

REVISITING MURALS



ANIMATING NEIGHBORHOODS

Revisiting Murals
Animating Neighborhoods

A collaborative project

Urbana-Champaign, Illinois 2010

Introduction

This booklet emerged from a commemoration of the thirty-first anniversary of the mural at Fifth and Park Streets in Champaign, ***A Pictorial History of African Americans of Champaign County***. The mural was created in 1978 by artist **Angela M. Rivers**. For this project, Ms. Rivers was in residence in Champaign-Urbana twice, in October 2009 and June 2010. She facilitated activities related to community history and memory mapping workshops, a radio talk show, oral history interviews and arts education—and delivered a lecture centered on the mural and its importance. She worked closely with young people from Champaign in the summer of 2010.

Ms. Rivers was raised and educated in Champaign, receiving a BFA from the University of Illinois. She has worked in various supervisory and administrative positions and as a curator, educator, and consultant for educational and cultural organizations and museums in central Illinois, the Chicago metropolitan area, and Dallas, Texas, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Field Museum of Natural History, the DuSable Museum of African American History and the Dallas Museum of Art.

“

My family's history is an integral part of the history of African-Americans in Champaign County; my mother's side of the family arrived just after the Civil War from Vigo County, Indiana. I grew up with stories about family members participating in numerous wars, building homes and lives, having farms and businesses. A great grandfather was a deputy sheriff at the turn of the last century and a grandfather was the first black policeman of Champaign. Because of this it was important to me to show in the mural that we as African-Americans had a history in Champaign; we arrived in the county to help build and maintain the railways, we owned farms and became productive members of the greater community. The mural for me has been a reminder of that history.

”

Angela M. Rivers

The mural resulted from the efforts of the **Educational Resources in Environmental Science (ERES)** organization in Champaign, headed (then and now) by **David Monk**. ERES then hired **Angela Rivers** and other artists to create the work through the **Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA)**. We have selected some quotes and images to share.

Now badly deteriorated, the 16 x 64-foot mural may be revisited in more images and interviews online at <http://eblackcu.net/mural/>.



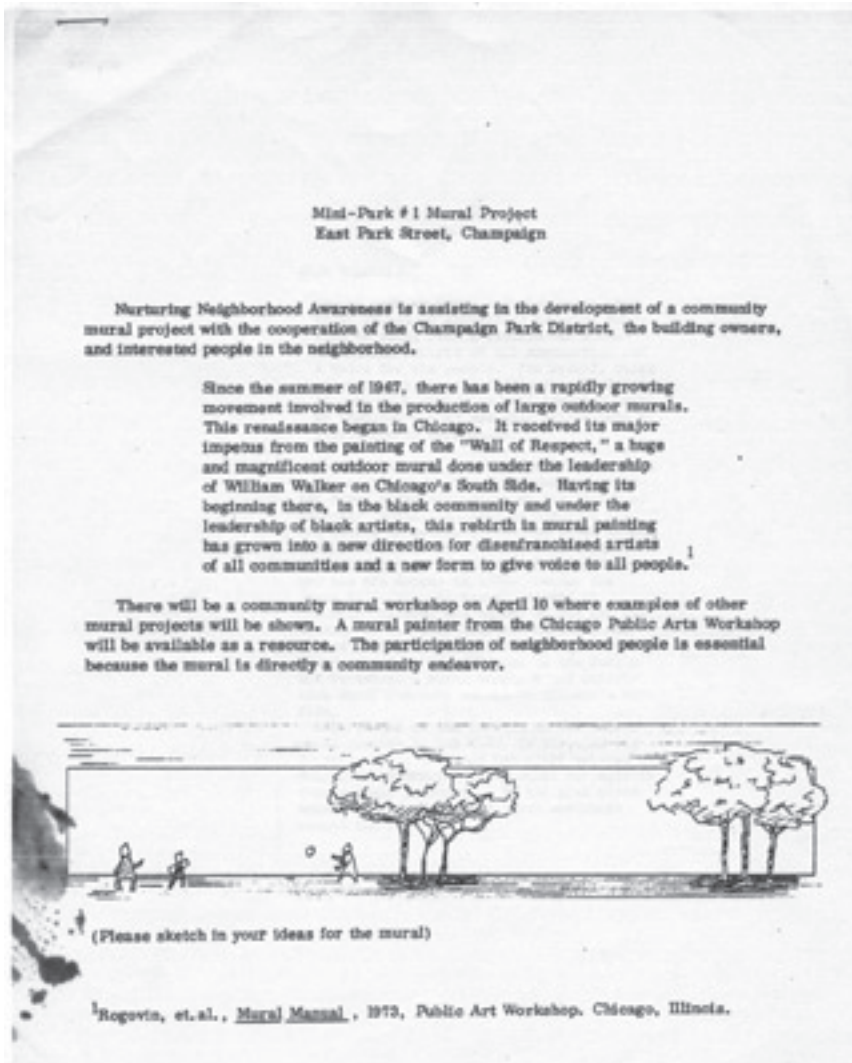
Artist Angela Rivers with eBlackCU interns in front of the Park Street mural, June 2010. L to R: Reginald Carr, Dominique Johnson, Jelani Saadiq, Angela Rivers, Jaime Carpenter, Deidre Murphy, Noah Lenstra and Rachel Harmon.
Photo by Patricia Rosario

