

March 4, 2024

TO: MAYOR BARBARA BUFFALOE  
RE: HENRY KIRKLIN PROPERTY

Dear Mayor Buffaloe,

The following request is in regard to the property at 107 Switzler Street once owned by Henry Kirklin, Columbia's legendary African American horticulturalist. We ask that you share this information and request with the city council and other appropriate city officials.

The property at 107 Switzler Street is for sale and we see an opportunity to preserve it through public ownership. As you may know, Kirklin was an internationally acclaimed horticulturalist. He is thought to have been the first African American to teach classes at the University of Missouri, albeit from the steps of the agriculture building because African Americans were not allowed inside academic buildings at the time.

Born into slavery in Boone County in 1858, Kirklin eventually acquired considerable property around 107 Switzler, which is where he established the gardens for his produce and plant sales. He became a remarkably successful businessman and owned most, if not all, the block adjacent to his house. His home remains on the site. Kirklin's accomplishments in the realm of horticulture and gardening earned him local and international renown, leading to a gold medal at the Jamestown Exposition in 1907 and a meeting with Booker T. Washington in 1913 during the National Negro Business League convention in Philadelphia.

The house has been a rental property for some time and has deteriorated. Our immediate concern is that the property is a desirable location for further development for rental units. Because it includes an undeveloped side yard, a new owner might see more profit potential in acquiring the property, tearing down the house and building multiple rental units.

In December 2023, HPC Chair Stephen Bybee toured the property in order to photographically document the interior and exterior. These photos are now on file with the HPC and will serve as an establishing act of preservation for the structure and its immediate environs. The Historic Preservation Commission has also provisionally nominated the Henry Kirklin home for a 2024 Most Notable Historic Property designation.

In some ways, because the house does not contain many historic artifacts and needs several improvements, the land's value takes on more significance as a historic asset. Kirklin's gardens and beds were located all around his home and would be ideal for reestablishing for public purposes (community gardening, education, etc.). We also see this as an opportunity for change that could ignite a renaissance of improvements throughout the neighborhood. Because Mr. Kirklin was not only a successful

horticulturalist and businessman but also a catalyst for learning and improvement within his community, we hope that the ultimate use of his former home and land will involve community engagement and community betterment.

As you know, few of the buildings honored on Columbia's African American Heritage Trail still exist. It would be tragic to lose this one as well. Our purpose in contacting you is to ask the city to immediately pursue acquiring 107 Switzler. There is urgency to our request because the real estate market remains so active and land for residential development in central Columbia is scarce.

With the city's acquisition, we ask that future uses be developed with an aim toward preservation, restoration and eventual public access. While several ideas have been discussed for long-term uses for the site, our group recognizes that it's current use as affordable housing may well be the best use for now (with improvements, proper maintenance and ongoing management). Changes for public uses could occur later.

We pledge to work together to provide donations to help offset the costs of acquisition and preservation.

We thank you for your immediate attention to this matter and will gladly meet to discuss it further and to provide more information about Mr. Kirklin, who was inducted into the Boone County Historical Society Hall of Fame in 2022, and about his historically important piece of property.

Gratefully,

Barbra Horrell – Co-chair, Sharp End Heritage Committee and native Boone Countian with extensive knowledge of Columbia's African American history

Vicki Russell – Co-chair, Sharp End Heritage Committee

Stephen Bybee – Presiding Chair, Columbia Historic Preservation Commission

Rev. Dr. Clyde Ruffin – Senior Pastor, Second Missionary Baptist Church

Billy Polansky – Executive Director, Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture

Chris Campbell – Executive Director, Boone County History and Culture Center

Robbie Price – AIA, LEED AP BC+D SOA Architecture