

# The Civil Rights Movement in Pittsburgh: *To Make This City “Some Place Special”*

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The Civil Rights Movement, with its compelling images of American citizens, black and white, young and old, male and female, resisting non-violently the wrath of segregation’s supporters—the police dogs and water hoses, the KKK and church bombings, the defiant governors and heckling mobs—has come to symbolize the world’s struggle for human rights. The triumph of the civil rights movement led other Americans to assert themselves, including women, gays, the elderly, the physically disabled, white ethnics and non-white immigrants. And it emboldened minority groups worldwide, including blacks in Latin America, apartheid opponents in South Africa, Untouchables in India, Palestinians in the Middle East, Aborigines in Australia, Catholics in Northern Ireland, dissidents in Eastern Europe, and Chinese students at Tiananmen Square.

The Southern phase of the Civil Rights Movement climaxed in the years between Martin Luther King’s Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 and passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts a decade later. In the South, the movement faced enormous obstacles but had clear-cut targets, including segregationist laws and blatant voting discrimination. The situation in the North was more complex and the targets more elusive. In Pittsburgh, this meant that a city with the motto “some place special” required a long and arduous struggle to make it *racially* “some place special.”

## **Civil War to World War I**

The racial lines in pre-Civil War Pittsburgh were sharply drawn. Blacks here who were runaways lived in fear of recapture and, runaways or not, they all suffered discrimination. In 1837, Pittsburgh blacks were hit with a double blow when an amendment to the state constitution stripped them of their right to vote, and the city forced their children to attend a segregated school on Miller Street. These developments, in addition to a long series of other grievances, galvanized the black community and its leaders, including Martin Delany, John Vashon, and Lewis Woodson. It also motivated sympathetic whites like Jane Grey Swisshelm, Julius LeMoyne and Charles Avery, who campaigned against slavery, helped runaway slaves to escape, and established Avery Institute for blacks’ higher education.

After the Civil War, the issues became less clear-cut. In 1870, Pennsylvania blacks won back the franchise, and five years later city schools were desegregated. In 1881 Pittsburgh blacks used their newly won franchise to help elect the first African American to city council, Lemuel Gogins, and in 1887 they celebrated when the state legislature guaranteed them access to public facilities.

These advances, however, did not signal that the state and the city were moving toward a color-blind society. Pennsylvania blacks regained the right to vote simply as a by-product of the U.S. Congress having amended the nation’s constitution to guarantee the franchise to Southern freedmen. Pittsburgh blacks elected one of their own to city council, but would have to wait another seventy-five years to duplicate that achievement. The children of Pittsburgh blacks won the right to attend desegregated schools, but it would take more than sixty years before black teachers were hired to teach in those schools. Blacks gained access to places of public

accommodation, but the courts later ruled that there was no requirement that they be granted equal treatment once admitted. And blacks had difficulty buying homes because of the widespread use of restrictive covenants, which prevented white homeowners from selling to black couples even when they wished to do so.

By 1915, a half-century after the Civil War, racial discrimination still haunted blacks in the North and the South. In 1896, the U.S. Supreme court in *Plessy vs Ferguson* had ruled that segregation laws were constitutional, and the Court did nothing to stem the violence and disfranchisement that had swept the South. In the North, racial discrimination also was endemic, but was informal and customary rather than explicit and codified. A half-century after the Civil War, America had determined it would not be a slave society, but it had yet to decide whether it would be a racial democracy.

## **World War I to World War II**

In the decade following World War I, Pittsburgh blacks gained the numbers and institutions they needed to attack racial injustice. Their numbers increased when the war cut off European immigration, creating a labor shortage that attracted thousands of Southern migrants. Between 1910 and 1930, the city's black population grew from 25,000 to 55,000, furnishing a population base that allowed blacks to develop an impressive set of institutions that included the Pittsburgh Crawfords, the Homestead Grays, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the YM/YWCA, the NAACP, the Urban League, and of course the churches. The *Courier*, the NAACP, and the Urban League, in turn, provided the community with the means for organized protest.

There certainly was much to protest. In restaurants, blacks found salt in their coffee, pepper in their milk, and overcharges on their bills; in department stores, they couldn't try on clothes and encountered impolite service; in downtown theaters, they either were refused admission or were sent to the balcony. Forbes Field, where the Pirates played baseball, confined them to certain sections of the stands. Despite the 1887 public accommodations law, downtown hotels regularly turned away black guests. Equally troubling, by the 1920s the region's Ku Klux Klan boasted seventeen thousand members.

Increased numbers and growing organizational strength should have made blacks part of the local political equation, but several factors limited their potential.

First, blacks comprised less than ten percent of the city's population, and their dispersal across several neighborhoods diluted the impact of that figure. Not until 1930, for example, did African Americans comprise half the population of their single largest neighborhood, the Hill District.

Second, key black leaders focused their energies elsewhere. During the 1930s, Homer Brown, long-time head of the local NAACP, labored in the state legislature in Harrisburg, removing him from the daily give-and-take of Pittsburgh politics. Daisy Lampkin, an NAACP fund-raising dynamo, traveled the country on the organization's behalf; and Robert Vann, editor of the *Courier*, had national aspirations and interests.