eBlackCU.net

A Collaborative Portal on African-American Experiences in Champaign-Urbana, eBlackCU seeks to use digital technology to connect interested individuals to the dispersed documentation of African-American experiences in Champaign-Urbana. With a grant from the UI Office of the Vice-Chancellor for Public Engagement, eBlackCU hired six interns over the summer of 2010. They conducted interviews and helped digitize documents, as well as learn web-related skills. Those of us involved with *Revisiting Murals, Animating Neighborhoods* were happy to join with eBlackCU's efforts. To help build this portal, individuals and groups are invited to submit memories, images, links, citations and digitized texts relating to local African-American experiences.

eBlackCU is a program that originated in the **Graduate School of Library and Information Science** at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and is funded by the **Office of the Vice Chancellor for Public Engagement** at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Please contact **Noah Lenstra** at nlenstr2@illinois.edu with questions on the project.



*Nurturing Neighborhood Awareness was an initiative of the Educational Resources in Environmental Science. Kathy (Cenders) Martin was the project director. This flier encouraged residents to contribute ideas for the mural design and invited them to attend a workshop with Chicago muralist, Mark Rogovin. The website for the Chicago Wall of Respect is <http://www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu/wallofrespect/main.htm>
Flier courtesy of David Monk.*

In the late seventies, **Kathy (Cenders) Martin** was project director of **Nurturing Neighborhood Awareness**. Interviewed by Jelani Saadiq in June of 2010, she remarked about the mural:

“

We wanted to encourage people to understand the environment as something they could participate in. When people come together, that's when creativity really happens, when people pool their energy and ideas.

”

Lucy Gray lived on Park Street in the Lost House, called that because it had been moved and other residents didn't know where it had ended up. Interviewed by Rachel Harmon and Angela Rivers in June of 2010, she recalled that:

“

[My] house had been moved on railroad ties by horses from the stadium. The house hadn't been lived in for a long time. All the neighbors came in and helped me clean. The Rivers and the Hines lived on Park Street. There were a lot of children.

”

