

"Point of View"

February 22, 1981

Interview with Fluker Walton, Sr.,
R. L. Ramsey, Elizabeth Green, and
Jesse McCants by Booker T. Scruggs

Gift of Booker T. Scruggs, 1982.

PREFACE

This manuscript is a transcript of an interview conducted for the Oral History Project of the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Public Library. The purpose of the project is to capture the first-hand accounts of the social history of the Chattanooga area in the twentieth century.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that the transcript reflects the patterns of the spoken, rather than the written, word. The information is presented as it was recalled by the interviewee at the occasion of the interview and has been edited only for clarity.

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007 On behalf of the Adult Education Council, I am Booker T. Scruggs, and welcome to Point of View. Each year on Point of View it is our custom to provide one week of programs concerning Black History Month, and February is designated as Black History Month. Today our guests will be representatives of the East Ninth Street Community Development Corporation. As many of you know, this is an organization which is designed to help revitalize East Ninth Street which has been the hub of the black community as designated here in Chattanooga.

114 But, before we do that we would like to take you to Blackford Street, which is not too far from East Ninth Street, and talk with an individual who can remember [much] of the history of East Ninth Street. He is going to talk about some of the businesses that were there, some of the professions that were on East Ninth Street then, and sort of bring us up to our guests that we will meet in just a few moments. So let us now meet Mr. Fluker Walton, Sr. Mr. Walton, we would like to welcome you to Point of View on this very special program that we're doing on black history and the black history of Chattanooga. Let's find out a little something about you before we talk about specifically the black history of Chattanooga as it relates to Ninth Street, East Ninth Street and West Ninth Street. How old are you, by the way?

Walton: I was born 1890, the 26th of August.

Scruggs: So I guess those of us who know a little bit about arithmetic can figure out that you'll be somewhere around 91 this year, right?

Walton: Well, I will be in August.

Scruggs: Okay. So, we're going to be talking about some of the things that you remember about Chattanooga as it relates to our subject matter today. Let's talk about Ninth Street, both East and West. There may be some persons who don't realize the fact that there was a West Ninth Street at one particular time. What are some of your earliest recollections about East Ninth Street?

024 Walton: East Ninth Street was just about like West Ninth Street when it was West Ninth Street. But when they remodeled West Ninth Street all the black businesses over on West Ninth Street, over in there, they were all eliminated.

Scruggs: That also eliminated one of the hospitals, didn't it, Carver Hospital? Wasn't it on East Ninth Street?

Walton: Yes.

Scruggs: Tell us a little bit about what you remember about Carver Hospital.

- Walton: 028 Well, Carver, as I remember when it was first established, it was for the wealthy white folks. It was called the Ellis Hospital then. But as people moved away from places, it went down.
- Scruggs: And then it became a black hospital?
- Walton: The Erlanger Hospital was crowded so much, pretty old, and the city put the black people that used Erlanger Hospital over there, and they called it Carver Hospital.
- Scruggs: Could blacks go to Erlanger Hospital after Carver Hospital was established for blacks?
- Walton: They could go back before then.
- Scruggs: Yes. But Carver was primarily for blacks at that particular time?
- Walton: 041 Yes. Some of the politicians claimed that that's the reason the city took over Carver, so they'd have a place for the blacks to go, to keep them from going to Erlanger.
- Scruggs: I see. There was another hospital within the East Ninth Street area, I believe it was on Eighth Street. It was called Wheeler Hospital. Is that correct?
- Walton: Waldens Hospital. At Eighth and Douglas.
- Scruggs: Okay. Now, was this also primarily for blacks.
- Walton: Yes. It was built by blacks and owned by blacks, the black doctors, all the black doctors. But the white doctors patronized it too when their customers wanted to go there.
- Scruggs: Now we've heard about the shortage of black doctors in Chattanooga presently. Were there a number of doctors specifically in the Ninth Street area, let's say, around the turn of the century.
- Walton: Not only around, all around -- I don't know, I guess it would take me ten or fifteen minutes to enumerate if I could think about them. But there were just any number of black doctors. They were good doctors, they had good training.
- Scruggs: 052 Mr. Walton, what about the entertainment in the Ninth Street area? East Ninth Street, I understand, has been kind of an entertainment center for blacks throughout the years. What do you remember about the entertainment there as it relates to maybe the theaters, movies, and so forth?

