

**'Everything We Needed'**  
**ELAINA SAUBER**

**HARRISONBURG - The vision of Harrisonburg's Newtown in the 1930s and '40s is still clear in Doris Harper Allen's mind, with sprawling vegetable gardens, endless fruit trees and a tremendous sense of safety and community.**

**The 87-year-old Harrisonburg native spent more than a year writing her memoir, "The Way It Was, Not The Way It Is," which describes her upbringing in the historically black neighborhood of Newtown - one that was rich with joy and simplicity, but fractured by segregation.**

**With an exceptional memory, Allen has long found comfort in writing to immortalize bits of history she's remembered over the decades. In December 2013, she decided to write a book about her life; and this week, it was published.**

**'Everything We Needed'**

**Newtown served as home to most of the city's black community after many freed slaves settled there following the Civil War. Today, the area is part of what is now considered Harrisonburg's Northeast neighborhood.**

**But, in the 1950s, much of Newtown was dismantled as part of the national urban renewal initiative.**

**"Everything we needed was right there; we thought our colored school and three colored churches were all we needed," she said, "and that's where we stayed."**

**The neighborhood was safe, she said, and children always traveled in groups. The police who patrolled Newtown "were friendly and nice, and we knew them by name," she added.**

**But it was the neighborhood's three churches - Bethel African Methodist Episcopal, John Wesley Methodist Episcopal (now United Methodist) and First Baptist - that served as the essential meeting spots for residents.**

**"[Church] was our source of information, our day in court, our togetherness, our happy and sad hours, our family hours and our fellowship," she wrote.**

**'People Didn't Complain'**

**Children rarely went hungry in Newtown, as nearly every home had fruit trees or gardens on the property. Families commonly raised chickens, goats, cows and hogs, despite the close proximity of houses.**

**"We were poor and didn't know it," Allen wrote, adding that no one in Newtown she knew of in the 1930s and 1940s had electricity, and indoor plumbing was a luxury. Her family lived on Effinger Street, tucked between East Gay and Kelley Streets.**

**While Allen's parents, Leo and Julia Howard, owned their home, most of the other 27 houses on Effinger were rented, and any maintenance complaints went largely ignored by landlords.**

**"People didn't complain. If they did, they'd still have to fix it - people just accepted it," she said.**

**The Howards taught Allen and her five siblings to never protest any prejudice they experienced. Manners were of the utmost importance, and parents passed down the rules of segregation to their children.**

**In addition to segregated public restrooms and water fountains, blacks were not permitted to browse white department stores, try on clothing, or return merchandise.**

**"You got what you wanted and you had to get out immediately," Allen said.**

**"If you tried on a pair of shoes and they were too small, you couldn't bring them back."**

**While employment was easy to find, blacks were limited to jobs as maids, cooks, waiters, chauffeurs, garbage collectors and shoe shiners. A Coca Cola bottling company stood at the corner of Main and Gay streets, but did not hire blacks, Allen wrote.**

**With the nearest black college 160 miles away in Petersburg, most African-American students around Harrisonburg had little opportunity to pursue higher education.**

**Allen, who attended Effinger Street School as a child, was taught by Lucy Simms in the last months before her death in 1934. Simms, born into slavery in Harrisonburg in the 1850s, would teach the city's black students for a half-century, becoming one of the area's most famed educators in the process.**

**In 1939, Harrisonburg's black students moved to the Lucy F. Simms School at 620 Simms Ave. Allen graduated high school in 1945, and married her first husband, Robert Harper, in 1950.**

**One day in 1950, two men with Harrisonburg's urban renewal project knocked on the Howards' door and informed the family that new roads and businesses were being built through Newtown, and their home would be bulldozed.**

**Allen's parents cried, but like all Newtown residents, they had no option but to comply.**

**With the help of a lawyer the Howards cleaned for, they were able to buy another house from a black doctor at 237 Broad St. Harrisonburg's redevelopment, fueled by the Housing Act of 1949 and heralded by city officials as a way to remove blight, ultimately displaced more than 200 Newtown families.**

**But some looked forward to the city's plans to build a new housing complex for Newtown residents because "there would be indoor water, electricity and a new way of living," Allen said, as outdoor toilets and no indoor heating was still common.**

**'A Long Time Coming'**

**On Aug. 28, 1963, Allen and her son, Bob, sat quietly in the back of a bus en route to Washington, D.C., for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. It was during this iconic civil rights event in which Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous "I Have A Dream" speech.**

**But change in Harrisonburg, as elsewhere in the nation, was easier said than done.**

**"We were happy about it, but we couldn't do the things Martin said," Allen explained, as it would put their already limited employment at risk.**

**In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court, through its Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka ruling, found that the legal segregation of public schools was unconstitutional. While that decision paved the way for integration, school systems throughout the United States remained segregated well into the 1970s.**

**Harrisonburg High School didn't admit its first black students until 1965, and the Lucy F. Simms School remained open until the next year.**

**"We were reading about elsewhere, wondering when Virginia would [integrate]," Allen said. "It was a long time coming."**

**Allen's other two children, Belinda and Bill, graduated from HHS in 1968 and '69, later going off to college and the military.**

**By 1969, she moved with Bob to Huntington, W.Va., where Allen had family and she said blacks had better job opportunities.**

**"I could get a job as a secretary clerk. All I had to do was take a course, and we didn't have that in Virginia," she said. "It was just altogether different. I stayed there 33 years."**

**But by 2000, she was ready to come home, and now resides at Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community in Harrisonburg, just a couple of miles yet a world away from where she grew up.**

**"I'm happy, not bitter. I've learned a lot, I've taught a lot and have helped others, so I feel comfortable," she said.**

**She's pleased with how far the Friendly City has come since her youth - but will always remember the way it was.**

**Want A Copy?**

**Copies of Doris Allen's memoir, "The Way It Was, Not The Way It Is," can be found at Red Front Supermarket, 677 Chicago Ave., Harrisonburg.**

**Allen also will be selling signed copies of her book at the Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center, 620 Simms Ave., during the following events:**

**The Soul Food Dinner and Art Show: Feb. 28, from 5 to 8 p.m.**

**Zenda Homecoming: rescheduled for March 14 at 4 p.m.**

**The book costs \$15. For more information, contact Allen at [dhowardharper@gmail.com](mailto:dhowardharper@gmail.com).**

**Contact Elaina Sauber at 574-6278 or [esauber@dnronline.com](mailto:esauber@dnronline.com)**

**Doris Harper Allen of Harrisonburg holds her memoir "The Way It Was, Not The Way It Is" on Wednesday. The 87-year-old city native spent more than a year writing the book which describes growing up in the historically black neighborhood of Newtown. (Photos by Nikki Fox / DN-R)**

**Doris Harper Allen of Harrisonburg talks about her memoir "The Way It Was, Not The Way It Is" on Wednesday.**

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