

JOURNEY FROM JERUSALEM



AN ILLUSTRATED INTRODUCTION TO ERIE'S
AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY, 1795-1995

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JOURNEY FROM JERUSALEM:
AN ILLUSTRATED INTRODUCTION TO
ERIE'S AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY,
1795-1995

BY SARAH S. THOMPSON

*WITH ADDITIONAL RESEARCH
AND ESSAY BY KAREN JAMES*



*ERIE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ERIE, PENNSYLVANIA
1996*

IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, THE SECTION OF ERIE NORTH OF SIXTH STREET AND WEST OF SASSAFRAS STREET WAS KNOWN AS "JERUSALEM."

SOME OF THE CITY'S EARLIEST AFRICAN AMERICAN RESIDENTS LIVED IN THIS AREA.

FRONT COVER: ED CURRY AND HIS WIFE DELLA ARRIVED IN ERIE COUNTY IN 1910. THEY SETTLED IN NORTH EAST, PA., AND ED FOUND EMPLOYMENT AT GENERAL ELECTRIC.
COURTESY ELLEN CURRY.

BACK COVER (TOP TO BOTTOM): MR. AND MRS. ROBERT VOSBURGH, FROM THE FRANCIS BASSETT GLASS PLATE NEGATIVE COLLECTION, ERIE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

REVEREND PAUL MARTIN TOOK A STAND FOR EQUAL RIGHTS OUTSIDE THE STATE STREET WOOLWORTH'S IN THE 1960S.
COURTESY DR. JOHN BARRETT.

DESCENDANTS OF SOME OF THE AREA'S EARLIEST AFRICAN AMERICAN RESIDENTS WERE RECOGNIZED IN A CEREMONY HELD DURING THE CITY'S BICENTENNIAL. SEE PHOTO IDENTIFICATION P. 74.
COURTESY RON NORMAN STUDIOS.



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417 STATE STREET
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*FOR BENJAMIN AND ANNA
AND THE CHILDREN OF ERIE COUNTY;
HISTORY IS YOURS TO MAKE.*



Courtesy of Hayes Houston
Barbara Dykes and her little brother Richard,
German Street, c. 1938.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Research for this publication began in 1993, as the Erie County Historical Society prepared to host the 17th Annual Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Conference on Black History in Pennsylvania. In conjunction with the conference, Erie's first attempt at a comprehensive overview of African American history was presented in the form of the exhibit, "The African American Experience in Erie: 1795 to the Present." Funding for this work came from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and the Pennsylvania Humanities Council. Preparation of the exhibit was a cooperative effort, very much dependent on community support, especially from several individuals who contributed both their time and personal materials. In particular, the exhibit and the beginnings of this book would not have been possible without materials loaned by Ada Lawrence, Ellen Curry, Bernice Akins, and Celestine Davis. Likewise, without the tireless efforts of Johnny Johnson, who spent many hours of his own time doing research and soliciting photographs, the success of the exhibit would have been compromised.

Preparation for the conference and exhibit served to highlight the fact that resources on the history of Erie's African American community were widely scattered, under-researched, and inadequately represented in published sources. Thus in 1995, work for this book was undertaken, supported by a grant from the Greater Erie Bicentennial Commission. Research at this time focused primarily on the twentieth century, an area which was, due to constraints of time and budget, not well developed in the exhibit. Unfortunately those constraints were still in effect this time around, leaving much work still to be done. Ideally, others will pick up the themes identified here and carry them further.

During the past months again many people were very generous with their time and photo albums; specifically, Hayes Houston, Gwen Cooley, David Cole, Denice Manus, Gene Toran, and Fred Rush. Though I cannot name them all here, I very much appreciate the time given to me by all interviewees; their names appear in the bibliography. Erie County Historical Society Librarian/Archivist Annita Andrick and Library Assistant Kelly Loell, and Earleen Glaser of the Mercyhurst College Archives were most helpful and cheerful in handling my research and illustration requests. Kathy Hauser's careful reading of the manuscript facilitated completion of the project. In addition to providing materials, all the people mentioned above gave the invaluable contribution of their support and encouragement for this project. They, along with Karen James, Professor Umeme Sababu, Cheryl Dix, and Don and Mary Muller kept me going when my enthusiasm was dampened by the frustration of difficult and time-consuming research, prejudice from both sides of the aisle, and the responsibilities of motherhood. Thank you all; I hope that the end product does justice to your faith. To my husband Jim: this project involved more work and sacrifice than either of us anticipated, and though it has been a rough road at times, I hope with time we can say, "Horas non numero nisi serenas."



Courtesy of Denice Manus

The well worn phrase "Our children hold the key to the future" is particularly appropriate when the course of history is at issue, for they are the history makers of the future. The Manus children, Denice, Cynthia, and Carlton, enjoying a spring day on their front porch at 24th and French Streets in 1955.

PREFACE

The history of the city of Erie begins in 1795. The history of African Americans in Erie begins at the same time, but, in the unfortunate tradition of U.S. history, standard accounts of the past two hundred years present a one-sided picture which does not adequately represent their presence or contributions. Thus we must prepare a parallel history, an African American history, with the hope that one day these separate stories will be woven together into a more complete historical tapestry.

Throughout this work, sources used are meticulously cited. As a student of history, one of the most important lessons to be learned is the importance of the source. History is the written or oral account of events, filtered, interpreted, and presented by the "historian," an individual with his/her own scope of experience and frame of reference. The personal bias of the author or story teller, however objective he or she may seem or claim to be, will be reflected in the history which is put forth. It is particularly important with the subject matter at hand in this book that sources be addressed because the inherent bias of those sources, be it blatantly or benignly touched by racism, influences the "facts." For example, Erie newspaper accounts, whether dated 1860 or 1960 reflect the opinions of the white community and show little awareness of issues affecting local blacks.

Most important in the consideration of sources is the bias of the author. Previous local histories have been written by whites and where there are passing references to African Americans they are in the context of the white world, written from the perspective of a white person. In this case the author is once again a white person, and though more sensitive to author bias and the lessons of revisionist history, the elemental bias of life experience in the majority group will certainly creep in. It is my hope that this circumstance will be offset by the intent of the book: to get an introductory history on the shelves, and to encourage more in-depth research and writing by others, particularly by African Americans. Ideally this book will serve as a reference point and source of pride for African Americans, especially children first exploring and questioning the scope of our local history. At the very least, it will serve to educate the white community as to the depth and breadth of the African American contribution to Erie's history.

With these goals in mind it should be noted that this is not an academic work. Analysis is limited and broad conclusions are not emphasized. More scholarly analysis needs to be done, and should become more feasible as the body of knowledge increases. This work was written with the general community in mind, with the objectives stated above. Though at times very specific detail is included to illustrate points or to serve as examples of the kind of information which is available, for the most part details of individual accomplishment are not highlighted. Therefore, only a few of the "firsts"



Courtesy of Gwen Cooley

Family, church, and community are the building blocks of local history. Left to right: Sonora Moore, Mary Gore, Ollie Cooley, kids, Mamie Cooley, 600 block of E. 19th Street, late 1950s.

and only some of the community's well-known figures are mentioned. The people and institutions not mentioned certainly deserve recognition, and I hope will receive it in future publications.

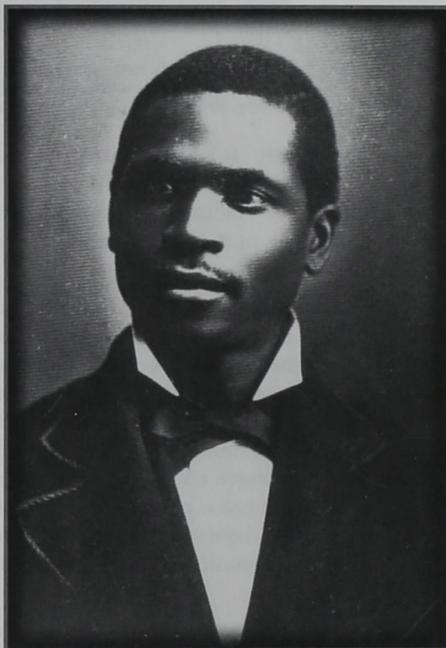
Finally, a note regarding terminology. Within quotations, I have retained the original terminology and capitalization of words, including references to race. Within my own writing, I have come up against the dilemma of correct usage when identifying individuals by race. Emma Lapsansky eloquently describes the issue and offers a solution I have chosen to follow myself. I have excerpted her "Author's Note" from *Black Presence in Pennsylvania: "Making It Home."*

Throughout this piece the author is mindful of the continuing debate about the proper nomenclature for identifying Americans of African heritage. It has a long history of its own.

Beginning at least as early as 1619 at Jamestown when the manifest of the vessel which carried slaves purchased from the Dutch listed the cargo as "20 Negars," Americans recognized the political and social implications of a name. Referred to only as "all others" in the clause of the Constitution that disenfranchised and de-citizenized them, African Americans themselves began in the 1790s to identify themselves as "African," hence such organizational titles as "African Union Society" or "African Methodist Episcopal Church."

This identification was summarily dropped in the 1830s when the convention of Free People of Color insisted that it was important to stress their status as "Colored Americans."

The debate continued through the nineteenth century with a focus on "negro"; then came a NAACP effort devoted to having Negro dignified with an uppercase "N." By 1965 "African," "African-Americans" and "Black," previously considered degrading, had superseded "Negro," at least among young intellectuals and revolutionaries. Recognizing the impossibility of satisfying everyone's conviction about the correct "title," this author has used several interchangeably.¹



Erie County Historical Society

Solomon Smith, from the Francis Bassett glass plate negative collection.

¹ Emma Lapsansky, *Black Presence in Pennsylvania: "Making It Home"* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania Historical Association, 1990), p. iv.

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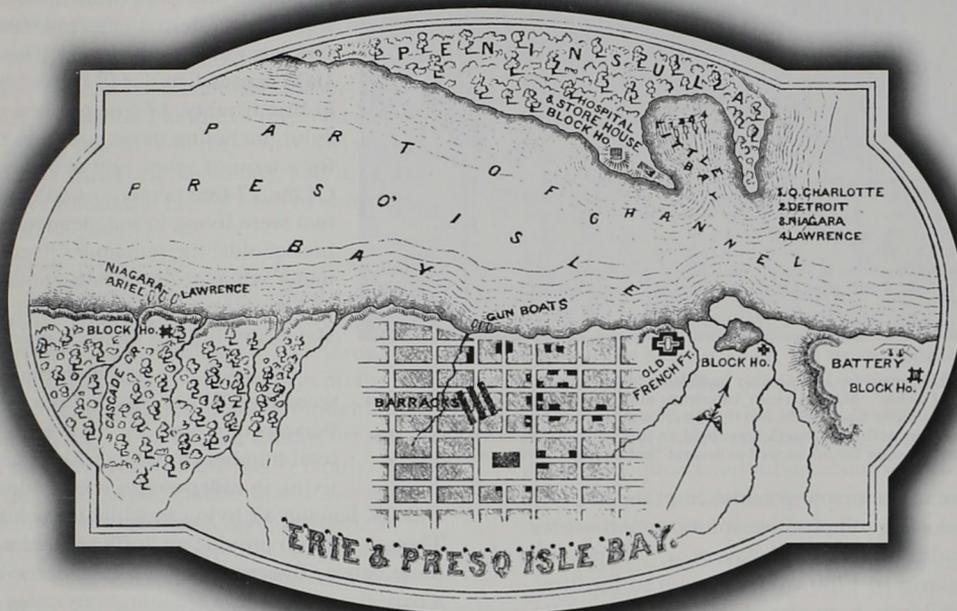
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Photo by Robert Odum, Courtesy of Gwen Cooley

Teenagers at a Booker T. Washington Center dance in the mid 1960s. The band included Larry Jones, the Crumbley Brothers, and Ernest Williams on drums.

PART I
EARLY SETTLEMENT: SLAVES AND "FREE PERSONS OF COLOR"
1795-1830



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“Erie Harbor During the War of 1812.” African Americans were present from the earliest days of settlement in Erie County. They played a significant part in Great Lakes naval engagements of the War of 1812; those who served under O.H. Perry sailed out of Erie in August 1813.

EARLY SETTLERS

In 1795, when the Pennsylvania legislature passed an act authorizing the surveying and settlement of the recently purchased northwest corner of the state, the legacy of black and white co-occupation of North America was already 175 years old. The first unwilling African immigrants had arrived in Jamestown in 1619. Since that time, the dilemma of separate standards based on racial prejudice had

been an integral part of human relations, even in the Quaker society of “Penn’s Woods.”

The first settlers of what would become Erie County brought with them the social conditions and maladies of the eastern U.S. They brought with them, as a matter of course and as part of their personal property, men, women, and children serving as slaves.¹ One of the first parties of surveyors and militia included in their number a male slave.² This servitude was tempered by the ambivalence of the larger Pennsylvania society, which had in 1780 produced the first legislation in the U.S. designed to abolish slavery.³ Rather than boldly striking down the condition viewed by many as

¹ Though I use the term “slave” throughout these chapters, I am in concurrence with Edinboro University Professor Umeme Sababu who reminds students that a more accurate term is “enslaved Africans.” The simple term slave may not accurately reflect the humanity of those described. I believe that the details presented here will illustrate that humanity more completely than has been the case in the past.

² *Nelson’s Biographical Dictionary and Historical Reference Book of Erie County, Pennsylvania* (Erie, PA: S.B. Nelson, Publisher, 1896), p. 822. This man accompanied John Grubb, and may in fact have been Boe Bladen.

³ Lapsansky, p. 3.

Erie County Historical Society

The 1820 census for Erie County included a “Directory of Slaves and Free Persons of Color.” Many African Americans at this time were serving out “a term of years” in white households, but there were a number of independent black households as well. The fourth household on this list is that of Sarah Kelso. The Kelsons held a slave for life as well as several “indentured” African Americans.

abhorrent, the opening sentence of the act bespeaks the compromise solution, “An act for the gradual abolition of slavery...”⁴ Those who were slaves in 1780 would remain so for life; their children, born after 1780, would be obligated to serve only until they reached the age of 28, at which time they would become free. With the passage of this act, many in eastern Pennsylvania chose to free their slaves outright, adding to the state’s significant population of free blacks, especially in the Philadelphia area.⁵ In the western part of the state change came more gradually.

By the time the first Federal Census was taken in the Erie area in 1800, the demographic profile included both slaves and free blacks. Census headings for that time began with “Name of the Head of the Family” followed by columns listing the number of individuals in the household, without identification by name. The categories were “Free White Males,” with breakdown by age, “Free White Females” with breakdown by age, “All Other Free Persons except Indians Not Taxed,” and “Slaves.” The last two columns did not specify sex or age, providing only a total count. “All other Free

Persons” included free blacks and also those “Bound to serve for a term of years” under the Gradual Abolition Act. Though they, or more specifically their “time,” could be bought and sold, these individuals were often referred to as indentured servants rather than slaves. The 1800 census lists 1,448 free whites in Erie County, 17 free persons of color, including those bound to serve for a term of years, and two slaves.⁶ Of the 17 free persons of color, only two were living in independent households; the remainder lived under white heads of households, and were presumably the children of slaves serving out their 28 years.

By 1820, the reported totals were Free White, 8,481; Free Persons of Color, 71; Slaves, 1. The total number of African Americans living in independent households

was 29, leaving 42 living in white households. Though they do provide an “official” record, these census figures should be considered only a partial count. There are numerous cases of individuals who were never recorded by the census takers, but who appear in other sources such as court records, newspaper accounts, or cemetery records.⁷

African American Heads of Households, Erie County⁸

Year	Name	No. in Household	Township
1800	Boe Bladen	1 (himself)	Erie
	Quashi	1 (“ ”)	Erie
1810	Boe Bladen	2	Erie
	Robert Taylor	4	Erie
	Eduard Frances	3	Erie

⁴ *Laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, October 14, 1700 to March 20, 1810, Volume II.* (Philadelphia: Published by John Bioren, 1810), pp. 443-446.

⁵ Lapsansky, p. 11. Philadelphia’s black population in 1820 was 10,000.

⁶ United States Census, Erie County, 1800.

⁷ The primary document research of the First Families project has uncovered many individuals not counted in official census records. The First Families Project is an on-going research effort into the life and culture of African Americans of nineteenth century northwest Pennsylvania, conceived of and lead by Karen James, with additional research by Sarah Thompson. Goals of the project are to research primary documents, increase public awareness of these sources, and increase the amount of published materials on local African American history. (See essay by Karen James included in this publication). The work of the First Families Project will provide a truer accounting of the city’s early black population.

⁸ United States Census, Erie County, 1800, 1810, 1820.

Andrew McKinney	9	Erie
1820 Wm. Morrison	3	Erie
Edward Parker	5	Millcreek
Bough Bladen	2	Millcreek
James Ford	5	Millcreek
Robert McConnell	4	Harborcreek
Caesar Augustus	1 (himself)	Harborcreek

These early heads of households included the first African American land owners in Erie County. The First Families Project has been conducting research on these first African American settlers of the county, and in several cases has traced the family trees to contemporary descendants.⁹

Recent primary document research of deeds, court proceedings, and burial records reveals the complexity and longevity of the master/servant/slave relationship. Many blacks had life-long relationships with the whites who may have originally brought them to Erie County. Fira Logan, a slave for life, lived out her days with the Kelso family. In the case of "indentured" blacks, the former master sometimes provided land, legal counsel, or even burial in the family plot.¹⁰ In other cases, even life-long servants were left to end their days in the county almshouse.¹¹ The degree of paternalism characterizing these relationships varied greatly.

BATTLE OF LAKE ERIE, SEPT. 10, 1813

Given the small percentage of African Americans in the total population, and the preponderance of those serving in an indentured state, the social order in Erie was surely rocked by the events of 1813. In that year, not only did Erie become a player in the strategic opera-

⁹ See First Families descendants photograph in Chapter VI.

¹⁰ First Families Project research on burial records in Erie Cemetery and Gospel Hill Cemetery in Harborcreek.

¹¹ For example, the death notice of Clarissa Logan, long time servant of the Vincent family, reported that she died after spending two years in the almshouse. *Erie Morning Dispatch*, February 26, 1880.

¹² The total population of Erie was around 500 in 1812. The Census of 1810 counted 395 people total, and 635 in 1820.

¹³ W. Jeffrey Bolster, "To Feel Like A Man: Black Seamen in the Northern States, 1800-1860," *Journal of American History* vol. 6, no. 4 (1990): 1173-1199. This article provides an excellent description of the nature and extent of black participation in the maritime trades.

¹⁴ Gerald T. Altoff, "African Americans in the War of 1812," *Journal of Erie Studies* vol 23, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 68. Altoff provides background information on naval service by blacks in general, as well as a description of those who served with Perry.

For Sale.

The time of a stout, healthy NEGRO boy, eighteen years of age, to serve until he is twenty-eight, late the property of John Kelso; deceased.

H. B. KELSO, *Adm'r.*

Erie, March 31, 1821.

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This notice appeared in the Erie paper and advertises "the time" of Bristo Logan, illustrating the effects of the Gradual Abolition Act. He had been one of the African Americans living in the Kelso household not listed by name in the 1820 census. Logan's "time" was purchased by a Millcreek man, and after completing ten additional years of servitude he became a free man, married, ran his own business, and lived out his days in Erie.

tions of the War of 1812, the townspeople also witnessed the influx of between 50 and 120 African Americans who served under Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry. Many of these men came from urban centers on the eastern seaboard, and probably found attitudes in the small town of Erie to be quite provincial.

In 1813, the African American population in the town of Erie was between 20 and 40, and in the entire county was between 30 and 50, or less than 1% of the total.¹² In urban areas on the east coast, on the other hand, African Americans comprised a much larger percentage of the population, and were very active in maritime trade. The seafaring life offered an avenue of opportunity not available on land, and many African American men shipped out of ports such as Philadelphia and Boston.¹³ Some of these skilled sailors also entered into service with the U.S. Navy, and African Americans had already proven themselves in naval engagements prior to the War of 1812.¹⁴

When war was declared against Great Britain and conflict came to the Great Lakes, the tiny town of Erie hosted the building of two brigs and several gunboats, and served as recruiting center and headquarters before the fleet set sail to engage the enemy near Put-in-Bay, Ohio. The building of the fleet was a trial in itself, a test of the frontier community's resourcefulness. Erie's remote location also



Reproduced from *The Erie Story Magazine*
Written primary sources document the presence and commendable performance of African Americans serving under Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry. This depiction is a twentieth century postcard illustration.

made manning the ships extremely difficult, and recruiting efforts extended from the Ohio territory to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Newport, Rhode Island. In addition to all the able-bodied men he could entice into service, Perry desperately needed skilled seamen. Without them he was effectively immobilized. Hence the critical contribution of the corps of African Americans in the crew; they added to the available manpower, and among them were seasoned sailors.¹⁵ The presence of these men helped ensure Perry's victory and the capture of the British squadron during the Battle of Lake Erie, September 10, 1813.

The percentage of blacks present in Perry's crew is established in general terms using first person accounts and correspondence of the time period.¹⁶ These sources contain repeated references stating that about one quarter of the crew were African Americans. However, muster rolls and other naval documents contain only scattered references to race; therefore, attempts to identify individual African Americans who fought in the Battle have yielded frustratingly small amounts of information. A handful of men, serving as ordinary seamen, ship's boys, privates, gunners, and fifers have been identified. Gerald

Altoff, Chief Ranger at the Put-In-Bay National Park site, has done extensive research on the men who served with Perry. He has identified several black men, using sometimes meager leads which must then be pieced together with additional knowledge, as in the following case:

In some instances references concerning individuals on board the fleet are peripheral and obscure. Issac Hardy was an Ordinary Seaman on the Niagara, where he was killed in action. Hardy's wife later applied for a pension from the government. To demonstrate her relationship to Hardy she was required to provide proof of marriage, and the marriage certificate for Issac and Diane Hardy is signed



Reproduced from *The Erie Story Magazine*
This postcard illustration was adapted from a painting by W.H. Powell which hangs in the Capitol in Washington, D.C. It shows Perry transferring from the disabled *Lawrence* to the *Niagara* during the Battle of Lake Erie, September 10, 1813. The man with his hand raised is said to be African American gunner Anthony Williams. (Postcard from the collection of George Albertson, Jr.)

¹⁵ Martha Putney has worked for many years to document the contributions of African Americans in battle and other areas. See her book, *Afro-American Merchant Seamen and Whalers Prior to the Civil War*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978) for additional details.

¹⁶ For description of primary source material see "African American Participation in the Battle of Lake Erie," unpublished paper presented by Sarah Thompson at the 17th Annual PHMC Conference on Black History in PA. This paper also contains lists of crew members sorted alphabetically, by rank, and by ship. Erie County Historical Society Library File.

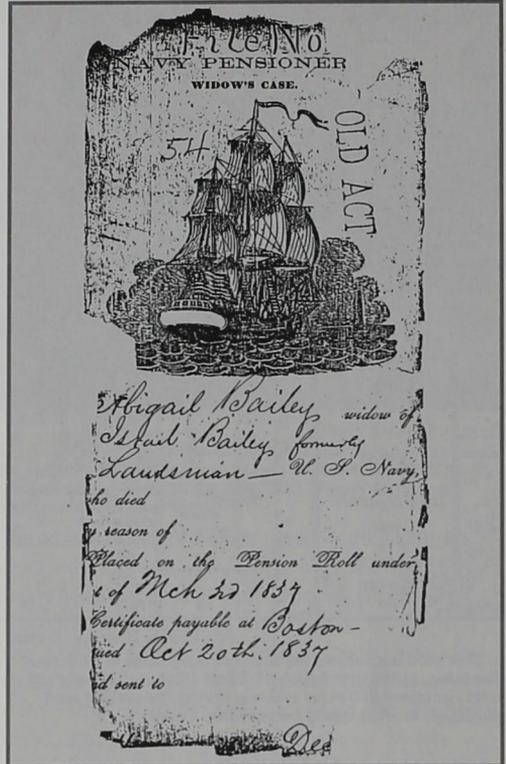
*John Gloucester, Pastor of the First Presbyterian African Congregation in Philadelphia.*¹⁷

The performance, as well as the overall presence of African Americans among Perry's crew is documented by sources such as a letter from Perry's commanding officer in which he notes,

*Perry speaks highly of the bravery and good conduct of the negroes, who formed a considerable part of his crew. They seemed to be absolutely insensible to danger.*¹⁸

This courage in the face of danger may be exemplified in the person of Anthony Williams. Records list Williams' rank as "boy," meaning he was young and served a variety of functions on board. This meager information belies his participation in the rich drama of historical events. Born in Salem, Massachusetts, he purportedly came to Erie from the east coast with a group of men brought to the area from Rhode Island by Captain Jesse Elliot. Research done in the 1930s indicates that Williams was assigned the position of gunner on the *Lawrence*. Heavy fire resulted in decimating casualties among the crew, but Williams remained at his post as others manning the same gun were killed. When Perry was forced to transfer to the *Niagara*, he included Williams in the small party that made the dangerous trip between ships, and placed him in charge of one of the guns on the *Niagara*.¹⁹ This moment was captured for history by W.H. Powell in an 1871 painting which hangs in the halls of the U.S. Congress.

Though no local African Americans are to be found on the muster rolls of Perry's fleet, they probably were involved in the all out effort of local citizens to aid in the construction of the ships from the fall of 1812 through the spring of 1813. During these months they no doubt had occasion to observe or speak with some of the black sailors recruited from the east coast. The information exchanged in these encounters would have revealed worlds about



Reproduced at the National Archives
Navy pension records held at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. provide details about the men who served in the Battle of Lake Erie.

life in Erie and the U.S. in general, but unfortunately will never be a part of the historical record. Several of the African American men who fought with Perry are later found in Erie County census records. Even those who did not remain in the area left their mark on local as well as national history by serving their country during the Battle of Lake Erie.

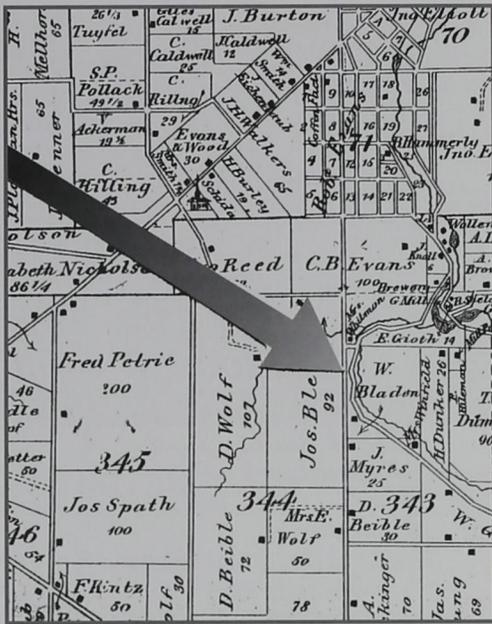
THE COMMUNITY

Among those African Americans who were Erie County residents at the time of the Battle of Lake Erie was Boe Bladen, perhaps the first black man to arrive in the area. The circumstances of his coming to Erie County are not completely clear. He is among those cited as the first purchasers of land from the Pennsylvania Population Company in the late

¹⁷ Altoff, p. 73.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁹ Don Albertson, "Two Stories: One Questionable, One True," *The Erie Story* vol. 36, no. 7 (July 1988): 6-7. Other sources identify this man as Cyrus Tiffany.



Erie County Historical Society

This 1876 map shows the Bladen family farm in Millcreek Township, at the time held by William Bladen. The original tract contained 400 acres and was among the earliest land purchases in what would become Erie County.

1790s. He purchased a full tract of 400 acres at \$1.25 per acre.²⁰ County histories written in late 1800s state that he came to the lake country with three surveyors, and that he was from Maryland.²¹ Bladen is said to have come from Guinea, where he had been royalty, and he reportedly bore tattoos or marks on his body in the tradition of his tribe, although other sources ascribe the marks to the cruelty of his slave days. In 1880, over fifty years after his death, this description appeared in the newspaper:

Among (Grubb's) slaves was Bow, a fine athletic commanding looking African. He had been recently brought from the African seaboard. He claimed to be a prince or chief, and the tattoo marks on his person, and his fine clear cut regular features gave substance to his claim and stamped him as being far superior to the average African.²²

His last will and testament reveals the intriguing information that the land he intended to pass on to his sons would be held by promi-

nent white settler John Grubb until his sons reached the age of twenty-eight. Grubb is listed in census records as having several blacks living in his household. One might speculate that Bladen came to Erie County with Grubb, as Grubb's slave or because his sons were bound to serve Grubb. Boe may have purchased his freedom and the tract of land, or been granted one or both by Grubb, who figures as both early slave holder and, later, abolitionist in county histories.

The Bladen farm, part of the land originally purchased by Boe, was located in Millcreek Township and was passed down through three generations to grandson A.B. Bladen who was described in 1895 as an "energetic, industrious farmer and a good citizen."²³ The parcel of land grew smaller and smaller through the 1800s as pieces were sold off, and eventually the family left the area. Today Bladen Road, off Cherry Street Extension, marks the site of the original homestead.

Other African American families owning property in Millcreek Township during the early decades were the Parkers and James Ford. In Harborcreek, the first black settlers were

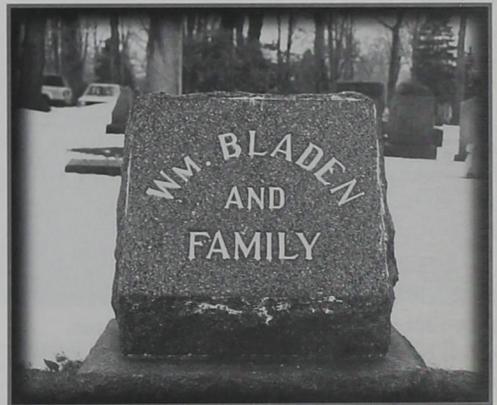


Photo by Sarah Thompson

Several members of the Bladen family are buried in this Erie Cemetery plot. Patriarch Boe Bladen was one of the first African Americans to arrive in Erie County in 1795. William Bladen was Boe's son.

²⁰ *History of Erie County, Pennsylvania*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Warner, Beers & Company, 1884), p. 223.

²¹ There is a Bladensburg in Maryland. In the tradition of slaves taking the name of their point of origin in the U.S., one might assume he came from this area.

²² *Erie Morning Dispatch*, February 28, 1880.

²³ Nelson, p. 822.

Robert McConnell and James Titus, who arrived in the late 1790s as part of the Thomas Rees household. They were at that time four years and one year old respectively. After serving out their twenty-eight years, each received 50 acres of land from Rees in an area of Harborcreek which came to be known as Gospel Hill. McConnell increased his land holdings over the years and at the time of his death in 1871 owned 242 acres.²⁴ Court proceedings of the time, a valuable research tool, reveal McConnell family genealogical information not available through the census, such as names of the wives of Robert's sons.²⁵ This type of family history material can be pieced together to create a better understanding of the county's African American history.

