

The Politics of Redevelopment: How Race Impacted the Rebirth of Beale Street, 1968-1977

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“Beale Street was the only street a black man could feel free on.”¹
-Saxophonist Edward “Prince Gabe” Kirby

Located in the heart of downtown Memphis, Tennessee, Beale Street means different things to different people. Some associate it with the home of blues music. Others remember it as the location of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s final Civil Rights march before his assassination. Although these aspects are extremely important to the overall narrative of Memphis’ most famous street, they represent only pieces to a much larger, complicated puzzle. The neighborhood attained worldwide fame as the home of blues music and Civil Rights marches, but on a daily basis, Beale Street was home to hundreds of African Americans. This Memphis neighborhood became the center of African American culture during Jim Crow and the modern Civil Rights era. The rise and fall of Beale Street similarly occurred after a series of highly specific and unique historical events. By the late 1960s, with the street in disrepair, the city government, particularly the Memphis Housing Authority, took the lead in making necessary improvements with the Urban Renewal program. In 1973, private developer R.P. Barassi and his company, Beale Street U.S.A., joined the project, only to be replaced in 1974 by the quasi-government Beale Street National Historic Foundation. The ultimate goal was not to return to the historic district to the center of black culture, but rather to fashion a tourist attraction and entertainment district for whites. Through urban renewal and redevelopment, Memphis city officials, Beale Street U.S.A., and the Beale Street National Historic Foundation, excluded African Americans in the redevelopment plans for Beale Street in an attempt to remodel the historically African American district.

¹ Edward Kirby, *From Africa to Beale Street*, (Memphis: Lubin Press, 1983), 66.

The Foundation of City, Beale Street, and Black Community in Memphis

The history of Beale Street starts with the formation of Memphis. Despite being a street rich with history, the naming of Beale Street remains unknown. Legends abound, most dating to the 1840s when two cities claimed the land on the fourth Chickasaw Bluff of the Mississippi River: Memphis and South Memphis. The founder of South Memphis, Colonel Robertson Topp, allegedly named the street after a War of 1812 hero named Thomas Beale (or Beal), who organized a company of sharpshooters during the Battle of New Orleans.²

After South Memphis and Memphis voted on a referendum for consolidation, on January 1, 1850, the towns merged, forming the largest city in Shelby County, Tennessee. This allowed the fledging city to focus on more important matters: cotton. During the antebellum years, Memphis' economy revolved around cotton, exporting over 400,000 bales of cotton a year by the 1850s.³

Since Mississippi Delta farmers heavily relied on slave labor to plant and harvest the crop, the cotton and slave trading markets boomed simultaneously in Memphis. Although the Memphis economy relied upon the buying and selling of slaves, actual ownership of slaves within the city remained limited. A free black population, albeit a small one, developed during this time. Prior to 1830, census records for Shelby County show no evidence of a free black population. Whether this population settled in the decade between the 1830 and 1840 censuses or whether a population existed but was not counted remains unknown. The 1840 census shows

² Richard M. Raichelson, Beale Street Talks: A Walking Tour Down the Home of the Blues (Memphis: Arcadia Publishing, 1999), 1; Architect-Engineer Associates and Memphis Housing Authority, The Blue Light District of Beale Street, Memphis, Tennessee: An Architectural and Historical Survey for the Memphis Housing Authority (Nashville: 1974), 5. Available at the Memphis and Shelby County Public Library and Information Center. Memphis, Tennessee.

³ Robert A. Sigafos, Cotton Row To Beale Street (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1979) 31; Beverly G. Bond and Janann Sherman, Memphis In Black and White (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 26.

seventy-six free blacks residing in Shelby County, most likely in the city. By 1850, the free black population nearly tripled to 216. The 1860 census, the last before the Civil War, confirms 276 free blacks in the county. Many of these men found work on the city's docks, where the sheer size of the cotton industry in Memphis necessitated the use of their paid labor; any hand was useful and needed. Ironically, these free men helped ship the very cotton that their enslaved black brethren farmed.⁴

Antebellum Beale Street consisted of a mix of businesses and residences. The Beale Street directory from 1849 lists grocers, a cabinet maker, and a physician among the businesses and Mrs. M. Johnson, a widow, and Reverend R. Frazier as residents. The 1855 Beale Street directory shows considerable growth, with seventy-one individuals as either residents or businessmen. The affluent citizens generally resided along and around the Beale Street neighborhood—the aforementioned Topp, eventual-Confederate war hero Nathan Bedford Forest, and others. **Despite this, on October, 1851, a free man named Joe Clouston purchased a piece of land near the corner of Beale and Desoto and opened a barber shop and grocery store.**⁵

The Civil War forever changed the racial makeup of Memphis. Initially, Tennesseans cautiously approached the idea of secession. The election of Abraham Lincoln and South Carolina's break with the Union, events which galvanized other southern states against the north, hardly affected Tennesseans. After the attack on Fort Sumter on April 12 and 13, 1861, however, the people of Tennessee ratified legislation demanding for secession. Tennessee entered the Confederacy on June 8, 1861. Just under one year later, on June 6, 1862, Memphis fell to Union

⁴ "Historical Census Brower" in *Geospatial and Statistical Data Center* [database on-line] (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, updated 15 June 2005, accessed 6 July 2006), available from <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/>.

⁵ Raichelson, *Beale Street Talks*, 1, 48, 68; Bond and Sherman, *Memphis In Black and White*, 26; Architect-Engineer Associates, *The Blue Light District of Beale Street, Memphis, Tennessee*, 7-8, 10, Memphis Room; Sigafos, *Cotton Row To Beale Street*, 32.

forces. The Union Navy overpowered the Confederate River Defense Fleet with more than five times the amount of guns. Being one of the first Southern cities captured, Memphis quickly became an asylum for fugitive slaves in the Mississippi Delta. Blacks lived in three camps outside of the city. By the end of the war, the population of these camps exceeded 15,000 men, women, and children.⁶

After the surrender of the Confederate States and the beginning of Reconstruction, some African Americans returned to the Mississippi Delta as sharecroppers and tenant farmers, some headed north, while others remained in Memphis developing the black community, particularly along the Mississippi River and Beale Street. The end of the Civil War brought the end of slavery but racial inequality ran rampant. On May 1, 1866 this volatility resulted in violent race riots along Beale Street. Black union troops and Irish police officers scuffled on Causey Street leading to a three-day race war, resulting in widespread violence against blacks and destruction of black property. Some blacks fled the city after race riots, but many remained and the immigration into the city continued.⁷

The Civil War and the subsequent race riots only temporarily set back Memphis. Since Memphis, unlike Atlanta or New Orleans, suffered little damage from Civil War, the Reconstruction period resulted in major growth; however, growing pains accompanied this period of prosperity. Poorly constructed roads and ineffective sanitation caused pools of standing water and sewage all over Memphis, creating breeding ground for mosquitoes. Although periods of disease previously descended upon the city, the yellow fever epidemic of 1878 proved especially deadly. After the official announcement of the outbreak in August, people fled the city in droves, as many as 25,000 in a few weeks. The population dwindled

⁶ Bond and Sherman, Memphis In Black and White, 49-51, 54, 56.