Third, council seats were contested on a citywide basis, which enhanced the power of the dominant political machine. Republicans so dominated local politics before the 1930s that the party could ignore the black vote, and the same was true of the Democratic Party afterwards.

More was involved, however. Some observers, including Robert Vann of the *Courier*, decried what they called black political apathy. The Urban League remained active in the 1920s and 1930s, but the NAACP, after an enthusiastic founding in 1915, declined in membership and spirit. In the 1920s, Rev. J. C. Austin spoke of finding the organization "just about as Christ

found Lazarus after the fourth day of his death, not only dead but buried." National headquarters informed the Pittsburgh branch that theirs was "weaker than any other unit we have in a city of the same size." In the late 1920s, Homer Brown and Daisy Lampkin revived the organization, but by the late 1930s, with Brown in the state assembly and Lampkin traveling nationally, the branch once again became dormant.

As a result, in the political arena, black efforts came to a standstill. In 1919, Robert Logan made a promising start when he became the city's first black alderman. Logan, however, was not reelected and, over the next two decades, blacks suffered a string of electoral losses. Two bright spots were the election in 1930 of Walter Tucker to the state legislature, followed five years later by Homer Brown to the same position. Nonetheless, by 1945 blacks had only three elected officials, and did not control the Democratic party organization even in wards where they formed a majority.

Indeed, black Pittsburghers' accomplishments in that era were social and cultural more than political. The *Pittsburgh Courier* by the 1930s had become the largest circulation black paper in the country, with a staff of writers and an outstanding photographer, Charles "Teenie" Harris. The Pittsburgh Crawfords and the Homestead Grays were two of the premiere baseball teams in the Negro Leagues and, unlike their counterparts in other cities, were black-owned—the Crawfords by Gus Greenlee and the Grays by Cumberland Posey. The Aurora Reading Club and the Loendi Club were two of the nation's oldest and most distinguished women's and men's social clubs, while the Frogs Club hosted an annual week of fun and festivities that attracted revelers from around the country.

Culturally, Pittsburgh in the 1920s and 1930s probably nurtured more world-class musicians than any city of its size, including Lena Horne, Mary Lou Williams, Maxine Sullivan, Billy Strayhorn, Earl "Fatha" Hines, Roy Eldridge, Kenny Clarke, Errol Garner, and Billy Eckstine. They even gained a presence in the field of classical music with Aubrey Pankey, a world-renowned baritone, Maudelena Johnson, whose music studio trained classical singers, and Mary Cardwell Dawson, founder of the National Negro Opera Company.

Political weaknesses made Pittsburghers rely on Harrisburg for civil rights initiatives. In 1937 Homer Brown convened state hearings on the hiring practices of the Pittsburgh Board of Education, which had refused to hire black teachers from the time it desegregated the schools in 1875. The hearing cleared the way for a lawsuit argued by two local black attorneys, Richard F. Jones and Joseph Givens and, before the year ended, the Board had hired its first black instructor, Lawrence Peeler, to teach music. Two years later, Homer Brown scored another victory when he helped get Harrisburg to pass a public accommodations law, amending and strengthening the 1887 act.

## **World War II Era**

World War II marked a decisive turning point in the civil rights movement. First, the war caused a massive shift in white racial attitudes. The fight against German racism abroad helped discredit American racism at home. It helped make prejudice no longer respectable and “racial democracy” an all-American value. This change in attitude led Americans to cheer Jesse Owens’ triumphs in Berlin, root for Joe Louis against the German Max Schmeling, and applaud Jackie Robinson’s baseball heroics. In Pittsburgh the change led citizens to form interracial citizen groups and forums, such as Mayor David Lawrence’s Civic Unity Council of 1946, to improve inter-cultural and inter-racial relations.

The fight against racism abroad also affected blacks’ attitudes, raising their consciousness and inspiring new levels of protest. At the national level, A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin threatened a massive “March on Washington” against employment discrimination, while the black press (led by the influential *Pittsburgh Courier*) rallied blacks around the campaign for a “Double V,” and passed out buttons proclaiming “Democracy—at Home and Abroad.”

Locally, as blacks shed the apathy that had so disturbed Vann, their demands quickly exceeded concessions whites were willing to make voluntarily. A reporter and photographer for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Edna Chappell and Charles “Teenie” Harris, sought service at a number of local eating establishments and found massive non-compliance with the 1939 public accommodations law. An even more aggressive attack on racial practices occurred in 1947, when Urban League staffer K. Leroy Irvis sent pickets downtown to protest department stores for not hiring black clerks. The picketing quickly succeeded in getting clerks hired, but the stores and Mayor Lawrence were furious, and Irvis was soon out of a job.

Finally, the war stimulated the steel industry and re-kindled black migration from the South, increasing the black population from 62,000 to 86,000 during the 1940s. In the 1940s, the combination of increased numbers and greater militancy helped blacks to assert themselves politically. A group that included Reverend Bert Logan, attorney Richard Jones, and Paul F. Jones, Chairman of the Allegheny County Colored Democrats, worked to increase political interest, resulting in the election of Harry Fitzgerald as the city’s first black alderman since 1919 and, in 1947, the election of magistrate Robert “Pappy” Williams as the city’s first black ward chairman.

