
Touring Lincolville: A Celebration of Historic
Black Business

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Frank Butler and Central Avenue

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Frank Butler and Central Avenue
By: Natalie Medina

FORWARD

Each owner has a story of how they attained property and what they did with it. However, what people chose to do with the property was influenced by their needs, occupation, political affiliation, and race. There is no memorialization of these places once they are converted leaving an "open wound" as any history of its occupants is not recorded. The property experienced lifetimes more of unknown traumas than one of its owners or occupants, standing through war, segregation, and violence that can only be seen through records of ownership and use without a memorialization. This is my memorialization to the people of Lincolnville and their "secret stories".

Hustling to report to Mr. Butler an early morning on Central Avenue, the county clerk did not glance at anyone to say hello. He was short of breath struggling to spit out the exciting news he had for the investor. He ran right in front of my cab, I almost hit him! Passing by the barbershops, grocers, cleaners, and a few homes he did not let anyone stop him.

I can see the headlines now: "Owner and operator of Minute Man Cab Co hit young county clerk!".

Driving around for the past three decades, you learn a little something about the people of Lincolnville. The most special relationship was between the clerk and Butler, dating back to when the clerk was a teen. Butler was out shopping for a property where the clerk was working at the time. At the time, the clerk was a young teen and just learning about his job and customer service. He was helping a white man at a shoe cleaning shop. The clerk only worked the register at the time and Butler knew that was his role as he was a regular customer there as well.

On this specific day, the white man was unhappy with the service done to his shoes and blamed the clerk for ruining them and demanded he buys him a new expensive pair. The clerk being just a teen did not have this kind of money and was bringing most home to support his family. The white man was well aware the clerk did not shine the shoes and the manager of the shop shines them all. Butler also knew this and defended the clerk.

He said, "I know you are a regular customer and know the manager is in charge of shining all the shoes, not the boy."

He gave the man the ultimatum, "Drop the issue and tip the boy for his trouble or I will tell the manager to have you fired as a customer and banned from all the other shoe shops for this very instance."

The white man apologized and promptly tipped the clerk.

To avoid any rumors spreading, he went around town repeating, "The young man at Butler's regular shoe shop is a fine young man, always giving the best customer service".

This word of mouth got the clerk his current job as a county clerk who knew of all the tax sales and as a lifelong thanks always told Frank Butler to get the first opportunity on the deals.

I've seen Butler on every inch of this town trying to grab the best properties, but the man won't let him have it. Waiting for my pick up one day, I saw him and some white man bickering about buying a dressmaker shop on 75 1/2 Oneida Street.

I overheard Butler say to an owner, "I'm working on a new development... a bunch of residential."

The owner responded, "This shop is going to remain a dressmaker for generations to come. There's no way you can flip it into homes. Who do you think you are?"

Little did the man know, this is one of many properties clerk told him about and man wasn't making payments. Butler was a stand-up guy and did not like sweeping businesses from under owners when they couldn't afford them no more. He tries striking up deals with them before it's taken away. No white man wanted to see Butler take away their livelihood, no matter what deal was on the table. If it were me, I'd give him maybe seventy percent because he still needs me to show him how its run. I wouldn't let him turn my office into no homes though.

The only time I really talked to him myself was when I drove him in my cab. He was really nice and conversational with me the whole way. I was surprised by how interested he was in my life.

When he got in the cab he told me, "No rush today Mr. Simmons, just headed home after my meeting."

I asked him what the meeting was about, and he said he just met up with some city officials to talk about the new development.

I asked him, "What's being developed? Lincolnville is already perfect."

Butler explained how he is trying to make more homes for black families, but there is no space to build. He offered the idea to renovate abandoned and delinquent properties into living spaces. It was a very unique idea, but no one believed it would work.

I asked him, "Respectfully Mr. Butler, if business owners can't pay their bills, how will regular ole families?"

