

Interview with Travis Gilbert, director of the Historic Wilmington Foundation, August 2, 2022

KS Brewer

So, just for the sake of the record, would you mind stating your name and your role here?

Travis Gilbert

Yeah. I'm Travis Gilbert, Executive Director of Historic Wilmington Foundation.

KS Brewer

Great. Thank you. And we were talking about the lodges, the different Masonic lodges here and you were saying something really interesting about the three White Masonic lodges that are in this area, right, versus Giblem lodge as a Black Masonic Lodge.

Travis Gilbert

Yeah, it's a Prince Hall Masonic Lodge. So it's a traditionally Black Masonic Lodge. There were two established in North Carolina, following the end of the Civil War, and they're kind of sister lodges in a sense. The first is King Solomon Lodge, in New Bern, and then Giblem lodge here in Wilmington and that's why Giblem has the number two, King Solomon has the number one. And they were I think conditions in eastern North Carolina were ripe for the development of these Black paternal organizations and benevolent organizations for women at the time, due to quite a substantial, Black professional class that had its roots in trades and skilled crafts and artisans. And then this influx of folks, White and Black, that were residents in northern cities, and were already exposed to organizations like the Prince Hall Masons in Philadelphia, and Boston so forth. So after the war when these sometimes Union veterans or business owners settled in New Bern, or Wilmington, they kind of added that ingredient to the mix that formed these two lodges.

I think it's quite a statement when you look at the three white Masonic lodges in Downtown Wilmington, and how vibrant and relevant they are, how they have been maintained and preserved for decades, and then you see Giblem and the inequity in historic preservation is in front and center because Giblem is, I would argue it's yeah, it's captured in time. It's frozen in time, sometime in the mid 20th century. Its use as a community center its use as a commercial space stopped and then once the community becomes less engaged with the site, once the income stream from lease commercial space dries up, you can see the kind of the depth of the building and so forth. But the but the other three white lodges - the first one is right down the street here, it's actually the Children's Museum. And then the second that replaced that building is Front Street, and that's where Slice of Life is today. And then the third is where the Scottish Rite Theatre is, that's an 1800 - 1900s structure. And once they moved out of that space, they went out to the suburbs where they they remain today.

KS Brewer

Oh okay, so that presence is still there, just not in that same building.

Travis Gilbert

Yes. And I will say that we're really just getting started with the Lodge in our commitment. We're in this for the the end game for the long run. But St. John's Lodge has been very supportive. I think they view this as a way to right some wrongs of the past. Their Lodge and their leaders have been traditionally on the wrong side of history. I certainly don't want to make a blanket statement but many of the leaders of the coup of 1898 or other moments in Wilmington's history where white supremacists ruled the day, quite literally, have have also been brothers in St. John's Lodge. And who they perceived as their foes were often members of Giblem Lodge. The Masons for men have a tradition of attracting the leaders within a community. So you can see these two lodges as being kind of a magnet for the leading male figures. For so much of Wilmington's history.

KS Brewer

Wow, that's so fascinating. And that touches on something I was curious about. So I don't know much about the Masons in general as an organization. And so it's been difficult for me to understand like what were what

was the relationship between, you know, the White Masons and the Black masons, especially in places like here where they're coexisting kind of.

Travis Gilbert

The establishment in the North, came about because of several black men attempting in the 18th century to join a white Masonic Lodge and were not welcome. So, a religious leader, James Allen, petitioned actually the Masonic bureaucracy in England to be chartered, and thus was born the Prince Hall Masons. So they were kind of born in that racial segregation in the North in the 18th century, and it's continued, obviously to this day.

KS Brewer

Wow. So the lineage of Black masons in this country comes from more of the English Masonic tradition? How would you say that?

Travis Gilbert

I'm not sure the traditions or the rituals have a difference between countries or continents or so forth? It's just the recognition. Something as practical as nonprofit status for Masons is tied to their registration in what the IRS would call the 'lodge system.' So there's all these tiers going up to a national level. So that was that kind of recognition they were seeking in the 18th century and they received from across the pond rather than here.

KS Brewer

Right, well, that's that's a great way to skirt the system. So you know, jumping forward in time a little bit I'm curious to hear more about your work on the Lodge now. And your collaboration with, I heard tell about this task force working for the lodge I'm not sure, you know, who was who that task force is composed of like, what your collaboration with them has been like, you know?