## **The 1950s**

The scope and pace of black protest accelerated during the 1950s. Marion Bond came to Pittsburgh from NAACP headquarters to revive the city’s dormant chapter. Here she met her future husband, a University of Pittsburgh law student, James Jordon, and together they helped invigorate both the NAACP and the local civil rights movement. In 1954 Marion Bond Jordon became Pittsburgh’s first NAACP Executive Director and oversaw a massive growth in membership from 500 to 25,000.

Jordon also oversaw an invigorated attack on racial discrimination. One of the NAACP’s major campaigns in the early 1950s was the desegregation of local swimming pools. Reverend LeRoy Patrick of the NAACP worked with Joe Allen of the Urban League to organize interracial teams of volunteers, who endured harassment and sometimes barrages of stones and bricks, to integrate Corrigan’s Pool in South Park, plus Highland Park and a number of other pools in the city. Henry Smith, Everett Utterback and other lawyers worked with the NAACP to litigate the integration of public facilities like the Lexington Roller Rink in East Liberty. And inter-racial

teams of volunteers tested eating establishments, theaters and hotels to break down racial barriers.

Interracial coalitions provided the movement with additional momentum. Florence Reizenstein, one of several white members on the Urban League's board, worked with the NAACP's Marion Jordon to create NEED, a scholarship fund for college students. Marguerite Hofer, Director of Church and Community for the Pittsburgh Presbytery, worked on fair housing issues with the NAACP as well as with the Allegheny County Council for Fair Housing Practices, which was a coalition of the NAACP, the Urban League, the Pittsburgh Presbytery, labor unions, and civic organizations.

The presence of whites and blacks working together helped change public perceptions of the movement from something that benefited blacks only to a shared effort to fulfill American values. It made a difference when someone with the stature of Leland Hazard, vice-president of Pittsburgh Plate and Glass, could ask white Pittsburghers: "Is it possible that no Negro musician is qualified for a chair in the Pittsburgh Symphony? Is it possible that there is only one Negro educator qualified to be a Pittsburgh public school principal?"

Civic leaders like Reizenstein and Hazard set a positive tone that helped public institutions to act. The results could be seen in 1952, when Pittsburgh passed a Fair Employment Practices ordinance, and in 1958, when the city became the second in the nation to enact a fair housing ordinance.

In 1955, three years before Pittsburgh passed its fair housing ordinance, Louis Mason helped it become one of the first in the nation with a central agency to process citizen complaints—the Commission on Human Relations (CHR). In 1967, the city passed a comprehensive Human Relations ordinance, which expanded both the powers of the CHR and the scope of its mandate.

The interracial alliances of that period helped blacks achieve political success in the citywide electoral system. In 1954, Paul F. Jones became the first black elected to city council since the 1880s. In succeeding years, blacks maintained at least one member on council, and at one point had two representatives, in the persons of Louis Mason and George Shields. Black political representation peaked in 1970 when Louis Mason succeeded to council president.

Black representation in the judicial system also increased in the 1950s. In 1950, Homer Brown left the state legislature and was elected Judge of County Court of Common Pleas, the first local black elected to a countywide office. Brown's election put Pittsburgh blacks on the national political map. A 1950 article in *Ebony* magazine noted that two of the twenty-one black judges in the nation came from Pittsburgh—Robert "Pappy" Williams, a magistrate in the Hill, and Judge Homer Brown. Brown's victory, and his stellar performance once in office, paved the way for others, notably judges Warren Watson, Henry Smith, and Thomas Harper.

In 1958, K. Leroy Irvis was elected to the state legislature, eight years after Brown retired. Irvis gained the necessary white vote in Oakland by running on the ticket with a white legislative candidate, James Clark, who long remained a friend. Irvis secured a large vote in the Hill thanks to an election team that included attorney Paul Jones, Frank Bolden, reporter for the Pittsburgh *Courier*, and others. His election team's shrewdest decision was to seek the assistance of women, who provided crucial support. Alma Illery's Achievement Clubs helped get out the vote, and Alma Illery herself, who had a personal rapport with residents in the housing projects, contacted residents about voting. In addition, beauticians and waitresses advised their customers how to vote, and handed out campaign buttons and literature. No one who could help was overlooked, including barbers, bartenders, and even numbers runners.

William “Blue” Miller, head of the union of city refuse collectors, made sure that his men voted and that they helped turn out the African-American vote while making their rounds. The Greater Pittsburgh Civic League, with Douglas King, also helped secure Irvis’ election. Tactics developed to elect Irvis were used subsequently to help elect other black candidates. These included bleaching the picture of judicial candidate Warren Watson before posting it in predominantly white areas like Beechview and Brookline.