Consideration of Erie's slave holders is illuminating in that the accomplishments of these men, regarded as founding fathers of the community, were achieved with the assistance of the African Americans in their service. During these early years the holding of African Americans was a common symbol of affluence, and society at large condoned such servitude as an acceptable form of labor.

Included here are slave holders and also those who held blacks for a "term of service," because even though it was more comfortable to refer to these individuals as "indentured servants," they were in fact considered the property of those who held them. The list of names includes: P.S.V. Hamot, Rufus Reed, John Grubb, the Kelso family, William Miles, Thomas Rees, Thomas Moorhead, John Burton, and others throughout the county, who in some form or another were working with African American men and women to forge a future in northwestern Pennsylvania.²⁶ In the evolving amalgam of nineteenth century race relations in Erie, slaves and freemen, slave holders and abolitionists often existed side by side; indeed, they often existed in the same person during different time periods. In the years



Photo by Sarah Thompson

Located off of Cherry Street Extension, Bladen Road today marks the vicinity of the former Bladen homestead. It lies just south of an exclusive neighborhood which in the early 20th century forbade the sale of homes to African Americans.

preceding the Civil War, these conflicting and contradictory states of servitude and states of mind would become more incompatible, and the call for real action more pressing. Within the African American community the foundations had been laid for property and business ownership, political presence, and the religious, civic, and educational organizations which grew during the remainder of the century.

Six cents Reward.

Runaway from the subscriber on the evening of the 12th inst. a Negro BOY Servant, aged 19 years, indentured to serve until the age of 28 years—do not know of any physical marks; except of his being fat, short and thickset; of his moral marks, he has many, much of the spirit of Cain, he is in fact a very bad character, altho' at first appearance & acquaintance would seem clever, but ought not to be trusted; he is a very bad subject, and is capable of every bad deed.

P. S. V. HAMOT.

Erie, June 15, 1825.

Erie County Historical Society

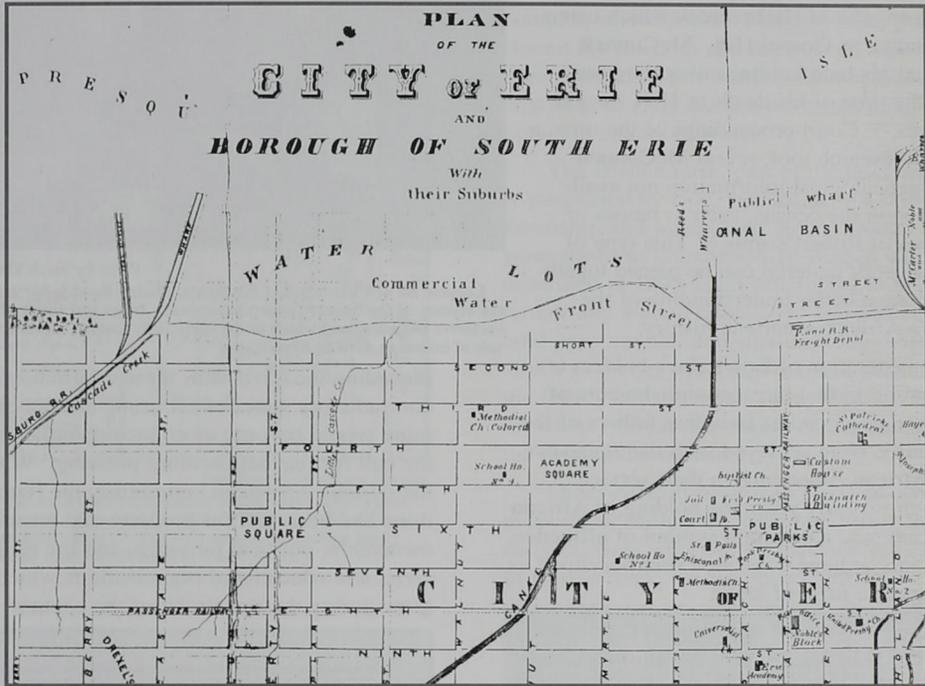
Many of Erie's prominent early white settlers either held slaves or held African Americans serving for a "term of years." The P.S.V. Hamot household included a number of African Americans. Low rewards were offered for runaways who were serving for a term of years.

²⁴ Karen James and Sarah Thompson, "Digging Up Bones: African-Americans in Erie County, 1800 to 1830," *Journal of Erie Studies* vol. 23, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 23.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Multiple sources including county histories and Cheney Collection, Erie County Historical Society Library and Archives.

PART II
 THE COMMUNITY AT MID-CENTURY:
 PRIDE AND PERSEVERANCE, PREJUDICE AND PATERNALISM
 1830-1870



Erie County Historical Society
 This 1867 map shows the "Methodist Church (Colored)" at W. Third and Walnut Streets. The church at the time was already twenty years old. Earlier in the nineteenth century the area north of Sixth and west of Sassafras Streets had been known as "Jerusalem."

The Civil War stands as the signal event of this time period, with the issues of secession and the abolition of slavery dominating political and social intercourse for decades prior to the war years. Even in northwestern Pennsylvania the slavery debate flourished in societies pro or con, in editorial pieces, and ultimately in military service as local men marched off to the battlefields. Comprehension of the scope of the conflict and reasons for risking life and limb varied from individual to individual. For whites the war may have been about patriotic pride and glory; for blacks the realization of justice for all. In either case, many chose to serve; many gave their lives.

Often romanticized in both historical and fictional accounts, the period is certainly one of the most important in our nation's development. It has received much attention in local history books, though the focus has been almost exclusively on military histories of white regiments. In non-military affairs, the phenomenon which has most captivated the imagination of writers and readers alike is the Underground Railroad. Its stories illustrate incredible determination and bravery resulting sometimes in triumphant success or, in other instances, heartbreaking defeat. The case of a fugitive who, after making his way this far, died and was buried in Erie County is one such

example.²⁷ Numerous stories of successful travel to freedom in Canada also exist. However, for a true appreciation of this activity, it must be placed in a realistic context. Without some understanding of local social dynamics, it is impossible to separate myth from reality. Reality involves fewer tunnels and heroic white conductors, and a stronger role for Erie's free black community.

THE COMMUNITY

Throughout the nineteenth century, Erie's African American population remained at less than 1% of the total. Census records show individuals moving into and out of the city; however, these figures are not terribly useful when considered in a vacuum. Because African Americans have traditionally been grossly under-represented in census records, their names may appear erratically or not at all.²⁸ This might mean that the individual was present all along and was simply not enumerated, might be found in another area for a number of years, or may have appeared under a different name. Thus the process of reconstructing details of the population at this time is difficult.²⁹ Easier to document is the fact that within the African American community, the roots of institutions which would carry into the next century were taking hold. Sources such as tax records tell us that African Americans were home and business owners, as well as renters and laborers. Civic, social, and political groups were in the making. Black families were scattered throughout the county, and formed clusters in Millcreek, Harborcreek, and



Bassett Collection, Erie County Historical Society

Elizabeth Waters, whose family came to Erie in the 1830s, married African American Civil War veteran Henry T. Burleigh. Upon his death at an early age, she married another veteran, John Elmendorf. He had served on the *USS Wm. Badger* at the rank of coxswain. Mrs. Elmendorf was a deeply religious, well-educated woman.

Corry. There were few housing restrictions other than the limits of economic means. Integration of the community was not an issue, perhaps based on the comfort of a completely dominant majority group.³⁰

Research on political and educational opportunities has yet to be completed, but independent African American organizations were in evidence. By 1847 the "Wesleyan Methodist Society (colored) erected their building on Third Street in Jerusalem, the western part of Erie."³¹ The church appears in this location on an 1867 map of the city, and is the forerunner of St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Several references to a "Colored School"

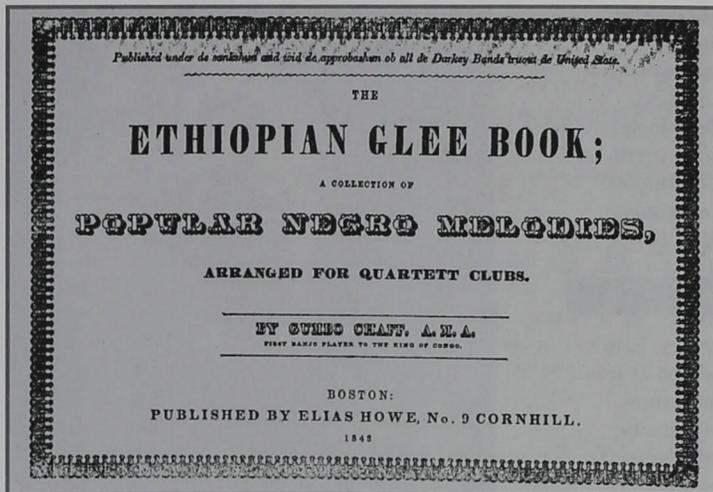
²⁷ "The Underground Railroad in Girard, A nearly lost fragment of local history" *Cosmopolite Herald-Girard, Pa.*, February 12, 1976. Photocopy in Erie County Historical Society Library File, "Underground Railroad, Erie County." In west county accounts of Underground Railroad activity, Elijah Drury of Girard township is mentioned often as a station agent. By one account a slave, in poor physical condition upon arrival at the Drury farm, never recovered and is buried in an unmarked grave in the family cemetery. (The involvement of Elijah Drury is also described in several undated newspaper articles by Walter Jack, probably from the 1930s. Erie County Historical Society Library File, "Underground Railroad, Erie County, PA").

²⁸ James O. Horton recommends John B. Sharpless and Ray M. Shortridge, "Biased Underenumeration in Census Manuscripts: Methodological Implications," *Journal of Urban History* I (1975): 409-39 for a general description of this problem. Related problems exist with City Directory data.

²⁹ While this work is difficult, it can be done. See essay on sources by Karen James, included in this publication, for description.

³⁰ The white population made up 99% of the total population at this time.

³¹ Laura Sanford, *The History of Erie County, Pennsylvania, From its First Settlement* (Erie, PA: by the author, 1894), p. 176.



Battles Collection, Erie County Historical Society

By no means were all residents of Erie City and County supporters of abolition or the cause of the Underground Railroad. Many had little understanding of the conditions of slavery beyond the picture painted by minstrel shows and songbooks such as this one, written entirely in "darkey" dialect.

appear in sources from the 1860s. Miss Louisa Waters taught nineteen pupils on Fourth Street, between Chestnut and Walnut Streets in the "colored church."³² A newspaper notice states that "the name of Miss Dickson" who taught in the "colored school" at the Bethel Church at the foot of Peach Street had been omitted from a printed list of teachers.³³ Some educational efforts involved white philanthropy. In 1821, a committee of leaders in the white community opened a Sunday school and moral society, presumably for disadvantaged citizens, which enrolled 64 white students and 21 black students.³⁴

Probably the best known friend of "the destitute and the colored" was William Himrod who operated a mission house at Second and French Streets. He also provided lots in the portion of Erie known as Jerusalem on the western fringes of town, north of Sixth Street and west of Sassafras Street. The area was named New Jerusalem by Himrod, who had a fondness for biblical names. Local people adopted this name partly because in those days it was very difficult to get there from the center of town.³⁵ Deed research indicates that he sold these lots at a very affordable price to whites

and blacks with a provision that individuals would build a house and reside on the property.³⁶

Early black settlers of the Jerusalem area included Bristo Logan, whose mother Fira was a slave for life brought to Erie by the Kelso family. Bristo's "time" had been sold by the Kelso estate to John Cochran of Millcreek for \$200.00. After reaching the age of 28 years old, Bristo became a free man, married, and lived and worked in Erie until his death. He was perhaps the first of several African American ice cream caterers in Erie.³⁷ Bristo's brother George, whose time had been purchased by Rufus

Reed for 100 barrels of salt (the equivalent of \$500.00), worked for Reed at his store, dock, mill, and distillery. The honest toil of "Reed's George" added to the prosperity of the city.³⁸ The institution of slavery, be it for life or a "term of years" lingered on in Erie through the mid-century. However, as more African Americans moved into freedom, the retention of the fruits of their labor and the accumulation of property in their own right became possible, as evidenced in tax records and deed books.

Response by whites to the advances of blacks was mixed. With slavery and servitude waning, the question of changing social status was raised. Editorial notes from an 1860 Erie paper illustrate a radical solution to the issue of what place African Americans should hold in the U.S. Some African American leaders and many whites had embraced the concept of

³² *Erie City Directory*, 1867-68, p. 196. This is most likely the church found on Third, not Fourth Street, between Chestnut and Walnut.

³³ *Erie Gazette*, August 27, 1863. Photocopy from First Families Project. This may have been Mrs. Susan Vosburgh Dickson, however, further clarification is necessary.

³⁴ Sanford, p. 159.

³⁵ *History of Erie County, Pennsylvania* (Chicago: Warner & Beers, 1884), p. 520.

³⁶ Deed research, First Families Project. Deed for lot #3150, Bristo Logan, Third and Chestnut Streets.

³⁷ *Erie Morning Dispatch*, February 28, 1880.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

returning blacks to Africa where they could establish their own colony free from the racism so prevalent in the U.S. The "back to Africa" or American Colonization Society movement was eventually abandoned by many blacks who came to feel it was merely a way of delaying or avoiding equal justice here in the U.S. While African Americans may have chosen to emigrate for reasons of pride and self-determination, predominantly white American Colonization Societies advocating this solution, including the Erie chapter, may have had mixed motives such as those expressed by the editor of the *Erie Gazette* on February, 9, 1860:

Alexander Simms, a colored man in this City, is now endeavoring to collect money to enable him to take his family, consisting of a wife and eight children to Liberia. We trust he will succeed. If he reaches that far off country, he will find there a genial climate, productive soil, and a population of equals among whom he can enjoy equal social, political rights and privileges. Our advice to all others of his color, who cannot live here contentedly, is, "go and do likewise."

The obvious implication being don't expect or lobby for social justice here.

For most whites, true social equality for African Americans was not a consideration. Peaceful co-existence, without challenge to the existing social order, was taken for granted. As for conditions in the South, the horrors of slavery were difficult to imagine, and were brought to life mainly through literary works. A Girard woman wrote to her son in 1854, "Since you left I have read Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*. ...it is a hard story if it is true."³⁹ At the same time, minstrel shows and songs in "darkey dialect" were popular forms of entertainment, without consideration of the degrading nature of the material.

³⁹ Letter from Mary Webster of Girard to her son Henry. Battles Collection, Erie County Historical Society Archives.

⁴⁰ Sanford, p. 159 and Russell manuscript, Erie County Historical Society Archives, p. 275.

⁴¹ John A. Miller, *A Twentieth Century History of Erie County, Pennsylvania*, 2 volumes. (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1909), pp. 871-872. Miller also states that Catlin invited Frederick Douglass to speak in Erie, and to ensure that Douglass was treated with respect, met him at the train station and walked arm in arm with him down State Street.

\$150 REWARD.

RUNAWAY from the subscriber, negro man
PHILLIP,

Twenty-three years of age, about 5 feet 9 or 10 inches high, stougt made, has a down look and rather stupid, redish eyes; fond of playing the Fife, which he does very well, and took one away with him. — he is fond of liquor, and generally gets intoxicated when an opportunity offers. The above reward will be given if he be delivered to the subscriber near Wheeling, Virginia, or seventy five dollars if secured in any County Jail in Pennsylvania or Ohio, so that he may be had.

A. Ridgely,
Ohio county, Virginia.

Sept. 18, 1825.—(Oct. 6.)

Erie County Historical Society

The large reward posted in this notice indicates that the runaway in question was a valuable slave for life, as opposed to only serving a term of years. Though the slave owner was from what was then still Virginia, the ad was placed in the Erie newspaper, in the belief that the fugitive was heading north.

When forced to confront the issue of slavery on religious or moral grounds, those whites willing to take a public stand formed groups reflecting their beliefs. An Anti-Slavery Society was formed in Erie County in 1836 with James Moorhead as its President.⁴⁰ In the 1850s, Erieite Henry Catlin published an anti-slavery newspaper, the *True American*, from an office at Fifth and French Streets.⁴¹ For those willing to go beyond rhetoric to the realm of physical, financial, and legal risk, there was the Underground Railroad.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN ERIE

Not underground and not a railroad, the Underground Railroad was a network of thousands of individual routes followed by fugitive slaves whose ultimate goal was freedom in the northern U.S. or Canada. Their efforts were



Cheney Collection, Erie County Historical Society
The belfry of the old Wesleyville Methodist Church was said to have harbored many runaway slaves, though many in the congregation did not approve of, or know of, the Underground Railroad activity taking place in their midst.

aided by sympathetic people along the way who provided food, clothing and shelter. In some cases these people may have been self-proclaimed abolitionists; in other cases they were simply responding to the human drama at hand as they found themselves faced with a human being in need of assistance. Such assistance was illegal after passage of a strong Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, and runaways were no longer safe anywhere in the U.S., making Canada the final destination.

Erie's location on the northern boundary of the U.S. made it a natural hub of Underground Railroad activity. Routes converged on Erie County from points west in Ohio, and south from safehouses in Meadville.⁴² Continuing routes to Canada led either across the lake, or east along the shore and overland through New York State. Communities throughout the county were participants in the process.

Southern slave owners vigorously pursued their runaway "property" and hunting down fugitive slaves was a profitable business. Erie newspapers carried notices of rewards offered for the return of slaves. The amount of the reward for a "slave for life" was much higher than for one serving a "term of years," and the incentive to turn in fugitives and collect the bounty was great. In one case though, before federal law mandated that runaways had to be returned to their owners, local courts took the side of the slave. A male slave from Kentucky had reached Erie only to be captured by several professional slave hunters. Public outcry caused the men to be brought to trial, and an attorney was secured for the slave. With Judge John Grubb (slave holder himself in earlier days) presiding, the court ruled that the slave should be set free.⁴³

Tales abound in nineteenth century county histories of fugitives, bounty hunters, safehouses, and secret passages. Unfortunately, documentation of Underground Railroad activity is extremely difficult because as an illegal activity, it had to be carried out in secret. Most written information is based on anecdotal accounts by whites and focuses exclusively on the involvement and heroics of local whites. The extent of white support for runaway slaves is often exaggerated in these after-the-fact accounts. At the time, to assist a slave meant breaking the law, facing fines or jail time, and taking a very bold stand on a very controversial issue.

Though rarely recorded, undoubtedly the African American community was involved in Underground Railroad activity, as substantiated

⁴² Charles L. Blockson, *The Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania* (Jacksonville, NC: Flame International, 1981), p. 4.

⁴³ Early 20th century newspaper account, undated, from "Local History Scrapbook," C-37, roll 2, Erie County Library System. Primary source documentation has not yet been found.

again and again by recent research in the field.⁴⁴

The reasoning behind such a hypothesis is logical: the free black community in the northern states did not consist of passive, unsophisticated victims, but was in fact a highly structured, complex network of human beings with diverse ideas, backgrounds, and life styles, whose differences were often over-ridden by the common bond of race and the injustice it engendered. Concern and support for fugitives was forthcoming in various degrees ranging from full-blown abolitionists to those simply aiding a runaway as chance circumstances provided. In short, the black community had both the reason and the resources to provide assistance, though the additional support of whites was surely needed and appreciated. Furthermore, "all other things being equal, runaways were better advised to trust an unknown African American than a white stranger."⁴⁵

In only one local account is a black man mentioned. Hamilton Waters, described as "a free mulatto known to everybody around Erie," (and the maternal grandfather of Harry Burleigh, see chapter IV), was involved, along with an unnamed young boy, in the transporting of three fugitives by wagon to the home of Frank Henry, a white "conductor" in Harborcreek. These runaways were able to make their way to the mouth of Four Mile Creek, and then crossed the lake to Long Point.⁴⁶ Still being investigated at the present time, the efforts of other free blacks in the Erie



Erie County Historical Society

The Dickson Tavern, located at Second and French Streets, symbolizes for many people Erie's involvement in the Underground Railroad. Other sources have referred to some aspects of the Dickson Tavern story as "A Legend in Doubt."

area are suggested by fragments of evidence. One who may have been involved was Albert Vosburgh, a long-time resident of the city. He was a member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society.⁴⁷ He was also a business and property owner, and had the means to provide assistance in the form of food, clothing, and cash to fugitives. He owned a home at 314 French Street, close to the busy waterfront. His efforts and those of other Erie blacks may never be documented, but must be, if in theory only, acknowledged.

Within the city of Erie, several sites along the bayfront are identified by 19th century writers as part of the Underground Railroad. Identified members of the Anti-Slavery Society and several free blacks lived in the area bordering the bayfront and lake shore, and these people may have assisted fugitives in their homes. In some cases, sites have become part of the Underground Railroad through the process of legend building and the misinterpretation of architectural or engineering elements. One such case is the Dickson Tavern, where early sewer and water works were mistakenly identi-

⁴⁴ James O. Horton, *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), pp. 53-55. Discussion of authors such as Larry Gara, Benjamin Quarles, and others.

⁴⁵ Horton, p. 65.

⁴⁶ Miller, p. 320.

⁴⁷ Vosburgh worked with several prominent eastern PA blacks who were active in the PA Abolition Society. Nelson, p. 742.



Photo by Sarah Thompson

In this small ravine on his farm, Elijah Drury is said to have been converted to the cause of the Underground Railroad after he witnessed the shocking scars on the back of a fugitive slave being assisted by another Girard "conductor."

fied as slave tunnels in the 1970s.⁴⁸ The implausible idea that the tunnels were constructed or used to get slaves down to the harbor in order to board ships for Canada was reported in Erie newspapers, and picked up by other Associated Press papers. The story did make mention of the fact that Historical Society staff and area academics disputed the slave tunnel theory, but these comments were down-played or completely overlooked.⁴⁹ The tunnel myth has been perpetuated by a basement exhibit in the Tavern which features a slave mannequin standing next to part of the original stone foundation. In the shadowy back corner of the space is the alleged tunnel entrance. This is in fact the beginning of a crawl space under an 1840s addition. Other tales describe a tunnel leading to a ravine which once existed between French and State Streets.⁵⁰ These legends have developed a life of their own and refuse to die, fortified by the strong memories of those who visited the site as children. Such is the powerful nature of Underground Railroad history. The value of the exhibit as an aid in interpreting the existence of Underground Railroad activity in the Second Street area must be weighed against the problems of misinterpretation.

The owner of the Dickson Tavern building from 1834 to 1841 was Josiah Kellogg, a Quaker and member of the local Anti-Slavery Society. Kellogg actually lived in another home on Second Street, and may indeed have assisted slaves, but, if he did so he did not publicize his actions. From 1842 through the early twentieth century the building was owned and occupied by the Rogers family. Perhaps during peak years of Underground Railroad activity in the 1850s they sheltered fugitives, assisting them onward under cover of darkness. Family oral tradition tells of hiding places in the basement.⁵¹ In any event, the Rogers and others who harbored slaves in their homes along Erie's bayfront probably

did not take on the enormously impractical task of tunneling down to the water's edge. Reports of tunnels in the county connecting homes to barns or to ravines are more feasible.

Passage to Canada by boat was in reality quite risky, since harbors were closely watched, so many fugitive slaves moved west by land into New York state and traveled through Buffalo and across the Niagara River to Canadian soil. The old Wesleyville Methodist Church and other sites east of the city may have been part of this route.⁵² The rural character of the county would have been more conducive to the hiding of slaves from prying eyes. Some of the ravines, swamps, and streambeds where fugitives may have lain in hiding still exist. Several such sites, described in written narratives, can be found in Girard and the west

⁴⁸ "Slave tunnel may have been early sewer," *Erie Morning News*, March 14, 1979, and again in "Fact or Fiction: workers say tunnel part of Underground Railroad," *Erie Daily Times*, August 15, 1989.

⁴⁹ There are other reported tunnels, such as one stretching from the Reed Mansion (today's Erie Club) down to the bay. This was also most likely constructed by the city for non-Underground Railroad purposes.

⁵⁰ Barr, Hugh, "Underground Railroad: Anti-Slavery sentiment and close proximity to Canada made northwestern PA a haven for the escaping slave," *The Erie Story* vol. 33, no. 2 (February 1985): 6-9.

⁵¹ Ruth Abigail Eismann, "Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry House, Erie, Pa." Typescript, Erie County Historical Society, Library File, "Perry Memorial House."

⁵² Blockson, p. 121.

county area.⁵³ The number of African Americans found in late 19th century census records whose place of birth is listed as Canada serves as a testament to the incredible migration of men, women, and children who may have passed this way on their flight to freedom, only to return when the laws and institutions which permitted their enslavement were abolished.

THE CIVIL WAR

The culmination of the growing tensions which were played out in the drama of the Underground Railroad was the declaration of war between the states, a conflict from which African Americans were initially excluded. During the first years of the Civil War, African Americans were not permitted to enlist in Pennsylvania regiments. The U.S. government, in an effort to avoid taking a stand itself, gave individual states discretion in the recruiting of blacks. Pennsylvania African Americans who were eager to serve their country went to Massachusetts and Rhode Island to join "colored" regiments being raised there.⁵⁴ After the federal government changed its position, Pennsylvania began recruiting men for the U.S. Colored Troops in June of 1863, and eventually raised eleven regiments, ranking the state sixth in the North for colored recruitment.⁵⁵ In all, over 8,000 African Americans served in Pennsylvania regiments during the course of the war.⁵⁶ Men from Erie County were among them. The *Erie Gazette* reported on Nov. 26, 1863, "A number of colored men, probably 10 or 12, recently left this City for the

Erie Weekly Gazette.

ERIE, PA.

THURSDAY, November 26, 1863.

A number of colored men—probably ten or twelve—recently left this City for the purpose of volunteering in Eastern Colored Regiments. Our best wishes follow them. We believe that, like their brethren at Port Hudson and Fort Wagner, they will, if the opportunity is offered, prove themselves true patriots and brave soldiers.

Erie County Historical Society

Although they have yet to be all individually identified, sources such as the newspaper, muster rolls, and military records indicate that members of Erie's African American community served for the Union cause in the Civil War.

purpose of volunteering in Eastern Colored Regiments. Our best wishes follow them. We believe that, like their brethren at Port Hudson and Fort Wagner, they will, if the opportunity is offered, prove themselves true patriots and brave soldiers." This they did.

Samuel P. Bates, in his 1871 *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-5*, describes the state's eleven "colored regiments."⁵⁷ They were made up of men from all over the state who were recruited in various locales and then rendezvoused at Camp William Penn, several miles outside Philadelphia. Bates lists name, rank, date of muster into service, and additional remarks for men in the many companies making up these regiments. Muster rolls recovered for the Forty-first and Forty-third U.S. Colored Troops (U.S.C.T) reveal additional detail. Many of the men in these regiments were mustered in at the recruiting stations in Meadville, Waterford, and Erie. Company G, 41st U.S.C.T. lists over twenty individuals mustered into service in Waterford.⁵⁸ At this time the names have not been traced to specific hometowns.

The 43rd Regiment was the first of the United States Colored Troops to join the forces

⁵³ County histories, cited in the bibliography, and Library Files at the Erie County Historical Society describe numerous Underground Railroad sites and incidents. Though most people associate Underground Railroad sites with buildings, it is important to remember that the greatest portion of a fugitive's journey took place in rural areas, and runaways covered hundreds of miles with only forests, swamps and fields serving as hiding places.

⁵⁴ One documented example is that of George H. Jackson, who was born in Franklin, Pennsylvania but traveled to Rhode Island to enlist. He served 22 months. In 1900 he entered the Pennsylvania Soldiers' and Sailors' Home in Erie. He is interred at the Erie Cemetery. Correspondence from Commonwealth of PA Dept. of Military Affairs, First Families project research.

⁵⁵ Frederick M. Binder, "Pennsylvania Negro Regiments in the Civil War," *Journal of Negro History* vol. 37, no. 4 (Oct. 1952): 385.

⁵⁶ Joe H. Mays, *Black Americans and Their Contributions Toward Union Victory in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (New York: American Heritage Custom Publishing Group, 1994) p. 101.

⁵⁷ Samuel P. Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-5*, 5 vols. (Harrisburg: B. Singerly, State Printer, 1869-71).

⁵⁸ Collection of George Deutsch. Photocopies, Erie County Historical Society Archives.



Courtesy U.S. Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks

Over 8,000 men served in the Pennsylvania units of the U.S. Colored Troops. Many others left the state to join regiments raised in other states such as Massachusetts and Rhode Island, or served in the U.S. Navy. Unidentified soldier.

of the Army of the Potomac and served throughout the Wilderness Campaign. Chaplain J.M. Mickley described the bravery of the regiment under devastating enemy fire at Petersburg:

"Colored non-commissioned officers fearlessly took the command after their officers had been killed or borne severely wounded from the field, and led on the attack to the close.... Here, on this, as on many other fields during this war, for the sacred cause of our republican liberties, free institutions, and the Union, the blood of the Anglo Saxon and the African mingled very freely in the full measure of devoted offering."⁵⁹

Although service in the army was not possible in Pennsylvania until 1863, such restrictions did not apply to naval service. Though quotas were established to limit black participation, the Navy offered an opportunity for service from the first days of the war. Navy service was not segregated, with blacks serving side by side with whites. In addition, pay was higher in the Navy than the Army.⁶⁰ By the close of the war, blacks had come to make up 25% of the Union Navy.⁶¹ An examination of the individual men who served is underway through the African American Sailors' Research Project, a cooperative effort by Howard University, the Department of the Navy, and the National Park Service. Howard University researchers are currently identifying all persons of African ancestry who served; subsequent phases will include "research into pension records, official Navy correspondence, ships' logs, and other relevant records with a view to developing a narrative history of the experience of African American sailors during the Civil War."⁶² Through this work, a number of men who enlisted or reenlisted at the Navy's Erie rendezvous station have been identified, though only one or two appear to have been locals.

A local researcher has uncovered a number of black men who lived in Erie County as Civil War veterans, both Army and Navy. She has surveyed census and other genealogical sources as well as military service and pension records to create a database of Erie County Civil War veterans.⁶³ While many of the men listed in this work came to Erie only as aging residents of the Pennsylvania Soldiers and Sailors Home, others were residents of the

⁵⁹ Mickley quoted in Bates, vol. V, p. 1082. For excellent accounts of African American participation in the Civil War, see also *The Sable Arm*, by Dudley Taylor Cornish, and *The Black Phalanx*, by Joseph T. Wilson, originally published in 1890.

⁶⁰ C.R. Gibbs, "Blacks in the Union Navy," *Negro History Bulletin* Vol. 36, No. 6 (Oct. 1973): 137-138.

⁶¹ John F. Marszalek, Jr., "The Black Man in Military History," *Negro History Bulletin* Vol. 36, No. 6 (Oct. 1973): 123.

⁶² Project description per Professor Joseph Reidy, Howard University.

⁶³ Kathleen Hauser is compiling military and genealogical information on all Civil War veterans who were born, lived, served from, died, or are buried in Erie County. Her work will be published in written and computer data base format. In its final form, it will be possible to sort the data base by race.

city. James Davis, who had served as a Corporal in Co. B, 24 U.S.C.T., in 1890 resided at 357 W. 3rd Street. Several blocks away lived Richard Copper, a naval veteran who continued his maritime career after the war. In 1910 he was a steward on the *USS Wolverine*, but his home port was Erie where he and his wife resided at 305 Chestnut Street.