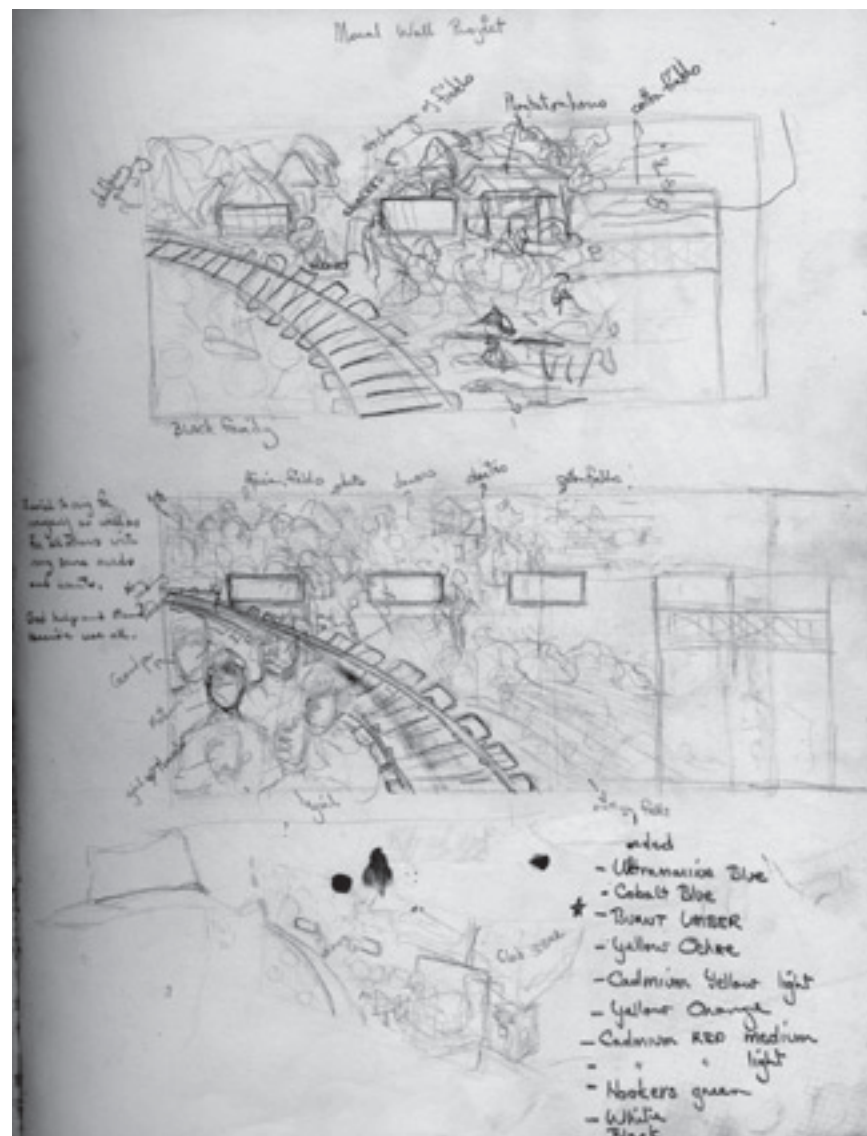
After the Second World War, Mrs. Gray and her family kept students. They turned the attic of their house into a dormitory because there were few places for Negroes to stay on campus. The five young male boarders also worked as waiters at the sorority where Mrs. Gray worked; that meant that they could get meals there.

Mrs. Gray said that when Angela Rivers started to paint the mural, she was just a kid. In fact, she had already graduated from the University of Illinois! The mural was next to a park with a playground where picnics and parties were held. It was a beautiful park, Mrs. Gray said.

“

Yes, I did like the mural. I didn't understand it, but I didn't understand art. [There was] a beautiful theme on that wall and all the neighbors were happy.

”



Preparatory sketch defining themes and color schemes, Angela Rivers, 1978. Courtesy of the artist.

David Monk, founder and president of **Educational Resources in Environmental Science (ERES)**

in Champaign, recalled that, as a contractor for the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), ERES provided employment in the late seventies that generated a lot of friendly associations and public service work. He described a silkscreen print-making workshop for which **Eugene Britt** was the community coordinator that preceded the Fifth and Park mural:

“

The ultimate image was a high contrast silkscreen picture of Eugene's head with an inserted high-contrast picture of a geodesic dome with children playing that was on the lawn outside of the Douglass Center. Most of this could be done at the Douglass Center because we could take the equipment there and demonstrate and have the children realize how a screen can be blocked in various ways including by the use of a photographically prepared gelatin. We held several noisy workshops that were quite successful.

”

In 1977 Educational Resources in Environmental Sciences established a Nurturing Neighborhood Awareness project. The aim of this project was to encourage and stimulate a more harmonious relationship between people and their environment. Using art, photography, and community interaction, NNA has provided opportunities for individuals to take positive and ecologically sound action in determining their own lives and that of their communities.

Recognizing that art is a humanizing force and believing that it should become an integral part of our daily lives, NNA, under the direction of Kathy Cender, began to explore the possibilities of a community mural project: a project to stimulate community awareness and involve people in creating a living work of art.

A proposal was presented to the Champaign Park District requesting permission to paint a mural to the east of MINI-Park #1 on Park and Fifth in Champaign, Illinois. NNA organized a mural workshop in which Chicago muralist, Mark Rogovin participated. The workshop generated interest, explored ideas for a mural theme, and began the process of organizing a mural team within the community. A questionnaire was circulated to encourage community involvement, stimulate ideas and expand active participation. Community support was unanimous with a majority interested in a theme of black history and culture.



