

East End of West Chester stars in Mud Row

By Bill Rettew for Daily Local News | Published July 2, 2019



Gentrification on Franklin Street. Photo by Darcie Goldberg.

WEST CHESTER — The East End of the Borough and its residents are the big stars in a new play, “Mud Row,” now appearing at the People’s Light & Theater.

The play was written by Tony Award nominee Dominique Morisseau and runs through July 28.

Historian Penny Washington recently led a tour through the East End. She said that the play deals with gentrification of the predominantly African American neighborhood on a macro scale and family dynamics on a micro scale.

Washington pointed out many examples in a changing neighborhood, with new and old construction often set side by side. The historic brick buildings are disappearing.

“Gentrification has created a changing demographic,” Washington said. “This space is sacred to me.

“Gentrification has changed the demographic of the neighborhood. These new houses could be located anywhere.”

The historian pointed to the past. She even noted the home where her mother was born.

“When we walk on this sacred space we are walking on our ancestor’s foundation,” she said.

Can the community survive mostly intact?

“With the old construction and new construction does the community have the practical wherewithal to influence the future of their neighborhood?” she said.

The neighborhood is packed full of African American churches. Washington said that many are facing a membership crisis.

“They don’t have the members to keep these churches viable — they’re still respected members of the community,” she said. “I’m not against progress as we walk through these streets.”

New and old sit side by side.

“These new buildings could be anywhere. Is there a way to have both, but not one at the expense of another? Are they just going to be considered expendable?”

“I certainly hope not but expect that they will. I have no animosity for the people who have recently come into the neighborhood.”

Washington does not want to see her neighborhood obliterated or the history whitewashed.

“The community exists because African American men and women banded together to create institutions that would strengthen themselves,” she said. “These intuitions exist because of the segregation practices common during the Jim Crow era.

“The black community exercised their power as a way to create a counter narrative. There’s a traditional narrative that says this was a tolerant community.

“The existence of these institutions is the counter narrative — it is evident that this community struggled with issues of equality and acceptance.”

Last week’s Washington led tour started at the Charles A. Melton Arts and Education Center at 501 E. Miner St.

The institution has served the educational, social and recreational needs of the black community for 100 years. At many of the places shown on the tour, African Americans living in the borough during the Jim Crow era were prohibited from using the town’s white only facilities and institutions.

Historic St. Paul's Baptist Church, at 418-420 E. Miner St., was another stop and has a relevant presence in the community due to its progressive leadership and its many serving ministries, Washington said.

Bethel A.M.E. Church is site of the oldest house of worship serving the black community in the borough. The denomination was formally established in 1816.

Frederick Douglass stayed at the Magnolia House Hotel, at 300-302 E. Miner St. It was owned by Moses G. Hepburn who in 1882 became the first black to serve on borough council.

Tent Sister's Hall, 113 S. Adams St., served as the home for the ante bellum African Americana female mutual aid society and those women helped fugitives on the Underground Railroad.

The serpentine block Star Social Club at 212 E. Market St. was founded in April 1896. It was a place where blacks could gather privately. Count Basie, Duke Ellington and B.B. King all performed here.

It was sold in 2019 and its future is uncertain.

"The fate of the Star Social Club is an example of what can happen when communities of color do not possess links to advocates that can assist in preserving their heritage," Washington said.

Mayor Dianne Herrin also took the tour.

"I learned so many things about our community from Miss Penny Washington that I did not know before, thanks to this walking tour," said Herrin, "including the fact that B.B. King, Duke Ellington, and Count Basie played at the Star Social Club on Market Street and Frederick Douglass stayed at The Magnolia House on East Miner Street.

"Thanks to her passion for the rich history of the East End, we are now going to approach the Borough's Historic Commission to seek ways to ensure preservation of the structures that enshrine and celebrate this history before it's too late."