⁷ Raichelson, Beale Street Talks, 2; Bond and Sherman, Memphis In Black and White, 59-60.

down to about twenty-thousand people; fourteen-thousand black and six-thousand white, mostly poor Irish. Of the remaining blacks, eleven-thousand contracted the disease but only 949 died, while only two-thousand of the remaining whites survived.⁸ The epidemic essentially concentrated Memphis' African American population. Despite this large black population, by the end of the 1878, the city defaulted on its many debts, and was forced to surrender the city charter to the state of Tennessee, becoming a taxing district.⁹

This disaster proved to be a blessing in disguise for the African American population in Memphis. The white, mass exodus gave blacks the opportunity to create communities without the severe racial tension of the pre-epidemic years. They established independent businesses that served the black community: saloons, theatres, hotels, fraternal clubs, and banks. This era of decreased attention to racial hierarchy and social class not only enfranchised blacks, but also immigrants: Jews, Greeks, Chinese, Irish and Germans owned a variety of business in the area, from groceries to laundries. This significant development gave Beale Street a cosmopolitan feel. At this time, Beale Street residents felt the racial tension of slavery and the race wars lessen, a characteristic that people tried to maintain even after the tax district regained city status.¹⁰

As the community developed, leaders in the black community emerged; Robert Reed Church Sr., the son of a white steamboat captain, quickly became the undisputed leader of black Memphis, with Beale Street serving as capital. He rose from a blue-collar childhood to unimaginable wealth, growing up helping his father run the steamboat and eventually working as the ship's steward. During the Civil War, he used his knowledge of the food and spirits to secure

⁸ Some speculated that African Americans' ancestry developed a natural immunity to the disease. Others reasoned that having someone to care for the sick increased the chances of survival and blacks, with eleven-thousand residents in the city, bettered their chances of life by sticking together.

⁹ Architect-Engineer Associates, The Blue Light District of Beale Street, Memphis, Tennessee, 15-17; Raichelson, Beale Street Talks, 2; Bond and Sherman, Memphis In Black and White, 63.

¹⁰ Raichelson, Beale Street Talks, 3.

a job as a saloon manager in Memphis. When the epidemic caused white evacuation from the city, the cost of land downtown, specifically along Beale Street, significantly dropped. Church used his savings to purchase this condemned land. Once the city fixed the sanitation problems that caused the disease, bonds were offered in order to pay the debts and regain the charter. Church bought the first bond, despite the enormous risk, for one-thousand dollars. These financial moves eventually made him a millionaire less than twenty years after the end of the Civil War and slavery. After expanding business ventures from real estate to banking, Church secured loans for many Beale Street entrepreneurs and provided leadership to the emerging black population in the latter years of the nineteenth-century.¹¹

The Rise and Fall of Beale Street

The turn of the nineteenth-century brought unprecedented prosperity to the district. Beale Street was the center of the black community in a predominately black city. According to United States 1920 census data, 98,962 blacks resided in Shelby County with 117,683 whites, the corresponding white to black ratio was 1.18:1. Comparatively, in the same census year in other Southern counties with large cities, Fulton County (Atlanta), Georgia registered a 2.23:1 white to black ratio while Orleans County (New Orleans), Louisiana recorded a 2.57:1 ratio.¹²

Edward “Prince Gabe” Kirby, a Beale Street trumpeter, summed up these numbers when he declared, “Beale Street was the only street a black man could feel free on. I was a young man and I had the same psychological feeling . . . this street was made famous by my own people. It was like leaving a plantation without someone pushing you or you having to beat a curfew. . . .

¹¹ Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 13-14; Raichelson, *Beale Street Talks*, 2, Sigafos, *Cotton Row To Beale Street*, 50.

¹² “Historical Census Brower” in *Geospatial and Statistical Data Center*, available from <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/>.

Beale Street was one of the few places in downtown Memphis where black folks could buy a meal and sit down and eat it.”¹³ During the day, Beale Street bustled with business. A. Greener and Sons offered a variety of dry goods. Battier’s Drug Store sold medications prescribed by one of the neighborhood’s many doctors. Families bought furniture to decorate neighborhood homes from the Mutual Furniture Company. The Beale Street Men’s Store vended the suits while Henry Johnson, one of the three-dozen barbers in the area, styled gentlemen’s hair, ensuring the sharpest look for that evening’s festivities. Daytime Beale Street symbolized a strong sense of community; African Americans representing a variety of social classes interacting—providing goods and services—for the betterment of everyone: “The most successful black businessmen had their offices and businesses located on Beale Street. There were banks, hat makers, doctors, lawyers, exclusive eat places, printing shops, [and hotels]. . .”¹⁴ With businesses catering to the wants and needs of the predominately black community, Jim Crow’s power weakened and the African American population achieved the closest thing at that point in American history to fairness and normalcy.¹⁵

At night, the neighborhood exploded with entertainment. Music blared from clubs like the Beale Street Palace. Never far from the music scene, dancing in the clubs was commonplace: “When the hour got a little later and the drink got to hitting just right, then people would do the type of dancing that suited them. You did what the spirit told you. . . . When [blacks] got to the place where they felt they could relax, just go on and enjoy themselves, they’d give a show.”¹⁶ Italian immigrant Virgilio Maffei, the diminutive owner of Pee Wee’s Saloon, provided the community with a variety of liquors. He competed with many other bars and taverns in the area:

¹³ Kirby, *From Africa to Beale Street*, 48, 66.

¹⁴ Kirby, *From Africa to Beale Street*, 65.

¹⁵ Raichelson, *Beale Street Talks*, 36, 42, 48-50, 53-54;

¹⁶ McKee and Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue*, 34.

the Monarch, the Midway, and Hole in the Wall. Even prohibition failed to stop the imbibing on Beale Street. Along with drinking, drugs, gambling, and prostitution were commonplace in the area's nightlife: "The oldtimers called the street the "stem" because it stemmed from the river bank. The stem was the swingest place a black person could go."¹⁷ Collectively, night time Beale Street provided the opportunity to escape the tribulations affecting Memphians (in general) and African Americans (specifically): the heat, bugs, disease, Jim Crow, prejudice, racism, and violence, to name a few. Over time, upper-class blacks disdained the unlawful and—in their view—immoral lifestyles the neighborhood cultivated. But, at Beale Street's apex in the 1920s, the area provided strong sense of community and avenue of escape for residents.¹⁸

The social interaction between immigrants like Maffei and blacks along Beale Street was not commonplace between whites and blacks; however, upper-class blacks and whites worked together for political purposes.¹⁹ President Theodore Roosevelt sought Church Sr.'s advice on how to include African Americans in the political process. In 1902, Church Sr. even hosted Roosevelt when the President spoke to African Americans in Memphis at W.C. Handy Park. Four years later, in 1906, Church Sr. started the Solvent Savings Bank and Trust Company. He used his finances to buy property from eastward-moving, upper-class whites and resold the property to black businessmen, resulting in a greater concentration of black-owned business in-and-along Beale Street. When Church Sr. died in 1912, the family power transferred to his son,

¹⁷ Kirby, *From Africa to Beale Street*, 65.

¹⁸ McKee and Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue*, 8, 35; Kirby, *From Africa to Beale Street*, 54-56.

