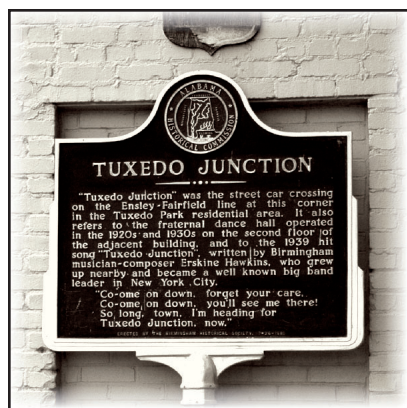
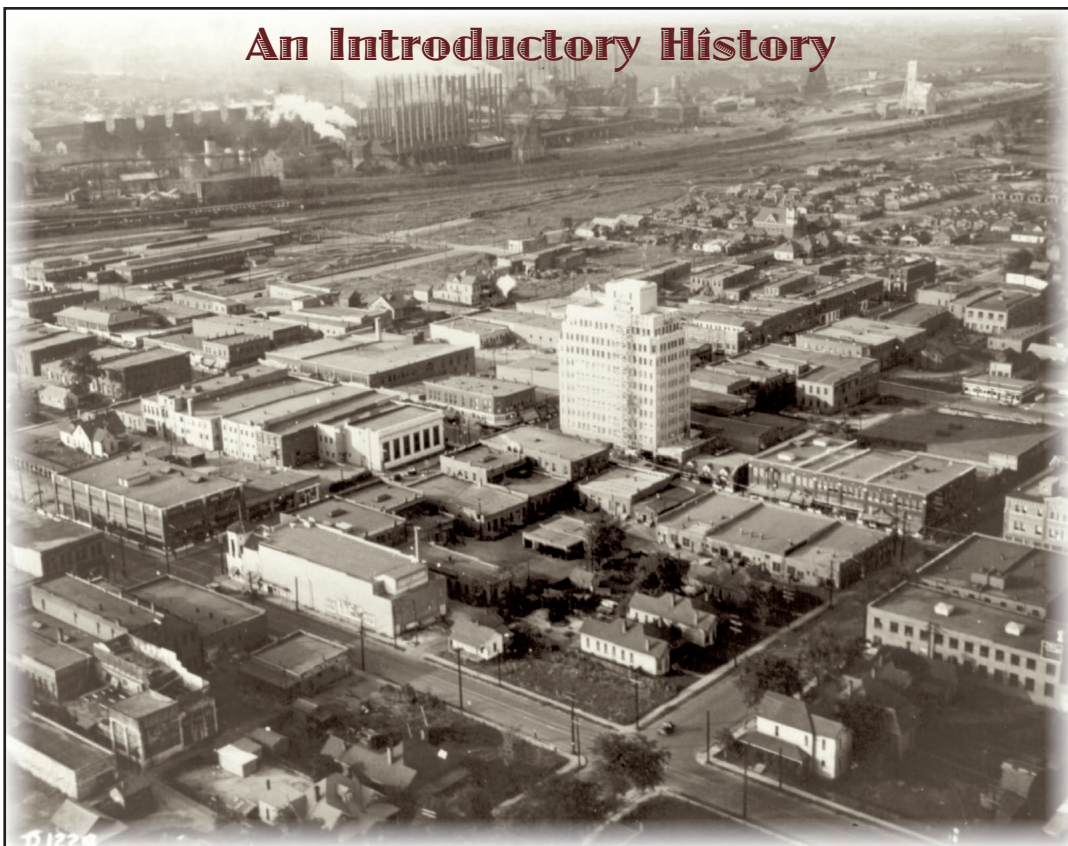


Downtown Ensley & Tuxedo Junction

An Introductory History



David B. Schneider
Schneider Historic Preservation, LLC

City of Birmingham
in collaboration with

Main Street Birmingham, Inc.

Downtown Ensley & Tuxedo Junction

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for the

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David B. Schneider

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Cover Photo Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives, Catalog #1556.27.76

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Downtown Ensley



Downtown Ensley, 1927

Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives

Catalog #1556.94.35 from top-left

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Downtown Ensley, circa 1954

Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives, Catalog #1556.34.35

Introduction



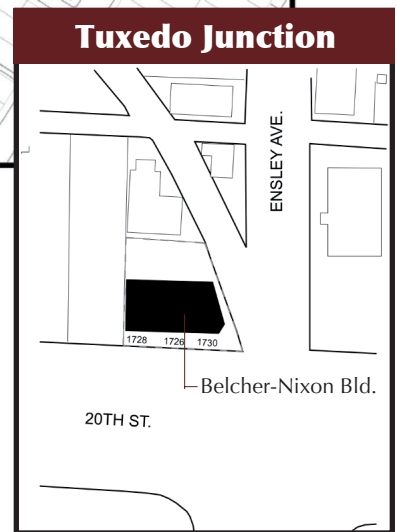
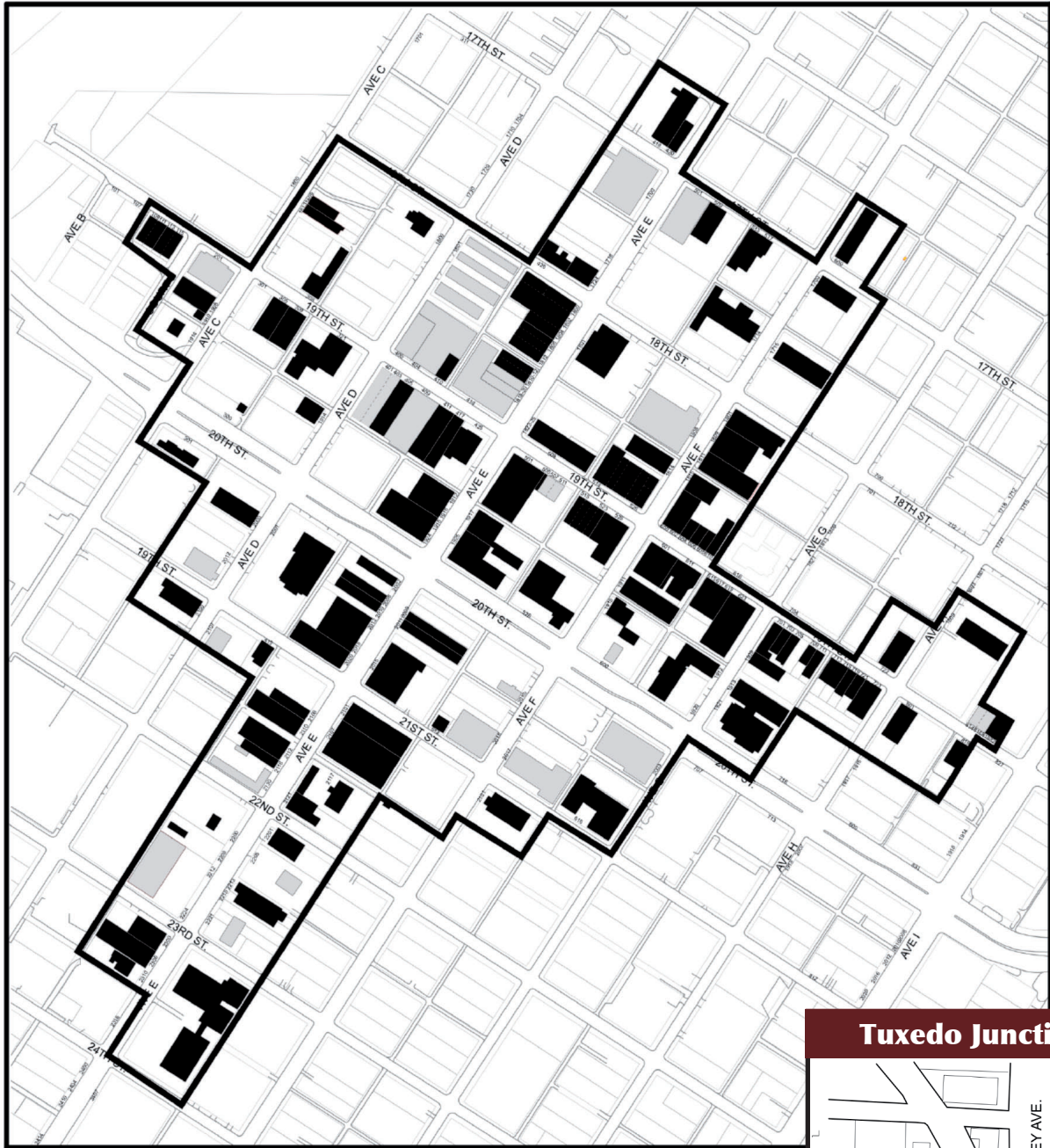
“Out where the steel begins – Ensley, hustling, bustling community with a big job...Where people work with roaring furnaces and piping hot metals...Where they live and trade...Where they look at towering smoke stacks with pride and watch the endless loads of Ensley-made steel pull out for other plants where the steel is turned into finished product...Ensley of furnace fame ...filled with civic pride...and wonderful people!”