As had been true for Homer Brown, Irvis’ election to state office removed him from daily involvement in local politics. Nonetheless, over three decades of a distinguished career, Irvis sponsored some 1,600 pieces of legislation—notably college scholarships for disadvantaged youth and creation of the State’s system of community colleges—that addressed the educational and economic needs of all Pennsylvanians, particularly those in financial need.

### **Destruction of the Lower Hill**

Political and judicial representation proved to be no match for what turned out to be the most serious threat ever to the community’s viability. In 1956, as part of an effort to create a cultural district on the edge of downtown, the city took possession of the Lower Hill and reduced it to rubble, eliminating over 400 businesses and displacing some 8,000 residents, most of whom were black.

The plan stemmed from a relatively new concept called “urban renewal,” and was implemented by a new agency, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). The hope was to change Pittsburgh’s “Smoky City” image and stop the out-migration of its middle class. What the city got was an arena and a couple of luxury buildings. What it lost was the trust of its black residents, as well as a dynamic and racially integrated neighborhood, because the Lower Hill contained many Jews, Italians and other nationalities in addition to blacks.

Blacks lost the commercial, social and emotional center of their most historic community. Thelma Lovette, born and raised at the corner of Wylie and Crawford, recalls the racial harmony and sense of community associated with shopping and walking along Logan Street among people of all colors and backgrounds, buying groceries, poultry, and dry goods at the Jewish shops while conversing with friends and neighbors. Sala Udin, born on Fullerton Street, recalls the social life on streets that were crowded and bustling and included bars and bordellos, churches and shops, as well as such important clubs as the Loendi. The street life extended late into the night at places like Crawford Grills No. 1 and 2, Stanley’s Lounge, and the Flamingo, which attracted interracial crowds to eat and/or enjoy some of the best jazz in the country.

At first many blacks had faith in the proposed “renewal” of the Lower Hill. The *Courier*, with the exception of city editor Frank Bolden, supported it at least tacitly. Homer Brown, in fact, had helped pass the “Pittsburgh Package” that launched the entire effort. Buildings in the Lower Hill were often old and dilapidated, and many residents—with insufficient appreciation of what they would lose—looked forward to the better housing they had been promised.

The project turned into a disaster. The destruction proceeded too fast, and the new housing did not materialize. Residents were forced to relocate rapidly, rupturing community ties and bringing misery, overcrowding, and deterioration to other neighborhoods. Even worse, the city had plans for a second phase that would expand the renewed area deeper into the Hill, beyond Crawford Street.

As the magnitude of the threat became clear, the black community organized to stop further encroachment. In 1960, James McCoy and Frankie Pace spearheaded a grass-roots mobilization of residents and activists who vowed “Not Another Inch.” At the corner of Centre

Avenue and Crawford Street, across from St. Benedict the Moor Church, they erected a large billboard proclaiming “No development beyond this point.” This site, called “Freedom Corner,” overlooks downtown. It had become, and remains, the assembly point for civil rights marches and demonstrations.

### **The Church in the Struggle: the 1960s**

Just as King mobilized church members for demonstrations in the South, churches were crucial to the movement in Pittsburgh. Reverends Charles Foggie, Herbert Wilkinson, Le Roy Patrick, and Amos Brecheen were some of the most powerful voices for civil rights within the community. Churches such as Central Baptist under Isaac Green, Church of the Holy Cross under Junius Carter, Bethel AME under Reuben Eberhardt, and Macedonia Baptist under Rev. Twigg were among the most active in supporting mass demonstrations.

Alma Speed Fox, long active in the NAACP, recalls, however, that her organization got support from churches all over the city, large and small. It was a time, she says, when it seemed “there was some picket line to get on every single solitary week.” The NAACP, under the leadership of Executive Secretary/Director Fox and President Byrd Brown, organized marches and picketing against many institutions during the 1960s, including Duquesne Light, Mine Safety Appliances, Sears Roebuck, Kaufmann’s, Hornes, Gimbels, the Board of Education, and the University of Pittsburgh. The NAACP also coordinated demonstrations and marches by other groups and individuals protesting hiring discrimination at the Civic Arena, Three Rivers Stadium and the US Steel building. Fox is still remembered for scampering between the legs of riot policemen who had formed a phalanx to block demonstrators from marching downtown after the assassination of Martin Luther King.

Women’s groups also provided support. This was especially true of the YWCA, where Vice-President Frieda Shapira (at that time, Vice-President of the Y, and wife of a founder of Giant Eagle Stores), Lavera Brown (later President of the Y), and staff worker Jan Neffke furnished logistical aid and physical bodies at demonstrations for employment and fair housing. Thelma Lovette provided support, both direct and indirect, in marches and in behind-the-scenes organizational work, through involvement with many civic organizations, from the Girls Scouts, Block Clubs and YMCA to the Urban League and NAACP.

