

*Highlights of  
Negro History  
IN  
Syracuse, N. Y.*



Issued under auspices of the  
Syracuse Inter-racial Group  
1947



Dunbar Center  
950 South Townsend St.

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## *FOREWORD*

"Highlights of Negro History in Syracuse" is an abbreviation of a more complete record which is in manuscript and will be printed when funds are available.

It is issued under auspices of the Inter-racial Group of Syracuse, for popular information and to give visiting speakers some idea of what has already been done in the city. With this background they will not feel under obligation to devote a considerable part of their addresses to the ABC of racial understanding.

It has been written with full knowledge of what has been done by other groups. The story of Dunbar Center by Mrs. Eaton pays tribute to the leadership given by the Commonweal club. My own chapter on Negro churches is a very bare record of Christian helpfulness on the part of many denominations, running back over many decades.

If you appreciate this miniature sketch, perhaps it is in your power to make possible the printing of the more complete history which has been written by friends of the Negro as a labor of love.

*Ernest J. Bowden*

## INTRODUCTION

By PAUL M. PAINE

Nothing like this, so far as I know, has ever been tried before. In fact the presence of colored people in this city, human beings with the hopes and fears that the rest of us have, has been until recent years pretty much ignored.

There are two exceptions. Religion has not been ignored. Loguen, who was here in the year of the Jerry Rescue, was a preacher, and Ernest Bowden's article in this modest publication shows the numerous churches which call these people, so naturally religious, to worship. Politics has not been ignored and the political picture, with the white politician striving to get the colored man's vote, has not always been creditable.

For the rest, until the movement began that established the Dunbar Center, the white population has been content, for the most part, to think of the Negro people as segregated in Railroad street, as it is still called altho the railroad has vanished, living in wretched houses, a place you never looked at unless you were taking a train eastbound or coming from that direction.

It is probably fair to say that in few cities in the North has there been more discrimination against the colored race. The Negroes have been discriminated against in the matter of employment; they have been discriminated against in the matter of housing until

the Federal Housing project opened its doors to some of them.

It isn't a pretty picture, tho there are signs of a brighter day.

And the satire lies in the fact that Syracuse was a pioneer in its championship of the Negro before the Civil War. The Jerry Rescue, so well described in Dr. Freeman Galpin's article in this booklet, is the noblest as well as the most exciting chapter in the history of Syracuse.

Well, what we are aiming to do, we who have put our heads together to produce this little book, is to present a fair and true picture of a segment of our population that asks for nothing of this city but a fair chance.



## *THE INTER-RACIAL GROUP OF SYRACUSE*

By HELEN P. MASON

Our present group was organized in 1936 as an expression of the concern which church women felt after a year's missionary study on "The American Negro". The study opened our eyes to the fact that in our midst was a portion of the population, practically unknown, whose forbears dated back 100 years in the life of our city; yet citizens in whom there was scant interest and about whose problems there was little concern.

We determined to find out the facts of our Negro population, to learn their needs and to do all in our power to fight the injustices from which they suffered.

Our first field trip was a call on Golden B. Darby, director of Negro activities in the old Dunbar Center. He had on the wall of his office a blueprint of the new building which was the vision of what he wanted. We took the responsibility of gathering together women from all the Protestant churches which felt as we did to form some sort of an organization, to use every power and device we could think of to stir our city to a sense of responsibility toward the Negro population.

Meetings were informal, held bi-monthly, and always included our newly discovered Negro friends. Women and some faithful men composed the group. No meeting was held without prayer and worship, for we sought guidance in a new field.

The primary concern of the group, then as now, was to change people's thinking toward the Negro and consider him as a real person who should be appreciated and treated like other people.

We asked each of our group to get to know some Negro person well. We were determined that these people should have a new building, that they must have better homes and employment. A newspaper man followed us about and reported all our activities. A few ministers stood by loyally and opened their pulpits to Negro speakers. We asked employers to waive discrimination and we approached school teachers and the superintendent of schools in regard to special programs for their students. We brought Negroes of national repute to the city to address special meetings.

Today the inter-racial picture in Syracuse is not so drab; rather it is full of promise.

In March 1944 it became necessary to form a federation of interested groups. This included church, social action, Americanization and labor groups; already committees are working on legislation, education, publicity and fact-finding.

Events sponsored have included a Fellowship Church held at Hendricks Chapel, Syracuse university, attended by inter-faith and inter-racial groups; also a Race Relations Work Institute. In these there was active Negro participation.

Today the situation is full of hope. We see a city waking to its responsibility. And we see a Negro population sharing these responsibilities, inspired by the hope of a better tomorrow.

