



Castle Street Collective
Wilmington, NC 28401
A registered 501(c)(3) organization
Tax ID: 93-4317054
P.O. Box 386, Wilmington, NC

**Enterprise on Castle: Black Business Heritage on Castle Street Project
Community Outreach & Participation Session**

Meeting Type: Community Input Session #1

Date: June 2, 2026

Location: Glimmers Recreational Therapy

Time: 5:00 pm

Meeting Format: In-person (informal, drop-in)

Facilitator: Castle Street Collective

Minutes Prepared By: Castle Street Collective

Recording Method: Video/audio recording for transcription purposes

Narrative Summary

This first community outreach session for the Enterprise on Castle project focused on introducing the effort, sharing early research findings, and inviting community guidance on how the work should move forward. Discussion centered on documenting and honoring the Black business and family history of Castle Street, especially during the period between emancipation and the 1898 Wilmington Coup, while also acknowledging that the current research is still preliminary and must be reviewed by a qualified historian before it can be treated as verified history.

A major theme of the meeting was the need for authentic Black community involvement in shaping a project centered on Black history. Participants spoke openly about trust, representation, and the limits of formal outreach when relationships have not yet been built. The group agreed that warm introductions, repeated invitations, and informal one-on-one conversations may be more effective than traditional meeting notices alone. Attendees also identified meaningful roles for allies, including note-taking, research, outreach, and helping make introductions, while emphasizing that community voices should guide the project's direction.

The session also produced several practical ideas for strengthening participation and building momentum. These included adding "drop in anytime" language to meeting outreach, exploring informal coffee conversations at Luna Cafe, developing oral history interviews and a "listening table" concept, and creating both physical and electronic suggestion boxes for people who cannot attend in person. Participants shared possible contacts, funding leads, and volunteer roles, and the meeting ended with a shared understanding that consistent presence, thoughtful outreach, and community-led relationship building will be essential to the success and credibility of the project.

Section 1 – Attendees

Note: Full names and roles were not always captured. Meeting had 2 confirmed RSVPs; walk-in attendees were welcomed.

- **Project Organizer / Castle Street Collective** – Castle Street Collective
- **Suzanne** – Neighbor, artist (created a neighborhood map); background in marketing
- **Kim** – Founder & Executive Director, Soaring as Eagles nonprofit (education programs for underserved families in New Hanover County); newcomer attending first session
- **Alan** – Community member; background in England; relocated from Chicago area



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- **Additional attendees** – Joined throughout the session; names not captured

Section 2 – Purpose of Meeting

This was the first community outreach session for the Castle Street History Project. The session was designed to:

- Introduce the Castle Street History Project to the broader community
- Explain where volunteers and community members can contribute at various project stages
- Gather community input on how the project should proceed
- Build relationships with Black community members whose history is central to the project

Section 3 – Project Overview

As presented by the Castle Street Collective.

3.1 Project Background

- The project originated from discussions within the Castle Street Collective about engaging businesses with historical plaques and walking tours.
- At a prior community meeting, residents asked: "*Why don't we tell the Black history of Castle Street?*" — sparking deeper research into the area's history.
- Preliminary research revealed a significant Black community presence on Castle Street, particularly businesses and residents who lived and worked there from emancipation through the 1898 Wilmington Coup, after which many families were displaced.
- The project's core focus is understanding the lives of Black families and home-based businesses on Castle Street between emancipation and the 1898 Coup, and tracing what happened to those families afterward.
- Specific individuals identified in preliminary research include:
 - **Henry Sampson** – Carpenter and shed builder, 501 Castle Street (1800s)
 - **William Howe** – Barber, 509 Castle Street (1800s)
 - **Daniel Fennell** – Labor contractor, 525 Castle Street (1800s)
- A previous Castle Street entity, formed in the early 1990s and led by a Black gentleman, also sought grants. The *Castle Street Collective* noted interest in learning more about what that group accomplished.

3.2 Project Phases

Phase 1 – Preliminary Research (In Progress)

- Pulling plats, plots, tax records, and deeds for Castle Street addresses
- Using AI tools to cross-reference tax records and deeds
- Building an overall preliminary research model

Important Note: Preliminary research is not verified and requires professional historian review before use.

