

CITY OF HIGH POINT

AGENDA ITEM



Title: Historic Marker Request
(Rev. Benjamin Elton Cox)

From: Lee Burnette, Planning & Development
Director

Meeting Date: July 15, 2019

Public Hearing: No

Advertising Date: NA

Advertised By: NA

Attachments: A. Historic Preservation Commission Recommendation
B. Staff Report

PURPOSE:

A request by The Southwest Renewal Foundation of High Point, Inc. for approval of a historic marker to recognize Rev. Benjamin Elton Cox to be located ½ block west of the former site of Pilgrim Congregational Church in the 400 block of W. Taylor Avenue.

BACKGROUND:

The Historic Preservation Commission is designated by the Historic Marker Policy to review and evaluate all proposed roadside historic markers prior to consideration by City Council. This roadside historic marker request is the seventh request under the City's roadside Historic Marker Policy.

BUDGET IMPACT:

The Southwest Renewal Foundation of High Point, Inc. is purchasing this marker.

RECOMMENDATION / ACTION REQUESTED:

- A. Staff recommended approval of this request as outlined in the attached staff report.
- B. On June 12, 2019, the Historic Preservation Commission recommended approval of this request by a vote of 7-0.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION

Historic Marker Request recognizing Reverend Benjamin Elton Cox

At its June 12, 2019 meeting, the Historic Preservation Commission reviewed a request for a historic marker recognizing Rev. Benjamin Elton Cox. Eight members of the Commission were present. Mr. David Fencl, Senior Planner, presented the request and recommended approval of the request as outlined in the staff report.

The Historic Preservation Commission determined that the proposed marker met the minimum evaluation criteria of the Historic Marker Policy, which includes the individual's contribution that is the subject of the request occurred at least 50 years before the request, no public or private markers recognize Rev. Benjamin Elton Cox individually, and the location of the proposed marker is within the corporate limits. The Historic Preservation Commission also determined that the proposed marker will be consistent in appearance with several existing City markers and recommended approval of the historic marker request, as recommended by staff, by a vote of 7-0. Julius Clark abstained from voting but indicated that he supported the request.



To: Historic Preservation Commission Members

From: David Fencl, Senior Planner

Meeting Date: June 12, 2019

Subject: Rev. Benjamin Elton Cox Historic Marker Request by the Southwest Renewal Foundation of High Point, Inc.

PURPOSE:

The Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) is designated by the Historic Marker Policy to review all requests for historic markers to be located in public street rights-of-way. The HPC shall first determine whether the request meets the minimum evaluation criteria outlined in the policy, and if the request meets the minimum evaluation criteria, the HPC shall then evaluate the request based on relevant criteria as determined by the HPC.

The following criteria must be present and factually correct in order for the HPC to review any request for placement of a marker:

1. Any site or event requested to be recognized must be at least 50 years old and for any individual to be recognized with a marker, the individual's contribution that is the subject of the request must have occurred as least 50 years before the request.
2. There may not be any current markers, public or private, currently recognizing the site or event within the City of High Point.
3. The location requested to be recognized must be within the corporate limits of the City of High Point and within public view.

Requests for markers shall be evaluated based on relevant criteria as determined by the HPC, including the following:

1. Is each historical claim by the applicant presenting the request supported by documentation or other evidence of the claim's validity? Documentation should consist of primary sources that were created at the time of the event and may include tax records, deeds, newspaper articles, meeting minutes, photographs, etc. Secondary sources may be submitted to help provide context and justify the significance of the event, person, or location.
2. In an attempt to avoid repetition and promote diversity in the recognitions, is the requested site, event or individual closely related to a site, event or individual accomplishment that has already been recognized with a Marker?
3. Has the site, event, or individual contribution maintained its significance over time?

4. Is the site, event or individual recognized outside of High Point at state wide, national, or international levels?
5. Marker proposals will be rejected if the Commission cannot authenticate or verify the historical information to its satisfaction. The Commission shall make the deciding rule if there is conflicting evidence.

STAFF ANALYSIS:

According to the information supplied with this Historic Marker Request, Reverend Benjamin Elton Cox was an American nonviolent civil rights activist and one of the original 13 Freedom Riders, who pastored Pilgrim Congregational Church from 1958-1968 in the historic Southside Neighborhood. The marker is proposed to be erected ½ block west of the former site of Pilgrim Congregational Church in the 400 block of W. Taylor Avenue in front of the new one-acre Botanical Woodland Teaching Garden alongside the Southwest High Point Heritage Greenway.

