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Jimmie Tucker (left) and Juan Self are the founding principals of Self + Tucker Architects. (Memphis News/Houston Coffee)



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BUILDING HERITAGE

Mixing the city's hidden history with new growth

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The basement of the Universal Life Insurance building, a Memphis landmark at Danny Thomas Boulevard and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue, is still defined by the intersection of overhead ventilation shafts and pipes.

Other basement rooms are still a work in progress or a staging area for the full re-birth of the temple-like building with Egyptian symbols.

But those in the basement for the formal re-opening of the building in April were greeted by a rousing welcome from the building's past: James Hawkins. Hawkins is the self-described "last of the Walker team" – specifically A. Maceo Walker, the son of Uni-

versal Life founder Dr. J.E. Walker.

Hawkins quickly had Universal Life employees in the audience stand for applause as he extolled the company's work ethic and status as a landmark in black-owned business success during the era of Jim Crow and racial segregation by law and by force.

"Life insurance is the only contract on God's earth by which the very thing that creates the need for money creates money," he said.

When he finished two minutes later, you could picture a new group of Universal Life salesmen going out to collect monthly insurance premiums door-to-door the way the company operated long ago.

The insurance company, once the largest black-owned insurance company in

the nation, closed at the dawn of the 21st century after absorbing its competitors and adapting to changes in the business that eventually overtook it.

And a few years later as the solid pale building that opened in 1949 sat vacant, Jimmie Tucker and Juan Self launched an effort to bring it back to life for other uses, including as the headquarters of their architecture and design firm.

They saw the names and departments that remained painted on some of the frosted glass panes of the wooden doors. They were excited to get a schematic of who was where in the late '40s and '50s before premiums were collected by mail, the billing generated by mainframe computers that took up entire rooms – data on cards not to be "spindled, folded or mutilated."

"I'm a native Memphian, so I understand the history of Universal Life and what it's meant to the community," Tucker said later.

As a child, his paper route, with its own monthly door-to-door collection process, included a member of the Walker family.

"Its Egyptian style is unique -- the location of the building," Tucker said. "With our appreciation for historic buildings, we just thought that there ought to be a way we can bring this project back."

There were a lot of changes from the original game plan than he and Self, also a native Memphian, anticipated.

"We were somewhat naïve," Tucker said. "This was our first redevelopment project, our first project as developers. We had no idea what it was going to take to make this project happen."

The building is a new symbol for the ambitious \$280-million South City redevelopment plan that takes in a lot more real estate than the immediate area. It extends south of FedExForum into South Memphis.

The building is one of 53 sites on the Heritage Trail – a set of historic sites and museums specifically about the black experience in the city's nearly 200-year history. The trail's boundaries include the area bordered by Beale Street on the north, Main Street on the west, Crump Boulevard

on the south and Walnut Street on the east.

The trail features several different "loops" by subject matter – civil rights, business-entertainment, historic commerce and historic residential – ranging from places that vanished long ago to those still in use today.

Historic sites include the Clayborn Temple, the Mason Temple, the National Civil Rights Museum, the Chisca Hotel, the former Tri-State Bank, the Hunt-Phelan House, Mount Olive Cathedral CME Church, R.S. Lewis & Sons Funeral Home, and the site of the McCleave Clinic that once stood on Vance Avenue.

It is history that has been hiding in plain sight. And for 30 years, Elaine Turner has been connecting the dots with her Heritage Tours business.

It was Turner who led a quick and abbreviated bus tour last month for the media and elected officials. The quick tour featured numerous sites that Turner scrambled to point to and highlight as the bus moved slowly past.

The trail features traditional markers, beacons that trigger SmartPhone alerts and an app for a deeper explanation and a dive into the digital historical record.

Turner herself is mentioned in one of the newer markers in the area – a plaque on South Main Street near Gayoso that notes the history of Turner and her sisters who were arrested at numerous sit-ins to integrate segregated businesses on Main and elsewhere during the early 1960s.

For Turner the history she highlighted isn't remote. That's also the case for Rosalind Withers, whose Withers Collection Museum and Gallery on Beale Street features the photographic archives of her father, Ernest Withers.

His photographs of black life in Memphis from the late 1940s to his death in 2006 are sometimes the only reference point for where some of the sites were and what they and the people of that Memphis looked like in those settings.

Two weeks after the first Heritage Trail tour, thousands of people filled nearby Robert Church Park for the annual Af-



Dr. Joseph Edison Walker and his wife, Leilia Walker, as photographed by Hooks Brothers Photography.

(Memphis and Shelby County Public Libraries)



Inside the newly renovated Universal Life Insurance building at the corner of Danny Thomas Boulevard and MLK Avenue. Self + Tucker Architects designed the renovations to bring a contemporary aesthetic to the historic space.

(Memphis News/Houston Colfield)

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cover story

rica in April festival, its live music echoing off the stone façade of Universal Life.

The festival's large crowds are an indication of the trail's possibilities in an area coming to life. The southwest corner of MLK Avenue and Danny Thomas Boulevard is about to come alive with construction after its terrain has been raised and leveled.

Universal Life's function is as a place of business in the present. But it's also a trailhead of sorts for how the past informs the future and becomes the present.

"This is a historic structure that is a part of the fabric of this city," said Paul Young, the city's director of housing and community development, who is overseeing the development of Heritage Trail and the larger South City area the trail is an integral part of.

South City has quickly amassed its own history.

The project with \$280 million in private investment has had several names – Triangle Noir, Heritage Trail and South City – and is on its third mayoral administration at City Hall.