¹⁹ The reader must bear in mind that American society was still constructing the characteristics of "whiteness" and "blackness." Many immigrants, despite having white skin, were not considered white. For further reading on this subject see the following secondary literature: Ian Haney-López, *White by Law: the Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Michelle Brattain, *The Politics of Whiteness: Race, Workers, and Culture in the Modern South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Robert Church Jr. While the elder Church involved himself in business—primarily banking and real estate—the younger Church became an important leader in the Republican Party.²⁰

The rise of this young, ambitious, African American man coincided with his white counterpart, Edward Hull Crump. Running for mayor in 1909, Crump, unlike many of his competitors, harnessed the power of the black vote. Over the next forty-five years, his political machine routinely paid African Americans to vote along his ticket. Crump needed Church for his status within the Republican Party and his relationships with numerous federal judges and district attorneys. Crump preserved the black right to vote only because they voted for him. Church saw his relationship with Crump as an opportunity for the black community to gain rights and power within the Memphis political scheme. This political relationship gave the community more power as a voting bloc than blacks in most cities across the United States. Black leaders used the Crump-Church alliance to attain a variety of city-funded amenities, like park and schools. This system was obviously far from perfect or fair, but in pre-*Brown vs. Board of Education* years, this relationship had no equal in southern politics.²¹

Although this relationship remained strong for over two-decades, the beginning of Beale Street's death began in the late 1920s. The Solvent Savings Bank, started more than twenty years earlier by Church Sr., and the Fraternal Savings Bank attempted a merger before closing down in December, 1927. An investigation revealed that bank officials stole money, tarnishing the reputations of many prominent Beale Street businessmen. When the market crashed in October, 1929, hotels, newspapers, and sports teams closed. The economic turmoil even silenced many of the recording studios that made Memphis blues music famous. Many of the

²⁰ Bond and Sherman, *Memphis In Black and White*, 80-81; McKee and Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue*, 52.

²¹ McKee and Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue*, 52; Bond and Sherman, *Memphis In Black and White*, 88.

businesses along Beale Street relied on banks for credit. After bank closings in the Beale Street community, many of these businesses experienced extreme hardships.²²

Exacerbating the hardships of the Depression, Crump's political machine curtailed the raucous behavior of many of the establishments on Beale Street by enforcing laws already on the books. Police arrested Beale Streeters for many of the accustomed illegal practices that made the street famous, such as drinking, drug-use, gambling, and prostitution. Few understood Crump's motivations. Some theorized he evolved into more religious man and the wild behavior on Beale Street became inappropriate in his eyes. Similarly, others said he wanted to fight crime and keep Memphis' streets safe. More than likely, though, Crump viewed the threats of an investigation by the Tennessee Crime Commission into the voting practices of African Americas as a necessity to shift his political alliances. For years, Crump's encouraged blacks to vote for his candidates in less than ethical ways. Crump tactfully decided to focus his policies on white interests in order to secure his political future.²³

This rationale likewise explains his disbandment of the political allegiance with Church Jr. and the black community. The city traditionally allowed leeway in the tax payments for real \estate owners. Memphis normally collected these taxes after property sold. When Crump selectively enforced the tax laws in 1939, Church owed \$89,000 in back taxes. A city tax auction that year depleted the family's estate. Church, a Republican, disagreed with Democrat Crump on many issues. Once Crump dissolved their political relationship, Church transformed from political ally to foe.²⁴

²² McKee and Chisenhall, Beale Black & Blue, 62.

²³ McKee and Chisenhall, Beale Black & Blue, 80-81.

²⁴ Some tag Crump a racist, which may or may not be accurate. Surely the white leader knew of the tax irregularities—Crump knew everything about his city. Ultimately, he chose to ignore this loophole until his relationship with the black leader no longer proved politically beneficial; he was the ultimate Machiavellian politician and his relationships revolved around usefulness. When the political winds changed, Crump's

Although the Depression ended in the early 1940s, Beale Street continued to decline, now at an even faster rate. The end of the World War II set off a chain of events that crippled downtown areas across the United States while birthing the American suburbs. Two distinct federal policies caused this dramatic change. First, the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration provided cheap home loans for returning soldiers. These mortgages cost less than monthly rent in most American cities and encouraged new home construction, rather than renovation. Second, President Eisenhower championed the assembly of a national highway system like he had seen firsthand in Germany's *autobahn*. In addition to new roads, government subsidies encouraged the repair of existing roads. These changes in the government's policy towards transportation made areas outside of cities, once inconvenient for American drivers, desirable. This perfect synergy of events caused the explosion of American suburbs and the death of downtown.²⁵

While former-GIs sprinted to the suburbs, Civil Rights activists battled for equal rights and fair-treatment. The landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court case increased the opportunities for blacks to live outside of Beale Street; for many African Americans, the coziness of a Jim Crow-shelter no longer seemed necessary. Furthermore, with the dwindling businesses on Beale Street, gambling—and the associated violence—became the primary activity. Many middle- and upper-class blacks no longer felt tied to the community. None of these factors alone caused the demise of the street, but rather, the collection of historical occurrences.²⁶

Some historians use the riots during the Sanitation Striker's March and the subsequent assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, at the Lorraine Hotel a few blocks

relationships with leaders in the community adjusted; McKee and Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue*, 81-83; Bond and Sherman, *Memphis In Black and White*, 115.

²⁵ Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000), 7-8.

²⁶ McKee and Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue*, 97.

from Beale Street, as a partial explanation for the decline of the surrounding neighborhood.²⁷ In fact, historians often overemphasize the King assassination as a cause of other historical events. Truthfully, by the late 1960s, Beale Street was already in disrepair and the assassination represents an interesting anecdote in the Beale Street story, but it certainly is not a primary reason for the end of the historic district. Prior to the heat of the Sanitation Workers Strike in 1967 and 1968, the local government began to develop plans to rehabilitate Beale Street.

Urban Renewal or Negro Removal?

By the 1950s and 1960s, downtown Memphis resembled a ghost town. Middle- and upper-class Memphians still controlled the city's business interests, but most moved eastward, handing the proverbial key of the city over to the poorest citizens. This concentration of poverty changed the heart of the city. In 1934, the city created the Memphis Municipal Housing Commission in response to the tribulations of the Depression and the growing number of homeless citizens. The name changed a year later to the Memphis Housing Authority (MHA) under a charter established in the Tennessee General Assembly called the "Memphis Housing Authority Act". Two years later, in 1937, the United States Congress passed the United States Public Housing Act which provided for Federal assistance to the low-rent Public Housing program. Nearly fifteen years after its creation, in 1949, MHA directed its efforts at redeveloping the blighted areas of the city—urban renewal. Originally, the plans for urban renewal called for the "clearing of blighted areas and the developing [of] land in keeping with

²⁷ For examples see Fred Hay, *Goin' Back to Sweet Memphis: Conversations with the Blues*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press 2001) and Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

the needs of the community.”²⁸ City officials, using federal and state money, wanted to buy property in disrepair or encourage proprietors to privately renovate. Beale Street was not the first area in Memphis to undergo urban renewal; these projects included areas all over downtown: Railroad Avenue, Jackson Avenue, the Medical Center Project, the Court Avenue Project. On September 9, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the “Department of Housing and Urban Development Act” which officially created a cabinet-level department of the same name, often abbreviated as HUD. This department and MHA worked together on urban renewal projects; HUD provided the capital and oversaw all expenditures while MHA made the ground-level decisions and presented proposals to their federal counterpart.²⁹

In July, 1959, Mayor Edmund Orgill announced the city planned to transform Beale Street into a tourist attraction. Over a decade after the mayoral proclamation, the first urban renewal project relating to Beale Street began when HUD appropriated nearly \$11 million and the city supplied an additional \$5 million. The project included over 150 acres of land and almost 14 city blocks. Officials claimed the appropriated money would be used for constructing “housing for the elderly, other low-cost public housing, [and] the . . . blue light entertainment district on historic Beale St. . . . Plans include[d] rehabilitation of some interesting and historic buildings in the area as well as the demolition of others.”³⁰ However, after funding cuts, officials scrapped plans to build public housing, besides the home for the elderly, leaving the district an

²⁸ Memphis Housing Authority, Facts on Public Housing and Urban Renewal (Memphis, TN: GPO, 1974) 1. Available at the Memphis and Shelby County Public Library and Information Center. Memphis, Tennessee. MHA, Facts on Public Housing and Urban Renewal, 1.