James L. Fisher, a former

Commissary

Sergeant in Co. F, 3rd U.S.C.T., in 1890 resided at 332 German Street. According to the 1890 census, his occupation was cook and waiter. During the war years two of his brothers, William B. and Charles M. Fisher had also served in the 3rd U.S.C.T., and a third, Robert M. Fisher had served in the Navy. While serving on the U.S. frigate *Powhatan*, Robert "assisted in destroying all the rebel batteries along the Potomac and James Rivers."⁶⁴

Hauser's research of the Descriptive List for Strong Vincent Post #67, G.A.R., reveals several more black Navy veterans, including Harry T. Burleigh's father, Henry T. Burleigh. Henry T. Burleigh, who was born in Boston, Massachusetts, but later lived and died in Erie, joined the Navy on Sept. 9, 1864 as a landsman on the Steamer *General Burnside*. At the time he was mustered into the Strong Vincent Post



Photo by Sarah Thompson

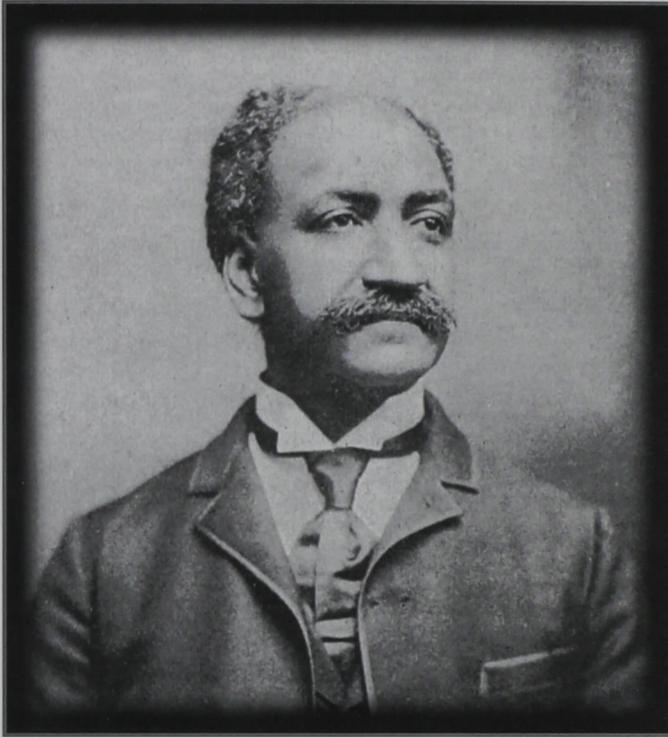
One of four brothers with Civil War service, Robert M. Fisher served in the U.S. Navy. After the war he settled in Erie, and is buried in the Erie Cemetery.

in 1871, he was working as a bank messenger. Upon his death at an early age, his widow married another black veteran of the Civil War Navy, John Elmendorf. Elmendorf worked as a coachman for Congressman William Scott, and later operated a boarding stable. He owned real estate in the city.

With the preparation of the index of all Erie County men who served in the Civil War will come new appreciation of the African American contribution. The worthy accomplishments of these men, impeded by prejudice and then forgotten by history, will be recognized at last.

⁶⁴ *Presidents, Soldiers, Statesmen, 1776-1889* (New York, Toledo, Chicago: H.H. Hardesty, 1889), p. 665.

PART III
WORK AND RELIGION:
1870-1900



Erie County Historical Society

Business owner John S. Hicks was featured in an 1898 publication highlighting Erie's prominent entrepreneurs. The original caption accompanying this photograph read, "Erie's Leading Confectioner and Ice Cream Manufacturer."

During the years following the Civil War the character of modern Erie began to emerge. The forerunners of twentieth century industry were flourishing. Housing patterns and public buildings still in existence today were established, and the influx of the immigrant workforce which would form Erie's diverse ethnic neighborhoods was underway. African Americans came to Erie seeking work along with people from around the world. They, and those who had lived in the city for decades, established themselves in the business community and helped to forge religious and fraternal institutions which have carried over into contemporary life.

In-depth analysis of this time period will be possible only after additional research is completed. What is best known at present has to do with the most affluent African American citizens of the day. This is the old pitfall of all traditional histories, regardless of race or ethnicity; the lives of the wealthy or powerful are much better documented than those of the poor or even average working person. The scanty information which does exist about those viewed by history as "the masses" tends to be locked away in primary documents, if it remains in existence at all.

Also at issue in the case of African American history is the tendency to view the

“black community” as monolithic when in reality there has always been a great diversity of attitudes and life experiences. However, these differences, great or minimal as they may have been, were often over-ridden in response to the forces of racism. In his book, *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community*, James O. Horton has written,

*Here also is a people who, despite their differences, were bound by a shared oppression and the power of a collective history. At crucial times, at points of crisis, this diverse people united to support common goals. It was not necessary that they walk in lockstep in order to form a community of common direction. There were many black experiences, yet one overwhelming common black history.*⁶⁵

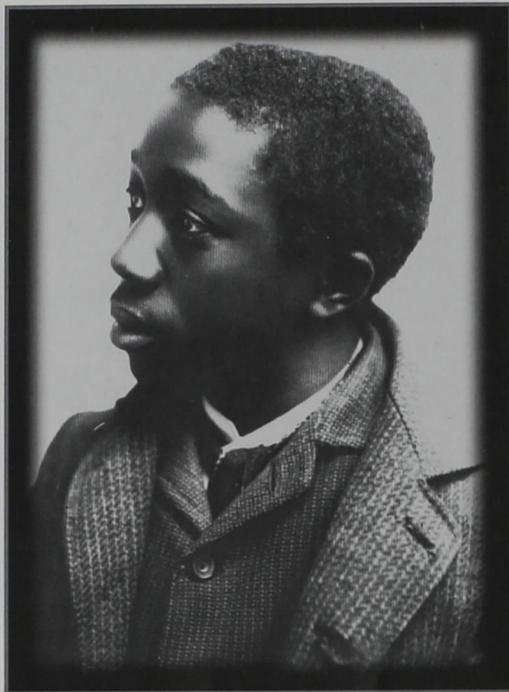
African American residents of the city of Erie, though we may discuss them as the “black community,” upon closer examination display this wide range of experiences and diverse economic status. The 1895 City Directory List of Taxables provides “the list of taxables, Real Estate, Personal Property, and Occupations, as taken from the City Assessor’s books.” Here we find affluent individuals as well as those of very modest means.

Name	Ward	Amount
John S. Hicks	3	12,485
Albert Vosburgh	1	1,975
“ “	2	2,890
“ “	3	185
Albert Rector	1	50
George Jackson	4	50

As is still the case, economic status defined relationships with the white power structure, which in turn determined many other aspects of the African American experience in Erie.

DISCUSSION OF FORMATIVE FORCES

As the city of Erie took shape, the African Americans living within it were influenced by complex forces characterized by scholars as external, internal, and structural. This discus-



Bassett Collection, Erie County Historical Society

Albert Rector, Jr. was the son of a teamster and resided with his widowed mother at 340 E. 7th Street. From 1895 to 1899 his occupation was coachman.

sion is included here to illustrate the sophisticated matrix of human interaction which must be considered for meaningful historical analysis.

(1) *External forces.* These refer very generally to the attitude of whites toward blacks, and more particularly to the manner in which the behavior of whites impinges on blacks. The degree of white hostility toward blacks, levels and types of discrimination, the limits that the white population sets to acceptable racial contact, the existence or lack of violence directed against blacks- all these count as external forces.

(2) *Internal forces.* These refer to the ways in which black urban dwellers have responded to their circumstances, either through the retention or creation of cultural values or institutions that are indigenous to the black community. Religious institutions, folk culture, and

⁶⁵ Horton, p. 3.



McConnell Family Collection, courtesy First Families Project.

Ordinary people and the ordinary details of their everyday lives determine the character of our history. Elizabeth Jackson with baby Mildred, 1906.

distinctive family patterns are examples of internal forces at work in the black community; so too are secular institutions of various sorts and black-based businesses. In addition, the attitude of blacks toward whites, and the behavior that results from such attitudes, also falls under the heading of internal forces.

(3) *Structural forces. These refer to fundamentally nonracial forces at work in the urban system that affect the black community in some manner. The type and quality of various housing stocks, the kind of transportation and communication systems available in a*

particular city, the general economic structure (commercial, manufacturing, etc), and numerous other aspects of urban society can, at any given time, impinge upon black urban dwellers in distinctive ways.⁶⁶

When placed within this complex framework, a much fuller picture of Erie's African American history will emerge. Particularly in terms of both external and internal forces, additional research is needed. The nineteenth century primary sources now under study reveal black business and property owners, integrated schools and black school teachers, and membership in white churches and the Civil War veterans post, circumstances which will surprise some readers. However, despite these positive signs, in the context of the larger Erie community, the African American citizen stood as a member of a very small minority group with little real power.

The historical backdrop of slavery and indentured servitude brought the first African Americans to Erie County. In some cases, the relationship with a former owner resulted in the conveyance of land for a family homestead; in other cases no assistance was forthcoming. Although the institution of slavery and those elderly reminders of its legacy were fading from sight, it remained a part of the community's collective consciousness. Because of

Erie's relative isolation from areas with more significant centers of black population, enlightened changes in attitude came only very slowly. As the economy and the local population evolved over the coming decades, as demographic and economic changes brought more blacks with new expectations, adjustments in social response would become evident. One arena of change was the evolving status of blacks in the work force.

⁶⁶ Kenneth L. Kusmer, "The Black Urban Experience in American History," in *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), pp. 105-106.



Robert J. MacDonald Collection, Erie County Historical Society

Harry C. Thompson held the position of steward on the Great Lakes steamer *Nyanza*. He is pictured here in the dining room of that ship in 1894. He also worked on the *USS Michigan/Wolverine* according to *City Directories*. In his home port of Erie, he lived with his wife Fannie at 448 W. Second Street, and after his days on the lake were over, he worked as a doorman at the Columbia Theater. He died in 1930.

WORK FORCE PROFILES

Census records provide a sampling of African American participation in the work-force in the late 1800s:⁶⁷

Sample of African American Heads of Households and Their Occupations, 1870

Name	Occupation
John Baccus	Keeps restaurant
Robert Baxter	Teamster
William Baker	Works at foundry
Ella Blake	Live-in Domestic
Samuel Blake	Laborer
Henry T. Burleigh	Bank messenger
Martha David	Washwoman
Lisa Davis	Live-in Domestic
Robert Fisher	Works at Car Yard
James Franklin	Janitor at RR office
Alfred Lawrence	Clergyman
Allen Perkins	Whitewasher
Albert Rector	Teamster
James Stewart	Laborer
Albert Vosburgh	Barber
Washington Williams	Working on the RR

⁶⁷ United States Census, Erie County, 1870.

Domestic servant and laborer were the predominant occupations, though some of those listed above would in the following decades rise to prominence in other fields. In fact, in addition to one prominent business and property owner, this sample includes a future business owner, a founder of St. James A.M.E. Church, the first black mail carrier in Erie, and at least two Civil War veterans.

In Nelson's *Biographical Dictionary and Historical Reference Book of Erie County*, published on the occasion of the city's centennial in 1895, several prominent African American citizens and families are featured. Publications similar to this one were done all over the United States. In most cases about half of the book, or in some cases the first volume, was devoted to historical material. The rest of the book, (or volume two) was filled with biographical sketches, paid for and submitted by the subjects or their families. As such, the content of a book like Nelson's was determined by economics and social status, and

inclusion in its pages is more a statement of one's affluence than anything else. To convey both the detail and disposition of the times, several of the sketches from Nelson's *Biographical Dictionary and Historical Reference Book of Erie County* are quoted here in full, others are excerpted.

One of those profiled was James Franklin, who at the age of fifteen had escaped from slavery, made his way to Canada, and then came to Erie in 1866. In 1881, after working for fifteen years as a janitor, he began to manufacture ice cream. His business was located in his home at 49 W. 6th Street until 1889, when he and his neighbors were bought out and relocated to allow for the construction of the Strong mansion (now Gannon University's administration building). By 1890 his residence and business are listed at 714 Sassafras Street, in a "fine brick home." Here, reads Nelson,

...during the warm months of summer he throws open his large double parlors and sells cream to the best people



Mercyhurst College, Sister Mary Lawrence Franklin Archival Center

Hamilton Waters and his grandsons Harry T. Burleigh (on the left) and Reginald Burleigh. Hamilton Waters had been a slave on a Maryland plantation until he was given his freedom in 1832. He was partially blind, possibly due to injuries received during punishment after being caught with a book. In Erie he worked as town crier and lamplighter and owned his own home. His grandsons helped him along his lamplighting route, and learned many of the old slave songs from him while at this task.

*of Erie by the dish, but his business is to manufacture and sell in quantities....Mr. Franklin is a member of the A.M.E. Church, and (his family is) among the best and most respected of colored families in Erie.*⁶⁸

The biographical sketch of Simon Peter West includes information on the "Erie A.M.E. Church," of which he was pastor. Nelson's notes that the church's present membership, thirty-nine, was the largest in its history. Of Mr. West we are told,

Rev. S.P. West was educated at the high school, West Alexander, Washington County, and the California State Normal School; graduating from the latter institution with the degree B.A., in 1886.... He was for three years the principal of the colored schools of Uniontown, Pa., and during this period

*held the position of census enumerator. In 1890 he received the degree of M.E.D. from the California State Normal School.*⁶⁹

In 1891 he began his study of theology. He was appointed pastor in Erie in 1892. While in Erie he was also active in the Erie City Lodge 3509, G.U.O.O.F., Phoenix Lodge No. 11, K.P., and Pythagorean Commandery 68 K.T.⁷⁰

The Waters family arrived in Erie about 1838. Hamilton E. Waters had served as a slave and suffered under the cruelty permitted by that system, partially blinded for life. He came to Erie with his wife Lucinda where they raised and educated their daughters. The eldest daughter, Elizabeth, completed a college education, though she was unable to obtain a position commensurate with her ability in Erie. She worked in a custodial position in the public school system and did private tutoring on the side. She married Henry Burleigh and to them were born four children including a son and a daughter, Harry and Eva. In 1895 Nelson's stated:

*"(This) son, Harry Burleigh, has already attained celebrity as a vocalist, being still under constant tuition, drill and improvement. He gives promise of becoming one of the noted singers of the day.... Eva Burleigh, was for two years a teacher in the Normal and Industrial School in Lawrenceville, VA., and is now a teacher in the Erie public schools. ...The more than a half century of residence of this family has demonstrated the power of determined purpose and effort to improve one's condition.... Many will rejoice with them in the arrival and full fruition of that better state of life in which their efforts to rise have so happily culminated."*⁷¹

Harry T. Burleigh was only beginning his career at this time, and did in fact receive

⁶⁸ Nelson's *Biographical Dictionary and Historical Reference Book of Erie County, Pennsylvania* (Erie, PA: S.B. Nelson, 1896), p. 700.

⁶⁹ Nelson, p. 741.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 741. Erie City Lodge #3509 G.U.O.O.F is listed in the 1894 City Directory as the "Colored Odd Fellows." Chief officers were James Peters, 320 Chestnut, a butler, and W.H. Van Dusen, 26 E. 5th, a head waiter. *Erie City Directory*, 1894, p. 74.

⁷¹ Nelson, p. 742.

national recognition after furthering his career in New York City (see chapter IV). His sister Eva, who in 1895 was a music teacher at Public School No. 4, Fifth and Chestnut Streets, also eventually left Erie to pursue a career in New York City.⁷²

A.B. Bladen, Millcreek farmer, worked land originally purchased by his grandfather Boe Bladen in the 1790s (see ch. 1). Boe's son (A.B.'s father) William had married into another Millcreek Township African American family, the Parkers. A.B. Bladen was a member of the First Baptist Church, served as town clerk in 1893-94, and was a Master Mason and Knight Templar.⁷³

The Vosburgh family, described by Karen James of the First Families Project as being among the first of Erie's black middle class, received the following write-up:

The Vosburgh family: In 1818, Robert and Abigail (Tisdale) Vosburgh, the former from Kinderhook, NY, and the latter from Taunton, Mass., after a brief stay in Ohio, came to Erie and made their home for life. They had nine children, and became identified with Erie. Of their children, Robert filled a position for about forty years, in the New York Custom House, and died in Brooklyn, in December 1889; George W. has been about forty-two years engaged in the Cleveland depot of the L.S. & M.S.R.R. Company; Richard was drowned; Henry and Israel perished in the destruction of the steamer "Erie" August 9, 1841; Charles died in Erie in 1880, and Fitz James at Oakland, CA; their daughter Susan, wife of W.H. Dickson, died in Erie in 1892, leaving Albert sole survivor of the original family in Erie. He has continued his father's business in Erie, much of the time on the same spot.... Albert Vosburgh is among the active, zealous Republicans of Erie. For many years he co-operated with William D. Fortin of Philadelphia; William Nesbitt of Altoona; Robert Stewart of New Castle, and others in



Collection of Barbara Tardy, courtesy First Families Project
Albert Vosburgh was the son of Robert and Abigail Vosburgh, who came to Erie in 1818. Albert, like his father, was a successful and prosperous barber. He owned several pieces of property in the city.

securing to all equality before the law. No one regarded with more intense satisfaction the great changes in the fabric of society. He has traveled extensively. Few are better posted in current and local history. He resides in the family mansion, so long associated with the name. The residence of the Vosburghs, in Erie, is exceeded in time by but few of the old families.⁷⁴

Vosburgh operated a barber shop on North Park Row. His home was at 314 French Street, and he also owned several other pieces of property in the city. In his later years he traveled extensively with his daughter, Florence Alberta Vosburgh, who attended Oberlin College.⁷⁵

⁷² Anne Key Simpson, *Hard Trials: the life and music of Harry T. Burleigh* (Metuchen, NJ & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1990), p. 24.

⁷³ Nelson, p. 822.

⁷⁴ Nelson, p. 741-742.

⁷⁵ Oberlin College correspondence, Tardy family collection, research of First Families Project.

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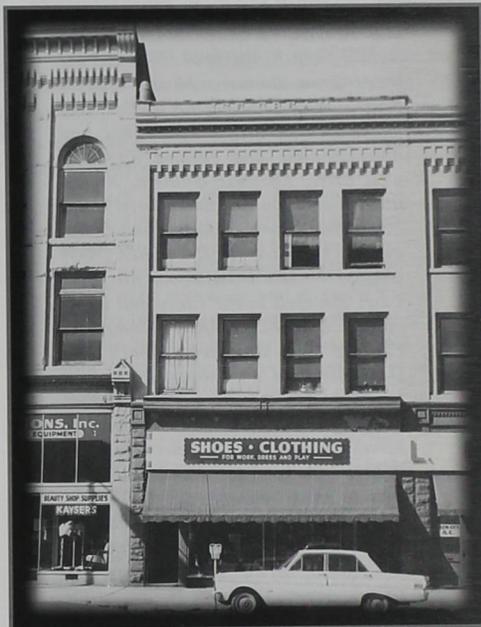
Erie County Historical Society

This 1898 advertisement features the "Hicks Block," completed in 1892. Hicks' operation was "one of the largest ice cream plants in the state."

The most prominent of this emerging middle class was another business owner, John Hicks, whose ice cream factory was among the largest in the state.⁷⁶ His endeavors are described this way:

John Hicks, ice cream manufacturer, confectioner and baker, Erie, PA., was born in Virginia, February 14, 1845, and is the son of John S. and Maria (Foster) Hicks. His father deserves great credit for accomplishing what he did under the adverse circumstances under which he labored. He was a slave, but being more than ordinarily intelligent, and possessed of an indomitable will, but, perhaps, most of all, being desirous of marrying a free woman, he bought himself, it being illegal for a slave to marry a free woman. Mr. Hicks received enough education to enable him to get on very nicely with the ordinary affairs of life. He has been in his present business since 1864, removing from Virginia to Springfield, Massachusetts in 1862. He remained there until 1871, when he came to Erie, and in 1878 engaged in business for himself. He was located at 1406 Turnpike Street for three and a half years, and then removed to 1216 State Street, where he remained nine years. In 1882 he purchased the lot and built a brick veneered structure, which he occupied until 1892, when he

built his present substantial three story building at 1218 State Street, the second story of which he occupies as a residence. The third story is rented for dwelling purposes, and the first floor is used as an ice cream parlor and store-room, while the basement is used as a factory. This is one of the largest ice cream plants in the State, the capacity being 120 gallons per hour. By fair dealing and a thorough knowledge of his business, Mr. Hicks has established a lucrative business, and has succeeded in accumulating comfortable means for himself and his family.... Mr. Hicks was married June 1, 1884 to Miss Frances Reinbold, a daughter of Mr. John Reinbold, of Erie, by whom he has one daughter, Miss Ida Louise Hicks. Mr. Hicks and family are members of the First Baptist Church of Erie; he is a member of the Masonic fraternity, and in politics is a



Redevelopment Authority of the City of Erie

In the center portion of this photo is the left or south section of the Hicks building at 1218 State Street. The picture was taken in the early 1970s, before the building was razed during urban renewal. In this photo, the words "ice cream" are barely legible just below the roof line.

⁷⁶ Hicks is the only African American included in two nineteenth century publications on local businesses. See Sarah Thompson, "100 Years of Black Businesses" *The Journal of Erie Studies* vol. 23, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 100-103 for a synopsis.

Republican. Mr. Hicks deserves great credit for his industry and enterprise. He is one of the most prosperous men of African descent that ever lived in Erie.⁷⁷

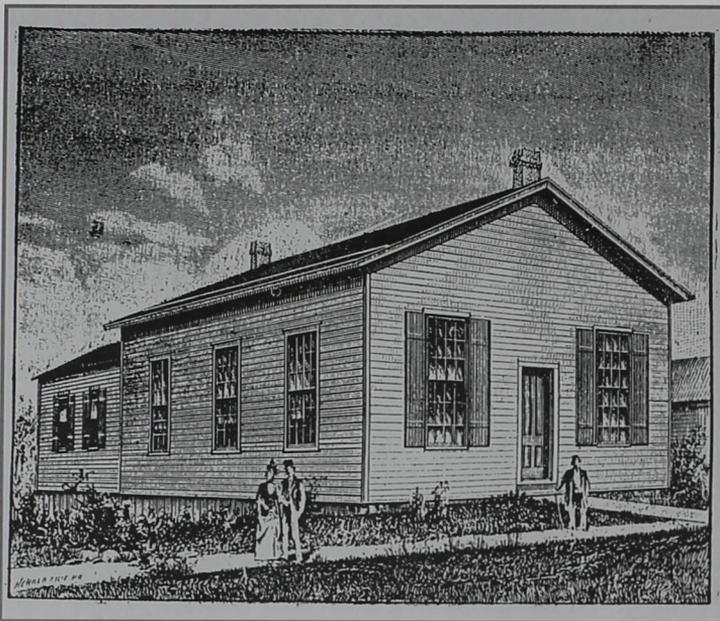
Hicks retired in 1910 and died in 1933. The business was not continued, and other tenants occupied the first floor after 1910. Hicks resided on the second floor until his death. The "Hicks Block" stood until urban renewal in the early 1970s.

These prosperous men, in addition to serving in formal positions as directors of various fraternal and church groups, also served in an unofficial capacity as bankers to the black community. Deeds indicate that property was often put up as collateral while money was borrowed, with the names of some of these men showing up in many transactions.⁷⁸

THE COMMUNITY

City directories list several fraternal organizations. They included the "Colored Odd Fellows," and the "Colored Masons," still active today as the Bay City Lodge #68. The masonic lodge was organized July 30, 1872, by charter members James Grandison, W.R. Barney, James Davis, and John Vosbury.⁷⁹ In politics, a "Colored Republicans Club" met at "their church on West Third Street."⁸⁰

From 1874 until 1915, there was only one African American church in Erie. Saint James African Methodist Episcopal Church was



Erie County Historical Society
St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in 1874. The first formal building was this wooden structure, a gift of the YMCA which was moved to 218 East Sixth Street and then to 242 East Seventh Street. In 1898 work was begun on a new building at the East Seventh Street site. This illustration appeared in an 1888 publication.

formed when a group of people split away from the earlier church known as the Wesleyan Methodist Church. These people were Washington Williams, Mrs. Mary J. Blake, Mrs. Emma L. Franklin, Mrs. Richard Johnson, Mrs. Maria Rector, and Mr. James Williams. Initially they met at the home of Washington Williams. In 1874 they became formally affiliated with the AME Connectional Church and took the name of St. James AME. The first building was a modest wooden structure donated by the YMCA and relocated to 218 E. Sixth Street. In 1881 it was moved again to Seventh Street between Holland and German, where a lot had been purchased. By 1895, the membership had grown to 39, with a "flourishing mite missionary society and a Sunday School with an average of more than 40 persons." Pastors of the nineteenth century included Reverends Wheeler, Phillips, Ross, Herbert, Griffith, Russell, Palmer, Burrell, Brown, Till, Pride, and West.⁸¹ In 1898 work was begun on a larg-

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 706.⁷⁸ Per research by Karen James, First Families project.

⁷⁹ Bay City Lodge #68, "100th Anniversary Banquet June 18, 1988," Commemorative Program, p. 6.

⁸⁰ *Erie Gazette*, October 3, 1872.

⁸¹ Nelson, p. 741.



Photo by Sarah Thompson

Robert H. Baxter was the city's first African American mail carrier. He owned his home at 450 W. 3rd Street and worked as a teamster and driver before becoming a mail carrier in 1885. He was also a member of the Bay City Masonic Lodge, as evidenced by his Erie Cemetery gravestone.

er building, which would carry the congregation into the twentieth century.⁸²

In education, African Americans attended and taught in Erie's public schools. In addition to Eva Burleigh, mentioned earlier in this chapter, another early African American teacher is Nettie Dickson, described in Nelson's as "a successful teacher in the public schools of Erie, ... (and) a highly accomplished oil and crayon artist."⁸³

Turn of the century photographs indicate that blacks and whites attended Erie High School together, and played together on the school baseball team, but details of classroom life are sparse. A tragic incident occurring in 1892 tells a bit more. The high school class of 1890 included three African American girls: Eva Burleigh, sister of Harry T. Burleigh; Margaret Baxter, daughter of Erie's first African American mail carrier and sister of the first African American police officer⁸⁴; and Mattie Dickson, adopted daughter of gun and locksmith William Dickson and Susan

Vosburgh Dickson. Upon graduating from high school, Mattie had taken a year's experience in teacher training to meet school board requirements and was then hired by the Erie School District. She had been appointed to teach at Public School No. 9 when the 1892 fall term began, and had only taught for a month or so when she committed suicide in the home of her uncle, Albert Vosburgh.⁸⁵ Her death received fairly extensive coverage in the newspaper, and her passing was mourned by many. Floral offerings were presented by the Class of 1890, the teachers of School No. 9, many of her pupils, Miss Ida Hicks, Mr. Harry

Burleigh, Mrs. Elmendorf, and Miss Waters, and others.⁸⁶ Pall bearers included several members of her high school class. The general outpouring of sympathy for this young woman is striking, and one wonders what life would have brought her had there been a chance for her to fulfill her promise. While contemplation of her future is pure speculation, and though the circumstances of her death are not fully understood, the circumstances of Mattie Dickson's short life and funeral service serve to illustrate that African Americans were teaching in Erie's schools in the 1890s, and were respected and liked by colleagues, classmates, and friends in the general community.

⁸² St. James AME Church historical fact sheet, produced by the church, Erie County Historical Society Library Files.

⁸³ Nelson, p. 681, (W.H. Dickson sketch).

⁸⁴ Robert Baxter first appears as a mail carrier in the 1886 City Directory; Rufus D.H. Baxter is listed as a policeman starting in 1904.

⁸⁵ "After Life's Fitful Fever," *Erie Dispatch*, November 14, 1892. This article reported that the home belonged to Wm. Dickson, but deed and census research indicates the home was owned by Albert Vosburgh.

⁸⁶ "Miss Dickson's Funeral," *Erie Times*, November 14, 1892.



Courtesy of Ada Lawrence

This photograph features members of the Erie High School class of 1901, including Earl Lawrence, center, back row. As an adult, Earl Lawrence was a band director and music teacher who taught private lessons and also in the county schools.



Courtesy of Helen R. Andrews

Taken in 1888, this group is the Erie High School class of 1890. Second row from the top, fifth from the left is Eva Burleigh, sister of Harry T. Burleigh; to her right is Margaret Baxter, daughter of Robert H. Baxter and later wife of Pleasant Peters. Second row from the bottom, second from the left is Mattie Dickson. Five women from this group taught in the Erie public schools, including Eva Burleigh and Mattie Dickson.

PART IV
TWENTIETH CENTURY GROWTH AND CHANGE:
1900-1940



Courtesy of Ada Lawrence

Booker T. Washington Center Band, Earl Lawrence, director. Standing, left to right: (____), Hayes Houston, Epimetheus Carlisle, Aaron Clanton, Arthur Clanton, William Cole, Sylvester Mount, Walter Thomas, Harold "Chick" Booth. Seated, left to right: Billy Lewis, Harold Moore, David Cole, Earl Lawrence, George Hill, Herman Green, Carlton Franklin. Probably 1937 or 1938, per Hayes Houston.

Though they heralded a rising tide of change which would dramatically alter conditions in Erie and the nation, the early decades of the twentieth century are often nostalgically recalled as a simpler time, before the problems and tensions of later years came to dominate the dialogue of race relations. The apparent harmony of these years may simply reflect a stable status quo between long time African American residents and the larger community, a status quo which would soon be challenged.

After decreasing somewhat at the end of the nineteenth century, between 1900 and 1940 the percentage of African Americans in Erie remained small, increasing only from 0.5% to

1.2% of the total population.⁸⁷ In terms of real people and their lives, this translates to approximately 244 people in 1900 and 1,375 in 1940. Statistics aside, these individuals needed places to live, work, worship, and socialize. Because of the constraints of white society and the increasing autonomy of the black community, these needs were met by the establishment of new institutions including several black churches, a local chapter of the NAACP, and a

⁸⁷ In terms of percentage of the total, the African American population was larger in the early decades of the 1800s than it was at the end of the century. As the institution of slavery was phased out, and as greater numbers of white settlers arrived in the area, the percentage of blacks in the city's population declined. The change was even more dramatic in the county, where in earlier years blacks had been found in many rural townships working for white families as "indentured servants."

community center, all before 1930.

The effects of national events such as World War I and the Great Depression were felt in Erie with the local consequences both impacting and being impacted upon by African Americans. As new waves of immigrants from southeastern Europe added to the diverse ethnic makeup of the city, members of the black community demonstrated their sense of belonging in a number of ways, including for a short time the publication of a magazine called *The New Deal*. Its editors explained “the why and wherefore” of the magazine as follows:

It is with the knowledge that Erie has a large and important population of members of the colored race and with a view to securing for them just a little greater place under the sun in city, state, and nation, that this magazine is launched today and becomes a fixture among the publications of Northwestern Pennsylvania.