## *FEDERATION OF INTER-RACIAL GROUPS*

By ROBERT E. ROMIG

When it became advisable to form some sort of federation of groups interested in the Negro, 19 groups responded. These were:

The Commonweal Club, the Protestant Inter-racial group, a corresponding group of Catholics, the Americanization league, the Huntington club, the Jewish Community center, the Women's International league, the Fellowship of Reconciliation C.O.R.E. (Committee on Racial Equality), the inter-racial committee of the Council of Churches, the Community commission of Inter-church Women, the Friends' Service group, the Inter-faith committee of Hendricks Chapel, the Bahai assembly, the Onondaga Goodwill association, the Moral Re-armament group, the Peace Council, the Consumer Co-operative, and the Council of Social Agencies.

Most of these have entered actively into the work of the federation. The Catholic group, however, has its own center in St. Joseph's church in East Genesee st. and its own director.

Officers elected were: President, Robert E. Romig; vice-president, Mrs. Roy H. Mason; secretary, Miss Grace Wilson. Mrs. Claude T. De Graw, Mrs. Carlton L. Hommel and Dr. William C. Lehman are members of its executive committee.

Its statement of purpose declares as its aim: To



improve inter-racial relations in Syracuse and to effect inter-racial action for social improvement.

Its method is three-fold: 1. Education thru research and fact-finding; 2. Education toward understanding of mutual problems; and 3. Action with the consent of the main body.

Representatives of constituent groups who helped get the Federation under way were:

Commonweal club, Miss Grace Rockwood, Miss Elizabeth Wilson; Inter-racial group, Mrs. Claude T. De Graw, Mrs. Victor E. Holly; Americanization league, Miss Helen Hewitt, Mrs. Alexander Mason; Huntington club, Miss Margaret Day, Miss Sybil Gowdy;

W.I.L., Mrs. Carlton Hommel; Jewish, Rabbi David H. Panitz; F.O.R., Miss Frederica Smith; C.O.R.E., Miss Dorothy Kaupke, Wylie Goodrich; Council of Churches, Rev. Warner H. Siebert, Prof. W. C. Lehmann; Inter-church women, Mrs. Leon W. Ellis, Mrs. Walter Smith;

Friends' group, Prof. and Mrs. Horace A. Eaton; Hendricks Chapel, Miss Caroline Day, Rev. Egbert M. Hayes; Bahai, Kenneth Christian; Goodwill association, Fred Dutton; MRA, Fred Hartman; Peace council, Prof. Norman Whitney, Robert Vogel; Co-operative, Rev. R. E. Romig; Social agencies, Miss Jean Maxwell.

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There has been a constant change of personnel, but enough of these are still active to give a lead to anyone in search of information.

## THE RESCUE OF JERRY

By DR. FREEMAN E. GALPIN

During the decades that preceded the Civil War, Syracuse became known as one of the most important stations of the Underground Railroad. Nor was this reputation undeserved, as Syracuse at that time possessed a small but stout band of ardent abolitionists who were willing to risk all in their war against slavery. Hardly a month went by without an anti-slavery meeting; and on several occasions local assembly halls echoed with the fiery orations of men like William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips.

Spirited individuals appeared who demonstrated their sentiments by rescuing runaway slaves from their pursuing masters.

The earliest known instance of such a rescue was in October 1839. Harriet Powell, maid to a visitor from Mississippi, was aided to Canada and freedom.

Local abolitionists were highly elated over their success and when in the fall of 1851 the Federal authorities seized one Jerry, a runaway slave from Missouri, another rescue was effected in one of the most dramatic scenes Syracuse has ever witnessed.

In all probability Jerry came to Syracuse during the winter of 1849-50. He gained employment as a cooper and won the goodwill of those who knew him.

Federal officers got on his track. He was arrested and brought to trial. Friends and abolitionists so

crowded the room that the judge was forced to call an adjournment. During the excitement that prevailed, Jerry managed to escape. He was re-captured and lodged in the jail.

Trial was resumed in the police office in the jail. Assault by a mob of angry citizens resulted in another postponement.

Next morning the jail was rushed, Jerry was dragged from his cell to the street, hoisted upon the shoulders of his rescuers, placed in a carriage and spirited away. Where he stayed that night and the next few days, no one knows; but in a short time he was driven north to Oswego and carried into Canada.

Quite naturally the Federal government sought to prosecute those indicted for having engaged in the rescue. A trial was held in Albany; but as one person after another was brought before the jury, the defense lawyers so effectively riddled the government's case that not a single conviction was secured. Another trial was held at Canandaigua, but this also turned out a farce and with that the Government dropped the entire affair.