It has included the demolition of the city's last two large public housing developments – Cleaborn Homes and Foote Homes – once identical brick complexes on opposite sides of South Lauderdale from each other.

Cleaborn is now the vision of what Foote will look like once its demolition and remake as a mixed-use mixed-income development is completed. Different styles of housing – single family homes, multi-family of several stories, some retail in the larger area.

The goal of the city's move away from the large public housing developments, made possible by federal funds, began in the late 1990s with a goal described by then-Mayor Willie Herenton and Housing and Community Development director Robert Lipscomb as "the end of public housing."

The beginning of the end, according to Young and others who are now overseeing the transition of Foote Homes, didn't focus enough of what would become of the tenants who moved out of public housing into privately owned rental housing where the rent was paid with federal subsidies.

Wrap-around social services for those residents are a more noticeable feature of what happened at Cleaborn Homes and what is happening at Foote Homes. But Young has said finding housing for the Foote Home families has been difficult in the transition.

Parts of the Foote Homes infrastructure are still standing for now in stark relief to the open flat surfaces where near exact replicas of the one and two-story



Attendees of this month's annual Africa in April Festival in Robert R. Church Park Saturday, April 21, lend promise that the Heritage Trail area could become an economic haven for African-Americans once again.

(Memphis News/Houston Corfield)

brick buildings once stood. Those remaining have no front doors, only plywood rectangles in their doorways and window spaces.

The federal funding to bring down Foote Homes didn't come easily – toward the end of the Obama administration under a new program called Choice Neighborhoods that emphasized the transition of public housing residents more than the old HOPE VI program that funded the other demolitions and reuses did.

It wasn't until the end of the mayoral administration of A C Wharton that the city got the federal funding it sought – \$30 million. It wasn't until his successor Jim Strickland was in office and inheriting the details of the move-out of nearly 400 families in Foote Homes that he also found out the city had to put up \$30 million of its own money to get the Choice Neighborhoods grant. The city quickly came up with an allocation of \$6 million over five years that continues toward a scheduled but tentative start of construction at Foote Homes in May.

For much of the ramp up to that the details have been about the immediate future more than the historic settled past.

The trail isn't the name of the whole ambitious development any longer. The trail is nevertheless a passage through a malleable and volatile present seeking a future rooted in a hard fought stability before the city's racial majority changed toward the end of the 20th century.

In Jim Crow Memphis there were three institutions in the black community that allowed for some

kind of independence from the whims and changing positions of the white power structure – insurance, funerals and churches.

It wasn't complete independence.

Walker and his family came to Memphis in 1920 from Indianapolis, Mississippi, where he had a medical practice. He and partners formed Universal Life in 1923. He was also the founder of Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church at about the same time as well as the Memphis Negro Chamber of Commerce.

The institutions Walker created and helped to create came about and endured with risks that are hard to imagine today although the economic goals and ambitions remain.

A new generation of African-American business and political leaders have in the last two or three years invoked the example of Walker and others who persevered in Jim Crow Memphis as part of the renewed drive for black economic growth in a city that is majority African-American in virtually every respect except the share of business – private and government – that goes to black businesses.

Rodney Strong, a Memphis native and head of an Atlanta consulting firm that works on minority business issues, pointed out those in the room at a 2016 meeting who were descendants of or connected by community to those who built black communities and institutions under much more difficult conditions and then pushed for more change after World War II.

He included the example of Walker Homes, the South Memphis housing development made possible by Walker and financed by the Tri-State Bank Walker was also a founder of.

Walker wasn't without controversy. He led a Democratic political organization at a time when most African-Americans were Republicans and former Memphis mayor and political boss E.H. Crump was at the top of the Democratic pyramid locally and statewide.

In "Memphis in the Great Depression," author Roger Biles terms Walker's leadership of the Memphis Branch NAACP "timorous" and "closely tied to the white city government."

By Biles' view, Walker replaced Robert R. Church Jr. as the city's dominant business and political leader after Crump's purge of the Church family in the 1940s. Church breathed life into the moribund Republican Party in Memphis and also founded the Memphis Branch NAACP.

Yet, it was Walker who fueled the separate black campaign structure in Memphis in the late 1940s for Democratic U.S. Senate contender Estes Kefauver in Kefauver's successful challenge of incumbent Democratic Sen. Tom Stewart.

Crump had declared himself a Dixiecrat in the rebellion by pro-segregation Democrats that led to the city going for Dixiecrat presidential contender Strom Thurmond in the 1948 presidential election. And he was a vocal foe of Kefauver.

The next year, Walker ran for

Memphis City Schools board – the first African-American candidate for local office since the dawn of Jim Crow and the overthrow of black officials elected during the Reconstruction era following the Civil War.

Walker lost but the loss opened the doors for other black candidates throughout the 1950s as the Crump era faded with Kefauver's 1948 victory and then ended with Crump's death in 1954. Four years later, at the age of 79, Walker was shot to death in his office by one of the co-founders of Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church in a dispute over an \$8,000 loan.

"Memphis wouldn't be what it is today without this building and the people that came through this building," said Young, the city housing and community development director. "When this building is activated in the next couple of months, you will see people coming in and getting critical support that they need to realize their dreams."

"There is no city in America that can replicate what Memphis is and what it's been," he said. "And we want to make sure that we own that."

In the basement at Universal Life, Harold Shaw, the great grandson of J.E. Walker, said: "What was dead in the water is now alive."

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