

Histories of Black Jersey City

1630-Present

In 1619, “20 and odd Negroes” arrived in Jamestown in the English colony of Virginia. This exhibition has been organized to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of this arrival and to honor the African-American presence in America by highlighting some of the rich history of African-Americans in our city, Jersey City.

In 1965, Martin Luther King received an honorary Doctor of Laws and Letters degree from then Saint Peter’s College and in 1968, he visited and spoke the Metropolitan A.M.E. Zion Church. One of the speakers who preceded Dr. King at Metropolitan was Dr. William Wilkinson, then president of the local chapter of the NAACP. Dr. Wilkinson said to the applause of thousands that, “Sometimes I think Jersey City is just as far south as Jackson, Miss.”

Now, New Jersey’s 31st Legislative District is represented in the senate by an African-American woman, Sandra Bolden Cunningham, widow of Jersey City’s first African-American mayor, Glenn Cunningham and in the Assembly is another African-American woman, Angela V. McKnight. Three of Jersey City’s nine council people are African-Americans: Ward A, Denise Ridley; Ward F, Jermaine Robinson; and councilwoman at large, Joyce Watterman.

An interesting development in the African-American community over the past thirty years has been the increasing number of new immigrants from Africa as well as the Caribbean and other parts of the African Diaspora. The history of the Afro-American community in Jersey City is enormously rich and varied, full of figures and incidents, stories and movements that positively compel attention and respect. The community-at-large should know this history much better and gratefully remember its many heroes and heroines.

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Archival assistance provided by John Beekman & Cynthia Harris of Jersey City Free Public Library & The NJ Room

Special Thanks to Director Christine Goodman, Office of Cultural Affairs



The Practice & History of Slavery in Jersey City

The first African-Americans here worked for the Dutch West India Company. Enslaved, their situation, in fact, was analogous to indentured servitude. There was ongoing movement by enslaved people from slavery to conditional freedom to half-freedom to freedom. Enslaved people could be and were baptized and married in church; could and did own property; could and did use the courts; and could and did intermarry with Whites. These circumstances led early on to the formation of an expanding community of free Black people. For example, in 1679, Jochem Antony, a free, Dutch-speaking Black man was admitted as a communicant, i.e. a full member, of Old Bergen Church.

The advent of English rule in 1664 brought this relatively fluid and benign state of affairs to an end. Chattel slavery (chattel = personal property) with all its economic, political, and social implications was built into the legal system and the importation of enslaved people was actively encouraged to meet colonial labor shortages. In the Province of New Jersey, a royal colony, the "slave code" passed by the legislature in 1704, prohibited both enslaved Blacks and free Blacks from owning land. The code also penalized African-Americans for being out at night, past curfew. The unjust and cruel treatment accorded African-Americans predictably led to a general paranoia on the part of Whites of revolt. Indeed, understandably, some enslaved Blacks did make and attempt to implement plans for self-emancipation. In Bergen County (the southern half of which was annexed to the new Hudson County in 1840 to compose by far the largest part of the new county), in the thirty-five years before the Revolution, enslaved people supplied 40 percent of the labor force. There was a high demand for labor, free and unfree.

One such wealthy, white slave owner was Thomas Brown, a ship owner engaged in the lucrative West Indies trade. Thomas Brown lived at Retirement Hall, in what is now Greenville, which was richly furnished with fine French and English furniture. He was a patriot and took the American side in the Revolution which made him stand out among his predominantly neutral and Tory Dutch neighbors. But what was the source of Captain Brown's prosperity? Thomas Brown was a slaver. Enslaved people were his stock-in-trade. When Retirement Hall was torn down in 1909, manacles and chains were found still anchored in the basement walls.