Among those in Syracuse who played an important role directly or indirectly in the rescue were Charles B. Sedgwick, Rev. Samuel Joseph May, Abner Bates, Charles Wheaton and Ira Cobb.

## *WHAT THE CHURCHES HAVE MEANT FOR NEGRO PROGRESS IN SYRACUSE*

By ERNEST J. BOWDEN

Churches, colored and white, have had a large place in the story of Negroes in Syracuse.

Easily first in historic interest is the little Wesleyan church which stands east of the public library at the intersection of E. Onondaga and E. Jefferson streets. It was founded in 1843 by a group of Methodist Episcopal abolitionists who were not satisfied with the compromising attitude of their own communion. It served as a station in the Underground Railroad.

Closely associated with it was the Unitarian "Church of the Messiah" at North State street and Burnet avenue (now St. Peter's Catholic), scene of the 22-year ministry of Samuel J. May. That, too, served the Underground Railroad and aided many thousands of Negroes in their escape.

It was the bell of the Congregational church, then in the 200 block, E. Genesee st., that tolled the signal for the Jerry Rescue. Abolitionists had made it their rallying-place.

Of Negro churches, the oldest is the African Methodist Episcopal, Zion, now located at 711 E. Fayette st. It was founded October 1842 by people who had met earlier in First Methodist church at Salina and Willow sts.

Bethany Baptist, 610 E. Washington st., was founded in 1887 with the backing of the Onondaga County Baptist Missionary and Social Union, now merged with the county association. It was built with a view to institutional work among Negroes. It has a spacious gymnasium, with accommodation for social affairs.

St. Philip's Episcopal church, 209 Almond St., came 10 years later. It is a mission of the Central New York diocese. Dr. Herbert G. Coddington, for many years rector of Grace church, took a deep interest in its founding.

The building of the New York Central station in its present location compelled a migration of Negroes to the region of Cedar, Madison and Adams sts. where a number of new churches were started.

Oldest of these is the Church of God in Christ, commonly known as the "Sanctified" church, 420 E. Adams st. It was founded in 1924 and maintains the type of worship to which some Negroes were accustomed in their Southern homes. A new branch of this church has recently been formed.

Hopps Memorial, Colored Methodist Episcopal, 707 S. McBride st., was founded in 1929. It has the advantage of a fine auditorium which makes it a convenient center for state and regional rallies.

Also there is "The Church of God and Saints of Christ", (Seventh-day), St. Luke's Missionary Baptist, and "Triumph the Church and Kingdom of God".

## *HISTORY OF DUNBAR CENTER*

By EMILY LOVETT EATON

Dunbar Center may be described as a child of the Commonweal club, an organization of business and professional women with the aim of "making a business of living, not a living out of business". It grew out of the need for wholesome recreation of the Negro group which was recognized by Mrs. Lucia Knowles, director of the Club's effort for a constructive recreation program for the city.

A few years before Commonweal began this effort, Mrs. Frederick R. Hazard and her sister, Mrs. Walter A. Burlingame, had become aware of the plight of the young Negroes of Syracuse who had no choice of meeting places, outside limited church facilities, other than pool rooms, saloons or commercial dance halls.

The two sisters met with a small number of Negroes to discuss possibilities for a Negro community center. A disused school building on E. Fayette st. was secured and a student engaged part time to direct activities. But the building was torn down, the student graduated and the effort given up.

Then the Commonweal club, with the assistance of Mrs. Knowles, decided to undertake a project for a Negro recreational center.

For several years the work was carried on in inadequate space and with volunteer help from university students, colored and white, under Mrs. Knowles' di-

rection, with the addition of playground activities in summer.

A more suitable, though still inadequate location was found at 308 S. McBride st., which later was bought by the Syracuse Welfare association and made available at nominal cost. Meanwhile an organization had been formed and named for the Negro poet, Dunbar, with Negro officers and an advisory committee directed by the Commonweal.

After several years of effort, application to include the center among agencies supported by the Community chest was successful and in 1929 the club was relieved of the increasingly heavy financial burden.

In the fall of 1930, Golden B. Darby became director, with his wife acting as secretary and supervisor of the program for women and girls.

In 1932 the center was incorporated, with Almus Olver as president.

The present director, Theodore E. Brown, came to Syracuse from Louisville Ky. after wide experience. He has seen remarkable advances in Dunbar achievement and influence, for much of which he is responsible. After three difficult years of attempting to carry on a program which had far outgrown the capacity of the S. McBride st. house, his efforts have been given proper scope in the recently acquired permanent quarters at 950 S. Townsend st.

