

VA - Johnson

Ellin B. Gordon

113 ELIZABETH MERIWETHER • WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA 23185

804-229-3382

Memo To: Steve Brezzo

From: Ellin Gordon

Re: Demolition of Elder Anderson Johnson's house and mission in Newport News, Virginia.

March 29, 1995

I am not sure if you are familiar with Elder Anderson Johnson's work. He is an artist living and working in Newport News, Virginia who also is a preacher with a small mission that meets weekly at his home and he is also a musician. He is a kind and gentle man who has risen above a great many adversities in his life and at the age of seventy eight he is still painting daily, administering to his small flock, and playing original music. His art work has been shown in a number of exhibitions of self taught artists and several of his pieces are currently on tour in Passionate Visions of the American South organized by the New Orleans Museum of Art. This show will be at The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. until May 7, 1995.

Elder Johnson's home (and mission) have been slated for demolition by the city of Newport News to make way for a recreation center. The city has bought his home from him and he has rented another and he is quite content in his new surroundings. But, those of us interested in preserving environments are particularly upset because of the exceptional wall paintings throughout the original house and the loss of another connection to our heritage and the heritage of the community.

The house is in poor condition, and although the city is willing to give away the plaster walls that are covered with the paintings, we are concerned that the paintings will not survive. To preserve the house and possibly have to move it will be costly and the city is not ready to undertake the project.

A small group of citizens met with the City Planner in the fall of '94, and since then Deborah McLeod, curator of the Peninsular Fine Arts Center in Newport News, has done a wonderful job. She has organized and met with a neighborhood committee (active now) and has met with the City Council three times. She has also approached several foundations about the possibility of funding and has received positive, though certainly tentative responses from three of them. We are now in need of support from throughout the country to try and get at least a partial commitment from the city to help. They have received a number of letters and printed material about Elder Anderson Johnson, but these have all been from a relatively small geographic area.

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Memo, c'ont.

If you could take the time to write a letter of support we would be most grateful. (The names and addresses are listed below.) Those of us who have already written letters have tried to explain the importance of this type environment to the community and the cultural heritage it represents to the community. We have also pointed out the number of people who visit Newport News to meet Elder Johnson who would otherwise be unaware of the area. And lastly how few of these environments have been saved and what a credit it would be to Newport News to accomplish this feat.

Please contact Deborah McLeod or me with any suggestions you have. As of March 1st the City has promised not to do anything without informing Deborah and I think there is a small window of time. If you would not mind, Deborah or I would appreciate receiving a copy of the letter you send.

I know how busy you are, but I hope you will find the time to help us. Many thanks in advance.

Letters to: Barry DuVal, Mayor
City of Newport News
2400 Washington Avenue
Newport News, VA 23607

Comments to: Ms. Deborah McLeod, Curator
Peninsula Fine Arts Center
101 Museum Drive
Newport News, VA 23606

Tel: (804) 596 - 8175

Your help would be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Ellin Gordon

I Cover letter

II Proposal

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2. Specific Request
3. Rationale
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III Appendices

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