This increased activism in Pittsburgh took place in the context of a national movement, participation in which helped reinforce local commitments. In 1961, Obadiah Simms, son of the pastor of Metropolitan Baptist Church and brother of Allegheny County Council President James Simms, was jailed twice in Mississippi for participating in sit-ins and freedom rides. [\[Link to Letters from the South.\]](#) The YWCA, NAACP, and other organizations took large numbers to the 1963 March on Washington, where Martin Luther King told them “I Have A Dream.” Nate Smith and Matthew Moore risked their lives by going South in the middle and late 1960s. Kay Fitts, a student at the University of Pittsburgh, learned of Dr. Leslie Falk’s Medical Committee for Human Rights and went to Louisiana and Alabama to work on health issues. The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) sent Robert M. Lavelle and Sharry Everett to Mississippi in the summer of 1964 to work on voter registration. Lavelle afterward continued the civil rights and community work of his father, Robert R. Lavelle, while Everett became a community activist, pushing for affordable housing on the North Side. Margaret Dobbins, a college student from Ohio, also went to Mississippi that summer. Dobbins subsequently came to study at the University of Pittsburgh, where she met her future husband, Jake Millions, and dedicated

herself so completely to the educational uplift of black pupils that a school was named in her memory.

Another person whose Southern experience helped shape his civil rights activities in Pittsburgh was Sam Howze. After his family had been displaced from Fullerton Street by urban renewal, Howze grew up in public housing in the Hill District. Inspired by Malcolm X and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Howze went to Mississippi, where arrests and beatings radicalized him. After changing his name to Sala Udin, he became active in Pittsburgh's "Black Consciousness/Black Power" movement, co-founding a drug treatment program (Ile Elegba), acting in a local theater group that included Rob Penny and August Wilson, and establishing a branch of the black-nationalist group, Congress of African People. In 1992 Udin joined his friend, Councilman Jake Milliones, in working to change Pittsburgh politics, and today serves on City Council as someone who, having survived the worst that Mississippi had to offer, has no fear about speaking his mind in Pittsburgh.

Whites also participated in the national struggle. Gail Falk (daughter of Dr. Leslie Falk, and not related to the Falks of the medical fund) traveled to Mississippi in 1964 with Robert Lavelle and Sharry Everett. [\[Link to Letters from the South.\]](#) The Thomas Merton Center sent volunteers South. Phil Hallen served as President of the Maurice Falk Medical Fund during the week, but on weekends drove truckloads of medicine and books to volunteers in Mississippi. Father Donald McIlvane, a priest active on the Race and Religion Council, marched in Selma, Alabama. And the indefatigable Marguerite Hofer recruited more than a dozen Presbyterian ministers to volunteer for service in the South. More than eight of those ministers went to Mississippi, and nearly all of them were arrested. Reverends William Anderson, Johnstone Patrick, and Luke Torosian spent a night of interracial fellowship while in jail with their black colleague, James J. (Jimmy Joe) Robinson of Bidwell Presbyterian Church. The authorities told Hofer she too would have been arrested, but "we don't have jail facilities for white ladies."

These campaigns by Pittsburghers were part of a national effort that, in 1964 and 1965, helped pass the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. Banning discrimination in voting, public accommodation, employment, and public education, these two acts constituted the most important civil rights legislation since Reconstruction, and signaled the triumphant climax of the Southern civil rights movement. The laws that King had sought were finally on the books.

### **Employment, Housing, Education**

It was widely assumed that outlawing racial discrimination would quickly lead to racial equality. But it proved easier to desegregate lunch counters and swimming pools and voting booths than to find ways to eliminate inequalities in education and housing and employment.

Nonetheless, a massive demonstration against Duquesne Light in the early 1960s provided a breakthrough in white-collar and, to a lesser extent, blue-collar, hiring. This successful assault unfolded after Byrd Brown, president of the NAACP, sensed the need for total community involvement in an organization still perceived as somewhat elitist. Brown formed the Labor and Industry Committee under the leadership of Jim McCoy, a dedicated civil rights officer for the United Steelworkers. McCoy, in turn, created another committee, the United Negro Protest Committee (UNPC) in 1963, and recruited church groups, community groups, and grassroots people to its cause. Many of the latter came over from the Greater Pittsburgh Civic League, the organization that formerly had helped elect K. Leroy Irvis to the state legislature.

At a planning meeting at the Centre Avenue YMCA, the UNPC accepted Douglas King's suggestion that they target utilities. Duquesne Light was chosen partly because its location

facilitated picketing. With the leadership of McCoy, Brown, King and Charles Harris, the UNPC turned out some 5,000 pickets, the largest civil rights demonstration to that date, and shocked the business community. The size of the demonstration, plus the tacit support of Mayor Joseph Barr, quickly forced other employers to capitulate soon after they were targeted, including Union Switch and Signal in East Liberty, Penn Sheraton Hotel, and Hornes department store downtown. Douglas King recalls that soon businesses were telephoning the NAACP to forestall picketing by hiring blacks.

Although many of the pickets were grassroots people, most of the hires were in white-collar positions. Their hiring was aided by the fact that America's economy, including Pittsburgh, was shifting from an industrial to a service basis. In fact, gains in white-collar and professional employment had begun well before the UNPC protests. Shortly after World War II, St. Francis and Montefiore hospitals began admitting blacks to their nursing schools, and Montefiore granted staff privileges to Dr. James Lewis, a dentist, and visiting privileges to Dr. Charles Burks, a physician. Shortly afterwards, St. Francis put Dr. Earl Belle Smith, a noted surgeon, on its staff. We have already noted how Irvis opened up clerical positions in department stores in the late 1940s. And in the corporate world, Arthur Edmunds of the Urban League and Fletcher Byrom of Koppers had persuaded local corporations in the 1950s to hire additional blacks in white-collar positions.

