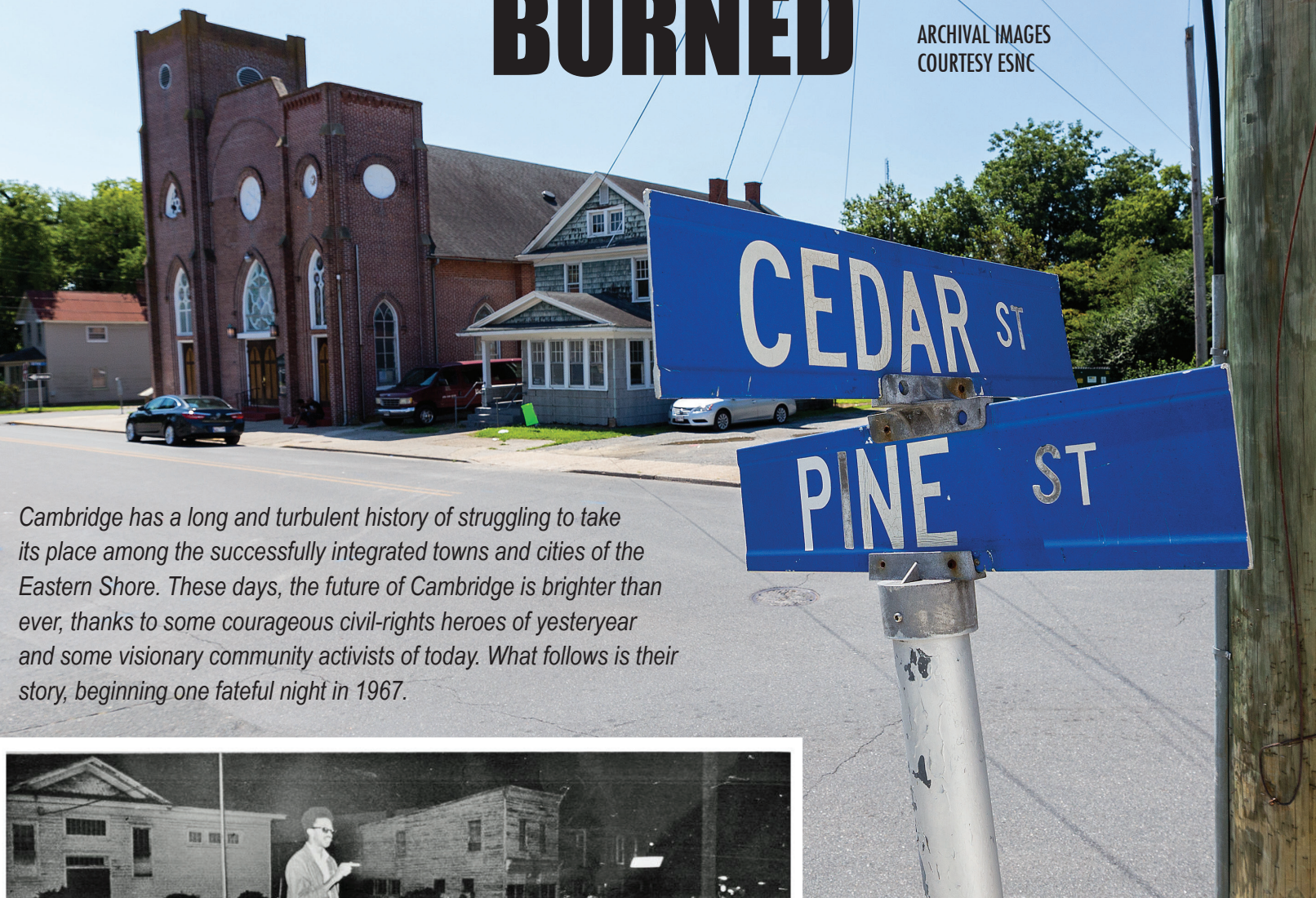


WHEN CAMBRIDGE BURNED

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Cambridge has a long and turbulent history of struggling to take its place among the successfully integrated towns and cities of the Eastern Shore. These days, the future of Cambridge is brighter than ever, thanks to some courageous civil-rights heroes of yesteryear and some visionary community activists of today. What follows is their story, beginning one fateful night in 1967.