## *SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF THE NEGRO IN SYRACUSE*

By ALMUS OLVER

Negro social problems, here as elsewhere, are concerned primarily with these things: Employment, opportunity, decent housing standards, health improvements, recreational and social facilities and social welfare services.

I pass over the question of education. Our public school facilities are available to the Negro without distinction or segregation. And any changes or improvements in his educational opportunity are contingent first of all on the solution of other basic problems.

Fundamentally the problems to which I have referred are economic in character and few of them can be solved, at least with any degree of success, no matter how completely we may be able to overcome race prejudice and discrimination, unless at the same time the Negro's economic status can be radically improved.

For generations in Syracuse the Negro has been the unskilled, menial worker whose job opportunities have been confined to manual labor and domestic service.

The number of businesses operated by Negroes have been insignificant and the professions represented, outside the clergy, by one physician, one dentist and a few social workers. His numbers make him an inconsequential political and economic factor in the community. There are no Negro police, firemen, postmen or teachers.

During World War II the Negro's employment op-



portunity and economic status improved to a degree never before witnessed in this community. He found his way into factory and industrial occupations previously closed to him, at wages comparable to those received by others similarly employed. However, even yet few if any Negroes are employed in so-called white collar positions.

When we consider Negro housing, we must concede that the Negro in Syracuse, as elsewhere in America, is restricted in fact, if not by law, to a system of segregation.

But no reference to Negro housing would be complete at this time without comment regarding the Pioneer Homes project of the Syracuse Housing authority. This public housing project in the immediate vicinity of Negro concentration has accepted Negro tenants without discrimination and on the same basis as white. At the moment 52 Negro families live there in modern, convenient, well-constructed units such as in Syracuse they have rarely occupied; and at rents much below what they formerly paid for sub-standard facilities.

The needs of the Negro for social welfare services are met in our community through the regular channels. Public assistance is available to him through our departments of public welfare under the same conditions and on exactly the same standards as those observed for other applicants. Two of the staff of the department of public welfare are Negroes, and in most cases assistance to Negroes is administered by these workers.

## *PROGRESS THROUGH THE YEARS*

By HELEN MURPHY

Since the war and the passage of the state law against discrimination, many Negroes have entered on fields of service that were closed to them heretofore. Opportunities have been grasped and many have proved themselves to be workmen who need not to be ashamed. Certain industrial plants have been opened to them; also the New York Telephone company and the Syracuse Transit company.

Negroes of Syracuse have long believed in being independent and owning their own homes; and we find that for over a hundred years they have owned property here. The Cromwells have been named as some of the largest of the property owners.

Prominent in the early business field was Mrs. Fannie Burns who owned a beauty shop in the Eckel building. The Williams brothers with their father owned and operated a thriving grocery store here for many years.

The first positions of leadership were offered by the church and it is this field that our greatest strides have been made in Syracuse. The churches have furnished leadership for the community in every worthwhile endeavor. They have served not only as houses of worship but also as meeting places of fellowship when the church was the only institution owned by them.

Bethany Baptist church is proud of the fact that Harriet Tubman, the great emancipator of her race, was baptized in its baptistry.

Illustrative of this deep influence of religion is the

life of Joseph Terrill who lived at 617 Orange st. His story was told in The Syracuse Post-Standard, Sunday, Oct. 27th, 1901 when he was 100.

He gained his freedom by way of the underground railroad and was aided to Canada where he enlisted at once and fought in the French uprising against the government. He later came to this city and at the time of the article had resided here more than 40 years.

Mr. Terrill related that during the hard trials he met in trying to get to Canada, he had a dream in which the Lord appeared to him and told him not to be afraid. He said that all fear of anything but a happy termination left him.

He, with seven other men, including Henry A. Williams, founded Bethany Baptist church. At this time a granddaughter of Mr. Terrill, Mrs. Katherine Johnson, is church clerk at Bethany.

Many business places are owned and operated by Negroes in Syracuse today; among them numerous beauty parlors, barber shops, a shoe repair shop, restaurants and tailor shops.

In the past many promising young Negroes who were studying to prepare themselves for worth-while and useful lives, have been forced to go to other cities to find a livelihood and use their talents. We hope this will not be necessary in the future; that our trained young people can return to Syracuse and enrich this community, doing the things they have been trained to do along with other racial groups.

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*(Mrs. Murphy is the wife of Rev. Leo R. Murphy, now in his 12th year as pastor of Bethany church.)*

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