Travis Gilbert

I think what our organization is attempting to do with our partnership with Giblem is to attempt to make historic preservation more equitable in Wilmington. Our organization recognizes that we have preserved an overwhelming majority of building sites that are tied to one narrative, the narrative that has always existed in Wilmington, the narrative that buried 1898 and all those sins, including our largest project to date - we invested over a half million dollars, and this is in the 90s, into the preservation of what we call the DeRosset House. And that family were large enslavers of their day. They materially and through military service supported the Confederacy. And then several family members were leaders of of the coup and it's a great site because there are powerful women at the site. And the story of that house gives example to this concept that women's rights in the South was often founded on a on a racist principle. For example, the one of the granddaughters of the gentleman that built this house was the last wife of Alfred Moore Waddell, the leader of the coup. After his death, she worked to materialize and groom has memory. She created the narrative after his death. And thankfully, that's all preserved at Chapel Hill, through her journals, and ephemera and whatnot. She also through the colonial dames was, I would argue, one of the first historic preservationists in Wilmington, so naturally she is going to advocate for the preservation of building sites that tell her side of the story. That was all part of her plan. We preserve buildings because of the stories they tell. So our past - this is our reckoning as an organization, of how we have contributed to this unjust narrative, this inequity in historic preservation and what better site to attempt to begin, just to begin to right those wrongs, than to help preserve this lodge? But we're acutely aware that this is not our building. That often this is not our necessarily our story to tell. I had a conversation yesterday, we're trying to work through like, how to donate- now that word is getting out, folks want to donate, and the community leader I was speaking to she was stressing the fact that the black community in Wilmington needs a way to be able to donate just a little bit, and sometimes a whole bunch, but every dollar that was given by somebody, they become financially invested in the success of the project. So we are simply performing bureaucratic staff level task -, grant writing, minute taking, agendas, organizing people, organizing resources, the knock on stuff, all the all the back end and letting the community drive this vision, share the story. So we don't come in and for lack of better term be like white saviors. Just trying to provide their staff resources that can

make or break a project like this because they're all volunteers over there. I mean, they all have full time jobs. And this is a place they go to to find those fraternal bonds. And sometimes it takes a staff to make projects like this viable. And we have an incredible grant writer on our staff, who's been extraordinary and in just a year has been able to get quite a few yeses and quite a few non-nos what I call them - it's like it's not a no but it's like a keep trying. So yeah, I hope that kind of helps kind of visualize where we are in the project, how we fit in this mix.

KS Brewer

Yeah, absolutely, and I appreciate you articulating that. I feel like you know as a White person who also is involved in activist spaces you have to, you know, reckon with these things and be conscientious of what your role is and what your role isn't. So what is the vision for the Lodge as it stands right now?

Travis Gilbert

They're working that out. Masonic lodges have a pretty standard formula, is what I call it. The first floor is leased commercial space - it provides an income stream or revenue for the Lodge. And then the second floor is typically like a community center or a hall, they would call it. Giblem's was called Maria Hall. And then the third floor is the Masonic lodge's kind of private space. In the past that has been male only, that kind of connotation does not exist to Giblem right now, and because they have rituals and traditions that are sometimes you know, clouded in secrecy, you know, the higher up you are, the less exposed you are. So this formula can be applied to buildings that are five stories tall like, like the building you were in at Level 5. So the vision is trying to lean on that historical use of the building. And first and foremost attempting to revitalize this building into a community center once again. Giblem has always been a space where folks have been welcomed, whether they're Masons or not Masons - for agricultural and technical affairs, church services dances, there was a roller rink in there for one time. The Black library was there from about 1926 through the 1940s. And how they would like to do that it I think, again, is leaning in the history and trying to create a space that can assist other nonprofits in free or very very reduced costs, meeting spaces, activist spaces and then also create an area that can highlight the African American experience in Wilmington. It is incorporated in many other institutions, interpretation and history. But what I've been hearing is there's a real demand or need to have their own space to not be a part of somebody else's story, but to focus on their story alone at one site. And Cedric and WilmingtonColor has been a part of that conversation, because they they don't have any type of facility. They're just operating at the bus on the street. And that has been a very successful business focusing on African American history in Wilmington. So those community partnerships are really important to revitalizing that space.