Since time immemorial, almost, there has been a substantial colored unit in the city but they have been so thoroughly assimilated into the general population that few have ever stopped to give thought to the fact. For more than half a century, however, many fine negro families have been taking up their residence here and putting their shoulder to the common wheel to the end that Erie might be made a better and more wholesome place in which to live.⁸⁸

The writers describe Erie as an “enlightened community where white brother and colored brother live in complete mutual happiness



Courtesy of Ellen Curry

On the steps of Wayne School, 1930s. In the early decades of the twentieth century, immigrants from around the nation and around the world came to settle in Erie, shaping the modern day ethnic and racial make-up of the city.

and harmony.” They also pledge to “promote wherever possible the interests of the negro” as well as “the advancement of anything (considered) to be for the great and general good of all the people.”⁸⁹ While a closer examination reveals some cracks in the image of complete happiness and harmony, this was a time of positive change and tremendous increase in black institutions.

CHURCHES

In 1915 Shiloh Baptist Church came into existence as a group of individuals met in the home of William Rowe at East Fifth and Wilson Streets after a revival meeting at St. James AME Church. This group of nine met with Reverend M.L. McKissic, visiting from Mount Zion Baptist Church in Wilkes-Barre. Reverend McKissic secured the appointment of Reverend Peter C. Childs as first pastor of Shiloh as of May 29, 1915. Services were held at the East Sixth Street Baptist Church for a little over two years until property was purchased on East Fifth Street. The first church building was dedicated in 1917. After forty years of growth a new structure was dedicated in 1955.

⁸⁸ *The New Deal* Vol. 1, no. 1, Erie, PA (November 1933); 2. Price was 10 cents. It is not known at this time how long the publication was in existence. This copy was found in the Erie County Library File, “Erie African Americans.”

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*



Courtesy of Ellen Curry

Shiloh Baptist Church was founded in 1915. The first pastor was the Reverend Peter Clay Childs. The first building was dedicated in 1917. After years of activity and growth, in 1955 a new building was dedicated under the pastorage of Reverend Jesse L. McFarland. In 1990, the interior of the church was redecorated. Reflecting on the evolution from the days of its founding members and the continuous service to the community, church writers noted, "our work must continually be handed down from generation to generation... as long as there are children to educate, people to feed, loved ones to bury, babies to bless, couples to marry and especially souls to be saved, our work will not be finished." Undated photo, probably 1940s.

In the same year that Shiloh Baptist Church was formed, St. James AME Church suffered a setback in the form of the Millcreek Flood. The devastating rush of water swept the building from its foundations, necessitating renovations which were completed in the early 1920s.

In 1926, Trinity Church of God in Christ was founded under the pastorage of Joseph Williams in a storefront on Peach Street. After the arrival in 1935 of Reverend J.D. Myers, the size of the congregation swelled and a brick building at 17th and Holland was purchased.⁹⁰

In some cases blacks who had been attending white churches split away to form their own congregations. African Americans whose families had for decades worshipped at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Paul, in the 1920s formed a separate group known as the Mission Sunday School with this goal in mind. The split was an emotional one, with

mixed feeling on the part of black and white parishioners alike. Some black families opposed the change, others embraced it. The congregation as a whole voted on the matter, and in a close count, agreed to support a separate service. These separate services were held for many years; however, the group did not evolve into a new church. Some of its members joined other Erie black churches, others returned to the main congregation at St. Paul's.⁹¹

COMMUNITY

The social dynamics behind the establishment of African American churches were a combination of increasing autonomy and independence among blacks and exclu-



Courtesy of Australia Butler

Holy Trinity Church of God in Christ, 17th and Holland. The church was organized in 1926 in a storefront on Peach Street. It has grown continuously since that time. Undated newspaper clipping photo.

⁹⁰ Undated newspaper clipping, collection of Australia Butler. Photocopy in Erie County Historical Society Library File.

⁹¹ Per Karen James, research of St. Paul's records and interviews with Ada Lawrence, Ester Wyatt, and Barbara Baxter Tardy

sionary actions on the part of some white churches. Another factor, according to one of the founders of Shiloh, was a difference in orientation among those coming to Erie from other parts of the country. "During World War I Negroes were gradually coming into this city and were not accustomed to going to a white church, so it was these people who started Shiloh."⁹²

The differences between newcomers and Erie natives were for the most part an urban/rural contrast, compounded in many cases by differences in regional standards of living. Those who had been born and raised in Erie were familiar with a different set of circumstances than those who had been raised in small towns or rural parts of the South. In the South, life was dominated first by race relations and the restrictions of Jim Crow laws, and second by often grinding poverty. While Erie offered some relief from these conditions, opportunistic landlords and employers may have been able to capitalize on the lower standard of living tolerated by some of the new immigrants. In some cases native Erie blacks chose to distance themselves from the newcomers as a separate socio-economic group.

One of the greatest errors which can be made regarding this period is to group all newcomers to Erie into one category. In reality, African Americans coming to Erie, though they shared the goal of seeking a better future through employment in Erie's thriving industrial sector, were a diverse group. Many of the early twentieth century immigrants were from



Courtesy of Ada Lawrence

The "Mission Sunday School" on the steps of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Paul, 1926. African Americans attended St. Paul's throughout the nineteenth century. In the decades of the early twentieth century a separate service was established in an effort to form a break-away black congregation. This group worshipped separately for years but in the end was absorbed back into the main congregation. With the passage of time, many people mistakenly came to believe that the separate service was the result of segregationist action by white parishioners rather than an expression of black autonomy.

the eastern U.S. or upper South. Many came from an urban background, and brought education and skills which made them valuable employees. Those whose background was more rural were representative of the nationwide trend toward urbanization of the nation's African American population, which was especially dramatic in the second half of the century.

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON CENTER & LOCAL NAACP

For the most part, tensions which may have been created by an influx of newcomers to Erie were put aside as endeavors aimed at "community uplift" were undertaken. The Booker T. Washington Center was created January 2, 1923 by a committee of concerned citizens including Harry C. Thompson, Rev. W.H. Price, Mrs. Sallie Parker, Dr. Clarence Cheeks, Mrs. Juanita Cheeks, Mrs. Effie Baxter, and Mr. Charles Franklin. Later in the year, Rev. P.C. Childs and Miss Frances Purdy joined the group, which formed the first board

⁹² "Black Churches' Start Recounted," Undated, unidentified clipping, Mili Roberts' column (photocopy from the collection of Ada Lawrence). Probably *Erie Morning News*, Fall of 1970. Includes interview with Mrs. Lula Elliot, founding member of Shiloh Baptist Church.



Courtesy of Ada Lawrence

The Booker T. Washington Center at its 133 E. Third Street location, where it operated from the late 1920s to 1950. After several additional moves, the Center is today located at 1720 Holland Street.

of directors of what was first called "The Community Center" and then on Sept. 11, 1923 became the Booker T. Washington Center. Miss Emma Roy of Pittsburgh became the first Executive Secretary in November of that year. The first site of the Center was at 313 W. Third Street, where it operated until March 1925, when a move to 133 E. Third Street took place. After another move to 157 East Third Street, the site at 133 East Third was purchased and remodeled. The Center remained here until 1950, providing education, recreation, and public health services.⁹³

In its early years the Booker T. Washington Center also concerned itself with the "social uplift" of the community it served, and handled social justice complaints. In one case the Center found itself in the awkward position of dealing with a number of complaints concerning working conditions at General Electric, which provided a portion of the Center's annual operating capital. In this case, the Center deferred to the NAACP.⁹⁴

The Erie chapter of the NAACP had been founded in 1918, with Mrs. Jessie Pope serving as first president. Mrs. Pope was an active president and represented Erie at several National Conventions. Also active in the first decades of the chapter's existence was Emma Roy. After a period of inactivity, the chapter was re-chartered in 1937 when Mr. Jesse Thompson, A.G. Cook, and Emily Wharton became concerned over the conflict of interest issue mentioned previously as the B.T. Washington Center was faced with complaints against G.E. Jesse Thompson became president at this juncture, and remained active for over fifty years, serving as president on five different occasions and earning the nickname "Mr. NAACP."⁹⁵ He represented a guiding force through the challenging and difficult years which lay ahead.

⁹³ Booker T. Washington Center, undated history, photocopy from BTW Center files, copy in Erie County Historical Society Library File. After several additional moves, an expansive new facility was built at 1720 Holland Street. This is the present location of the Center.

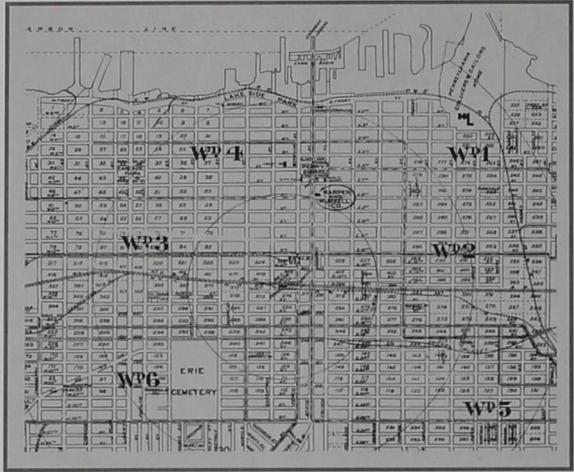
⁹⁴ Larry W. Moore, "History of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People - Erie Branch 1918-1979," *The Journal of Erie Studies* vol 23, no 1 (Spring 1994): 49.

⁹⁵ Interview and conversations with Bernice Akins, 1994-1995.

PROTEST, RESPONSE, & RESTRICTIONS

Pennsylvania has a long tradition of African American civic and political organizations which have provided a forum for the thoughts and concerns of their members. The Pennsylvania State Federation of Negro Women's Clubs, Inc. was founded in 1903, and is a member of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, the oldest black women's organization in the nation.⁹⁶ At the national level, as far back as the 1830s there were active African American organizations, such as those represented at the annual "Conventions of Free People of Colour in these United States." After 1835 the American Moral Reform Society was based in Pennsylvania, where there were also strong chapters of the Anti-Slavery Society.⁹⁷ The participation of local blacks in these very early groups is currently being investigated.

In the twentieth century, even before the formal establishment of the local NAACP branch, Erie's African American community made its voice heard on issues of racism. One instance is documented in the public forum of the newspaper. An *Erie Daily Times* article dated January 15, 1907, carried the subheadline "Afro-American Citizens object to the stage production to be given at the Majestic Theatre next Friday... Adopt strong resolutions." The



Courtesy Erie Historical Museum

During the twentieth century, restrictive housing practices such as steering by realtors and exclusionary statements in deeds and rental agreements resulted in "de facto" segregation, with African Americans concentrated in particular parts of the city.

meeting of protest against the performance of a play titled "The Clansman," a sympathetic portrayal of the South during the Reconstruction period, was held at the African M.E. Church. Rev. J.E. Morris drew up the resolutions, which called for cancellation of the performance because:

"Whereas, we as citizens of the City of Erie (representing as we do a portion of the race known as Afro-Americans) are to be insulted, outraged, and painted in the blackest picture possible, which is untrue of us as respectable citizens."⁹⁸

This may have been the first organized public protest by Erie African Americans, and is an interesting foreshadowing of events to come.⁹⁹

The response of the white community to the calls for social justice and to increasing numbers of African Americans manifests itself in a number of ways, including an increase in racist restrictions. Housing patterns serve as an example. Housing at the turn of the century appears to have been unrestricted except as determined by economic factors. The greatest number of African Americans in 1900 was in Ward 4, the west bayfront area, which was

⁹⁶ Pennsylvania State Federation of Negro Women's Clubs, *Great Grandmother's Goodies* (Collierville, TN: Fundcraft Publishing, Inc., 1992), p. 3. This cookbook contains a brief history of the Pa. State Federation of Negro Women's Clubs. The purpose of this group of clubs is to "promote the physical, moral, intellectual and spiritual welfare of women and girls; to promote their rights to obtain for them opportunity of reaching the highest level in all fields of human endeavor; and through a program of education, patience, tolerance and goodwill to promote harmony, fellowship, and cooperation among all groups of people."

⁹⁷ Robert C. Dick, "Rhetoric of Ante-bellum Black Separatism," *Negro History Bulletin* Vol. 34, No. 6 (Oct. 1971): 133.

⁹⁸ "Kick Against the Clansman: Afro-American Citizens Object to the Stage Production..." *Erie Daily Times*, January 15, 1907. The production did take place, and was viewed by a "large and well-pleased audience." *Erie Daily Times*, Jan 18, 1907. "Theatrical: The Majestic Tonight."

⁹⁹ In an interesting example of differing philosophies within the black community, another article quotes prominent citizen John Hicks as saying that he strongly opposed the protest for a number of reasons, especially because it would only serve to publicize the play. His opinion of the play was, "I think it's a show like many others, that should not be allowed on the American stage because the plot is not to elevate, but its motive is to degrade. It's tendency is to poison the mind of the strong against the weak, or in other words, the white against the black." (*Erie Daily Times*, January 19, 1907, "Colored Citizen Who Witnessed the Clansman").



Erie County Historical Society

Erie's Lawson family did its share for the World War I effort. Mr. Lawson and his four sons served in the army, and Mrs. Lawson, National Deputy in the National Corps of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Army and Navy Union, sold \$1,396.48 in War and Thrift Stamps in two weeks.

home to approximately 125 blacks.¹⁰⁰ Likewise in 1910, the Fourth Ward ranks first, followed by the First, Third, Second, Sixth, and Fifth Wards. By 1920, however, a shift which would carry through the rest of the century had begun, and by 1930 the order by percentage African American population was Second, First, Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth. It appears that African Americans were being "steered" into certain parts of the city. This was accomplished in large part through discrimination by landlords, but was most blatantly spelled out in the case of home ownership, where restrictions were commonly incorporated into deeds.

In the affluent Glenwood area, neighborhood association rules included a clause prohibiting the sale or conveyance of property to African Americans, not to mention many Asian and European groups deemed undesirable.¹⁰¹ These restrictions probably date from around 1920, but the practice continued for many years to come. In 1925 a deed for property near Greengarden Boulevard included a very similar clause regarding "Nationality."

This property shall not be conveyed, occupied, used, sold, assigned, or

leased to any person of Negro or Mongolian descent, or to any person of Hungarian, Mexican, Greek, Armenian, Austrian, Italian, Russian, Polish, Slavish, or Roumanian birth without the consent in writing of the Company, which expressly reserves the right to modify this restriction to the extent of accepting persons of foreign birth whose residence in said section would in its opinion be in no wise prejudicial to the best interests of the property or other purchasers of lots.¹⁰²

With segregated neighborhoods came an "us and them" attitude which carried over into many aspects of life. Prejudice and discrimination were never sanctioned by legislation in Erie, but *de facto* segregation existed, as illustrated by what was common practice. Certain

¹⁰⁰ This was the "Jerusalem" area established by Wm. Himrod in the early 19th century. Research documenting African American housing patterns in this area around the turn of the century is in progress as part of the First Families Project.

¹⁰¹ "Restrictions of Glenwood," undated pamphlet, Erie County Historical Society collections.

¹⁰² "Examination of Title to Land in Res. Tract No. 27, called 'Southland.'" Collection of Bill Schaaf, Manning-Schaaf Company Realtors. Mr. Schaaf has included this document in courses for real estate trainees to illustrate changes in real estate practice. He points out that in 1955 the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act was amended to make it illegal to "refuse to sell, lease, finance, or otherwise deny (real estate transfers) because of a person's race, color, sex, religious creed, ancestry, national origin, handicap, or disability," (PL. 744, in *Modern Real Estate Practice in Pennsylvania*, p. 242) This legislation was further bolstered by federal law in the 1970s.



Courtesy of David Cole

Stevenson's Community Concert Band, at the Glenwood Park Amphitheater, c. 1927-28. Left to right: Ben Leatherwood, Claude Harris, Mary Jones, Sylvester Mount, (____), Otis Hines, Walt Thomas, Robert D. Stevenson, William Cole, Z. Brown, (____), Margaret Williams, "Barber" Bill, Collin Deson, (____), (____) Stinard, Susan Wilson, (____).

restaurants would not serve blacks, hotels would not accommodate them, bowling alleys would not allow African Americans to use their lanes. While there were no written rules supporting these practices, blacks requesting such services were routinely told there were no openings, that they needed reservations, or, they were simply denied admittance. Many stores would not hire an African American for a job "in the front," relegating them instead to jobs in the back handling stock or performing other duties away from the public eye.¹⁰³ Perfectly competent African American women were refused clerical positions in local industries, and were instead assigned to jobs on the assembly lines where many worked several decades until secretarial positions were "opened" to blacks, at which time they distinguished themselves.¹⁰⁴

WORLD WAR I

Even when opportunity was limited by racism, African Americans made their way and

pushed back the barriers with exemplary performance. During World War I local men served in the armed forces where restrictions were severe and recognition for valor was usually reserved for whites. Erie's Lawson family sent a husband and four sons to serve in Europe. Mr. Benjamin Lawson was Mess Sergeant, machine gun detachment, Third Infantry; Samuel G. Lawson was Wagoner, Battery A, 351st Field Artillery; Richard was a Private, Battery A, 351st Field Artillery; Roy was a Private, Fifth Engineer Service, Company 507, American Expeditionary Force; and Walter Lawson was a Cook, Embarkation Mess, Base Section No. 5, Brest, France.¹⁰⁵ On the homefront Mrs. Carrie Lawson sold \$1,396.48 worth of War and Thrift Stamps in two weeks, making a tremendous contribution to the cause as did other African American women across the nation.

Upon returning to the U.S., soldiers who had done all they could with the opportunities they were given found that conditions at home had not improved. In fact, the years after the war saw a worsening of racial tension and violence in many parts of the nation. In Erie, a local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan held meetings downtown.¹⁰⁶

In a very public display of discriminatory treatment, African American contingents, ie. bands and drum and bugle corps, were required to march last in parade lineups in Erie.¹⁰⁷ For

¹⁰³ "Living Erie's black history: 'Color lines' of the 1940s," *Morning News*, February 19, 1994 and "Perceptions of Erie's African American employment opportunities through the decades," *Morning News*, February 25, 1995. These articles are based on the experiences of Ada Lawrence, Ellen Curry, Mazie Smith Purdue, and Sylvia Thurston.

¹⁰⁴ Interviews and conversations with Ellen Curry, 1994-1995.

¹⁰⁵ *Erie County in the World War, 1917-1918* (Canton, Ohio: O.F. Kwett), p. 107.

¹⁰⁶ Moore, NAACP, p. 48.

¹⁰⁷ In one particularly racist display, the last unit in the parade was a little black boy on a hay wagon eating watermelon. Writer Alice Carter remembers that as a child this event served as a painful realization about the realities of racism. Alice R. Carter, *Can I Get a Witness?* (Erie, PA: Erie County Historical Society, 1991), p. 11.



Courtesy of Ada Lawrence

The Lawrence Cleaners, 402 W. 3rd Street, offered cleaning, dyeing, and pressing. The business was founded by Emma Gertrude Lawrence, a widow with several children to support. Under the management of her children, the business operated until Charles Lawrence retired in 1963.

one of the city's early twentieth century black musical groups, it was intolerable. Stevenson's Community Concert Band, directed by Robert D.L. Stevenson during the 1920s, refused to accept the last place in the parade status. The band applied for and was granted a permit to march at a different time on the same day as the city's holiday parade, marching as a one unit parade of pride.¹⁰⁸

BUSINESS PROFILES & JOB OPPORTUNITIES

It was in this context of a small but growing African American population existing within the inherent constraints of racism that several long-lived black businesses were established. Supported by the black community in part because African Americans were not welcome in comparable white businesses, these businesses served many white patrons as well and were an integral part of the business sector.

Carrying over from the nineteenth century was Gem City Ice Cream, owned by the Franklin family. This business continued to serve the community "Ices and Frappes" until around 1920.

City directories of the teens and twenties carry advertisements for the Franklin business and also for Lawrence Cleaners. It had been established by Emma Gertrude Lawrence who

began by taking in laundry to support her family after her husband's death and eventually opened the formal enterprise at 402 W. Third Street. Lawrence Cleaners continued to operate at the original location under the direction of her son, Charles, until his retirement in 1963. Also involved in the business was Emma's daughter, Effie, and her family by marriage, the Lucases.¹⁰⁹ This business was well known to all citizens of Erie.

The Pope Hotel, or as its sign read, "Hotel Pope," was established by William and Jessie Pope and is first listed in the Erie City Directory in 1928. Primary management duties fell to Jessie, who was also very active with the local NAACP. Located at 1318 French Street, the Pope Hotel provided entertainment, food and drinks, and lodging. Jessie Pope's son, Ernie Wright, Sr., took over management responsibilities in 1933 and became owner of the business in 1942 after his mother's death. Ernie Wright brought entertainers to the Pope Hotel who were already or later became nationally known talents. The floor shows attracted numerous patrons, who came to enjoy artists such as Ethel Waters, Duke Ellington, and Pearl Bailey. Ironically, though both whites and blacks patronized the Pope Hotel, visiting black entertainers were not permitted to stay in area "white" hotels, and white clubs and theaters had segregationist restrictions or exclusionary policies in place at the time.¹¹⁰

Though there were no facilities for eating or entertainment, African Americans could find lodging at the Twentieth Century Hotel several blocks away at 1319 Peach Street.¹¹¹ This hotel was owned and operated by Fred and Lucille Gresham, and was commonly called the

¹⁰⁸ Interview with David Cole, July 11, 1995. He does not remember the date of this incident.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Ada Lawrence, January 27, 1994.

¹¹⁰ Philip W. Nykyforuk, "The Pope Hotel, 1928-1978," *The Journal of Erie Studies* vol. 16, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 22-35.

¹¹¹ Cole interview.

Gresham Hotel. It is listed first in 1929 and operated into the 1950s. Those staying at the Gresham Hotel might have traveled a short distance for food or drink to a Twelfth Street club and restaurant run by Ruby Horton. She also offered rooms to rent on the second floor.¹¹²

Other small businesses were to be found in black neighborhoods, operating out of people's homes or in small storefront set-ups. Ernie Wright, Sr. ran one such small business, a small storefront bar on German Street, before he took over at the Pope Hotel.¹¹³ Often these businesses were not formally listed in city directories. Oral histories will provide the information needed to accurately document the black business community at this time.

For the most part African Americans were employed by others, be it large companies, small businesses, or the city. During the early twentieth century Rufus D.H. Baxter served on



Courtesy of Denice Manus

The floor shows at the Pope Hotel featured well known performers and drew sizeable crowds.

the city police force, followed later by his son, Rufus V. Baxter. Other early black policemen included Clarence Kittrell for a time, and Pleasant Peters from 1917 to his death in 1936.¹¹⁴ Postal service workers included



Erie County Historical Society

The Pope Hotel, c. 1933. Located at 1318 French Street, the Pope Hotel was established in 1928 and operated until 1978. The building was razed the year the business closed.

Robert H. Baxter, whose service began in 1886; Charles Franklin, beginning in 1897; and in the late 1930s, Percival Williams.¹¹⁵

Among early African American health care professionals in Erie was Dr. Clarence Cheeks, who came to Erie in 1917 to practice dentistry after graduating from Western Reserve University. He married Erie native Juanita Thompson, opened an office for a time at 1801 State Street, and then moved to 1157 Buffalo Road.¹¹⁶

In 1927, Wendell King helped bring radio to Erie. King was born and raised in New York and was educated at Union College in Schenectady, NY, obtaining his degree in electrical engineering in 1922. After serving in Europe during World War I, he worked as an engineer for radio stations in Cleveland and Ashtabula before coming to Erie in 1927 with radio station WEDH.¹¹⁷

After coming to Erie, Wendell King met and married Iva Gwendolyn Allen. They lived in the Pope Hotel for several months and then purchased their own home on Bird Drive. Though initially greeted with animosity by some neighbors, they lived there for over thirty years. In 1935, King went to work for Bliley Electric Company as a research engineer working with quartz crystals which were at that time

¹¹² Interview with Howard, Mildred, and Gary Horton, April 6, 1995.

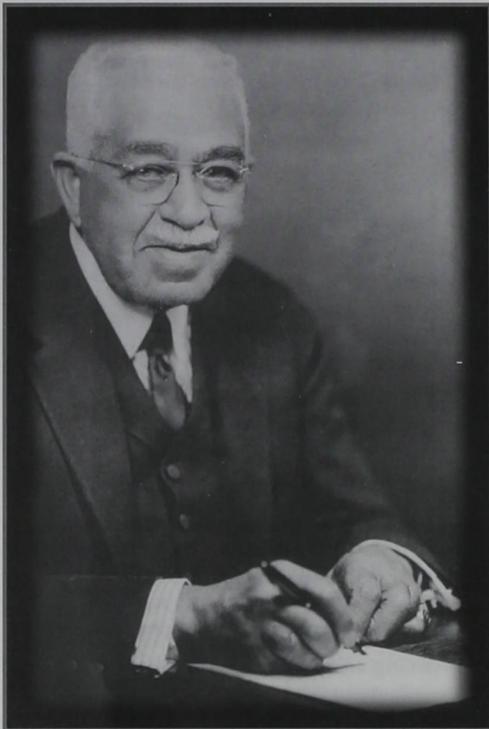
¹¹³ Interview with Hayes Houston, February 1, 1995.

¹¹⁴ Death notice, *Erie Daily Times*, February 17, 1936. He is listed as Marshall P. Peters in Erie City Directories.

¹¹⁵ Moore, "NAACP," p. 49, and City Directory search.

¹¹⁶ "Black Erieite's Heritage Recorded," *Morning News*, October 6, 1970. (Mili Roberts column).

¹¹⁷ *Morning News*, Feb. 22, 1971, Mili Roberts interview with King's widow, Iva Allen King. Mrs. King died July 7, 1976.



Erie County Historical Society

Singer and composer Harry T. Burleigh received national and international acclaim. He was born and raised in Erie, where his mother and grandparents had settled in the 1830s. After moving to New York City, his illustrious career spanned fifty years.

used in amateur radios. An amateur radio buff himself, King's intellectual curiosity and constant tinkering at home eventually lead to the invention of a two-way radio. This type of radio was eventually installed in the city's police cars.¹¹⁸

Between 1900 and 1940, Harry T. Burleigh was making a name for himself on the national scene, and at the time of his death in 1949 he was well-known and well-respected, a "recognized composer and acclaimed singer." Obituaries were carried in major U.S. newspapers, *Time*, and *Newsweek*.¹¹⁹ Burleigh had been raised in Erie, graduating from Erie High School in 1887. He spent the next several years working for the Brown Folding Machine Company and the Colby Piano Company, which employed him as a stenographer but also

allowed him to practice piano in his off hours. He apparently made public performances during this period as well.¹²⁰ In 1892, with the backing of several Erie admirers, he travelled to New York City where he auditioned for and received a scholarship at the National Conservatory of Music. It was there that he made the acquaintance of Anton Dvorak. Their relationship and exchange of ideas led to Dvorak's inclusion of fragments of the spiritual "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" in his "Symphony From the New World." The Czechoslovakian Dvorak sought to include the essence of truly American music in this composition, and believed that African American and Native American themes were an integral part of the uniquely American genre.¹²¹

Burleigh would go on to a national and international performance career, though all the while he remained employed by New York City's St. George's Episcopal church, where he held the position of soloist for fifty-two years. Today Burleigh is remembered most for his work arranging and putting into writing the spirituals born of the plantation slave experience. These songs had been passed down through the generations for the most part by oral tradition only, except where they had been co-opted for use in white minstrel shows. Burleigh felt that the



Collection of Barbara Tardy, courtesy First Families Project

Rufus D.H. Baxter joined the Erie police force in 1903, and first patrolled a large beat bordered by 8th, 18th, Myrtle and Poplar Streets. He later worked as a dispatcher. His son, Rufus V. Baxter also became an Erie policeman.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Simpson, p. 152.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 12-17.

original strength and dignity of the spiritual should be preserved and promoted as an important contribution to American music. He wrote:

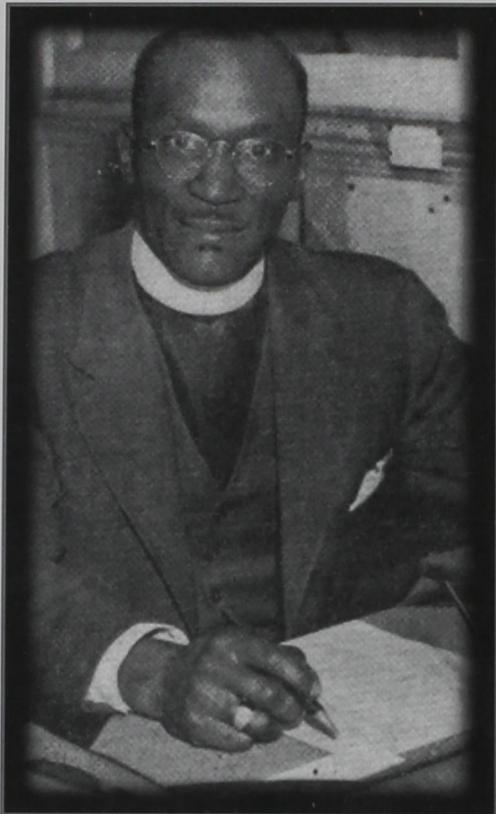
The plantation songs known as "spirituals" are the spontaneous outbursts of intense religious fervor, and had their origins chiefly in camp meetings, revivals, and other religious exercises....(They) are practically the only music in America which meets the scientific definition of Folk Song.

It is a serious misconception of their meaning and value to treat them as "minstrel" songs, or to try to make them funny by a too literal attempt to imitate the manner of the Negro in singing them....Their worth is weakened unless they are done impressively, for through all these songs there breathes a hope, a faith in the ultimate justice and brotherhood of man. The cadences of sorrow invariably turn to joy, and the message is ever manifest that eventually deliverance from all that hinders and oppresses the soul will come, and man-every man-will be free.¹²²

In spite of his achievements in his field, after an impressive funeral service, he was buried in an unmarked grave in White Plains because white cemeteries in New York City would not accept his body.¹²³

THE DEPRESSION YEARS

During the years after World War I, industry in Erie prospered. Several of Erie's biggest companies were well established by 1920: Hammermill had begun operation in 1899; General Electric in 1911; Continental Rubber in 1905. Erie Malleable Iron Works and several other large foundries traced their origins to the nineteenth century. Opportunities in Erie's industrial sector drew immigrants from across the country and from overseas; however, for blacks opportunity was often limited to low-



Erie Daily Times Photo, Courtesy Erie County Library

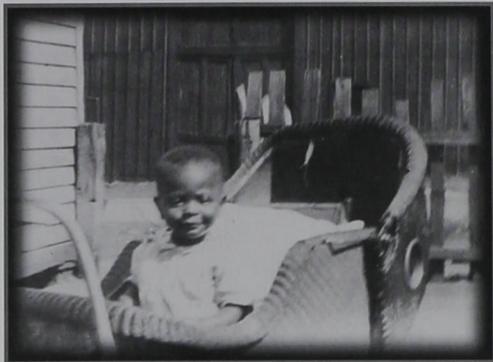
"The Reverend Ernest Franklin Smith shown above at his desk, credited with having done an outstanding job of organizing among the colored people of the west side through his church, the Samaritan A.M.E. and the Welfare Mission, 1115 Walnut Street." *Erie Daily Times*, May 6, 1940.

skill labor such as foundry work.