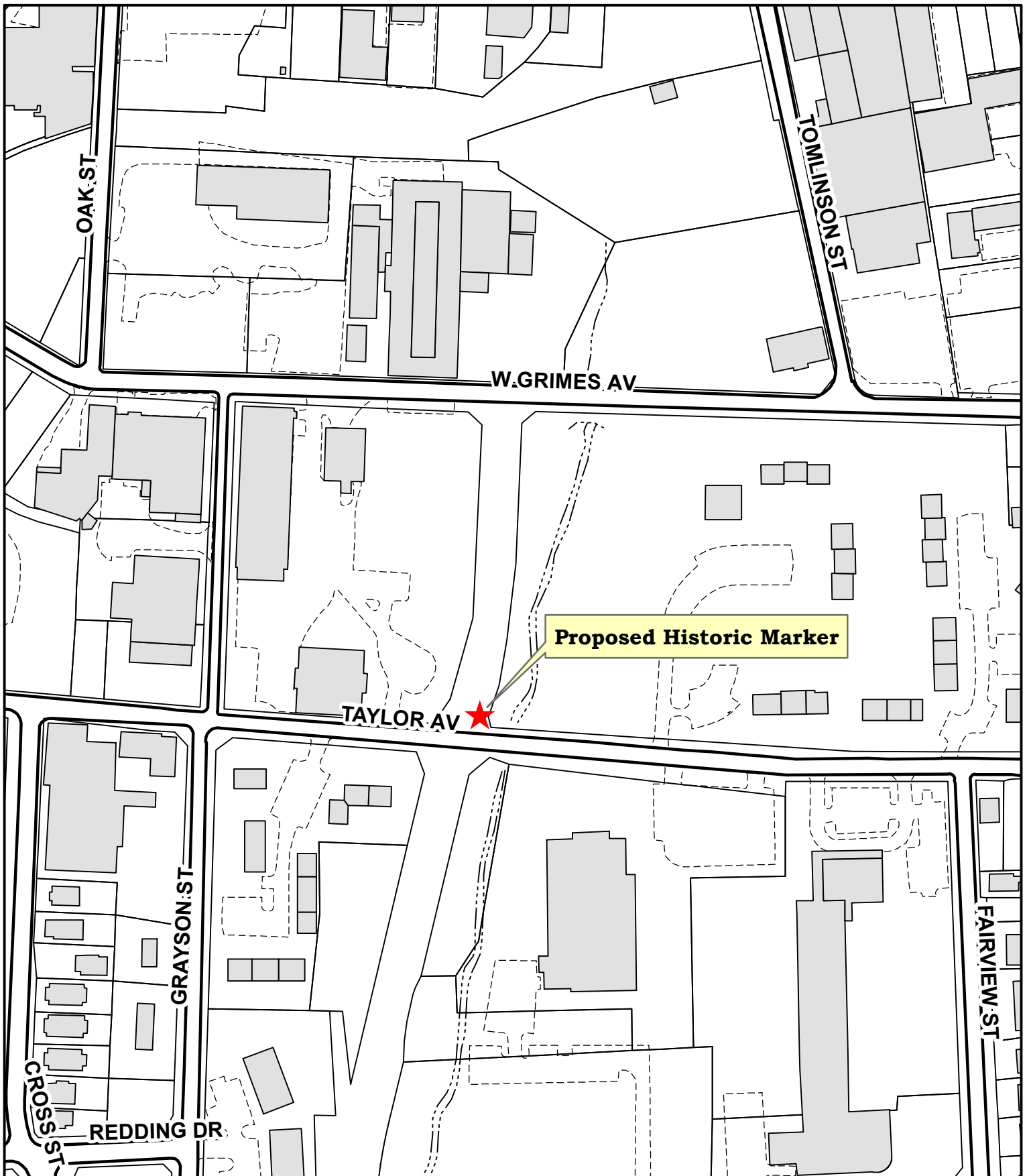
Rev. Cox was one of the most important national nonviolent Civil Rights leaders during his decade in High Point as one of the original 13 Freedom Riders who protested segregation on Interstate buses in the South. Rev. Cox trained William Penn High School students in the methods of nonviolence helping them organize the first high school sit-in in the United States at the High Point Woolworths on February 11, 1960. Rev. Cox also organized the first High Point Chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and served as NC and National Field Secretaries for both CORE and the NAACP.

