The tradition of “good hope” lives on through its present owner Glenn Armentor.

Historic hall offers insight into Freetown

Editor’s Note: This article was written with help from the Lafayette City-Parish Planning Commission Lafayette IN a Century (LINC) documents and a neighborhood history provided by The Glenn Armentor Law Corporation located in the historic Good Hope Hall.

Last week, I wrote about the collection of neighborhoods known as Freetown-Port Rico — the area between the railroad tracks to University Avenue and Johnston Street to Pinhook Street.

But to know more about the people who helped shape this neighborhood, we must look to the meeting place where their daily activities occurred.

New mission

By the 1870’s and 1880’s, Ku Klux Klan activity thankfully had drastically declined, and thus fighting the common enemy of the “True Friends Society” no longer bonded neighbors together.

A new mission was on the horizon. Following the theme of looking out for one another, the wives and daughters of the “free men of color” took the helm with a new mission of looking over the public welfare of neighbors. These women took care of the sick, as well as planned the celebrations and collaborated on the social advancement of the African-American community in Lafayette.

The “True Friends Association” was chartered in 1883, during a time when the nation had no social or welfare programs. This revolutionary association did a great service for the African-American community of Vermilionville from its home base in current day Freetown-Port Rico.

There was a group of members in the association who were perhaps the most hopeful of the bunch. This group was said to look forward with great hope that they would one day have the good life they wanted. This segment of the association formed the “Good Hope Society.” Together, these two groups became the leaders of the African-American community in Lafayette.

New meeting place

In celebration of the founding of the “Good Hope Society,” these neighbors built a meeting place.
Downtown auction. The structure was sold to the Good Hope Society for $3,400 in January 1913. Good Hope Hall continued to serve the community until it was partially destroyed by a hurricane, which damaged the top floor of the structure.

**Strength in numbers**

The “Good Hope Society” rebuilt Good Hope Hall as a single story building on high brick piers.

In the roaring twenties and the Depression of the 1930s, Good Hope Hall grew as one of the nation’s truly great jazz halls and featured many of the Jazz “greats,” such as Louis Armstrong and Fats Pinchon. The hall was the center for orchestras and bands from all over Louisiana, as well as national touring bands.

One of the most fascinating reported traditions of this hall occurred whenever a dance was scheduled. The trumpeter would climb to the upper gallery of the structure and blow his horn for several minutes to announce to the entire community and downtown a party was happening at Good Hope Hall.

**Let the good times roll**

During its heyday, the hall also was locally significant as the center of the neighborhood.

For instance, Benoit operated his barber shop at the hall for many years until he moved across Stewart Street. He operated from that second location until his death at 97 in 1989. At the end, he was still charging $2.50 for haircuts he once gave for $0.25.

On music nights, the African-American community would go to Good Hope Hall to hear jazz music. Many Caucasian members of the community would gather in the streets to listen to the music coming from within.

Some believe this was the only corner at the time where African-Americans were permitted to hang out while members of the Caucasian community were left out in the street.

The building was a “jazz mecca,” often with “double-headed” sessions of one band playing at one end of the hall while another played the same tune at the opposite end. There are reports that the music “rocked the building” on many nights.

Music at the hall drew innumerable crowds of African-Americans and Caucasians for nearly two decades. New Orleans jazz musicians and their bands were among those who played at Good Hope Hall. Many came on railroad excursions when tickets were just $0.50 one way and $1 round trip.

By the late 1930’s, Good Hope Hall was suffering after a competitor, Economy Hall, was built on Washington Street.

By World War II, jazz concerts at Good Hope Hall had ended and the building sat unused during the war years. The building was then converted into St. Paul’s Catholic Church where Mass was heard each Sunday. The building was looked after by various Freetown deacons, who also were the great-grandchildren of the original free men of color. The building remained a symbol of the close-knit friendship and neighborhood bond throughout the first half of the century.

**New life**

In the early 1950’s, Good Hope Hall no longer served as the Catholic Church as Good Hope Chapel was built directly behind it. The hall served as a place for wedding receptions and the Good Hope Society meetings.

The Good Hope Society kept the property for most of the 20th century, until May 1977, when they sold it to Patrick Prudhomme for $22,000. Prudhomme, a local businessman, worked to make the hall into a community theater once again, but his attempts failed.

In 1981, he sold the structure to a pair of young attorneys, Gary Steckler and Glenn Armento, who sought to make the building their law office.

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Kate Durio always can be found Downtown where she lives & works.