As elsewhere, the Depression had a debilitating effect on Erie industry, and the hard times trickled down to area workers with devastating personal consequences. Large numbers of workers were laid off for a lengthy period. African Americans may have suffered disproportionately. Though figures have not been compiled for Erie, nationwide 38% of African Americans were regarded incapable of self support in any occupation by 1934, with the figure for whites being half as high at 17%. In urban centers the number of African Americans on relief was up to three or four times the number

¹²² Introduction from "Negro Spirituals, arranged for solo voice by H.T. Burleigh," Franco Columbo Publications, Melville N.Y. 1917. Harry T. Burleigh Collection, "Original Sheet Music" file, Erie County Historical Society.

¹²³ Burleigh died in 1949. In 1994 Burleigh's remains were brought to Erie, where he was re-interred in the Erie Cemetery. Many people attended the memorial services. "Harry T. Burleigh buried in Erie," *Morning News*, May 29, 1994.



Courtesy of Hayes Houston

Children, friends, and relatives of the men and women seeking out the city's employment opportunities swelled the city's African American population before and after World War II. Robert Edward Dykes, German Street, 1938.

of whites.¹²⁴ Already dealing with the problems of discriminatory treatment and population growth which outpaced job opportunities in urban areas, African Americans faced very hard times.

In Erie, relief came from several sources. Many people, black and white, found assistance through the "Poor Board" at the former Jarecki building at 9th and Holland Streets. The eventual establishment of the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) brought additional aid through a wide array of federally funded programs. A variety of projects, including the removal of the city's old streetcar tracks, provided the only work many Erie men had seen for years. Civilian Conservation Corps camps provided out-of-town opportunities for young men. The camps, which were segregated, provided a minimal wage plus room and board in a barracks setting. African American men from Erie participated in Corps conservation and reforestation projects in the Allegheny National Forest.¹²⁵

Private relief efforts were also important. One long standing example of assistance to Erie's African American community on the westside came in the person of Reverend Ernest Franklin Smith. In 1934, Rev. Smith arrived in Erie and established the Good Samaritan AME Zion Church at 1113 Walnut Street. Always concerned with the physical as

well as the spiritual needs of his parish, Smith established the Negro Welfare Mission next door at 1115 Walnut. Soliciting financial support and material contributions from private individuals, he established a nursery school, health classes to encourage improved sanitary conditions, and adult education classes. Meals for needy children were also provided, and in 1940 the Erie Daily Times called the mission "the only place in the city where a Negro transient can stop."¹²⁶

In the course of providing much needed social services, Smith also established himself as a liaison between the black and white communities through his cultivation of white supporters for the mission. He later came to serve as an unofficial recruiter of new employees from the South (especially the Laurel, Mississippi area) for several area employers. Smith travelled between Erie and Mississippi speaking at church gatherings and other informal meetings. Often his efforts bordered on being clandestine as Southern employers were not enthusiastic about the prospect of losing their workforce.¹²⁷ Back in Erie he assisted newcomers with the tasks of finding housing and other necessities. His efforts played a part in shaping the circumstances of the second half of the century.



Courtesy of Hayes Houston

Barbara Dykes and her little brother Richard, German Street, c. 1938.

¹²⁴ John Hope Franklin, and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, Sixth Edition. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 341.

¹²⁵ Interview with David Cole, July 11, 1995 and August 12, 1995.

¹²⁶ "Negro Minister Has Attempted to Better Conditions of His Race," *Erie Daily Times*, May 6, 1940.

¹²⁷ "They Came To Erie Seeking Refuge From Poverty, Racism," *Times News*, April 3, 1983.

PART V
THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE:
1940-1980



Garfield School, Grade 1, with Miss Campbell, March 1958.

Courtesy of Denice Manus

Between 1940 and 1980 dramatic demographic changes occurred in cities across the U.S. Marshalling the resources necessary to secure victory in World War II required massive adjustments in the nation's military, industrial, and domestic sectors and set into motion a rushing wave of emigrants from America's farms to its cities. After the war, continuing redistribution of the nation's rural population to its urban centers brought major social change. The often racist response of Northerners to the influx of Southern blacks competing for jobs and in need of housing and services spurred on the advance of the Civil Rights Movement. During the years of the

Civil Rights Movement the nation and the city of Erie experienced human relations highs and lows as hatred and hope squared off. Some progress was made in the areas of equal rights and equal opportunity in work, education and politics. The spirit of harmony and cooperation at times evident during the Civil Rights protests of the 1960s was superseded by a sense of frustration and sometimes bitter disappointment as the struggle dragged on through subsequent decades with increasingly less support from the federal government or mainstream America.

Erie faced the challenge of change with resistance. The Erie School District can be

WORLD WAR II



Courtesy of Hayes Houston

Hayes Houston relocated to Erie in 1937. He served in the U.S. Army from June 20, 1942 to Dec. 7, 1945 with the 387th Engineer Battalion, 5th Army. After serving in N. Africa, Italy, and the Philippines during World War II, he returned to Erie where he has since lived, worked, and enjoyed an active retirement.

viewed as a crucible of race relations and provides a window on the emotions of the times. In 1940, the city schools were 95% white and 5% black; by 1980 they were close to 18% black, with trends indicating that the percentage of minority students would continue to increase.¹²⁸ These numbers are a by-product of the social and demographic forces at work from 1940 to 1980. Black in-migration to the city and “white flight” to the suburbs reflect the forces which shaped the events of this time period.

During World War II, African American men and women served in more branches of the military than ever before. Again, in the face of ability and the demands of war time, racial barriers were pushed back until finally, near the end of the war, platoons of black and white soldiers were combined to fight against the Germans.¹²⁹ Throughout the war, black soldiers were active on many fronts. Documentation of this service still needs to be done because, as stated by 71 year old veteran Vernon Gambill,

“There were so many contributions by black soldiers in World War II that have been forgotten or simply not told. Part of the reason, I think, is that we did not see too many black correspondents, photographers, or other members of the media, so we had no one to tell our stories.... Unfortunately, yes, bigotry was another reason we were forgotten. There were officers at the time who just didn’t want black soldiers to get any credit.”¹³⁰

After serving with valor, and experiencing the acceptance of a less racist European society, veterans returned home to find a disappointing status quo. In one case black veterans were forced to relocate to second-class “colored only” train cars while white Nazi P.O.W.s sat up front, signaling that the triumph of democratic ideals abroad did not necessarily translate into changed conditions at home.¹³¹ Veterans returning to Erie were not welcome in white American Legion Posts, and had to create a separate unit, the Perry Memorial Post #700.

POST-WAR WORKFORCE

Returning soldiers did find changes in the work force. In 1941, under pressure from labor leader A. Philip Randolph, President Franklin Roosevelt issued an executive order

¹²⁸ William P. Garvey, “Anatomy of a City III,” manuscript dated Nov. 1993, p. 10. Sister Mary Lawrence Franklin Archival Center, Mercyhurst College, Erie, PA.

¹²⁹ Howard Smead, *The Afro-Americans* (New York & Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), p. 99.

¹³⁰ “More of our forgotten veterans,” *Morning News*, November 10, 1994.

¹³¹ Interview with Fred Rush, Jr., July 12, 1995 (experience of Fred Rush, Sr.).

prohibiting discrimination by industries receiving federal defense contracts. As a result of this order many jobs, particularly union jobs which had previously been closed to blacks, opened up. During the post-war period, adjustments in hiring and the laying off of many war-time employees probably eliminated some of these new found jobs.¹³² Still, the prospect of these relatively lucrative jobs combined with increasingly difficult circumstances in the South, drew many blacks to urban areas of the North, including Erie.

The active recruitment of Southern blacks



Erie Daily Times Photo, Courtesy Erie County Library

After establishing the Good Samaritan AME Zion Church in Erie, Rev. Smith made many trips to Mississippi recruiting African Americans for jobs in Erie industries. He personally arranged employment and housing for many newcomers and founded the Negro Welfare Mission at 1115 Walnut Street. Classes and services such as this preschool were offered.

"Rev. E. F. Smith with members of the Nursery School," *Erie Daily Times*, August 28, 1952.



African Americans relocating to Erie from other parts of the U.S. sought employment in the city's thriving industrial sector. Women working in General Electric's Building #6, wrapping coils with insulating material, 1950s or 60s.

Courtesy of Sylvia Thurston

for local industrial work and the migration of families following friends and relatives were part of a larger trend which would result in a major shift in the nation's population from rural to urban areas. The continuing efforts of Reverend Smith and others brought many people to Erie from the Mississippi delta region, though as stated earlier, to generalize about the newcomers is unwise. One can safely say that many people, representing many small towns and rural counties came to Erie from the South, but within these parameters a diversity of locales, backgrounds, and degrees of affluence and education are represented.

IMMIGRANTS FROM THE SOUTH

It is a common mistake to ascribe the hometown of Laurel, Mississippi to all black immigrants to Erie. This misconception stems from the fact that a large number of people did come from Laurel and have maintained a strong connection with home. The Laurel connection has also been emphasized by the local media. A 1983 newspaper report stated that approximately two hundred Erie families had roots in Laurel.¹³³

The town of Laurel in the first half of the twentieth century experienced an economic "boom" as area sawmills flourished. The thriving economy offered a unique opportunity in

¹³² This trend is documented for other cities, but is an area which has not, to my knowledge, been analyzed for Erie.

¹³³ "They Came to Erie Seeking Refuge From Poverty, Racism," *Times News*, April 3, 1983.



Courtesy of the Hi-Lite Club

In 1957, the Hi-Lite Club of Erie became a lifetime member of the NAACP. Members present at the tea held to commemorate the occasion were, left to right: Erma James, Virginia Franklin, Mazie Smith Purdue, Bernice Akins, Bishop J.D. Myers accepting the pledge, Eunice Byrd, Nina Connors, and James Justice.

Mississippi for work other than sharecropping. By 1928 Laurel had a well-established black middle class with effective and respected leadership.¹³⁴ In that year the Oak Park Vocational High School, a new (segregated) facility serving the black community, was dedicated.¹³⁵ Enough graduates would immigrate to Erie in later years that a local chapter of the Oak Park Alumni Association was established here in 1983. The mere fact that Oak Park Alumni chapters exist across the U.S. is testament to the “great migration” from South to North. Large numbers of men and women from Laurel sought better wages and opportunities in the North as uncertain times caused lay offs and strikes at the local mills in the 1950s and 60s.¹³⁶

Any investigation of the immigration of African Americans to Erie will reveal roots reaching across the entire South, from the Atlantic coast to the Mississippi, and the Gulf of Mexico to the Mason-Dixon Line. A reading of recent obituaries of older African

American residents reveals birth places throughout the South: Sayerton, Alabama; Oxford, Mississippi; Quitman, Mississippi; Norfolk, Virginia; Little Rock, Arkansas; Akron, Alabama; Wilkesboro, North Carolina; Houston, Mississippi; Chicaw County, Mississippi. The networks of communication and the economic forces, which both precipitated and facilitated their journeys, should be studied while those who made the move are able to share their stories.

THE COMMUNITY: CLUBS & CHURCHES

Founded in 1937, the Daisy Lampkin Club was an active women’s group throughout this time period, celebrating its fortieth anniversary in 1977. Named for the Pittsburgh civic leader

¹³⁴ Cleveland Payne, *Laurel: A History of the Black Community 1882-1962* (Laurel, Mississippi: by the author, 1990), p. 78.

¹³⁵ See Cleveland Payne, *The Oak Park Story: A Cultural History 1928-1970* (Laurel, MS: National Oak Park High School Alumni Association, 1988) for detailed information.

¹³⁶ Payne, *Laurel*, p. 112.

and NAACP activist, the club raised money for charities and local groups through dinners and yard sales. It is currently inactive, but may be revived in the future.¹³⁷

The Hi-Lite Club celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 1994. Founded November 27, 1954, the club has through the years been involved in numerous projects such as assisting African American orphans or making quilts for newborns infected with the AIDS virus. The group was featured in the official NAACP journal, *The Crisis*, in October 1957 when the club held a tea for the NAACP Fighting Fund for Freedom, and pledged a life membership.¹³⁸

On February 18, 1946, in a house at 258 E. 17th Street, the Second Baptist Church saw its beginnings. The first worship services were held at the Lake City Dwellings social center until an increase in members and resources necessitated a move to larger accommodations. After relocating several times, in 1981 the congregation purchased the present building at 757 E. 26th Street. At that time the church took on a \$318,000 mortgage, which by 1991 had been paid in full. Renovation and expansion projects have continued under the leadership of Reverend Allen B. Green, and the church has seen a continuous "increase in attendance and immeasurable growth in grace."¹³⁹

Immaculate Conception Catholic Church traces its beginning to 1942. Henri Ellman, working as a redcap at Erie's Union Station, met a young priest named Father Paul Obenrader. Ellman informed Father Obenrader that he was interested in founding a parish where Erie's black Catholics could worship and call the church their own. The few black Catholics in the community at that time attended mass at St. Patrick's or St. Peter's Cathedral, but the numbers were increasing. According to Sylvia Thurston's history of the church, "with growing numbers of blacks moving into this



Photo by Sarah Thompson

Immaculate Conception Church was completed May 26, 1948. It met the needs of increasing numbers of African American Catholics in Erie.

area, the number of Catholics was also increasing. Catholicism among African Americans was and still is more prevalent in the South and southwestern areas of our country."¹⁴⁰

Initially, Sister Andrea Bennet organized a summer school for religious education. On December 8, 1946 the future parish's first Mass was celebrated by Father Vincent L. Enright at the Lake City Dwellings social center. Mass was heard there every Sunday until a church was completed May 26, 1948. Though the initial players are now deceased, Mr. Ellman's daughters and granddaughters remain active members, and the parish has grown and evolved to meet the needs of the changing society.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Telephone interview with Lillian Johnson, July 5, 1995.

¹³⁸ Hi-Lite Club Album, and Ellen Curry interviews 1994.

¹³⁹ Second Baptist Church, "48th Anniversary Commemorative Program, March 27, 1994," pp. 5-6.

¹⁴⁰ "Erie's Black Churches," *Morning News*, July 14, 1994.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*



From article by Larry Wayne Moore

The 1941 Pontiacs, front row, left to right: Jack Williams, Robert Beard, Jim Members, Harold "Dobbie" Holden, Buck Green and Buster Dance; back row, left to right: Louis Brown, Andrew West, Fred Rush, Sr., Harvey Porter, Jim "Teeter" Thomas, Claudis Harris, Ernie Roston, John Page, Howard Hill, and "Little Joe."

THE PONTIACS

Probably the most widely known and fondly remembered black organization of the period is the Pontiacs baseball team which traces its roots to a St. James AME Sunday School team of the 1930s. Originally the team's name changed as its sponsors changed, but after a nine year sponsorship by Longnecker Pontiac, the name Pontiacs was continued for the duration, 1936-1956.¹⁴²

The Pontiacs played in Erie's Glenwood League, which in the 1940s and 50s drew large numbers of spectators, especially when the talented Pontiacs were playing. The team played around the tri-state area, with some communities being more receptive to black players than others.

The Pontiacs' ranks were boosted in the 1950s by many players from the recently dissolved Negro League. The Negro League had gone into decline after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947, giving black players an opportunity for potentially more lucrative careers with the formerly segregated National Baseball League. One Negro League team, the Cleveland Buckeyes, had strong ties to Erie. The owner of the team was Ernie Wright, Sr., who also owned Erie's Pope Hotel (see chapter

IV). The Buckeyes were a powerful team. In 1945 they beat Pittsburgh's Homestead Grays to win the Negro League World Series. They challenged the Cleveland Indians that year, but the Indians declined to play.¹⁴³ Several Buckeye players went on to Major League teams, including Willie Grace and Sam Jethroe. Jethroe played for a Brooklyn Dodgers farm team for a year and was then transferred to the Boston Braves in 1950. In his first season he batted .273 and was named National League Rookie of the Year.¹⁴⁴

Grace and Jethroe both settled in Erie after their days as professional players were over, with Jethroe opening his own business, "Jethroe's Steak House," now located on East 18th Street. When they and a number of other former Buckeye players joined the Pontiacs' lineup, they created a powerhouse team. In their final years, the Pontiacs were able to secure the divisional championship.

In an interesting legal case, in July 1994, Jethroe filed suit against the National Baseball League which had denied him pension benefits. The Major League Baseball Players association claims that Jethroe did not play long enough to qualify for benefits, saying he is 358 days short. Jethroe's suit claims: 1.) his service was actually longer than that calculated by baseball authorities, and 2.) his six years in the Negro League should be counted because he tried out for the Boston Red Sox in 1945 and he was denied employment because of his race. Jethroe's attorney states that "denying him pension rights under these circumstances amounts to a denial of his civil rights and is actionable under relevant federal and state law."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Larry Wayne Moore, "The Pontiacs: Black Baseball to Remember," *The Journal of Erie Studies* vol. 23, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 2-14. This reprint of Moore's article contains details about players and team rosters.

¹⁴³ Bruce Thompson, "Negro League Baseball in Erie," *Library Medley*, WQLN, May 20, 1995.

¹⁴⁴ "Sam Jethroe's Turn At Bat," *Sunday Times Magazine*, March 8, 1992.

¹⁴⁵ *Erie Daily Times*, July 14, 1994. Litigation is still pending.

BUSINESS PROFILES & OPPORTUNITIES

During the 1950s, several well known black-owned businesses were established. In 1949 John W. Taylor came to Erie from Midland, Pennsylvania to establish the city's first black funeral home. He purchased the former Booker T. Washington Center building at 133 E. 3rd Street and opened his business there in 1950. Through the years Mr. Taylor was involved in numerous civic and political activities. He was an active Mason and American Legion member and served on several Boards of Directors, including Opportunities Industrialization Center (O.I.C.) and other area institutions. In 1988 the



Courtesy of Ellen Curry

Job opportunities in Erie were often limited to harsh, dangerous physical labor such as foundry work. The local NAACP lobbied to increase employment options. Luther Curry at work at Interlake Iron Works.

John Taylor Funeral Home relocated to 1400 Parade Street, when the Third Street area was redeveloped by Hamot Hospital. John Taylor III carries on the family business.¹⁴⁶

Ruth Mason's funeral parlor was first formally listed in Erie City Directories in 1954. She operated the business out of her home at 1701 German Street, where she also ran a beauty shop. She was very active in the community, and for a time headed the local NAACP Education Committee. She was one of the first African American women to run for City Council.¹⁴⁷ On behalf of the Civil Rights movement her voice was heard on many occasions. In the late 1960s, she served as president of NATO I (Neighborhood Action Team Organization).¹⁴⁸

The Kentucky Barbeque is remembered by many for food which cannot be found in today's world of fast food franchises. It was operated by Daniel House at 1436 Parade Street and was first listed in City Directories in 1954.

In 1950 Mack Bean began work as a plasterer. Through the years he received his journeyman's papers and accumulated valuable experience as a cement finisher. However, employment opportunities were inconsistent



Photo by Kathy Merski

The John W. Taylor Funeral Home was located at 133 E. Third Street from 1950 to 1988, when it was relocated to 1400 Parade Street. John Taylor has been a leader in numerous civic and political organizations.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with John Taylor, Jr., February 2, 1994. See Sarah Thompson, "One Hundred Years of Black Business," *The Journal of Erie Studies* vol. 23 no. 1 (Spring 1994): 110-114 for synopsis.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Ellen Curry. A number of women have been quite active in politics over the years. Margaret Bower had also run for City Council in 1965. A decade later, Ellen Curry ran for County Council and the School Board. Rubye Jenkins also ran for political office during these years. The contribution of women, individually and through clubs and church groups, to the community, the political process, and the cause of Civil Rights, needs to be addressed in further studies.

¹⁴⁸ "Two Meetings Set by Poverty Units," *Morning News*, October 17, 1968.

**FREEDOM MEANS MORE THAN
TOKEN INTEGRATION**



This Erie factory gate is closed to most Negroes. This barrier MUST be removed if Negroes are to have a better standard of living in Erie.



Join the NAACP and support the Fight For Freedom so that your children may escape the bondage of racial segregation in housing and discrimination in employment.

Courtesy of Dr. John Barrett

This NAACP membership flyer from the early 1960s targets discrimination in hiring and proclaims, "You need the NAACP...and it needs you." The youth group photo includes Jessie Thompson, whose long years of service earned him the name "Mr. NAACP."

and in 1977 he and Ed Taylor formed their own business, "B & T Ready Mix." Of his original objective Mr. Bean has said, "I wanted to establish myself as a credible contractor, not only for myself but for the Minority Community and my fellow Minority contracting Brothers."¹⁴⁹ In 1978, B & T Ready Mix became the Mack Bean Construction Company, a successful business which continues today under the direction of Mack's son James Bean.

African Americans seeking employment with local companies found limited opportunities. There was work available in area foundries where historically many blacks had found employment, but the physical cost of working in this hot and dangerous environment was high.¹⁵⁰ The local NAACP worked continuously against discrimination in hiring. Pressure was brought to bear on large compa-

nies like Marx Toys, Kaiser Aluminum, Hammermill Paper Company, Lord Manufacturing, and General Telephone to hire blacks, both men and women.¹⁵¹ In 1955 the local economy suffered a major setback when General Electric closed its refrigeration unit. Individuals involved with the social welfare of the city were concerned that tough economic times and increased competition for jobs would do little to improve race relations.¹⁵²

**Racial Discrimination Is
Still With Us ... In ERIE!**

ERIE BRANCH

NAACP

(National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)

Membership Campaign

Now Underway



This house is condemned, but, because they are Negroes, this Erie family must live in this dwelling —

No Place To Move!

Courtesy of Dr. John Barrett

In the early 1960s the Erie NAACP campaigned for the "elimination of unfair housing practices used in the past by the Public Housing Authority and the Erie Redevelopment Authority." This brochure further states, "We are determined to work until our community has a citizenry fully educated to the acceptance of the cherished American ideal 'that all men are created equal.'" The shacks in this photo, in the vicinity of Franklin Avenue, had no running water and occupants shared a communal spigot.

¹⁴⁹ "Black Community News Bulletin," Fall 1980. Photocopy, Erie County Historical Society Library File.

¹⁵⁰ Al McConnell recalls being advised as a young man by a relative to seek out any other work possible before turning to the foundries for employment for this reason. Conversation, August 21, 1995.

¹⁵¹ Moore, "NAACP," p. 53.

¹⁵² Interview with Randall Falk, July 20, 1995.

HOUSING

During this time period racist attitudes, both benign and malicious, came head to head with the reality of changing times in Erie. The response of whites, as private citizens and as public officials, ranged from alarmist to reformist. Within the black community a number of leaders represented various courses of action. Men and women from both civic and religious spheres played leadership roles. Erma Lindsey and Nola Myers published a neighborhood newspaper called "Sepia News" and kept public attention on the city's public officials. Alex Thompson was a catalyst for community action and change in the political arena. Clergymen such as Reverends Paul Martin, J.D. Myers, Rufus Arteberry and others played active roles. No longer would it be possible for the issues of inadequate housing, unfair treatment in the education system, or discrimination in employment to be ignored.

The first issue to "go public" in a big way involved patterns of housing. A newspaper article dated April 28, 1959 carried the headline "Erie Negro Population 8,000; Gain is 4,500 for Ten Years." The report was based on a segment of the WSEE TV program "Future," featuring Erie Community Relations Commission officers Rabbi Randall M. Falk and Howard E. McKinney. During the program, Falk and McKinney predicted "continuing growth in the city's Negro population," and predicted that the city's biggest problem would be providing adequate housing for the new residents. They noted that although the city's population had increased, the actual physical area occupied by non-whites had diminished.



Courtesy Redevelopment Authority of the City of Erie

Redevelopment of Erie's downtown, beginning with the Peach-Sassafras Streets area had a profound effect on many African American families, who were in some cases displaced to areas which were then slated for the next phases of redevelopment. Many Peach-Sassafras residents were eventually bumped over into the corridor along Buffalo Road. Photo: April 1957

Falk warned "we are in the process of creating slum areas unless we act swiftly."¹⁵³ Concern about the evolving slum areas is voiced in newspaper editorials and other public forums of the period, yet the root causes are seldom addressed, except by Erie Community Relations Commission documents. Forerunner of the Human Relations Commission, the Erie Community Relations Commission was established in 1954.¹⁵⁴ Through its reports and other documents, details of black/white relations in Erie are revealed. The Commission was created by a group of concerned citizens, several of whom were clergymen. Enlisting the assistance of a national Human Relations organization, the Commission established in Erie was one of the first in Pennsylvania.¹⁵⁵ In its early years the activities of the group were mainly educational, because very few complaints were filed in the fifties. In fact, as late as 1965, then director Leonard L. Karter was quoted as saying,

*I know there's discrimination in Erie. We should be getting four or five times as many complaints as we are. I don't know whether people are afraid to complain-or they just don't know we have a Human Relations Commission.*¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ "Erie Negro Population 8,000; Gain is 4,500 for Ten Years," Unidentified newspaper clipping, April 28, 1959. Erie County Library System folder, "Erie African Americans."

¹⁵⁴ The evolution of the Erie Human Relations Commission, with its varying degrees of power or impotence makes a good case study of the Civil Rights climate in the city.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with Randall Falk, founding member, July 28, 1995.

¹⁵⁶ *Erie Daily Times*, November 23, 1965.



Erie County Historical Society

As the African American population increased, efforts were made to restrict the newcomers to certain sectors of the city where available housing was often substandard. West Nineteenth Street between Sassafras and Myrtle, looking west, 1956.

The nature of the Commission's education activities reveals the separatism of the times. Some of its early efforts attempted to encourage interracial interaction through the pairing up of black and white churches by denominations. Other efforts included scheduling visits for whites in the homes of blacks and vice versa, a radical concept for some people. Even in 1965 the Commission heard a complaint from a woman who was given an eviction notice after being visited by a black woman. In the words of Leonard Karter, "People just can't seem to understand that somebody might have a Negro friend."¹⁵⁷

Beyond encouraging social interaction, the Commission investigated and documented inequities in housing. Surveys of "Negro Family Life" and "Negro Living Conditions" were conducted, with the results providing a clear indictment of housing practices in Erie.¹⁵⁸ Two 1958 documents reveal conditions which in subsequent years would impact heavily on community relations and whose consequences are being felt even up to the present day. In its dealings with crime, gangs, and other social issues tied to substandard neighborhoods, the city today is grappling with an ugly legacy identified almost forty years ago.

In March 1958, the Commission released a

statement on "The Problem of the Minority Families in Redevelopment." The initial phases of the redevelopment movement which would reshape Erie's downtown were underway. The Peach-Sassafras Street area, one of the city's worst slums, was targeted first. One third of its residents were non-white.¹⁵⁹ In terms of social change, not to mention the long-term vitality of the center city, the end results were disappointing. The HRC assessed the redevelopment effort this way:

Many of us welcomed redevelopment because we believed it would do away with bad housing and assist the dispossessed to find really decent housing. We welcomed redevelopment because we knew that many of the residents of the blighted areas are Negroes, held there by the discriminatory practice related to the field of home purchasing and renting. We welcomed redevelopment because we believed that Federal and Local authorities would see to it that the expenditure of public funds would be for the equal treatment and the equal benefit of all, regardless of race. What is now a serious question to be faced by all of us is whether we have a program which would in any way improve the quality of housing of the Negro family affected by redevelopment...the majority of them are in neighborhoods essentially similar to the Peach-Sassafras area, and many of them are relocating in areas already suggested for future redevelopment.¹⁶⁰

The existence of slum areas in Erie was due in part to the influx of individuals with low education, skill, and income levels after World

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Photocopies in Erie County Library file, "Erie Human Relations Commission." Though well-intentioned, these surveys are an interesting study of an inherent, unconscious bias. The survey asks the interviewer to rate the "untidiness" of homes visited, but there is no option for "tidy" living quarters.

¹⁵⁹ Erie Community Relations Commission report to Governor's Citizens Committee on Discrimination in Housing, Dec. 3, 1958. Photocopy, Erie County Library file, "Erie Human Relations Commission."

¹⁶⁰ "The Problem of the Minority Families in Redevelopment." March 4, 1958. Photocopy in Erie County Public Library file folder, "Erie Human Relations Commission."

War II. This was, however, only one facet of the problem. The idea that the density of blacks in these slums areas can be explained by economics alone is quickly dispelled upon closer examination. The Community Relations Commission found that many blacks could have afforded better homes. The Commission reported, "Rents in the Peach-Sassafras area are above average. Many Negro families are now paying rents more than adequate to secure really decent homes in standard neighborhoods."¹⁶¹ Blacks were being held in these areas by restrictive forces in the real estate market.



Erie Daily Times Photo, Courtesy Erie County Library

A large crowd of nearly 1,500 people gathered in Perry Square April 7, 1968 to hear a eulogy for Dr. Martin Luther King. Dean Murray, of St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral delivered the eulogy, noting that there had not yet been an arrest and saying, "It is immaterial in any event, for whoever pulled the trigger, it was hatred and apathy that killed Martin Luther King." Reverend Jessie McFarland, pictured speaking, and Reverend Rufus Arterberry, seated, also addressed the crowd.

It was common practice among realtors to "steer" prospective tenants and home owners to particular parts of the city, a practice which produced dramatic results as the percentage of African Americans in the city's population increased. Realtors simply refused to show homes to blacks outside prescribed neighborhoods. Realtors would not appear for appointments to show a home to blacks, or would not make information regarding the availability of certain homes accessible to blacks.¹⁶² Those who managed to circumscribe the restrictions were often met with hostile actions from their new neighbors. After moving in at a new west-side location, the home of one prominent family was attacked by whites until an unofficial patrol was set up by friends of the family.¹⁶³

The effective isolation of blacks from white neighborhoods lead to the phenomenon

of general ignorance among whites who were perhaps genuinely shocked when the protests of the Civil Rights Movement hit home. To this day, there is a surprising lack of awareness on the part of the white community about historical and contemporary African American issues. This situation can only be corrected through additional research efforts aimed at bringing African American history into the mainstream of the community's sense of self.

PROTESTS OF THE 1960S

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the local chapter of the NAACP brought pressure to bear on local institutions and officials in an effort to address racism and discrimination. While Addison Winston was president of the branch in the late 1940s, a claim of injustice was for the first time taken into the court system (previous complaints had not gone beyond a Justice of the Peace).¹⁶⁴ The East High School Band had planned a roller skating party at the Twelfth Street Skating Rink to raise money for uniforms. At the time blacks were not allowed to skate with whites. As a result of

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Interviews with Ellen Curry, Lillian Johnson, Howard Horton. In order to see a wider selection of homes than she was given by white realtors, Ellen Curry became a real estate salesperson herself, though she did not remain active in the field. Lillian Johnson followed her lead, and remains an active realtor today.

