

*A Brief History of*  
**The Lehigh Valley Black African Heritage History Project**

**PHASE I (Completed)**

This particular effort to capture the history of the African American community in the Lehigh Valley began in 2001. Byron Crudup, Betty Carson, Gwen Adams, and Donald Gunn talked informally about how to accomplish this task. They turned to Dr. James Jackson of the Psychology Department of Muhlenberg College for assistance. Dr. Jackson, Rick Daugherty, the Executive Director of the Lehigh County Senior Citizens, Duane Tolson, Director of Operations at the Senior Center, as well as Dr. Ethel Drayton-Craig, Director of the Office of Multicultural Life at Muhlenberg came together to craft a plan for an oral history project.

Plans began to gather the stories of the “oldest of the old” and of Allentown’s once thriving African American community in the Lawrence Street neighborhood. Interested members of the African American community including Ella Green, Phyllis Alexander, Deloris Marshall, Esther Lee, Dr. JoAnn Spencer among others, gathered to plan how to proceed. The Little Lehigh Urban Renewal Project that occurred in the 1960’s and 1970’s was of particular interest. After several meetings, a core committee emerged who carried out the goals of the project. The Lehigh County Historical Society came on board to house and preserve the research gathered. This type of project, focused on African Americans, was a first for the Lehigh Valley.

The committee successfully applied for several grants totaling \$12,920 from the Pennsylvania Humanities Council and the Charles H. Hoch Foundation. Dr. Jackson and Dr. Drayton-Craig served as the Humanities Scholars on this phase of the project. Fifteen Muhlenberg College student researchers were recruited and trained to conduct two - 1 ½ hour interviews per interviewee. Over the next year, working in teams of three (a video camera/audio person, an interviewer, and an observer) they captured 18 oral histories.

Mark McKenna, Artistic Director of Touchstone Theatre trained students to be good listeners and observers utilizing theatre techniques. Dr. Jackson asked Touchstone Theatre if they could turn the research into a Living History to be performed for the community. Touchstone agreed to join the project as a long-term collaborator.

Dr. Judith Ridner of the History Department at Muhlenberg College joined the project to research the Little Lehigh Urban Renewal Project. With the assistance of one of her students, she combed the archives of The Morning Call and the Allentown Redevelopment Authority for information about Blacks in Allentown. Retired Morning Call reporter, Richard (Dick) Cowen joined the efforts and lent tremendous support with his personal Cowen Ethnic Archives of Morning Call and Evening Chronicle articles spanning two centuries.

## **Key Events of Phase I**

- November 2002 - Poster presentation of the project appears as part of *Healing Stories/Transforming Lives: Celebrating Our Community Voices* at the Banana Factory, in Bethlehem by Touchstone Theatre and The Community Exchange Program.
- February 19, 2003 - The Office of Multicultural Life at Muhlenberg hosts a discussion and preliminary exhibit with presentations by students, Abby Schwartz and Elissa Mannion.
- February 27, 2004 - Dr. James Jackson and Dr. Judith Ridner conduct a brown bag lunch discussion at The Lehigh County Historical Society to unveil the Lehigh Valley Black African Heritage History Project to the broader community.
- March 25, 2004 - Over 100 residents and dignitaries attend The Lehigh Valley Black African Heritage History Project Opening Exhibit and Community Dialogue at the Lehigh County Senior Citizens Center.
- April 7, 2004 - The Office of Multicultural Life opens the traveling exhibit with a presentation at Muhlenberg College's Seegers Union and a week at the Trexler Library.
- May 2004 - First Presbyterian Church in Allentown hosts the traveling exhibit
- June 2004 – PPL displays part of the exhibit. County Executive, Jane Ervin speaks at press conference to announce exhibit's month long display at the Lehigh County Government Center.
- July 29, 2004 - The Senior Center hosts the exhibit at a Community Dialogue.
- August 10, 2004 - RCN Cable TV, Channel 4, airs *Focus Lehigh Valley* with interviews with Jan Ballard, Dick Cowen, Dr. James Jackson, and Dr. Ethel Drayton-Craig.

## **PHASE II (Continuing)**

Committee members wanted to continue the project. Susan Clemens-Bruder, a Muhlenberg History Professor, got involved to help continue the momentum of Phase I. Dr. Ridner, Professor Clemens, and Dr. Drayton-Craig worked with Deb Kipp of the Muhlenberg grant office to obtain funds for continued oral histories conducted by history students. Phase II will begin shortly with a \$15,000 grant from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Additional interviews will be conducted with a particular focus on the "oldest of the old" from Bethlehem and Easton as well as Allentown.

