

JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

NATIONAL WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

Examining the Lives of Six Erie Heroines

By Johnny Johnson
March 2023

In 1987, Congress declared March as National Women's History Month in perpetuity. A special presidential proclamation is issued every year to honor the extraordinary achievements of American women. As in Black History Month, the role and contributions of Black women often catch this national spotlight. But what of local Black women whose contributions had a profound and enduring impact on their communities through social action, health and education initiatives, political interactions, and the desire to make the city and county better places to live?

This article highlights six Erie Black women who contributed greatly to Erie's Black community and the Erie community at large. These are not the only Black women deserving of such attention, of course, but all were trailblazers.

From the inception of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, these women were at the forefront of creating change. Let us rediscover these six women as we celebrate them during National Women's History Month: Emma Roy, Arnola Myers, Mazie Purdue, Gertie McGee, Erma Lindsey, and Mary Jane Roy.

Erma Jane Allen Lindsey

Erma was born in Paulding, Mississippi, on July 11, 1925, and was a resident of Erie for 47 years. Erma was widely recognized as the mother of the Civil Rights Movement in Erie County, refusing to accept the mistreatment of African Americans and fighting for equality and justice for all.

Shortly after arriving in Erie, she organized a welfare rights organization to help welfare recipients understand their rights. She would later become involved in politics, school issues, and working with her neighbors to improve living standards.

She was the co-founder of the Opportunities Industrialization Center, founder of the Holland Drug Center, formed the city's first Tenant Council for housing residents, and was a leader for neighborhood improvement. She was active in the Erie County Democratic Party focusing on voter registration. Her tenacity in helping Erie citizens vote and make a difference in the Erie community is summed up in her words: "The power of the vote is great, by exercising this right, we, as a people, will be able to bring about necessary change." The greatest weapon in the fight for equality is the ballot box.

Emma Roy



MISS EMMA ROY

Emma Roy was the first Executive Secretary of the Booker T. Washington Center from 1923 to 1934.

Emma Roy grew up in Erie and graduated from Erie High School. She pursued her studies at Margaret Morrison College (the women's college for Carnegie Mellon before closing in 1973) in Pittsburgh, majoring in social work. When she began her duties at Erie's Booker T. Washington Center in 1923, she was just 24.

Emma Roy designed many programs to improve opportunities for young people. She believed in their right to success but also stressed that success is earned and carries responsibility. She conducted affairs at the Center in a manner commanding their respect.

The young men joined such groups as the Vagabond Club, and young women and children often put on plays like "Mother Goose." To encourage physical development, Emma arranged affiliations with the YMCA and East High School so that swimming instruction could be part of the program, along with social education.

In addition to her work at the Booker T. Washington Center, she served for several years as a social worker for the Pennsylvania State Emergency Relief Board during the Great Depression.

Miss Roy's favorite saying during her work with youth and minority citizens of Erie was, "Make the most of time. Lose no happy day. Time will never give you

back the chances thrown away.” (“Erie History – The Women’s Story,” by Sabina Shields Freeman and Margaret L. Tenpas – Benet Press, pg. 107)

Arnola Myers



Her epitaph: “She gave so much and asked for so little.”

Arnola Armstrong Myers faced many obstacles in her life, including only limited education as she began adulthood. She married early and soon began a family that grew to include six children. She anguished over their upbringing in an undesirable neighborhood and over their education in schools where there was discrimination. Arnola spent her life overcoming these obstacles.

She was born Arnola Valentine Armstrong on February 14, 1935, in Little Rock, Arkansas. The family then moved to Erie, where at 17 and before finishing high school she met and married H. Lincoln Myers. But felt called to be more than a wife and mother. She studied for her high school equivalency diploma (GED) and at 24 passed the qualifying examination. She believed that a good education was a critical steppingstone and that a college degree was a passport to a better life. An acquaintance recognized the great potential in Nola and helped her get started at Penn State Behrend. At 29, after the youngest of her children had started school, she began her first college course. After a year, she transferred to Gannon University where her interest in politics led her to earn a degree in political science.

Nola worked at St. Martin’s Center as director of its Head Start program while attending college. She graduated in 1968 and began work as a counselor at the Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC). During the next two years, she advanced to the position of director of Student Services. She was a former director of the Booker T. Washington Day Care Program. At the time of her death, she was employed by the Greater Erie Community Action Committee (GECAC) as daycare administrator.

Nola Myers’ efforts to improve life for blacks and women began in her neighborhood as she worked to have a brothel removed. She later became a spokeswoman for parent groups fighting discrimination in schools. She worked to get minorities involved in public television at WQLN and was the producer of an inner-city panel show called “PACE.” She became a member of the Fair Housing Committee helping to correct public housing ills for both renters and

landlords. She also joined the Erie Peace Fellowship and marched in demonstrations in the early years of the Vietnam War.

