

## Mutual Interest

**At the turn of the 20th century, African-American businessmen in Durham began to develop a business district that provided opportunities for the black community and eventually for a change in social mores.**

**By Beth Teague**

While much of Durham's national business history revolves around the tobacco industry, a lesser-known story permeates its downtown streets — a story rooted in the community's rich African-American heritage and evident in companies that still flourish after decades of growth. It's the story of a primarily black business district on downtown Durham's Parrish Street, an area that earned the unofficial moniker "Black Wall Street" from supporters in North Carolina and beyond who recognized the significant accomplishments of local entrepreneurs and the opportunities they afforded black residents in Durham and surrounding areas.

Even in the Jim Crow era of the early 1900s, when segregation limited blacks' educational and economic opportunities throughout the American South, black-owned businesses found a supportive haven in Durham. Their legacy continues today, as companies born a century ago remain an important part of Durham's economic environment and a redevelopment initiative aims to restore Black Wall Street to its original grandeur.

### **Bricks and mortar**

Perhaps the best-known Black Wall Street success story is the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, established in 1898 by African-American business leaders who recognized the need for an insurance association to serve black consumers. Leading the charge were John Merrick, an entrepreneurial barber with substantial real estate holdings, and Dr. Aaron Moore, Durham's first African-American physician. When financial troubles forced five of the seven founders to leave the venture, Moore, Merrick, and Moore's nephew, C.C. Spaulding (who later served as the company's longtime president), reorganized the company, becoming known as the triumvirate that strategically positioned North Carolina Mutual for local and national success.

"In the time of Jim Crow, significant efforts were made - through legal and informal means - to relegate African-Americans to second-class citizenship," explains Dr. Ben Speller, a senior research fellow at North Carolina Central University who is involved in the Parrish Street redevelopment initiative. "There were businesses blacks could not patronize, and these men decided to fill in the gaps. If white-owned insurance agencies and banks could not or would not serve blacks, people like Merrick, Moore, and Spaulding would provide those services. They weren't pushing for equality and integration; they were pushing for the same material and economic benefits afforded to whites, even if they had to do it in a self-contained society."

The company soon reaped such benefits. Business grew quickly between 1898 and 1906, and in that year, N.C. Mutual moved the company headquarters to a two-story brick building on Parrish Street, a strategic decision that formed the foundation for Black Wall Street. In time, N.C. Mutual purchased additional buildings on Parrish Street and rented them out to other black-owned businesses, including a drugstore, a tailor, barber and beauty shops, clothing stores, law offices, and the Mechanics & Farmers Bank, which was chartered in 1907 and offered many black citizens funding for start-up businesses and new homes.

As these businesses were patronized by black customers, the white community took notice. In the book *Black Business in the New South*, author Walter B. Weare cites comments from a 1908 issue of Durham's white newspaper, the Morning Herald, which described Parrish Street as a "Beautiful Business Block" managed by "these thrifty people ... who have not only an eye for business but one for beauty. ... Not a street in this town would object to having an outside or an interior as attractive as these stores that front Parrish Street."

Acceptance by Durham's white residents led to national attention for Parrish Street, particularly as African-American leaders like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois visited Durham during the business district's heyday. Washington and Du Bois praised the blacks' entrepreneurial successes and the whites' tolerance of these activities, which was exemplified by the fact that several white-owned businesses operated on the eastern end of the street.

Du Bois' and Washington's comments were especially significant because many viewed Parrish Street as a compromise between their conflicting opinions of how best to deal with Jim Crow laws. Whereas Washington argued blacks should accept discrimination and focus on gaining respect through hard work and economic prosperity, Du Bois advocated educating an elite corps of black Americans to facilitate political and economic initiatives against the oppressive laws. "N.C. Mutual's story exemplifies a combination of both philosophies, in terms of mirroring the white business success model and promoting a sense of community uplift," says Victor Gordon, Durham's Parrish Street project coordinator. "Both models were symbolized by N.C. Mutual's success. Activities on Black Wall Street made Durham a model for race relations and African-American success stories in the early 1900s."

