

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: NOVEMBER 4, 2009

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER *J*

SUBJECT: NAMING OF THE GYMNASIUM AND POOL AT CHARLES HOUSTON RECREATION CENTER

ISSUE: Naming of the gymnasium and pool at Charles Houston Recreation Center.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council: (1) receive the recommendation of the City Council Naming Committee to name the gymnasium and pool at Charles Houston Recreation Center; and (2) set the proposal for public hearing and consideration on Saturday, November 21.

BACKGROUND: Last spring a group of Alexandrians, most of who are former students of the Parker–Gray School and other Alexandria schools attended by African American students before integration, formed an ad hoc room naming committee (Attachment 1). Their goal was to explore naming rooms at the new Charles Houston Recreation Center in honor of notable African American citizens whom they considered have had an important influence on Alexandria's past and present. The Center is located on the site of the old Parker Gray School, and the committee felt that the site is a historic one that is appropriate as a location to recognize outstanding individuals who contributed to the betterment of the African American community.

The Ad Hoc Committee met weekly through the summer and fall to develop criteria and to discuss how to recognize persons of influence who participated in the struggle to advance African Americans in Alexandria economically and socially, and to enhance their education from the 1920s to 1965. The committee's goal is to preserve the history, heritage and legacy of those who worked hard to help others.

DISCUSSION: The Committee has recommended that the naming of rooms at the Charles Houston Recreation Center begin with the naming of the gymnasium and the swimming pool. They propose that the gymnasium be named after Coach Louis Johnson and Mr. Morris Seibert, two individuals who made outstanding contributions to the youth of Alexandria.

They have proposed that the swimming pool be named the Memorial Pool in honor of the nine African American youth who drowned in the Potomac River recognizing that before integration African American youths were not permitted to swim in the Alexandria Municipal Pool (Attachment 2).

The Ad Hoc Naming Committee held a public hearing on these proposed namings on September 30 to obtain community input. About 40 persons attended the hearing. They also received petitions in favor of the proposed namings (Attachment 3).

On October 15 the City Council Naming Committee (Councilman Frank Fannon, Councilwoman Del Pepper and City Manager James Hartmann) held a meeting with the Ad Hoc Charles Houston Naming Committee to discuss the naming proposals. The City Council Naming Committee voted unanimously to recommend to City Council that the gymnasium and the pool be named as recommended.

I recommend that Council schedule these proposals for public hearing and consideration on Saturday, November 21. If the naming of the gymnasium and pool are approved by Council, the Ad Hoc Charles Houston Naming Committee plans to hold a celebration at the Charles Houston Recreation Center in February 2010 during Black History Month.

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment 1. Ad Hoc Charles Houston Naming Committee

Attachment 2. Summary Information on Nominees

Attachment 3. Petition

STAFF:

Jack Browand, Director, Marketing, Public Relations and Special Events, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities

Sheila Whiting, Center Director, Charles Houston Recreation Center

Michele Evans, Deputy City Manager

Ad Hoc Charles Houston Naming Committee

Mr. James E. Henson, Sr., Chair
Mr. Horace Burton
Mr. Robert Dawkins
Mr. Willie Gambrell
Mr. Julian Haley, Jr.
Mrs. Ramona Hatten
Mrs. Gwen Henderson
Mr. John Taylor
Ms. Dorothy Turner
Ms. Catherine Ward
Mr. Andrew Winfree

City Staff

City Manager's Office

Michele Evans, Deputy City Manager
Andrea Blackford, Communications Officer

Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities

William Chesley, Deputy Director, Recreation Services
Jack Browand, Director, Marketing, Public Relations and Special Events
Sheila Whiting, Center Director, Charles Houston Recreation Center

Office of Historic Alexandria

J. Lance Mallamo, Director
Louis C. Hicks, Director, Black History Museum

Louis R. Johnson
(1910-1988)

In 1939, Louis R. Johnson left a football coaching position at Jefferson High School in Charlottesville, VA to become the coach of four major sports (track and field, baseball, football, and basketball) at Parker-Gray High School.

Over the next 20 years, Coach Johnson would produce some of the best teams and athletes in the state of Virginia; however, this fame was tempered with the hard realities of life in a segregated society. For example, the team had to travel from Alexandria to cities such as Roanoke, Charlottesville, or Petersburg in an open bed, canvas truck filled with hay, because there were no hotels or eating establishments available to African Americans.

Due to segregation and financial instability, conditions at the school were difficult as well. Parker-Gray lacked proper locker room facilities; the gymnasium was the size of an orchestra pit; and the school's football field was only 75 yards (to score a touchdown, the player would have to move an additional 25 yards to complete the 100-yard requirement).

In the face of these difficulties, Johnson continued his efforts to encourage his charges to become outstanding athletes and students. His efforts resulted in outstanding athletes who went on to receive team recognition in the following categories: All Metropolitan Football Team, Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) Teams, All Mid-American Conference, CIAA Wrestling and Boxing Championships, Pittsburgh Courier Black College Hall of Fame and other college Halls of Fame. Several of Coach Johnson's athletes went on to play for the National Football League, the Canadian Football Conference, and the American Football Conference.

