Who would’ve thought that this little, seemingly insignificant county had such a rich, admirable heritage? Few things open our eyes to our latent potential more than a candid look at our history; and now, after touring the Round House, I am certain of the true, innate, God-given greatness in every one of us when I see the lives of people like Oliver Nestus Freeman who persevered and excelled, with incredible strength, courage, and ingenuity, against all odds, in the days of segregation and racial oppression. How much longer will we continue to complain and hide behind our excuses when men and women of this caliber have overcome giants larger than anything we can imagine today?

On February 22, 1882, Oliver Nestus Freeman was born in rural Wilson County to Julius Freeman, a former slave from Johnston County, and Eliza Freeman. He was the fifth of eighteen children and was educated at Tuskegee Normal School where he majored in industrial arts and was trained in construction and masonry; he also earned a diploma from North Western School of Taxidermy. While at Tuskegee, Nestus (the name he preferred to be called by) met Willie Mae Hendley whom he later married; they had four children: Naomi, Oliver, Mary Frances and Connie. Both Nestus and Willie Mae were first-grade teachers at Wilbanks School and yet what he is most known for is his extraordinary skill as a mason. In 1946 he built a home for his family, made of stone, bottles, tree saplings, and string, which we today know as the Round House Museum. His home included, in his yard, a 7-foot dinosaur, exotic birds, concrete tables, chairs and benches, birdbaths, archways, and a seashell mailbox. In North Carolina Architects & Builders, the online article by Kate Ohno says, “Oliver Nestus Freeman was a prolific, creative, and multi-talented craftsman active in Wilson…He became the community's preeminent brick and stonemason and also worked in tile, but he is best known for his stonework on his own buildings and throughout the community.” Additionally, Nestus helped with the Boy Scout Camp near Bailey and, as hobbies, he enjoyed stone sculpting, carpentry, botany, taxidermy, and raising and training animals. As many have said, Nestus was a visionary and this quality was strengthened in his friendships with great minds like Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver. Finally, on September 28, 1955, Nestus departed this life, leaving a rich legacy of ingenuity, leadership, endurance, and charity.

When I visited the Oliver Nestus Freeman Round House, it was enriching to see pictures of him, his family and in the times in which they lived. According to the Wilson Visitor’s Bureau, “The Oliver Nestus Freeman Round House is a museum featuring the artifacts that depict the culture and contributions of African Americans to the history and development of Wilson.” Looking at the tools which Nestus himself made and used for all his masterpieces was surreal; it felt like I was entering into his world, made with his hands. And then to look at his pictures and read his actual handwriting made him even more real to me. Somehow, it was as if he was standing right there, beside me, letting me see his character and the man he became as a result of all he endured.

Of course, the Round House is about much more than just Oliver Nestus Freeman. In fact, it is full of pictures, bios and history about men and women in the black community who achieved great things in the days of racial segregation and oppression. As I walked through the Round House, I noticed that the first black newspaper in Wilson was the Wilson Blade. Also, the first black hospital in Wilson was Wilson Hospital & Tubercular Home (later Mercy Hospital), established by Dr. Frank S. Hargrave who served as director from 1913 to 1923. Indeed, the first
black rest home licensee was Geneva W. Dew while the first black public health nurse was Mable Ellis. And then, there were many early black doctors and nurses such as Dr. Boisey O. Barnes, Sr., Dr. Frank Sullivan, Sr., Dr. William Hines, Jr., Dr. Joseph F. Cowan, Sr., Helen James, RN., Dr. Frank Hargrave, Dr. George K. Butterfield, Sr., D’arcey Yancey RPH, Dr. Kenneth M. Shade, Sr. (Shade’s Drug Store), and Dr. Isaac Albert Shade (Shade’s Drug Store). The Round House also showcased many local, historical establishments, such as:

1. The first two black-owned theatres: the Ritz Theater and Globe Theater.
2. The first black-owned funeral home: Darden Funeral Home, founded by Charles Henry Darden, the first black undertaker in NC.
5. The three oldest black churches in Wilson: London Church (Organized in 1866), Roundtree Missionary Baptist Church (Est. 1868 and rebuilt in 1976), and St. John A.M.E. Zion Methodist Church (Founded in 1869).

Then, on the other hand, there are numerous individuals who paved the way for blacks in the marketplace:

1. The first black person to serve at the Wilson County Sheriff’s department was Raymond Lucas who started on August 1, 1967.
2. The first black Superintendent in Wilson County Schools was Randolph Sessoms (1996-98).
3. The first black detective was Lee Jackson “Hank” Williams and Rudolph Best, hired in 1950.
4. The first black uniformed lieutenant with the City of Wilson Police Department in 1969 was Frank Jones. He was also the first black Sheriff Candidate in 1974.
5. The first black chief of police in Wilson was Willie R. Williams (1995-2001).
6. The first black officer on the Wilson police force to become Major was David J. Speight.
7. The first black police woman in Wilson was Patricia Raynor Melton (1976-1980).
9. Black actors, artists, dancers, singers, musicians: the Monitors, Georgia Burke (a famous Broadway Star in NYC), the Wilson Chapel Four (the first black quartet to sing on a white radio station in Wilson N.C.; they also sang at the inauguration of President Franklin Roosevelt.), Sherlock Artis, Miguel Nunez Jr., Mrs. Gloria Burks (Considered “Wilson’s First Lady of Song,” she was the first black female invited to sing for a former U.S. President, Jimmy Carter, when he visited Wilson; she is also the first black female invited to sing for the inauguration of the former Governor of N.C., Jim Hunt.), Sallie B Howard (Educator, actress, playwrighter. She appeared in productions that included actors Sidney Poiter and Harry Belafonte.), Cynthia Ellis (singer, actress, casting director), and Mrs. E. Brodie (artist).
The Round House honors those who plowed the rocky ground of racial prejudice and indifference, but it’s impossible to see the fullness of black achievement in the early history of Wilson without mentioning Mr. Samuel Vick, a noted educator and government employee. He was born in Castalia, North Carolina, on April 1, 1863. He received his early education in Wilson public schools and later graduated from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1884. After graduating from Lincoln he returned to Wilson to teach in Wilson’s public schools and later served as principle of the black graded school that bears his name. He was an excellent orator who was able to speak on the important issues of the day. He was also the first black postmaster from 1889 to 1894 and from 1898 to 1903, as well as the owner and operator of the Orange Hotel. He owned the Globe Theater, organized the insurance company Lincoln Benefit Society, Inc., and established The Commercial Bank which was a black-owned bank established in 1920. Moreover, he served as a Presbyterian missionary, established Odd Fellow Lodges across North Carolina, and was a major landowner in the districts, Elba, Irma, Doris (now named Powell). Needless to say, we’ve only touched the surface of all that Samuel was and did, but, as you can tell, he had his hands in many areas of society, influencing many.

As previously stated, when we take the time to explore our past we will find treasures of truth that will give us the motivation to be those who rise above the discouraging voices and influences of public sentiment and bigotry, in whatever form it takes against us. To see the achievements of people like Oliver Nestus Freeman and Samuel Vick, and their contemporaries Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver, we all, despite our skin color, can glean a great deal of strength and courage to be who we were created to be. Of course, this means we will have to be willing to lay aside our excuses and all our dependence on someone or something else to provide us with security. Like these great men, we must dig deep to find the answers within ourselves to achieve great things in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.
Works Cited