Staff believes that this historic marker request meets the minimum evaluation criteria due to the period of Rev. Cox's activity in High Point being more than 50 years ago, there are no other historic markers recognizing Rev. Cox individually in High Point and the marker's proposed location is within the City of High Point and within public view. The applicant has submitted information that documents Rev. Cox's significance at the local, state and national level.

RECOMMENDATION / ACTION REQUESTED:

Staff recommends the Historic Preservation Commission recommend approval of the historic marker request recognizing Reverend Benjamin Elton Cox. This historic marker request meets the minimum evaluation criteria, and with the documentation submitted, staff believes this request meets all of the relevant evaluation criteria of the Historic Marker Policy.

Attachments: Rev. Benjamin Elton Cox Historic Marker Location Map
Historic Marker Request and Documentation



HISTORIC MARKER REQUEST

400 Block of West Taylor Avenue
Reverend Benjamin E. Cox



Proposed marker location

Planning & Development
Department

City of High Point



Scale: 1"=200'

City of High Point Historic Marker Request

Request

Create and place a cast aluminum historic marker [pictures below], designed according to the City of High Point Historic Marker Policy, manufactured by Sewah, Inc., the company who manufactures the NC State Highway Historic markers, to recognize the **Reverend Benjamin Elton Cox (1931-2011)**, an American nonviolent civil rights activist and one of the original 13 Freedom Riders, who pastored **Pilgrim Congregational Church** from 1958-1968 in the historic African American Southside Neighborhood. The marker will be placed ½ block west of Pilgrim Congregational Church (now gone) in the 400 block of W. Taylor Avenue in the new one-acre *Botanical Woodland Teaching Garden* alongside the *SW High Point Heritage Greenway*. The Southwest Renewal Foundation of High Point, Inc. will pay for the marker. The City of High Point Historic Marker Policy requires a black background with silver lettering and the City of High Point seal at the top.



The first historic marker approved under the current City of High Point Historic Marker Policy was installed July 4, 2016 in Highland Cotton Mills Village at S. Elm and Mill Avenue, near the future Southwest High Point Heritage Greenway, funded by the Southwest Renewal Foundation of High Point, Inc. in partnership with the Marion Stedman Covington Foundation, Highland Village Neighborhood Association and City of High Point.



City Transfer and Storage Company Historic Marker was unveiled February 14, 2019 at the trailhead of the future Southwest High Point Heritage Greenway in the 100 block of W. High Avenue at the company's original site in partnership with City Transfer and Storage Company, Southwest Renewal Foundation and the City of High Point.

Evaluation Criteria

Documentation/Primary Sources for Site: The early site of Pilgrim Congregational Church is confirmed through City of High Point Directories located in the NC Heritage Room of the High Point Public Library. Local historian and documentarian Phyllis Bridges describes the church as starting in 1890 in a store front on S. Main Street by the Rev. Zachariah Simmons and moving to W. Taylor Avenue at Fairview Street in 1895. (email Phyllis Bridges to Dorothy Darr, February 27, 2017) High Point City Directories confirm the site of the church on W. Taylor at Fairview from 1902 through 1967. (Please see also a seven-minute documentary on the history of the church https://youtu.be/8_7wyX2texk submitted by Bridges and current pastor of the church, the Reverend Angela Roberson.)

Documentation/Primary Sources for Rev. Cox: Documentation for the historical significance of the Rev. Benjamin Elton Cox can be found in well over 10 different primary sources which puts this civil rights history into the accepted record of public information. (For a more detailed description of Cox's civil rights activities on the state and national scene during his decade in High Point, please see appendices.) Cox was one of the most important national nonviolent civil rights leaders of the early 1960s. His work as a nonviolent Civil Rights leader during this decade of 1958-1968 in High Point is unapparelled.