Walton: Two shows on East Ninth Street, one at the corner of Ninth and Houston, I guess that would be about the year of 1904 or '05 or '06, somewhere in there. At Ninth and Houston there was a lawyer, J. P. Easley, which we don't hear anything about now. He was a very important black lawyer in Chattanooga.

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Scruggs: He had his offices on Ninth Street?

Walton: No, he had his offices in his home on Cameron Hill on Cedar Street. But he had a moving picture show there. And across Ninth Street, up above Houston, the Conyers brothers had another black motion picture show, owned and black. And the one on the west side at "Five Points" was [owned by] a Doctor [George] Macker. He was a dentist and he had a motion picture show there.

Scruggs: Now Bessie Smith, we have heard, performed at the old Liberty Theater where, I guess, Southern Bell is now. Do you remember when Bessie Smith performed there?

Walton: No, I don't remember when she performed there. [For] a great number of years I lived out in the country. I lived out at Tyner. I never saw her perform, but I heard her on the records. There's another Smith, a Mamie Smith, that sang along about the same time as Bessie Smith, but nobody seems to recognize her. She was kind of a blues singer too.

Scruggs: East Ninth Street, as we know it today, is a predominantly black area. But we understand that you remember it when it was predominantly white, is that correct?

Walton: No, not predominantly. But it was so intermingled, you see, a white store here and a Jewish store there and a black store there, a black shoe shop there. And there was quite a number of -- what do you call them -- they used to call them cobblers. There was quite a number of shoe repair men. Blacks. They would make your shoes and they would mend them. There was quite a few on Ninth Street.

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Scruggs: What was the predominant occupation of the blacks, let's say, in the early 1900's, on Ninth Street?

Walton: You mean on Ninth Street?

Scruggs: Yes.

Walton: The occupations?

Scruggs: Right.

Walton: Barber shops, drug stores, restaurants.

Scruggs: 085 Now, when we were talking earlier, you mentioned about taxis, and I guess many people call them jitneys, which run up and down Ninth Street, just sort of transport people within the area. They were called something before that.

Walton: Now the jitneys and the taxis were two different categories. Along about 1917 or '18 [around] East Third Street, East Chattanooga -- the blacks had lived out in this section from Citico Avenue all over the town -- they couldn't get a streetcar in town unless they got out there around five o'clock. The people wouldn't let them on the streetcar. And Carl Angel and some other man, I don't remember who he was, bought two large Cadillacs that [were] used [by] the aristocratic white folks' uniformed chauffeurs.

Scruggs: So they were used as somewhat taxis, is that right?

Walton: 105 They bought those, no, no, no. They bought those and put them on the street as jitneys. Now they'd go up and down the street, pick up people waiting to travel, like a streetcar. But the taxis, they didn't do that; you had to call the taxi to come to your house to pick you up. Now a taxi driver then, if he was going down the street and saw somebody standing on the street waiting for the jitney, he wouldn't pick them up.

Scruggs: He wouldn't?

Walton: No.

Scruggs: Why not?

Walton: That's taking the money away from the jitneys. That wasn't their business.

Scruggs: All right.

Walton: Of course, before then, as you say, we had hackneys. Now, h-a-c-k, that's a hack drawn by horses.

Scruggs: These were also operated by blacks?

Walton: 113 Yes. They were before the taxis. The taxicabs were established in Chattanooga [at] Terminal Station before Terminal Station the Central Station and Union Station and at the biggest part of the hotels. You would find in there a black hackney standing in front waiting for somebody to come to be a customer.

Scruggs: Mr. Walton, what about some of the misconceptions that persons have had about the East Ninth Street area over the years? We've heard both positive and negative aspects about East Ninth. What

(Scruggs): are some of the misconceptions that you have heard while you've
119 been living here in Chattanooga?

