

# Old neighborhood gets new attention

One of West Ashley's oldest neighborhoods is getting new recognition for its lengthy, complex and inspiring history.

The Maryville-Ashleyville neighborhood, nestled between S.C. Highway 61 and the Ashley River, just south of Charles Towne Landing, was owned in the 17th century by three English noblemen who helped found the Carolina colony.

But the history that's most visible today began around 1886, about two decades after slavery ended.

That's when Mary Matthews Just, described in a Chicora Foundation research paper as "an exceptionally strong black woman who went to work in the phosphate fields, unheard of during this period," got to work.

Just encouraged residents to "transform the settlement into a



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that's beginning to change with an upcoming addition of a historical marker along S.C. Highway 61.

town" and helped create one of the state's first purely black town governments, a model for blacks across the country, the foundation notes.

"Maryville" was named in her honor.

Its rich history remains largely invisible today, but



Staff Photo by Matthew Fortner

Emanuel AME Church on 5th Avenue in West Ashley is an anchor for the Maryville neighborhood.

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## ATTENTION

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City Council also recently recognized the neighborhood.

Neighborhood President Clemon Richardson has lived in the neighborhood since 1945 but never knew much about its history.

That changed when the city began to annex it in recent years.

"When we worked on merging with the city, the question kept coming up to me about the history of this area," he says. "After the merger was over with, we started thinking why there were so many questions about it, and we started looking into it."

They discovered, among other things, that its first owners were three of the Lords Proprietors. The area, just south of the original settlement, was known as "Proprietors' Plantation" or the "Governor's House."

A 1673 plat from the Shaftesbury Papers shows the plantation, including a star-shaped palisade. Gov. Joseph West had his home inside. (Remember, this was still about seven years before West moved the settlement across the Ashley, to the peninsula.)

One of its subsequent owners, Dr. John Lining — one of the colony's scientific leaders — may be buried on a small island in the marsh.

The property changed hands several times in the 19th century, and after the Civil War, the widow of Charleston County Sheriff C.C. Bowen and her husband, Gen. W.N. Taft, subdivided it and sold the land to local black families.

Some credit Taft for founding Hillsboro and Maryville, but the Chicora Foundation notes that many feel that Just was the more important historical figure.

"Mary went on to organize both religious and instruction classes and educational opportunities for the Maryville residents," the foundation's research notes. "Little more is currently known about the community."

To drive through Maryville-Ashleyville today, one quickly recognizes it's not like other West Ashley suburbs built by a single developer in a more or less homogenous style.

The neighborhood's one-story and two-story homes represent a vernacular mix of brick, stucco, wood and concrete block, all nestled along small streets, many of them trailing off into the Ashley River marsh, with impressive views of downtown Charleston in the distance.

Richardson says while the neighborhood has seen a tremendous amount of change during the last

55 years, it still maintains a town feel.

"We want that," he adds. "When we talked about merging with the city, that was one of our requests — that we keep this atmosphere."

In some senses, the history of Maryville is similar to Lincolnville, a black township formed in northern Charleston County. But there's one important difference: Lincolnville survived.

Maryville's demise as a town came in 1936, nine years before Richardson moved in.

At that point, the General Assembly, at the urging of newer, white residents, withdrew its charter, forcing Mayor Thomas Carr and his assistants out of office.

A newspaper article at the time notes, "Maryville is made up almost entirely of negroes, although its population of 500 has been augmented in the last few years. The effort to abolish this township has been a long one. The town was incorporated about 50 years ago, and its charter was saved in 1933 when town officials agreed not to levy a 5-percent tax on the town's merchants, most of them white."

When Richardson appeared before City Council this fall to re-

ceive a resolution on behalf of the neighborhood, Mayor Joseph P. Riley Jr. referred to the town's dissolution as "obviously a sad moment in our state's history."

Still, what seems to stick in Richardson's mind is not the state's decision to revoke the charter, but Mary Matthews Just's efforts to get the town going so soon after slavery ended.