Joe Winters, “Neighborhood Airview,” *The Birmingham News*, October 22, 1950

The Downtown Ensley Historic District is historically significant as the commercial core of the Birmingham suburb of Ensley. The town was founded in 1887 to service the workers of the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company’s Ensley Works, then the largest of TCI’s early facilities in the Birmingham District. The community developed as a substantial self-governing town that was incorporated in 1899 and merged with Birmingham in 1909. The neighborhood’s surviving historic resources illustrate much of its late-nineteenth through mid-twentieth century development and are architecturally important as a representative collection of period building styles dating from circa 1885 through 1960.

The Belcher-Nixon Building is significant as the only tangible built reminder of Tuxedo Junction, a predominantly African American commercial center that also has significance in American musical history. Tuxedo Junction was immortalized in a 1939 song of the same name that was written by jazz musician Erskine Ramsay Hawkins’ band and became a long-running national bestseller after it was recorded by the Glen Miller Orchestra in the 1940s. The Belcher-Nixon Building is also significant for its association with prominent local African American dentist and civil rights leader Dr. John W. Nixon.

Downtown Ensley Historic District/Tuxedo Junction



Downtown Ensley

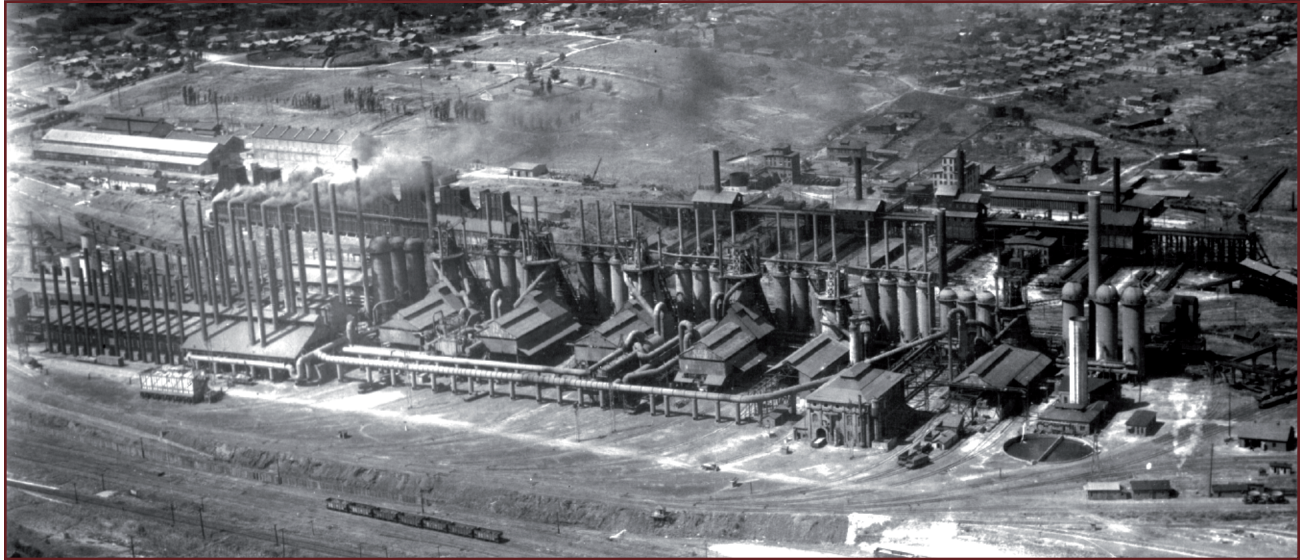


Beginnings

Enoch Ensley, a wealthy Tennessee planter and merchant, began acquiring land in the Opossum Valley near Birmingham in the early 1880s with the intent of developing a vast steel production facility to exploit the site's location adjacent to the Pratt coal seam. It was on this site, described in contemporary accounts as "rough, sterile, full of scrubby pine and blackjack" that the town of Ensley and its extensive iron and steel operations would be developed.¹ The Ensley Land Company was established in 1886 with Enoch Ensley as president and the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company owning a majority of the company's \$10 million in stock. Four thousand acres of land were acquired to develop the company's industrial facilities and a town. Founded in 1852 as the Sewanee Mining Company of Tennessee, T.C.I.'s original operations were limited to the mining of coal. The company began producing coke in 1873 in response to an increased demand from the expanding regional iron industry. Renamed the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company in 1881, the company was reorganized to add the production of pig iron to its operations. The company acquired the Pratt Coal and Iron Company and its extensive facilities in the Birmingham area in 1886.

