OBERLIN RISING

Dedicated April 21, 2018

ABOUT OBERLIN RISING

The Oberlin Road public art project seeks to provide a series of forms and layered experiences that help neighbors and visitors celebrate and explore the history of the Oberlin community.

Most people experience the design as they drive along on Oberlin Road and see five large sculptural pieces, which mark the site. These markers serve as bold, commemorative monuments to the once vibrant African American community that created Oberlin Village.

The other design elements are more subtle and are experienced through on-site exploration and discovery. By walking through the site, references to original foundations and the foundational stories of the neighborhood can be discovered.

History Embedded in the Site

Derived from a Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from 1914, site-cast curbs will delineate the foundations of three structures that were located on the site. These foundations recall the physical presence of the families and individuals who formed churches and businesses that constituted the rich social, cultural and economic core of Oberlin. Emanating from the house foundations are four earthcast benches which hold stanzas of Howard Craft’s “Ode to Oberlin”, a celebration of the spirit of Oberlin.

Additionally, along the retaining wall to the south are fifteen “lunes” (the American form of Haiku) which speak more directly to some of the notable people, places, and events of the community. Finally, the sign for Oberlin Rising is a handmade concrete casting which contains impressions of actual handprints of ten of the eldest and ten of the youngest members of the community.

Plantings

Designed by Katherine Gill. The landscape is a physical and symbolic expression of resiliency, new growth, and the potential for long term health and sustainability. A field of native grasses, perennials and shrubs provide the backdrop for the sculptural markers.

OBERLIN CEMETERY

Oberlin Cemetery, one of only four known African-American cemeteries in Raleigh, is a 3 acre plot of land located less than a quarter of a mile northeast of Oberlin Rising. It contains 209 headstones, though a field study conducted in 2016 suggests that approximately 625 individuals are buried there.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Raleightes: Oberlin Village
http://www.waltermagazine.com/profiles/raleightes/oberlin-rising/

Friends of Oberlin Village
https://friendsooberlinvillage.org/

Revealing the Past at Oberlin Cemetery

Social media tag #oberlinrising

Oberlin Rising is the product of artistic and historical collaboration between Thomas Sayre, the Friends of Oberlin Village and Smedes York to mark the memories, beliefs and traditions of the Oberlin Village Community.

The park is open to the public. Visitors are encouraged to stroll, read, sit, enjoy and reflect.
Ode to Oberlin as featured in Oberlin Rising was modified from its original version in order to fit the sculpture. Below is the ode as originally written by Mr. Craft.

I
Here along what was once
Old Hillsboro Road
Black makers fired the flame
That fashioned this place
Fifty dollars for a parcel of dream
Measured out by the acre
Hear the hammer
Boards banged into place
Bricks slapped with mortar
The draymen’s horse
Clop, clopping, pulling cart
With supplies for seven hundred and fifty
Pioneers of the possible
Masons, Carpenters, Seamstresses, Schoolteachers
Transformed Peck’s Place and Save Rent
Into a mighty village
Rising!

II
Oberlin!
For founder James H. Harris’s alma mater
Ohio Home to abolitionists
Oberlin!
For freedom
And tomorrows made from longings
Slaves dared not long for
But longed for anyway
Oberlin!
Testament to a people’s will
And the tomorrows born from it
Your craftsmen have gone forth
Into the Capital City,

III
Oh Oberlin,
Where churches rose
Built by the God fearing
Where those who once
Played with marbles and dolls
Stood against segregation
Where faith feeds souls
As only belief in “home” can
Your progeny’s branches
Strong with green leaves
The seeds from their fruit
Carried by the wind
You grow evermore
In heart, in mind, in body
Taking root in tomorrow
Nourished by yesterday

IV.
Visitor’s Note
As you stand here or sit and gaze
And breathe in the history of this place
Know it was born of sacrifice and struggle
And it was made and is made
From the lives of people
Who loved and lived and do so still
Let their spirit, industriousness, and determination
Lend strength to your own
So when you walk away
A piece of Oberlin travels with you

Your educators have built schools
Founded Universities
Your people have stood on the frontlines
In America’s wars

- Howard L. Craft

ABOUT THE PILLARS

Curved, earthcast, sculptural markers as high as 20 feet dot the landscape and capture the eye. Their subtly sweeping form creates a sense of movement, with their leading edge oriented to point the gaze in one direction: toward the Oberlin Cemetery, which dates to the 1870s and, today, is concealed behind an office building just northeast of the site.

The markers are made of concrete, cast from molds that were created by digging curved furrows directly into the site. When the concrete cured, the markers were pulled up from the ground and placed in position. Their texture and form have been defined both by the earth underneath, and the mark of the human hands on the exposed troweled surface.

The Seamstress.
The cross hatched texture refers to fabric in general and shirts, in particular, which were laundered and repaired in the community and served many of Raleigh’s leaders.

The Teacher.
A yard stick was used to refer to the classroom, to education which was of great importance to the community at large.

The Lawyer.
A gavel made the pattern of random dots which refers to the legal profession and, in particular, to Willis M. Graves, Jr., who grew up in Oberlin Village, and was part of Thurgood Marshall’s legal team.

The Farmer.
A garden hoe was used to create a texture to represent farming which sustained the community, especially in its early days.

The Mason.
A mason’s trowel was used to create a pattern which refers to the many bricklayers and masons who resided in the community and helped build many of Raleigh’s important downtown buildings.