Silver Hill

Early African-American residents of Silver Hill began to build a community in Old Town Township, west of the City of Winston, at the end of the nineteenth century. The later neighborhoods of West Highlands and Buena Vista developed to the south and northwest, respectively. Before 1893, a 20’ by 45’ wood-framed, African-American Baptist church was built on Holiday Street. The church had several names over the years, including “Old Ironsides”, Primitive Baptist Church, and finally, Antioch Baptist.

Newspapers report that Silver Hill got its name from local folklore. Legend holds that the hill was once home to an African-American witch doctor. People who wanted his services had to pay in the form of silver coins, hence the name. A slight variant claims that people offered silver coins to ward off witches they believed lived in the area.

In 1894, realtor W.E. Franklin filed a plat for Silver Hill with the Register of Deeds. His plat shows thirty-three lots laid out along Holiday Street and Lincoln Avenue with Cross Street providing an east-west connection between the two streets. Today, Lincoln Avenue has been renamed Biscayne Avenue, and the original locations of Holiday and Cross have been incorporated into residential lots. At the time Franklin filed the plat, one lot was already improved with a square structure, perhaps the home of an early resident. H.D. Shutt filed a plat for six additional lots east of Franklin’s land around 1908.

By 1910, the Census recorded twelve families living in Silver Hill; half of the families were white and half were African-American. Lucy Conrad, John Harrison, Charlie Cain, Frank Harrison, John Hunt, and Flora Johnson headed the African-American families, while James H. McMillan, James L. McMillan, Arnold McMillan, John Nelson, Latonius Hilton, and Jonas Kline headed the white households. The Hunt family, Flora Johnson, and Latonius Hilton owned their land, while the other families rented. At the time, most of the men living in Silver Hill worked in Winston’s tobacco factories while women worked as servants for private families.

By 1930, the racial composition of the neighborhood had changed and only African-American families were recorded in the Census. The Hunt and Frank Harrison families continued to live in the neighborhood, as did descendants of Flora Johnson. Five of the eleven families listed as living in Silver Hill owned their homes, with values ranging from $700 to $1,000. Several of the men worked in tobacco factories.
factories, but others had jobs as brick masons, gardeners, auto mechanics, truck drivers, and one as a theater porter. The women who worked remained in service with private families.

An itinerant preacher conducted services at the neighborhood Baptist church on Holiday Street about once a month. Silver Hill resident William Cain recalled that the Baptists “did foot-washin’. … They still had communion, too, but that came along with it.” The church caught fire on Easter Monday of 1942 and burned down. Fire Department records note that the “old church building [was] of no value.” It had not been in regular use at the time, and it was not rebuilt. The congregation later founded the West End Baptist Church, before merging with First Institutional Baptist Church to found United Metropolitan Baptist Church in 1965.

The church sat in front of an African-American cemetery, an additional parcel of land adjoining the church lot having been purchased in 1906. Between 1901 and 1951, 558 known burials took place in the cemetery. There are likely other unknown burials; newspaper articles mention grave-stones dated as early as 1895. The grave markers are now all gone, and the quiet cemetery is owned and maintained by United Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church.

In the 1950s, Silver Hill’s streets remained unpaved even as houses for white families were built along neighboring Carolina Avenue. In 1976, a Winston-Salem Journal article on Silver Hill reported that Wiley Avenue remained unpaved and only three houses in Silver Hill were occupied, one by William Blackburn. Blackburn, who had worked at the B.F. Huntley Furniture Factory, purchased his home at the northern corner of Wiley Avenue in 1947. The house was known in deeds at the old home place of Jack Brooks, an employee of Southern Railway. Brooks had built the home about 1920; it is one of two remaining houses from Silver Hill’s years as an African-American neighborhood. The other is located at 432 Wiley Avenue. Today, Silver Hill’s streets are paved, and most of the small original lots have been combined into larger lots for modern housing.

This information is also available at the Forsyth County Historic Resources Commission web site: www.ForsythCountyHRC.org