His face lit up when I asked as if he enjoyed being challenged and even doubted. He told me how he would split up one property into a multi-family property and the families would split the costs.

He asked me, "Are you going to serve more people with one taxi serving one street or one taxi on every street? I am serving more people by providing more living space that is affordable for these hard-working families."

I told him I knew where he was coming from, but he could tell I wasn't completely convinced.

"Take me to 58 Washington Lunchroom. There's someone I want you to meet."

I took Butler to the lunchroom where he insisted, I come inside for lunch. He offered to pay for my food and any business I might lose during this time. I agreed to go inside and take my lunch break early and would take up the free food, but no need to pay for business loss. He introduced me to the owner Georgia Cooper and her family who worked in the lunchroom.

"This is Mrs. Cooper, one of my good friends.", Butler exclaimed.

Cooper chimed in, "You can call me Georgia, honey."

Butler continued telling me how he has been talking to Cooper about her family's living situation for years and she has even shared the thoughts of her neighbors and extended family on the issue of housing.

She added, "They are all struggling to afford the increasing rents of their current homes and as their children begin to start new families there is nowhere for them to go. They stay with their parents and are crammed in one home."

Butler realized that families did not want to move out of Lincolnville and most properties are businesses with multiple of the same type of business on a street.

We sat for about an hour lunch with Georgia and Mr. Butler talking about how Georgia has a big family, and the kids are starting to have their own families. I really do see what he means about making more homes for everyone, but I worry about the businesses being taken away.

I asked them, "How will Lincolnville function with just homes and no jobs?"

I kept my thoughts to myself as long as I could to not offend Mr. Butler and his ambitions, but I couldn't contain myself. I know he has a good heart and wants to help everyone.

Before he could answer I saw the look of concern in his face and interjected, "I have a buddy 93 Washington who owned a shoe shop and during his off time was a landlord. Not like he could afford to own property like you, so he wasn't in any of the deeds. He just worked for the man on the deeds."

Butler nodding along said, "He may have some valuable information for me. I never pass up an opportunity to connect with people."

I took his comment as acceptance and guided him out to the taxi.

While we were on our way I told him, " You know he had a great relationship with his tenants and knew of all the ins and outs of residential."

Butler responded, "I appreciate the opportunity to conversate, but he's not the man on the deeds like I will be, so how can he help me?"

I told him, "He had the skills of customer service from the shoe shop. He could really do it all and I know he would help you find a solution for our housing problem."

We arrived at 93 Washington and luckily saw my buddy out collecting rents.

"Hey Ferrell!", I yelled out as Butler, and I walked to the sidewalk of the residence.

With an intrigued look on his face and a confident walk up to us both, he greeted Butler with a strong handshake.

"Jas Ferrell, nice to meet you.", he said. "This is Mr. Frank Butler.", I told him.

"You don't need to tell me; this is just the man I've been looking for. I know exactly who you are.", he replied.

After some chit-chat and catching up with my buddy and Butler, the investor cut straight to business.

"Your friend Simmons tells me you got some ideas for turning business to residentials.", he stated.

Ferrell answered, "I have been waiting for a man like you to do business with for long enough. I won't keep you waiting another second."

Using his hands for emphasis, Ferrell continued, "My idea is to keep the businesses right where they are as to not upset anyone, but to add floors on top that are residential with stairs on the outside for a private entrance. The residents won't even see anyone in the shops".

Butler's eyes lit up and he added, "This is a wonderful idea, but a big development for sure that I will need lots of approval for."

Ferrell couldn't contain his excitement and bolted to his car to pull out a clipboard.

"Here I have some drawings of what it would look like and pages of signed petitions from my residents and other shop owners like myself!", he exclaimed.

I remember signing this petition about a year ago, but I thought Ferrell was just coming up with another crazy idea that would never be fulfilled. Butler looked like he had hope in the once shoe shop owner. He had the money, connections, and now support from the community to go straight to the officials for the seal of approval.