He calls the new recognition of the history "very, very long overdue," adding, "We hope it will give encouragement to our youth that no matter how things may look, there is a light at the end of the tunnel."

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# A BIT ON MARYVILLE

## The People, Trials, and Tribulations of one of Charleston's first black enclaves

**By Donna Jacobs**  
**Contributing Writer**

Maryville, South Carolina: An All-Black Town and Its White Neighbors is the title of Allen Carrington Hutcheson's thesis presented to his committee at Harvard College in November 1995 as one of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors. This thesis is one of the many archived documents at the Avery Research Center for African-American History & Culture recounting the history of Maryville. It is a fascinating read.

The Town of Maryville was laid out on land along the Ashley River that was originally the "experimental plantation" for the Carolina colony. Governor Joseph West's palisaded home stood near the modern-day intersection of Fifth Avenue and Main Street in the 1670s. According to Hutcheson's research, Fifth Avenue followed the original road to the palisade, therefore, qualifying the street as one of the oldest roads in South Carolina.

In the late 1880s the land was divided and sold to African-Americans who were earning money in the phosphate mines or as day laborers on farms. One of the original landowners was a woman named Mary Just. Hutcheson's thesis speaks of the difficulty in determining the details of the original foundation and development of the town due to the lack of records and the inability to corroborate personal recollections. He even addresses the two historical contradictory versions of the town's name: "one white and one black. One is the work of a white genealogical historian, Henry A.M. Smith, who in one sentence gives the widow of C.C. Bowen the credit, or rather blame, for having the land divided up and sold out to Negroes. The other published account is in the biography of Ernest Everett Just, a distinguished black biologist of the 1920s who was raised in Maryville."

Just's mother was Mary Matthews Just. She worked in the phosphate mines and according to Hutcheson, "negotiated a solid investment in one of the sought-after plots in the village in 1888." In Kenneth R. Manning's biography of Ernest Just, *Black Apollo of Science: The Life of Ernest Everett Just*, Manning uses Just's letters as supporting evidence that the town was named for Ernest's mother, Mary. He writes: "she became a strong community leader, canvassing the inhabitants, mostly men, and persuading them to transform the settlement into a town. They called the town, Maryville, after its prime mover."

Mary Just had a passion for education and felt the town of Maryville needed a school. She sold property to help found the Frederick Deming Jr. Industrial School in the early 1890s. It was the first industrial school for African-Americans in South Carolina. She also instilled this passion in her children. Her son, Ernest, took the spark she instilled in him and excelled in the academic field, graduating magna cum laude from Dartmouth College with a zoology degree, and special

honors in botany, history, and sociology. In 1916 he received his doctorate in experimental embryology from the University of Chicago.

Dr. Just achieved international acclaim and his research in the field of embryology is considered fundamental. He did this despite the racism and prejudice that was the norm for his day. Today Just's accomplishments are recognized and celebrated each February when the Medical University of South Carolina hosts The Ernest Everett Just symposium, a fitting tribute to a native son.

As the landscape of St. Andrew's Parish began to change from rural to an area attractive for suburban development in the late 1920s, the town of Maryville felt the pressure. In a legal battle, where few documents remain, the town's charter was revoked by the state legislature. By 1936 Maryville was officially no longer a town and had come under the jurisdiction of the magistrate and police of St. Andrew's Parish. Annexation into the City of Charleston followed late in the 20th century, continuing a trend in the Parish that had begun in the early 1960s.

***West Ashley Flashback with Donna Jacobs explores a wide-ranging history of West Ashley from the 1890s to the late 1990s. Jacobs is the author of the book *Byrnes Down from Arcadia* Publishing's *Images of America* series, and has a new *Images of America* book about West Ashley in the works, to be released in 2012. Contact Donna at [westashleybook@gmail.com](mailto:westashleybook@gmail.com).***