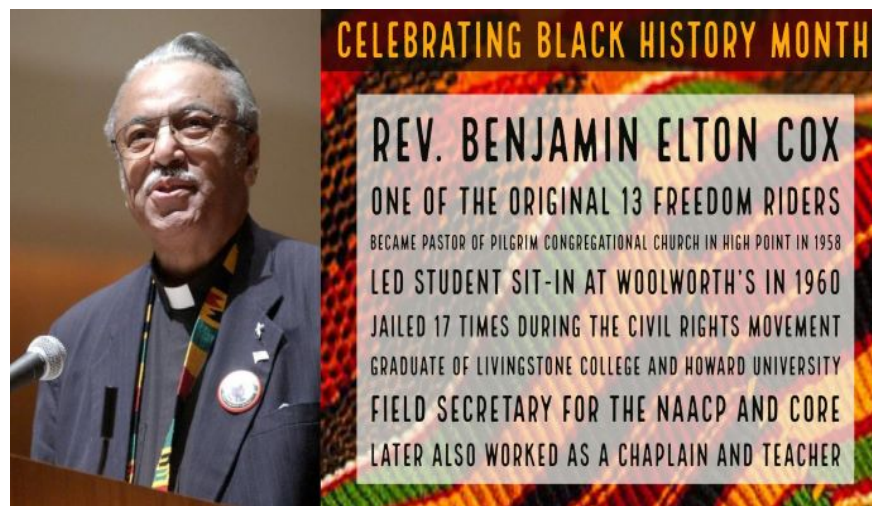
Rev. Cox moved to High Point in 1958 as the young pastor of Pilgrim Congregational Church in the Southside Neighborhood after graduating from Livingstone College in Salisbury NC and Howard University School of Divinity. He served on the High Point School Desegregation Committee in 1959. In 1960, Cox was asked to train William Penn High School students in the methods of nonviolence helping them organize the first high school student sit-in in the US. The following year, in May 1961, he became one of the original 13 Freedom Riders. He organized the first High Point Chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and served as NC and National Field Secretaries for both CORE and the NAACP. As CORE moved towards militancy in the mid-1960s, Cox remained loyal to nonviolence as exemplified by Martin Luther King (who was assassinated in 1968).

Rev. Cox's reputation alone as one of the Original 13 Freedom Riders in 1961 while Pastor of the Pilgrim Congregational Church in High Point deserves recognition in High Point's Southside Neighborhood with an historic marker. That year, James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality recruited Cox to join the first Freedom Ride to protest segregation on interstate buses. The Supreme Court had ruled that segregated public buses were unconstitutional, but southern states had ignored the rulings and the federal government did nothing to enforce them. The first Freedom Ride left Washington, D.C. in May, 1961, and met with considerable resistance and violence along the way. Cox escaped by accident the burning of the first bus, because he returned home to High Point to preach to his congregation on Mother's Day. Despite this violence, he returned to Alabama to finish the Freedom Ride. Over the years, Cox was arrested seventeen times. One arrest led to a Supreme Court case, Cox v. Louisiana, that declared "breach of peace" laws unconstitutional.

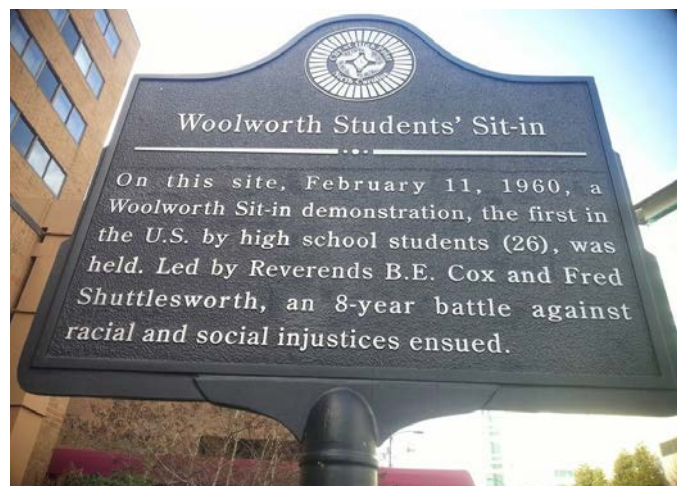
Currently there is no recognition of Cox in the Southside Neighborhood. His leadership is mentioned on a historic marker in east High Point commemorating the sit-ins. But no trace remains of Cox in the Southside Neighborhood where he served as a pastor and led the campaign for civil rights both here in North Carolina and across the nation.

