

Spring 2022

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Recommended Citation

Harman, Ashley, "The Secret Stories of 116 Central Avenue" (2022). *Touring Lincolnvilve: A Celebration of Historic Black Business*. 9.

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The Secret Stories of 116 Central Avenue

Ashley Harman

Introduction

Reading the various files on black businesses in St. Augustine I found one location in particular popping up over the years. Upon further investigation I found the businesses within this location changing every few years between the late 1880s to the 1930s. Seeing this within my research I knew that there were some interesting stories to be shared about this location. I wanted to share the trauma and pain of unsuccessful businesses and both the rewards and consequences that comes from the changes occurring at this location. I hope that the following story will inspire you to also look at the change and locations around you with a curious and investigative eye.

Spain

My dream started with my childhood. I longed to see worlds other than my own and make history across the world. My dreams at night were filled with prosperous lands elsewhere, full of fruits and riches while my days were filled with hard work that would not lead me anywhere but stagnancy. While I waited for my opportunity for success, I made shoes in my hometown with the utmost quality but my hunger for innovation would not stop until I would finally attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean, dead set on the course of my journey to the great unknown shores of St. Augustine.

The Atlantic Ocean

With not much to my name I boarded this ship with high expectations of what was to come. The blue ocean waves slap against the broad hull of the ship taking me across the Atlantic with much fervor. My dreams and my hopes of success all hang in the balance of this lengthy but necessary journey across the Atlantic Ocean. This darned boat that rocks back and forth vigorously is my voyage and the tumultuous ocean is my barrier. Crossing this vast obstacle shall bring me my success, I am sure of it. My dreams of change and history-making from my childhood depend on the success of this journey into the unknown.

St. Augustine, Florida

Upon landing onto a beautiful shore, I find myself surrounded by land ripe with potential. Despite my past as a shoemaker in my home country I have come to this land to start anew with my latest aspirations. Touching the dirty soil and disrupting its natural formation I can see the potential for my agricultural dreams. Seeing this raw potential, I used a land grant I had received to begin putting in the work necessary to bring my aspirations into fruition. I would be the one to create a commercial orange grove, one of the first of its kind in Florida I am sure of it. I saw firsthand the plentiful seeds that were planted in the many acres of my land and after years of hard work the seeds sprouted into beautiful orange trees. My dream of the first commercial orange grove in Florida was finally sprouting. Overtime I was visited by many community members who enjoyed the hard work I had instilled into my dream. I truly enjoyed the frutos de

mi trabajo but it did not last long as a businessman named Bartolo Genovar approached me with an offer I couldn't refuse.

Bartolo Genovar

Seeing a young boy with such prosperous fields of land inspired me to approach him with an offer he could not refuse. I purchased the young boy's beautiful orange groves from him for the purpose of my own monetary gain as I saw the potentials of these deeply cared for lands. Upon successfully gaining this vast new land I brought in workers of various ages and backgrounds to empty the groves of its past and unroot his prior successes. This land being worked upon would be a big great new venture for me that will bring me my own success. Upon the newly barren land I ordered my workers to start building my greatest venture yet; built of stone and brick this would become a great commercial building for various businesses to bring financial success to me.

Building Construction

I am carried and put in place by powers beyond my control, hearing the hushed conversations of the people nearby. Placed upon other sets of myself and stuck together to create something new. My only use is to become a place of shelter for the people and businesses that over time will come and go. I hear the conversations of nearby laborers who express their annoyance with my own replacement of the beautiful orange groves and the lament of their loss of the land before my placement. After settling in my final position, I still hear the stories that go untold for the years to come. I hear the original excitement of a business owner starting their new financial propositions within me. But the emotions that come with the stories I hear are not

always positive. The excitement of a new financial venture always fades away until it becomes something more muted or even harsh. Overtime the excitement turns into grief. The grief of losing the risk you took by investing into a new business. The grief of moving out all your belongings. The grief of seeing others go lasts within me for centuries.

Alice Swain

Although I haven't been a tenant for the longest time ever, I have seen my fair share of tenants come and go. This building has always held a multitude of businesses within its walls, but it never ceases to be a final resting place. Before me and my grocery store arrived within this commercial building there were plentiful other groceries and markets that replaced one another, not one business finding eternal success. I even saw new types of business ventures other than the common groceries or markets when a shoe repair shop that Norris Brown opened within the building but again the same trend followed where eventually the business was no longer successful and left the building. After time I know that this building will sit empty and hollow, as if it is haunted by the ghosts of its previous inhabitants, withering away until it has become nothing or replaced by another commercial venture. I can only hope that it is a distant future and that this nightmare of mine shall happen long after I am disappeared from this world as the ruins of my business would ruin me.

116 Central Avenue in present-day

In present day the land that once held various black owned businesses looks like a whole new land. Long gone are the uneven pavements and stone masonry commercial buildings, replaced by modern-day residences and condominiums. Newly placed brick pavements line the

streets alongside palm trees and Spanish-roofed buildings. Even the residents and business owners look different as the neighborhood gentrified itself over the years.

The Atlantic Ocean

Despite the multitudes of changes and gentrification over the years one thing remains constant: me. The bright blue ocean who started it all. My tumultuous waves brought change and growth to the previously barren land. I was many things for the area but overall, I was a venue for change and a pivotal mode of transportation for those dreaming of said change. Many ships cross me every day bringing new life and possibilities to every shoreside. Perhaps one day I will carry the next set of adventurers who will bring about even more change to my shores.