The Block is a culturally, emotionally and historically rich area in downtown Asheville. The African-American heritage of this district offers an empowering message of rising from the restraints of enslavement to become one of the most economically viable African-American communities in the entire country. It will do so again. The dynamic history of the area has created a valuable and rewarding experience for those who remember, and those who visit now.

Early History

The history of Asheville itself is tightly interwoven with The Block. In 1800, a village on what is now known as Pack Square was home to 38 white settlers and 13 enslaved African Americans. The construction of the railroad opened this once remote village to the rest of the country, as visitors flocked to the mountains for "health treatments." This influx of activity in the region created a need for service work—a need met primarily by African-American laborers.

Prior to the Civil War, the Eagle Hotel, located on what is now Biltmore Avenue, relied on slave labor to serve those housed in quarters located within The Block. During the same period, slave houses for "The Henrietta," a large estate on Biltmore Avenue, were located on the former Velvet Street. In 1886, those homes were bought by Isaac Dickson, an African American businessman and educator elected to Asheville's first school board, who then rented the homes to individuals within the community. Dickson was among a number of African-American leaders responsible for engendering a community and culture that was deeply rooted in the churches, schools, businesses, and homes of the city's African-American population.

In 1891, a group of local prominent African-Americans sought to create a community space in the model of a YMCA—a first for Asheville and the nation. One of the men, Edward S. Stephens, established a relationship with George Vanderbilt and approached him with a business proposal. Vanderbilt was convinced by the idea and in 1893 invested $32,000 in what came to be known as the Young Men's Institute, a cornerstone of culture and self-sufficiency in the community. YMI offered retail space in its ground floor space that housed doctors, a drug store, and educational facilities—a kindergarten, night school, and reading room.

At the turn of the century, the area was bustling with activity. The neighborhood, like the YMI, was a self-sufficient community due to the close-knit web of businesses and homes. Not only was economic activity flourishing, there were also many cultural projects that empowered the community: hospitals were started; newspapers were founded; new schools were opened; a community was built. All of these ventures were initiated by individuals and groups within the neighborhood.

The Great Depression

The Great Depression, which began in 1929 and lasted into the 1930’s, severely impacted Asheville and The Block because of its service-based economy. Even during these trying times, the resiliency of the community solidified as residents became even more self-sufficient, growing their own food and helping one another with basic needs.

From an outsider’s point of view, the neighborhood never entirely recovered from those hard economic times. Housing had been degraded, but the people and their community ties had grown stronger through the trials. During the late 1930’s and into the 1950’s, The Block continued to be a beacon of community activity and liveliness. Juke Joints were popular and the area became a hot spot for locals. People flocked from all over to see big names such as Louis Armstrong and James Brown.
1960-Present

The 1960’s was a turbulent time for all Americans, and Asheville’s African American community was no exception. The Block had been an inward looking community, based on self-sufficiency, and in many ways sheltered from the brutality of racism in everyday life. Neighborhood residents received quality services and education through their own initiative. Businesses and churches supported the community and, in turn, the community supported them.

With integration, however, the community found itself unprepared for the cultural transition. African-American high school students from Stephens-Lee were integrated into the white high school, but no attempts were made to retain any of their history or culture. The African-Americans were now able to shop at previously white-only establishments, but merchants on The Block had difficulty attracting new business from white shoppers.

At the same time, Asheville was one of many cities across the United States that participated in Urban Renewal, part of a national effort during the 1950’s through the 1970’s to improve so-called “blighted” areas of cities. The East End/Valley Street neighborhood was one such neighborhood targeted during this period, devastating a thriving community and leaving scars that remain today. Connections between The Block and the surrounding communities were severed and the once-vibrant sense of community that defined The Block was lost.

The 1980’s signaled more hard times for most of Downtown Asheville as suburbanization took hold and retail activity moved to the malls. Many buildings were boarded up and The Block fared no better. The YMI, once the cornerstone of the community, had fallen into such disrepair that it was closed for much of that decade. Starting in the early 1990’s, revitalization efforts sparked new investment in the Downtown area, as Asheville reclaimed its reputation as a tourist destination. Almost every district has experienced resurgence in the past two decades, yet The Block remains relatively untouched by this new investment in Asheville’s Downtown.

Currently, The Block represents a convergence of history, opportunity, and future growth. Signs of the District’s historic self-sufficiency have re-emerged: a reenergized YMI Cultural Center; the revitalization plans of Mt. Zion and Eagle Market Streets Development Corporation, the proposed Performance Center. Taken together, these initiatives and future development projects present an opportunity to revisit The Block and envision a future where coordinated, compatible development will serve to catalyze reinvestment and development in the Eagle-Market District.

Development of The Block - Historic Timeline

- 1800 – The Block is a Village with 38 white settlers, 13 African-American slaves
- Pre Civil War – Eagle Hotel built near Biltmore Ave, using African-Americans who lived nearby in the Block
- Mid 1800s – Homes built in The Block for African Americans building “The Henrietta” estate
- 1880 – Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church founded
- 1886 – Block homes purchased by Isaac Dickson and were rented to surrounding community members
- 1893 – George Vanderbilt invested $32,000 for the Young Men’s Institute (YMI), offering retail space and educational facilities. YMI became the cornerstone of culture and the community’s self-sufficiency.
- 1919 – Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church constructed on Eagle St.
- 1930s – Great Depression brought hard economic times to Asheville and The Block
- 1930s-1950s – Despite hard times, The Block continued to develop and exist as a beacon of community
- 1960s – Urban Renewal removed “blight” and largely destroyed The Block and East End Community (once connected, now separated); Valley Street was changed to South Charlotte Street and Velvet Street was removed
- 1980 – YMI takes on role as a cultural center
- Today – The Block is a monument of history and is re-energized with development activities from YMI Cultural Center, Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church, Eagle Market Street Development Corporation, and other local business leaders.
1901 Development Pattern

In the early 1900’s the YMI building and Mt. Zion Church were surrounded by sparse development, mostly homes. Biltmore Avenue was well established. Clusters of homes existed near Sycamore and Market as well as the eastern end of Eagle.

1913 Development Pattern

In this era an open stream ran between Valley and Market streets. Clusters of small homes existed and the street pattern was significantly different.
A fine-grained pattern extended throughout the heart of the district prior to the construction of the parking garage along the north edge of Eagle Street. Structures like the Del Cardo and Wilson buildings were close together, creating continuous street edges. Wilson Alley extended north across Eagle Street. Further down Eagle, between Spruce and Valley, development was more thinly dispersed. Velvet and Spruce just south of Eagle were lined with homes. The intersection of Valley and Eagle, the commercial and cultural hub of the community, was lined with small shops and neighborhood services.

The effects of Urban Renewal are readily visible on the landscape today. Modern architecture, utilitarian land uses, and surface parking lots are scars that contrast greatly with the traditional urban form of the past. The eradication of homes and businesses that accompanied the construction of Charlotte Street remains unjustified by the lack of rehabilitation and reinvestment. The current development pattern is unwelcoming to pedestrians. A lack of active storefronts, numerous blank walls of new infrastructure, and the back sides of businesses and city services all contribute to what some would call a “no-man’s land,” a significant void in livable urban development. The map is titled “Improvements” and is the final location map for the “Valley Street Connector”. Structures are marked as “Standard”, “Deteriorating”, or “Dilapidated”.