The post-Revolutionary government of the State of New Jersey quickly made clear to African-Americans for whom the Revolutionary War had been waged. A 1788 law banned the importation of enslaved Blacks into the state. A progressive measure? Not really! It increased the value of free White labor and increased, too, the value of the "property" of White "masters." Moreover, the law also forbade the immigration of free Blacks into the state to prevent free Black labor from competing with free White labor. The Afro-American percentage of the population was intended to stay at what was deemed a safe, manageable, and profitable level. By 1800, close to three thousand enslaved people could be found in Bergen County, almost 20 percent of the total population.

New Jersey was the last northern state to abolish slavery and then through "gradual" emancipation. This "abolition" was accomplished in a way so corrupt, so rife with bad faith, and with such glacial slowness, as to leave no reasonable doubt that the whole process had absolutely nothing at all to do with the best interests of African-Americans and everything to do with the economic interests of slaveholders and the prejudices of the White majority. In fact, Jersey City generally did not sympathize with the plight of enslaved Black people because of bigotry and a concern to maintain southern markets. Further, abolitionist sentiments were not widespread- New Jersey vote against Lincoln twice and initially rejected the 13th Amendment.

African-Americans born to enslaved mothers after July 4, 1804 were required to serve lengthy "apprenticeships" before manumission: twenty-five years for males and twenty-one years for females. Slaveholders were permitted to sell their fictional "apprentices" down south before they reached the age of manumission. Enslaved women and men born before July 4, 1804 were considered, after 1846, "apprenticed for life." Unsurprisingly, there were still enslaved persons in New Jersey in 1865. Many streets, places, and avenues in Jersey City continue to bear the names of families that supported and benefited from the institution of slavery.

Nevertheless, in the antebellum period in Jersey City, there was a nascent Black middle class. Between 1840 and 1850, there were six Blacks who owned land with values ranging from \$500.00 to \$3000.00. The Rev. Timothy Tate (alternatively Eate) organized St. Mark's A.M.E. Zion Church (a prior name of Metropolitan A.M.E. Zion) in 1846 at the Fourth Street home of Mrs. Ashby.

The church was well enough established by May 1847 to make its first report at the New York Annual Conference. The A.M.E. Zion Church was a part of the abolitionist movement. After the Emancipation Proclamation was signed and the Civil War ended, its vigorous missionary activity among the freedmen of the south gained it the name of the Freedom Church. There were two African Burying Grounds in what is now Jersey City: in Bergen-Lafayette, approximately between Maple Street and Johnston Avenue and between Whiton Street and Pacific Avenue; in the Journal Square area, approximately between Sip and Stuyvesant Avenues and between Van Reypen Street and Kennedy Boulevard. Separate public schools for African-American children existed within the current borders of Jersey City from 1852 up to 1877, when the schools were integrated.

slavery & Jersey City

The Underground Railroad was the way, before the Civil War, enslaved Black women and men from the south, in great danger and at grave risk to themselves, emancipated themselves from the trammels of slavery and travelled north to Canada and freedom with the help of abolitionists along the way. It is estimated that of the one hundred thousand and then some self-emancipated people who were carried on the Underground Railroad, Jersey City hosted more than sixty thousand passengers. The self-emancipated and their helpers knowingly and willingly broke man's law and risked concomitant penalties because of their strong belief that they were obeying God's law and adhering to a higher moral standard.

All the routes of the Underground Railroad met in Jersey City because of its proximity via its ferry and Hoboken's to New York City. There were a few "stations" or safe houses. One of these was the home of Dr. Henry Holt on Washington Street. Another, the Hilton-Holden House, at 59 Clifton Place, still stands, beautifully restored. Finally, there was the station operated by two free African-American brothers, Thomas and John Vreeland Jackson. Oyster fishermen, in 1831 they purchased land in present day Greenville. The HUB area, as in Hudson Bergen Light Railroad, on Martin Luther King Drive, was recently renamed in their honor Jackson Square.

Jersey City and the A.M.E. Zion Church (I)

The roots of the A.M.E. Zion Church in Jersey City go back to 1846. The church grew and prospered and by 1875, the minister in Jersey City was the best paid Minister in the New Jersey Conference (\$600.00 per annum). In 1876, it was described as "the leading station in the New Jersey Conference."

