

Opinion

wvgazette.com

EDITORIALS

Local history Remembering 'The Block'

CHARLESTON'S Anthony Kinzer has come up with a good idea. He wants the city to designate a onetime black neighborhood of Shrewsbury Street as a historic landmark.

During the era when many American cities were segregated by law as well as tradition or economics, Charleston's "Block" was a thriving neighborhood of black businesses, professionals and residents. Barbers, lawyers, doctors, movie theaters, hotels, restaurants, all contributed to the city's economy and to Charleston's African-American middle class.

Although Jim Crow strictures banned them from much of Charleston, blacks survived and created endurable lives within the confines of their enclave. They "made a way out of no way," as the saying goes.

Too much of the neighborhood has been demolished to make way for the interstate and other developments over the years to qualify for a spot on the National Register of Historic Places. All the more reason for Charleston to note what is left of the city of an earlier time.

Several landmarks survive — formerly all-black Garnet

High School, long since converted to a career center; 143-year-old Simpson Memorial Methodist Church; the Samuel Starks house, the Harden-Gilmore house and the Mattie V. Lee home. All five are listed individually on the national register.

Such designations prompt people to pause, reflect, learn and share their local history. That goes for casual visitors, transplanted residents or people who have lived here all

their lives. Good signs and explanations or self-guided walking tours could further enrich the neighborhood and Charlestonians' appreciation of it. Such efforts often improve neighborhoods. They can lead to refurbishment

and even give new value to old real estate.

Kinzer, executive director of the West Virginia Center for African-American Art & Culture, has proposed that the city's Historic Landmarks Commission designate the area bounded by Washington, Capitol and Smith streets and Leon Sullivan Way. It is an ideal way to preserve and transmit local historical knowledge.

We look forward to following the development of this smart proposal.

During the era when many American cities were segregated by law as well as tradition or economics, Charleston's "Block" was a thriving neighborhood of black businesses, professionals and residents.