

**Reita Smith**  
**Senate Bill 31**  
**Senate Government Oversight & Reform Committee**  
**Proponent Testimony**  
**February 24, 2021**

Good Afternoon, Chairwoman Kristina Roegner, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Craig and members of the Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Reita Smith, I am a Columbus and family historian who previously served as the Founding Chair of the James Preston Poindexter Foundation. I am both honored and humbled to appear before this body today, to share a subject both dear and special to my heart. I am so pleased and grateful that Senator Craig put forth this bill will designate the two remaining original Poindexter Buildings as Historic Buildings.

There is an old saying “what’s in a name.” Well, the unique name that this village bears is a story of a special individual. His life’s works is reflected in many ways in our lives today. As I present this story, I have come to realize that this story and event is not known to those who are new to Columbus. It is important to put our history in perspective in order to make it relevant to our today and our tomorrows. There is so much I would like to share but I will try to keep this brief.

First, let me share that this journey has been a long one with many dedicated individuals who have worked tirelessly with us to save the Poindexter Village Buildings and the related stories of the African American Community. We have been blessed to receive support from many folks from; the community, elected officials, those who lived in Poindexter Village, and so many community organizations. But the City of Columbus and Ohio History Connection are my heroes in this story.

I cannot share all the details today but this is a quick outline. We here in Columbus have a unique and important story to tell about a special place who bears a special name that tells another unique story of a gentleman, who had a reputation admired by so many in our city, state and nation. It began for me, almost 14 years ago, with a group of civic mind individuals who were concerned with providing good public housing for our citizens. That was the Poindexter Village consisting of 35 buildings nestled on the East side in the African American community and under the ownership and direction of HUD and Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority.

**The Name, let me share a little about Rev. James Preston Poindexter.**

Rev. James P. Poindexter was a self-taught man but, his life’s work was to be of service to mankind. He was a man extraordinary for his time. As a man of Native American, Caucasian, and African American decent, this man of nations was able to transcend his life’s work and become a symbol of hope, integrity, honesty, respect, and leadership. He came to Central Ohio in the early 1800s, in fact, his home was just blocks from where we are today. Poindexter’s home was at 41 North Fourth Street, and his barber shop was across from the State House on High Street were the Huntington Building is today. As a barber, his clients were statesmen like yourselves. He also, befriended at least two Governors who then became Presidents and who sought his opinion and wisdom.

While living on 4th Street, he was also a conductor on the Underground Railroad with a number of leaders in the community. His leadership also brought him in touch with others who were working for social justice. He was elected and appointed to many boards, organizations, and public positions which included; the Columbus City Council, Columbus School Board, School for the Blind and political committees are just a few honors he held. These accolades speak to his respected reputation as a man of honor, honesty, integrity, and a man of faith. He led the faithful at Second Baptist Church for over 40 years. His reputation and being a symbol of Hope, throughout his life. The naming of this Public Housing site Poindexter Village was to be named in his honor is and it why we are here today.

### **Let me tell you a little about the PLACE called Poindexter Village**

At this time, many of you are probably too young to remember the days of the Great Depression. In the late 1930's the nation was recovering from the Great Depression when public housing needs were addressed by President Roosevelt's New Deal. This program was designed to relieve sub-standard housing conditions and create jobs and business opportunities through expanded housing construction. The goal was to provide decent, safe, and affordable housing that would allow residents to transition to home ownership. Columbus architect Howard Dwight Smith, who was the designer of the Ohio State University Horseshoe, designed these buildings to last 100 years. The modern townhouses faced either a street set well back from the sidewalk, they faced a broad park-like commons or courtyards which provided safe spaces for children and families' activities. The Village was a success.

The Poindexter Village story cannot be told without the stories of the people who made the village a community. From the beginning the Village was a place to live. It symbolized hope, safety, economic grounding, cultural education, and family values. There were high standards and values that all families adhered to as a part of their respect for the village and one another. It was the place to be, and had long waiting list for those wishing to live there. The families who were lucky to live there enjoyed the modern amenities of the day; electric ranges, steam heat and telephone lines. It was the place to be. It offered the opportunity for working families to transit in becoming home owners. The village's architecture was designed as a progressive urban planning and landscape it was to be a model for public housing nationally.

Poindexter was nestled in the midst the vibrant black community of Columbus's East Side between two main arteries of Long Street and Mt. Vernon Avenue. The area was known as the "Million Dollar Mile" and called 'the Cultural Capital' of the black community. It was a self-sustaining community in part because of segregation and black business thrived. There were at one time 5 theaters, East Market, many restaurants, a bank, a variety of stores including drug and hardware stores, beauty/barber shops, dry cleaners, professional offices and a hospital and many places of entertainment. This area boasted local musicians who had national reputations, and artists flourishes; making the area a certain stop for bands touring the country. As one of the many successful individuals who were products of Poindexter. Poindexter Village and the community have been share with the world through Aminah Robinson's art work.

Lonnie G. Bunch, The Director of 'the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C. wrote me and said; "As a museum dedicated to documenting, studying and exhibiting

African American life, art, history and culture we recognize the importance of these sacred places which served as respite places for African Americans during the period of segregation.” A place is not just a physical or geographic location, but is where culture is made and histories and identities are created and recreated. We urge you to continue to advocate for the preservation of these important historic properties.”

Next Fall on Oct. 12, will be the 81<sup>st</sup> anniversary of Poindexter’s dedication. Many still remember it as a glorious day in our community. There was a great crowd which included many excited children. These children are now as our elders have warm memories of President Roosevelt in that open car coming to a ‘Place called Poindexter Village.’

I have shared a quick overview of Poindexter Village and the life of Reverend Poindexter. However, I have another story and it is very personal to me. Rev. Poindexter touched my family in many ways. I too was a resident of Poindexter Village at a very special time of my life with my 3 children in the late 1950’s. As my first home, it has special meaning to me and my children. Every resident of Poindexter Village was my extended family; they nurtured us and cared for us. It was a special place, it is home.

As I conclude, I have to honor my special connection thru my ancestors. Rev. Poindexter was a friend of my great-great grandfather Lewis Adams and my great grandfather David Adams. They were co-conductors on the Underground Railroad. Poindexter recommended my Great Uncle Emory Adams to a Special Commission for the 1895 World’s Fair in New Orleans. He also married my grandparents Cory and Jennie Adams, in 1901 on Mann Street (now Hawthorn Ave.) which now runs through Poindexter Village.

I am so proud that we are here today, to share how important the recognition of the two original Poindexter Village Buildings which is being proposed to be preserved as a historic site. We have been blessed also that the Ohio History Connection has included it to be a part of their network as their 59th site to be a Museum and Culture Learning Center in partnership with the James Preston Poindexter Foundation.

God Bless and thank you for your attention.