

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



Jackson Hicks Brown (1908-1968)

Born in Pulaski, Tennessee on February 16, 1908, Jackson “Jack” Hicks Brown became a prominent businessman with deep ties into much of the rich history of Nashville’s famed Jefferson Street. There exists little information about his Tennessee native parents, though his mother, Nannie Brown, worked as a factory cook. Jackson Brown moved to Nashville by 1930, when he lived as a student at 1032 16th Ave North. After studying at Meharry Medical College’s School of Pharmacy, he graduated with a degree in pharmaceutical studies in 1933. Soon after, he married first wife Martha and the couple moved to a small brick home at 2412 Jefferson Street (later demolished for the interstate).

By 1937, Brown opened his first drugstore at 2602 Jefferson Street. Two years later, he ran as a candidate for city council representative of the Eleventh Ward but ultimately withdrew from the race when his mother took ill. Brown remarried around 1940 to his second wife, Omega Beidleman, and moved to a new home at 2406 Jefferson Street. As his business began to expand, he opened a second Brown’s Pharmacy at 1610 Jefferson Street. The late 1940s would soon reveal exciting new entrepreneurial opportunities for pharmacist Dr. Jackson H. Brown, who married his third wife, Christine, in 1946.

During the Jim Crow era, Black residents

and merchants conducted business in comfort and enjoyment on and around the bustling Jefferson Street corridor, frequenting places like the Ritz Theater, department stores and grocery stores, without having to encounter issues of race in these daily activities. This diverse business district was not only home to many prominent African American business owners like Dr. Jackson H. Brown and the Otey family, but also included several Jewish merchants and white owned-and-operated businesses with integrated staff. Notably during this era, the otherwise medically-inclined “Jack” Brown established two of the most popular entertainment venues to grow out of Jefferson Street’s remarkable “Golden Age.”

The years 1948-1950 ushered in significant changes and advancements for Dr. Brown’s career and property holdings. In 1948, he embarked on new ventures into the restaurant and hotel businesses, opening Brown’s Hotel at 1610½ Jefferson Street and Brown’s Dinner Club at 1612 Jefferson Street. A nondescript, 20th century Commercial Style edifice housed the brick two-story hotel. Brown’s Pharmacy occupied the northeast corner of the first floor, with Brown’s Dinner Club located in a one-story section on the west side of the building. This elite hotel provided lodging accommodations to many now-legendary African American performers, including Louis Armstrong,

Jimi Hendrix, Nat King Cole, Dinah Washington, and Little Richard, who at the time were not allowed to stay at “whites only” hotels. As a result, famous African American performers who visited Nashville’s vibrant Jefferson Street corridor socialized and ate alongside locals at places like Brown’s Dinner Club, which featured regular Sunday “jam” sessions.

Brown’s Dinner Club featured refined interior details including heavy moldings, chandeliers, a side row of sleek, low booths, heavy drapes, arched openings, and a long dark wood bar. Two- and four-seat tables with crisp white tablecloths dotted the aisles while mirrored walls lent a glamorous vibe. Male attendants donned white dinner jackets and bow ties during this fashionable era of elegant supper clubs. Annual guide *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (published 1936-1966), which directed African American travelers to safe and welcoming establishments during the era of Jim Crow laws, included Brown’s Hotel in its listings beginning in 1948. At the time, this hotel served as one of only eight options for travelers in Nashville, five of which were privately owned.

In 1950, Dr. Brown opened two new drugstores at 1436 12th Avenue South and 1029 21st Avenue North, for a total of four pharmacies under his brand. Continuing this entrepreneurial momentum, Brown went on to establish one of the most well-known venues in Jefferson Street’s rich entertainment history, Club Baron at 2614 Jefferson Street. In 1955, he opened Club Baron as a Black recreational center at a cost of \$75,000. The club boasted Nashville’s only skating rink for African American patrons, a dance floor, and

restaurant that featured nationally-recognized blues artists.

Later the site of a rapturous guitar duel between Jimi Hendrix and Johnny Jones, Club Baron regularly showcased stars like Ray Charles, Jackie Wilson, B. B. King, Ivory Joe Hunter, and Little Richard. In 1959, Brown’s Pharmacy opened at 2614A Jefferson Street. Brown remodeled the club in 1965 to include a ground floor mixing bar and second story beer-selling restaurant. He deeded the property to the Pride of Tennessee Elks Lodge in November 1966 for use as a masonic temple.

In addition to his many business ventures, Brown served as a member of the National Pharmaceutical Association and achieved the rank of a 33rd degree Prince Hall Mason. He worshipped as a member of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church at 949 37th Ave N.

Dr. Jackson H. Brown passed away on Friday, February 23, 1968 while en route to a local hospital. Survivors upon his death included a son, Charles DeWayne Brown of Nashville, and three sisters—Mrs. Fannie Howard, Mrs. Rose Bryant, and Mrs. Grace May Puckett. Dr. Brown was laid to rest at Nashville’s historic Greenwood Cemetery.

Brown’s Pharmacy at 1610 Jefferson Street closed around 1970, and Brown’s Hotel and Dinner Club closed by 1973, these anchor establishments heavily impacted by the passage of integration laws and the nearby construction of Interstate 40.

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