The Ensley Land Company had the town surveyed and platted in 1887. Designed by Newport, Rhode Island engineer Edward Waring, Jr., the town was laid out on a grid that paralleled the proposed plant facilities and featured a complete sewage system with separate piping for storm water and sewage. Birmingham's street railway was soon extended to the community. Construction began the following year on four blast furnaces, the last of which was lighted on April 4, 1889.² Enoch Ensley died unexpectedly in 1891, and in 1892 T.C.I. combined its Ensley holdings with the Debardeleben Coal and Iron Company, the Cahaba Coal Mining Company, and the Excelsior Coal Company "to form the

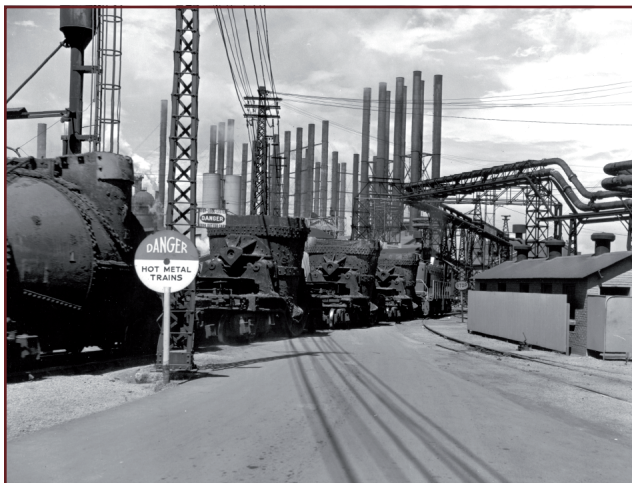
Downtown Ensley



Ensley Works

Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives, Catalog #1556.17.06

largest single industrial enterprise in the Birmingham District.”³ By that time, the company’s total holdings reached 400,000 acres of land, seventeen blast furnaces, and coal lands that produced 13,000 tons of coal per day.⁴ An open-hearth steel plant was added to the Ensley site in 1899 and the company continued to expand, becoming “the Birmingham District’s strongest industrial corporation” by 1907.⁵ Despite T.C.I.’s success, an economic downturn in the autumn of 1907 resulted in circumstances that led to its acquisition by the United States Steel Corporation on November 5 for \$35.3 million. T.C.I. became a subsidiary company of U.S. Steel yet retained the T.C.I. name. At the time of its formation in 1901, U.S. Steel was “the largest industrial corporation in the world.”⁶



Ensley Works

Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives, Catalog #1556.25.12



Ensley Works

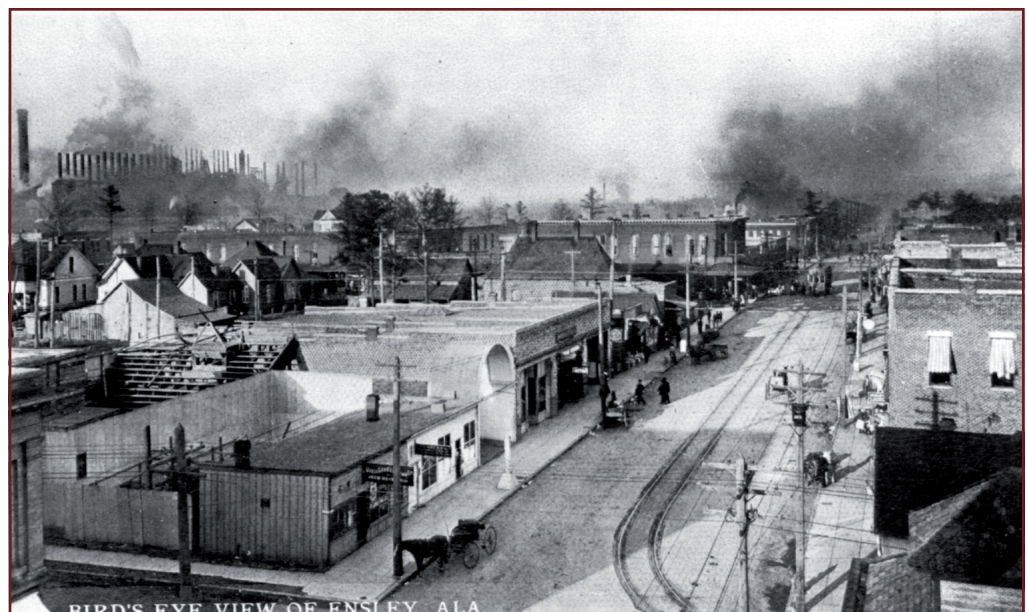
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Downtown Ensley

In 1893, during a particularly difficult economic downturn, the Ensley Land Company went into receivership and was sold at a sheriff's sale. The company was reorganized in 1898 with local businessman and T.C.I. executive Erskine Ramsay as one of its principals. With economic conditions improving, additional industrial development occurred in Ensley: an open-hearth furnace was built at the Ensley Works; the Semet-Solway Company opened a new coke byproducts facility; the Birmingham Cement Company opened a facility to use blast furnace slag to make concrete; the Alabama Steel and Wire Company built a plant; and the Ensley Brick Company was established.⁷ Additional blast furnaces were added to the Ensley Works in 1900 and 1904 and the facilities began producing rails in 1904. In 1907, T.C.I. management announced plans for a \$25-30 million modernization and expansion program "with the intention of doubling capacity and 'radically' cutting costs."⁸ After its acquisition by U.S. Steel in 1907, additional improvements were made and annual steel capacity at the plant reached 840,000 tons by 1912.⁹ U.S. Steel expanded its operations to the southwest in 1909 and created new facilities and another town at Corey, later renamed Fairfield. By World War II, the company's total employment reached 28,000.¹⁰

A Bustling Town

The town of Ensley grew slowly in the 1890s but expanded rapidly in the early 1900s. T.C.I. built two hundred workers cottages in 1898 and the Ensley Land Company added two hundred more in 1900. The City of Ensley was incorporated on February 12, 1899 and its population reached 10,000 by 1901. Fourteen thousand workers were employed at the Ensley Works by 1907. According to Marjorie Longenecker White in her book *The Birmingham District*, by 1908 "more than 30 miles of streets and sidewalks had been paved; water, light, and storm and sanitary sewer systems extended; and a city



Right

*Downtown Ensley,
ca. 1900*

Courtesy Birmingham Public
Library Archives, Catalog
#1556.1.16

Downtown Ensley & Tuxedo Junction



Downtown Ensley



Downtown Ensley, ca. 1925

Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives, Catalog #1556.33.66

hall, schools, and a public library built, giving Ensley more public improvements than any other municipality in the area other than Birmingham itself.”¹¹ Ensley merged with the City of Birmingham in 1909. Industrial expansion continued and Ensley’s population more than doubled by 1910 and topped 41,000 by 1934.¹²

White continues: “Ensley prided itself as a community ‘with a backbone of steel’ and a regional business and shopping center serving Ensley, [Ensley] Highlands, Bush Hills, Fairview, Oak Hill, Central Park, Pratt City, Wylam, Fairfield and outlying communities. Aggressive promotion and development activities fostered a strong sense of separate identity which endures today.”¹³ The community’s commercial district initially developed along Avenue E between 17th and 20th Streets. The 1902 Sanborn map shows a relatively dense concentration of primarily one and two story



Downtown Ensley, ca. 1925

Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives, Catalog #1556.33.65

Downtown Ensley

commercial buildings lining both sides of Avenue E and along the southwest side of 19th Street and both sides of 17th Street between Avenues D and E. By 1911, business had extended somewhat to the southwest along Avenue E and to the southeast along 17th and 19th Streets. TCI operated a dispensary and a commissary at the north end of 19th Street. The 1928 map indicates that considerable commercial development occurred since the earlier edition, with much of it occurring along 19th Street by then the commercial district's principal corridor. The city's fortunes were well represented by a large collection of buildings of substantial architectural character and quality.

The 1925 city directory indicates the following general mix of businesses in downtown Ensley: a bakery, two banks, four confectioners, at least eight barbers, seven clothes shops, eleven dry goods stores, two flower shops, two fruit dealers, two funeral homes (one white and one black), eleven furniture stores, nine grocers, two general merchandise stores, seven hardware stores, five jewelers, three laundries or dry cleaners, two loan and pawn shops, a meat market, four mens' stores, nine pharmacies, two photographers, a printer, twelve real estate companies, restaurants, several shoe repair and making shops, at least six tailors, two wholesale produce companies, an F.W. Woolworth Store, a Kress Store, a Singer Sewing store, a Western Union, at least fifteen doctors, several dentists, several lawyers, and restaurants.

