Black History Month. Maxine Ray, a Western graduate and former resident of Jonesville, has worked to make sure Jonesville was not forgotten. Because of her efforts, on April 10, 2001 a Kentucky Historical Highway Marker was erected on Western

Kentucky University's campus to honor Jonesville. Although these dedications do not in any way make up for the destruction of the community they do maintain that Jonesville has not, and will not, be forgotten.

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