The above photoscreen of Eugene Britt, the project community coordinator, was the outcome of photo silk screen workshops held at the neighboring Douglass Center. It was from such workshops that the mural project evolved.

This panel from an ERES flier about the mural shows the print based on a photograph of Eugene Britt that Mr. Monk described. Flier courtesy of David Monk.

Black artists Angela Rivers, Benny Drake, and Eugene Britt, all born and raised in Champaign, led the mural team in coordinating community interest and involvement in the drawing of preliminary sketches. The mural design was based on historical information gathered from library sources and conversations with elderly people of the community, as well as the experiences of the artists and team members.

After Park Board approval of the sketches, the mural team's next task was to find sufficient funding. The Women's Employment Counseling Center was interested in the mural project as a worksite for its CETA Summer Program for Economically Disadvantaged Youth (SPEDY). NNA agreed to conduct the mural project as a work experience program for SPEDY and then interviewed and selected 15 youths between the ages of 14 and 21 who were employed through WECC's CETA grant.



Many community people contributed materials and equipment to the project. Sandblasting equipment, scaffolding and other necessary supplies were provided by interested local businesses, agencies and individuals of the community. People came to rest or play in the park and watched the mural in process or helped paint a section. The mural provided an educational function by offering people an opportunity to study the history of a people, to learn skills in art and painting, in leadership and responsibility, and in developing and finishing a project. The mural generated curiosity, criticism, creative discussion and neighborhood awareness. Culturally, it provided the experience of working together to explore and celebrate the community heritage and to further contribute to its development.

This portion of ERES pamphlet describes the support for the mural from local businesses and organizations. Sandblasting equipment and scaffolding were used on loan. Flier courtesy of David Monk.

The location of this historical mural is significant. It is found in one of the older communities in Champaign. The area is well-kept and is receiving attention for its historic value. The Salem Baptist Church on Park and Fifth, across the corner from the mini-park, is listed in the booklet "Historical Sites in Champaign County." The mural enhances the neighborhood and emphasizes the unique role that black people have in contributing to the development of the community.

The completed portion of the mural is 16 feet by 64 feet and is composed of a series of images portraying the history of black people in Champaign. Using vivid colors and strong characterization, the mural begins with scenes of Egypt and Africa, depicts the trauma of the slave ships, shows early farming activity in the U. S. South and progresses on to Champaign, Illinois, reflecting this city's importance as an early railroad center.

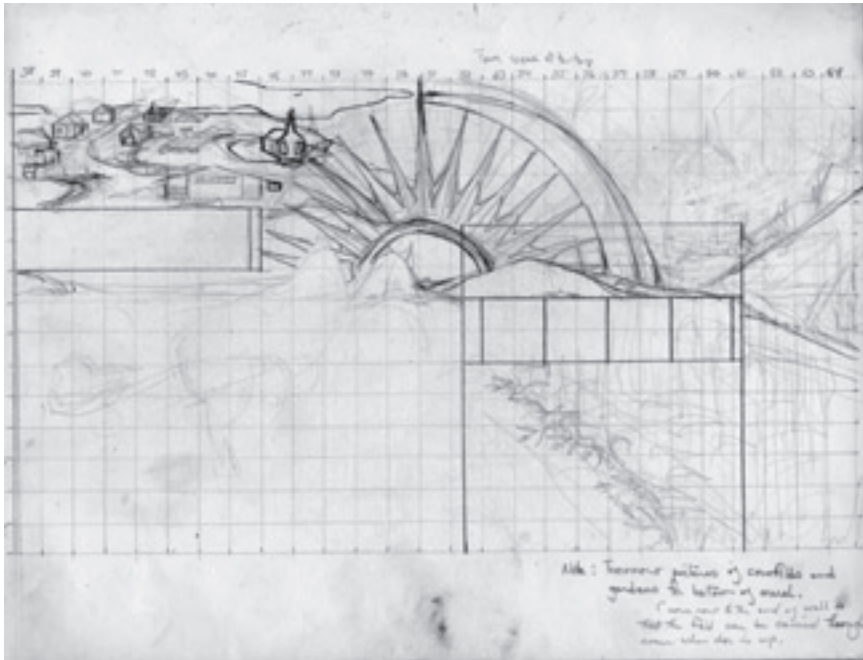
Lack of time and finances prevented the mural team from finishing the wall adjacent to the mini-park, an area of 15 feet by 93 feet. Community commitment urges that this project be completed.