## **PHASE III (Continuing)**

Phase III began immediately after the completion of Phase I. The primary goal of this phase of the project is to create an original theatrical production to bring the story of the African American experience in the Lehigh Valley to the larger community. Another goal is to foster a greater sense of community by bringing people together through a series of story and song gathering sessions. The committee along with Touchstone Theatre asked actor, Peggy Pettitt of New York City, to come to the Valley to work with the community by conducting story-gathering sessions to provide background material for the play. The production, scheduled for

spring of 2008, will feature a multi-racial cast of professional actors along with community members and will be shown at various locations throughout the Lehigh Valley. Touchstone Theatre received a pledge of \$50,000 from an anonymous donor, as a matching grant for the production of this History Project performance. In addition, the National Endowment of the Arts awarded Touchstone a \$20,000 grant towards the project.

**Key Events of Phase III**  
*As of May 2007*

- November 19, 2005 - The committee invited the community to the Historical Society to learn about the History Project theatre production with Peggy Pettitt. Roberta Meek, jazz vocalist in the Lehigh Valley and Muhlenberg College and Wescoe School history student became an active member of the committee and began extensive research of the urban renewal project for an honors thesis.
- February 18, 2006 - Peggy Pettitt returned to conduct another story gathering with community members at Touchstone Theatre.
- September 23, 2006 - Roberta Meek presented her honors thesis research entitled, *Urban Renewal or Negro Removal: Race and Housing in Allentown, Pennsylvania 1963-1968*. Peggy Pettitt continued her story gathering techniques with attendees.
- November 4, 2006 – Peggy Pettitt returned for another story gathering session held at Touchstone Theatre
- February 17, 2007 - Peggy Pettitt returned for another story gathering session held at Touchstone Theatre
- March 24, 2007 – Peggy Pettitt and Mark McKenna led another story gathering session at St. Paul Baptist Church in Bethlehem, PA
- April 28, 2007 - Peggy Pettitt and Mark McKenna led another story gathering session at St. Paul Baptist Church in Bethlehem, PA

**For additional information contact:**

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- Future story gathering sessions:

June 23, 2007, 1-4pm  
Grace Deliverance Baptist Church - 838 N. New Street, Bethlehem

June 30, 2007, 1-4pm Location to be announced

**Lehigh Valley Black African Heritage History Project**  
**Interviewees**  
*As of March 2007*

Alan	Blanks	Jerome	Falls
Alan F.	Blanks	Mabel	Grantham
Kathryn	Boone	Bernice Warren	Greene
Pedro	Boone	Donald	Gunn *
Clyde E.	Bosket Sr.	Ginny	Harrison
Josephine	Carter	Matthew	Harrison
Richard	Cowen	Hazel	Isley
Byron	Crudup	Donald	Jay
Arnold	Drayton	Barbara	Lucien
Alpharetta	Drayton Washington	Shirley	McCants *
Ethel	Drayton-Craig	Arlene	Wallach
Bernard	Durant	Deborah	Watts
Sandra	Easterling	Sydney	White

*\*deceased*

**Committee Members Phase I**

Phyllis	Alexander	Dr. James D.	Jackson
Jan	Ballard	Deloris	Marshall
Richard (Dick)	Cowen	Mark	McKenna
Rick	Daugherty	Andrea	Miller
Dr. Ethel	Drayton-Craig	Dr. Judith	Ridner
Ella	Green	Duane	Tolson

**Muhlenberg College Student Researchers Phase I**

Megan	Diani	Abby	Schwartz
Jacqueline	Edwards	Doron	Sims
Gretchen	Herbert	Rebecca	Toth
Karin	Jacobus	Julie-Ann	Volonnino
Elissa	Mannion	Jessica	Walsh
Lisa	Medalie	Sarah	Weiss
Alexander	Mount	Bri-Anne	Wilson
Brooke	Novack		

**Committee Members Phase II & III**

Susan	Clemens-Bruder	Mark	McKenna
Richard (Dick)	Cowen	Roberta	Meek
Rick	Daugherty	Dr. Judith	Ridner
Dr. Ethel	Drayton-Craig	Kim	Rose
Dr. James D.	Jackson	Jill	Youngken

*The Lehigh Valley Black African Heritage Project is a collaborative project of  
Muhlenberg College, the Lehigh County Senior Center, the Lehigh County Historical Society, the  
Northampton County Historical and Genealogical Society,  
Kutztown University, and Touchstone Theatre.*