²⁹ David Bowman, “Beale Street Blues,” 76. Available at the Memphis and Shelby County Public Library and Information Center. Memphis, Tennessee; Mary K. Nenno, Ending the Stalemate: Moving Housing and Urban Development into the Mainstream of America’s Future (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1996), 4-5; MHA, Facts on Public Housing and Urban Renewal, 1.

³⁰ “\$16 Million Beale Project O.K.’D,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 28 November 1969, 1.

urban wasteland. Empty lots replaced razed, historic buildings. Five years after the start of project, Beale Street resembled “removal” more than “renewal.”³¹

Some Memphians challenged the actions of the Urban Renewal project. After advertisements of a public hearing appeared in local newspapers, many protesters voiced their opinions during an early August, 1968 meeting. The ad hoc Beale Street Merchants Association threatened to take their businesses—some of them million dollar-grossing companies—to other cities. The 85-member Beale Street Merchant’s Association renewed its protest to the project. A shouting-match ensued between Guy Lanksy, owner of a local men’s clothing store, and Downtown Association attorney William W. Goodman: “Shut up, shut up, shut up,” Goodman said. “You’re out of order. You want say something to me then come outside.”³² Although some merchants attended the hearing and objected to the MHA’s plans, many Beale Street businesses acquiesced to the buyouts. For many Beale Streeters the money and the opportunity to leave the decaying area seemed too good to miss.³³

The title “urban renewal” at the very least was inaccurate. Communities were not necessarily returned to the prosperous days. The Beale Street Urban Renewal project was the idea of elite, white leaders of the city. In 1968, the five-member governing body of MHA charged with the task of “renewing” Beale Street included a variety of Memphians: a clothing store executive, an insurance executive, an investment firm executive, a prominent lawyer. Of the five members, Edward F. Barry, Julius Lewis, W.E. Montgomery, and Morrie Moss, were white men. The only black member of the 1968 MHA board of commissioners was Ethyl H.

³¹ Fred Hay, *Goin’ Back to Sweet Memphis: Conversations with the Blues*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press 2001), xxiii; Bowman, “Beale Street Blues,” 76.

³² Richard Lentz, “Heated Hearing Concludes Prelude to OK of Beale Street Renewal,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 9 August 1968, 25.

³³ Wayne Chastain, “Many Hearts, Too Sad to be Blue Remember Spirit of Beale Street,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 12 January 1970, 13; Lentz, “Heated Hearing Concludes Prelude to OK of Beale Street Renewal,” 25.

Venson. A long time Civil Rights activist, Venson co-founded with her husband the Cotton Makers Jubilee when organizers of the all-white Cotton Carnival only allowed black laborers to guide the float-pulling mules. In 1966, Mayor William B. Ingram, in a surprise move, nominated Venson to the MHA executive board; she was the first African American and the first woman to serve. The board changed members every few years—members would resign and move on—but the makeup of the board remained constant: four white men and Venson. Her selection as a board member raises serious questions about the genuineness of Ingram’s appointment.

Venson’s name was easily recognizable in the African American community because of her involvement with the Cotton Carnival. But she clearly lacked the qualifications to sit on the MHA executive board. Her peers at MHA were all company executives. Certainly, an African American with a business background would be more appropriate to serve in this position.

Venson maintained little power within the board; Ingram made a concerted, political move when appointing Venson. She served a conciliatory role. With an African American on the board, despite her powerlessness, the black community would have less standing ground when arguing unfair representation in the city’s influential commissions and councils.³⁴

The Memphis Housing Authority plans for the urban renewal resulted in the removal of not only declining business, but families as well. Behind the saloons, bars, and theatres on Beale Street, hundreds of Memphians lived in small, two- or three-room homes. Surveys and studies conducted by MHA revealed the project affected the residences of “about 324 families of two persons or more. 224 individual homeowners and 325 roomers live[d] within the first phase of

³⁴ “Hospital patron Edward Barry, director of St. Jude, dies at 91,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 14 September 1984, 31; “Businessmen Julius Lewis, Civil Leader: Dies at 83,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 24 December 1975, 9; “W.E. Montgomery Jr., 63, Dies,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 12 October 1973, 10; “Businessman, benefactor, Morrie Moss, dies at 85,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 10 April 1993, 21; Ruth Jacquemine, “Jubilee’s First Queen Reflects on a Life Full of Helping,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 23 March 1981, 10; Jimmie Covington, “Woman First, Negro Second, Says New Housing Advisor,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 22 November 1966, 12; Charles Goodman, “Jubilee Founder Enjoys Recounting Its Heritage,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 31 May 1978, 25; Bowman, “Beale Street Blues,” 76.

the Beale Street [project].”³⁵ Although during previous urban renewal projects MHA relocated nearly three times that number of families in a single plan, the funding-cut midway through the project impeded this process. Many families fell through cracks during the relocation process. Those who successfully relocated hardly fared better; rather than living in the rented homes directly off of Beale Street, families lived in crowded, crime- and drug-infested public housing projects. The housing project exacerbated the problems afflicting many Beale Street families. Evidently, the goal of urban renewal was not renewing Beale Street, but rather removing of families and eyesores.³⁶

The Barassi Era

By the winter of 1972, MHA completed urban renewal along Beale Street, leaving most of the lots bare. In order to justify the millions of dollars used to tear down the buildings, the city needed to recoup that money through tax revenues from businesses and residences in the area; rebuilding structures in the area and leasing them to businesses seemed financially prudent. Lacking the available capital, the city opened the task to private development companies.³⁷

By March, 1973, the Memphis Housing Authority received proposals from two firms: R.P. Barassi and Associates (RPBA)—run by whites—and Beale Street Blue Light Corporation—run by blacks. Both developers assured MHA that their plans included a variety of shops, live entertainment, and food, all while returning Beale Street to the center for black culture. Despite similar general ideas for the direction of the project, the two companies differed drastically.

³⁵ Bill Evans, “Plans Ready for Relocating Beale Street Area Residents,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 25 June 1969, 37.

³⁶ Bowman, “Beale Street Blues,” 76.

³⁷ Bowman, “Beale Street Blues,” 77-78.