White-collar and professional gains for blacks in Pittsburgh were greatest in the field of education. Although the Board of Education had hired Lawrence Peeler in 1937, only token numbers were hired until the late 1940s, and momentum increased during the 1950s. By 1970, more than 400 blacks were employed in the Pittsburgh school system, ten percent of its professional staff. Blacks also made progress in administration, culminating in 1971 when Gladys McNairy was elected president of the Board itself. In 1968, Jack Daniel and Curtiss Porter helped organize a sit-in at the University of Pittsburgh that produced a Black Studies Department, followed by programs to increase the number of black faculty, staff and students.

If blacks made substantial gains as teachers, the same cannot be said for their situation as pupils. The challenge for public education remained neighborhood-based segregation and academic underperformance. Many black leaders, including Reverend Elmer Williams, Jake Milliones, and Margaret Milliones, focused on issues of integration and quality education, recognizing these as keys to future advancement. But meaningful integration was never achieved, even with promising experiments such as magnet schools. Nor was the black-white performance gap substantially reduced, although the potential for doing so was demonstrated by principals Doris Brevard, Janet Bell, Vivian Williams, and Louis Venson, whose pupils at Vann, Westwood, Madison and Beltzhoover consistently exceeded national norms in reading and mathematics.

Housing was another problem area. Progress in residential integration proved difficult. As early as 1952 the city had passed a fair-housing ordinance that helped a few blacks find homes in formerly all-white neighborhoods. But such neighborhoods, once integrated, typically became majority black. Pittsburgh, like other cities, remained highly segregated, with a segregation index in the high-70s, meaning that over seventy percent of blacks would have to move to "white" neighborhoods to achieve an index of zero, or total integration.

Public housing presented nearly insurmountable problems. The projects became increasingly segregated and neglected, despite efforts by activists like Bishop Charles Foggie of Wesley Center AMEZ, who worked valiantly to improve conditions.

## **Blue-Collar Struggles**

Blue-collar employment proved the most difficult and explosive of all issues. The situation for blue-collar workers was bleak. The steel industry had been declining since World War I, and was in a state of virtual collapse by the late 1950s. This bitter reality meant that even a relatively liberal union like the United Steel Workers had difficulty ending practices by which blacks held the least desirable jobs. The union's Civil Rights Committee (CRC) had been established in 1948 and was quite generous in making donations to civil rights organizations. But, despite efforts by men like Frank Shane, the CRC proved less willing to follow up on complaints about discrimination in the union itself. And, despite the efforts of James McCoy, little changed even after lawsuits and federal pressure forced the steel companies and the steelworkers' union to sign a Consent Decree in 1974, paying damages to black workers and allowing them to transfer seniority from their previous jobs. The Decree generated fierce resentment among white workers, and its long-run effects were minimal. Nonetheless, the contribution of the steelworkers union should not be minimized. The fact that they kept such an outstanding organizer as Jim McCoy on the payroll, and allowed him to devote himself to organizing the black community against job discrimination was of inestimable benefit. "We owe a lot to the union for what they did," concludes Douglas King.

If the problem in steel was getting promoted, the problem in the building trades was getting hired. With few exceptions, the trades were determined to remain as lily-white as possible. Organized efforts to change this began with the Negro American Labor Council (NALC), a national coalition of black industrial unionists led by A. Philip Randolph. In 1961, the NALC and the NAACP staged mass picketing of the Civic Arena, which was being built on the ruins of the Lower Hill and employed only eight blacks out of a workforce of several hundred.

Exceptionally good leadership allowed at least one employment victory. In 1967, Nate Smith, the only black member of the Operating Engineers' Union, formed "Operation Dig" and persuaded his union to accept some ninety blacks whose heavy equipment training he had supervised.

Smith's success with Operation Dig and the Operating Engineers, alas, was not duplicated with other building trades. In 1969, therefore, impelled by the anger and militancy that followed the riots of 1968, Operation Dig, the Bidwell Training Center, the NAACP, and a number of other community and anti-poverty organizations formed the Black Construction Coalition (BCC). This group, of which Clyde Jackson was a prime mover, halted work on ten building projects, put 800 marchers on the North Side and, after two weeks of demonstrations, brought the city to the brink of massive violence. Reverend Jimmy Joe Robinson of Bidwell Presbyterian Church in Manchester was active throughout the demonstrations, and Robinson and NAACP President Byrd Brown suffered beatings and macing during one particularly violent police confrontation on the Manchester Bridge. Their efforts produced the Pittsburgh Plan, hailed as a national model to train blacks for construction jobs, but ineptness and union recalcitrance undermined the agreement.