The African-American population of Jersey City was growing; in part because it was the terminus of four major trunk lines. In that era, railroads meant sleeping cars and dining cars operated by the Pullman Car Company. The company hired Afro-Americans as porters and cooks. These jobs were better paid and more secure than most jobs open to African-Americans in Jim Crow America. This was the nucleus of an Afro-American middle class.

Moreover, a significant number of these men were graduates of historically black colleges and universities. Ironically, they were better educated than the overwhelming majority of the Whites they served in so-called "menial" capacities. In 1890, E (li). George Biddle became the minister at the A.M.E. Zion Church in Jersey City, the same church which seventy-eight years later heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speak only six days before his assassination in Memphis in 1968.

Biddle had been born a slave in Pennsylvania, but been bought out of slavery by his mother. In Boston, he attended an all-white school, from which he was summarily expelled for refusing to join in singing the national anthem. Afterwards, he trained as a "sign and fancy painter." When the Civil War came, Biddle enlisted in the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, the second Afro-American regiment organized in the Union Army, in which he earned a Purple Heart for severe wounds to his shoulder and neck suffered in battle.

The heroism of the 54th Regiment was later celebrated in the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial (1884) on the Boston Common by Augustus Saint Gaudens and the film "Glory" (1989) with Morgan Freeman and Denzel Washington. After becoming a minister in the A.M.E. Zion Church, Biddle was stationed in New Haven, CT. There, at Yale University, while serving as minister of his own church, he completed the full course of theological studies and specialized further in philosophy and ethics.

He was as well a close reader of the Holy Bible in the original tongues -- Hebrew and Greek. When Biddle came to Jersey City, he brought with him not only his considerable erudition and proficiency in biblical languages, but a first-rate theological library, too. Eventually, E. George Biddle would become a bishop in the A.M.E. Zion Church and the long-time editor of its official organ, the Zion Trumpet -- treating subjects as diverse as premillennial dispensationalism and the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr.

Jersey City and the A.M.E. Zion Church (2)

In Jersey City, Biddle was part of an extraordinary A.M.E. Zion milieu and culture that included Florence Spearing Randolph, Julia A.J. Foote and Bishop Alexander Walters. Each catalyzed the other and together they created a chain reaction that produced mighty effects in the secular and religious spheres -- in temperance activity, in the women's suffrage movement, in the fight for civil rights, in missionary work at home and abroad, in education, in the ordination of women.

They had much in common with each other. Whether born into bondage themselves or in its shadow, the "peculiar institution" and its effects shaped their world. In that world, they had originally occupied modest, even humble positions: Around Louisville, Kentucky, Walters was a server in private homes, in hotels, and on steamboats sailing up-and-down the Ohio River; Randolph a dressmaker; Biddle a sign painter; and Foote a domestic and common sailor's wife. Whether looked at through the lenses of race, gender, or class, they all seemed destined to lead hard, narrow lives of little note. Yet how differently things turned out!

Walters was pastor of Mother Zion Church, the premier A.M.E. Zion church and a friend of W.E.B. Du Bois. Described in an 1895 history of the A.M.E. Zion Church as "extremely a race man," he was co-founder with T. Thomas Fortune (a co-owner and the editor of the New York Age, then America's leading Afro-American newspaper) of the National Afro-American Council, the first civil rights organization to be active throughout the country. Later, he was a founder and vice-president of the NAACP and an early member of the National Urban League.

Randolph, one of the first women ordained in the A.M.E. Zion Church (a pacesetter in this regard among African-American denominations and Protestant churches generally) was an effective minister in a number of churches. She raised monies for foreign missions and from 1922-1924 travelled in Liberia and Ghana visiting the missionaries her efforts had aided. Founder and first president of the New Jersey Federation of Women's Clubs, she was a leader as well in the New Jersey Suffrage Association.