MODEL OF INSPIRATION: VICTORIA L. JACKSON-STANLEY, WHO GREW UP JUST THREE BLOCKS FROM THE 1967 EVENTS ON PINE STREET, IS BOTH CAMBRIDGE'S FIRST FEMALE AND FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN MAYOR.

Victoria Jackson was sitting at home on that steaming-hot July 24 night in 1967. Her father, Fred, had been active in the civil-rights movement, but on that night, he was home with family. She heard there was going to be a rally on Pine Street, and a leading voice in the movement, H. Rap Brown, was coming to town to talk to some of the young people. But her father explicitly told her and her sister: "Stay in the house."

Something woke her in the middle of the night. It was the sound of gunshots, just three blocks from their house. Looking out from her second-floor window, she was astonished to see flames dancing over the rooftops.

"I remember thinking," she said, "Oh my God, Pine Street's on fire. All I could see was the red flames. I remember being afraid because I knew my father was out there somewhere, trying to extinguish the flames!"

When the sun rose the next day, she saw Pine Street, the heart of the city's vibrant and historic black community, in ashes and the people around her in tears.

"I felt like crying myself, because I didn't understand why we would do that — we, meaning the black community — would burn down parts of Pine Street. I knew what was happening, but I didn't know the significance," she said.

Victoria L. Jackson-Stanley made headlines in 2008 when she first took office, not only as Cambridge's first African-American mayor, but as the first female mayor in her hometown's history, as well. Now in her third term, she still thinks often of the events that shook Cambridge to its core 50 years ago.

Looking back on that night, Jackson-Stanley says the fires, and what led to them, were based on simmering racial tension from a black community sick and tired of the status quo. Because they were so frustrated, she says, they took matters into their own hands.

That seminal event in Cambridge history is being reexamined now, five decades later. Local activists Dion Banks and Kisha Petticolas founded the Eastern Shore Network for Change and launched a four-day event in July to commemorate the civil-rights movement in Cambridge, "Reflections on Pine."

They seek, among other things, to create a comfortable conversation in and around their hometown about a point on the timeline that, for many people, had simply been ignored. The two realized that much of Cambridge's racial strife was a stagnant wound that had never properly healed. This recognition led to their first collaboration in 2012, a community conversation called "45 Years After the Fire."

With 150 people in attendance, "We realized that voices kind of raised up as the conversation got going," Banks said. "People got emotional. People were crying. Kisha and I had to regroup, because we were in total shock. We decided to let the emotions ebb and flow, because they were real, and the people were in a safe place."

IT WAS THEN that Banks and Petticolas decided to plan for the 50th anniversary. The goal was not only to commemorate what happened a half-century earlier but to get everyone involved today. It was not to be a black event or a white event, but instead an event for the entire community to learn, listen, heal and talk. ☺



A TIME FOR CHANGE: THE DAUGHTER OF A CAMBRIDGE PHARMACIST, GLORIA RICHARDSON (WITH ARMS RAISED) WAS ONE OF THE CENTRAL HOMEGROWN FIGURES OF THE CAMBRIDGE CIVIL-RIGHTS MOVEMENT. AFTER PROTESTS TURNED VIOLENT IN JUNE 1963, THE NATIONAL GUARD ARRIVED AND IMPOSED MARTIAL LAW FOR WELL MORE THAN A YEAR.

“Reflections on Pine” began on Thursday night, with an opening reception at Chesapeake College that unveiled the ESNC’s pictorial exhibit. From there it was on to the Hyatt Chesapeake, where local civil-rights activist Gloria Richardson Dandridge spoke. Friday included a lecture at the library with Peter Levy and David “Nicky” Henry, followed by a mural unveiling near the entrance to town, highlighting the African-Americans of Dorchester County, then dinner back at the Hyatt. Saturday saw a public conversation on race moderated by Pulitzer Prize winner E.R. Shipp, followed on Sunday by a unity walk and church service at Bethel A.M.E. on Pine Street, which had been home to the Cambridge movement of the 1960s.