In the context of a collapsing industrial base and systematic discrimination in employment, government efforts such as Lyndon Johnson's 1964 "War on Poverty" embodied laudable intentions but could make only marginal improvements. The Economic Opportunity Act, created to turn LBJ's dream into a reality, created a whole raft of anti-poverty agencies, including Job Corps, VISTA, Community Action Programs, Model Cities, Head Start, Legal Services, Foster Grandparents, and the Office of Economic Opportunity.

Pittsburgh's principal anti-poverty agency, Community Action Pittsburgh (CAP), headed by David Epperson, won praise from the local press and was cited by the federal government as a model, but had no more success than others around the country. One study concluded that CAP's ineffectiveness stemmed partly from the geographic dispersal of its clients and partly from a surfeit of competing agencies, such as Model Cities. Together, such competing leaders and priorities deprived local blacks of the unity needed to force the bureaucracy to respond. However, CAP left a legacy of institutions, including the Alma Illery Health Center, the Community Development Corporations, and Head Start.

In the end, blacks in the blue-collar civil rights struggle had little to show for their efforts. As frustration increased, individual militants entered the battle. But even they could be somewhat misguided in their goals. William "Bouie" Haden, a self-appointed leader with a long history of police involvement and an intimidating demeanor and appearance, led a small but noisy demonstration that forced the Homewood Giant Eagle to appoint a black manager to its Frankstown store. But even such individual acts of militancy could do little to change the deep structural problems that frustrated so many blacks, especially the young.

### **Riots of 1968**

Given the grim situation in employment, housing, and education, it is remarkable that Pittsburgh escaped the riots of the mid-1960s that engulfed Los Angeles, Newark, Detroit, Chicago, and Rochester. In a prescient series of articles that appeared in the *New Pittsburgh Courier* in March, 1968, Carl Morris noted that militants in Pittsburgh had seen other cities' riots on television, and were rumored to be planning a "B-Day," or "Burn Day," for May, 1968.

With the assassination of Martin Luther King in April, Morris' warning came true a bit early, and Pittsburgh joined other cities in convulsive riots. King was assassinated on a Thursday. In other cities, violence erupted almost immediately and suffered a high death toll, but Pittsburgh remained relatively calm until Saturday night, and experienced only one death. The difference in Pittsburgh was partly due to the wisdom of Mayor Joseph Barr, who informally delegated responsibility for calming things in the Hill to K. Leroy Irvis, and on the North Side and Manchester to Reverend Jimmy Joe Robinson. Irvis dispersed a large crowd, which had surrounded two policemen, and later persuaded a group of angry young men not to get themselves killed in order to vent their anger. Out of respect for Irvis, young rioters posted guards in front of and behind his Centre Avenue apartment. In the Manchester community on the North Side, Reverend Jimmy Joe Robinson, Harvey Adams, and "Swampman" Williams maintained calm with the informal assistance of black Police Lieutenant Mugsy Moore. Robinson worked tirelessly to calm the young people, aided by a number of youth gangs and groups he had worked with previously, such as Percy Trevillion's "Black Rangers." He also was aided by Irvis, who at one point came over and defused what could have turned into a shoot-out between angry youths and the police.

Irvis and Robinson helped save lives, but could not stop the property damage, especially in the Hill. Over five hundred fires destroyed much of the business district and drove most merchants out of business or out of the Hill. Ironically, the riots completed the destruction that urban renewal had begun.

The assassination of King and the riots of 1968 marked the end of the civil rights movement, at least of its integrated, non-violent phase. The laws that King and others had sought were on the books, but made little apparent difference in the daily lives of poor blacks.

The racial isolation of the black community increased as whites continued to leave for the suburbs. The inner cities became more segregated, which made issues of housing, employment and education less amenable to civil rights tactics and coalitions that had worked in the past. As the interracial alliance began to unravel, blacks increasingly felt a need to do for themselves.

The urge to “do for self” did not necessarily reflect bitterness or frustration. For some it was the natural expression of independence and self-confidence. In regards to business, one can cite numerous examples of this attitude. Back in the 1950s Silas Knox had started Owl Cab company, later ceding ownership to Paul F. Jones. Robert Lavelle’s real estate business and Dwelling House Savings and Loan Association helped increase home ownership. Herb Bean owned several gas stations, notably one at the corner of Centre and Kirkpatrick, plus an auto repair shop. William Pryor, a master furrier operating in the Hill District since 1947, donated time and money to all sorts of community causes. Clyde Jackson established Wylie-Centre Industry, the first black-owned nail factory in the world. Milton Washington’s Allegheny Housing Rehabilitation Corporation has been deeply involved in developing, managing and rehabbing moderate and low-income housing throughout the region.

In terms of community involvement, one can cite many examples. These would include Bidwell Presbyterian Church, whose extensive program of community service spawned institutions such as the Manchester Youth Development Center and Bidwell Cultural and Training Center, now the Bidwell Training Center, directed by William Strickland. The list would also include individuals such as Nancy Lee, who mobilized a raft of community groups, including churches, the Negro Business and Professional Women, and the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, while raising over \$100,000 to build an African Heritage Classroom at the University of Pittsburgh.

