Phillips promotes for his people

Carver Park 'something real'

By Millicent Fauntleroy
Of The Courier

"Uncle Davey Johnson's boy" became a man many years ago to everyone but himself.

Oh, he doesn't call himself a boy. But his speech and manner belie reality. What you see is not necessarily what you get with Charles Phillips.

Phillips, an octogenarian, is Davey Johnson's boy. And despite his 86 years, the reverance with which he speaks of his long-gone grandfather, tells one he'll always be "Davey Johnson's boy."

Even now, "Uncle David's" authority can be felt in Phillips' home where his imposing portrait gazes down from a music room wall.

David Johnson is responsible for Charles E. Phillips being here in Champaign — in the North End. Johnson came to the area from Cape Girardeau, Mo., shortly after the Civil War ended. For a time, he farmed at Neoga on land owned by Tom Beasley. Later, however, he purchased the family homestead on East Stoughton Street, Champaign.

It was in that house at 503 E. Stoughton St. that Phillips grew to be a man.

And it was his grandfather, probably more so than even young Charles' mother, or grandmother Harriett, who directed his coming of age.

As Phillips tells it, his grandfather taught him that "Ignorance is the greatest curse ever placed on a human being." Young Phillips believed him, of course, and set about making sure he would never be so cursed.

Carver Park

And that determination paid off not only for Phillips, but for the several black families in the North End who are indebted to him for the Cinderella fantasy that took them from tar-paper shacks to decent housing in what is now Carver Park, which has about 50 homes.

Second of four parts

Carver Park is the subdivision Phillips helped to promote in the early 50s. A few years after it was built, The Courier described it as "the first large-scale residential development here to be initiated with private capital entirely through Negro families."

But Phillips, former insurance agent, civic leader and savings and loan executive, is the man who knows his story and the Carver Park story best. He tells the sequence of events which led to the development this way:

"I wonder how in the dickens I got it stared," he mused.

But, as usual, it starts with "Uncle Davey Johnson."

"When my mother brought me here from Kansas City, Mo., where I was born, my grandfather was on a farm then. He was down at Neoga on a farm, see — not far from Mattoon— in Coles County.

"There were some persons of color here in Campaign. . .He decided to come to Champaign because it was about the closest city. We came to live with him."

"I went to the Marquette school on the other side of University Avenue. There weren't very many colored families here then back in those days. Of course, the influx from the South brought in a lot of them afterwards, you see.

Earlier failure

"Back over here in this section, then there was a man of color, here, by the name of English. Many years ago he tried to promote an addition back here. He didn't make it go. I guess he couldn't get support. But I was a young man then. I didn't realize it.

"Then, too, I was hustling myself. My grandfather was a very active man and he encouraged me to get out and work with the people.

"So I started out as a young man. He bought me a bicycle. And I used to go around to homes where people had growing children, babies and so forth. We had a concert at the Methodist Church here and I Methodist Church here and I concert. And I brought in more money than the others for the concert and they gave me the first prize. The first prize was a photograph camera, you see. And I'd take the camera and take the pictures of the children and take 'em back and sell 'em to them.

"So I got started working with the people. Then the people got so whenever they wanted to have a little party and they wanted to get the invitations out, they'd give me a dollar or so to take my bicycle and distribute those invitations. And I got to working on that."

Became a leader

Young Phillips' enterprising nature led him into fraternal work where he was to make his mark as a leader of the Elks, the Knights of Pythias and the Pilgrim Knights of the World. His successes in that area led him to be noticed by Sen. William B. McKinley.

"Congressman McKinley was running. So he said, 'I'd like to have you work for me. He put a headquarters down there on East Main Street. I had political headquarters up there.

"Fellows used to comment about that. Said old Phillips is over there running that political headquarters, and he's not old enough to vote. I couldn't vote when I first took a hold of it. But I promoted it."

That ability to "promote" and his faithful adherence to his grandfather's admonition "to get out and meet the people" were crucial to Phillips' ability to gain public confidence for the Carver Park venture.

It was relatively simple for him to gain support after returning to Champaign about 35 years ago.

He came back to the North End in 1938 after a series of successes, and a few failures, as an insurance agent, a small business owner, a building and loan executive, a docket clerk for the state and small time publisher in Springfield and Monticello.

Helping his people

The contacts he had made, the experiences he had encountered, the failures he had risen above were enough to show him that no real progress had been made "for my people."

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Phillips set about getting "something real" for his people.

When he returned to the community, he found black persons in northeast Champaign living in what he described as "terrible conditions." According to Phillips, many lived in tar-paper shacks, three or four homes to a lot.