The newly organized, Ceta funded, Champaign County Consortium for the Arts has taken an interest in the mural hiring a half-time employee to work on the project. Women's Employment Counseling Center has renewed its pledge in providing SPEDY workers.



The mural is a model of wholistic social action: people taking an active part in creating their own environment, developing practical skills in artistic crafts, and acquiring attitudes of self worth and leadership. NNA feels strongly that the mural project is a worthy community endeavor and is an important step in the direction of a more balanced and less alienated society.

This panel describes the content of the mural, including scenes from Egypt and Timbuktu, and the trauma of enslaved people. The pamphlet notes that the mural was an example of "people taking an active part in creating their own environment." Flier courtesy of David Monk.



Preparatory sketch of mural by Angela Rivers, showing grid used to transfer drawing to wall. Courtesy of the artist.



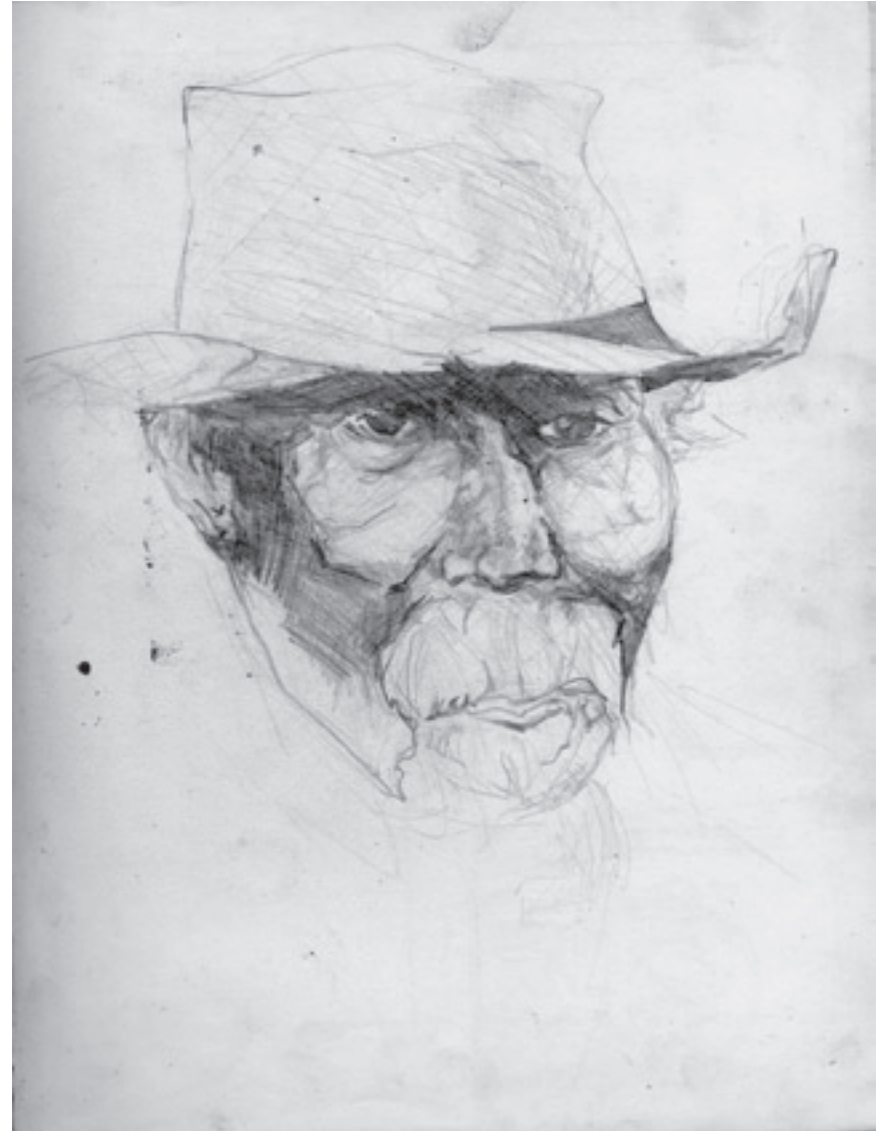
Detail of the mural, "A Pictorial History of African Americans of Champaign County." Courtesy of the artist.



"A Pictorial History of African Americans of Champaign County," 1978, located at Park and Fifth Streets, Champaign. Image courtesy of Angela M. Rivers.