¹⁶³ Interview with Fred Rush, Jr., July 12, 1995.

¹⁶⁴ Moore, "NAACP," p. 51.



Erie Daily Times Photo, Courtesy Erie County Library

Marching through a mix of rain and snow, black and white citizens joined together March 14, 1965 for a two and one half mile march in honor of a white minister from Boston beaten to death in Selma, Alabama after participating in civil rights demonstrations there. Singing hymns, and pausing for a moment of prayer at Perry Square, the marchers proceeded to Shiloh Baptist church where the Reverend Jesse McFarland lead a memorial service. Reverend McFarland told his audience, "Until no man alive distinguishes between black and white, until every man is free, no man is free."

the court case, the superintendent of schools banned all skating parties until the rink owners changed their policies.

The persistent accumulation of these individual victories created an overall pattern of progress. All across the country the actions of individuals and their families, churches, and civic groups lent force to the rising tide of the Civil Rights Movement, which in its public manifestation came to be felt in Erie as local citizens joined in picket lines and protest rallies.

Local churches and their ministers played an important role in delivering an organized, articulate, and undeniable message to the citizens of Erie. At a 1963 rally, Reverend Jesse McFarland declared that the struggle for freedom for the Negro "has been a story of unparalleled hardship, but the noise you hear these days is the death-rattle of a dying man: a new man is being born. In our struggle let us be right."¹⁶⁵ The event at which he spoke was organized by the local NAACP to protest the lack of job opportunities for blacks, particularly in city government. The crowd of nearly 1,000 people was the largest to date. In addition to clergymen including Rev. A.H. Hunter of the Antioch Baptist Church, Rev. James Ford of Second Baptist Church, Dr. Lewis Hillyard of First Unitarian Church, Rev. Paul Martin of St. James AME, and Rev. Roy Shaffer, Archdeacon of the Episcopal Diocese

of Erie, addresses were given by Mrs. Ruth Mason, Fred Rush Jr., and Mrs. Isabelle Carlisle.¹⁶⁶

Perry Square and City Hall were the scene of numerous public protests during the early sixties; sometimes large groups took part, sometimes only one or two individuals stood with pickets. In 1965, 1,000 people, black and white, marched down State Street on a rainy March day in memory of a Boston minister killed in Selma, Alabama. Besides protesting locally against the violence wrought and condoned by authorities in Alabama, Erie citizens put their convictions to the test by traveling to the actual battle grounds. On March 7, 1965 marchers attempting to proceed from Selma to Montgomery had been met with violent resistance from police. When Martin Luther King determined the march would go forward, unstoppable, Erieites lent their support. A delegation left Erie by bus to join others from around the nation in Selma. The culmination of their journey was a prayer service led by Dr. Martin Luther King on the steps of the capitol building in Montgomery, Alabama.¹⁶⁷

At the same time that these gestures of support and solidarity were being made, on other fronts entrenched racism ensured that

¹⁶⁵ "1,000 at NAACP Protest," *Erie Daily Times*, June 24, 1963.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ "Faculty, Students Support Rights Cause: Active Commitment Emphasized By All," *The Merciad*, April 8, 1965, and "Erieites to Join Selma Marchers," *Morning News*, March 24, 1965.

progress was proceeding at an excruciatingly slow pace. Frustration over the lack of dramatic change, combined with an accumulation of generalized anger and disillusionment fostered the growth of more militant responses. Erieites and their public officials watched as this anger erupted in other parts of the country, wondering if, when, and to what extent it might be felt here. The fear of subversive activities and tension regarding possible violence was as palpable in Erie as it was elsewhere in the nation. City officials were aware that unrest was brewing and went to extraordinary lengths to prepare themselves, including arming the police with riot gear and assault weaponry.¹⁶⁸



Erie Daily Times Photo, Courtesy Erie County Library
 On June 23, 1963, the NAACP held a rally in Perry Square to address the issue of job opportunities for African Americans, particularly in city government. A crowd of nearly 1,000 heard speakers including Reverend Jessie McFarland, and pictured here, Ruth Mason.

Preceded by smaller incidents, late in the evening on July 18, 1967, (the day the worst riots in U.S. history broke out in Detroit, Michigan) an incident occurred in Erie which triggered a dramatic response from local officials. In the vicinity of 18th and Holland Streets bricks were hurled at passing vehicles, and several fires were set, one of which destroyed the Radov Corporation building. People gathered to watch the fire, and skirmishes broke out among the on-lookers and also with police on the scene. The following day two-inch headlines proclaimed "Six Charged in Riot; Fire Laid to Arson," with the subheadline, "Mayor Promises to Restore Peace....Accuses Outsiders."¹⁶⁹ This disturbance in Erie, representative of small town U.S.A., was viewed as significant by the national media, which sent in teams to cover the situation here.¹⁷⁰ The circumstances of the "riot," (described by other sources as a "distur-

bance" created by a bunch of guys on a street corner) bear further investigation as a microcosm of feeling at the time. Some of the young men caught up in this more radical spirit of protest brought their agenda to the table at other times and through other courses in the following years. Some worked to help other youths or became community organizers. One, Benny Wall, was effectively silenced, an alleged victim of police brutality.¹⁷¹

CITY GOVERNMENT RESPONDS

Called in to investigate conditions in Erie in 1968, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission issued a telling report which stated in part:

"A wide gap exists in communication and understanding between black and white communities in the City of Erie. As a result, the black residents have, to varying degrees, developed a profound sense of alienation from the processes and programs of government. This has resulted as it inevitably must in the intensification of real or imagined grievances against the power struc-

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Larie Pinteau, August 16, 1995.

¹⁶⁹ *Morning News*, July 19, 1967.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Larie Pinteau, August 16, 1995.

¹⁷¹ Interviews: David Cole, Erma Lindsey, Fred Rush. Wall was allegedly beaten so badly that his mental capacity was reduced.



Courtesy of Ellen Curry

Courting the African American vote has become a tradition in American politics. This was Lou Tullio's first mayoral campaign. Lou and Ceil Tullio with, left to right: Ed McDonald, Herbert Knight, Shirley Meadows, M.L. Banner, Ardella Barbour, Elizabeth McDonald, Roberta Smith, Joe Rys, Ellen Curry, Alex Thompson, Corine Ricks, Olen Smith, Jr.

*ture. Therefore, every abrasive contact with agencies or individuals representing authority has intensified this alienation.*¹⁷²

Lou Tullio is the symbol of city government during this time period. Serving as mayor for twenty-four years, he was a seemingly permanent fixture in Erie politics, and one who future mayors will be measured against for many years to come. The span dates of his tenure meant that he was an important player in Erie's Civil Rights Movement. First elected in 1965, he served six consecutive terms, guiding the city through troubled times with consummate political skill. Like many politicians of his day, Tullio pragmatically courted the black voter. During his first run for mayor he issued campaign literature stating,

I intend to provide equal job opportunities for all the people of Erie and intend to have Negro representation on various City Commissions and Committees. I have worked closely with the Booker T. Washington Center and have helped to develop its program of activities. Also, I am a member of the Anti-Poverty Committee and intend to get as much help as possible for the impoverished people of this community. My record of accomplishment in

*this City speaks for itself and I pledge my support to your various causes. There will always be a need for trash haulers in this City, and I have invited these people to sit down with me and discuss their problems.*¹⁷³

When, early in his first term he was pushed to deal with the problem of "trouble in the Negro Community," Tullio did what he did best. He went directly to speak with the concerned citizens, and

then he secured funds, mostly from federal and state sources, to try to remedy the problem with new programs. One of his actions on the morning after the July 18th incident was to ask city council to authorize the borrowing of \$115,000 "to eliminate a lag in anti-poverty programs for the vicinity... to be reimbursed from federal sources."¹⁷⁴ This money was to be channeled through the Greater Erie Anti-Poverty Action Committee. He also directed that the old Booker T. Washington Center be renovated for use as a recreational center. Other needs of the community were addressed by the creation of three community-based organizations known as Neighborhood Action Team Organizations, or NATO I, II, and III. The three NATO groups provided a working forum for neighborhood citizens' groups, with effective leadership operating from the grassroots level and up.

During the late 1960s, ground was broken for two new neighborhood centers whose purpose was to provide recreational, educational, health and social services for underprivileged citizens. Officials credited the creation of these

¹⁷² "Condensed Text of PHRC Report," *Erie Daily Times*, January 14, 1969.

¹⁷³ "Boosters for Tullio flyer," collection of Ellen Curry.

¹⁷⁴ "Mayor Promises to Restore Peace," *Morning News*, July 19, 1967.

facilities with the "cooling off" of neighborhood "hot spots."¹⁷⁵ The Martin Luther King Center served citizens in the west bayfront area. The John F. Kennedy Center served the northeast section of the city, and grew out of the NATO III Center, a storefront property at 2024 Buffalo Road. With the help of several grants the JFK Center grew to provide basic social services, an emergency food program and food co-op, a Child Day Care program, a Safety Patrol program, and recreational activities. By 1974, a large new facility had been added to the original building. Economic initiative has always been a focus of JFK Center programs. In 1982 the Center opened the JFK Car Care Center. In 1983 the Center nurtured the birth of a new economic development venture: property was purchased for a machine shop still operating today as JFK-MDC, Inc., which produces non-metallic parts for use in the electrical control industry. The PT-109 Restaurant and Tulagi Island Room lounge closed in 1990 after years of operation.¹⁷⁶ Over the course of the past thirty years, both the JFK and MLK Centers have grown to become an integral part of the social service network in their respective neighborhoods. They provide an invaluable range of services to all residents.



Stanton Rand Studio, Meadville, PA, Courtesy of Gwen Cooley

African American members of this Police Academy class, hired after legal action was taken against the City of Erie, are, left to right, back row: Nate Jones, Fred McDowell, Henry Joyce, Vernon Blakely, Jerome Odum; second row: Walter Love, Russell Wyatt, Andrew McCullom; front row: Jackie Radcliffe, Ron Drew.

¹⁷⁵ "King Center Plans Let Erie 'Keep Cool,'" *Erie Daily Times*, October 17, 1968.

¹⁷⁶ "History," from JFK Center files, p. 7-8.

CENTRAL CITY N.A.T.O. NEWSLETTER

1616 Parade St., Erie, PA.

SEPTEMBER 1979

Phone 454-5518

OIC BENEFIT PROGRAM Featuring Mary Alice Brown

Julian Bond! Mary Alice Brown! Lake Erie Concert Choir! They are the headliners for the big Erie OIC Benefit Fund Show scheduled at 8:00 p.m. Saturday, October 6, at Strong Vincent high school auditorium, 1330 West 8th Street.

Julian Bond, a state senator in Georgia since 1974, is the populist who achieved national prominence as a leader for the "new look" in American politics at the 1968 national convention of the Democratic Party in Chicago.

Besides recognition as a political leader, Bond also has established himself as a television network celebrity, motion picture actor, newspaper columnist and lecturer, extremely popular on the campus circuit.

Mary Alice Brown returns home to Erie after launching a recording career with such top musical attractions as the Bee Gees, Temptations and Les McCann, plus continuing her night club appearances.

Lake Erie Concert Choir, under the direction of founder Duane Kraus, plans a "Tribute to Irving Berlin", production of "All It Takes is Love" and "Get Happy", a medley of eight top songs from the 1930's, as its repertoire for the program.

Tickets are \$7.00, with a \$5.00 price for students and senior citizens. Group ticket orders can be placed by contacting Ms. Ruth Donaldson, president of the OIC Auxiliary, sponsor of the show, at Erie OIC, 16th and German Streets (Telephone: 453-6771). Tickets also are on sale at Central City NATO, Dee's Cigar Store, Razzberry Records, Record Theater, National Record Mart, GECAC Headquarters, and the King, Kennedy and Booker T. Washington Centers.



Sister Mary Lawrence Franklin Archival Center, Mercyhurst College

Three Neighborhood Action Team Organizations were established in the late 1960s under the Tullio administration. The NATOs, as they were called, served as community centers and provided a range of services, including hot lunch and recreation activities for senior citizens. At the time this newsletter was published, Central City NATO staff included Gertie McGee, administrator and newsletter editor; Charlice Walter, administrative assistant; and Frankie E. Jones, transportation specialist.

Tullio brought in large sums of federal money and was able to take advantage of many federal programs such as the Model Cities initiative to set up various committees and agen-

cies which dealt with social problems. He met with less success at the basic level of changing the status quo of the city's infrastructure.

The hiring of African Americans to serve with the city police and fire departments has for decades remained a source of frustration and a symbol of resistance to change.

Following the Baxters' service on the police force in the early to mid-20th century, very few blacks were hired, despite the growth of both the city and the force. In the post-World War II decades Howard Hill,



Courtesy of Gwen Cooley

The city's elementary schools reflected the racial make up of the neighborhoods surrounding them, an issue later addressed by desegregation orders and busing. Burton School Grade 6, 1970-71.

Andrew West, Clarence Bradley, Jim Hayes, Ike Battles, Sr., and Clifton Dobbs joined the force. However, as further progress did not appear evident, the NAACP resorted to filing suit against the city to force a response. In 1975, after some election year political maneuvering, the Tullio administration did hire a group of black officers, male and female.¹⁷⁷ The record since then bespeaks the sameness of contemporary circumstances. Only five African American officers have been hired in the past twenty years. The hiring of more African American teachers in the city's school system was dealt with more swiftly, possibly because the pressure to change had a more dramatic impact, with violence and protest erupting throughout city schools.

PROTEST IN THE SCHOOLS

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the classrooms and cafeterias of the Erie School District had become a volatile theater in the continuing assault on the status quo. More than anywhere else, it was in the schools that black and white Erie citizens were brought together. The schools held a somewhat captive, racially-mixed audience. Because of the segre-

gated housing patterns described earlier, several elementary schools accommodated the majority of the city's African American children. A product of the old "neighborhood school" system, one school approached 85% black, and several others were near 33% at a time when the population as a percentage of the total was only 10%.¹⁷⁸ At the high school level, because all students were divided between four high schools, racial balance was more nearly achieved in terms of the actual makeup of the population. The *de facto* segregation of neighborhood schools was thus somewhat alleviated; however, racial tension was not. Students internalized and interpreted the concerns, fears, and prejudices of their parents, and acted them out with an impropriety their elders shied away from. A rash of



Strong Vincent High School

The early seventies were tumultuous years in the Erie School District, with flare ups of tension. At Strong Vincent High School one of the tasks of the student Grievance Committee was to try to resolve such differences. The 1970 Grievance Committee included Darice Howard, Rose Ann Giamanco, Bonnie Bowers, Jon Seiferth, Tony Snow, and Gary Horton.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Fred Rush, Jr., July 12, 1995.

¹⁷⁸ Marshall elementary was one of the worst cases, being 65% black in 1968 when it was closed and its students bused to eight other schools. Others with disproportionately high percentages of blacks in 1968 were:

Garfield	300 E. 21st St	84.28%
Burns	418 W. 5th Street	49.64%
Mckinley	961 E 22nd St	39.20%

Five other elementary schools were more than 20% black. (Frank Anderson, *A History of the School District of the City of Erie, PA, 1795-1970* (Erie, PA: Erie School District, 1976), p. 179). In addition there were allegations of inequities regarding supplies and textbooks, and general working conditions for teachers. (Moore, "NAACP," p. 56)

protests and disturbances plagued the schools in 1968 and 1969, and continued into the early 1970s.

The local NAACP monitored the situation, focusing attention on the treatment of students and the hiring of additional African Americans for professional and para-professional positions. In 1967 at a meeting with School District officials Mildred Horton, chairperson of the NAACP Education Committee, called attention to "existing problems of frustration and deprivation in Erie's education program, resulting from exclusion of negroes from the mainstream of the school system." She pointed out that "of the total number of 1,658 employees, there were only 10 negroes." Only eight of the 874 full-time teachers and only one of the twenty-nine counselors were black.¹⁷⁹

At the nadir of misunderstanding and mishandling of the student protests, police canine units and mace were used to restore order.¹⁸⁰ Through the final years of the 1960s, tensions were simmering. In describing a violent episode which took place at Academy High School in 1968, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC) stated that:

a real tension situation does exist in Erie, brought about by an accumulation of unresolved grievances by Negro residents against local authorities and the status quo. The intensity of the underlying tension made even random and routine events, normally tolerable or ignored as trivial, such as the expulsion of two children from school, the trigger for violence and civil disorder.¹⁸¹



Strong Vincent High School
This 1970 yearbook photo features a bi-racial Color Guard at Strong Vincent High School. The right to participate in such extra-curricular activities was won after decades of lobbying by parents, students, and the local NAACP against exclusionary practices. Pictured, left to right: Darice Howard, Dotty Wheeler, Marge Mink, and Dee Ann Johnson.

Inappropriate and inadequate School District response lead to demands for change from both student and parent groups. The School Board responded in a number of ways. A teacher recruitment program was initiated and trips were made to colleges, particularly in the South, but also to eastern Pennsylvania schools such as Cheyney State and Temple University. The School Board defended its record and denied allegations of racial discrimination. As the NAACP continued to apply pressure, changes became evident. During 1968, sixty black women and seven black men were hired, though most of these were not for professional teaching positions.¹⁸² James Murfree was appointed assistant principal of Academy High School in 1969. Shortly thereafter he became acting principal of Wilson Junior High School. In 1970 Tom Robinson was named head football coach at Academy. The vigilance of the NAACP and pressure from citizens was a crucial factor in effecting these changes; however, once again, the slow pace of change resulted in an eruption of frustration.

In February 1968 the Erie School District

¹⁷⁹ Anderson, pp. 176-178.

¹⁸⁰ "Condensed Text of PHRC Report," *Erie Daily Times*, January 13, 1969. One of a series of articles, this PHRC report describes an incident at Academy High School, April 3, 1968.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* The disorder erupted when a white teacher struck a black student with a classroom pointer as he moved too slowly to his seat. A physical altercation between the two followed. The student was sent home without a hearing. The following day a petition supporting the student was presented to the principal, and following rumors that he had torn up the petition, violence broke out in the cafeteria. The disturbance spread to the street, where several cars were damaged. Authorities shut down the school and called in the police, who arrived armed with police dogs and mace.

¹⁸² Anderson, p. 179. The experiences of the teachers recruited from the South, many of whom did not stay in the area for too long, would make a good research project and would shed light on the racial tensions in the schools, ESD working conditions in general, and the "anti-outsider" sentiment which often surfaces in Erie's African American community.



Courtesy of Lois Mabins

Graduates of the C.O.P.E. teacher training program, left to right: Lois Mabins, Celestine Davis, Carmelita Blanchard, Nancie Redding, 1974.

had been directed to “eliminate racial imbalance,” but by 1969 had still not submitted an acceptable desegregation plan.¹⁸³ In 1970, problems in the schools were one reason the state NAACP declared that conditions for blacks in Erie were the worst in Pennsylvania. Two law suits were filed in federal court in Pittsburgh against the Erie Housing Authority and the Erie School District. The suit against the School District sought to have the District placed under receivership, ineligible for any more federal funds.¹⁸⁴ The foot-dragging on the part of the School District hinged on a fear of antagonizing white middle class residents of the city. These people, the voters to whom Erie’s politicians answered, wanted the conservative status quo maintained. When a desegregation plan was finally implemented in the 1970s, the exodus of this segment of the population was dramatic.¹⁸⁵ In 1980, the District began the process of implementing the second phase of its desegregation plan with emphasis on the middle school level.¹⁸⁶ Even when

viewed with hindsight, change has come slowly. From the perspective of 1968, it did not appear to be forthcoming at all.

The gulf that existed between Erie citizens and authorities was addressed through various programs. From 1970 to 1975 a cooperative program between the Erie School District and Gannon University called COPE (Career Opportunities Program in Erie) trained minority teacher’s aides for certification as teachers. Twenty-two individuals received their teaching certificates and a B.A. from Gannon University or Villa Maria College through this program. A good number then moved into teaching positions in the Erie School District.¹⁸⁷

Other School District efforts were less successful. One initiative which caused a great deal of concern among African American parents and public outcry from the Erie Clergy Committee for Social Justice was the District’s “Crisis Classes.” Designed as a way of handling “disruptive and incorrigible students,” this program removed students from their regular school environment and placed them in special classes at the old Marshall School building. This was seen by opponents of the pro-

¹⁸³ “2nd Extension Given School Integration,” *Erie Daily Times*, March 4, 1969.

¹⁸⁴ “NAACP Says Erie Dilemma No. 1 In Pa.,” *Erie Daily Times*, January 26, 1970.

¹⁸⁵ Census figures illustrate this point:

Year	Total Population	# of Afr. Am.	% Afr. Am.
1960	138,440	6,656	4.8%
1970	129,231	8,577	6.6%
1980	119,123	11,567	9.7%
1990	108,718	13,086	12%

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Dalhart Dobbs, July 25, 1995. Mr. Dobbs makes the point that the white flight of the seventies may have been lessened if better public relations and education programs had been carried out by District and City officials. During the second phase of desegregation, these issues were handled better.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* Mr. Dobbs taught at Academy High School until 1970 when he became director of this program.

gram as a way of isolating more militant black students when what was really needed was a review of disciplinary procedures and the root causes of tension in the schools.¹⁸⁸ The group "Concerned Parents for the Erie Black Community" was very critical of this program, as was the Erie Human Relations Commission. These organizations led the drive to have the classes restructured and ultimately halted in November 1968.¹⁸⁹

Two areas of particular concern to parents were the inclusion of Black History in the curriculum and changes in teacher attitudes. The second goal would be achieved by increasing the number of African American teachers and encouraging a more enlightened perspective in white teachers. Reverend Lorenzo Grant of the



Courtesy of Gene Toran

The Miss Tawny pageant was established in 1966 by the Four Associates, Gene Toran, George Carter, Ernie Wright, Sr., and Melvin Witherspoon. Of these four founders, Gene Toran has remained actively involved with the pageant, and still serves as director and promoter. After rotating between a number of locations, the Booker T. Washington Center became the pageant's permanent home. Over 900 young women have been participants over the years. Pictured, Gene Toran and Linda Boyd, Miss Tawny 1971-72.



Photo by Kathy Merski

The Opportunities Industrialization Center, or OIC, offered training in a wide array of fields. Modelled after the original OIC in Philadelphia, the Erie center opened its doors February 11, 1967, and subsequently assisted thousands of Erie residents with vocational training and personal development. Pictured, Gail Barnes studying the techniques of data entry, c. 1978-79.

Human Relation Commission summed up the situation, "If teachers are ignorant of Negroes, the students will be ignorant."¹⁹⁰ Workshops for teachers in training and for those already employed were recommended.

Stronger measures were advocated by some members of the black community. The range of opinion within the black community is illustrated by two citizen action groups. A group led by Ike Battles, Jr., working out of the ACT (or Action) Center at 138 E. 18th Street, urged parents to boycott Academy High School and instead send their children to "Freedom School" at the Center. Voicing a more moderate approach, David Cole of the Concerned Parents group warned that the institution of a segregated freedom school "could set things back and we'd just be hurting ourselves."¹⁹¹

The concept of a Freedom School was the focal point of another protest in March 1970. At that date a boycott was planned of all junior and senior high schools in the school system to point out that problems were not being resolved quickly enough. A mass rally to build support for the protest was held at the Booker T. Washington Center, E. 7th and French Streets. More than 1,200 people attended.¹⁹² The boycott itself was termed "Black Monday" and drew about 170 students out of their class-

¹⁸⁸ "Clergy, Black Groups Take Stand in 'School Crisis,'" *The Erie Churchman*, October 1968, p. 8.

¹⁸⁹ "Crisis Classes End, Aides 'Put on Call,'" *Erie Daily Times*, November 6, 1968. See also *Erie Daily Times*, October 15, 1968, "Classes Acceptable with Change," and working papers of Concerned Parents and Human Relations Commission in Erie County Library file "Erie African Americans."

¹⁹⁰ "Concerned Parents to Fight Within Limits of the Law," *Erie Daily Times*, October 23, 1968.

¹⁹¹ "Group Asks Freedom Schools," *Erie Daily Times*, November 25, 1968.

¹⁹² "Overflow Crowd Pledges Support for Black Monday," *Morning News*, March 2, 1970.



The Bayfront Ballet, left to right: Rhonda Champion, Paula Foster, Kelly Payne, Stephen Galloway, Jeana Foster, Stacie Champion, Rita Payne, Pamela Payne, Kathleen Green, director. c. 1978-79.

Photo by Kathy Merski

rooms to attend Freedom School classes at the Booker T. Washington Center. Among the teachers of these classes was James Forman, National Field Director for the Black Economic Development Conference and author of the "Black Manifesto." Both protest organizers and School District officials claimed to have prevailed. The point of the boycott may have been lost on some officials. Mayor Tullio stated, "We don't need Black Mondays or White Tuesdays or any of that...we need to resolve our differences and get to work on living."¹⁹³

COMMUNITY RESPONSES

As conflicts continued on into the 1970s, the city reflected contradictory images, dependent on the eye of the beholder. In 1972, as Erie won the All-American City title, in the Erie School District African American students and parents were still presenting charges and demands for change.¹⁹⁴ More obvious change was evident in various community initiatives, where, unencumbered by a resistant bureaucra-

cy, individuals took action on their own. Expressions of "Black Pride" and emphasis on Black History were part of programs sponsored through neighborhood centers and individual effort. Celestine Davis worked to see that the observance of the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. was recognized as a school holiday.¹⁹⁵ An annual debutante ball and other activities were organized by the Society for the Improvement of Negro Youth Association (SINYA). Also based on the principles of pride and self-esteem, the Miss Tawny Pageant was established

in 1966. Founders of the pageant were the "Four Associates," George Carter, Ernie Wright, Sr., Mel Witherspoon, and Gene Toran who today still organizes and directs the pageant. Celebrating 30 years of promoting racial pride and unity, as well as understanding between the black and white communities, this program has become an enduring institution.¹⁹⁶ Other events and groups such as Little Miss Soul and Touch of Class were also established during this time period by dedicated individuals.

Media coverage began to be more balanced. Mili Roberts was added as a columnist by the Times in 1970.¹⁹⁷ Her columns described historical and contemporary local African American life. Other writers for the paper included Fred Rush, Jr., and Bobby Harrison. Harold Shields became the area's

¹⁹³ "Black Monday Draws Less Than 15 Percent," *Morning News*, March 3, 1970.

¹⁹⁴ "Students Present Demands," *Erie Daily Times*, April 21, 1972.

¹⁹⁵ "Woman Secured King Observance," *Morning News*, January 11, 1971.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Gene Toran, and Miss Tawny Pageant program books, collection of Gene Toran.

¹⁹⁷ "Black Columnist Added by NEWS," *Morning News*, September 14, 1970.

first African American television broadcaster, appearing as a weekend commentator for WICU. The public image of the Erie community was slowly evolving.

At the institutional level, the Greater Erie Community Action Committee was established in 1965. Today GECAC is a major provider of community services, and a positive force in many aspects of community life. Beginning in 1967 occupational training and placement was provided by the Erie Opportunities Industrialization Center. Modelled after the Philadelphia center, Erie's OIC was headed by Reverend Paul Martin. A wide range of courses was offered from English as a Second Language, Remedial Reading, and GED preparation to Auto Mechanics, Machine Shop Blueprint Reading, Welding, General Office Practice, and Data Processing. The OIC building at 1503 German Street housed a large staff of counselors and recruiters. Funding was mostly from federal sources, but the organization did raise a local match through OIC "tag days" and other private donations. Funding changes and budget cuts necessitated a reduction in staff and operations in 1987, and in 1988 OIC was closed. The German Street building was destroyed by fire in 1989. Other area organizations such as the neighborhood centers, GECAC, and the County Vocational School carried on the services and classes of OIC but the spirit of the center was not duplicated.¹⁹⁸

In the arts and cultural sphere, the Bayfront Orchestra and Bayfront Ballet were created. The Bayfront Ballet provided an outlet for talented young people. One of the youngsters, who just happened to be recruited from another recreation program because the group needed a male dancer for a production of "Peter and the Wolf," has gone on to become a lead dancer for the Frankfurt Ballet in

MEREDITH NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER, 1975

ERIE, PA.

WE NEED —

New ideas to meet the ever increasing challenges of modern society. Larry Meredith is a man of ideas.

MEREDITH WILL LISTEN

They say that politicians work their gums before elections and gum the works after. Not so with Larry D. Meredith, he will listen to what the people want and respond with energetic and understanding services.



LARRY D. MEREDITH
Candidate for City Council
LEVER 13B

Sister Mary Lawrence Franklin Archival Center, Mercyhurst College

Attorney Larry Meredith ran for a seat on Erie City Council in 1975. His campaign literature proclaimed, "People from all walks of life in the City of Erie need someone to place on the agenda of City Council their hopes, ideas, and aspirations. We need downright practical and sensible solutions to everyday people's problems. The Erie community feels that Larry Meredith is one who can understand the problems of everyday people." He was elected after his second run for the office in 1977.

Frankfurt, Germany. On his return trips to Erie, Stephen Galloway continues to inspire young dancers of today's Bayfront Ballet Company.¹⁹⁹

POLITICAL ACTION

References to African American political groups date back to the nineteenth century, when a "Colored Republicans Club" met at "their church on W. 3rd Street."²⁰⁰ Through much of the twentieth century, African American involvement with the Republican party remained strong. In the 1940s there was an active black Republican Women's Club, which held teas and other functions, and worked to disseminate information about candidates and the political process. Active political families, such as the Boyds and the Taylors, were staunch Republicans.²⁰¹

During the 1960s and 1970s there was a great deal of emphasis on the political process as an instrument of change. Voter registration and education played a key part in the Civil

¹⁹⁸ OIC advertisement in Daisy Lampkin Club Anniversary program, Hi-Lite Club collection. Eva Tucker interview July 21, 1995. Mr. Tucker served on the OIC Board of Directors.

¹⁹⁹ "Born to Dance," *Times News Showcase*, June 15, 1989; "A Talk with Stephen Galloway," *Times News Showcase*, September 2, 1993; "Erie Native Speaks the Language of Ballet," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, June 3, 1989; and Gwen Galloway interview, July 1995.

²⁰⁰ *Erie Gazette*, October 3, 1872.

²⁰¹ Interview with Ellen Curry, February 7, 1996.

**CURRY RECIPE
FOR
GOOD COUNTY GOVERNMENT**

- A Good portion of District Representation
- A Blending of male and female representation.
- A Budget wise woman.
- A Seasoned representative has been active in the Erie community for years.
- A Winner of the Gerald L. Phillippe Award for outstanding community work.
- A 2nd District homeowner aware and dedicated to 2nd district problems and needs.
- A Proven Administrator.