On the advice of Mayor Virgil Lafferty, former mayor of Champaign, a survey of housing needs was undertaken. "It was a terrible situation," Phillips told the city council in the late 40s when he reported on some homes without toilet facilities, running water or electricity.

The council offered to help, but when the city began to drag its collective feet, Phillips set out to interest blacks in building and buying homes.

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Street signs display black history

Charles Phillips is justly proud of the work he did in helping to create the Carver Park addition. "I've helped a lot of people and helped myself," he says.

But he is even prouder that he alone named not only the residential development, but all the streets in it.

His voice is sure and steady as he points to the volumes and papers, clippings and old magazines which line the walls of a study area in his home.

It was from these faded, tattered but important works and from his vast knowledge of black history that he selected names such as Dorie Miller, George Washington Carver and Mary McLeod Bethune to give to streets on which "people of color" would walk.

One street name is not taken from black history. It is that given to Tawney Court named for Marietta Busey Tawney, of the Busey banking family, who sold 10 of the 160 acres of farmland she owned for the development because she, too, believed in "Uncle Davey John' son's boy."

Bethune is "Bethume' in Champaignese

Mary McLeod Bethune, the black educator, in whose honor Charles Phillips named a street in the Carver Park addition, would be appalled, no doubt, that she is going down in Champaign history as "Mrs. Bethume."

The famed black leader who advised Presidents and founded a college to teach young blacks to spell (and read and write) is destined always to be a Bethume, at least in Champaign.

Phillips explains city workers made the error when they painted and erected street signs in Carver Park. City officials, he said, say they cannot afford to correct the misspelling.

Now the street is Bethume Court to several of the youngsters who live along it and even to Illinois Bell, which makes the misspelling in the current directory.

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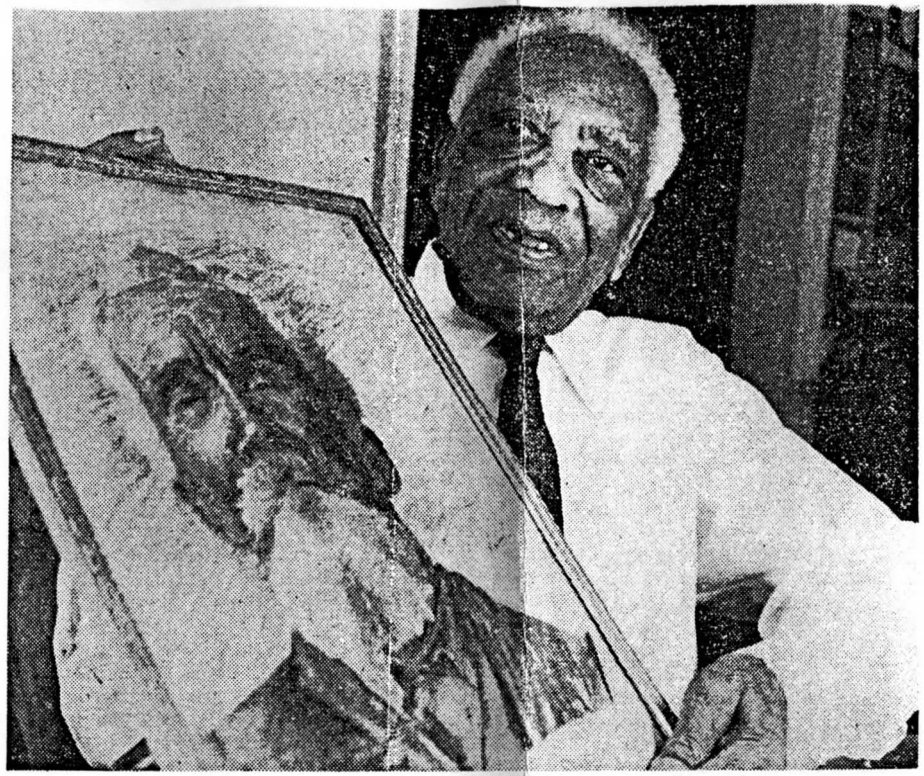

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But they did. On a Tuesday the three men promoting the development learned how much they would need to get started. On Friday they were able to deposit $10,000 in the Commercial Bank, all of it raised by blacks.

The feat was so spectacular that white lawyers, a local newspaper editor and several other prominent persons quickly rallied around to offer their assistance.

In short time, Carver park was no longer a dream.

In 1951, the first of 47 black families moved into the subdivision. And "Uncle Davey Johnson's boy" had made it possible.

"It was an easy matter," he said. "We just had to show them how to do it."

Perhaps for Charles E. Phillips, "getting it together" was easy. But for many of the black residents of Champaign's North End, things have been anything but easy. In Part Three, several older residents of the community tell what it was like to grow up black in Champaign. They are the voices in a brief history of the North End.

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