

Former slave turned businessman celebrated in Mount Holly

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Descendants of a former slave who has become an increasingly popular historical figure in Mount Holly were on hand to see his legacy recognized by city leaders Monday.

The story of Ransom Hunter, who is strongly believed to be the first freed slave to have owned property in Gaston County, has spread to a larger and continually expanding audience since 2014. His accomplishments went unknown to people outside his family for years, due in part to the limitations of public records, as well as society's past tendencies to gloss over black history.

But efforts of surviving relatives and a local African-American historian have contributed to more people learning about Hunter's achievements. And in May, the Mount Holly Historical Society paid tribute to Hunter's life by naming him their 2017 Historic Person of the Year. It was the inaugural presentation of what will be an annual award, and the society noted that Hunter was a freed slave turned farmer and business owner, who served on the public school committee and founded two churches that are still in existence today.

From slave to baron

After he was freed from slavery sometime around 1860, Hunter acquired land around the corner of Hawthorne Street and West Glendale Avenue in Mount Holly. He had learned useful skills such as carpentry and blacksmithing while in bondage, and he realized that rocky land was along a critical travel route between Mount Holly and Stanley. So he established a popular livery stable where travelers could have their horses shod.

At a time when no other blacks were known to own land, Hunter built a large house near the intersection, and successfully cultivated the unforgiving terrain there to include cornfields and groves of pecan, peach and apple trees, as well as a farm with cows and chickens. The hub that he established led other businesses and amenities to spring up along Hawthorne Street, as African-Americans found a place they felt welcome.

Hunter eventually used his profits to buy more land, eventually selling it for profit as Mount Holly was incorporated and became a thriving riverside city. He sold land to A.P. Rhyne that allowed for the construction of the area's first cotton mill in 1875, and he had a hand in numerous transactions involving property that now houses well known buildings downtown.

"Ransom Hunter was there before there even was a Mount Holly," said Wilson.

Public recognition

The award was first announced and celebrated during the 67th Annual Mount Holly Community Awards Dinner on May 4. None of Hunter's descendants were in attendance at that event, and after several of them inquired about that oversight, the city invited them to the July 10 council meeting for a public recognition that will be on the official record.

Eric Wilson, a 58-year-old great-grandson of Hunter, was one of eight descendants who were able to attend Monday's gathering. They were joined by Mount Holly Historical Society President Mary Smith, who spoke briefly about the reason the society's board of directors selected Hunter for the honor.

Hunter had numerous children and grandchildren, and two of the latter are his oldest surviving relatives today, though neither of them were able to make it to the meeting Monday. But Wilson, who grew up in Mount Holly and now works as a Greensboro architect, said he and the others who did attend appreciate the acknowledgement.

"The family and I are grateful for what they have done," he said.

In the future, Wilson said he would like to see the city go several steps further in paying tribute to Hunter's contributions. That would include acknowledging that Hunter owned and sold real estate that was eventually developed into much of present-day, downtown Mount Holly. Hunter's descendants also want the city to follow through on a promise to build a public park on the corner lot where Hunter's family home once stood at the corner of Hawthorne Street and West Glendale Avenue.

"We're patient," said Wilson. "But we're eager to see more recognition."

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