Continuously active since 1847, Bethel A.M.E. possesses some of the oldest stained-glass pieces in the state of Maryland, as well as one of the only fully functioning pipe organs in America. They’re now working on securing grant monies for church restoration, because, as Petticolas said, “We need this to remain

the heart of the movement. To put it in context: Before we were free, we were functioning in this very spot. “The ‘Reflections on Pine’ weekend was a commemoration of events, not all of them good, but it was about celebrating the people who had the courage to push forward,” Petticolas added. “We are picking up the mantle and pushing forward, standing on their shoulders.”

DURING THE TIME of American slavery in the early 1800s, black people in Cambridge formed a community off High Street. From that point, on into the 20th century, the black community grew and strengthened. Pine Street even had the only African-American library in the state of Maryland.

But Cambridge was a town segregated by geography. The white community had their lives and businesses on Race Street, while the black community had theirs on Pine Street, which emerged as the heart of the African-American community. There were dozens of small businesses in the neighborhood. They called it Black Wall Street and Little New York. It was

prominently featured in the Green Book, a travel guide for African-Americans in the 1950s and ’60s that reported which hotels and restaurants would be safe and welcoming.

The district — stretching along Pine Street, from Muir Street to Cedar Street — included nearly 40 businesses and could rival prominent black neighborhoods like Harlem or U Street in Washington. The Phillips Packing Co. was one of the largest processing plants in the nation, employing 10,000 people in Cambridge. During wartime, the company won contracts to supply canned goods to the military, and for that reason the plant was running shifts around the clock.

In the 1930s, the community was paid more than \$1 million in wages, and Cambridge attracted some of the greatest names in music to the clubs on Pine Street, including Ella Fitzgerald, Cab Calloway and James Brown. But that all changed when the packing companies lost their wartime contracts, and the employers left Cambridge, in the 1950s. Unemployment averaged 30 percent for whites, but soared past 70 percent for blacks.



SPIRITUAL RENEWAL: DION BANKS AND KISHA PETTICOLAS OF THE EASTERN SHORE NETWORK FOR CHANGE STAND IN THE BETHEL A.M.E. CHURCH ON PINE ST, HOME OF THE CIVIL-RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN CAMBRIDGE. THE LOCAL INSTITUTION POSSESSES SOME OF THE OLDEST STAINED-GLASS PIECES IN THE STATE AND ONE OF THE ONLY FULLY FUNCTIONAL PIPE ORGANS IN THE U.S.

“When the contracts go, your jobs go,” Banks said. “They started closing places and laying off people. There became this movement, locally, to protect white jobs versus black jobs.”

As the racial strife intensified, the National Guard was called to Cambridge during 1963-’64, one of the longest stretches of military occupation of any American city in the history of the civil-rights movement.

“There was a war taking place in Cambridge,” said Peter Levy, author of *Civil War on Race Street*, during remarks at “Reflections on Pine.” “The Guard was brought in and maintained, essentially, for a year to prevent endless violence. The most amazing thing about Cambridge is that more people weren’t killed. It’s remarkable, on both sides.”

Cambridge in the 1960s became home to one of the most vibrant civil-rights

movements anywhere in the U.S. But the town never achieved the same notoriety as other flashpoints of the movement. That’s because what was happening in Cambridge didn’t fit with the national narrative of a struggle for public accommodations like lunch counters and public buses. On the contrary, the Cambridge movement was focused on education and employment. When the national narrative turned to public accommodations, Cambridge’s story got subsumed by that.

“Cambridge needs to see itself as a place that belongs on the modern Freedom Trail,” Levy said. “I think in some ways, Cambridge needs to be put back on that map if we’re to understand what took place in the 1960s,” he said.