Foote was a preacher of such power that she could hold enthralled in rapt, breathless attention an audience of five thousand. Tirelessly, she preached all over the United States and in Canada to integrated audiences, at revivals, at camp meetings, and in churches-- adamantly refusing to address segregated audiences. But when she initially experienced the inner call to preach the Gospel, she had to contend with the opposition of husband, parents, and minister. Overcoming this resistance and more, she was the first woman ordained in the A.M.E. Zion Church. All in for both temperance and women's suffrage, she was also a gifted author. Her book, *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch* (1879), is read today in college/university courses offered in African-American Studies, Women's Studies, and Religious Studies programs. A sensitive spiritual advisor, her advice and counsel were sought by other seekers after righteousness.

The previously mentioned George Biddle was Randolph's pastor. He encouraged her interest in church work. She became a Sunday school teacher and Youth Class leader in his church. Moreover, he tutored her in theology and gave her access to his library. At the same time, Randolph was friends with Foote, who lived in the household of Bishop Walters. In the controversy in the A.M.E. Zion Church over the ordination of women, Walters favored the ordination of women. He saw this outcome as a natural development of the democratic, egalitarian impulse present from the start in the Methodism of Wesley -- a man who supported William Wilberforce's struggle to end the British traffic in human beings and called slavery in America, "the vilest that ever saw the sun."

In addition to the standard Protestant Evangelical teaching about conversion -- acceptance by faith of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior bringing salvation (more formally, justification or regeneration) to the believer, Biddle, Foote, Randolph, and Walters were immersed in the Holiness movement -- a movement whose teachings had revolutionary implications in their Jim Crow, Robber Baron America.

The theological foundation of the movement was a fervent belief that through the action of the Holy Spirit, in a post-conversion experience called "immediate sanctification," the root of sin in the heart of the believer could, then and there, be removed, and the believer enabled, while still here on earth, to participate in the holiness of God. This belief empowered those who held it and were transformed by it to challenge racial barriers, gender stereotypes, and class hierarchy.

The Talented Tenth: Afro-American Leadership in Jersey City

When Jersey City hired its first Afro-American policeman in 1880, George Harris, the doorway to the precinct was blocked by a hostile mob trying to stop him from taking his post. One-hundred-and- twenty-one years later, another Afro-American man, Glenn Cunningham, who had worn a Jersey City policeman's uniform for twenty-five years, was sworn in as Jersey City's first Afro-American mayor. The late Mayor Cunningham, with his keen interest in local history (he wrote, produced, and narrated a video about slavery and the Underground Railroad in Jersey City, *Hidden Footprints*) must have relished the historical irony of that moment.

In 1898, Jersey City Public Schools hired the first African-American teacher, Alice Fearing. In contrast to George Harris, she had a peaceful start at Jersey City School No. 19. - although the controversy that preceded her hiring. Today, an Afro-American, Franklin Walker, is the acting Superintendent of Schools of Jersey City. This year, Afro-American Priscilla Gardner, the Director of the Jersey City Free Public Library, retired after fifty years of dedicated service and the main library was re-named in her honor. When Gardner started in the system, she had not been permitted to interact directly with patrons, but was confined to shelving books. Julian Robinson, a Dartmouth graduate and a dean and vice-president at Jersey City State College (now NJCU) became the first Afro-American to run for mayor in 1969. Fred W. Martin was Jersey City's first Black councilman. He was elected in 1961 to represent the Bergen-Lafayette ward. Providentially, as it turned out. In 1964, from the night of August 2nd to the morning of August 5th, civil unrest convulsed Lafayette. Called by some riots, by others an uprising, there is no doubt that the ultimate source of the disturbances lay in Black unemployment due to racism, discrimination in municipal hiring, and poor recreational facilities for youth in the predominantly Black Lafayette area. Police fanned the flames of discord by provocatively patrolling with shotguns and .38 caliber handguns at the ready.

