

# Newtown Conservation Historic District Project

## NEWTOWN: AN AFRICAN AMERICAN ENCLAVE IN SARASOTA, FLORIDA

For many years, Newtown residents and leaders appealed to their government representatives for funding to complete a comprehensive study to document the history of their community. The significance of the contributions of the African American enclave to the people of Newtown and the broader community of Sarasota, Florida deserves to be prominently recorded for posterity. While there have been some well-written accounts of various aspects of this community, notably the 2014 series published by the *Herald Tribune* during Newtown's centennial year of 2014, there was more that its residents wanted to add to the story. Rich details about the lives of Newtown's residents over the course of a century have not been available in one place and some have not been publically accessible at all. They were widely dispersed and found in public collections, such as the Sarasota History Center, in private collections of photographs, letters and old newspaper articles stored away in homes, and in the oral tradition of the residents, a common practice among African American families. Stories passed down over the generations - memories of places, people and events - were spread by word of mouth, and not written down. This is one of the retentions of African cultural heritage in African American culture today.

The lack of written records, particularly in regard to the early histories of Overtown and Newtown are tied to the fact that education for African Americans was essentially non-existent during slavery and for decades after its abolition. This is why many of the early residents of Newtown could not read or write. The establishment of educational facilities for African Americans post slavery was slow to develop.

For decades after the doctrine of "Separate but Equal" was to have been abolished by the US Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, unequal educational opportunities persisted, particularly in the South. This was definitely the case in Sarasota, Florida, a city that resisted school desegregation for eight years after the 1954 Supreme Court ruling. Details about the social history of Newtown are part of the wealth of information contained in the oral tradition and can be reclaimed by interviewing today's residents. Gathering and then weaving together the separate threads of the Newtown and Overtown stories that have been cast about in various places should result in a tapestry that reveals much more than any one thread could.

Our goal is that the NCHD Report will inspire Newtown’s residents: those who never left Newtown but want to help it improve, the exceptional young people who returned to Newtown after graduating from college and vocational schools or at the conclusion of athletic careers, the seasoned leaders who have accomplished so much and shown remarkable strength of character in fighting the battles of racism and discrimination, and the generations who, unfortunately, know little about the historical challenges as well as achievements of their ancestors and living relatives. The citizens of Newtown have risen to confront challenges on many occasions.

Societal circumstances have changed dramatically over this 100-year period, and so must the ideas and strategies designed to keep this community intact and prevent losing it to the encroaching development that some consider to be gentrification. Newtown has a rich legacy that can only be preserved if its people value it and are willing to fight for it. Their decades-long perseverance in pursuit of the funding to complete this study of their community demonstrates that they have the same strong will as their ancestors, who built a thriving community out of what once was empty land and through which dirt roads were carved and houses built by their own hands.

The occasion of Newtown’s centennial in 2014 represents an exceptionally appropriate time for the Newtown Conservation Historic District (NCHD) Project to occur. “Working on a Dream” is the phrase that resonated during the first meeting of the Project’s participants: City government representatives, the NCHD Project Team of researchers, and the Newtown Community Task Force in 2015. The phrase has been a motivational force in the effort to complete an exceptional report that reflects many of Newtown’s stories – ‘herstories’ and ‘histories.’ This is a “dream” that has finally come true, and we are working to ensure that it becomes an enduring reality to be celebrated for many years to come. Regarding the importance of this Project, Fredd Atkins, former mayor of Sarasota and City of Sarasota Commissioner, made this statement to a *Herald Tribune* reporter: “The community will not only learn more about their history and their forefathers’ history, they’ll also learn to respect the struggle and respect the opportunities they have now...A lot of the things going on today go contrary to this struggle. I think the project will help young people, and new people coming here, celebrate our history and our community.”<sup>1</sup>