Detail of the mural, "A Pictorial History of African Americans of Champaign County." Courtesy of the artist.



Man with the Hat, preparatory sketch by Angela Rivers, 1978. Courtesy of the artist.

Artist **Bennie Drake**, who worked on the mural in 1978, was interviewed by Jaime Carpenter in June of 2010. He noted:

“
Angela [Rivers] gave me the opportunity to work outside and have the skills. Seeing people come by [meant we could] talk to them, explain to them exactly what we were doing before we caused conflict.

”

Artist **Daniel Mitchell** was involved with the Park Street mural as a college student and was interviewed by Dominique Johnson in July of 2010 about his recollections of that time.

“
I was hired as one of the supervisors. My role was to bring a group of 15-20 youth (mainly high school) together and to manage personalities so that they all come together and do some great art. I learned to be a team player, to be flexible, and compassionate.

”

The family of **Ray Hines** lived on Park Street in the seventies. In July of 2010, Mr. Hines was interviewed by Rachel Harmon and Deidre Murphy about the mural:

“
Some people wanted it and some people didn't. They finally got together and got it up there but there was a struggle in doing it. She [Angela Rivers] got her little group together and they worked putting it up. I think it displays the way [African-Americans] feel about the town. [It was] the only real way they had to express themselves to young people because our newspapers were prejudiced.

”

Pauline Gates Pelmore also lived on Park Street in the 1970s (and to this day.) Reginald Carr interviewed her in June 2010. When he asked her about the meaning of the mural to African-Americans, Mrs. Pelmore laughed because she didn't identify as African-American:

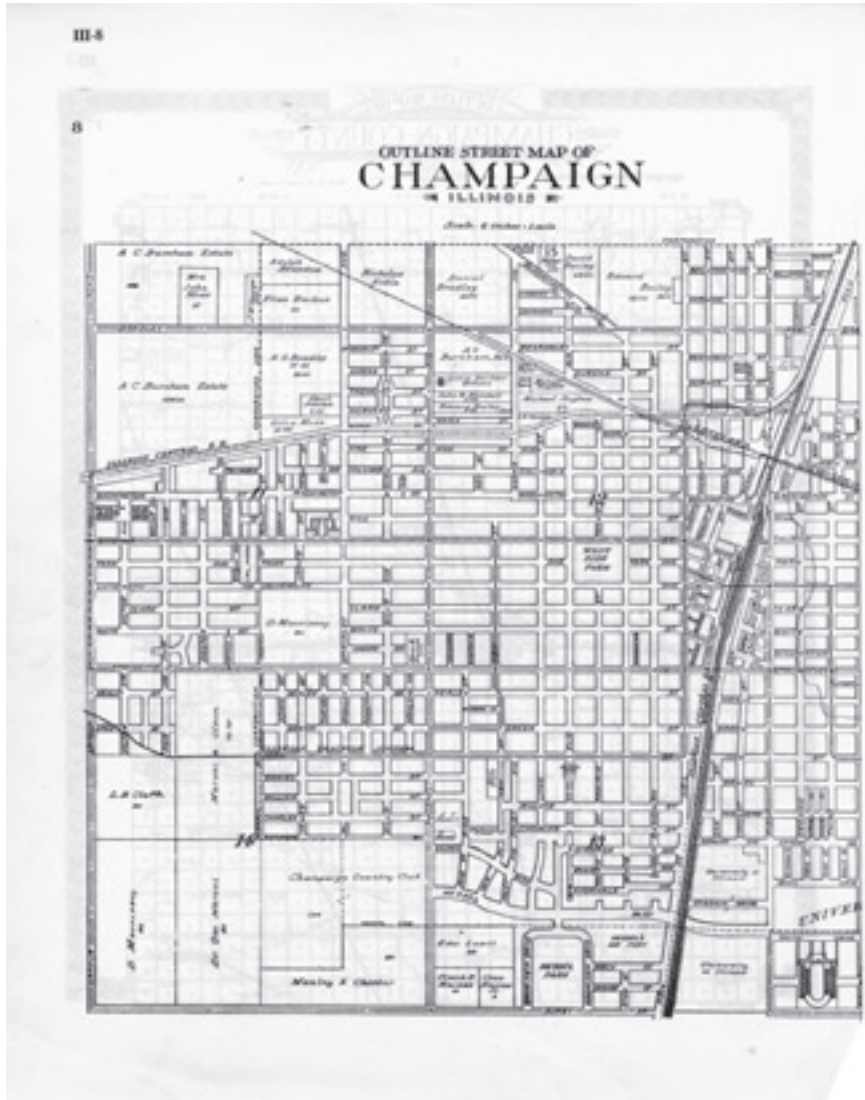
“
It tickles me because I am part of six different races!