Walton: It hasn't always been, as some people say, a low degraded place
in town.

Scruggs: How was it then?

Walton: I tried to demonstrate awhile ago. You see, white families --
did you ever hear of Judge Martin Fleming?

Scruggs: No, I haven't.

Walton: Well, he was raised on Ninth Street, and he turned out to be a
city judge for ten or twelve years.

Scruggs: So Ninth Street does have a rich history then.

Walton: Yes. I guess [it's] still there, what they call the Martin Ho-
131 tel. That was [at] one time Martin Fleming's property. There
was storekeepers up and down Ninth Street. Whites. Jews. They
had their families in there, and their children were playing right
on down Ninth Street. And I remember, specifically, that in 1935,
[and] before that, I'd come down Ninth Street, and see on the
street -- I've seen it all over town -- suits of clothes, coats
and things, hanging up on the street, advertised for sale.

Scruggs: And nobody bothered them.

Walton: Nobody bothered them. You'd go down the street, plenty of places
on Ninth Street would be fruit stands out on the street, apples
and oranges and stuff. Somebody would walk up there, pick what
they want to buy, pay the man and go on in.

Scruggs: Times have changed, right?

Walton: Yes.

Scruggs: There is a group to get East Ninth Street revitalized, and you
142 were saying that you did not want to see East Ninth Street re-
vitalized [like] West Ninth Street, right? So in other words
you would like to see black businesses maintained?

Walton: Well, yes, you see, because before they changed West Ninth and
Cameron Hill and stuff like that, there was plenty of black busi-
nesses over there. There was tailors, and there were barbers and
dentists, doctors, barber shops, stores.

Scruggs: Okay, hopefully this will be maintained. Mr. Walton, thank you

(Scruggs): very much. You have recalled beautifully. We certainly appreciate your coming on Point of View and telling us about your
150 view as it relates to the black history of East Ninth and Chattanooga in general.

We would like to now welcome our studio guests as we're going to be talking more about the present as it relates to the East Ninth Street community, and we have with us today representatives of the East Ninth Street Community Development Corporation. First, we would like to introduce you to Mr. R. L. Ramsey who serves as the executive director of the organization, Mrs. Elizabeth Green who serves as the chairperson of the board of directors, and also Mr. Jesse McCants who serves as the vice-chairman of the board of directors. We would like to welcome each of you to Point of View. Mr. Ramsey, let's start by talking with you. We've heard Mr. Walton talk about some of the history of East Ninth Street, and we're sort of bringing things to [the] present now and talk about a little bit of the projections for the future and so forth. And, in doing that let's talk about, first of all, the purposes and goals of the East Ninth Street
158 Community Development Corporation. Basically, what are you designed to do?

Ramsey: Okay. What we are trying to do, we're trying to come up with a comprehensive economic development plan that will be in accordance with the downtown development activities taking place. As you are well aware, roughly \$260 million worth of downtown development is taking place. We want Ninth Street area to be consistent with what is happening downtown. So, what we are trying to do in a three-phase concept is to come up with that type plan.

Scruggs: As you are talking about monies now, I guess all of us are aware that there have been or there are some proposed cutbacks, especially as it relates to urban development and urban considerations by the present administration. How, if any way, will this affect the East Ninth Street situation?

Ramsey: Presently we're not feeling the crunch. Later on in the future
168 I know it will hamper us somewhat. Some of the things that we have planned I think we will have to cut back or modify the situation. I can't predict exactly what would happen. I'm waiting to see what would happen or what the President will say after February 18. Based on the statement he will make then, I think we will be able to analyze it and go straight forward.