Cambridge did come to national attention after the events of July 24, 1967, however, when H. Rap Brown ➡





— chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and an active Black Panther invited to speak by Gloria Richardson — delivered a powerful address while standing atop a parked car.

“Black power — that’s the way to say it. Don’t be scared of these honkies around here. Say black power,” Brown told his audience, according to a transcript from the Maryland State Archives. “You’ve got to be proud of being black. You can’t run around here, calling yourself ‘colored,’ calling yourself Negroes. That’s a word the honkies gave you. You’re black, brother, and be proud of it. It’s beautiful thing to be black.

“And now, we look at what the man does to black people. A 10-year-old boy in Newark is dead. A 19-year-old boy shot 39 times, four times in the head. It don’t take but one bullet to kill you. So they’re really trying to tell you something else. How much they hate you. How much they hate black folks.

“You just been running around here, letting them do everything they want. I mean, don’t be trying to love that honkey to death. Shoot him to death, brother, ‘cause that’s what he’s out to do to you. Like I said in the beginning, if this town don’t come ‘round, this town should be burned down. It should be burned down, brother.”

THE FIRE STARTED that night behind Pine Street Elementary School, which had been built in 1918 as a school for black first-through-seventh graders in the neighborhood. Today, the Cambridge Empowerment Center sits on the site; only a tall concrete-block wall remains of what used to be the school.

As the fire spread across Pine Street, it engulfed other homes and businesses. The block was soon an inferno. Yet, Cambridge Police Chief Brice Kinnamon stood back and kept the fire company from moving onto the scene to do their job, according to Levy.

Several residents, including a black city commissioner, begged Kinnamon to intervene.

“No,” came his reply. “We’re gonna let it burn.”

Eventually, the fire company did break through to begin putting out the blaze, Levy said, but it was too far out of control.

“It burned the heart of this community,” Petticoles said, standing on Pine Street, at the site of the old schoolhouse. “It wiped it out. Where the African-American community had been very progressive, this took things to a whole different place. It looked like somebody dropped a bomb.”

Pine Street today is a shadow of its former self. Of all the black-owned businesses and entrepreneurs on Pine Street, only the Elks Lodge — a pillar of the neighborhood — and Zion Church were able to rebuild. The neighborhood has since slipped into an economic depression. The cause of the fire, wiping out two city blocks, was never officially determined.

The economic and cultural impacts of that one night proved instant and lasting, said Jackson-Stanley and



EYES ON THE FUTURE: THE ESNCC’S PETTICOLAS AND BANKS HAVE BIG PLANS FOR CAMBRIDGE IN THE NEAR FUTURE: A MUSEUM, LEARNING CENTER AND EVEN A MULTIMEDIA PRODUCTION STUDIO ARE ALL ON THE DRAWING BOARD.



Banks, and Pine Street has been unable to rebound in the 50 years since.

“That dollar does not circulate on Pine Street anymore, not the way it used to,” Banks continued. “We don’t have the cultural experience, the sense of community. We have people who remember and talk about the heyday; we have books about it. But to experience Pine Street the way my mother and her friends used to, that’s gone.”

At the time, authorities said they kept their firefighters off Pine Street because they feared for their safety. One civil-rights icon has another theory. Now 95 years old, Gloria Richardson, who led the Cambridge movement in the early ‘60s, explained that in 1967, the black community in Cambridge had been boycotting

white businesses. One tactic included asking young kids to loiter in front of certain storefronts on Race Street. If shoppers from the black community saw those kids, it was a signal not to patronize that shop. She added that Pine Street businessmen went so far as to hire buses and pay for the gasoline and drivers to shuttle members of the black community out of Cambridge, to go shopping instead in Salisbury and Easton.

“I think they let that place burn down,” Richardson said, “because they realized the black businessmen in Cambridge were also supporting the boycott. They were glad to see the stores and restaurants and motels the black people had built up be burned down.”