Ronald Barassi, the twenty-eight year-old chief executive officer and president of the company, worked for John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company of Chicago. He had moved from Chicago to Memphis several years earlier to further his education. With his connections to several banks, Barassi assured complete financing; Barassi intended to redevelop the area simultaneously. He wanted to develop the whole project over few years and then turn the project over to the city. Developers commonly call this type of improvement “turn-key.” During the proposal stage, Warren G. Creighton, chairman of the RPBA board, estimated the cost of the project between \$60 million and \$100 million. Obviously, Barassi needed this money up front in order to complete the project concurrently.³⁸

The leadership of the Beale Street Blue Light Corporation starkly contrasted with R.P. Barassi and Associates. Although born in Newberry, South Carolina, in 1939, H.A. “Art” Gilliam moved to Memphis with his wife and started working for the locally-based Universal Life Insurance Company. By age forty-five, Gilliam earned vice presidency of the company. In addition to his career, Gilliam served on numerous boards: the Memphis Urban League, the Memphis Chamber of Commerce, and Lemoyne-Owen College. Furthermore, he regularly attended the Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church. After his death local newspapers wrote, “Every city needs men and women who are willing to donate time and talents to public affairs even after success in business or the professions has enabled them to lead comfortable lives protected from the pressures and controversies of public issues. [Gilliam] was such a person. . . . Memphis has lost a gracious gentleman and a valuable citizen.”³⁹ The chairman of Beale Street Blue Light Corporation, Phillip S. Morris, worked as a faculty member for the Memphis

³⁸ Orville Hancock, “Two Developers Compete for Blue Light Project,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 19 March 1973, 17; “MHA to Decide on Proposals For Beale St. Rejuvenation,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 20 March 1973, 15; Leon Munday, “Beale Pact Signed Over Hayes’ Protest,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 26 June 1973, 19; Bowman, “Beale Street Blues,” 78.

³⁹ “H.A. Gilliam Sr.,” *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 31 July 1973, 6.

Academy of the Arts teaching interior design. The company cultivated strong ties to the Memphis community, a devotion RPBA lacked. Accompanying these personnel differences, the company planned to finance Beale Street more conservatively. Rather than solving the development problem with the Barassi simultaneous-construction approach, Gilliam planned to rebuild Beale Street in several phases, each costing between \$5 million and \$7 million, in order to ensure feasibility and funding.⁴⁰

After seven weeks of deliberation, on April 14, 1973, the MHA executive board selected R.P. Barassi and Associates to develop Beale Street over the Beale Street Blue Light Corporation because of finances; MHA favored the “turn-key” style over Gilliam’s series of phases. The company immediately changed the project name to “Beale Street U.S.A.” The plan received a barrage of criticism from many groups concerned with the lack of African American involvement in BSUSA management. The first to reject the union between MHA and BSUSA was Ethyl Venson, chairwoman of the MHA board of commissioners and the only member to not vote for the proposal—she abstained. A few weeks later, on June, 25, 1973, when MHA officially voted on the contract-signing the project over to the BSUSA, she voted down the handover, saying, “I feel that we do not have the proper black involvement in the proposal.”⁴¹ Venson was not the only African American community leader to publicly criticize the unfair employment opportunities for blacks in the BSUSA.⁴²

A.W. Willis Jr., politician and African American activist, disagreed with MHA’s decision to involve any private company, but especially the white-dominated BSUSA. Willis, the first

⁴⁰ “H.A. Gilliam, Civic Leader,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 30 July 1973, 15; “H.A. Gilliam, 62, Dies In Jamaica” *The Commercial Appeal*, 30 July 1973, 3; “H.A. Gilliam Sr.,” Memphis Room; Hancock, “Two Developers Compete for Blue Light Project,” 17; Hancock, “MHA to Decide on Proposals For Beale St. Rejuvenation,” 15; Bowman, “Beale Street Blues,” 78.

⁴¹ Munday, “Beale Pact Signed Over Hayes’ Protest,” 19.

⁴² Orville Hancock, “MHA Approves Beale Plan,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 13 April 1973, 10; James Denley, “Delay In Sales Of Beale Land Asked By HUD,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 21 April 1973, 17; Munday, “Beale Pact Signed Over Hayes’ Protest,” 19.

African American member of the Tennessee General Assembly, and former city councilman Lewis Donelson III preferred the creation of a foundation to manage redevelopment over a private company. Willis “criticized MHA for . . . selecting a redeveloper which has little black corporate representation. ‘You can’t take the black out of Beale Street. If you do, you have perpetrated a fraud and people won’t buy it,’ he said.”⁴³ BSUSA tried to silence these criticisms by soliciting the help of Memphis celebrities.⁴⁴

Barassi and Creighton halfheartedly attempted to bring Isaac Hayes, the Stax records singer and native Memphian, onboard the project. In exchange for stock options in BSUSA, Hayes would lend his name to the project, similar to the position of Ethyl Venson in MHA. In an ideal situation for BSUSA, the singer would not have any real power. Hayes found this deal unacceptable; he wanted to influence the project with more than just his name. He withheld any participation unless BSUSA agreed to actively hire black subcontractors and workers. The two parties bartered for several weeks. Both admitted, more than money or stock options, Hayes wanted involvement from African American on all levels, from laborers to board members. He particularly pushed Barassi and Creighton to make H.A. Gilliam, the company’s former competitor for the development rights, a board member. Ultimately, BSUSA refused to acquiesce to Hayes’ demands. In a letter to the company, Hayes wrote the money enticed him but he adamantly refused “to [become] a ‘Judas’ to the black community of Memphis.”⁴⁵

Barassi later commented to the local newspapers: “We didn’t bother to answer [the letter] or anything else. We were just not going to stand for anybody demanding or trying to dictate to use

⁴³ James Denley, “Twisting Roads To Renewal Job Have Been More Intriguing Than Beale Itself,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 22 April 1973, 1.

⁴⁴ Hancock, “MHA Approves Beale Plan,” 10; Denley “Existing Roads To Renewal Job Have Been More Intriguing Than Beale Itself,” 1.

⁴⁵ Munday, “Beale Pact Signed Over Hayes’ Protest,” 19.

what we were supposed to do.”⁴⁶ After the city officially signed over the project to BSUSA, Hayes openly criticized the company and pleaded with MHA to include measures in the agreement to ensure African American involvement he had hoped to guarantee with his failed partnership with the developer. No such assurance ever materialized into the contract between the city and BSUSA. By July, 1973, the power to redevelop the historically African American Beale Street transferred from the majority –white Memphis Housing Authority to the majority-white R.P. Barassi and Associates and Beale Street U.S.A.⁴⁷

The Memphis Black Political Council attacked the racially unilateral actions of the Memphis Housing Authority and the R.P. Barassi and Associates. The council consisted of five presidents of local political clubs: C.B. Myers (Eighth District Democratic Club), Charlie Morris (Kennedy Democratic Club), Clarence Harris (Shelby County Republican Party Minority Division), Melvin Robinson (Shelby County Democratic Club), O.Z. Evers (Unity League of Shelby County). On August 2, 1973, the Council publicly stated its demands to MHA: suspend all action on Beale Street, reassess the entire case, and review the selection of RPBA as the developer.

Council members, particularly Charlie Morris, questioned the Memphis Housing Authority’s actions and asked tough questions: “Who else than black people themselves—than the sons and daughters of those who brought Beale Street into historical being—are more aesthetically equipped to recreate and reconstruct the unique nature of Beale Street? Who else in universal judgment should have this right other than the black people themselves, whose inherent

⁴⁶ Munday, “Beale Pact Signed Over Hayes’ Protest,” 19.

⁴⁷ Hancock, “Beale Pact Gets MHA Approval,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 26 June 1973, 19; Munday, “Beale Pact Signed Over Hayes’ Protest,” 19.

talents, only, can constitute real know-how.”⁴⁸ O.Z. Evers echoed Morris’ statements about the ownership of Beale Street. Evers believed that blacks and immigrants created the area and those groups should reap the financial benefits of any redevelopment. The Black Political Council also recognized the problems with management of the government entity. Morris “accused MHA of ‘not being disposed toward the black populace of Memphis’ and of favoring ‘systematic racial discrimination over judgment, ineptness over integrity and money over morality. . . .Beale Street in thought, in action, in spirit, in use and to some extent in fact, has belonged to black people as long as there has been a Beale Street.”⁴⁹ Morris and his compatriots saw the white-led redevelopment as an attack on African American culture. If a council of all blacks were charged by the city to redevelop the three Civil War parks in Memphis—Jefferson Davis Park, Nathan Bedford Forest Monument, and Confederate Park—many whites would be furious. The Black Political Council was similarly outraged at the prospect of BSUSA developing a culturally-significant piece of African American history.