Downtown Ensley was also a center for entertainment with several movie theatres. The largest and most elaborate of these, the Ensley Theatre, was designed by Birmingham architect Lawrence S. Whitten and opened in 1927.¹⁴ "Escapism was built into the Ensley's exotic architecture, its ornate stenciled pilasters, stippled walls, its three large chandeliers and three lobbies floored with decorative mosaic tile. The Ensley was built for silent movies, and was outfitted with a large Robert Morton pipe organ."¹⁵ The building remains at 1925 Avenue E although it was remodeled for use as retail space in recent decades. Other theatres that are no longer extant included the Franklin Theatre, located in the block adjacent to the Ramsey-McCormack Building and the Belle Theatre. The Palace Theatre, located along Avenue D, served the local African American community.



Ensley Theatre, 1937

Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives

Downtown Ensley

The city continued to prosper during the 1950s due to its “backbone of steel and commerce.”¹⁶ The completion of the Ensley Overpass in 1954 was hailed as a major stimulus for increased development within the community by opening Ensley to other areas to the west.¹⁷ Also in that year, the first phase of construction of the interstate system through Jefferson County was underway in Ensley. An article in the Birmingham Post-Herald that same year stated that: “This ‘city within a city’ is right now in the midst of growing and changing – new buildings are going up every day, homes are being built and more and more modern stores are moving into the community.”¹⁸ A 1960 Birmingham News article entitled “Ensley Steel Works of TCI still rate as one of South’s great plants” noted that: “In both world wars and during the Korean conflict, steel from Ensley helped to convince the nation’s enemies that they could not hope to match America’s industrial might.”¹⁹



Downtown Ensley 1927

Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives,
Catalog (clockwise from top-left)
#1556.45.33, #1556.9.94, & #1556.45.32



Downtown Ensley



Top: The Bustling Little Metropolis, 1950s
Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives,
Catalog #1556.27.76

Right: Downtown, circa 1937
Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives,
Catalog #OVH41



Downtown Ensley

Ethnic History

Ensley's industries attracted workers from many countries and different ethnic backgrounds. African Americans made up the largest of these, but there was also a significant Italian American population, as well as small Jewish and Greek communities. According to Lynne B. Feldman in *A Sense of Place: Birmingham's Black Middle-class Community, 1890-1930*: "By the early 1900s Birmingham had the nation's largest concentration of black industrial workers. In 1910, black workers held 75 percent of the jobs in Birmingham's iron and steel industry and even held leadership positions in the city's growing labor union."²⁰ A small African American business section developed primarily along Avenue D between 17th and 20th Streets. Businesses in the area included restaurants, small shops, and service businesses such as barber shops and tailors. African American professionals located in the area included the Stallworth & Johnson funeral home, dentists John D. Rawls and Joseph N. King, and physicians James K. Robertson and Frank S. Simpson. Entertainment venues included the Palace Theatre, a movie and vaudeville theatre on the north side of Avenue D, and several nightclubs. The only surviving buildings representing this section include the house at 1800 D that was converted for use as a restaurant and nightclub by at least World War II and the two buildings at 1809 to 1813 Avenue C, the latter of which served as a Knights of Pythias Hall.

Italians represented Birmingham's largest immigrant group, with a population of 2,160 by 1920 being more than forty percent larger than the city's English population, and double that of the area's German or Russian populations.²¹ Ensley's Italian population in 1910 stood at about eight hundred, most of whom were settled in a twenty-block area in the residential area along Avenue F just to the east of the



Christopher Columbus Hall. Christopher Columbus Halls were established in many cities by Italian-American communities as social organizations. Ensley had a significant population of Italian-Americans.

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Knights of Pythias Hall, 1913 Avenue C. Little remains of the once-thriving African-American business district that extended along Avenues C and D. This building, built circa 1900, housed the "colored" K of P Hall in the early 20th century.

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Downtown Ensley

downtown and known as “Little Italy.” In addition to working in the TCI mill, a number of Italians operated businesses within the commercial district. According to The Italians, From Bisacquino to Birmingham, “Italians did not have the anti-Negro prejudice that probably kept native whites from establishing businesses in black neighborhoods. Moreover, blacks willingly traded with Italians, whereas some native whites would not.” Jacob Cantavespre, the son of an Italian immigrant bricklayer, operated a coal business out of a building in the predominantly black commercial district at nearby Tuxedo Junction. Other Italian businesses in downtown included Joseph Pizzitola’s shoe repair shop on Ave D; Vincent Scalco’s fruit store at 1720 Avenue E; Jake Marino’s shoe repair shop; Samuel Spano, a shoe shiner; Joe Rizzo’s shoe repair shop at 306 19th Street; and Maeza’s Grocery at 517-521 17th Street. Ensley’s Italian community built a fraternal lodge, the Christopher Columbus Hall, in 1925. A new Catholic Italian Chapel was completed in 1939 with the Rev. A. Pucciarelli serving as its priest and a Good Will Center for Italians was located at 608 16th Street.²² Ensley’s Italian community began to migrate away after World War II.²³

Greek American businesses included Bourboulas Brothers Restaurant at 1813 Avenue E; Nick Paffos, a confectioner, at 101 19th Street; Gus Zanthos, a confectioner, at 302 19th Street; Peter Harduvel, operator of a pool room; and Alex Costs, who operated a billiard parlor at 403 19th Street. Berthon’s Cleaners was established in Ensley by French immigrant A.H. Berthon in 1925. Another French American, Paul Fontille, operated a furniture store. Jewish owned businesses in downtown included Myron Greenburg’s dry goods store, C. Sarasohn & Son’s Dry Goods store, Goldstein & Cohen’s department store, Silver & Sons 5&10, and Applebaum’s Department Store. Cotton & Gingold dry goods store is the only business still operating and is now known simply as Cotton’s. One Chinese business, Sam Loo’s laundry, was operating in downtown in 1925.



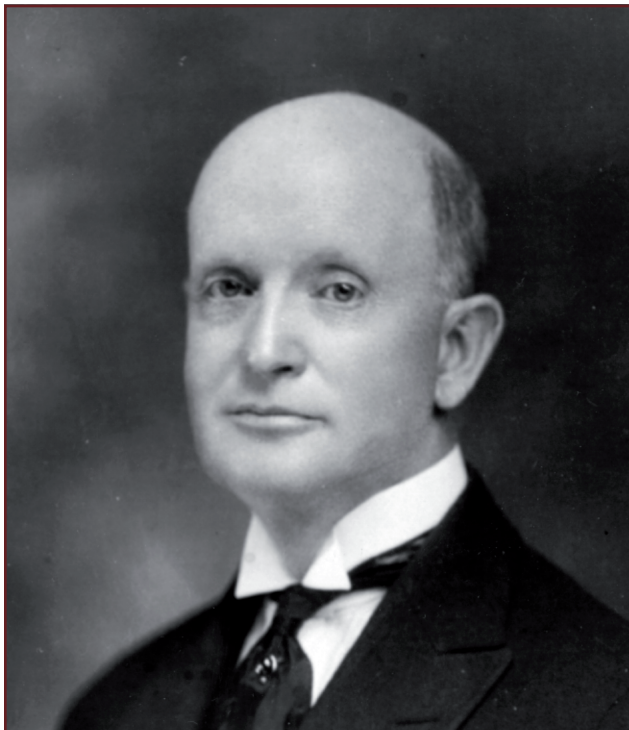
Neglected Commercial Building, 305 19th Street - Many of Ensley’s buildings are in an advancing state of deterioration.