References to Cox's Civil Rights leadership in High Point include:

- A) The City of High Point celebrated Rev. Cox on its website one year in recognition of Black History Month:



- B) The Woolworth Student Sit-In historic marker in east High Point on S. Wrenn lists Cox as a leader in the nonviolent civil rights protest by William Penn High School Students February 11, 1960.



C). The *African American Heritage Guide*, published by the High Point Convention and Visitors Bureau, recognizes the Rev. Benjamin Elton Cox in the 1960s as “a leader in the black community of High Point...bringing a sense of dignity, worth, unity, and fearlessness to his people. He organized groups to encourage voter registration and to secure entrance and service in all public places for African Americans.”

Site and Its Significance: The site of Pilgrim Congregational Church throughout much of the 20th Century was located in the historic, mixed-use, commercial blocks of W. Taylor Avenue and Fairview Streets between W. Green and S. Elm Streets in the traditional African American Southside Neighborhood in southwest High Point. This commercial district was made up of a number of churches, including Pilgrim Congregational Church, Fairview Elementary School, cafes, groceries, a sweet shop, dry cleaner, billiard room, barber shop, and other small local businesses which were destroyed in the late 1960s during urban renewal in High Point. A large highway was planned down the middle of the Southside Neighborhood dividing the community in two. Fairview Elementary School was rebuilt on its current site, but these local, small local businesses never returned. Rev. Cox left High Point in 1968 and Pilgrim Congregational Church moved across town to a new site, its current location on the east side at 401 Gordon Road.

Two major highways dividing High Point’s African American neighborhoods were planned and built on the east side during urban renewal starting in the late 1960s-- Kivett Drive (now Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.) and College Drive (now University Parkway). But the large highway planned to divide the historic African American Southside Neighborhood was never constructed. Its dedicated right-of-way running from W. Grimes south is now being transformed into the Southside Greenway--Phase 3 of the *SW High Point Heritage Greenway* (please see map attached). This phase will connect Goldston and Southside Parks, cross W. Taylor, and run north from W. Grimes, via Tomlinson to W. Russell to connect to Phase 1 of the greenway. (Phase 1 connects to the city’s mass transit facilities—Amtrak Station, Hi-Tran and PART bus terminals--at W. High and S. Main Streets.)

The public site chosen for the **Rev. Benjamin Elton Cox Historic Marker** is on Phase 3 of the greenway, ½ block west of the original site of Pilgrim Congregational Church, at the entrance to the new \$26,000 *Botanical Woodland Teaching Garden*

now under construction. The garden features 76 new trees and shrubs, 3 figure eight gravel walking paths, and a new 10-foot wide asphalt greenway alongside the woodland and Richland Creek, as well as benches, signage identifying the trees, and public art. The woodland is diagonally across from Southside Park and Recreation Center, Fairview Elementary School, and Southside Boys and Girls Club.

The site to be recognized is over 50 years old. The person to be commemorated carries local, state, and national significance as an American Civil Rights activist and one of the original 13 Freedom Riders. The location is within the corporate limits of the City of High Point. The site is in public view along a state road (W. Taylor Avenue) and the *Southwest High Point Heritage Greenway*.

Partners with the Southwest Renewal Foundation who sponsored the woodland garden and helped with this historic marker include: NC Urban Forest Council, NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund, Guilford County Soil and Water Conservation District, City of High Point, Deal Foundation, St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Episcopal Diocese of NC, Hayden-Harman Foundation, Piedmont Triad Regional Council, High Point Arts Council, High Point Convention and Visitors Bureau, Sandy Dunbeck (in memory of her mother, a nature artist), Kao Specialties Americas, TAG, and the 400th Commemoration Committee of African Americans in the US.

Marker Inscription

Rev. Benjamin Elton Cox (1931-2011)

An American nonviolent Civil Rights activist and preacher, one of the original 13 Freedom Riders, and Pastor 1958-1968 of Pilgrim Congregational Church located originally ½ block east.