Arnola Myers belonged to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and was the first Black woman in business to resume wearing her hair naturally.

She died in 1974 at just 39. On her tombstone are inscribed the words, "She gave so much and asked for so little." ("Erie History – The Women's Story," by Sabina Shields Freeman and Margaret L. Tenpas – Benet Press, pgs. 231-233)

Mazie Purdue



Broke the color barrier for Black women in politics

Mazie Smith Purdue was the first known African American woman elected to an elected office in Erie. She served on the Erie School Board from 1992 to 1995 and was vice president of the body in 1994. Purdue's impact on the lives of students, their families, and the community at large stretched far beyond her role on the board.

Mazie, a Strong Vincent High School graduate, helped establish local chapters of the National Council of Negro Women and Negro Business and Professional Women, as well as various after-school, summer lunch, and self-esteem programs at Shiloh Baptist Church. Purdue also helped lead women of color and the Erie chapter of the Pennsylvania Conference on Black Basic Education, and served as a nurse, social worker, and executive director of the Child Development Center at the Booker T. Washington Center, among other accomplishments.

Gertie McGee



Gertie M. McGee was a social worker and civic leader

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, Gertie McGee was raised in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the daughter of the late J.T. and Frances Harrison. She attended Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and received her social services degree from Case Western Reserve in Cleveland. She furthered her studies at Gannon in political science/government studies and became a paraprofessional social worker and community developer for GECAC. She was then employed with the Erie School District as a parent involvement specialist until her retirement. She was a member of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception.

One of the mothers of Erie's civil rights movement, Gertie McGee was responsible for sparking major change. In addition to her work in the church, she was a Democratic Party committeewoman for 24 years and was also a judge of elections. She was never afraid to speak up in public about all social injustice regardless of controversy. Gertie fought for what was right and without hesitation and did what good she could for senior citizens, children, women, and the African American and Hispanic population.

She wrote, implemented, and supported innovative social programs for a better life in Erie. Additionally, Gertie pioneered the fight to end poor nutrition in Erie schools. She successfully pushed to establish the "hot lunch" program in Erie elementary schools. Gertie also developed and implemented a "Meals on Wheels" lunch program to provide nutritional meals for senior citizens. Social worker, community activist involved in civic and church work, politician, wife, and mother, Gertie McGee made history in Erie. She served on many councils and committees and also served as president of several organizations, including OIC, Haldac, and Women of Color. She was director of Central City N.A.T.O. from 1968 to 1979, serving the needs of senior citizens and employing youth in summer programs at the center. She died in 2010.

Mary Jane Roy



Educator and difference maker

Mary Jane Roy was born October 19, 1928, to the late Bardella Vactor Winston Williams and Willie Winston, although she was raised by Bardella and Charles Williams in Washington, Pa.

After graduating from Washington High School in 1945, she entered Bennet College for Women in Greensboro, N.C. After two years, she transferred to Penn State University in State College, where she earned a bachelor's degree in Physical Education and Sociology in 1952.

Mary Jane was hired by Morganza Reform School as the youth activities coordinator. In 1953, she moved to Erie, Pa. to take a job with the Urban League as the recreational director for girls at the Booker T. Washington Center. In later years, she worked as a traveling social worker and an early childhood educator for migrant worker families employed by Troyer Farms. Mary Jane then worked at Henderson Methodist Church as a preschool director, and shortly afterward, she and a group of parents founded the Har-Lin Community Center on Buffalo Road.

In 1970, Erie schools Superintendent Robert LaPenna asked her to start the new Title Twenty Daycare Program for the Erie School District. Mary Jane took a leave of absence for a short period to start the program for the Erie School District. It turned into three years as Mary Jane opened 10 daycare centers for the district.

In 1973, Mary Jane returned to Har-Lin and continued to provide quality childcare and education for the children of Erie, as well as providing summer jobs for youth, through the NYC program. She was also instrumental in establishing the two-year early childcare associate degree offered by Villa Maria College, with the lead support of Sister Eunice and Sister Alice Schierberl.

Mary Jane Roy retired from in Har-Lin in 1993. She was affiliated with the National Black Child Development Institute, Black Administrators in Child Welfare, Orpha Chapter #21 (Order of the Eastern Star), Daughter of Isis, ABWA (American Business Women's Association), and Penn State Alumni Association and PACCA.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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." He is a scholar-in-residence and board member at the Jefferson Educational Society.

Subscribe to JES Publications
Mailing List!

Support JES | Donate

In Case You Missed It

[Truth in Love | Black Maternal Health: Black Mamas' Lives Matter](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris J. Baker**

[Be Well | Soothe Your Stomach ... from Top to Bottom](#) written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

[Book Notes #136 | ChatGPT & the Future of Humanity](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

[Folk Songs and Inflation: Music Lessons from Woody Guthrie](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

Jefferson Educational Society | jeserie.org