Add a strong voice from the City of Erie to the New County Government

SHAKE UP! SHAKE WELL...AND SERVE THE ERIE COMMUNITY

**Vote for
ELLEN CURRY**

County Council
2nd District

14A

14A

Erie Shoppers Guide Photo, Courtesy of Ellen Curry

Ellen Curry made a strong showing in her bid for County Council in 1977. She had a notable record of service to the Erie community, and had received the Phillippe Award for outstanding community work.

Rights Movement. In Erie, Kenneth Roy, John Taylor, Alex Thompson, Ray Butler, Margaret Bowers, Gertie McGee and others were actively working with the local Republican and Democratic parties.²⁰²

As a result of several political initiatives, African American candidates began to appear on local ballots. Many of the early candidates were Republicans. In 1965 Margaret Bowers ran for City Council as a Republican, and lost by only 750 votes. The next year Zach Boyd ran, also on the Republican slate, followed by Ruth Mason. Ellen Curry, a Democrat, ran for a seat on the Erie School Board in 1967. She had been approached the "Committee for Better Schools," a bi-partisan group of concerned citizens whose goal was to de-politicize the school board. She was 128 votes shy of becoming the first elected African American school board member. Curry also ran for County Council in 1977, the year it was created, and was defeated by Buzz Andrezeski, who was just starting his political career.²⁰³

Alex Thompson organized an Erie County Black Democrats group, which supported a number of candidates for the Erie School Board and City Council, including Sam Jethroe and Wesley Roberts.²⁰⁴ Though none of those mentioned here was elected, these individuals paved the way for others and raised the profile of African Americans in the election process. As an off-shoot of this heightened awareness and political presence, Mr. Tessie Blanchard was appointed to fill out an unexpired term on the School Board. Upon completing this term he ran for the office but was defeated.²⁰⁵

In the spring of 1975 Larry Meredith ran for City Council as a Democrat but did not win a slot as a Democratic Candidate for the fall elections. He did, however, appear on the November ballot as the Republican write-in candidate. He came in fourth, unable to secure a Council seat. Running on the Democratic slate in 1977, he won enough votes to become the first African American to hold a seat on City Council.²⁰⁶ In the same year Harold Shields ran for and won a position on the School Board, prompting great celebration and a double "inaugural ball" in the Erie Hilton ballroom.²⁰⁷ Shields served until transferred out of the area in 1980. After a controversial term, Meredith did not run an aggressive re-election campaign and was defeated by a narrow margin. It would be almost twenty years before another City Council victory. In the meantime, the forces of change continued to advance at the slow pace typical of Erie history.

²⁰² Joseph K. Currett, "A Historic Purview of Black Political Involvement in the City of Erie," May 12, 1986. Draft section of thesis for Gannon University Masters in Public Administration. This draft contains errors and omissions but is the only piece on this subject I was able to find. If used as a source, information should be verified with other sources. Photocopy, Sister Mary Lawrence Franklin Archival Center, Mercyhurst College.

²⁰³ Interview with Ellen Curry, January 31, 1996.

²⁰⁴ Currett, p. 15.

²⁰⁵ Interview with Eva Tucker, Jr., July 21, 1995.

²⁰⁶ Larry Meredith interview May 31, 1995. Voting behavior in this election is described by David Hood, "Influences on Voting Behavior in Contemporary Politics," *The Journal of Erie Studies* vol. 8, no. 2 (Fall 1979): 46-67. There is no voting area with a "black majority" in Erie. As Eva Tucker points out, it is impossible for an African American candidate to win without the support of the white community, therefore, election of an African American is not a matter of racial politics, but one of consensus building. (Interview with Eva Tucker, Jr., July 21, 1995).

²⁰⁷ "Meredith, Shields' Festivity at the Hilton," *Times News*, Jan 15, 1978.



Courtesy of Bernice Akins

The National Bowling Association was founded in 1937 when the American Bowling League was closed to African Americans. When desegregation occurred in the other leagues, the NBA remained organized. The Gents and Poissettes were the first NBA sanctioned leagues in Erie.

The Gents Mens Bowling League was organized by Dr. Daniel Snow in 1960. The League's first officers were: Dr. Daniel Snow, Charles Samuels, Julius Edwards, Charles Crockett, John Johnson, Dunbar Brown, Benjamin Mooney, Jack Carper, Junius Johnson. This photo includes one of the League's finest bowlers, Luke Curlett, standing upright at the far right.



Courtesy of Bernice Akins

The Poissettes Ladies Bowling League was organized in 1962 by Bernice Akins. The League's first officers were: Bernice B. Akins, president; Sonja Johnson, vice president; Roberta Pope, secretary; Jodye Thomas, treasurer; Ada Lawrence, sergeant at arms. This photograph was taken after their second season, at Frontier Lanes.

PART VI
ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE THIRD CENTURY:
1980-1995



Courtesy Ron Norman Studios

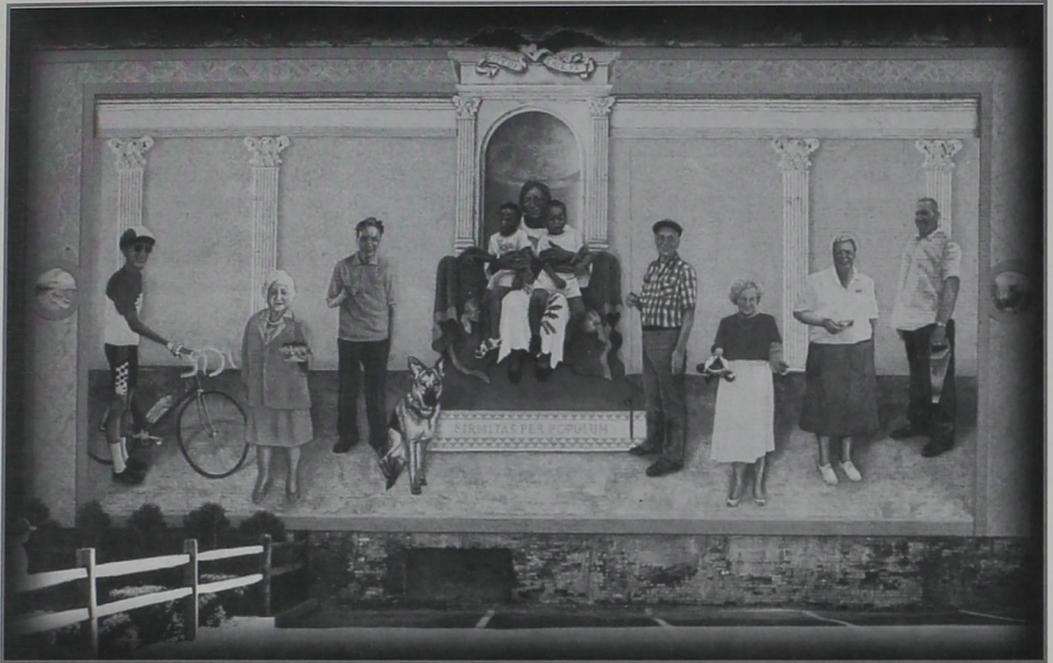
On August 20, 1995, descendants of some of Erie's earliest African American settlers gathered for a reception organized by the First Families project and held at the Cathedral of St. Paul, where many of their ancestors had worshipped. First row, (children): Ricky Crenshaw, Michael Crenshaw, Tiffany Jackson, Shannon Tardy, Harold Paul Tardy IV, Julian Baxter Tardy, Christopher Jones. Second row: Mary Bowers McConnell, Albin J. McConnell, Mary McConnell Watson, Stacey Watson Crenshaw with baby Michael Crenshaw, George Jackson, Monica Marshall, Kelly Tardy, Anita Slow Jones, June McConnell Slow. Third row: Denise McConnell, Tim McConnell, Sr. with baby Austin J. McConnell, Alyse McConnell, Julia Tardy, Linda Wilson, James Wilson, Alexis Wilson, Karen Slow Harris. Fourth row: Tim McConnell, Jr., Quincy McConnell, Harold Paul Tardy III, Ada Lawrence, Harold Paul Tardy, Jr., Barbara Baxter Tardy, Eric Wilson.

The years 1980 to 1995 mark the culmination of the second century of Erie's African American history. As such, there is a natural tendency to judge these years more critically as indicators of "how far we have come," and conversely, "how far we have to go." The difficulty lies in the fact that historical perspective here is extremely limited, while the subjectivity inherent in personal participation is high. The matter is further complicated by the preponderance of "same old" issues whose disheartening refrain seems to surface again and again. This time period opens with local NAACP President Greg Myers declaring,

*"Discrimination against minorities is still a serious problem and we must educate the total Erie community in terms of the need to bring about racial equality....Key areas needing improvement are employment, education, and housing."*²⁰⁸

Closing comments for 1995 could easily read the same. Though the lack of progress implied by such remarks reflects a staggering shortfall in the hopes and visions of the future expressed thirty years, sixty years, ninety years ago, there has, at another level, been tremen-

²⁰⁸ "Myers elected local NAACP President," *Morning News*, Jan 22, 1979.



Courtesy Erie Art Museum

In 1991, through a grant by the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation, this mural was created on the downtown Woolworth's building by Kristin Reed. Titled *Firmitas Per Populum*, or *Strength Through People*, it features citizens from the Erie Community and represents the character and heritage of the city. Pictured are James Nuber, Lucille Abbey, Tony Manna, Mildred Horton, long time NAACP activist, with adopted children Ryan and Jacario, Harold "Smitty" Smith, Mary Horderny, Louise Kutruff, and John Michalski.

dous change. This change, though not always readily apparent in the "existing order" is dramatically evident when the expectations and parameters of social and political action of today are contrasted with decades past. In this context a knowledge of history illustrates both how far we have come and the distance we have yet to travel. The past fifteen years have been a combination of progress, inertia, and backsliding. The relative proportions of each of these states, combined with an understanding of what areas have experienced what type of momentum, should be used to construct a model for future initiatives. The challenge for the next hundred years is to research, record, and rectify the patterns of behavior which we find woven throughout the history of our city.

CONTINUING EFFORTS OF THE NAACP

Local NAACP officials are familiar with the sense of "deja vu" as they wrestle with issues so similar to those dealt with by their predecessors. Following Greg Myers as local presidents were Reverend Jon Goshay, Reverend Dwane Brock, and Rubye Jenkins. In 1985 Howard Horton, Sr. became the 18th president; Sid Booker became the 19th in 1987. In 1993 Dorothy Smith became the 20th president, and today she continues the "fight for justice and equality."²⁰⁹

Contemporary issues of concern to the NAACP should be cause for alarm to those who would like to believe that Erie has made great strides in the area of Civil Rights. In recent years, the branch has monitored increased Ku Klux Klan activity in Erie

²⁰⁹ "Erie Branch....." photocopy from Erie NAACP office.



Courtesy of John F. Kennedy Center

Any consideration of Erie's future must be preceded by an examination of alarming statistics which show a disturbing percentage of the city's children living in poverty. Children are at once the key to a better future and the victims of circumstances beyond their control today.

County, taken a local television station to task for its negative portrayal of African American men, and kept a vigilant eye on hiring practices in the city's police and fire departments. It has filed yet another complaint against the Erie School District. In a 1994 newspaper report, Dorothy Smith stated, "We do have problems in the area of desegregation within the school district. There are schools within our district that are heavily populated by minorities."²¹⁰ Earlier that year, the NAACP filed the complaint with the state Human Relations Commission charging that Erie schools are no longer racially balanced as required by law. At the time, Superintendent James Barker said that he too was concerned about racial balance in the District, and that studies were underway to determine the extent of the problem.²¹¹

Two years later, discussion has shifted somewhat and revolves around the issue of busing. The shortcomings of busing are obvious, especially to parents whose children spend much additional time in transport, and who may be unable to participate in after school activities; however, its original intent is still valid. Across the nation the topic is being debated, in what many consider to be yet

another death knell for the moribund Civil Rights Era. In Erie, the School District claims that busing should be reconsidered because there has been no significant increase in achievement scores among children who are bussed, which, by Smith's assessment calls for examination of school district methods, not an attack on busing. This debate, of great concern to voters on both sides of the fence, will become a political hot potato in future years.

These and other issues remain at the forefront of NAACP efforts to improve the conditions of life in Erie, for as Dorothy Smith states, when you look at history, "the only positive thing to say is that we are

continuing to work for the betterment of the entire community."²¹²

DEMOGRAPHICS AND SURVEYS

In 1995 the United Way's Minority Participation Committee released a report titled "Directions: A Blueprint for Progressive Change in the African American Community." The objective of the report was "to produce a statement by the African American community articulating its needs and preferred strategies for problem resolution."²¹³ It was based on grass roots data collection and problem solving sessions conducted by the African American community in conjunction with the Erie community at large. The report begins with a powerful introductory statement regarding the undertaking of yet another study of this type:

It appeared that the community had (already) been bombarded with a plethora of horrifying statistics docu-

²¹⁰ "Four decades later, segregation remains," *Erie Daily Times*, August 31, 1994. This article includes data on race for all ESD schools.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² Telephone interview with Dorothy Smith, February 9, 1996.

²¹³ Minority Participation Committee, United Way of Erie County, "Directions: A Blueprint for Progressive Change in the African American Community," p. 1.

menting what everyone already "knew." Traditionally, African Americans have always fallen behind Whites in nearly every measure of physical, social, and economic well-being. Such glaring disparities are evidenced among the 14,304 African Americans who presently live in Erie County:

*35% of all African American households in Erie County are living in poverty; this compares to a 7.6% poverty rate among the county's White population.

*The median income for Erie County's African American households is nearly \$10,000 less than that of their White counterparts.

*While African American students represent only 8.3% of the total population within Erie County public schools, they account for approximately 16.2% of all drop-outs.

*While African American juveniles account for less than 8% of Erie County's juvenile population, approximately 27% of all cases recently han-



Weekender photo by Jack Hanrahan

The 1994 annual meeting of the Erie Minority Political Caucus, featured endorsements of political candidates for the upcoming primary. Left to right: Reverend Duane Brock; Robert Barney, coordinator of the Minority Political Caucus; Dr. John Dogun, guest speaker; Denise Horton and James Bean, officers of the Minority Political Caucus.

dled by the Erie County Office of Juvenile Probation involved African American youth.

What the African-American community already "knew" was that many of its members were living (and continue to live) in a state of crisis which appears to be worsening.²¹⁴

Subsequent pages describe conditions faced by that segment of the African American community most susceptible to the forces of poverty, racism, and the cycle of despair: those individuals whose average annual income is between \$5,000 and \$10,000. Significantly, the problem identified as most severe by the greatest number of people in the survey was unemployment /underemployment, which lies at the root of many other pro-



Courtesy of Gary Horton

In October 1995, several buses and numerous cars left Erie bound for Washington as hundreds of local African American men and boys participated in the Million Man March. Carrying the meaning of the march back to the community, these individuals have held follow-up meetings, initiated projects, and enhanced ongoing efforts such as one which "adopts" and mentors male children from Burton, Emerson-Gridley, and McKinley Elementary Schools. Pictured at the Million Man March, October 16, 1995 are, left to right, facing the camera: Robert Barney, Howard W. Horton, Andre R. Horton, Gary N. Horton.

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 1. Figures cited here are for the entire county, which has an African American population of 5.2% versus 12% for the City of Erie alone.



Courtesy Friends of Governor Ridge

This postcard was distributed during the 1994 gubernatorial campaign of Tom Ridge, paid for by the African American Coalition. The back of the card read, "Tom Ridge listens, cares and shares our concerns of the African American community: Jobs, Education, Crime, Health and Welfare, Minority positions in his cabinet and on his staff and increasing business opportunities for minorities and women owned businesses. Please join me and vote for Tom Ridge, because we need results now!" The photo features local Ridge supporters, left to right: Leroy Miles, Erma Lindsey, (Tom Ridge), Marisa Gray, Bruce Walker, Kimmie Jackson.

found problems: poverty, inadequate health care, substandard housing, crime, family violence and abuse. It is, in fact, an issue which determines and defines the overall prosperity of the entire community.

Between 1980 and 1990, Erie's total population declined an additional 8.7%, while the city's minority population increased 17%.²¹⁵ This statistic, when combined with others, such as the higher rates of unemployment and poverty for African Americans, presents a disturbing diagnosis for the fiscal and spiritual well-being of the city. William Garvey, in "Erie: Anatomy of a City," notes the consequences of a high unemployment rate for blacks both in broad financial terms for the city as well as in very sadly specific ways for local children. He notes that the weak economic condition of the city's African American community has a negative impact on the city's tax base. As the African American sector of the population is projected to grow to 18% of the total in the next century, this effect will only worsen. The racial imbalance in unemployment figures is striking:

For some time now, the unemployment rate for Erie African Americans has been around 20% or three times the unemployment level of Whites, and is particularly acute among young African American males, 40% of whom are unemployed. Equally discouraging is the fact that 53% or 2,281 of the African American community who are employed actually make less than \$10,000 a year. Only the presence of a growing African American middle class earning \$25,000+ (1,180 persons or 27% in 1990) raises the average African American salary in Erie to within \$5,000 of the average White salary.²¹⁶

Another unfortunate "trickle down" consequence of the high unemployment rate concerns the number of children in Erie who are living in poverty. In 1992 the Children's Defense Fund reported that among cities of 100,000 or more, Erie lead the nation in the percentage of Hispanic and African American children living in poverty. Of two hundred cities in this population category, thirty-one showed 50% of African American children were living below the poverty line, and "for Erie County the figures were even worse (at 62%." In addition, "between 1979 and 1989 the poverty rate among children in Erie County increased from 21.8% to 30.1%, giving the area the twelfth highest rate of increase."²¹⁷

This grim picture must be presented as a preface to any more encouraging words because the relative prevalence of poverty and despair reflects on everything else we try to say about ourselves as a community. In addition, we must not lose sight of the fact that within the statistics are individuals, girls, boys, men, and women, whose future and well-being are inextricably tied to that of the entire community.

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

²¹⁶ Garvey, p. 15.

²¹⁷ Garvey, p. 15-16.

POLITICAL ACTION

Erieites have played a part in national events throughout the twentieth century. Local NAACP activist Mrs. Jessie Pope attended national conventions in the early decades. In July 1961 five delegates from Erie, Mr. Jessie Thompson, Dr. John Barrett, Mrs. Bernice Akins, Miss Ellen Curry, and Mrs. Mary McLendon, took part in the NAACP Freedom Train. Erie was represented at Dr. King's March on Washington in 1963. In October 1995, hundreds of men from Erie participated in the Million Man March. At home on the local scene, over the years a number of groups have lead political action initiatives.

In the early 1980s political involvement was galvanized by reaction to the "Reagan Revolution." The Caucus on Minority Affairs (COMA), largely a response to Reaganomics, was made up of thirteen community organizations representing minority people in the Erie community.²¹⁸ COMA was formed to increase voter registration and political participation among local African Americans, and to make candidates aware that they should not take the black vote for granted. R. Benjamin Wiley, COMA chairman, stated, "Yes, your vote can make a difference. Sometimes it can make the total difference. If you don't vote, you don't count."²¹⁹

In 1981, when the state NAACP convention was held in Erie, this call to action was sounded again. As local officials lead by Mayor Tullio welcomed delegates and invited them to enjoy area historic sites and shopping malls, NAACP officers called for attention to other areas. Dr. Charles Butler, president of

²¹⁸ "Black Community Newsletter," Fall 1980. Organizations comprising COMA were: Bay City Lodge, Gem City Elks, Holland Drug Action Center, Greater Erie Community Action Committee, Greater Erie Economic Development Corporation, John F. Kennedy NATO Center, Central City NATO, Holland Tenant Council, Welfare Rights Organization, OIC, the Erie NAACP, Greater Erie Minority Contractors Association, and Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

Make A Difference
FAULKERSON

city council

**Erie is on the cutting edge of being something wonderful...
Be a part of it.**

VOTE FAULKERSON Lever 16A



Paid For Comm. to Elect Faulkerson

"Committed to Excellence for All"
A Vote For Kids
Re-Elect

Mazie Smith Purdue

for
**Erie School Board
Director**



Paid for by the Committee to Re-Elect Mazie Smith Purdue

VOTE MEL WITHERSPOON

**ELECT CHANGE TO CITY COUNCIL
NOW IS THE TIME FOR CHANGE ...**

- Improving City Services to Residents
- Improving Government Relations
- Better Management of Tax Dollars
- Holding the Line on Taxes
- Building Community Coalitions
- Improving Police-Community Relations
- Responding to and Empowering People to Keep Neighborhoods Safe for senior citizens
- Working to create new jobs
- Providing opportunity for young people

**IT IS TIME FOR CHANGE ...
IT IS TIME FOR INCLUSION!**

ENDORSED BY ...

- Central Labor Union & Industrial Union Council
- American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCME)
- Carpenters' District Council of Western Pennsylvania (AFL-CIO)
- East Side Federation of Polish American Societies



PULL LEVER 16B

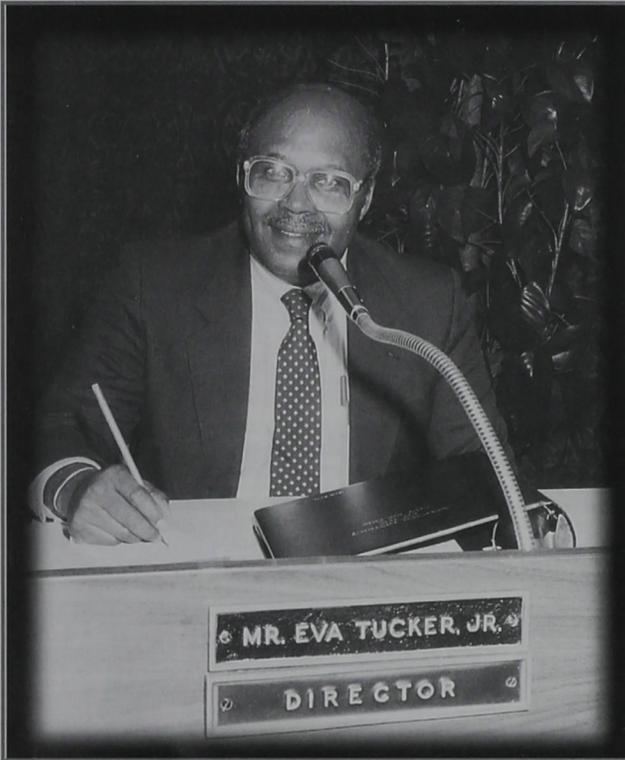
Paid for by the committee to
ELECT MEL WITHERSPOON

Morning News

In the 1995 elections, Mel Witherspoon and Charles Faulkerson were among the candidates for Erie City Council, and Mazie Smith Purdue ran for re-election to the Erie School Board. Witherspoon won a City Council seat.

the Pennsylvania State Conference of NAACP Branches, offered this greeting:

Conservatism seems to be in vogue, but we must remember there are two things this country respects, money and political power. We don't have a lot of money, but we can vote. Along with membership, political involvement must be our daily number one priority. We must unite as if our very lives depended on our unity, for in reality this is the case. We must continue to work together for the advancement of all Americans, particularly Black



Courtesy of Eva Tucker, Jr.

Eva Tucker, Jr. has served on the Erie School Board since 1981. He has served as president of the board four times. He believes that "changing the curriculum in our schools to reflect the racial, ethnic, and cultural mix of our city would improve racial relationships," and that, "by learning together, the students in the public schools are establishing new relationships that will improve the quality of their lives in the future."

*Americans, for the time is short, the hour is late, and the matter is urgent.*²²⁰

Local chapter president Reverend Jon Goshay added,

"We here of the Erie Branch NAACP welcome you, our brothers and sisters in the struggle, to be at home among us. The problems we face here in Erie are similar to the problems you are experiencing throughout the Commonwealth. We hope and pray that through our discussions and by working together here at the convention some answers may be found."²²¹

The pursuit of these answers took many forms, from the keynote address by Dr. Benjamin Hooks, NAACP Executive Director,

to practical workshops on topics such as "Labor, Industry, and Minority Development," chapter fund raising techniques, and, led by former local chapter president Mildred Horton, "Political Action."

The election of Larry Meredith and Harold Shields in 1977 had raised the profile of African Americans in the political community, but did not alter substantially the existing power structure. Additional victories were not immediately forthcoming. There was, however, continuing activity and black political initiative in the coming years. Ellen Curry was only narrowly defeated in her bid for the First District County Council seat in 1977. Gary Horton ran for 4th Ward District Justice in 1981 under the banner "Accessible, Accountable, and Willing to Listen." In 1988 Jesse Jackson's campaign for President of the United States received local support. Jackson's son, Jesse Jackson, Jr. spoke at a Rainbow Coalition rally held at St. James AME Church which drew a crowd of 150 people.²²²

In 1981, after Harold Shields was transferred out of the area by his employer, Mr. Eva Tucker was appointed to fill his seat on the School Board. Mr. Tucker, professor of geology at the Penn State Behrend campus, served out Shield's term and was reappointed in 1983. In 1985 he ran for the office, and upon receiving a record vote, became the third elected black official in the city's history. He has served continuously since that time, leading the ticket in the 1992 school board elections. He has served as School Board President four times, and today continues striving to ensure quality education for Erie School District students. He points out that the school district is a product of the community it serves; therefore

²²⁰ NAACP, Program brochure 47th Annual NAACP State Convention, Erie, PA. Hi-Lite Club Collection.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² "Jackson supporters keep campaign alive in Erie," *Morning News*, April 25, 1988.

the community must take an active interest and role in shaping policy.²²³

Tucker was joined on the school board by Mazie Smith Purdue in 1992. Purdue was defeated in 1995, after a difficult year of negative publicity. However, 1995 brought victory in another political arena. Since Larry Meredith's defeat in 1979, no African American had served on Erie City Council. In the 1995 council campaign, African American candidates ran on both the Democratic and Republican tickets. Republican Charles Faulkerson ran on the pledge to "Make a Difference," and received 7,883 votes, but did not secure a Council seat. Democrat Mel Witherspoon garnered 15,347 votes ensuring victory by a good margin. On the night of his election to Council he said his first priority was to study the city budget process.²²⁴ In a symbolic "passing of the torch" Witherspoon took his oath of office from Larry Meredith, January 3, 1996.

Throughout the years various political coalitions have formed to represent the interests of the African American community. From COMA in the early 1980s to the Erie Minority Political Caucus and African American Coalition of recent years, these groups have stressed the importance of voting as a mechanism for effecting change. According to Gary Horton, Minority Caucus Political Participation Committee Chairman, voter registration and political involvement remain both a priority and a challenge.

BUSINESS PROFILES & OPPORTUNITIES

A more representative city government not only reflects the democratic process at work, it is also tied to other issues of equity, such as better representation on the police and fire departments. The hiring of African Americans for city government positions has remained a



Photo by Jessie L. Stovall, J&L Studios
In a symbolic "passing of the torch," Mel Witherspoon was sworn in as a city councilman by Larry Meredith. Since the end of Meredith's term in 1981, no African American had served on City Council.

source of continuing frustration. Two decades after the local NAACP sued the city over its failure to hire African Americans for the police and fire departments came the 1995 headline, "Survey shows fewer minorities working for Erie government."²²⁵ Prepared by Homer Smith, Erie's Equal Employment Opportunity officer, the report revealed that "the percentage of minorities working at Erie city government positions falls short of earlier years... and (is) not close to reflecting the makeup of the overall Erie community." The reason, according to Erika Freeman of the Hispanic American Council of Erie, is that achieving balance is simply not a priority for elected officials. Mayor Joyce Savocchio responded to this charge by saying that the city has been working hard to get more representation in the police

²²³ Interview with Eva Tucker, Jr., July, 21, 1995, and *Times News*, March 1, 1992.

²²⁴ *Morning News*, November 8, 1995.

²²⁵ *Morning News*, September 1, 1995.



Times News photo, Collection of Sherrie Powell

Christeen Tolbert operated Chris's Restaurant at 940 W. 4th Street from 1980 to 1994. Pictured, Rose Lee Twillie and her mother Christeen Tolbert prepare a buffet featuring candied yams, barbecued chicken wings, rump roast, collard greens, and cornbread muffins.

and fire departments, the two bureaus with the most employees, but with little success.²²⁶ The fact remains that out of the city's 203 fire department employees only two are blacks, and of the 234 police department employees only 16 are black. Most of these 16 were among those hired after the court order precipitated by the NAACP lawsuit.

Only three African Americans have served as Erie fire fighters. Willie Blakely served from the mid-1960s until his death in the 1980s. Today Jeff Ponder and Greg Martin are the only African Americans out of a force of over two hundred men (182 sworn fire fighters), less than 1% representation. After joining the force in 1976, Martin worked his way up through the ranks, serving as coordinator of Emergency Medical Services in 1989-90, Chief Inspector in 1991, and was named Fire Department Chief in 1993. He began this career climb by taking both the police and fire fighter's exams, placing quite high on the fire fighters' list. Commenting on the low percentage of African Americans in the fire department, Martin noted that although there have been outreach pro-

grams such as civil service awareness and education programs under both Mayors Tullio and Savocchio, the civil service exam is still a major factor in the "screening out" of minority applicants. Those who score higher on the test tend to be those who are most interested in fire fighting as a career, hence education and outreach to young children looking for career role models make up another part of the equation for change.²²⁷

Hiring practices at the Erie Postal Service were also addressed by classes to prepare minority candidates for the civil service exam. This effort was led by Dr. William R. Clark. Due to his efforts, more than thirty African Americans are now employed by the Erie Post Offices.²²⁸

In the Erie School District, though the official position is to conduct "aggressive recruitment of minority candidates within 250 miles of Erie," the numbers of African American teachers hired since the pressure induced hirings of the 1970s do not in fact reflect an aggressive approach according to Dorothy Smith of the NAACP. Smith, and others within



Photo by Johnny Johnson

The Har-Lin Community Day Care Center was founded in 1965 by Mary Jane Roy. It provides care for children from the age of six weeks old through the kindergarten years, and also offers after school programs.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Interview with Greg Martin, July 13, 1995.

²²⁸ From the text of a Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Award for Community Service presented May 14, 1994. Dr. Clark's more than forty years of service to the Erie community were recognized at this time. A large number of individuals were nominated for PHMC award, indicating the high level of commitment to community service. Others receiving the award were Gerrie McGee, Erma Lindsey, Dalhart Dobbs, Sr., Tom Myers, Jr., Dr. R. Anthony Snow, Gary Horton, Mary Blanks, Thomas Lee, and Charles Kennedy, Jr.

the school system, point out that *policy* and *recruitment* do not necessarily translate into significant changes in hiring practices.

In the 1970s Martha Sanders, as executive director of the Human Relations Commission, led the struggle for the hiring of more black police officers. She successfully took the city to court, but many feel paid a high price. One year after the suit was settled, the Human Relations Commission was defunded. When it was re-established, Sanders was not rehired. She left the area, but in 1984 returned to Erie to speak at a dinner honoring the police officers she helped put on the force. Sanders told her audience that change will come to Erie only with continuing struggle, and that hiring practices will never improve, "unless someone has the guts to demand it."²²⁹ She warned that civil rights had no priority with city government or Erie citizens in 1984, and said, "Our minds and hearts have been divided, and not by accident."²³⁰ Her words hold true a decade later; whether or not they become a description of the future lies in the hands of the community.