*Erected by the Southwest Renewal Foundation of High Point, Inc.,
Civic Partners, and City of High Point
Dedicated October 11, 2019*

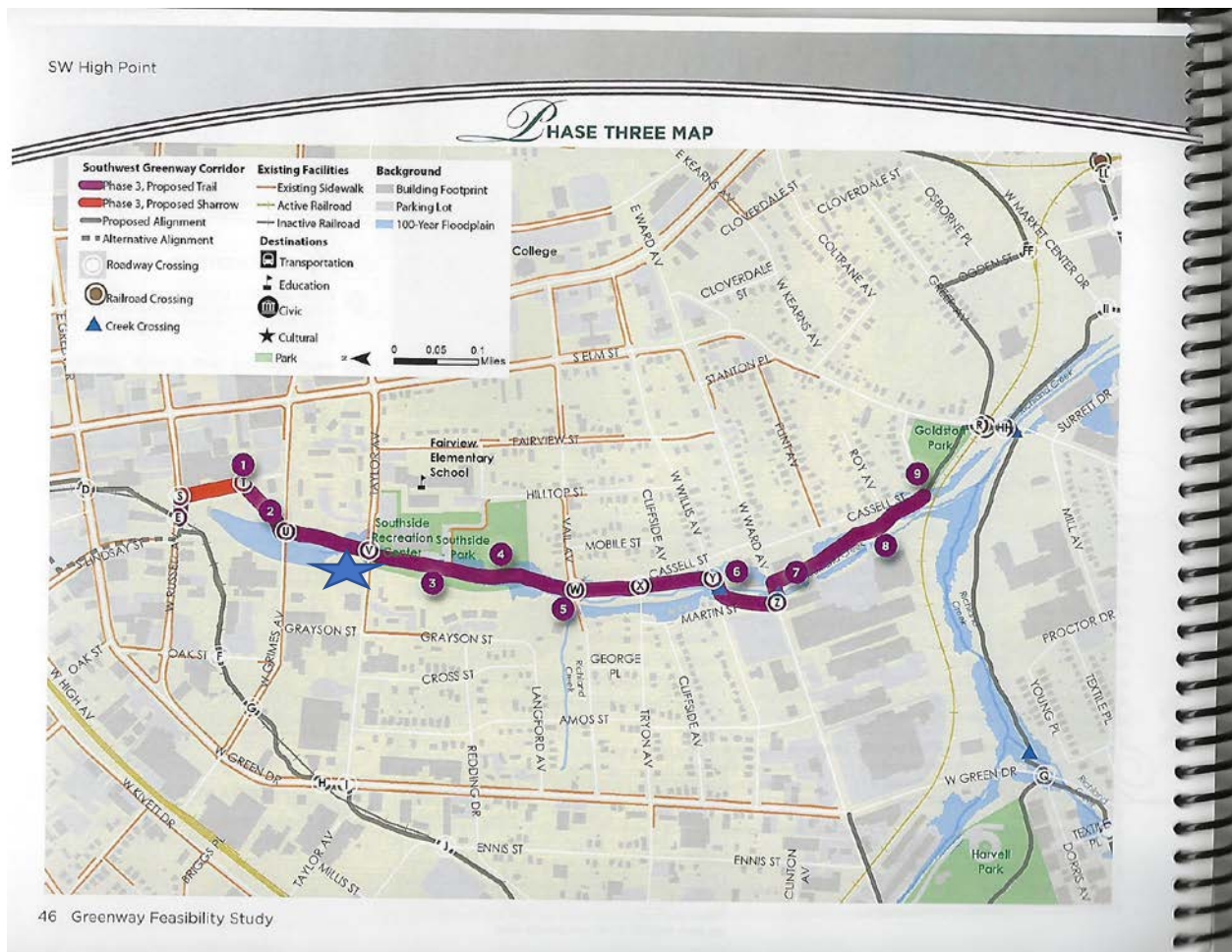
Dorothy Darr, Director, Southwest Renewal Foundation of High Point, Inc.,
dorothy1@northstate.net or info@highpointssouthwest.org, 336-887-5130
www.highpointssouthwest.org



APPENDIX A: PHASE 3 OF THE SW HIGH POINT GREENWAY



MARKER LOCATION



APPENDIX B: Civil Rights Digital Library

<http://library.uncg.edu/depts/archives/civrights/detail-bio.asp?bio=33>

Cox, B. Elton (Benjamin Elton)

Biography:

"Reverend Benjamin Elton Cox Sr. was born on June 19, 1931, in Whiteville, Tennessee, the seventh of sixteen children. He first participated in civil rights demonstrations at the age of fifteen, protesting outside of a A&W Root Beer drive-in restaurant in Kankakee, Illinois. At the age of sixteen, Cox served as national field secretary for the NAACP, organizing youth chapters. Although Cox dropped out of high school to help his family financially by shining shoes, in 1950 he was able to graduate from Joliet Township High School, an integrated school in Joliet, Illinois. Cox then attended Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina, and graduated in 1954 with a major in sociology and a minor in history. After college, he attended Hood Seminary in Salisbury, but he finished his theological studies in 1957 at the Howard University School of Religion. Cox moved to High Point, North Carolina, to become pastor of Pilgrim Congregational Church, and quickly became active in the community by serving on the High Point School Desegregation Committee in 1959. After the Greensboro Four's sit-in at Woolworth's in 1960, he organized a group of local high school students to participate in the Greensboro demonstrations. In 1961, Cox founded the first Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) chapter in High Point and was hired as the North Carolina Field Secretary. Following a meeting with CORE director James Farmer, Cox went to Washington, D.C., for training in nonviolent response to harassment and mistreatment. Cox was one of the thirteen original Freedom Riders in May 1961 and was involved in the Freedom Highways workshop held at Bennett College in July 1962. In December 1961, Cox went to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and was arrested while leading a peaceful demonstration; in the resulting case, *Cox v. Louisiana*, the U.S. Supreme Court declared this use of the state's "breach of peace" law unconstitutional. Cox was also instrumental in getting many North Carolina public establishments to integrate, notably McDonald's franchises. Cox's involvement with the civil rights movement resulted in seventeen arrests and multiple death threats. He resigned from CORE in 1965 when black power advocates came to dominate the organization, and later moved to Jackson, Tennessee." --From Greensboro VOICES Biography, "Cox, Ben Elton ("Ben"), Sr." accessed 8 October 2008,

Preaching and the civil rights movement

After his ordination in 1958, he (Cox) became a pastor of Pilgrim Congregational Church in [High Point, North Carolina](#).^[2]

He was a popular preacher in the area and received the name "Belton' Elton" during the course of his freedom rides.^[2]

Cox quickly gained a reputation for being a strong supporter of the [civil rights movement](#). He started desegregation efforts in local schools, serving as an advisor for NAACP Youth Council, and participating as an observer for the [American Friends Service Committee](#).^[2]

After the [Greensboro sit-ins](#) in February 1960, he encouraged local students to participate in their own sit-ins, under the condition they stay non-violent.^[2]

Cox views on being non-violent were very strong. He soon caught the attention of the national [NAACP](#) leaders, including [James Farmer](#). Farmer hired Cox to help stump the south.^[2]

Shortly after Farmer hired Cox, Farmer became executive director of [CORE](#). Cox soon received a call from Farmer, wanting to know if Cox would be willing to join the [Freedom Rides](#) due to his background as being an ordained minister. Cox agreed and showed up in Washington wearing formal clothing, in case anyone was questioning if the Ride lacked divine guidance.^[2]

Cox was one of one of the two ordained ministers, the other being J. Metz Rollins from [Nashville](#). Rollins soon had to bow out leaving Cox as the only preacher and [John Lewis](#) as the sole representative of the Nashville movement.^[2]

To parallel the efforts of CORE field secretaries, Cox traveled across the South during the Spring and Summer of 1960. Cox was spreading the gospel of nonviolence to students. Many student activists were accepting of the message. Despite the many instances of white supremacists provoking violence, the sit-ins continued without a violent race war that many predicted would occur. ^[2]

In the summer of 1961, he participated in the [CORE](#) Freedom Ride from Missouri to Louisiana on July 8-15 1961. He defended his actions in the [Freedom Ride](#) by stating in the film [Freedom Riders](#), "If men like [Governor Patterson](#) [of Alabama] and [Governor Barnett](#) of Mississippi... would carry out the good oath of their office, then people would be able to travel in this country. Then people in [Tel Aviv](#) and [Moscow](#) and [London](#) would not pick up their newspaper for breakfast and realize that America is not living up to the dream of [liberty and justice for all](#)."^[3]

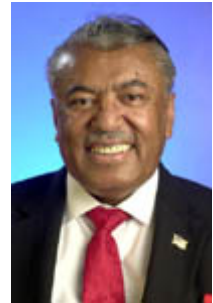
Cox was arrested seventeen times over the course of a few decades. ^[3]

APPENDIX D: **Freedom Rider endured jail, shootings, attacks to get out black vote**

The Jackson Sun

Before Ben Elton Cox Sr. left to join the Freedom Riders in 1961, he wrote his will and sent it to his parents.

