



MEMORANDUM

To: Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee
CC: Tyler Wicks, Director of Parks and Recreation
From: Paul Montgomery, Mayor
Date: July 28, 2025
Regarding: Jack Pierce and the Riverview Community

In 1940, the Riverview Apartments were constructed, marking the beginning of formal development within the Riverview neighborhood. By August of that year, the community was officially dedicated and occupied. To serve the growing population, the Kingsport Board of Education soon constructed a new Douglass School building within Riverview. Douglass High School (named for Frederick Douglass) became the centerpiece of the community. By the mid-20th century, Douglass was the largest African American high school in the entire Tri-Cities region, known for its strong academics and athletics. After federal desegregation mandates, Douglass High School was closed in 1966 when Black students were integrated into formerly all-white schools. The closure marked the end of an era; however, the old Douglass school building would later find new life as a community center and park.

By the early 2000s, many of Riverview's original structures and homes (including the 1940-era public housing apartments) had aged significantly. The neighborhood was grappling with issues such as drug activity and rising crime. The City of Kingsport recognized that reinvestment was needed to revitalize the neighborhood. In 2006, Kingsport received an \$11.9 million HOPE VI revitalization grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to transform Riverview. This initiative, a roughly \$30 million public-private redevelopment effort, gave Riverview "a new lease on life" with modern housing and facilities.

A crucial part of the neighborhood's renewal was the renovation of the former Douglass High School building. The city invested over \$5 million to expand and modernize the facility into the V.O. Dobbins Sr. Community Complex. Opened in September 2010, this complex now serves as a multi-purpose center housing nonprofit agencies and community services, while also preserving the heritage of the original Douglass school. A state historical marker was unveiled on the site to denote Douglass's historical significance as the region's foremost African American high school. The renovated building features a dedicated Douglass alumni office, a "Douglass Room" with trophy cases of school memorabilia, and new wings including a regulation gymnasium and a three-story nonprofit center. As City Manager John Campbell observed, this innovative complex provides "a vibrant nucleus to the community" while allowing various agencies to collaborate and better serve residents. In short, the redevelopment of Riverview not only improved physical

conditions but also reinforced the community's pride and resources. Today, Riverview boasts modern homes, a popular splash pad and park, and the Dobbins Complex, a dramatic turnaround from the neglected state the area was in decades prior

Jack Pierce, Sr. (1929–2025) was a lifelong resident of Kingsport's Riverview community and is widely regarded as one of the city's trailblazing citizens. Born December 24, 1929, to Albert and Lena Pierce in "Old Kingsport," Jack came of age just as the Riverview neighborhood was being established. Jack attended the segregated Douglass High School and graduated as a member of one of the last classes to finish at the original "Old Douglass" on East Walnut Street before the new school was built in 1951. He then built a successful career at the Eastman Chemical Company, where he worked for 39 years. Notably, Mr. Pierce broke racial barriers at Eastman, he earned a promotion to foreman, becoming the company's first Black foreman. This was a significant achievement at a time when opportunities for African Americans in management were very limited.

Jack Pierce chose to raise his own family in Riverview. He and his wife Betsy Pierce were married for an extraordinary 74 years, and together they raised seven children in the Riverview neighborhood. The Pierce home was known to be warm and welcoming; Jack never met a stranger and was quick to share his humor and wisdom with neighbors of all ages. He was a devoted member of Shiloh Baptist Church (located on E. Sevier Ave) and later became a devoted member of Central Baptist Church (located in Riverview), where he served on the Usher Board and practiced his faith through service.

Jack Pierce's civic impact extended far beyond his home and workplace. He served on numerous local boards and committees dedicated to improving life in Kingsport and especially in Riverview. He was a member of the Riverview "Catch the Vision" Strategic Planning Team and the South Central Kingsport Community Development Board, both of which played key roles in shaping the revitalization of the neighborhood. He also served on the board of the Upper East Tennessee Human Development Agency and volunteered for organizations such as Holston Habitat for Humanity. Jack was deeply committed to preserving the heritage of Kingsport's Black community, volunteering as a Douglas Alumni and alongside the Bays Mountain Historical Committee, he ensured the stories of the black families that helped build Kingsport were not forgotten.

Reflecting on the transformation of Riverview, Jack once remarked, "I can remember at times we've had mayors who didn't think Riverview was a part of Kingsport." His words reflect both the hardship and the resilience of a community that long fought for recognition and investment. Jack took immense pride in Riverview's rebirth, from a neighborhood once plagued by disinvestment to one now considered among the safest and most stable in Kingsport. His legacy is not only one of personal achievement but of steadfast dedication to community and progress.

Riverview Park today stands as a cornerstone of the Riverview neighborhood, serving as both a community hub and a symbol of transformation. Anchored by the V.O. Dobbins Sr. Complex, the park includes amenities such as pickleball courts, a multipurpose field, a splash pad, and a modern playground. These resources reflect the community's renewal and vibrancy. The park serves as a living tribute to those who led Riverview's revitalization and built a foundation for future generations.

In recognition of this legacy, and to honor one of the most influential figures in Riverview's history, it is proposed that Riverview Park be renamed **Jack Pierce Sr., Park at Riverview**. This change would enshrine the memory of Jack Pierce, a lifelong resident, civic leader, and one of Kingsport's most respected African American voices. Jack's warm spirit, dedication to service, and commitment to community uplift helped shape Riverview into the thriving neighborhood it is today. While his presence is deeply missed, his legacy endures in the lives he touched and the neighborhood he helped build.