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Downtown Ensley



Ramsay-McCormack Building Architect's Rendering
Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives, Catalog #BN4289
Erskine Ramsay, Industrialist and Philanthropist



Ramsay-McCormack Building

The September 1926 edition of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce's newsletter announced that: "Erskine Ramsay and Carr McCormack will erect a six story office building of reinforced steel and concrete, to cost \$200,000, at Avenue E and Nineteenth Street, Ensley. This will be Ensley's first Skyscraper." The location was then the epicenter of Ensley's commercial core and was sited directly across the intersection from the imposing Bank of Ensley building, constructed by Ramsey and McCormack in 1911. Construction of the building was delayed and by the time it was started in 1928, its plans had been expanded to include ten floors.

Designed by Birmingham architect Brooke B. Burnham, the \$500,000 building was completed and ready for occupancy in January 1930. The building housed a variety of businesses over the years and served as the headquarters of the United Security Life Insurance Company for many years.

Vacant since 1986, the Ramsay-McCormack Building has become a prominent symbol of the community's declining fortunes. A photograph of the building that ran in an August 2007 [Birmingham News](#) article was entitled "an icon of blight."

Erskine Ramsay (1864-1953) was among the most prominent of Birmingham's industrial, commercial, civic, and philanthropic leaders in the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth centuries. Ramsay's business interests were varied and he, often in conjunction with partner McCormack, was involved in real estate, coal, engineering, industry, and inventing. A millionaire by the age of forty, Ramsay gave extensively to charities throughout his lifetime and was active in many civic organizations. The front-page notice of Ramsay's death in [The Birmingham News](#) stated that: "A fabulous American of the nation's most colorful years of industrial growth, Mr. Ramsay made his fortune in Birmingham in the days of his youth and spent his senior years giving it away for good causes."

At one point, he offered families a stipend if they would name their children after him. One such child, Erskine Ramsay Hawkins, would gain international fame for his song named in honor of nearby Tuxedo Junction.

Downtown Ensley

Years of Decline

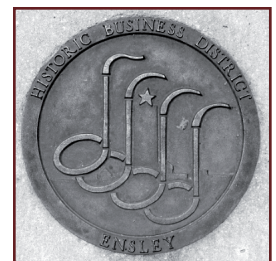
By the late 1960s, signs of economic decline had already begun within Ensley's retail sector. A 1968 study by the Birmingham Planning Department found that industrial smoke, dust, and noise was a deterrent to Ensley's growth.²⁴ Ironically, just a decade later, the loss of the industries that were producing the noise, smoke, and dirt would be the catalyst for the community's decline. By the 1970s, competition from area shopping centers and malls began to erode Ensley's retail base.²⁵

Ensley's fortunes began to decline sharply after 1974, when U.S. Steel significantly expanded the Fairfield Works with the construction of two innovative Q-BOP furnaces and added another furnace in 1978. The older more inefficient facilities at Ensley were gradually shut down, with the last of the mill's open-hearth furnaces ceasing operation in late 1978. With the closure of the rail mill and U.S. Steel's steel service center, Ensley's era as a major industrial center was over and much of its employment base was lost. Many of the buildings along 19th Street were vacant by the mid 1980s and the shooting that year of the manager of the Ensley Grill during a robbery was the catalyst for still more closures.²⁶

A prominent symbol of the community's declining fortunes, the Ramsay-McCormack Building became vacant in 1986. A 1996 article in the [Birmingham News](#) noted that: "Not much remains of downtown Ensley these days but ghosts and a handful of hold-on businesses. Even the grand 10-story Ramsay-McCormack Building, a landmark image of Ensley's past, now stands sadly empty, its windows one by one becoming broken."

A Rebirth

The citizens of Ensley have demonstrated great resilience and despite the community's changed circumstances, evidence of rebirth and economic renewal is becoming more tangible. Ensley's rich historical and architectural legacy are important assets that can promote the revitalization of the downtown area. A 2008 article in Main Street Birmingham, Inc.'s newsletter noted that the organization was under contract with the City of Birmingham to implement the BEACON program for neighborhood commercial district revitalization and that more than \$65 million in development is planned or underway in Ensley. The organization was instrumental in obtaining a Preserve America grant from the National Park Service that helped to fund a historic resource survey and National Register nominations for the Downtown Ensley Historic District and the Belcher-Nixon Building, and that will assist with the conversion of the Belcher-Nixon Building into a community center. In addition, the community has an active Ensley Merchants Association, as well as six neighborhood associations.



Downtown Ensley



The Ensley Street Railway

Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives, Catalog #OVH102

Tuxedo Junction

& The Belcher-Nixon Building



The Belcher-Nixon Building is the only surviving historic commercial building at Tuxedo Junction, a predominantly African American commercial center that also has significance in American musical history. Constructed circa 1922, the building served as the offices for several black dentists and physicians, primarily Dr. Andrew F. Belcher who practiced there from circa 1922 to 1951 and Dr. John W. Nixon, who practiced there from 1951 until 1988. Tuxedo Junction was immortalized in a 1939 song of the same name that was written by jazz musician Erskine Ramsay Hawkins' band and became a long-running national bestseller after it was recorded by the Glen Miller Orchestra in the 1940s.

Tuxedo Junction

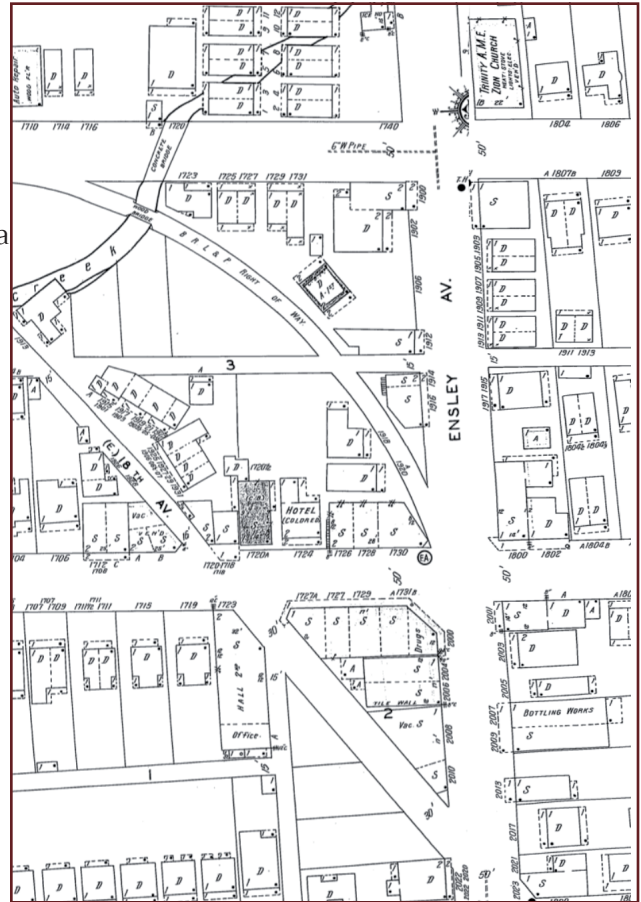
The Tuxedo Park suburb of Ensley was platted in 1899 and developed primarily as a residential area for African Americans employed at the U.S. Steel Ensley Works. The Birmingham Railway, Light and Power Company trolley lines split at the intersection of 20th Street and Ensley Avenue, with one line heading west along 20th Street and the other arching to the northwest and continuing down 19th Street. This split is what created the irregular-shaped lot on which the Belcher-Nixon Building was later built. A small but vibrant African American commercial district grew around the intersection and came to be known by the locals as Tuxedo Junction. The 1925 Sanborn map shows store buildings on all four corners of the intersection, a hotel to the west of the Belcher-Nixon Building, a store with a lodge hall across the street to the southwest, and other stores and a bottling works in the block of Ensley Avenue south of 20th Street. Similar conditions are shown on the 1951 update to the map.