Though they were trained to be nonviolent, the riders were well aware of the violence and death threats that would follow them as long as they were part of the civil rights movement.



Ben Cox

As a Freedom Rider, Cox said he got accustomed to driving at night in order to cover a lot of ground and avoid racist attacks. Driving at high speeds on dark Southern roads, Cox said he would tell his colleagues: "We can't outrun bullets."

Cox was no stranger to bullets.

"I've been in 37 states for civil rights and in jail 17 times. My life has been threatened 87 times in writing," Cox said. "I've been shot at trying to get people to register to vote."

During a voter education ride, Cox and others stayed the night at a house in Tallahassee, Fla., when shots were fired into the home. "Three of the original Freedom Riders went into hiding" because of the constant threats and have never been heard from since, Cox said.

Cox, a native of Whiteville, started preaching at 17 and joined the civil rights movement when he was 26.

Now 69 and living in Jackson, Cox said it's a shame that some people today still don't vote.

"The only equality we have in this day and age is the ballot," said Cox, a teacher in the Jackson-Madison County school system.

As early as age 5, Cox knew that things were unequal.

"Before we went downtown, our parents gave us a lecture. You could not look white people straight in the eye. You must make sure you say, 'Yes sir' and 'Yes ma'am.' If whites were walking on the sidewalk, you had to get off the sidewalk to let them pass," Cox said. "As a child, I thought that was awful."

Cox grew up to become a soldier on the battlefield for civil rights. He stayed in the Lorraine Motel in Memphis shortly before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on a motel balcony.

Cox had several opportunities to meet with King. To this day, he marvels at the magnitude of the man.

"I was with Dr. King four times. If you were in his presence, you would melt like butter on a hot piece of toast."

APPENDIX E

BENJAMIN ELTON COX OBITUARY, The Jackson Advocate (excerpts):

<http://www.jacksonadvocateonline.com/rev-ben-elton-cox-sr-freedom-rider-passes-at-79/>

“The Rev. Ben Elton Cox, Sr., the veteran Freedom Rider who survived an Amiston, Ala., bus burning to lead four others on a Trailways bus ride to integrate travel facilities in Little Rock, has died—a month before the 50th Anniversary of the Arkansas Reunion....”

“As a member of the NAACP, he once said, ‘I’ve been in 37 states for civil rights and in jail 17 times. My life has been threatened 87 times in writing,’ cox said. “I’ve been shot at trying to get people to register to vote.”

“He led a life dedicated to the pursuit of freedom and equality,” said Dr. John A. Kirk, chair of UALR’s Department of History, and a scholar of civil rights history. ‘As well as leading the Freedom Rides in Little Rock, Rv. Cox was one of the original 13 riders on the very first Congress for Racial Equality Freedom Ride in 1961, I had the pleasure and privilege of speaking with him at a conference at the University of Florida a number of years ago. He was a fine, upstanding and humble man whose presence will be sorely missed.’

APPENDIX F: Various quotes and anecdotes:

Speaking on a panel with Freedom Riders at the University of Illinois at Urbana, Cox told his audience, "You're looking at a man who's an ordained minister, preaching since I was 17. "I'm 72. And since I realized what segregation was at the age of four, I have never had one day of total freedom in the land of the free and the home of the brave. I've either been discriminated against, or heard about it or listened to other confessions about it. But yet, I love America. As far as I'm concerned, it's the greatest country on earth. If you find one better, call me collect."

Ben Cox Jr. said his father spoke little about his role in the Freedom Rides and the civil rights movement. The younger Cox believes his father wanted to shield him from the darker things he'd experienced.

Dorothy Kendall Kearns, who knew Cox personally during his time in High Point, says the only reason he escaped the burning of the bus during the first Freedom Ride, was that he came home to High Point to preach to his congregation on Mother’s Day. Despite the violence, he returned to Alabama and completed the ride.