”



The mural as it looked in 2009. Photo by Sharon Irish

Students at the bilingual **Booker T. Washington (BTW) K-5 elementary school** also visited the mural. Spurred by the imminent demolition and rebuilding of the Grove Street campus in 2010, the BTW staff and parent-teacher association (PTA) helped organize a walk to the mural from the nearby school. Ms. Rivers and her aunt, **Mrs. Hester Suggs**, the former principal of BTW School, introduced the children to the social history of the mural, the school and the neighborhood before the students left on their walk. The current PTA is planning an exhibit to commemorate and celebrate the school's long history of using public art to promote historical understanding of ourselves, others, and places. Following up on the mural tour to Fifth and Park, the BTW PTA will continue to focus discussions with students on comparisons between current and historical crises in low income, multicultural and inner city communities of color, such as the Douglass Park Neighborhood in which their school is located.



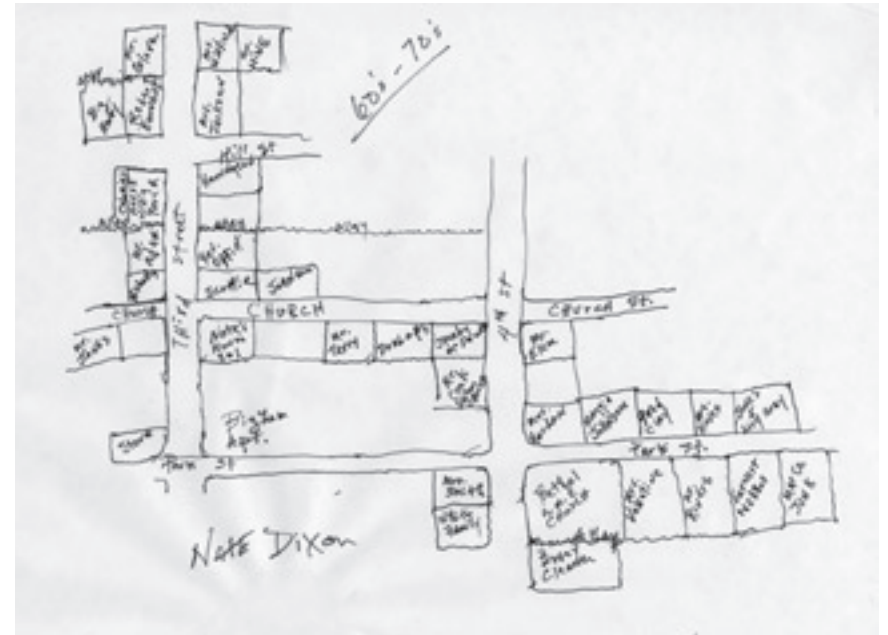
Courtesy of Champaign County Historical Archives. Standard Atlas of Champaign County, Illinois, including a plat book (Chicago: Brock and Co., 1929).



Courtesy of Champaign County Historical Archives. Standard Atlas of Champaign County, Illinois, including a plat book (Chicago: Brock and Co., 1929).

Memory Maps

Revisiting Murals, Animating Neighborhoods hosted three memory mapping workshops, at the Douglass Annex, the Douglass Branch of the Champaign Public Library, and Washington Square Apartments in Champaign. Using Sanborn maps of north Champaign and Urbana from 1925 and 1951, workshop participants were asked to draw their own maps of the neighborhoods where they grew up or once lived. Conversations around the tables were lively, full of stories and names of others who have passed on. We offer a sampling of the maps that were drawn during those workshops. Try it yourself!



Mr. Nathaniel Dixon served as the director of the Champaign Park District's Douglass Center, starting in 1973. He worked for the park district in a number of leadership capacities for 27 years. His memory map includes the Earnest/Nelson property and a junk yard that became a park bordering the mural in 1978. With permission of Nate Dixon.



