

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

A SHARED HERITAGE

True Americans: An Abridged Introduction to the Epic Story of African Americans in Erie County

By Dr. Chris Magoc, Johnny Johnson,
and Melinda Meyer
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Following is the first of a 12-part series on African American history in the Erie region. The series will continue in Jefferson Educational Society publications over the next year.

Condensing the extraordinary 225-year-long history of African Americans in Erie County into a few words is an impossible task. Yet that is our purpose here: to reintroduce readers to the inspiring history of Black Americans in this region – a story integral to the larger sweep of events in northwestern Pennsylvania, and yet until relatively recently, underappreciated. This represents the first of what will be an unfolding series of snapshots, appearing here over the next 12 months and aimed at deepening our understanding of a history that belongs to all residents of greater Erie.

Thanks to decades of work by community historians, today we are generally more aware of the discomfiting fact that many of the first African Americans who came here did so as property, enslaved persons belonging to some of Erie's most prominent citizens. Those who visit the moving site of Gospel Hill Cemetery discover that Harborcreek Township was home to the largest population of enslaved and free African Americans in northwestern Pennsylvania. Visitors to the Erie Maritime Museum learn that nearly a quarter of Oliver Hazard Perry's triumphant force in the Battle of Lake Erie were black sailors, "insensible to danger," as one officer recounted.

Less remembered are the Erie County patriots, black and white, who struggled to end a system that held nearly four million men, women, and children in bondage in the land of the free. Risking their livelihoods and even their lives, abolitionists like Albert and Robert Vosburgh assisted runaway enslaved people making their way to freedom along the Underground Railroad. In 1858, Henry Catlin, who hid refugees inside bins of his abolitionist newspaper, the *True American*, in his office

at East Fifth and French streets, brought the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass to Erie to deliver a lecture called “Unity of the Human Race.” After the Civil War, Hamilton Waters, a partially blind former enslaved person who had been active in the Underground Railroad, served as the city’s lamplighter. While walking the streets, he sang the plantation spirituals of his youth, in the process inspiring grandson Harry Thacker Burleigh, who would become one of the world’s great composers.

In this fiercely divided hour in America, we need unifying stories like that of Erie iron entrepreneur William Himrod, who established the community of “New Jerusalem” north of West Sixth Street and west of Sassafras Street for free Black people and destitute white people. One of its residents, Emma Gertrude Lawrence, took in laundry to support her family, and by 1906 had become Erie’s first female black business owner. Lawrence launched a multi-generation family legacy that enriched the economic, social, and cultural life of the city. Her son Earl Lawrence was a gifted musician and music educator, and newspaper publisher. Granddaughter Ada Louise Lawrence, Erie’s first full-time black schoolteacher, had a passion for inspiring young minds and for African American history that was ultimately manifested in community history projects like *Journey from Jerusalem* (1995) and *A Shared Heritage*.

The next phase of *A Shared Heritage* will further develop and publicly commemorate these and many more key figures and events. If, as former President Herbert Hoover once said, “the purpose of history is a better world,” these tales of courage and heroism, of pioneering innovation and entrepreneurship, of those who struggled for freedom and to strengthen our democracy, are stories we need – now more than ever.

About the Authors:

A Shared Heritage is co-led by Johnny Johnson (Burleigh Legacy Alliance), Dr. Chris Magoc (Mercyhurst University), and Melinda Meyer (Erie Yesterday).

Johnny Johnson, M.Ed., is a native of Covington, Georgia and has been a resident of Erie for 50 years. Mr. Johnson taught health and physical education at various middle and high schools in Erie’s Public Schools for more than 30 years before retiring. He is one of the founding members of the Harry T. Burleigh Society. The current president of the Burleigh Legacy Alliance has participated in numerous historical programs and is the author of “Erie African Americans in the 1880s.”

Dr. Chris Magoc is a professor of History at Mercyhurst University whose most recent book is “A Progressive History of American Democracy Since 1945: American Dreams, Hard Realities” (Routledge Press, January 2022). He is a 2012 recipient of the Mercyhurst Teaching Excellence Award.

Melinda Meyer is an experienced public historian, educator, project consultant, grant writer, and nonprofit administrator. As a public historian, she pursues avenues to share local history with all audiences. Ms. Meyer has also taught museum studies and historic preservation undergraduate courses at Mercyhurst University.

About A Shared Heritage:

Launched in 2020, *A Shared Heritage* is a local community history project long in the making that shines a light on the rich heritage of African Americans in Erie

County, Pennsylvania. The centerpiece of A Shared Heritage is a walking and driving tour of 29 significant sites of African American history encompassing the entire county.

Visitors to the project website, available [here](#), will find an illustrated tour guide, along with other features: a concise narrative history and timeline of African American history in Erie, brief profiles of dozens of African American “pioneers, community builders, and freedom fighters” who have contributed to the greater Erie region, and interviews with five history-making figures of Erie’s recent past: Celestine Davis, Johnny Johnson, Gary Horton, Rubye Jenkins-Husband, and Marcus Atkinson. The project is a partnership of the Mercyhurst University Public History Program, Burleigh Legacy Alliance, and Erie Yesterday with support provided by WQLN, the Jefferson Educational Society, VisitErie, Erie Arts and Culture, and Erie County Public Library.

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