Tuxedo Junction

The area became a major center for African American music in the 1920s and was “the only place negroes could go to dance then” according to a long time resident.²⁷ Music venues included Tuxedo Park, an American Woodman hall above a commercial building across 20th Street from the Belcher-Nixon Building that relocated to the Belcher-Nixon Building about 1930, and probably other restaurants and gathering spots in the area. A caption to a photograph of the Belcher-Nixon Building in a 1940 Birmingham Post article noted that “over the coal yard is a Negro fraternal hall where on Saturday nights Negro feet shuffle and swing to ‘Tuxedo Junction,’ the corner’s theme song.”²⁸

Tuxedo Park, located in the block bounded by Avenues T and U and 13th and 16th Streets, several blocks away from the Belcher-Nixon Building, historically served as “a Park for Negroes and called Tuxedo Park” or a “Negro Amusement Park.”²⁹ The 1928 Sanborn map depicts the park with a pool and bathhouse, a skating rink, an office, a shooting gallery, and a dancing pavilion. A 1939 entry in the Board of Equalization record indicates that the site then had a dance hall, two concession stands, and two sheds, all in poor condition. All but the dressing rooms, the dance pavilion, and a transformer station had been demolished by 1950.

Erskine Ramsey Hawkins, a Birmingham jazz trumpeter who had apprenticed under noted jazzman John Whatley, began playing at the dance pavilion at Tuxedo Park in 1926 when he was twelve years old and was soon playing in local nightclubs and halls with the George Earl Band.³⁰ The 1940 Birmingham Post article indicates that Hawkins played in the American Woodman hall in this building and, since the hall relocated to this building by 1930, the timing is consistent with his appearances in Tuxedo Junction. A neighbor, Catherine Williams, recalls having seen Hawkins play in the hall in the early 1940s.³¹ Hawkins began touring New York in 1934 with the Bama State Collegians, a college band he had joined while attending the Alabama State Teachers College and that would form the nucleus of the Erskine Hawkins Band. When Hawkins and his composer/arranger Sammy Lowe were approached by RCA to record one of Hawkins songs in 1939, they chose a tune they had been using



Tuxedo Junction - 1928 Sanborn Map

Tuxedo Junction

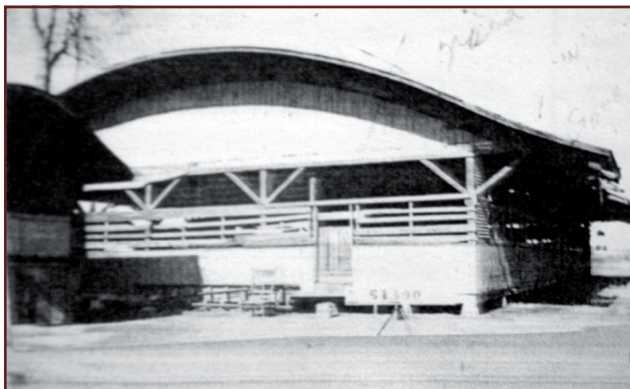
to sign off their shows at New York's Savoy Ballroom. A member of the band's staff suggested the name "Tuxedo Junction" for the tune, in honor of Hawkins' early career. The song was a success, but it became a major hit when the Glenn Miller Band recorded it in the early 1940s. The recording sold more than three and a half million copies and topped the record charts for almost a decade.³² In the years during and immediately following the popularity of the song, the crossroads it was named after became something of a local tourist attraction and at one time "there were 15 music boxes playing 'Tuxedo Junction' there."³³

Then Birmingham Mayor James Morgan is quoted as having said about Tuxedo Junction: "It's the filthiest thing I've ever seen. Crime and illness are bound to come from nasty holes like that." A major urban renewal slum clearance project was completed in the 1950s followed in 1961 by the construction of the 484-unit Tuxedo Court low-income housing project.³⁴ In discussing plans for the Tuxedo housing project, a chamber of commerce official was quoted as saying: "Our plans are to completely remodel and clean up the whole Ensley district, into what we think would be a model community."³⁵ The Belcher-Nixon Building is the last remaining historic commercial building at the Tuxedo Junction intersection.



Erskine Hawkins

Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives, Catalog #842.1.30



Dance Pavillion, Tuxedo Park

Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives

Largely due to its historical associations as the last surviving historic commercial building in Tuxedo Junction and with Erskine Hawkins' song of the same name, the Belcher-Nixon Building was designated a historic resource by the Jefferson County Historical Society and an Alabama Historical Commission historical marker was placed there in 1980.

Tuxedo Junction

Belcher-Nixon Building

The Belcher-Nixon Building was constructed circa 1922 and originally housed the offices of Dr. Andrew F. Belcher, an African American dentist, on the second floor and three commercial shop spaces on the first floor, numbered 1726, 1728, and 1730 20th Street. The building was traditionally occupied by African American businesses, although its first retail tenant as indicated by the 1923 city directory was Adolph Rathman, a white grocer, operating out of 1730. The other two retail spaces were vacant in 1923. The 1925 directory records that J.E. Stevens, a barber and tailor, had moved into 1726. G.W. Thornton's billiard parlor and J.H. Smith's restaurant are listed at 1730. Edward J. Allen replaced Stevens by 1928 and the two other spaces were again vacant, Rathman having died in 1927.³⁶ About 1930, Dr. G.N. Adamson, an African American physician, and the American Woodmen Union Relief Benevolent Society Camp #65 relocated from a building across the street and joined Dr. Belcher upstairs in this building. The American Woodmen was established as a semi-fraternal benevolent and insurance society and was the African American counterpart to the Woodmen of the World.