Scruggs: Before we talk with your board members here, we have a kind of an outline or a phase-one concept plan of East Ninth Street. If you would just basically sort of give us an overview of what we're looking at here. West? Right? [looking at document]

Ramsey: Right. West is to your left. One of the things I would like to indicate on here is that we're going eastward. One of the things that is presently taking place now -- this is the Times property which is located on the right if you were headed Ninth Street going east to Central. We have received a \$25,000 grant from Lyndhurst for ENSDE design Mr. Reginald Ruff, an architect, black architect, in the city, for him to do a regional study to see what this complex can be best used for. The Martin Hotel is also located here. So that's one of the things that we're doing, and this is one of the activities I think that would be a tremendous benefit to the area once the study is completed.

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I would like to go down by the railroad overpass. What we are trying to do here, we're trying to seek funds to build TVA Conservation Energy Training Institute for the seven-state area. The price tag would be a \$3 million deal. Within two and half years this Energy Training Center will train two thousand and five hundred energy advisors. I hope that we can seek federal funds to build this. This would be one of the prime economic generators that we need in the area that would bring both black and white into the area.

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Another thing that I would like to point out here is that this is the entertainment district which we would like to try and keep. One of the things we are going to have to do here is to do some cosmetic [work]. What I mean by cosmetic is to rehab some of the buildings and put a nice store front. There's a possibility we might have to demolish some, but we will keep that entertainment district.

Scruggs: Okay. Mr. Ramsey, we'll come back and maybe talk about some of the housing rehabilitation target areas in just a few moments. But we'd like to talk with Mrs. Green now. We understand that some years ago this project was started, and there were some problems, primarily because the community did not have any input into basically what was going to happen to their particular neighborhood. But now I think this has been somewhat rectified because you are on the board now and you are representing the constituents of the community and so forth. Tell us, basically, how is the community now having input in terms of what's being done in the East Ninth Street area.

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Green: First of all we are forming various task forces that the members of the community are serving on. We have task forces dealing with health, housing, business, every phase of the community [is] represented on various task forces. We have also held workshops. We've gotten the community input in things that they would like to see happen, things they don't want either. So we're considering all possibilities when we consider redeveloping the area. There's input from the community which has been

(Green): very good, and we do have several task forces that have been really busy. Of course, you know, we had the Christmas parade that we've never had before, and that was primarily one of our task force merchants' association. So, they are also planning something else for the future. So, they are all very busy working. We don't have total participation; of course, we don't expect that at all times. But we do have participation from most of the merchants and residents in the area.

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Scruggs: Okay. Mr. McCants, let's talk a little bit about the image of East Ninth Street. As we were talking with Mr. Walton there we mentioned that there have been some negative images in the past, and I would assume that these negative images have really overridden the positive images, as it relates to East Ninth Street. Now what can be done or what is being done to somewhat eliminate these kinds of images and to project in the future something positive about the street?

McCants: That is true, Booker. East Ninth Street, as you know, has suffered from a negative image; it still suffers. And I think one of the major problems is that once an incident occurs on East Ninth Street, regardless of how minor it is, it is overplayed. And this is not unusual, this is done throughout black downtown areas in this country. Usually a minor story in the black or Ninth Street area, let's say, will get front page coverage. And when this is done it has a tendency to frighten away potential customers that would patronize those businesses. And consequently businesses are beginning to relocate in other sections of the city; they are moving off East Ninth Street. And when this happens, it causes the people to move away from East Ninth Street; consequently, the remaining businesses suffer. And many of them will possibly end up going out of business unless we can change this image. Now, what can be done to change the image? That is a very difficult task. When you have a black area, regardless of how much publicity you give it, you still have a negative image. Now one thing I think kind of helped East Ninth Street in the past year, [was] this Christmas parade, something as minor as that. It brought the merchants together, the residents together, people all over the city. Elected officials participated, both blacks and whites. And as they began to go down East Ninth Street as a part of this parade, they learned at that time that you won't necessarily get mugged just because you are walking down East Ninth Street or riding down East Ninth Street, and that you can come there and you can do business. That was one thing.