"People came to Durham to learn how to do it," adds local historian Kelly Bryant, who worked for N.C. Mutual from 1944 to 1981. "As a college student, I had a business class that came to Durham just to talk about it and visit the businesses here."

### **Community building**

In 1921, N.C. Mutual marked its continued success by expanding the corporate headquarters to a handsome six-story complex that, at the time, was the second tallest building in Durham. This feat was carefully achieved: Company officials designed the structure not to exceed the height of the tallest - and white-owned - building.

Beyond bricks and mortar, the effects of Parrish Street were far reaching in Durham's black community. Executives from N.C. Mutual, in particular, were instrumental in the growth and development of local African-American institutions, including White Rock Baptist Church,

Lincoln Hospital, North Carolina Central University, and the Durham Colored Library (now known as the Stanford L. Warren Library). “Parrish Street was the financial district,” Bryant explains. “The people there had the ideas and could provide the financial help that was necessary to build the black community. It was the center of activity that helped in the development of the Hayti, the primary black residential area, by providing financial support and community leadership.”

Chronicling the success and impact of N.C. Mutual and other Black Wall Street institutions is the primary focus of a redevelopment effort that aims to commemorate the street’s local and national significance and rejuvenate the historic structures located there.

Led by Durham’s Office of Economic and Employment Development and assisted by a city-appointed committee of local historians, business leaders, nonprofit executives and other stakeholders, the initiative views Parrish Street’s heritage as an impetus for economic development. “We want to interpret the street responsibly and provide resources for visitors and residents to learn about its history,” says Gordon. “We want to tell the public, existing Parrish Street businesses, and future entrepreneurs why this history is important and give them an avenue to explore it. Whether we use cultural festivals, public art, or a curriculum offered through the public school system, we will tie everything back to the street’s historical significance.”

Specific plans are still in development; organizers envision the project as a long-term endeavor. But various activities will be implemented within the next year, from streetscape improvements to special events showcasing the Black Wall Street story. And eventually, the city hopes to design a “Museum Without Walls,” an interactive exhibit using photography, street banners, interactive kiosks, and other media to detail the area’s historic significance. “By putting this information on the street and within Parrish Street businesses, we can engage pedestrians with detailed components of the story,” says Alan DeLisle, Durham’s economic development director. “By taking elements of a four-wall museum and putting them on the street, we can use various interpretive techniques to help visitors learn what Parrish Street is all about.”

### **Still thriving**

After decades of prosperity, various factors contributed to Black Wall Street’s gradual decline. Growth in the 1960s forced many businesses - including N.C. Mutual - to relocate to larger facilities downtown or in surrounding communities. And as desegregation swept the South affording black consumers easier access to white establishments, they relied less on the historically black business district.

Despite their relocation, many of the businesses that built Black Wall Street still thrive in Durham. Mechanics & Farmers Bank, which celebrates its centennial in 2007, serves customers statewide and still operates a branch on the ground floor of Parrish Street’s six-story N.C. Mutual building, which has been designated as a National Historic Landmark.

And from its present-day headquarters a few blocks away, N.C. Mutual has grown to become the largest black-managed insurance company in the United States. Company history - including its growth during the Black Wall Street era - is chronicled in N.C. Mutual’s Heritage Room, which

is open to the public through guided tours arranged in advance. “Our history is part of what makes our company unique,” says Chuck Watts, N.C. Mutual’s general counsel and corporate secretary. “When you look back on the Jim Crow era, it’s easy to think no one was dealing with the issues and being successful. But from the start of the 20th century through the 1950s, there was probably more black capitalism in Durham than in any other American city.”

DeLisle says this sentiment embodies the Parrish Street redevelopment effort. “We want to stay true to the grassroots aspect of this story as we develop new entrepreneurs to thrive on that street - which is really what Black Wall Street was all about,” he says.

“Anyone in business can recognize the genius that existed in Parrish Street,” adds Speller. “This was a smart group of people who saw an opportunity and acted on it, setting up an infrastructure to serve the black community. They knew they couldn’t change public policy overnight, but they could build a business in the process.”

Beth Teague lives in Chapel Hill.

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