James K. Robertson was operating a drug store at 1728 20th Street by 1931 and remained a tenant until about 1960. Also by that year, 1730 was converted for use by a white coal dealer named Jacob Cantavespre, the son of an Italian immigrant bricklayer.³⁷ Photos of the building taken in 1937 show that much of the north, east and south walls of the first floor of the building were removed at 1730 to accommodate this use. A shed canopy was added along the east elevation, as were a series of bollards along the sidewalk.³⁸ By 1937, Peter Sims, an African American, had taken over the coal shop, although a painted sign shown on the building in a 1937 tax assessment photo reads "Robbins



Belcher-Nixon Building Circa 1939
Birmingham Public Library Archives

Tuxedo Junction



Belcher-Nixon Building, 1948
Birmingham Public Library Archives

Coal.”³⁹ The following year Thomas Dotson was operating a shoe repair shop within the space and a photo of the building dated 1947 shows that the large openings in the walls had been infilled with storefronts. The 1939 tax assessor’s card indicates that the building had two rooms on the second floor used as a dentist’s office, one room as a doctor’s office, two extra rooms as anterooms, and one “large hall” for the Woodsmen. Mamie Pickett began operating a clothes cleaning shop at 1726 circa 1935 and was replaced as a tenant by the Tuxedo Beauty Parlor by 1947. The Tuxedo Variety Store moved into the latter space about 1953 and remained there into the 1980s. After Roberston’s drug store moved out in the early 1960s, 1728 saw a variety of tenants including the Help One Another Club, the Christ Temple AFM Church, and later United Service Associates, Inc. Booker T. Washington insurance company moved into 1730 in the 1960s and remained there until the 1980s.

Other African American professionals who had offices upstairs included physicians Marque L. Jackson and later Andrew P. Robertson. Dentists Isaac Graves and Ramsey G. Cole had offices there in the 1940s. In 1951, Dr. Belcher recruited Dr. John W. Nixon to join his practice. Dr. Nixon later assumed the practice after Belcher’s death and continued to practice in the building until his death in 1988. Pauline Nzeribe, also a dentist, practiced there in the 1990s.

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Dr. Andrew F. Belcher

Andrew F. Belcher was born in Centerville, Alabama circa 1896 and was the son of Felix Belcher, a barber. A World War I veteran, he attended college at Tuskegee Institute and, after teaching school for a short time, enrolled in the dental program at Meharry Medical School in Nashville. At the time of the 1920 census, he was still living in Nashville and his occupation was listed as a dentist. By 1922 he had relocated to Ensley and established his practice. Dr. Belcher also participated in numerous other business and social activities. He was a charter member of the Birmingham Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity; a member of the Jefferson County Dental Association, the Knights of Pythians, and the American Woodmen; and was chairman of the board of directors of the Jones Valley Finance Company. While visiting Michigan in 1951 to convalesce, Dr. Belcher died unexpectedly. His obituary in the Birmingham World stated that “over a thirty-year period, he built a terrific practice – young Drs. Isaac Graves, B.M. Jefferson and Nixon were encouraged and assisted by him.”⁴⁰

Dr. John W. Nixon

Dr. John W. Nixon was born in Bartow, Florida in 1922 and was the son of Willie Nixon, a phosphate mine worker. He attended college prior to entering the Army during World War II. After the war, he completed his education, which included attending Bethune-Cookman College and Fisk University. He received his D.D.S. degree in 1951 from the dental school at Meharry Medical College in Nashville. Upon graduation, Dr. Nixon, like many blacks at the time, seriously considered relocating to the North where opportunities were thought to be greater. He was offered a practice in Boston with the opportunity to pursue graduate work at Tufts University. About the same time Birmingham dentist, Dr. Andrew J. Belcher, offered him a position. At first convinced that he should accept the Boston



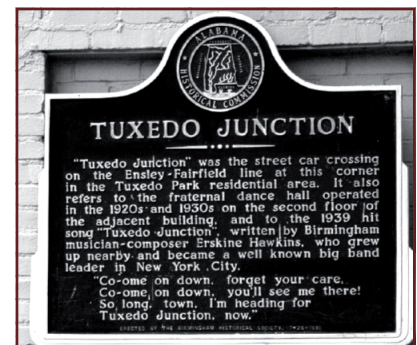
Belcher-Nixon Building in 2008
Schneider Historic Preservation, LLC

Tuxedo Junction

position, Nixon sought the advice of his mentor, Dr. Harold D. West, who convinced him to accept Belcher's offer to visit Birmingham. During his visit, Dr. Belcher passed away and Nixon stayed on to help with his patients. He later wrote: "Birmingham became my temporary domicile. Each year I thought I would move away the following year, but somehow I just stayed on and on."⁴¹

Dr. Nixon was an important participant in the struggle for civil rights in Birmingham in the 1950s and 1960s. He served as the president of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), two terms as president of the Alabama Conference of NAACP Branches, and one term as the chairman of the Southern Regional Conference of NAACP Branches. In 1963, during the pivotal confrontations led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, leader of the Birmingham-based Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), Dr. Nixon was among a group of black business leaders who called for moderation rather than confrontation. While the work of King and Shuttlesworth was the precursor to The March on Washington in August 1963, and ultimately the passage of more effective civil rights legislation, the established relationships moderate black professionals like Dr. Nixon had with their white counterparts helped pave the way for the successful implementation of many of the local reforms that the protests had initiated.

The events in Birmingham led directly to President Kennedy's announcement of a new civil rights act during a speech on June 11, 1963. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to enforce the sections of the law prohibiting discrimination in the workplace. While the EEOC was initially envisioned to have regulatory authority in its enforcement activities, including the use of cease and desist orders, the final legislation creating the Commission left it with only the power to investigate individual complaints of discrimination and to attempt to mediate a settlement between the parties involved. Still, as Robert C. Lieberman of Columbia University writes in "The EEOC and Civil Rights Enforcement," "Title VII soon became the basis for a strong, arguably effective state initiated program of antidiscrimination enforcement—the cluster of mandates and practices known collectively as affirmative action."⁴² Because the EEOC had limited powers, it effectively began to work with a variety of private entities, including the NAACP, to carry out its mission. Birmingham was chosen by Alfred Blumrosen, the EEOC's chief of conciliations as the site of EEOC's first conciliation initiative "because as a highly visible focal point for the civil rights movement and a major industrial center, Birmingham was 'symbolic of all the problems of discrimination in the South.'"⁴³ The EEOC worked closely with Birmingham's branch of the NAACP, of which Dr. Nixon was then president, on a series of cases involving job discrimination in the area, notably those cases relating to U.S. Steel, the city's largest employer.



Tuxedo Junction

Dr. Nixon used the Belcher-Nixon Building as his primary base of operations for much of his civil rights-related activities throughout the 1950s and 1960s. He maintained a small office in the building where he would plan his activities, communicate with other leaders by phone, and hold small meetings. The building served as the local NAACP headquarters during Dr. Nixon's term as the organization's president.⁴⁴

In addition to his dental practice and civil rights work, Dr. Nixon was active in a wide variety of other pursuits. He served for a time on the faculty of the University of Alabama-Birmingham Dental School and was appointed to the National Advisory Dental Research Council of the National Institute of Health in 1976. In addition, Dr. Nixon served on the state Board of Pensions and Security and was a member of the President's Cabinet at the University of Alabama. His business pursuits included helping to organize the Citizens Federal Savings and Loan Association and he was a founding member of Operation New Birmingham, a partnership between Birmingham and Jefferson County to promote economic development and racial harmony. An accomplished actor and storyteller, Dr. Nixon appeared in both local productions and as a bit player in major films and was a member of the Screen Actors Guild. He participated in an annual Black History Month oral history program and became "a much sought after dramatist of poetry because of his acting skills and melodious voice."⁴⁵ He later joined with Birmingham actor and writer Thom Gossom, Jr. to create an oral history program called "Speak of Me As I Am" that was very popular in Birmingham schools and churches until Dr. Nixon's death. Dr. Nixon was also an Associate Minister at the Sixth Avenue Baptist Church. In 1971, Dr. Nixon joined with prominent Birmingham business leaders A.G. Gaston and Arthur Shores to establish United Service Associates, Inc. (USAI), a facilities maintenance company. Headquartered in the Belcher-Nixon Building, USAI has provided cleaning services to such clients as Marshall Space Flight Center, Stennis Space Center, Kennedy Space Center, NASA, Holiday Inn, and the U. S. Air Force.⁴⁶

