

How Springfield has Overcome Racial Discrimination and Transformed into a Diverse Community

By Trinity Thomas

Springfield, a historic neighborhood north of downtown Jacksonville, is known for its unique architecture and diverse local businesses.

Established in 1869, Springfield holds a history of multiple attempts at development and transformation.

Brown's 1895 Book of Jacksonville stated that the homes in Springfield were sold "exclusively for white persons." Although, the culture is heavily Gullah Geechee inspired, such as the haint blue paint found on many homes in Springfield. The Gullah Geechee are a group of descendants of formally enslaved central and west African people. The city of Jacksonville has the largest concentration of Gullah Geechee people in the country. Springfield was also home to Zora Neal Hurston at one point, as well as Olympic gold medalist Robert Hayes. Black history runs deep in this community.

Things began to change on May 3, 1901, when a spark from a residence's cook stove set ablaze some Spanish moss from the Cleveland Fiber factory. The wind picked up and the fire consumed the city streets. In over 8 hours, the flames went through 146 city blocks and destroyed over 2,000 buildings. Seven died and around 10,000 were left homeless. The neighborhood was then forced into a period of major economic growth. A majority of the homes that are still standing were built between 1901-1920.

After the 1925 Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance of Jacksonville, Springfield developed to be predominantly white. The Black population was pushed to other areas of Jacksonville such as LaVilla, Brooklyn and Eastside. Racial zoning had become illegal. As a loophole, exclusionary zoning came to be. The first zoning map in 1930 made predominantly Black neighborhoods unrestricted, meaning industrial buildings could be placed right in the middle of Black neighborhoods. The 1957 redlined map looks just like the unrestricted zoning areas on the city's first zoning map.

Mixed-use storefronts, which appeared in the early 1920s as a result of the failed streetcar line, paved the way for this strip of local businesses that serve as a hub for modern art, shopping needs, and rich culture.

According to Brandon Byers, owner of The Cookbook Restaurant, "Nine black-owned businesses have assembled themselves here in a sense of family and community. If you ride around the neighborhood, you see a sign with hands locked together. There's a Black hand, a Chinese hand, a Puerto Rican hand... But what means the most to me, the wording between those hands, it says *you belong here*."

A place for all of your needs, this area of Springfield serves as a great example of building from within the community. With all of the businesses being Black owned, the shops of North Pearl are a beautiful example of a culture thriving where it was at once excluded.

"Springfield is doing a great job of creating and breeding a melting pot of people, culture, and all walks of life. They are bringing healing, culture and music to the neighborhood," said Byers.