Many became famous: Earl Lloyd, the first African American to play in the National Basketball Association and a Naismith Hall of Famer; Canadian Football professionals Horace Burton and William "Red" Jackson; and Charles Price, player for the Los Angeles Dons pro football team, who later served as a Fairfax County Public School administrator. Other protégés included Wrestler Aaron Anderson, Jr., an athletic and academic standout at Virginia State College, who went on to make a major contribution to the NASA program; and U.S. Air Force Colonel (Ret.) Tommy Turner, a Parker-Gray football player who went on to fly bombers for the Strategic Air Command and C-141s for the Military Air Command. Johnson's students grew to become not only athletes, but teachers, mentors, educators, and community leaders.

During his two decades of service to the Parker-Gray community, Coach Johnson instilled his students with a strong work ethic, and the vision and ambition to look beyond the limitations of racism and segregation to building a future of educational, economic, social equality. Many Parker Gray alumni fondly speak of Coach Johnson, his guidance, and his insistence on achievement, leading one alumni member to remark, "He was more than just a coach; he helped mold me into a man."

His legacy of education and service to youth has resonated throughout the history of the City of Alexandria, and serves as an inspiration for generations to come.



Louis R. Johnson

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Morris Russell Siebert (1922-1993)

Native Alexandrian Morris Siebert is an example of the concept of “paying it forward.” Siebert, a protégé of Parker-Gray High School Coach Louis Johnson, continued Johnson’s legacy of service and mentorship to African American youth in the City of Alexandria.

Siebert attributed his ideas of achievement and clean living to Johnson, who was his baseball and football coach from 1940-1942. After graduation, Siebert was drafted in 1942, joining the World War II Allied Forces. He served in France and Germany, and witnessed suffering and death in the combat zones in those countries. “I saw a race of people suffering—I saw humanity,” he said. “I decided I wanted to help [people] when I saw suffering from things like rickets.”

After his discharge from the Army in 1945, he returned to Parker-Gray and graduated with the class of 1948. Following graduation, he attended Storer College in West Virginia for one year. In 1950, he joined the Alexandria Recreation Department where, he worked at the Parker-Madden Playground and for years, in many of the City’s recreation centers. During the day, Siebert worked as a clerk for the Department of Defense’s Army Adjutant General Office, located in the Pentagon.

In addition to his regular work, Siebert was a mentor and coach to several hundred youth who participated in activities at the Pendleton Street Recreation Center, helping them to develop their athletic, academic, and life skills. He provided parental leadership for the “latchkey” children, whose parents were often required to work more than one job in order to make ends meet.

He did this extra work without salary, and without the benefit of an annual budget or staff, but gave indiscriminately and unconditionally of his time and leadership. He made recreation facilities available on his day off, and often went beyond the scope of his duties to provide leadership and guidance to youth. As one of his charges recalled, “Morris was a warm, caring man. He was also the strong, no-nonsense man we needed in our lives. He demanded respect; negative attitudes were not an option. He taught us early that we have freedom to make choices, but we do not have the freedom from the consequences.”

In the 1970s, Siebert’s service and dedication was honored with the establishment of a summer basketball league named for him and his high school coach. The Johnson-Siebert Basketball League, which operated for three years (1971-1974) was, at that time, the third largest summer league in the United States.

Siebert retired from government service in 1990, with more than 35 years of service. For more than two decades, he served as a model mentor and coach. His years of service honor the memory of his mentor and coach, Louis Johnson, the guidance and leadership of his parents and family, the support of the Parker-Gray community, and the great legacy of achievement and service to community that continues among the many unsung heroes in our City to this day.



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Morris R. Siebert

The Memorial Pool

Causalities of Segregation

African Americans in Alexandria suffered along with others of their race when a segregated system prevented them from enjoying recreation facilities in their hometown.

Although the City had a municipal pool for white residents before 1952, African American citizens in the City often swam in the Potomac River or Hunting Creek for relief from hot summer days. Although the City, in the early 1950s, provided transportation to a swimming pool in Washington, D.C., once a week, this was not enough for some youth. Walking two or three blocks to the Potomac River and Hunting Creek was too tempting to pass up.

As a result, accidents and drowning were bound to happen, and did. The Charles Houston Pool is proposed to be named the Memorial Pool in honor of African American youth who drowned in the Potomac River and local creeks during segregation, when they were not permitted to use the City pool on Cameron Street.

Listed below are the names of young African Americans who lost their lives:

1931

James Kyer, age 16

1932

Francis Gilliam, age 16

1940

John G. Beckham, age 8

1944

William Lewis, age 8

1949

Theodore Exzell Watkins, age 9

Benjamin Watkins, age 11

1950

Earl Jackson, age 14

1952

Lonnie Richard Johnson, age 9

Morris Leroy Johnson, age 11

WE REMEMBER THEM

At the rising of the sun and at its going down

We remember them.

At blowing of the wind and the chill of winter

We remember them.

At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of summer

We remember them.

At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of autumn

We remember them.