Dr. Nixon died at age sixty-six on December 20, 1988 after a short illness. An editorial in The Birmingham News the following day stated: "Few people have so totally involved themselves in all aspects of a city's life as John W. Nixon did after coming to Birmingham in 1951...With his family and many friends, we mourn the passing of a truly remarkable Renaissance man."⁴⁷ The city's major African American newspaper, the Birmingham World, noted Nixon "was a former president of the Birmingham chapter of the NAACP and had a long history as a civil rights activist."⁴⁸

In 1963, Dr. Nixon wrote: "If not living together, at least living side by side for one hundred fifty years has made a fertile background in the South for an intimate human understanding unsurpassed by any other section of the nation. Very soon we will lead the nation, not only in economic, political, and industrial development, but in real progress for all people."⁴⁹

Notes



¹ Marjorie Longenecker White, The Birmingham District: An Industrial History and Guide (Birmingham, AL: Birmingham Historical Society, 1981), p. 98.

² White, p. 99.

³ White, p. 99.

⁴ Robert Gregg, Origin and Development of the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company (New York: The Newcomen Society of England, American Branch, 1948), pp. 16-17.

⁵ "Written Historical and Descriptive Data, Addendum to the Tennessee Coal & Iron Co., Fairfield Works," Historic American Engineering Record, Washington, D.C., n.d.

⁶ Kenneth Warren, Big Steel: The First Century of the United States Steel Corporation 1901-2001 (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), p. 1.

⁷ White, p. 100.

⁸ Warren, p. 79.

⁹ Warren, p.82.

¹⁰ "Written Historical and Descriptive Data"

¹¹ White, p. 101.

¹² White, p. 102.

¹³ White, 102.

¹⁴ Personal communication to author from Marjorie Longenecker White.

¹⁵ "Educational Supplement to Neighborhoods: Artful Excursions Through Birmingham's African-American Communities," lecture, Vulcan Park and Museum, February 2008, transcript online at www.visitvulcan.com/Educational_Supplement_to_Neighborhoods.pdf

¹⁶ "With its backbone of steel and commerce, picture of Ensley's future is bright," The Birmingham News, December 2, 1954.

¹⁷ Joe Campbell, "Ensley Overpass stands as monument to teamwork, vim and vigor of all citizens," The Birmingham News, May 27, 1954.

¹⁸ "Ensley Fast Becoming Commercial, Industrial Hub Of Western Section," Birmingham Post-Herald, October 5, 1956.

¹⁹ Ensley Steel Works of TCI still rate one of South's great plants," The Birmingham News, April 27, 1960.

Notes

²⁰ Lynne B. Feldman, *A Sense of Place: Birmingham's Black Middle-class Community, 1890-1930* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1999).

²¹ *The Italians: From Bisacquino to Birmingham*, (Birmingham, AL: Birmingham, 1981), p. 2.

²² Clipping dated February 23, 1939," Ensley vertical file, Birmingham Public Library.

²³ "Birmingham's Ensley: Once a city thriving," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, June 4, 2005.

²⁴ Dick Johnson, "Industrial Noise, Dust, Smoke Hinderance to Ensley," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, June 10, 1968.

²⁵ "Plans to revitalize Ensley's downtown area is [sic] discussed," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, December 2, 1977.

²⁶ Peggy Stanford, "Doing business on 19th Street, Ensley merchants cite tradition, express fear," *The Birmingham News*, April 18, 1986.

²⁷ Barbara Thomas, "Tuxedo Junction nicer than swing era town," *The Birmingham News*, July 1, 1968; The article quotes Mrs. , F. A. Simpson who had lived in the area neighborhood since 1914.

²⁸ Bill Bennett, "Tuxedo Junction, Ensley's Corner With Theme Song," *Birmingham Post*, July 27, 1940; No other documentary sources clearly indicate that Hawkins performed in this building and this article was written more than a decade after the American Woodmen hall moved from across the street. Still, the Belcher-Nixon Building would have been known to Hawkins and it remains the only standing resource in the neighborhood for which there is any evidence of his performance there.

²⁹ Jefferson County Board of Equalization Records, Parcel #22-32-3-007-001.000.

³⁰ Hawkins was named after noted Birmingham industrialist and philanthropist Erskine Ramsay who at one time paid parents to name their children after him.

³¹ Interview with Catherine Williams, Birmingham, AL, October 3, 2008

³² Larry Ragan, "Tux Turns Fifty," *Birmingham Magazine*, July 1989; Carl Sanders, Jr., "The song that made an intersection famous," *The Birmingham News*, July 25, 1980.

³³ From Where I Stand," *Birmingham-Post-Herald*, July 27, 1955.

³⁴ Joe Campbell, "Expanded slum clearance in Ensley area studied," *Birmingham News*, August 22, 1956.

³⁵ "Ensley C. of C. Busy With Civic Projects," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, December 7, 1956.

³⁶ *Alabama Deaths, 1908-59*, (Provo, UT, USA: The Generations Network, Inc., 2000).

³⁷ 1930 Census.

³⁸ These bollards were later cut off flush with the sidewalk and they remain visible today.

³⁹ Jefferson County Board of Equalization Records, Parcel #22-31-4-037-029.000.

⁴⁰ "Impressive Rites Held For Dr. A. F. Belcher," *Birmingham World*, November 2, 1951, p. 1.

⁴¹ John W. Nixon, "Home-To Live and Die in Dixie," in Robert H. McKenzie, ed., *The Rising South*, Vol. 2, Southern Universities and the South (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1976), n.p.

⁴² Robert C. Lieberman, "The EEOC and Civil Rights Enforcement," New York, Columbia University Department of Political Science, March 2007.

⁴³ *Ibid.*; Lieberman quotes Alfred Blumrosen in "Administrative Creativity: The First Years of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission," *George Washington Law Review*, #378, p. 741.

⁴⁴ 1967 city directory; Interview with John C. Nixon, Birmingham, AL, August 22, 2008; Interview with John Nixon, Jr., Montgomery, AL, October 1, 2008.

⁴⁵ "Speak of Me As I Am, A Play Written by Thom Gossom, Jr.," website, <http://www.speakofmeasiam.com>; After Dr. Nixon's death, Gossom expanded and re-wrote the oral history program as a play.

⁴⁶ United Services Associates, Inc. Cleans Up When it Comes to Accolades," press release, United Services Associates, Inc., January 12, 2005.

⁴⁷ "Dr. John W. Nixon," *The Birmingham News*, December 21, 1988, p. 10A.

⁴⁸ "Final Rites Held for Dr. Nixon," *Birmingham World*, December 24, 1988, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Dr. John W. Nixon, D.D.S. "God Smiles on a Troubled City," Address by John W. Nixon, D.D.S. to the Columbus Club of Frontiers International, June 25, 1963.

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