A member of one of the early African-American families in Champaign-Urbana, Mrs. Rivers worked as a reproduction artist for *Our Wonderful World Encyclopedia* early in her career. Later, she worked for Champaign Unit #4 School District as a teacher's aide and then as the Title I Parent Coordinator, retiring after 30 years of service to the district. Her memories from the 1930's - 1940's include the original Douglass Park and its surrounds, and her home on the corner of 5th and Eureka Streets. With permission of Eunice Rivers.



Angela Rivers and her mother, Eunice Nelson Rivers
Photo by David Monk

sandstone pit • canning plant • hobo camp • tracks
 Bone ditch • Sam Gagliano's grocery store • ice house
 beauty shop • alley • unpaved roads • pool hall
 Schools—Lawhead (grs 1-3); Willard (grs 4-6) • CU Days
 BBQ pit behind Al Rivers' house • laundrette • well
 First St. cab company • undertakers • piano lessons Co-
 lumbia Hotel, 1920s • outhouses • cess pools
 dairy at 5th and University • coal burning furnace
 asparagus, strawberries, beans • chickens and eggs
 Poplar Street junkyard • goats • funeral homes
 collard and dandelion greens • grapes • beehives
 home-based sweet shop • "night clubs"
 fruit trees—apples, pears, walnuts, apricots, cherries
 public pools were not segregated
 Illinois Times (Black newspaper)
 jump on the train to downtown
 urban renewal=Black removal

Some phrases and themes from the mapping sessions that provide a sense of the collective memories, October 2009.

Acknowledgements

We are most grateful to all the participants in the year-long project that focused on the neighborhoods of north Champaign and Urbana, especially Angela Rivers, and her family in town—Eunice Nelson Rivers, Hester Suggs, Estelle L. Merrifield, as well as many cousins. Participants in workshops and interviews, besides those already named, included: Ernest Adam, Abdul Alkalimat, Dawn Blackman, Erma Bridgewater, Sharon Carrie, William Chambers, Gary Clements, Nate Dixon, Willeta and Carlotta Donaldson, Bennie Drake, Lucy Gray, James H. Hayes, Jr., Shirlee Hill, Willie Houston, Lawrence C. Johnson, Jan Kalmar, Carrie Lipscomb, Elaine Lyles, Kathy (Cenders) Martin, Valerie D. McWilliams, Daniel Mitchell, Dave Monk, Tumelo Mosaka, Patricia Roberts, Vanessa Rouillon, Dana Rush, Simon Schocken, William Sibley, and Troy Walker; apologies to any others whom we may have overlooked. Thanks as well to the Rev. Larry Lewis who let us use Bethel AME Church for our discussion when it started raining.

We would also like to thank students—mostly from the University of Illinois and Parkland College—who contributed to the project in so many ways, particularly Noah Lenstra. Other students included: Stephanie Birch, Jaime Carpenter, Reginald Carr, Rachel Harmon, Emily Heaton, Dominique Johnson, Eric Johnson, Sang Lee, Annette Miller, Deidre Murphy, Susan Rodgers, Jelani Saadiq, Sydney Stoudmire, Noelle Williams, and Andrew Zimmerman.

We owe thanks to many individuals and organizations who gave time, energy and funds to this project. **The Frances P. Rohlen Visiting Artists Fund of the College of Fine and Applied Arts** at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, sponsored the residencies of Ms. Angela Rivers and the subvention for this booklet. Additional support was provided by the **Illinois Informatics Institute through the Community Informatics Initiative in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science**, and the **Office of the Vice-Chancellor for Public Engagement**.

The Champaign County Archives in Urbana, Illinois (director: Anke Voss); the **Champaign Park District** (program coordinator: Barbara McGee); **the Douglass Branch of the Champaign Public Library** (manager: Essie Harris); and the **Early American Museum** (director: Cheryl Kennedy) in Mahomet, Illinois, were generous partners.

For further information

On the mural: eBlackCU.net/mural

On the early history of the Rivers family, compiled by Wendell Purchase:

<http://wendellpurchase.com/wendellpurchase/RiversFamHistory.htm>

Booker T. Washington PTA

<http://www.champaignschools.org/FIC/SchoolProfiles/BTWashington.pdf>

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Cover illustrations courtesy of Angela M. Rivers and of Champaign County Historical Archives. Maps of Champaign and Urbana from Standard Atlas of Champaign County, Illinois, including a plat book (Chicago: Brock and Co., 1929).