Phase 2 – Hire a Professional Historian (Requires Grant Funding)

- Issue Requests for Qualifications (RFQs) to 3–4 historians already identified
- Seeking a historian who can cover both land records and the people/families side of research



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- Candidates identified include Andre Kearns (Black Ancestries) and others with Wilmington ties
- Funding goal: approximately \$50,000 grant for historian engagement

Phase 3 – Physical Implementation (Requires Larger Grant)

- To be determined once research is completed and community input has been received
- Possibilities include: historical plaques, street artwork, walking/heritage tours, signage, website features
- Models cited: Wilmington Color Tours; Boston and Charlotte heritage tours; Joan of Arc-style historical site markers

3.3 Historical Context Shared

Shared by a participant with prior research experience.

- Original 1730s city map shows the Castle Street area bounded by 5th Street, Worcester Street, and Red Cross Street; the area was not fully developed until the early 1800s
- At the foot of Castle Street (now Grand Street Park area): a wharf, a Civil War-era salt-making factory, and later a gas (coal gas) manufacturing facility
- At least 48 buildings on the street predate the 1920s — historically significant but currently outside the formal Historic District
- 900 block: site of a charitable and social lodge operated by a woman in the early 20th century; demolished circa 1970
- Castle Street was described as the area's "nightlife hotspot" (per the Smoke Life shop owner)
- Elemental Grove owner noted Castle Street as a historical ley line / straight shot to Wrightsville Beach

Section 4 – Key Discussion Topics

4.1 Inclusive Community Engagement

- A concern was raised that the project board is all white while the project centers on Black history — raising questions about who holds decision-making authority.
- The *Castle Street Collective* acknowledged the concern and affirmed: the goal is genuine collaborative input from the Black community, not token representation.
- Participant Kim noted that trust is a major barrier; she attended because a white colleague told her she "should be here" — a warm personal referral made the difference.
- Key principle discussed: extend invitations to the table; do not presume participation; keep inviting even if response is initially slow.
- Participant Suzanne expressed discomfort volunteering on a Black history project without sufficient Black community involvement and asked about her appropriate role.
- The group affirmed that allies can make introductions, take notes, do research, and connect people — without presuming to speak for the community.
- One participant quoted a Black *Castle Street Collective* from a prior workplace context: "*It doesn't matter what race you are — show up and invite everyone to your table. If they don't come, then you did your job.*"

4.2 Outreach Efforts to Date



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- Door-to-door business visits along Castle Street (3rd to 12th Street), conducted multiple times
- Outreach via newsletter (300 subscribers), Instagram, and Facebook
- Encore magazine published meeting announcements
- Flyers distributed to businesses along the street
- Organizations already contacted or in process:
 - Wilmington Color / Cedric's (Minority Chamber)
 - Commission on African American History
 - Journeys Wilmington (email bounced — contact: Isla Speller; correct info needed)
 - Encore magazine
 - Historical Foundation of Wilmington — not yet contacted; on outreach list
 - Museum at 7th and Red Cross — not yet contacted; on outreach list

4.3 Why Black Community Members May Be Hesitant to Attend

- Meetings occur in spaces that may feel predominantly white
- Trust gaps remain due to historical patterns and prior negative experiences
- Walk-in/drop-in format may help reduce the perceived pressure of commitment
- Warm personal referrals are far more effective than cold outreach
- Suggestion: hold informal gatherings at Luna Cafe — a neutral, familiar meeting spot — to facilitate one-on-one conversations

4.4 Meeting Times & Accessibility

- Current schedule: two sessions per week (5:00 PM and noon), alternating between this location (5:00 PM) and Rest. Bookery (noon)
- Sessions continue through approximately August 17th or 22nd
- Suggestion to add "drop in anytime" language to all meeting communications — adopted
- Meeting schedule will not be changed, but drop-in wording will be added going forward
- Informal coffee meetings at Luna Cafe for 1:1 outreach outside formal sessions — supported by participants

4.5 Funding & Financial Overview

- Target grant for historian engagement: approximately \$40,000–\$50,000
- Meeting with an Endowment (unnamed) is upcoming — considered a promising opportunity
- Rhonda Bellamy (Arts Council) mentioned as a resource for grant writing webinars and has relationships with endowment funders

4.6 Oral History & Storytelling Ideas

- Suggestion to conduct recorded, informal oral history interviews ("leisurely, friendly conversations") with long-time residents and community members
- Recordings could be transcribed using existing technology
- "Listening table" concept proposed: set up a table with a sign saying "I am listening" and invite community members to share stories
- Suzanne expressed interest in conducting interviews and facilitating conversations — identified as a meaningful contribution she can make