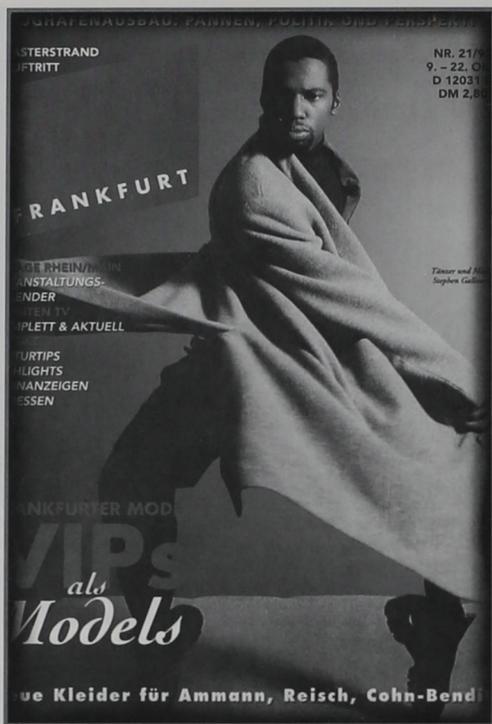
Some more positive outcomes can be found in the area of independent enterprise. In 1994 the First Annual Erie Opportunity Trade Fair was held. Its stated purpose was to provide minority entrepreneurs the opportunity to make as many introductory sales calls to major corporations as possible in a single day, in a single location. When the event was repeated in 1995, thirty-three corporations and institutions were introduced to the services of twenty-six minority owned and operated companies. Services ranged from income tax preparation and construction to catering and consulting. The businesses represented at the trade fair are only a small sampling of the many minority owned companies which are a part of the area economy. Daycare centers, florists, manufacturers, restaurateurs, retailers, specialty clothing makers, and many others would have to be included in any comprehensive listing.

²²⁹ "Blacks challenged to fight Erie City Hall," *Morning News*, May 7, 1984.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ "Soul Food is Song of South," *Erie Daily Times*, July 6, 1988.

²³² Interview with Sherie Powell, July 28, 1995.



Journal Frankfurt photo, Collection of Gwen Galloway

Erie native Stephen Galloway has made a name for himself in Europe. He is a lead dancer with the Frankfurt Ballet, and also does professional modelling, as illustrated by this magazine cover. Galloway had his first instruction with Erie's Bayfront Ballet, see photo in chapter V.

During the years 1980 to 1995, often against high odds, many new businesses were established, large and small, short-lived and enduring. In 1980, Christeen Tolbert opened a restaurant at 940 W. 4th Street, using money from family savings accounts so as not to incur any loan debt. Chris's Restaurant was from the start a family endeavor, with sons, daughters, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews all pitching in to help when needed. With Christeen as head chef, the kitchen produced the Southern-style food she had grown up with in Heidelberg, Mississippi. In addition to a weekly Sunday buffet from 1-6pm, she also catered wedding receptions and other affairs.²³¹ To the dismay of the many who sought out her home-style cooking, Christeen retired and sold the restaurant in 1994.²³²



Photo by Sarah Thompson

The Erie School District strives to reflect the multiculturalism of the community in its curriculum and personnel. Gwen Cooley has worked in an administrative position as a Parent Involvement Specialist for 10 years. She also serves as advisor for the African American History Club at Central High School.

Law Funeral Home has served the area since July 31, 1983. A fairly recent but high-profile addition is Mike Taylor's "Erie Lincoln Mercury" dealership, established in November 1994. The economic contribution of these companies to the local economy cannot be denied. Mayor Joyce Savocchio, on the occasion of the Second Annual Opportunity Trade Fair stated,

Minority enterprises today form a significant proportion of all the nation's businesses, and their number is continuing to grow. The talents, insights and hard work of minority Americans are adding to our nation's technological prowess, providing us with new solutions to important problems and creating jobs in many industries, some of which did not even exist only a few years ago. This is the genius of economic freedom, and we should do everything in our power to preserve this freedom and expand it so that opportunity for all will continue to be the defining characteristic of our community. (I) urge our citizens to support the minority businesses in the Greater Erie area who have proved their faith in the citizens of our community by choosing to locate their enterprises in

the City of Erie and contribute to the functioning of our local economy.²³³

The contribution to the local economy takes many forms,⁴ from the business ventures noted above, to the purchasing power of African American consumers, to the countless individuals working in the industrial and service sectors, and the professionals providing educational, medical, and legal services to the community. Though in 1983 Fred Rush, Jr. was quoted as saying "Erie doesn't have a black middle class yet,"²³⁴ the United Way today documents more than 800 African American households earning more than \$35,000 annually.²³⁵ We see African Americans in leadership positions in local corporations, on City Council, and scheduled to assume duties as president of a local university in July 1996.²³⁶

These high profile victories shine out over the continuing battles in the trenches. Particularly in the area of minority contractors, progress has been mired down in the quicksand of status quo inertia, in this case credit and bond ratings. In 1984, minority contractors met with state officials and aired their frustration over the "can't get experience without work, can't get work without experience" morass. Bill Harden of Harden Cement Contractors explained that minority contractors pay two to three percent higher interest on bonds, primarily because they have less experience than some of the more established companies. The higher interest makes it impossible for a minority contractor to be the lowest bidder.²³⁷ In 1994, Don Crenshaw of Crenshaw Brothers Construction confirmed that the prob-

²³³ Program brochure, 2nd Annual Erie Opportunity Trade Fair, May 9, 1995.

²³⁴ "They Came to Erie Seeking Refuge from Poverty, Racism," *Times News*, April 3, 1983.

²³⁵ Interview with Sam Epps, November, 14, 1995. Data from "Directions" research.

²³⁶ Dr. Frank G. Pogue has been selected to assume duties as President of Edinboro University in June 1996. A member of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, EUP has an enrollment of approximately 7,400 undergraduate and graduate students.

²³⁷ "Minority contractors have many questions about new state center," *Morning News*, March 7, 1984.

lem is still a significant limiting factor for minority contractors.²³⁸

Laborers also face “limiting factors.” In 1981 black laborers manned picket lines in front of the new Erie Insurance building site and at the Civic Center site. The picketers, all experienced laborers and construction workers felt they had been by-passed on key construction jobs by out-of-state contractors who failed to meet minority hiring laws. “It’s always the poor black who gets left out,” said Howard Horton. “We don’t want handouts, we just want to do what we do for our livelihood- work.”²³⁹ In 1994 local laborers watched as others built the new eastside prison which they felt, ironically, would house many local blacks driven to crime by, among other things, lack of meaningful employment.²⁴⁰ Such is the cycle of disparity.



Courtesy of Crenshaw Brothers Construction
The hiring of minority contractors and laborers remains an issue in the 1990s. A Crenshaw Brothers Construction crew at work at Hamot Hospital.

CHURCHES AND COMMUNITY SERVICE



Photo by Johnny Johnson

Second Baptist Church celebrates its fiftieth anniversary in 1996. Since 1980, the congregation has been lead by Reverend Allen B. Green. Under his effective leadership the church purchased its present church on 757 E. 26th Street in 1981. The building has been fully renovated, and the mortgage paid in full. In 1994 Second Baptist hosted the Pennsylvania State Baptist Convention.

Traditionally, intervention in cases of community distress has come from the local churches, service organizations, and dedicated, charitable individuals. For Saint James African Methodist Episcopal Church, the tradition of nurturing body and spirit has surpassed the 120 year mark. The history of this church is literally a “journey from Jerusalem.” From its origins in a West Third Street home (the old Jerusalem section of the city) the congregation has evolved into the strong contemporary presence known in the city today. In 1983 a stately and more spacious new building was dedicated, the symbolic blacksmith’s anvil featured on the grounds.²⁴¹ In 1994, during the 17th Annual State Conference on Black History, the church was honored with a Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission marker which reads:

²³⁸ Interview with Don Crenshaw, April 14, 1994.

²³⁹ “Unemployed blacks protest in Erie area,” *Morning News*, July 15, 1981.

²⁴⁰ Interview with Howard Horton, June 1995.

²⁴¹ The denomination traces its roots to Richard Allen, who with his followers was forced to leave St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. For a time he lead services in a blacksmith’s shop; later the church known as “Mother Bethel” was constructed at Sixth and Lombard Streets.



Photo by John Landry, Courtesy of Crowner King Architects

St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church remains a spiritual leader. In 1987 the present building at 236 East Eleventh Street was dedicated, featuring the symbolic blacksmith's anvil on the grounds. The denomination traces its roots to Richard Allen, who first led services in a blacksmith's shop after the white church he had been attending refused him fair treatment.

St. James A.M.E. Church, At 236 E. 11th Street. Founded 1874, this is Erie's oldest African American congregation. Five of its first six members were women. Originally at 3rd and German Streets, this church has long ministered to the spiritual and social needs of the Erie community.

The year 1994 was also a year of distinction for the Second Baptist Church, which hosted the State Convention of Baptist Churches. This was the first time that an Erie church had hosted the event. Over five hundred churches from across the Commonwealth attended. St. James AME, Second Baptist, and many other congregations, whether housed in grand buildings or storefronts, provide spiritual strength and sustenance to the Erie community through their diverse faiths and followers.

Additional charitable work comes through numerous service and fraternal organizations. The long standing groups such as the Daughters of Ozeil (local chapter founded in 1917) and women's clubs such as the Hi-Lite Club, which celebrated its 40th anniversary in 1994, have been joined in recent decades by several sororities. On July 9, 1978, Mu Nu

Omega was chartered in a ceremony at the John F. Kennedy Center. Over the years the group has taken on a number of projects including a Tutorial Program at the Booker T. Washington Center and a Sickle Cell Anemia Program. The local chapter of Delta Sigma Theta was established in 1979. One of its on-going projects is sponsorship of the RIF program which operates out of the Martin Luther King Center. This program uses an out-reach

style, rather than a classroom setting, to teach reading skills.²⁴² Several groups have sprung from purely local initiative, such as the Association of Black Images of Dignity (ABIDS), which was active between 1981-1986. These are only a few examples of the many local fraternal and service organizations, some with a national base, others the product of the creativity and concern of local individuals.

Individual efforts often involve improving the lives of children. A Touch of Class Modeling group evolved from the Little Miss Soul Pageant, founded in 1973 by Sylvia Gamble. John and Barbara DeBarry now direct the group and work to develop self-esteem and pride in young girls. Garbed in African cloth and projecting a regal presence, the group has performed in at many local events as well as in Pittsburgh during ceremonies recognizing members of Pittsburgh's old Negro League teams.

In 1992 Reverend Herlis Murphy, pastor of Community Missionary Baptist Church, visited

²⁴² Interview with Havana Rollins, July 1995.

Tuskegee, Alabama. He returned to Erie concerned about how much Black history had been omitted from his own education. Determined that this would not be the case for future generations, he created the "Walking in Black History" program. Pastor Murphy, with the help of the Reverends Rosamond Kay and Willis Merriman, recruited volunteers, raised funds, and solicited support from the City of Erie, the Erie School District, various colleges and local churches in order to create a unique learning experience. The Walking in Black History program takes students on a bus trip through history. They visit the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the Tuskegee Institute, the Martin Luther King Institute and other sites which heighten cultural awareness. This hands-on approach to learning about other regions and cultures effectively develops a broader view of history.²⁴³

All the individuals working to better our community cannot be enumerated here. Their numbers are too great. In some cases they work alone, in others they work through existing organizations or, as in the case of Dr. Mary Beth and Reverend Charles Kennedy, create their own. The Kennedys have over the years founded three organizations, the Community Country Day School, the Community Drop-In Center, and the Community of Caring, to address unmet needs in the Erie community.

Institutional efforts, too, are numerous. One innovative approach is the United Way's Project Blueprint. Minorities represent a significant proportion of the local population, the work force, and the clientele served by health and human service organizations, but are underrepresented in these same agencies. Project Blueprint's goal is to accelerate the involvement of minority decision makers on



Photo by C.G. Shearer, Courtesy of Havanna Rollins

Numerous fraternal and service groups make a positive contribution locally through their community work. Delta Sigma Theta was founded in 1913 at Howard University as a public service sorority. The Erie chapter was organized in 1979. Charter members of Delta Sigma Theta included, pictured left to right, back row: Havanna Rollins, Brenda Meredith, Toni Farmer, Estelle King, Deborah Vactor; front row: Virginia Bernard, Gwendolyn Galloway. Not pictured: Susan Harris, Denise Horton, Nancie Redding, Gloria Turner, Bettie Whitworth. The local chapter has placed a priority on education, health care, and youth library service.

the boards of directors and committees of local non-profit organizations and agencies. The purpose of the leadership development program is "to increase the number of minorities with leadership skills who have input in the decision-making processes that affect the Erie area in general and the minority community in particular."²⁴⁴ The program was established in 1993 and has graduated fifty-eight individuals.

Speaking to her fellow graduates at the 1995 Project Blueprint graduation ceremonies, Jeanette Myers Thames presented an inspirational "charge," which reads in part:

Whenever I think of "The Charge" I remember the lines in a hymn, "A Charge to Keep, A God to Glorify." To my fellow United Way Project Blueprint Brothers and Sisters: I charge you with "A Trust to Keep, A Spirit to Glorify."

I charge you with saying a definitive "NO" to the naysayers who will do their utmost to convince you that one person cannot/will not/does not make a difference to his family, to his spouse,

²⁴³ Walking in Black History flyer.

²⁴⁴ Descriptive flyer, United Way of Erie County.



Photo by Johnny Johnson

The Walking in Black History program takes Erie students to sites in the South significant to the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement. Here William Hopkins and students literally feel the power of the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama.

to his friends, on his job, and to his community. I charge you with knowing that you have a responsibility to be a committee of one whose goal is to make a positive change in your home, with your spouse, on your job, with your friends and in your community....

I charge and challenge you to network with United Way members and other affiliations to make our community the best that it can be. I charge and challenge you to remember to challenge wrongdoing where ever you see it. I charge and challenge you to uphold the principles of love, kindness, and respect in our community.²⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

Ms. Thames' moral charge is an appropriate conclusion to this publication. In a previous section, Mr. Eva Tucker was quoted as saying that the School District is a product of the community; therefore the community must take an active role in shaping its policy. Our history is a product of the community as well. As members of this community we are all responsible for the history that lies

ahead, and the directives laid out by Ms. Thames can certainly ensure more positive results. Herein lies the connection between our history and our "humanity;" if we live by more humanitarian principles, we will leave a more favorable historical legacy. There is also another connection, derived from a slightly different definition of humanity and particularly applicable to the field of African American history. Professor Maulana Karenga, creator of the Kwanzaa celebration, described it in an address given at Edinboro University in January 1995. He said that when a people's history is not known or not acknowledged their humanity is somehow diminished. Humanity here is tied to status as a human being, equally deserving of respect, human rights, and all the accoutrements of humanitarianism. The recording



Photo by Rick Klein, Courtesy United Way of Erie County

Project Blueprint, Class of 1995. Left to right, first row: Samuel Epps (director), Marysol Velez, Darya Moore, Shirley Clark, Jeanette Thames, Junius Johnson; second row: Leonard Davenport, Marci Moffett, Wanda Carson, Linda Shabazz, Denise Williams, Sandra Martin, Maria Espada-Comstock; third row: Dorothy Smith (chairperson), Darrell McCullum, Annette Roberts, Ronnie Porter, Ellisa Glenn-Brown, Hernan Velez; back: James Tomlin.

²⁴⁵ Jeanette Myers Thames, Project Blueprint Graduation address, October 29, 1995.

and understanding of history is therefore a critical component of, and a powerful force in, the breakdown of prejudice. This approach is not new; Erie parents in the 1960s and 1970s demanded that black history be incorporated into the school curriculum for this very reason. Nonetheless, several decades later we still struggle to overcome the myopic limits of our old standard vision of local history.

Thus the “charge and challenge” of this publication is to carry forward and expand the mere overview presented here. Illuminate the record with more detailed descriptions of the institutions and individuals who have made Erie’s African American history what it is; then integrate this information into the community’s collective consciousness to create a fuller, more representative Erie history.

There are some visible signs that this process is underway: the Burleigh reinterment was a community-wide homecoming; the Bicentennial Parade, unlike parades past, included numerous floats depicting historic and



Photo by Johnny Johnson

On May 28, 1994 the remains of Harry T. Burleigh were brought home to Erie, PA where he was re-interred in the Erie Cemetery. A memorial service was held at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Paul, which Burleigh had attended while growing up, and where he had been a member of the choir.

contemporary African American themes; a local committee is working to ensure that the African American contribution to Perry’s victory is realistically represented in the new Erie Maritime Center. Additionally, the “positives” we see all around us are grounded in history: from the 1960s we have organizations such as the John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Centers, and many community based groups dedicated to reaching young people; from the early twentieth century, Shiloh Baptist Church and Holy Trinity Church of God in Christ, the local NAACP, and the Booker T. Washington Center; from the nineteenth century St. James AME Church and the Bay City Lodge; and from throughout the two hundred years surveyed in previous pages, the individuals who came to Erie to make a better future for themselves, their families, and their descendants. The pace of change is slow, and the need for pressure is constant, so the challenge remains: learn history, record history, and finally, make a better history in the next hundred years.



Photo by Earleen Glaser

Erie’s Bicentennial Parade featured several floats depicting contemporary and historical African American themes. This is the Touch of Class float, left to right: Sharisse Barney, Ynette Barnes, Rose Rusie, George Barnes, Kevin Carroll, Sharmaine Gamble, Gerie Mathis, Arlisha Carson, Endia Vincent, Shannelle Santiago.

FINDING THE HISTORY AMONG US

by Karen James



Jackson children, 1916.

Courtesy of the McConnell Family

One of the hardest parts of researching African Americans living in the nineteenth century is remembering that these people had a life apart from their status as slave, freeman, or “person of color.” To be a slave was not the only element of life; African Americans, in or out of slavery, were first and foremost people. As people they were first husbands, wives, sisters, brothers, friends, and neighbors. They were good at some things and not so good at others. Some were reliable and hard-working and others were not, just like any other people. This must be said because so often the African American is seen as a “slave” and only that. Many researchers forget to look at the lives of

African Americans as people and instead look only at how Blacks were impacted by White society and political structures. In doing this the real story of African Americans has been reduced to a footnote or “side bar” in U.S. history.

To find the history of any people you must look for people. Marriage records, death and birth announcements, criminal and civil records must be examined. African Americans living in Erie can be found in church records, and remembering that the Black churches came long after Black people came to Erie, all church documents need to be reviewed. The newspaper is also a wonderful source of infor-

mation. While census records often did not include members of the African American community, the newspapers did. Abraham Wright is a good example of this. The Wright family lived in Erie from about 1824. We know this because Abraham Wright testified in a criminal case in that year. One year later, the local newspaper reported that he was injured in an accident involving a wagon, and in the following week, that he had died.

It is possible that the Wright family did appear on the 1820 census, though not listed by name. In that year, Black families and individuals were not named unless they were the free head of a household. In 1838, church records indicate that John and Jane Wright attended the First Presbyterian Church of Erie, and had at least two children, Tom and Clarissa, living in their household. Though many of the Wrights never appear on any census record by name, local history records tell us that the family was an important part of Erie life for nearly one hundred years.

The lesson here is to use official government records as a guide and not as the final word. Remember to think of African Americans as part of the whole, not as an isolated sector of society. Look for information everywhere, and above all, do not stereotype. Look for Black men in military service, as small business owners, farmers, and skilled workers. Black women can be found as teachers, business owners apart from their husbands, and as homemakers. Black occupations included boarding house keepers, saloon owners, barber shop owners, gunsmiths, blacksmiths, construction workers, sailors, and teamsters. African American children and adults living in Erie had the opportunity to attend a number of area schools and churches. African Americans used local doctors when needed and hospitals when available. Funeral homes buried the dead, and often have excellent records giving valuable information such as date of birth and the names of parents, spouses, siblings, and close family friends. Never guess about what people who lived one hundred and



Emma Jackson.

Courtesy of the McConnell Family

fifty years ago did; check everything, everywhere. As you read the following paragraphs, you will see how various sources can be fitted together to make one picture of an individual or family.

Examples of information with sources noted:

The Occasional Writings of Issac Moorhead, (Erie County Historical Society, Spec. Coll. B M821). Issac Moorhead came from a well-to-do family in Harborcreek and North East Townships. The Moorhead family held slaves for many years before becoming involved with the Abolition Movement. In his writings, Moorhead does not mention his own family's slaveholding, but gives very useful information about many other slaveholders and African Americans living in the city of Erie,

such as: Charlie Logan served Captain John Cummins during the Revolutionary War (p. 169), and Charlie Logan burns down barn, (p. 196); Katie "Old Kitty" Harris was one of four slaves held by Thomas Wilson, and was 100 years of age in 1874 (p. 195).

Almshouse Inmate Book, Pleasant Ridge Manor, Girard, PA. The Almshouse records show that many African Americans held as slaves were released to the "Poorhouse" once they were no longer able to work. Records also show that Blacks living in Erie who did not own property had little chance of ever pulling themselves out of poverty. Even retaining property was difficult, as was the case with the Logan family. Following the death of the men, the families were unable to hold on to their property.

History of Erie County, Vol. 1, John Miller, Chicago: 1909. Fira Logan was brought to Erie by General John Kelso about 1797, and was later held by his wife Sarah Kelso (p. 309).

Of nineteenth century African American families, the Logans were written about most often. There are many newspaper references, as well as the manuscript accounts by whites, the county histories, deed records, census records, and records of the First Presbyterian Church: Sale of one of the Logan sons by Kelso estate, *The Erie Gazette*, June 2, 1821; Charles Logan dies, *Erie Gazette*, March 1827; George Logan marries Julia Ann Wright, *Erie Gazette*, December 25, 1830; Bristo Logan marries Clarissa Wright, *Erie Gazette*, December 10, 1835; Bristo Logan and his brother George purchased property from William Himrod, Deed Book Vol. 1, p. 60, Feb. 25, 1836; George, sold by the Kelso family to Rufus S. Reed, became known as "Reed's George," *Russell Manuscript* (p. 345, 338-339); Bristo dies, *Erie Gazette*, Dec. 10, 1835; Following the death of Bristo's wife Clarissa, reported in the *Erie Morning Dispatch* February 26, 1880, a short history of the Logans and other Black families formerly held in slavery was published in the *Erie Morning Dispatch*, February 28, 1880.

The Bladen family has also received much attention, though often from secondary sources repeating information found in other secondary sources.

Boe Bladen bought his freedom at the age of forty years from John Grubb, (*The Erie Morning News*, September 14, 1970). John Grubb held a large force of African Americans on his farm in West Millcreek. (John Miller, *A Twentieth Century History of Erie Co., Pa.*, p. 310) There is good reason to believe that many of the men and women held in slavery by Grubb remained in the area. For more details about Grubb as a slave-holder see John C. Reed, *The Grubb Family History*. Bladen's sons William and Jacob remained with John Grubb until they reached the age of twenty-eight, (Boe Bladen will, #16016, Erie Co. Courthouse).

Bladen's physical description is given, (*Erie Morning Dispatch*, February 28, 1880). At the time of the War of 1812, Bladen lived in Erie Township, (Census, 1810). Bladen had a confrontation with a military officer in 1813, (*Russell Manuscript*, pp. 278-279). Also living in Millcreek was landowner Edward Parker and his wife Anna, (First Presbyterian Church Register #1, 1825-1879, at ECHS). Bladen and Parker seemed to have a close relationship. Parker is mentioned in Bladen's will, and Parker's daughter Malinda married Boe's son William.

Following Boe Bladen's death in 1829, William and Malinda continued to farm the family land. They had three children, Jacob W., Alfred, and Anna. Anna died at the age of seventeen, (*Erie Gazette*, February 18, 1864). It was at that time that William Bladen purchased the family burial plot at the Erie Cemetery, (lots 161 & 162, section O-3). Nine members of the Bladen family are buried there. Little is known of Jacob Bladen, the youngest son of Boe. Jacob was living in Harborcreek with his wife Ann in 1857 (*Erie Gazette*, March 12, 1857). Why he did not stay on the farmland left to him by Boe is unknown. Jacob died in 1872, (*Erie Cemetery Interment Book*). William Bladen passed the remaining family

land on to his only surviving child, Alfred (will #16018). The property thus became the only farmland in Erie County continuously held by one African American family for 100 years (*Nelson's Biographical Dictionary*, p. 822).

Malinda lived on the Bladen homestead with Alfred until her death, (*Erie Dispatch*, August 21, 1900). Alfred married Alfredie Holsey of Concord Township (*Erie Gazette*, August 21, 1862). The Holsey family had done well for themselves, and owned land in Concord Township. All their children received a common school education, and one, Grace Holsey, after graduating from Corry High School in 1895, went on to graduate from Columbia University (*Corry 125th Anniversary Celebration*, Corry Museum). Alfred and Alfredie Bladen had one child, Ellen Ethel Bladen. After five years of marriage, Alfredie died. Alfred Bladen's second wife was Julie Clifford. The Cliffords were long time residents of Erie, though Julie had been born in Hardy County, Virginia in 1826. The couple had one child, John Dicher Bladen. After Alfred's death, Julie lived in Waterford and Oil City. She died in Oil City at the home of Jess Bladen, January 14, 1920 (*Erie Dispatch*, January 15, 1920).

Newspapers are obviously an important source of information on local Blacks. The following section gives some insight into how important African Americans were to Erie. In practically every edition of every newspaper there is some mention of African Americans. These articles often reveal information not recorded anywhere else.

The Erie Gazette, November 4, 1824: Information on Chloe, a Black woman held in slavery by Mrs. David Wallace.

The Erie Gazette, May 31, 1827: "For Sale, A Colored Woman." This woman may have been Clarissa Wright Logan.

The Erie Morning Dispatch, May 7, 1880: Account of how James Williams, a fugitive slave, died in Erie.

The Erie Times, January 17, 1907: "When Slavery Existed in Erie." Includes text of a Bill

of Sale for a slave purchased in the southern part of Pennsylvania in 1798 by John Grubb of Millcreek. Most histories have focused on Grubb's activity as an Abolitionist.

The Erie Times News, September 14, 1970: Mili Roberts' column gives a brief history of Black Erie, one of the best written.

The Erie Times News, October 5, 1970: Mili Roberts' column on Saint James A.M.E. Church and the Lawrence and Burleigh families.

The Erie Times News, April 9, 1972: "Ex-Erieite Purchases Career Academy." This is the story of the Franklin family.

The Erie Times News, July 3, 1988: "Look Back to Harmony and Success." Article by Tricia Wood DeMarco focuses on early African Americans and Native Americans in Erie.

Careful reading of sources such as all of those listed above makes clear that the African American was both separate from and a part of the Erie community all at once. For many African Americans, in fact for most of the African American families living in Erie County, life was simply the day to day concerns of any other family. There were children to raise, gardens to tend, and a living to be earned.

Remembering that Blacks lived their lives the same way as Whites makes the research easier. African Americans married, had children, attended church, got into trouble, had medical problems, served in the military, and participated in all of life's other events. Searching for records of these events makes finding African Americans much easier to do, and gives a much fuller picture than does relying on census records alone. Every source of information must be examined for names, dates, and events, and the information needs to be processed with the general history of the time. Then we will have a true history of Erie's African Americans.

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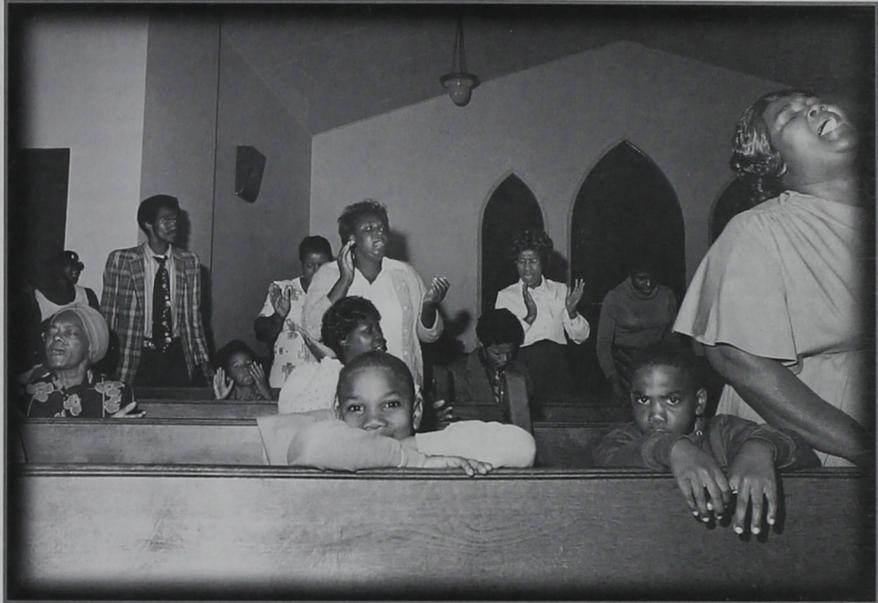
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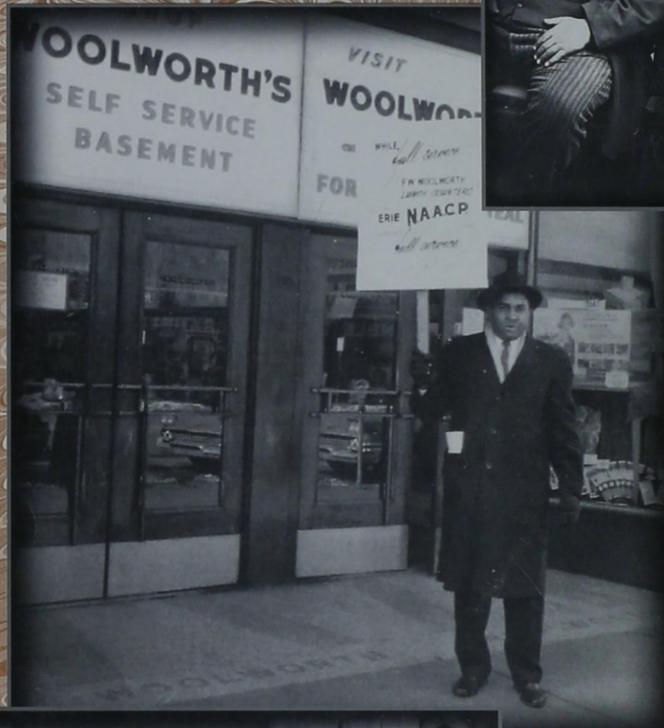
Sarah and Karen at the Erie History Center, May 13, 1994.

Photo by Jim Kirk



Bethlehem Temple Church, 21st and Wayne Streets, c. 1978-79.

Photo by Kathy Merski



FIRST FAMILIES PROJECT
CATHEDRAL OF ST. PAUL EPISCOPAL
AUGUST 20, 1985 ERIE, PA.

HOWESMAN PHOTOGRAPHY



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