Even after the riots and the rise of attitudes of separatism and “black power,” some white allies continued to work for black community development. Phil Hallen, President of the Maurice Falk Medical Fund, worked with James McCoy, founder of Freedom House, and Dr. Peter Safar of the University of Pittsburgh’s medical school, plus John Conley, John Grice and Ames Coney in the late 1960s to establish the Freedom House ambulance program, meant to provide on-the-spot treatment and transportation to hospitals for blacks. The program was highly effective, and became the national model upon which pre-hospital emergency care is now based. Its success, ironically, led to its demise when Pittsburgh folded it into a new citywide Emergency Medical System (EMS).

Similarly, Caryl Kline continued her remarkable program, “Continuing Education for Women.” Although not targeted specifically at black women, Kline made sure that mature black women were included. One of the program’s successes was Edna Chappell McKenzie, who returned to college in 1966, subsequently gaining a Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh and heading the Ethnic Studies program at Community College.

And Monsignor Charles Owen Rice purposefully relocated to Homewood in 1965, taking over Holy Rosary parish church, and supported a host of causes and organizations, from jitney drivers and Black Panthers to the Catholic Interracial Council. Rice befriended militants like Bouie Haden as well as mainstream civil rights and social workers in the Urban League.

Nonetheless, in Pittsburgh as in the rest of the nation, while Lavelle and Jackson and Washington spoke of “empowerment,” others spoke of “black power” and questioned the goal of racial integration. This “black mood,” as Carl Morris termed it in 1968, dominated the nation and Pittsburgh for the next quarter century as battles over community control, affirmative action, busing, Louis Farrakhan and Jesse Jackson gripped the land, and issues of drugs, crime and

family break-up consumed blacks' attention. The mood turned sour among many in white America as well, and accelerated in the 1980s as Republicans won the votes of angry, fearful whites by using Willie Horton, the black rapist-murderer, to personify black men, and the "Welfare Queen" to personify black women.

### **The Situation Today**

Unprecedented economic growth in the 1990s, plus the ascendance to the highest office of a man whom some jokingly refer to as "the first black President," helped change the racial climate. In Pittsburgh, the change could be seen in a labor market so tight that black unemployment dropped by more than half, from 19 percent to 9 percent, and the overall rate of serious crime fell by 42 percent. It could be seen in the decline, from 74 to 67, in the index of segregation, the first decline in living memory. (100 means total segregation; 0 means total integration.) It could be seen visually in the construction of Williams Square, a black-owned office building on Centre Avenue. It can be seen today in the attractive, racially integrated townhouses and homes that now stretch eastward from Crawford Square almost to Kirkpatrick Street, leading a local newspaper to speak of the "Rebirth of the Hill." It can be seen in on-going conversions of public housing into mixed-income neighborhoods of attractive townhouses in the Hill and Oakland, with projections for the same to happen elsewhere. And it can be seen in the different way in which this process of conversion has been handled, with involvement of local residents and the inclusion of substantial numbers of former public housing residents in the new developments. The URA's financial and in-kind support of the new Freedom Corner memorial park provides further evidence of important changes that have occurred since the 1950s.

An improved racial atmosphere can also be seen in the fact that appointment of blacks to positions of power now causes little comment. Colin Powell and Condaleeza Rice quietly replaced Willie Horton and the "Welfare Queen" as political and racial symbols. Without fanfare, Mulugetta Birru, formerly director of the Homewood-Brushton Revitalization and Development Corporation, became Executive Director of the URA, the very agency that forty years earlier had torn down the Lower Hill. In what was regarded as a natural succession, Lloyd McClendon moved up from hitting coach to become general manager of the Pittsburgh Pirates. Today, Oliver Byrd serves as Senior Vice-President at Mellon Bank, James Diggs as Senior Vice-President and General Counsel of PPG, and Glen Mahone as president of the board of the airport authority. Leading black businessmen include Randy Harper, owner of American Micrographics, and Ron Davenport, chairman of Sheridan Broadcasting Corporation, the largest minority-owned news network in the country. Toward the end of the 1990s, Milton Washington quietly became the first black to join the board of the powerful Allegheny Conference on Community Development (ACCD), and was soon followed by George Miles, President and CEO of WQED television, and William Strickland, director of the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild.

Despite these accomplishments, there remains much to be done. Ralph Bangs of the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Social and Urban Research has shown that racial disparities in Pittsburgh continue to be among the highest in the nation, and black Pittsburghers, especially those in blue-collar fields, continue to suffer enormous social and economic disadvantages.

Perhaps, however, the corner has been turned. The determination by the community to build a memorial commemorating the civil rights struggle shows Pittsburghers' pride in those who went before. They know the struggle is not over, but has moved to a higher level, to one of strengthening the bonds of community as well as securing the social, political and economic equality that is the promise of America. Accomplishing this requires renewing the commitment

of everyone, albeit in a different time, in a different context, and perhaps with different approaches. Whatever the future holds, it certainly is better than it would have been had not courageous Pittsburghers, black and white, young and old, dedicated themselves to making Pittsburgh “some place special.” In doing so, they helped make the world a better place.