

HOUSING a Legacy

Renewed interest in

John William “Blind” Boone and ragtime

By Dianna Borsi O'Brien
Photo by Deanna Dikeman



More than four score after his death, classical and ragtime composer and pianist John William “Blind” Boone is making news in Columbia, where a resurgence of interest in the man, his home and his music is currently taking place.

For starters, a capital campaign sponsored by the Blind Boone Heritage Foundation will soon kick off to fund the interior renovation of his home on Fourth Street for a proposed museum. The project cost is estimated at about \$500,000, including museum exhibits. Today the house gleams under a fresh coat of historically accurate red paint as part of an exterior renovation completed last year.

Born in 1864 to a runaway slave and a bugler in the Missouri Militia, Boone lost his eyesight when his eyes were removed at 6 months old to save him from the ravages of “brain fever.” Boone’s mother was once owned by a relative of Daniel Boone, which explains the musician’s surname.

Despite his origins, he went on to become one of Missouri’s most famous people, black or white; he toured the country and Canada for decades and played classical, ragtime, spirituals and popular music of the time — including his own compositions and arrangements.

Boone was the first musician to bring spirituals to the concert stage, says Lucille Salerno, a founder of the Original “Blind” Boone Ragtime & Early Jazz Festival, which has been producing ragtime festivals in Columbia since 1991. She’s also one of the founding members of the Blind Boone Heritage Foundation.



Boone lived in the house on Fourth Street from 1889 until his death in 1927.

Taking the home from the eyesore it once was to the beauty it now is cost \$455,587, which included expenditures for emergency stabilization, according to Assistant City Manager Paula Hertwig Hopkins, in addition to its purchase price of \$182,064. The work has been funded through the lodging tax, Community Development Block grants, restoration grants from the state of Missouri and other funds.

Yet in many ways, the two-story wood structure beside the Second Missionary Baptist Church is an ordinary house for its time, according to Nick Peckham of Peckham & Wright Architects. Like many houses of its day, the Boone home features custom-made windows and a rock foundation.

But the house is so much more, says Clyde Ruffin, president of the Blind Boone Heritage Foundation, senior pastor of Second Missionary Baptist Church and a professor of theater at the University of Missouri.

"It's a symbol," Ruffin says. "We need symbols to keep the story alive."

The story of Boone and his house is one of overcoming obstacles without complaint.

The slogan for Boone's concert company was "Merit, Not Sympathy, Wins." Boone has also been quoted as saying his blindness was not a handicap but instead helped him become the talented musician he was. For years, his piano and portrait resided in Frederick Douglass High School and provided inspiration to the black community, Ruffin says.

The home also withstood its own challenges. In the 1930s, it housed the Stuart Parker Memorial Funeral Home and then the Warren Funeral Chapel, the only African-American-owned business to survive the urban renewal razing of the

1960s, according to a Special Business District and Central Columbia Association Web site publication. When the City purchased the house in November 2000, it had so much termite damage, it took significant effort to simply stabilize the building.

In 1980 the house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places for its local importance in black history. Then in 2003, the structure was reclassified and elevated to the level of national significance.

Today, new energy-efficient windows keep out the wind, but the house lacks plumbing, electricity and heating. Glass cracks underfoot on the wood floor, and '70s-era paneling covers many of the walls, but hardwood pocket doors peek out of their frames, and the high ceilings once again have been revealed. Woodcarvings grace the exposed staircase and surround the glass-tiled fireplace. But there's no furniture or any sign of the wealth or talent of the man who once lived there.

Despite his success, Boone and his wife, Eugena, had unmarked graves until 1971. And Boone's home wasn't slated for public restoration until it was purchased by the City in 2000.

So what happened?

In 1916, Boone's close friend and manager John Lange Jr. died, and by then people were moving away from live concerts and were beginning to listen to the radio, play phonographs and take to the roads in new automobiles. After Lange's death, Boone had a series of managers, but none of them could recreate the popularity and bookings of Lange's efforts. By May 1927, Boone was talking of retiring.