KS Brewer

That sounds amazing. I did hear a little bit about the the library that was there during Jim Crow and that, just, I felt was so inspiring and really spoke to me about what it must have felt like to create resources for your community in an environment that doesn't want you to have them, you know, to like bring that kind of like nurturing and like an intellectual wealth. You can tell me if this is right or not, I saw something else about there maybe being a grocery store in there that one time? A market. You know, that nutritional wealth and just bringing different assets, you know, to, to people that are being disenfranchised from them.

Travis Gilbert

Absolutely. Creating that Black space has driven the actions that have turned major historical events in this town. A common misconception about another infamous day in our city's history, it's a shame how many we have, was in 1971 during Wilmington 10 - have you been exposed to that story?

KS Brewer

We've heard a little bit about it, but I'm very curious to hear what you have to say about it.

Travis Gilbert

Yeah. So to unfortunately simplify the narrative, which is always a trap... When the courts finally insisted upon the integration of New Hanover County schools over 10 years after Brown v Board of Ed, rather than

integrate the Black high school, Williston, the Board of Ed decided to close that institution and bus the Black students between two all White high schools, effectively eliminating that Black space that was just a font of community building. So the student protests that ignited Wilmington 10... how they vocalized their disapproval was that they wanted that Black space, they wanted Willesden. And weaponizing history, some have ignorantly stated that that they were advocating for segregation. You see that trap there. When in fact they were just they were seeking out that Black space that they were denied due to integration. So they organized in Gregory Congregational Church on Nun Street, and just like Giblem during 1898, that raised suspicions of the White community in Wilmington who had control of police, National Guard, city government. And that's just a matchbox waiting to happen and it ignited in 1971, and caused another wave of untold amount of killings, murders, and destruction of property and then the wrongful prosecution of these these 10 activists.

KS Brewer

Absolutely. And let's see oh, you know, I think I saw on your website too, I think something about the Confederate monuments when that was a huge debate a few years ago and coming out saying like, you know, we support the removal of these statues and contextualizing them in other spaces. And, to me, that is what makes sense largely, and sort of the tone of my project also is not wanting to... it doesn't help to erase or to bury that history because we've been doing enough already. But to but to tell it like it is, you know, to have both sides of the story, which we generally haven't.

Travis Gilbert

Yeah, we were in quite a predicament as a community about those monuments because they were works of art created by nationally renowned sculptors and architects. Ironically, the one was designed by the designer of the Lincoln Memorial, best piece of irony in Wilmington's history right there. And so what do you do with a work of art that is... that triggers some folks in our community that wrongfully inspires others? And, there's no good answer. I was on the Board of Trustees at that time, not on staff... my biggest fear about those statues removal, I believe is coming to fruition - that they are going to become more polarized objects and more of a ritualistic pilgrimage site. The idea is how the mayor who's very center, left of center but there's a reason he's been there for all these years, you know, in a single southern town, he knows how to play both sides of the fence, was supportive in their removal, but understood that he needed a legal foundation in which to remove them, so it wasn't tied to his morals or any type of statement that is subjective. And the argument was the city never accepted them as a gift. So they were still the private property of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, established by one of those DeRosset, women, Catherine, from the house. So legally, they had to be returned to the United daughters that Confederacy essentially it was like, this is your property, it's on our property and we would like it not to be on our property anymore. So now they're going to be, what I understand, erected on private property. And think about all the rituals that can, that do occur in the American South, on private property in rural areas. They're altars, and I'm concerned.

KS Brewer

That's a huge concern and I never really thought about it that way. You know, like, been confronted with that version of reality occurring with some of these statues. So that's, yeah, that's concerning.

Travis Gilbert

Yeah. You know, like Pieta of Mary holding Jesus Christ in our arms. The one is, it truly is an altar. So it's a beautiful work of art and there are connotations to that Pieta and yeah, so but if they didn't fight that legal battle of they aren't, we never accepted them as a gift they would not have it would have perhaps taken longer to remove them. There was safety in how rapid they came down. Safety in that, that it didn't drag out through public forums and meetings and that would have been very I think, disturbing is one word used to describe it, but not healthy for our community. But I really I wish, I don't speak for the organization just as Travis when I say, I really wish they would have gone to an historic site, where there would have been a trained interpreter that could contextualize the monuments in a secular way, as opposed to them being used continually as fodder for burgeoning white supremacist and as a young white man, I am the demographic - young white men are

becoming extremely polarized and violent over these white supremacist concepts, and I just think of all the people that have not been exposed the life experiences I have that can fall into that dangerous trap. Just nothing good will come out of those monuments being returned to the UDC.

