

A neighborhood at work

Between the early 1900s and the 1960s, a neighborhood located northwest of downtown Des Moines was home to much of the city's African-American population.

The neighborhood, called Center Street after the area's main street, grew during World War I when the Colored Officers Training Camp opened at Fort Des Moines to train African-American officers. After the war, many officers and their families stayed in Des Moines and settled near Center Street. During this time, the coal mines in the southwest Iowa town of Buxton closed and much of that community's black population also settled in the neighborhood.

The black population faced discrimination in housing, education, and business. The neighborhood was one of the few areas where African Americans could live and work peacefully. Center Street was a self-sufficient place that met the social, financial, educational, and residential needs of the black population. African Americans opened their own businesses and provided goods and services to one another during a time when white-owned businesses did not want them as customers.

"Some of the buildings didn't stand so straight and tall, but they had a lot of personality in them," said Gaynelle Narcisse, a Des Moines resident who is writing a book about Center Street.

The Center Street neighborhood flourished in the 1940s and 1950s. The area's business district boasted barber shops, beauty parlors, restaurants, night clubs, grocery stores, pharmacies, lawyers' offices, funeral homes, pool halls, hotels, laundries, service stations, a movie theatre, photography studio, and print shop. Many neighborhood businesses attracted customers by advertising in *The Iowa Bystander*, the city's black newspaper.

Some residents operated businesses out of their homes or hired themselves out to provide services that ranged from delivery to catering.

"The money stayed in the community and it was able to thrive," Narcisse told *The Goldfinch*. "The residents patronized the businesses there and the neighborhood survived."

VISIT THE EXHIBIT!

The Center Street neighborhood is the subject of a museum display at the Historical Building in Des Moines until 1997. For more information call 515-281-6412.

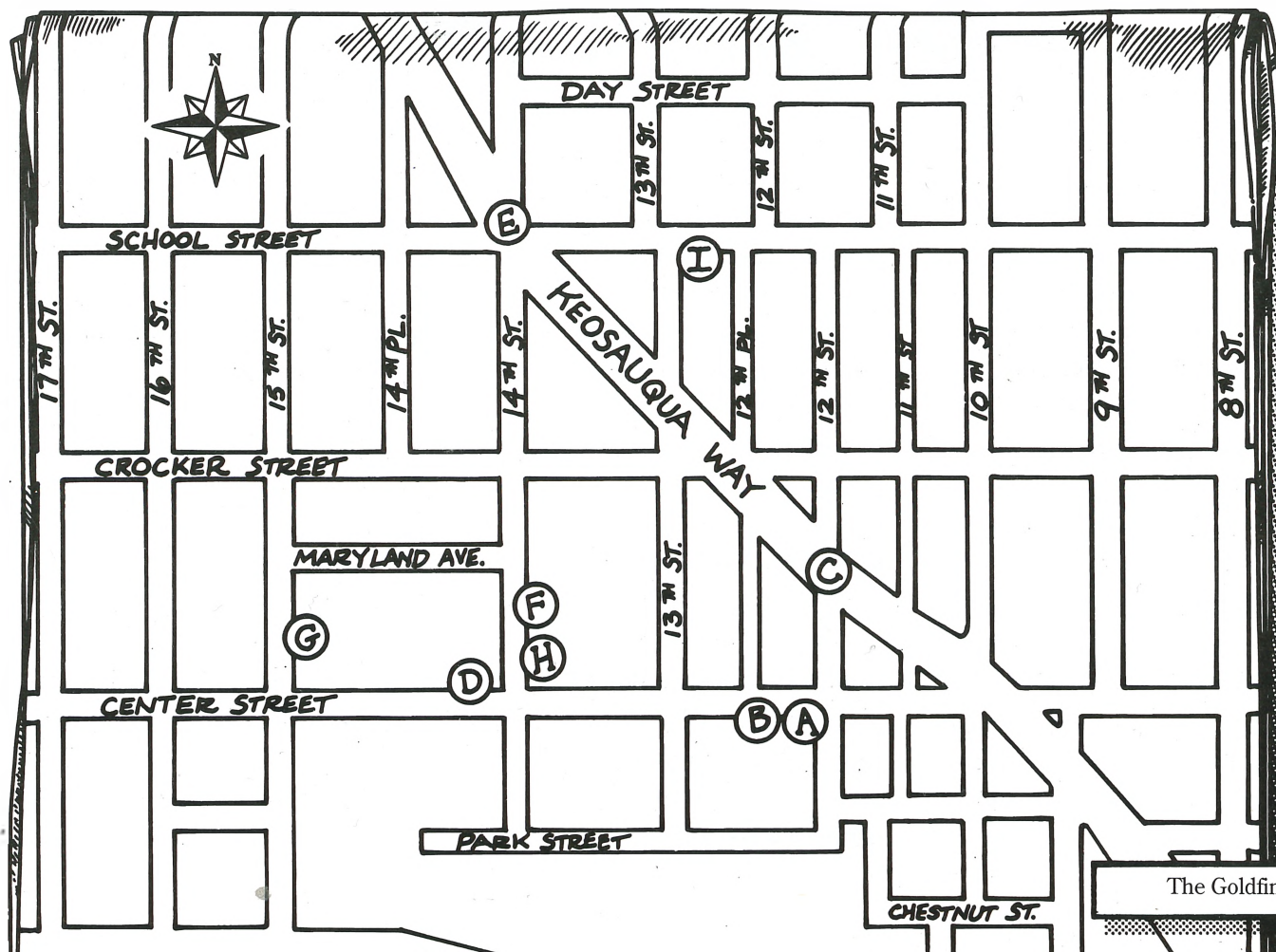
In the early 1960s, much of the neighborhood was torn down to make room for a freeway. Many Center Street residents lost their homes. Businesses closed or moved to new locations and the city lost a vibrant business district. ▲

— Amy Ruth

Who worked where?

Match the businesses described below with their locations on the map of the Center Street neighborhood. Answers on page 30.

- ① Three service stations operated near 12th Street and Keosauqua Way.
- ② The Community Pharmacy, one of Iowa's first black-owned pharmacies, was on the southwest corner of 12th and Center Streets.
- ③ The Community Luncheonette was next door to the Community Pharmacy.
- ④ Pauline Humphrey operated her Crescent School of Beauty at 1407 Center Street, between 14th and 15th Streets.
- ⑤ Bernice Richmond was a caterer. She lived at 1046 14th Street, north of Crocker Street.
- ⑥ Robert E. Patten operated his print shop on the east side of 14th Street between Center and Crocker Streets.
- ⑦ Ayers Curtain Laundry was on the south side of School Street, between 12th and 13th Streets.
- ⑧ Tug Wilson ran Wilson Funeral Home on 14th Street, near the corner of Center and 14th Streets. It later became Estes & Son Funeral Home.
- ⑨ Ray Lucas offered light hauling from his location on 15th Street, between Center and Crocker Streets.



Art by Mary Moye-Rowley