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Vosburghs: One of Earliest, Most Influential Families

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

As the Shared Heritage project team scoured old Erie newspapers, census records, and histories seeking information on Erie's African American community, it quickly became clear that the Vosburgh family was one of the earliest and most influential families to call Erie home. They were powerful advocates for racial equality during and after the era of slavery, successful entrepreneurs, and community leaders.

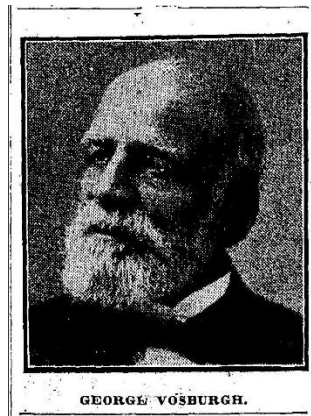
Robert and Abigail "Abby" (Tisdale) Vosburgh arrived in Erie in 1818 from Ohio. Their roots, however, were in the Northeast. Robert was born in 1778 in Kinderhook, Columbia County, New York and Abigail in Taunton, Massachusetts on May 23, 1794. The couple had nine children – eight boys and one girl – with the last child arriving in 1831. A successful barber, Robert Vosburgh afforded his family a home on North French Street, which was destroyed by a full-block fire in March 1844 and replaced with a "mansion" shortly after. The family was well-known for its contributions to the abolitionist movement and shepherding those fleeing enslavement through the Underground Railroad network.

Their eldest son, also Robert Vosburgh, moved to New York City in about 1840, where he initially worked as a barber. In 1855, he and Charles Miller opened a drugstore at 106 Grand Street under the name of Miller & Vosburgh. Robert is best known, however, for his 22-year-plus career for the New York Custom House. Appointed in 1861 by customs director Hiram Barney, Vosburgh was the first Black staff member at New York's U.S. Custom House. His hiring was incredibly controversial, and newspapers across the country published inflammatory stories of Mr. Barney removing William O'Brien – a white man – from his position as “marker” and replacing him with an African American worker. Vosburgh withstood the criticism, and as stated in his death notice in *the Erie Daily Times* on December 16, 1889, “The long retention of Mr. Vosburgh in his responsible official position attested his merit and qualifications.”

Robert's only son, another Robert, a porter, perished in the Hudson River Railroad line disaster at New Hamburg, New York on February 6, 1871, when a passenger train collided with an oil tank car on a drawbridge over Wappinger Creek.

Robert and Abigail Vosburgh's next two children, Henry (b. 1816) and Israel (b. 1817), found employment on the ill-fated Steamer Erie as a second cook and porter, respectively. On Monday, August 9, 1841, the Steamship Erie was traveling on Lake Erie from Buffalo to Erie and then was to go westward to Chicago and other western ports, when an explosion onboard set the vessel aflame. Of the 340 passengers onboard, more than 250 perished, including Henry and Israel Vosburgh.

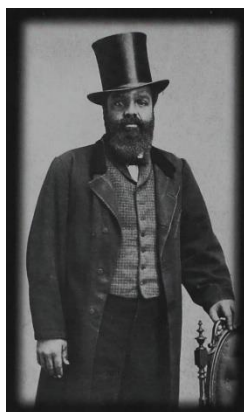
George Vosburgh, born in 1819, moved to Cleveland, Ohio in his 20s after visiting the city in his youth. Though he spent many years employed as a shipping master, he was best known for his 46-year career at the Union passenger depot, working in the lunchroom. According to the death notice published by the *Cleveland Leader* on May 25, 1904, George Vosburgh counted among his friends U.S. Senator Blanche Kelso Bruce of Mississippi, who was the second African American to serve in the U.S. Senate and was engaged to marry his daughter before her untimely death, as well as the great orator Frederick Douglass, and militant abolitionist John Brown. Reportedly, George Vosburgh met every U.S. president from Abraham Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt.



George Vosburgh, from his obituary in the *Cleveland Leader*, May 25, 1904.

Albert Vosburgh, who inherited his father's shop at 9 North Park Row (basement) and home (314 French Street) when he died on August 19, 1846, was an active Republican and member of the Bay City Lodge, No. 68 Free and Accepted Masons, one of the oldest African American fraternal organizations in the city, and the Erie Independent Marching Club, among others. He was a known collaborator of William Forten, son of Philadelphia abolitionist and powerhouse James Forten, and William Nesbit, who was the first president of the Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League and lobbied for the passage of the 14th Amendment. Albert Vosburgh and his wife Eliza had one daughter, Florence Alberta. Florence Vosburgh studied music at Oberlin College and married Rufus Baxter, who became one of the first African American policemen for the city of Erie when he joined the force in 1903.

Susan Vosburgh Dickson, born in 1825, was Robert and Abigail Vosburgh's only daughter. She married William Dickson in 1864 and had two daughters of her own, Henrietta "Nettie" and Martha "Mattie," both of whom graduated from Erie High School and became teachers. Susan Dickson and her family lived with her brother Albert Vosburgh at the family home on French Street as she was her mother's caregiver until Abigail died on January 9, 1877.



Albert Vosburgh, from *Journey from Jerusalem*, Page 33. Collection of Barbara Tardy, courtesy of the First Families Project.

Little is yet known about Richard, Charles, and Fitz James Vosburgh. Richard was said to have drowned in Erie in November 1880. Charles, born 1826, was a sailor and a member of a fraternal organization, possibly the same masonic group to which his brother Albert belonged. He died on December 22, 1880 in Erie. Fitz James was born in 1831 and was a barber, like his father. He moved to California, where he married Matilda J. Reese, a dressmaker, on May 16, 1865, and they had at least five children: George Hilbert, James Reese, Madge E., Edith A., and Abbie T. He died on November 5, 1878 and is buried at Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland, California.

This is just a brief summary of the lives of the Vosburgh family, described by Karen James of the First Families Project (1990s research project aimed at documenting African American life and culture in northwestern Pennsylvania) as being first among Erie's Black middle class. Additional readings may be found in the Heritage Room at the Erie County Public Library and Library and Archives of the Hagen History Center.

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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.

In Case You Missed It

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