KS Brewer

So, I wanted to ask you a little bit about another thing I saw you working on as well. Which is the Maides Cemetery. I just stumbled across on your site as I was looking at Giblem. And I just spoke to me so much like there's just a feeling I got from it. I don't even know that I could, you know, rationally say why apart from just like having an interest in cemeteries and in the ways we memorialize, or don't, you know, and Kathy King seems like such an impressive figure fighting for that.

Travis Gilbert

Yes. She is amazing on so many different levels. Truly.

KS Brewer

So I'd love to hear a little more about about that. How did how did the foundation get involved?

Travis Gilbert

A cold call, Kathy called my number here and said, you know, can you be of any help? Every May, is National Preservation month. And when she called we just so happened to be searching for opportunities to volunteer in honor of National Preservation month and how naive I was to think one Saturday for three hours would somehow do justice to this site and somehow be appropriate, you know, the right thing to do. Go out for three hours and call today. And yeah, the end of those three hours, it just was clear if we walk away now, that is not the organization that we strive to be and not in our value system. So it started as every Saturday last summer, Saturday after Saturday. And now we've gotten it down to one month, one Saturday a month. But I think Maides is a conduit for our organization. If you spread yourself too thin, you don't do any good, you're ineffective. So through Maides, we can make a difference at that site that has extraordinary strengths in accessibility because it is adjacent to a public park owned the city of Wilmington with a walking trail, and so forth. Other abandoned cemeteries don't have that kind of luxury, that of accessibility, of visibility. So through Maides we can speak for all these other over 100 abandoned cemeteries in this tiny little county that you can't reach or you would never know existed because they're that overgrown. And and hopefully inspire others to try and make a difference at those cemeteries that we unfortunately can't because you're just become ineffective. And as a conduit, it has helped our organization become visible within East Wilmington, which now many buildings are becoming eligible for the National Register of Historic Places in that part of town. There is an extraordinary collection of craftsman bungalows and folk Victorian cottages and really wonderful vernacular domestic architecture out there. And it just so happens to be, I really didn't connect the dots until after we committed ourselves to Maides, The Department of Transportation is going full steam ahead with creating a raised highway. What is you know the death knell for communities and preservation? It's always a raised highway called Independence Boulevard Extension. And it's going to go right through this neighborhood and within eyesight of the cemetery. And I'm thankful that Kathy called, I'm thankful for all of our volunteers going out and contributing to Maides' preservation because if we had arrived on the scene during these Department of Transportation meetings, advocating for the preservation of the East side, it would have been more hollow than it is today because we would have been outsiders and I think we still are outsiders, but at least we were introduced to that neighborhood through something positive, like sweat equity in a sense because that I mean that conversation is gonna go on to like 2028. And we're right now just trying to figure out what is the perpetual care that is required in Maides cemetery? Is it the city because it's adjacent to a park, or is it the county that state statute says is obligated to not preserve these cemeteries but at least be aware of them? The state statute's kind of vague and it just, it's the county commissioners that have an obligation statutorily to spend money to preserve them, but at the bare minimum, they just need to know they exist. So they're in the state of in between the lines and it's so sad that there's no money, there's no staff to just preserve them. They're abandoned, and nobody else the land. It's just nobody. Yeah, that's a you know, like Maides, Matilda Maides, the last descendant of that that

nuclear part of the Maides family ,donated her grandfather's homestead to the city of Wilmington to establish a park, excluding the cemetery. So to this day, nobody owns it, it just exists. And that is the case for all these cemeteries.

KS Brewer

And when when was that that that Park was founded?

Travis Gilbert

She donated the land in 1962. I don't know when the park was established. But I will say in 2016 there was a Parks and Rec bond that the voters approved to a referendum during that election, and that funded the creation or the expansion of the Davis Center which is a wonderful parks and rec facility, a huge beautiful gymnasium and so forth at that park. And then there's a private middle school, middle and high school I guess it is called Dreams. There's an all female public charter school that's adjacent to the park. So there's there's a lot of activity out that way.

Travis Gilbert

This is my problem. Someone talks history to me and I just go on and on and on!

KS Brewer

Oh my god no, I think it's fascinating. Yeah. I could ask you so much more, but I feel like you got a run and that's, that's great.

Travis Gilbert

No, I appreciate you taking the time.