

OPINION

Staunton wants to revive a neighborhood where Black residents once honored Union veterans buried there

City decisions in the 1960s set it into decline. The General Assembly can help reverse that.



by John Blair

January 15, 2024



An abandoned house on Jones Street in the Uniontown section of Staunton. Photo courtesy of Will Cockrell.

The Virginia General Assembly's 2024 Session will feature an opportunity to correct an error that disproportionately affected the City of Staunton's Black residents and decreased their opportunity for economic advancement.

Delegate Ellen Campbell is sponsoring House Bill 136 that will authorize the City of Staunton to waive or reduce utility connection fee costs for a portion of the City known as Uniontown, an area of the city that lost its economic vibrancy as a result of prior land use decisions by previous Staunton City Councils.

Uniontown was a village originally established in Augusta County. After the Civil War, a cemetery for the burial of federal (Union) troops was established in the area. A number of Black residents established a village near the cemetery. In 1880, the *Staunton News Leader* reported on a June 3rd march by Staunton's Black residents to the cemetery commemorating the dead Union soldiers buried there. Julius Gaines' *Old Uniontown-Glances Backwards* states that the march became an annual occurrence for Black Stauntonians.

Gaines' work established that the village derived its name from either the cemetery itself or a church in the village called Union church in which Baptists and Methodist shared the same structure for worship. After its establishment, Uniontown became a vibrant village in the 1920s with 64 households, most of which were Black families.

In 1948, the area was largely annexed by the City of Staunton. On February 1, 1961, the City Council rezoned the properties within Uniontown to a light industrial classification. On June 8, 1965, the City Council adopted regulations limiting construction and repair of residential dwellings in light industrial zones. These land use decisions resulted in a slow and steady decline of the once vibrant village. Most residents eventually left the area, and only a few homes are occupied today.

However, in 2022, the Staunton City Council commissioned a Uniontown Neighborhood Action Plan lead by a Steering Committee and consultants. These partners produced a plan which establishes a number of goals and actions to revitalize Uniontown. One of the plan's recommendations is to extend public water and sewer services into Uniontown with a waiver of utility connection fees. "We feel this is an excellent opportunity to help revitalize a historically neglected part of our city," said Staunton Mayor Stephen Claffey.

This is the genesis of Delegate Campbell's legislation. Dillon's Rule, a rule of judicial construction that is now embodied in Article VII, Section 2 of the Constitution of Virginia, only permits localities to exercise powers expressly granted by the General Assembly. Currently, there is no authorization for the City of Staunton to lower or waive utility connection fees. Delegate Campbell's legislation would empower the City of Staunton

to establish criteria for the reduction or waiver of utility connection fees in Uniontown. This authorization would allow the City to assist the revitalization of Uniontown.

Staunton City Councilors acknowledge that previous Council actions resulted in Uniontown's demise, and they believe that this authority can be a piece of the puzzle to strengthen and revitalize the area. Councilor Alice Woods views the legislation as a part of an effort to repair the previous damage to Uniontown's prospects, commenting, "This is an effort to repair the past to build towards the future."

The nature of a General Assembly session is probably best termed as "loosely organized chaos." The legislature considers thousands of pieces of legislation in a condensed period of time. It is the City of Staunton's hope that Uniontown's future prospects will not get lost in the 2024 legislative shuffle. This is a bipartisan opportunity to heal a past wound and provide a path forward for Uniontown's residents.

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