At the beginning of the year and when it ends

We remember them.

As long as we live, they too will live; for they are now a part of

us, as we remember them.

PETITION

THIS PETITION IS GENERATED TO GARNER SUPPORT FOR THE NAMING OF THE GYMNASIUM AND SWIMMING POOL AT THE CHARLES HOUSTON RECREATION CENTER FOR THE FOLLOWING INDIVIDUALS:

GYMASIUM: Coach Louis R. Johnson and Morris Siebert

SWIMMING POOL: In memorial to African American youth who drown in local rivers due to the lack of swimming facilities for African American citizens in the city of Alexandria.

| <u>Name</u> | <u>Address</u> | <u>Parker-Gray Class</u> |
|-----------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Beatrice Cross Taylor | 520 So. Payne St. | 1954 |
| Ann B. Flye | 610 Ribbon St | 1956 |
| Marjorie C. McKinney | 4524 Chendale Sq. | 1947 |
| Lois Brooks | 1005 Wood Place | 1944 |
| Arnold Taylor | 510 S. Payne St | 1945 |
| Arthur Albert Taylor | 406 W. Alfred St | 1953 |
| HARRIET MOORE | 508 S. PAYNE | 1951 |
| Wilbur MOORE | " " | 1949 1950 |

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| | <u>Name</u> | <u>Address</u> | <u>Parker-Gray Class</u> |
|----|---------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Charles Taylor Knapper | 404 No. Alfred | 1948 |
| 2 | Dorothy E. Knapper Taylor | 406 No. Alfred | 1st CLASS |
| 3 | Sally Mitchell | 422 N. Henry St. | 1967 |
| 4 | Charlene Dixon | 503 W. COL. ST. ALEXANDRIA | 1952 |
| 5 | Andrew Winfree | 427 N. COL. ST. | 1955 |
| 6 | Therese Williams | 6800 Brindle Heath Way | 1958 |
| 7 | Robert Winfree | 6207 14th ST. NW, WASH, DC | 1952 |
| 8 | Morraine H. Winfree | 6207 14th ST. N.W., WASH, DC | 1952 |
| 9 | John S. Taylor | 540 S. Payne ST. | 1954 |
| 10 | Dorothea M. Campbell | 425 No. Alfred St Alex, Va | 1941 |
| 11 | Howard Turner Jr. | 1010 Vernon Alex, Va. | 1959 |
| 12 | NORMA WILLIAMS | 102 Normandy Hill ALEXANDRIA | |
| 13 | Julian Wiley, Jr | P.O. Box 906 Alex, VA | TCW 79 |
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| <u>Name</u> | <u>Address</u> | <u>Parker-Gray Class</u> |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Frank G. Duxon | 303 N. Col. St. Alex VA. | 1951 |
| Marion J. Elliott Sr | 318 N. Patrick St Alexandria | Resident Since 1970 |
| Robert C. Logan | 313 N Patrick St Alex VA | 1968 ^{Year} |
| Frank Taylor | 520 S. Payne Street Alex Va. | |
| Apple Andy | 7698 Walter Circle Alex. VA | 22309 (1971) |
| William C. King | 4000 Garden of UPR. Marlboro, MD | 20772 |
| Bernie Casey | 623 S Fayette Alex Va | |
| James A. Dixon | 583 N. Columbus St Alex VA | 22314 |
| Louise Elliott | 318 N. Patrick St Alex. Va. | 22314 1954 |
| Delores Nixon | 4307 Birchlake Ct. Alex Va. | 22309 |

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| <u>Name</u> | <u>Address</u> | <u>Parker-Gray Class</u> |
|---------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| Isabel "Wallace" Smith | | '42 |
| Catherine Wood | Alex, VA 22314 320 S. Nuttall St. | '49 |
| Carlotta Phillips McCreae | 6118 Purcell Ave Alex Hill | 57 |
| Norma Jennings Turner | 1309 Cronoco St Alexandria Va | 1947 |
| Willie Mae Lee | 825 Cronoco St. Alex., VA 22314 | '56 |
| Barbara M. Trimes | 1504 Birchwood Dr. Aron Hill, Md. 20745 | 51 |
| George Payne | 4424 Scarborough Sq. Alex., Va 22309 | '54 |
| Betty Payne | " " (13) | '64 |

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725
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| <u>Name</u> | <u>Address</u> | <u>Parker-Gray Class</u> |
|--------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| Earl Turner | 106 S. Fayette St, #11 Alex, VA 22314 | '47 |
| Charles Sias | 7824 Breckness Ln Fairfax Station, VA 22309 | '65 |
| Barbara "Berts" Proctor | 426 N. Fayette St, Alex., VA 22314 | '48 |
| Albert Berts | 1735 Price St Alex., VA 22301 | '47 |
| Marjorie "Charity" Berts | " " Alex., VA 22305 | '47 |
| John Gray | 3107 Montrose Ave. " " | '56 |
| Eugenia Gray | " " | '59 |
| Marjorie McKenney | 4524 Wendale Sq. Alexandria, Va 22307 | '45 |