A Cambridge native, Richardson had

a no-nonsense, militant style that clashed with others in the movement, such as John Lewis, who favored nonviolence. Her moment in the spotlight came in 1963, when rioting rocked Cambridge following a march by African-Americans in protest of the sentencing of two young demonstrators.

Counter-demonstrations by white protestors followed. Governor Millard Tawes ultimately ordered the National Guard into Cambridge to maintain law and order. He also implemented a curfew, which quelled the demonstrations. But the unrest would continue, and as a result, the guardsmen were deployed in Cambridge for 18 months.

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PASSING THE TORCH: STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF SEMINAL LEADERS LIKE GLORIA RICHARDSON, HARRIET TUBMAN, VICTORIA JACKSON-STANLEY AND FRED JACKSON, DION BANKS AND KISHA PETTICOLAS REPRESENT THE CURRENT GENERATION OF CIVIL-RIGHTS CHAMPIONS.

THE WHITE HOUSE got involved, and Gloria Richardson was Cambridge's liaison to Washington. She worked hand in hand with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and, after many hours of negotiations, the Treaty of Cambridge emerged. It called for desegregation of public accommodations and public schools, the formation of a biracial committee and the creation of a federally sponsored housing project.

And the guardsmen left.

The treaty itself "was absolutely iconic and amazing," Banks said. "This woman was like a five-star general in the way she thinks, the way she talks. She was clear on her demands, and she let them know, if you shoot, we're shooting back. She didn't mobilize a bunch of supporters. She mobilized an army."

"Reflections on Pine" had invited Richardson back to Cambridge, for what was supposed to be an intimate conversation looking back on 1967. Offering 120 tickets initially, it sold out instantly. They bumped it to 200, then 250. Every ticket sold out.

"When she walked in," Petticolas said, "she put her hand over her face. She was shocked and overwhelmed that so many people from Cambridge wanted to hear her talk."

Sparking that conversation about 1967, and doing it in such a big way, had made the people of Cambridge feel it's okay to talk about the events of Pine Street and to cross whatever invisible line was there, Petticolas said. She said before now, people didn't want to talk about it because it conjured difficult emotions.

"We're almost to the point where we've caught our breath, and we're working on what happens next," she said. "There's this momentum that we need, to come together and do things. It feels like we've created a momentum with 'Reflections on Pine' that has become contagious."

"There's still plenty of work to do," she added. "I'm not saying everything is as it should be, but we've come a long way, and there is a definite sense of pride in that."

Things are now changing for Cambridge. It's starting to see reinvestment, like a facelift to a derelict shopping center along Route 50.

"When you're the through-road to the beach, and you get a Chick-Fil-A in your town, and a Starbucks, people are going to stop and say: 'What else is here?'"

Cambridge is going to be the place to come. Things are going to change, and it's going to be amazing for Cambridge," Petticolas said.

In the months to come, the Eastern Shore Network for Change plans to coalesce around issues such as housing, education and prisoner reentry. They're also planning an "illumination project," a year-long conversation on race.

Meanwhile, Petticolas and Banks are planning a bold new chapter in the form of a museum on Pine Street that would be dedicated to the movement, among other related community activities.

"We're using this building to train the next generation of entrepreneurs who will start businesses on Pine Street," Petticolas said. "This nonprofit is the beginning. It's primarily a museum, with tentacles that reach out: We see a learning center, dream lab and incubator space here one day."

Inside the facility, Banks and Petticolas also are planning for classroom space, rental space for events, a sound-and-video studio for multimedia production, and office space for the Eastern Shore Network for Change. It doesn't have an official name yet, but for now they're calling it "Reflections on Pine, Phase II." By using the space as an incubator, they can create more anchors on Pine Street, so the community can start generating more revenue. That should lead to more investments in business, property and eventually tourism and the arts.

"There are plenty of people in this community looking for an opportunity and have no idea where to start," she said. "We have the know-how, means and capital to start that kind of rebuilding. We're going to move forward and step out of this, into something great."





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