The Black Political Council helped transform the redevelopment project into a Civil Rights issue. The Council presented their criticisms in racially-charged city, which still felt the pains King’s assassination from five years earlier. The assassination may not have directly affected Beale Street’s decline, as aforementioned, but it certainly provides a highly provocative context for the redevelopment project. Council members not only wished to protect Beale Street’s cultural significance but also the African American entitlement to continue to write the narrative of the street. Self-determination is at the heart of the Civil Rights Movement, clearly tagging Beale Street redevelopment as a obvious extension. The group threatened legal action

⁴⁸ Johnnie Vaughan, “Black Council May Go to Court for Beale Street,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 2 August 1973, 16.

⁴⁹ Vaughan, “Black Council May Go to Court for Beale Street,” 16.

against MHA and RPBA in order to cease any white-controlled redevelopment, which provided a pre-text for a more racially diverse Beale Street redeveloper.⁵⁰

The Beale Street National Historic Foundation: Simultaneously Progressive and Regressive

The agreement between the city and the R.P Barassi and Associates ended shortly after it began. A few weeks after his confident proclamation about the cost of the project, Barassi halved the prediction. By the spring of 1974, the banks pulled out of the project. Ironically, the aspect of RPBA that led to its selection by MHA—the financing—failed miserably, leaving the executives at the company to point the finger at outside variables: “Unfortunately, shortly after the designation of [BSUSA] as preferred developer, the United States in general, and the Memphis area in particular, were hit by a severe economic decline which made private financing of the Beale Street project impossible.”⁵¹ Interestingly, the financiers of this project were not local banks; most of them were headquartered in Pittsburgh and Chicago, so the Memphis economy could not have played a large part in Barassi’s financial woes. Some theorized that Barassi’s inexperience and lack of “financial solidity” caused banks to grow weary of the project. Ethyl Venson concurred and after BSUSA folded, she criticized Barassi: “[He] has certainly had every chance in the world to perform. He has not performed . . . I have not had confidence at

⁵⁰ David Flynn, “Current Beale St. Plan To Be Battled by Group,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 3 August 1973, 23; “Black Developers Sought for Beale,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 2 August 1973, 42; “BPC Attacks Beale Project,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 31 July 1973, 3; Vaughan, “Black Council May Go to Court for Beale Street,” 16; Bowman, “Beale Street Blues,” 78.

⁵¹ Warren G. Creighton to Dr. Charles L. Dinkins and the Beale Street National Historic Foundation, 29 July 1976. Transcript in the hand of Jocelyn Wurzburg, Special Collections and Mississippi Valley Collection, Ned R. McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

any time that he would perform.”⁵² The pressure from outside groups and individuals over the lack of racial diversity surely impacted the failure of the company to independently redevelop.⁵³

On April 26, 1974, Mayor Wyeth Chandler announced a plan to create a nonprofit foundation to develop the famous district, the precise proposal Lewis Donelson III and A.W. Willis Jr. suggested during the MHA developer-search two years earlier. BSUSA agreed to transfer development rights to a foundation in exchange for a management contract and the priority to lease the property to other businesses. This new proposal would hypothetically foster black involvement and investment by placing African Americans in positions to make powerful decisions, considerations MHA’s urban renewal and Barassi’s development never made.⁵⁴

The Beale Street National Historic Foundation (BSNHF) consisted of community leaders nominated by Mayor Chandler and approved by the City Council. The purpose of the quasi-governmental organization was to “recreate historic Beale Street and to develop the Beale Street area as an economic, social, and physical asset to the people of Memphis and as a national historic cultural center for the enshrinement of the contribution Black people have made to the heritage of the United States, [and] to promote the common good of the City of Memphis and its inhabitants.”⁵⁵ Officials planned for the anywhere from twenty to thirty-three members. The organization had officers, an Executive Committee, and a series of small, 3- to 5-person committees: Cultural and Historical; Development, Finance; Fiscal and Property; Management, Government Liaison; and Marketing. Ronald Terry, chairman of First Tennessee National Corporation board, served as the first chairman. At first Mayor Chandler tapped thirty-three

⁵² Leon Munday, “Plans For Beale Given Help,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 20 August 1974, 17.

⁵³ Creighton to Dinkins, 29 July 1976, Wurzburg; Hancock, “Two Developers Compete for Blue Light Project,” 17; Hancock, “MHA to Decide on Proposals For Beale St. Rejuvenation,” 15; Bowman, “Beale Street Blues,” 78.

⁵⁴ Jefferson Riker, “Beale Street Development Shifts to Nonprofit Group”; *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 27 April 1974, 1.

⁵⁵ Beale Street National Historic Foundation, “By-Laws,” November 1975. Transcript in the hand of Jocelyn Wurzburg, Special Collections and Mississippi Valley Collection, Ned R. McWhorter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

trustees, a number later reduced to twenty-two, including thirteen blacks and nine whites, easily surpassing the racially inequitable staffs of both MHA and BSUSA. Would this panel, where blacks held majority-numbers, promote the positive change needed along Beale Street?⁵⁶

Unlike the racially polarizing actions of the Memphis Housing Authority and Beale Street U.S.A., the Beale Street National Historic Foundation sometimes seemed like a progressive organization, fighting for the involvement of blacks and the preservation of culture and history. At other times they resembled the two previous developers, interested in creating a tourist version of the area suitable for white families. Many factors indicated that BSNHF was the balanced organization that individuals like Ethyl Venson and Isaac Hayes and groups like BPC had demanded for years. Many of the trustees were African American, including Roberta Church, Frances Hooks, and Sammy Davis Jr. The organization even made an effort to hire minorities for the day-to-day operation; Aubrey Howard, an African American graduate of Rhodes College, worked as the executive director. The goals of BSNHF furthered this point: “Preserve, where possible, and reflect the black heritage of Beale Street Area . . . Support and encourage minority involvement in the planning, construction, and ongoing operation of the Beale Street area.”⁵⁷ The organization even drafted a resolution which stated, “The participation of minority contractors . . . is essential to the goal of promoting the common good and the general welfare of the City of Memphis, in that black businesses that have a vested personal interest in the Project’s success would participate to the advantage of Memphis as a whole and

⁵⁶ Beale Street National Historic Foundation, “Board of Trustees,” July 1975. Transcript in the hand of Jocelyn Wurzburg, Special Collections and Mississippi Valley Collection, Ned R. McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN; BSNHF, “By-Laws,” November 1975; Bowman, “Beale Street Blues,” Memphis Room, 78.