Martin and other brave community leaders worked hard and successfully to calm things down despite the "law and order" intransigence and willful cluelessness of Mayor Whelan (afterwards, a member of the notorious "Hudson Eight," he would spend seven years in federal prison on conspiracy and extortion charges connected with a kickback scheme involving municipal and county contracts) as to the real causes of what was happening. A college president's son and one of the first Black graduates of the Harvard Business School, aside from public service, he ran a cosmetics company and published a crusading newspaper, the New Jersey Herald News, which fought against segregation.

The connection with cosmetics was not fortuitous. The beauty culture market, divided up to some extent by race and ethnicity, was one in which many Black entrepreneurs excelled; most famously, Madame C.J. Walker. Cordelia Thomas Greene Johnson arrived in Jersey City about 1915 as part of the Great Northward Migration of Afro-Americans from the rural South and initially survived economically by taking in laundry. Training received in Madame Walker's school allowed her to start her own business as a beautician. Founder and president of the Modern Beautician Association as well as president of the local chapter, established in 1918, of the N.A.A.C.P., Madame Johnson was a champion of safe and sanitary methods and conditions in beauty parlors -- at this time, owing to the state's failure to license and properly regulate beauty parlors, scarring and injury were not uncommon occurrences. A suffragette, Madame Johnson remained active politically and was a close associate and colleague in party work of New Jersey's premier Black Republican, Dr. George E. Cannon, also of Jersey City.

Dr. George E. Cannon has a multifaceted legacy; as a scholarly physician, author of the pioneering article, "Health Problems of the New Jersey Negro"; as an influential Republican figure, seconding the nomination of Calvin Coolidge for the office of president at his party's convention; as a church founder (Lafayette Presbyterian Church, now Claremont-Lafayette United Presbyterian Church); and as a wealthy developer, president of the John Brown Building and Loan Association. However, he is particularly interesting as the treasurer of the Frederick Douglass Film Company. The film company produced films designed to counter the vile, minstrel show stereotypes perpetuated by Griffith's KKK-endorsed *The Birth of a Nation*. The films, *The Colored America Winning His Suit* (1917), *The Scapegoat* (1917), and *Heroic Negro Soldiers of the World War* (1919) reflect the hopes and the values and the aspirations of an emerging Black bourgeoisie -- social mobility through good character, hard work, education, and patriotism.

Dr. Cannon's practice was taken over after his death by Dr. Lena Edwards and her husband, Dr. Keith Madison. Edwards was an OBGYN and delivered over five thousand babies in Jersey City. Dr. Edwards was a committed Roman Catholic with a special devotion to St. Francis of Assisi. When the first African-American Roman Catholic church in New Jersey, Christ the King Church on Ocean Avenue, opened in 1930, it contained a baptismal font donated by Dr. Lena Edwards. When many would have been thinking about retirement, Edwards became a tertiary Franciscan and moved to Texas to provide medical care for migrant workers. Seeing the need, Edwards founded a modern maternity hospital, to which she generously contributed from her own funds. President Lyndon Johnson awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964 for a lifetime of helping others.

The life of Jersey City-raised Raymond A. Brown reads like the screenplay of a film that the Frederick Douglass Film Company might have produced. Son of a laborer and a domestic, Brown did unskilled manual labor in the New Deal Civilian Conservation Corp, saving up money to attend college. He then attended a historic Black college, Florida A & M. Upon graduation, he returned to Jersey City where, because of his race, the best job he could get was as an elevator operator in a hotel. Undeterred, Brown went to Fordham Law at night. After service in WWII, Brown was finally able to finish law school at the age of thirty-four. Taking cases anywhere and everywhere, including pro bono civil rights cases, Brown became one of the best known criminal defense attorneys not only in New Jersey, but in the entire country.

If Brown was a trailblazer for Afro-American male attorneys, and surely he was, then Jersey City-born and Henry Snyder High School-educated Judge Shirley Tolentino was one for Afro-American female attorneys. When she received her J.D. in 1971 from Seton Hall Law, she was the sole African-American female in her class. A series of firsts would follow: first African-American woman appointed to the Jersey City Municipal Court; first Afro-American woman appointed Presiding Judge of the Jersey City Municipal Court; first Afro-American woman appointed to the Superior Court of New Jersey.