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Now but what is really key to the redevelopment of East Ninth Street is to really do something about the physical condition of East Ninth Street, those buildings that are not suited for businesses or for people to live in. If you would go through

- (McCants): that area, there are houses no one should be permitted to live in; they should have been condemned a long time ago. But people are still living in those houses. That kind of blight is an eyesore for any community. And as long as the physical condition of the houses and the businesses are deteriorating, you can't change the image of East Ninth Street. Something has got to be done. It's going to have to be bold action taken to give East Ninth Street a new look. And as you give it a new look, give the merchants the faith and confidence to know that this does not mean that they have to leave. It's unfortunate that black folks have a tendency of thinking that once things get fixed up, they have to leave; that's not true. I like to feel that once you fix something up, that gives me the opportunity to stay there. And I think that's what the merchants down there are going to have to do. They've got to join in and help change the image, change the physiological aspect of that area and go on and do some business.
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- Scruggs: Mr. Ramsey, in talking about black heritage and black history and so forth, and also in talking about the organization in terms of redeveloping and so forth, we usually think in terms of tearing down and displacing and relocating and all of that. Now in terms of heritage, what is going to be maintained on East Ninth where we can look back a few years from now and say, "Well, this was on East Ninth fifty years ago and had something to do and it contributed to black history"? Are you going to have any kinds of things of this nature remaining?
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- Ramsey: Yes, yes. As you know, Booker, I think most of us know that we got our start from the church. [looking at document] All right, here's the church, First Baptist, on Eighth Street; it was built in 1885 by slaves. That will remain. Other churches in the area, Zion up in this area here. There's a church not shown at Lindsay and East Ninth Street. Back in 1886 or '87, I'm sorry, there was a group of slaves organized the First Congregational Church. However, it was not built until 1903, between the area of 1903 and 1904. This is something that we want to keep. I think it's very important for your son and my daughter and other black kids to know that down on Ninth Street there was history concerning blacks.
- Scruggs: Very briefly now, we talked about West Ninth Street now, and in talking with Mr. Walton we mentioned that there are no black businesses on West Ninth Street. What are you going to do to maintain the black businesses that are there, and also what are you going to do to help in the relocation process, if any, of those residents who are living on East Ninth, either one of them?
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- Ramsey: One of the things that we are going to do-- as you know, they are not making any more land-- what we hope to do, blacks that

- (Ramsey): are presently located on Ninth Street I hope they will remain and can remain on Ninth Street. But one of the things that all of them are going to have to understand, we are redeveloping and we want to redevelop Ninth Street so both black and white will feel free in coming down. So what we are asking them, let's upgrade your facility, building, or whatever, and we hope that if this can happen there would be minor relocation. There's another thing that the East Ninth Street Development Corporation can do, and that is to seek federal funds to assist black businesses. As you know, we are in the process of trying to establish a MESBIC [Minority Enterprise Small Business Investment Co.]. This would be one of the financial mechanisms that we will use to try to help the black business.
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- Scruggs: Miss Green, very briefly, we got to go. What would be your message to the Chattanooga community in helping you as chairman of the board of directors of the East Ninth Street Corporation?
- Green: Get involved, come down and help us. We need the support of the total community, not just the residents on East Ninth Street. We need the involvement of everyone.
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- Scruggs: Involvement, what do you mean more specifically?
- Green: More specifically, we need them working on the various committees, we need their input even if it's just calling the office and says that I have an idea that this may work. You know just any kind of input that they have. We're open from nine till five.
- Scruggs: We'd like to thank each of you for coming down and telling us about the East Ninth Street Community Development Corporation. Of course we wish you all the luck in the world in getting what has to be a massive project underway. And hopefully in the future we will see some real, real viable conclusions. Thank each of you. Our guests today on this portion, or have been, Mr. R. L. Ramsey who is the executive director of the East Ninth Street Community Development Corporation, Miss Elizabeth Green who serves as the chairperson of the board of directors, and Mr. Jesse McCants who serves as the vice-chairman. Next week our guest will be Chuck Davis who is a professional dancer, and he will be here to show you how creative dancing becomes an educational process through our city schools, and we certainly hope that you can be with us for that particular program. Until then, this is Booker T. Scruggs for the Adult Education Council's Point of View.
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