⁵⁷ Beale Street National Historic Foundation, “Minutes of Meeting,” 29 October, 1975. Transcript in the hand of Jocelyn Wurzburg, Special Collections and Mississippi Valley Collection, Ned R. McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN; BSNHF, “By-Laws,” November 1975.

the black community in particular.”⁵⁸ The Foundation nearly went to court with BSUSA to protect this resolution.⁵⁹

The calculated decision by the Beale Street National Historic Foundation to include minorities in all phases and levels of the project extended to all private companies hired, including Beale Street U.S.A. By July, 1976, relations between the two entities were extremely strained. BSUSA claimed over \$100,000 in fees—of which, \$280.09 had been paid—owed by BSNHF. The Foundation claimed that the private firm failed to hire a “competent” staff, which really meant “diverse” staff. The contract between the two groups included provisions for hiring African Americans. Misunderstanding the situation, or perhaps refusing to consider race an important qualification for staff members, BSUSA fired back in a series of letters to the Foundation, defending their staff and threatening to sue if the Foundation neglected to pay. The city eventually mediated a deal between the two organizations: the Foundation paid BSUSA the fines and Barassi and his company involvement left the project. All these actions presumably characterize a consortium dedicated to improvements in race relations. However, the racial tension and accusations that plagued the Memphis Housing Authority and Beale Street U.S.A. also cursed the new foundation.⁶⁰

After seventeen months of control by the Beale Street National Historic Foundation, in December, 1975, African Americans began protesting the Foundation. WDIA radio, the first radio station in the United States with all-black programming, aired a call-to-action by one of the afternoon-commute disc jockeys. The message elicited memories of Beale Street, the famous

⁵⁸ Beale Street National Historic Foundation, A Resolution Seeking to Involve Minority Contractors in the Beale Street Redevelopment Project (Memphis, TN: GPO 1976). Transcript in the hand of Jocelyn Wurzburg, Special Collections and Mississippi Valley Collection, Ned R. McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

⁵⁹ Beale Street National Historic Foundation, “Minutes of Meeting,” 18 November 1976. Transcript in the hand of Jocelyn Wurzburg, Special Collections and Mississippi Valley Collection, Ned R. McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN; BSNHF, “Board of Trustees,” July 1975; BSNHF, “By-Laws,” November 1975.

⁶⁰ “Beale Street: Why?” *The Commercial Appeal*, 12 April 1976, 6; Creighton to Dinkins, 29 July 1976, Wurzburg.

musicians, and the personalities that sprang the black community. The diatribe criticized the Foundation's slow pace and claimed committee members concealed their written reports in order to avoid confrontation with African Americans attending the public meetings. Most importantly, like previous censures of MHA and BSUSA, the attack on the Foundation deplored the lack of racial diversity. The DJ argued that selecting blacks as trustees was nothing more than an act of pageantry to placate the black community and that the white businessmen on the Foundation routinely ignored the African American trustees' presence.⁶¹

White members of the Beale Street National Historic Foundation confirmed these criticisms. David Bowman, Cultural Committee member, cast serious allegations against leaders of the Foundation, particularly Ronald Terry: "[He] headed the Foundation's Executive Committee, and from the beginning, he and several other white committee chairmen dominated the meetings and set policy; the black board members tended to sit back and follow the leaders, no doubt awed by the head of the billion-dollar bank."⁶² Jocelyn Wurzburg, chairwoman of the Cultural and Historical Committee, affirms Bowman's allegations. Although the Foundation recruited an interracial panel, the opinions of the white leaders Bowman referred to shaped the policy: "The thrust of the foundation and its developers, was trying to figure out how to make it white enough so that white people would come down here. . . . They were just scared to death that there was something called a "tilt point." If it's too black then whites won't come. They were just terribly preoccupied with that."⁶³ The race of Beale Street's target patrons affected the Foundation's policy. Architectural firms hired by the Foundation to develop plans clearly had race in mind. Firms placed entrances and exits to Beale Street only on the northern end, not the

⁶¹ Radio broadcast, WDIA 1070 AM, 28 December 1976. Transcript in the hand of Jocelyn Wurzburg, Special Collections and Mississippi Valley Collection, Ned R. McWherter Library, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

⁶² Bowman, "Beale Street Blues," 78-79.

⁶³ Jocelyn Wurzburg, interview with author, tape recording, Memphis, TN., 31 June 2006.

southern end. Whites primarily lived in the areas north of the district, while blacks inhabited the southern neighborhoods. In order to entice whites and exclude blacks, the architectural firms strategically placed the access points. Wurzburg concluded that despite the attempts to diversify the Foundation, hire black contractors, and force BSUSA to select a “competent” staff, ultimately, “[The Foundation’s leaders] really wanted to make a white version of Beale Street.”⁶⁴

Wurzburg, a Human Rights and Civil Rights activist, and her small following opposed this policy in the monthly meetings. She objected to the recreation of Beale Street as a white translation of the historically African American district: “I kept thinking ‘What’s the matter with the black tourist dollar?’ Memphis, which is centrally-located in the country, drivable from all sides, why not we have a couple of black couturiers in New York and Paris, designing clothes? What if they had designer’s shops on Beale Street in Memphis? Why don’t we market it black?”⁶⁵ The population of Memphis could support an entertainment district developed for African Americans; the 1980 US census revealed 47.6 percent of the Memphis population was black. “If the food is good and music is good, white people will come. . . . All we need to do is make sure there is good food and good music. . . . The best thing that could happen is that Beale Street would be the Mecca of interracial entertainment and socializing with the music and everything else.”⁶⁶ Wurzburg envisioned a return to Beale Street’s heyday of the 1920s, when African Americans and Jewish, German, and Italian immigrants congregated on the streets. Regrettably, the Foundation’s leadership failed to see Wurzburg’s vision and was dedicated to the black exclusion policy; Wurzburg left BSNHF after two years. At the end of the 1970s, the Foundation prepared to finish the project that the Memphis Housing Authority had started in

⁶⁴ Wurzburg, interview.

⁶⁵ Wurzburg, interview.

⁶⁶ Wurzburg, interview.

1968 and the Beale Street U.S.A. continued in 1973. Beale Street would be the tourist attraction for Memphis and it would be for whites.⁶⁷

Afterward: John Elkington and Performa Entertainment Real-estate

In the late 1960s, John Elkington moved to Memphis to work for the Tennessee Community Management Company; by the mid-1970s he sat on the BSNHF's Fiscal and Property Management committee. After BSUSA released all rights to the redevelopment project, the Foundation floundered and stalled. Working primarily in housing developments, in 1981 Elkington revamped the old Lenox School, a 1909-school house in the Cooper-Young district of Memphis, into high-priced condominiums. When Mayor Wyeth Chandler asked for his involvement as the commercial developer, the thirty-two year old jumped at the challenge and created Perform Entertainment Real Estate.

Unlike like many of his predecessors, Elkington immediately sought the advice of black community leaders, interviewing nearly one-hundred African American Memphians before the project broke ground. Using the vivid memories of the men and women he interviewed, Elkington, although an outsider being both white and not from Memphis, established ties to the community unlike previous developer R.P. Barassi. Elkington created three goals for the project: "We are going to return commerce to the street. We are going to make sure it becomes the music center of the region. . . . We are going make sure there are no barriers, real or imaginary, that would be setup or visible to anybody."⁶⁸ The plans to build specific, racially-motivated access

⁶⁷ "1980 Census of Population, Number of Inhabitants" in U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census [database on-line] (Washington, D.C.: GPO, accessed 25 July 2006), available from http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1980a_tnABC-01.pdf.