The City of Sarasota solicited written quotations for a Newtown Conservation Historic District Project that would establish the Newtown Conservation Historic District. The contract was awarded to Vickie Oldham as the consultant who would complete the defined “Scope of Work” described as including, but not limited to, the following:

- 1) Attending a series of five public meetings starting with the opening forum to introduce the consultant to the community and the Newtown Citizen Historic Task Force.
- 2) Reporting to city staff and submitting written project reports periodically.
- 3) Meeting and working with a Newtown Citizen Historic District Task Force to:
  - a. identify the Newtown Conservation Historic District area and map the district boundaries,
  - b. document the history and culture of Newtown over the last 100 years (1914-2014),
  - c. record Newtown’s oral tradition and complete the required narrative for a series of historic markers,

- d. develop a walking tour with an educational component as part of the project package, and
  - e. work with a graphic designer and web master to complete the final marker panels and integrated web pages.
- 4) Presenting their project map, report, and research to the Newtown community, the Historic Preservation Board, and the City Commission.

The NCHD Project Team completed all required elements of the project’s “Scope of Work.” In addition, the team provided supplemental research data and outreach efforts that were beyond the Scope of Work, but that the team was confident would add broader community access to and knowledge about the project. Two community events were held to assist residents in preserving family heirlooms. The following social media sites were launched: Facebook; YouTube; Flickr; and Twitter (#Newtown\_Dream). The NCHD Project Team accomplished the critically important and challenging task of assembling, analyzing and producing a report that coalesced what were scattered details of the Newtown community’s origins and development over the 100-year period from 1914-2014 into one document. Because the histories of the two communities are intricately interwoven, information about Overtown, the first African American enclave that arose in Sarasota, is included in this NCHD Report.

Parades and other commemorative events have been important in the celebration of Newtown’s centennial. This document will provide an enduring tribute to the legacy of the community. Many African American neighborhoods in urban areas have been absorbed into the larger cities in which they are located. In most of these instances, the unfortunate fact is that all knowledge about those neighborhoods is lost. Thanks to the Newtown Conservation Historic District (NCHD) Project, this will not be the fate of Newtown. This Project Report establishes a permanent contribution toward the acknowledgment, commemoration, and preservation of Newtown’s unique history by rediscovering, reassembling and preserving its scattered elements.

The story of Newtown is recorded using two sources of information: primary and secondary documents. Examples of these can include:

**Primary Documents:**

- Oral History interviews of current and former Newtown residents;
- Newtown Conservation Historic District area maps;
- Census records;
- Maps;
- City Directories;
- Historical and contemporary photographs depicting Newtown people, places, events and properties;
- Handwritten letters, diaries and journals, memorabilia;
- Video and film

**Secondary Documents:**

- Stories about Overtown and Newtown obtained from historical writings, newspaper and magazine articles, websites, and secondhand accounts;
- Drawings from photographs depicting Newtown people and properties;
- Biographies; and
- Museum and library exhibits

Using the information gathered from 42 oral history interviews, over 200 documents and photographs, and numerous Internet resources, the NCHD Final Report examines the following topics:

- The early settlers of Overtown and Newtown;
- How residents made a living (occupations, businesses);
- Education and schools;
- Impact of segregation, desegregation, and integration on their lives;
- The history of community churches;
- The history of medical treatment;
- Sports teams and athletes;
- Military service;
- Community organizations;
- Politics;
- Analysis of historical maps for the Overtown and Newtown neighborhoods, creation of new digital maps, and connecting maps to the historic resources;
- Identification and description of the historic resources of Newtown and Overtown;
- Vision for the future of Newtown; and
- Interview Transcripts

The NCHD Project Team recognizes that this study is based upon a limited sample of the total population of Newtown. In collaboration with the Newtown Community Task Force, the Project Team prioritized prospective interviewees from different generations, social backgrounds, and professions. This provides an interesting and diverse perspective. Numerous other sources of information have been used to create a comprehensive portrait of Newtown: 1914-2014.