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- Goal: use oral histories to supplement verified historical research for walking tours and displays

4.7 Website & Community Input Tracking

- The *Castle Street Collective* has created a new tab on the project website to document community input
- Need for assistance in determining how to display community input in a visual, engaging way
- Community input notes from each meeting to be posted to the website after each session

4.8 Suggestion Box Concept

- Kim proposed both an electronic and a physical suggestion box so community members who cannot attend meetings can still contribute
- The group enthusiastically supported the idea
- Discussion on placement of a physical box: a willing business with an old-fashioned mailbox could serve as an intermediary collection point
- Kim agreed to take the lead on implementing this concept

Section 5 – Volunteer Opportunities Discussed

The following are ways community members can contribute at various stages of the project:

1. Grant writing
2. Community outreach and warm introductions to key contacts
3. Taking minutes at meetings
4. Library research (especially NC Reading Room)
5. Presenting to Wilmington City Council
6. Reviewing permitting processes in advance of physical implementation
7. Web design and digital content
8. Signage and graphic design
9. Storytelling / oral history interviews
10. Connecting the project to private donors
11. Social media support (Karen currently handles postings)
12. Sharing meeting flyers with personal networks via text and social media

Section 6 – Key Community Contacts Identified

Name	Organization / Role	Notes / How to Connect
Bragg (Ron, possibly)	Owner, Smoke Life shop, Castle Street	Long-time area resident; shared neighborhood history; has extensive local knowledge. Suzanne to facilitate introduction.
Elizabeth	Elemental Grove (adjacent to Smoke Life)	Shared historical stories about Castle Street; enthusiastic about the project; added to project newsletter.
Cedric	Wilmington Color / Minority Chamber	Conducts walking tours; has a stop on Castle Street; has been contacted.



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Name	Organization / Role	Notes / How to Connect
Isla Speller	Journeys Wilmington (African American walking and riding tours)	Email bounced — correct contact information needed. <i>Castle Street Collective</i> to pursue.
Frankie Roberts	Founder / Executive Director, Lync Incorporated nonprofit	Grew up near Castle Street; attended 7th Day Adventist Church on the street. Kim to share contact number.
Mr. Boykins	Shaw's Mortuary (est. June 1895, 6th & Red Cross)	Williston graduate; extensive historical knowledge. Phone: 910-262-0649.
Jonathan Barfield	Former County Commissioner	He and his father were the only Black county commissioners since 1898. Phone: 910-233-8780.
Andre Kearns	Black Ancestries organization	Candidate historian for RFQ process.
Rhonda Bellamy	Arts Council / NC Endowment connections	Runs grant writing webinars; Arts Council contact with endowment funder relationships.
Tim Pinnock	Academic / historian	Wrote article reconstructing the Black community of the area.
William Morgan	Wilmington historian	Connected to Shaw Funeral Home area; has local historical knowledge.

Section 7 – Historical Resources Referenced

1. *Strength Through Struggle: The Chronological and Historical Record of African American Community in North Carolina, 1865–1950* by Winning Reeves — available at the North Carolina Reading Room (coffee-table format; cannot be checked out; photographs encouraged)
2. North Carolina Reading Room — newspaper clippings, historical records
3. Real estate data (4th to 16th Street): at least 48 pre-1920 buildings identified along Castle Street
4. Tax records and deed research — AI-assisted and preliminary; not yet verified by a professional historian

Section 8 – Decisions Made

1. Meeting schedule will remain unchanged (5:00 PM and noon sessions, alternating locations)
2. "Drop in anytime" language to be added to all future meeting communications
3. Community input notes will be posted to the project website after each session
4. Kim to pursue the suggestion box concept (electronic and physical)
5. Suzanne to facilitate a warm introduction between the project and the Smoke Life shop owner (Bragg)
6. Kim to share the upcoming meeting flyer via text to her personal network
7. *Castle Street Collective* to send upcoming meeting details (JPEG) to Kim for distribution



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8. Aaron to create more inviting and casual-looking flyers for broader community outreach, in addition to existing formal materials
9. Informal coffee meetings at Luna Cafe to be explored for one-on-one community outreach outside of formal sessions

Closing Observations

- Participants affirmed the importance of showing up consistently and persistently to build trust, even when initial response is slow.
- Community consensus: "You can't force people to come, but you invite and keep showing up."