⁶⁸ John Elkington, "Healthy Bodies, Healthy Buildings," interview by Carol Coletta, *Smart City Radio*, 13 July 2006.

points to the street vanished. Similarly, Performa actively recruited African American businesses, managers and employees to return the middle-class community to Beale Street. By July, 2006, African Americans owned 35 percent of the businesses on the street. The Beale Street of the twenty-first-century includes a mix of old and new, authentic and modern. One of the original Beale Street inhabitants, A. Schwab's General Store, still attracts customers with an eclectic mix of voodoo potions, toiletries, and memorabilia. Another veteran tenant on Beale Street, Dyer's, still serves burgers and milk shakes like it did when it opened in 1912. From the musical days of Beale Street, two newer establishments reside on Beale Street: B.B. King's Blues Club and Mr. Handy's Blues Hall. Performa Entertainment Real Estate also attracted international chain restaurants and bars to the area, like Hard Rock Café and Coyote Ugly Saloon, started November 16, 1997 and May 17, 2006, respectively.⁶⁹

Conclusions Drawn from Beale Street Redevelopment

The history of Beale Street redevelopment is one of a series of conflicts. Perhaps the most pervasive conflict individuals and groups struggled with was capital versus culture. Beale Street represented two distinct ideals: economic gain and cultural watershed. During the urban renewal phase, from 1968 to 1973, MHA officials forced white and black store owners to decide between keeping their shops, their way of life alive or sell out to the city government. With a few exceptions—A. Schwaub's and a few others—most owners relinquished control of Beale Street, putting the future of the area's African American culture in jeopardy. This situation surely caused much strife for the business owners, many of whom grew up in the neighborhood

⁶⁹ "Merchants," in Beale Street Merchants Association [on-line] (Memphis, TN: accessed 25 July 2006), available from <http://www.bealestreetmerchants.com/merchants.html>; "Coyote Ugly Memphis," Ugly Inc. [on-line] (New Orleans: accessed 25 July 2006) available from <http://www.coyoteuglysaloon.com/memphis/index.html>; Elkington, Interview.

and managed second and third generation operations. Capital and culture represent two poles on a hazy spectrum. Few sat on one pole or the other; like many of life's toughest decisions, most of the owners constantly moved throughout the gamut of possibilities until MHA-imposed deadlines forced action.

The dichotomy between capital and culture affected the redevelopers. All three groups, MHA, BSUSA, and BSNHF grappled with the questions this conflict poised: How much culture is too much culture? At what point does culture make redevelopment unprofitable? How can we encourage private development if Beale Street is simply a series of museums? Will Beale Street compete with the strips malls being constructed east of the downtown? Race certainly affected this conflict. Most developers saw an African American oriented project economically untenable. Jocelyn Wurzburg experienced firsthand that even the partially-progressive BSNHF largely disregarded the African American dollar.

Intertwined with capital and culture was another conflict: authenticity versus accessibility. For most blacks and some whites, authenticity was paramount to the success of the project; the 1970s version of Beale Street should closely resemble the 1920s. The area must have bars, pawnshops, blues music, street vendors and performers. Sights, sounds and smells of the modern Beale Street ought to catapult the visitor back to the heyday. Some felt the only way to achieve this ideal was for blacks to control the project top-to-bottom. Since their parents and grandparents built Beale Street, they felt entitled to the opportunity to rebuild and control its destiny. The entire project could and should be developed, financed, and operated by African Americans. However, John Elkington reached a high level of authenticity by merely listening to the opinions of many African Americans he interviewed. Involvement by blacks did not necessarily mean authenticity. The project needed the opinions and visions of African

Americans, something the redevelopment plan never gained until Elkington joined. Furthermore, authenticity to Beale Street did not necessarily exclude whites from the area; in fact, as Wurzburg provocatively claimed, “Every white person dreams of being a black person on Saturday night at least once in their life. Here we have a chance to give whites a chance to experience ‘blackness.’”⁷⁰ Wurzburg and some of her colleagues saw Beale Street as an opportunity for whites to understand a completely different culture, less like a tourist attraction and more like visiting a foreign country.

Obviously, many whites disagreed with this sentiment. Starting with Mayor Orgill and ending with Ronald Terry, the goal for redevelopment was replication, not authenticity. Accessibility to the white middle- and upper-classes remained the goal throughout the process for many individuals. The success of the project hinged on the developer’s ability to attract whites into an area Wurzburg believed “always had the connotation of being black and white people [would not] go.”⁷¹ Those who pushed for white accessibility foresaw a Beale Street of tourism, regardless of the details of the content. Developers at one point even strongly considered an open-air mall until the National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation nixed the plan, much to the dismay of the Foundation’s leaders.⁷²

Besides the local conflicts the Beale Street redevelopment project created, we must recognize it as another chapter in the struggle for Civil Rights in America. Many people forget that the Movement did not end with *Brown vs. Board of Education* or the Sanitation Workers Strike. No, the Civil Rights Movement continued into the 1970s and beyond; it continues into the twenty-first-century. The rebirth of Beale Street and the fight for African American inclusion in that process remains integral to our understanding of Memphis’ role in the Civil

⁷⁰ Wurzburg Interview.

⁷¹ Wurzburg Interview.

⁷² Bowman, “Beale Street Blues,” 79.

Rights Movement. It was not just the site of King's assassination, but the ground level of civil rights put into practice.

Almost forty years since the beginning of urban renewal we must ask this question: which ideal won: authenticity or accessibility, capital or culture? Some enthusiasts like historian Fred Hay detest the reborn Beale Street: "Beale Street is not a shrine to the blues but, like most popular American attractions, is a shrine to consumer culture. It flattens that which is layered, conceals that which is distinctive, dulls that which is brilliant, and glitters what is subdued. It celebrates sameness and slights diversity. . . . It has been made safe for America but has lost its social meaning and no longer serves the vital role it once placed in sustaining African American culture."⁷³ David Bowman echoes Hay's analysis of the process: "The city's leaders wanted remake [Beale] in their own image, to falsify it, to create Beale Street toned-down, cleaned up, and guaranteed safe for the white, middle-class tourist. . . . Ironically, the . . . [the MHA], an agency created . . . to provide public housing, took charge of turning Beale Street into a white man's fantasy of black culture."⁷⁴ When seeing the Hard Rock Café and Coyote Ugly Bar along the same street that harbored blacks from Jim Crow seventy years earlier, Hay and Bowman make their point. However, the state of Beale Street may not be as dire as they believe. True, these modern bars with silly themes appear out of place. But, rather than compare the new Beale Street to the perfect version, perhaps Hay and Bowman should remember how the various officials in the 1960s and 1970s wanted Beale Street to look. The whole area could look be completely historically inaccurate, especially with a modern strip mall instead of bars and clubs. Furthermore, to believe that city government, private developers, or anyone, for that matter,

⁷³ Hay, *Goin' Back to Sweet Memphis: Conversations with the Blues*, xxv-xxvi.

⁷⁴ Bowman, "Beale Street Blues," 76.

could have recreated the social and historical factors that forged Beale Street is pure naivety. For modern Beale Street to work, culture *must* work concurrently with capital.

African American Beale Street started under the oppression of slavery and the racial tension of Jim Crow. It was always an escape from the hardships of life on the Mississippi Delta. Granted, some of the troubles that early nineteenth-century African Americans experienced no longer exist. But life can still damper and cripple a person's spirit. Just because time has passed does not mean living is any easier. The new Beale Street is still busy seven days a week, where patrons go drink alcohol, listen to live music, eat barbeque, and escape from the adversities of life on the fourth Chickasaw Bluff. Beale Street, a place to escape one's troubles, is still alive.