More than 80 years later, Boone's legacy, his music and his memory remain in the city he once called home. **CHL**

Blind Boone: Projects and Events

EVENTS:

May 16: *Nobody Else Ever Played Like Boone: The Life and Times of John William "Blind" Boone*, a play sponsored by the State Historical Society's Missouri History in Performance Theatre. 7 p.m., Second Missionary Baptist Church on Broadway, Free. For more information, contact Christine Montgomery at the State Historical Society of Missouri at 882-2476 or montgomeryc@umsystem.edu.

June 9 and 10: The Original "Blind" Boone Ragtime & Early Jazz Festival will feature several performers including the Ophelia Orchestra from Oslo, Norway. Missouri Theatre Center for the Arts. For more information contact Lucille Salerno at 445-2539 or salernol@missouri.edu.

RESOURCES:

Blind Boone Restoration Project Facebook page

See photos from the restoration project, find information from past festivals, and get information on Boone. Become a fan, and learn more.

Visit [facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com), and search for Blind Boone Restoration Project.

Blind Boone Park Renovation Group Web site

This site for the group in Warrensburg, Mo., features extensive information about John William "Blind" Boone, much of it collected, researched and written by self-taught Boone expert Mike Shaw. blindboonepark.org/events.html

ON THE SHELF

Blind Boone: Missouri's Ragtime Pioneer by Jack A. Batterson

Blind Boone: Piano Prodigy by Madge Harrah

Bringing “Blind” Boone To Life Again

The life, times and sounds of John William “Blind” Boone will come alive on May 16 with the premiere of a new play about the renowned musician.

Sponsored by the State Historical Society's Missouri History in Performance Theatre, *Nobody Else Ever Played Like Boone: The Life and Times of John William “Blind” Boone* is being written from primary historical sources, such as interviews with Boone and those who knew him, and will include recordings of his piano playing.

The first performance of the play will take place in the Second Missionary Baptist Church on Broadway, the same venue where Boone's career launched in 1879.

Mary Barile, the play's writer and a recent doctoral graduate in theater from the University of Missouri, is excited about bringing Boone to life.

“That’s the fun part about historic theater,” Barile says. “It makes people come alive. They are not just people on a page any longer. This play will give them their voices back. We’ll learn about their passion, humor and suffering.”

Barile says she hopes community members will take part in the play. Because the play will be conducted as a reader's theater, no memorization is required.

In addition to using historical materials, Barile is calling on help from noted Boone experts, scholars and devotees, including Lucille Salerno, Missouri historian Mike Shaw, musician John Davis and author Jack A. Batterson.

The play will open and close with a spiritual, just as Boone did his concert performances, and songs will be performed by Celestine Hayes, a local singer and expert on Negro spirituals, according to Christine Montgomery of the State Historical Society.

When Worlds Collide

Ragtime music melds African syncopation with marches, folk tunes and European romantic strains, says local music expert Kevin Walsh, who hosts a radio show on KOPN that features jazz and blues music and writes about music for local publications. This intertwining of music and cultures, he says, could only happen in Missouri, where the mighty Mississippi and Missouri rivers create a cultural crossroads.

“Wonderful things happen in music where worlds collide, and it happens all the time in Missouri,” Walsh says. “People in Missouri get the beat.” In addition to John Williams “Blind” Boone, Chuck Berry, often referred to as the father of rock and roll, also calls Missouri home.

Missouri's collision of cultures led to Boone's development of ragtime, America's first original music, according to Lucille Salerno, a founder of the Original “Blind” Boone Ragtime & Early Jazz Festival and founding member of the Blind Boone Heritage Foundation.

“Ragtime swept through the world and completely took over,” Salerno says.

Although Boone is often remembered for his ragtime roots, he was actually trained as a classical musician, composer and pianist. He toured 10 months a year for decades and set the stage for later ragtime luminaries.

“Scott Joplin is standing on his shoulders,” Salerno says.

As a child, Boone showed an aptitude for music. Community members in Warrensburg, where Boone lived at the time, paid to send Boone to St. Louis to attend the Missouri School for the Blind, where he heard the music that would later become ragtime being played in the Tenderloin district. Boone soaked up a new kind of sound, a mixture of African rhythms, work songs, spirituals and popular music.

There, he learned to “rag” music, or to add syncopated beats. “Lightning in a bottle.”

That's how Walsh describes the happy accident that resulted in ragtime, the music that made Boone famous.

Merit, NOT Sympathy, WINS

Boone's concert company slogan