

Bristol's Solar Hill Has A Long, Interesting History

- By Bud Phillips Special to the Herald Courier
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The area now known as Solar Hill has had three names. Far back, it was called King's Hill, then became Lancaster's Hill, and in 1869 became Solar Hill. For several years, it was the most elite residential section of Bristol, Va. It has recently become an official historic district.

Now that much restoration work has been done on Bristol's historic Solar Hill, I think it is a good time to review the history of this section of our city.

This area was formerly known as part of King's Meadows, usually referred to as the Upper Meadows. Later, it became Lancaster Hill, so named for Thomas C. Lancaster who bought and occupied the old James King house for some time.

Then, because of an observatory set up on the hill to view the "Great Eclipse" of Aug. 7, 1869, this became known as Solar Hill (it is interesting to note that this year marks the 140th anniversary of the event).

I might mention here as a side note of interest that my great grandfather Boggs died in Letcher County, Ky., during that eclipse. Some thought this darkness that fell over the hills and mountains of Kentucky meant that my ancestor was doomed eternally, but we would not think such things now.

This area known as Solar Hill is part of the old Sapling Grove tract. Earlier, it was owned by the estate of Gen. Evan Shelby. In 1814, it came into the ownership of the pioneer King family. The Rev. James King was living on it by 1817 when his third son, Cyrus King, was born.

It was Rev. King's slaves that cleared the hill and this became his milk cow pasture. Those cows had a habit of gathering about noon every day in a grove of huge oak trees that had been left when the hill was cleared. This became known as the Noon Grove. This noted grove was located on and around what is now the northwest corner of Solar and Cumberland streets.

A rural Washington County, Va., post office was established in the King home in 1839 that was known as Sapling Grove. At that time, a change was made in the Old Stage Road to serve this post office. The route

of that road is now Kings Alley and King Street. It passed by what was then the backyard of the King home, but this soon became the front yard.

In June 1853, the Rev. King and family left the hill and moved to a house that he had built on Beaver Creek near what is now the Melrose Street Bridge.

The Sapling Grove Post Office, that then had Campbell Galliher as postmaster, was discontinued on Oct. 1, 1853. The new Bristol Post Office was then established on the following Nov. 5, 1853. The last run of the stagecoach across Solar Hill was made at about 1 p.m. Oct. 28, 1856. By 1860, the Solar Hill lands had become the property of Joseph Johnston of Philadelphia, Pa.

Soon after the close of the Civil War, it became apparent that if Bristol were to grow, more land would have to be made available for development.

At first, Capt. J. H. Wood, who built my home, Pleasant Hill, and his father-in-law, W. W. James, sought to buy the land and make a private development of it. The plan was abandoned because of financial difficulties incurred by Mr. James.

However, J. H. Wood headed the move to have the town buy the land. A deal was made with Johnston to purchase the land for \$24,937.50. The town approved the purchase by a vote of 101 to 21.

Mayor I. C. Fowler, John H. Winston and Capt. Joseph W. Owen directed the laying out and naming of the streets. The sale of lots was set for July 5, 1871. On that day, David Sullins, for whom Sullins College was later named, rode a horse named Prince as he moved from lot to lot making the sales.

Two lads, Frank Winston and a Pepper boy, went ahead of Sullins flagging the lots.

The first lot sold was on the southwest corner of King and Sullins streets (behind our present public library). It was sold to Nathan Dodd for \$300.

The lot that brought the most money was located on the southwest corner of Johnson and Scott streets. It was bought by Mr. McCormick for \$605. The fact that it sold for more than other lots that had much better views may be explained by its fronting on a planned railroad.

In those days, having a residence in close view of a railroad was considered to be somewhat of a status symbol. The two first houses completed after the sale included the W. W. James house on Sullins Street and the G. M. Whitten house on 203 Solar. This house was later known as the Wallace house and even later as the Johnson house. The Whitten/Wallace/Johnson house still stands.

Solar Hill was long the most elite section of Bristol, Va. It has now become an official historic district and is making a comeback with much restoration being done.

BUD PHILLIPS was a local historian and author.