Doctors, lawyers, funeral home directors, dentists, ministers, and teachers historically formed the vanguard of the Black leadership class. Cornelius R. Parker Jr. was a second generation member of this elite group. Parker's father had opened the first Afro-American funeral parlor in Jersey City in 1895. However, Parker's path was far from smooth or easy. Losing his father early, Parker endured stints as a chauffeur, dock worker, mechanic, welder, and trade embalmer before he could open the Parker Funeral Home (now the Cotton-Parker Funeral Home) in 1954. But Parker did not let his hard-fought-for business success monopolize his life. He gave back to his own particular community and the community-at-large: he served on the city council; he served on the board of education; he advocated for affordable housing; he was instrumental in securing a historic building as a new home for his historic congregation -- Metropolitan A.M.E. Zion Church.

His commitment to civil rights for Afro-Americans made him an active member of the Jersey City NAACP, where he worked closely with then President Raymond Brown to desegregate Journal Square restaurants one-by-one through litigation. The initial step would be a visit by Parker and other NAACP members to see whether they would be seated and/or served. At that period, hotels at Journal Square were still segregated, too: e.g. the Hotel Plaza (now senior/physically challenged housing).

The memory of journalist Earl Morgan is still fresh in our minds. A lifelong resident of our city, a community activist, a spokesperson for the United Black Front of Jersey City in the 1970s, a Hudson Dispatch and Jersey Journal reporter and columnist for decades, Earl first, last, and always was a lover of Jersey City and its history. Earl's final cause was spreading the message of the Croson Study, that the new Whiter, younger, more affluent Jersey City seemed to be quickly leaving the Blacker, poorer, older Jersey City far behind.

But long before there was an Afro-American male journalist named Earl Morgan, Jersey City had an Afro-American female journalist named Ella Barksdale Brown. Brown wrote for the Jersey Journal, too, as well as the New York Amsterdam News. Brown was in the first graduating class of historic Black Spelman College. A suffragette, an anti-lynching advocate, and an educator, Brown's papers are now at Yale University.

Though born in Alabama, Afro-American journalist and fiction writer Doris Jean Austin, attended Jersey City Public School No.12 and Lincoln High School. At the latter, her English teacher, the Rev. Ercell F. Webb, also her pastor at Monumental Baptist Church, encouraged her gift for writing. Before liver cancer claimed her life at forty-five, Austin produced a significant body of work. A MacDowell fellow, her articles appeared regularly in the New York Amsterdam News, Essence, and the New York Times Book Review. There was an anthology of short stories, too. Best friends with another Afro-American author, Terry McMillan, she is Delilah Abraham in McMillan's novel, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. In the movie version, this character is played by Whoopi Goldberg. Austin's own novel, *After The Garden*, in which class conflict is a major theme, is set in Jersey City with Astor Place and Kearney Avenue representing the antipodes of upper and lower class life in Black Jersey City.

The Miller Branch of the Jersey City Free Public Library and the Mary McLeod Bethune Life Center are the cultural heart and lungs of Ward F, Bergen Lafayette. It is impossible to talk about the former without talking about David-Daoud and Barbara Williams together with retired J.C.F.P.L. director, Priscilla Gardner. Before moving to the main library on Jersey Avenue, the Bergen Avenue Miller Branch was Gardner's professional stomping ground for whole decades. It was at this branch that the Williams family et al. started CAS (Community Awareness Series) in 1977 -- music lessons, concerts, and forums on emergent issues of public interest, etc. A couple of years earlier, in 1975, Daoud had founded SOLE (Spirit of Life Ensemble), a jazz group that like CAS continues today. Daoud is a visual artist, poet, and community activist as well as SOLE'S percussionist.