

BAPL's "Black Bethlehem Project" featured on WFMZ, Channel 69

The Bethlehem Gadfly History, Bethlehem October 13, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on Bethlehem History* 

Black Bethlehem Project

We've had occasion several times in these pages to high-five **BAPL** and Rayah Levy for the "Black Bethlehem Project," only one part of the wonderful programs and resources BAPL has produced to help raise our consciousness about the Black experience and racism at this cultural moment when, in the wake of the George Floyd murder, the nation is again engaged in a reckoning with race..

There's simply no excuse for not opening our minds to knowledge appropriate to understanding the Black experience locally as well as nationally.

History's Headlines: Black lives in the Lehigh Valley



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Selections from Frank Whelan, "History's Headlines: Black lives in the Lehigh Valley." WFMZ, October 10, October 12, 2020.

Recently the Bethlehem Area Public Library began what it called the Black Bethlehem Project. Headed by M. Rayah Levy, the head of the library's adult services, it focuses on the history of Black people in the Christmas City primarily in the years from the 1950s to the 1970s. Made possible by an \$11,000 grant from the Lehigh Valley Engaged

Humanities Consortium, the project, using oral and written interviews and narratives, focuses on the experiences, both good and not so good, of Black people's lives during that slice of the 20th century in Bethlehem.

Black missionaries could be found in the streets of Bethlehem. When Moravian painter Valentine Haidt painted his "The First Fruits," he showed Black people both on earth and in heaven. Not all Moravians however shared these views of Black people. Some owned slaves and some sources suggest that Black slaves were used in building projects, particularly in its North Carolina community at Salem.

Few Black people were brought to Pennsylvania. Historians estimate that only 2 percent of Pennsylvania's population was Black by the end of the colonial era. Most of the laborers coming into Pennsylvania were white, indentured servants from Europe. And there were no large plantations in the colony that required the labor of enslaved people. Most of the slaves in the colony were domestic servants and were living in Philadelphia. They did not come directly from Africa but were from the West Indies. There was no large market for enslaved Black people in Pennsylvania unless they understood English and were trained in housekeeping.

Almost certainly few white colonists were shocked by an ad in the Philadelphia newspaper, the Pennsylvania Gazette of August 28, 1732, by merchants William Allen and Joseph Turner of "a parcel of fine Negro Boys and Girls to be sold," or one offering for sale "two likely Negroes bred to House Work" that appeared in the May 13, 1736 edition of the same paper. Allen abandoned the slave trade in the early 1750s and later founded Allentown. Probably the first African Americans to be seen in Allentown were Henry, Frances, and Sampson. When William Allen's son James married in 1767, they were a part of his wife's dowery. They lived at Trout Hall when the family was there in the summer. James Allen emancipated them in his will when he died at age 37. "I have always been convinced of the horrors of slavery," he added.

Slavery came to an end in Pennsylvania but very slowly. The slave trade was abolished in 1776. But there was much argument over the law passed in 1780 that finally did so. Much of the opposition came from many of the clergy who had one or two enslaved people as household servants. Many who received little salary found it cheaper to buy a slave than hire

a housekeeper. The law of 1780 stipulated that those who were slaves at the time of its signing would be slaves the rest of their lives, their children would be free when they reached 21 and their children would be born free. As a result of this complicated process it would be 1847 before the last elderly enslaved persons in Pennsylvania died.

Some historians believe that the first Black people to come into the Valley in any number that were not enslaved came with the building of the Lehigh Canal in the 1820s. Later, according to the late historian Lance Metz, by the 1830s they were employed as mule drivers on the canal boats. The first Black person in Bethlehem that was recognized in Bethlehem after the West Indian missionaries was Benjamin Rice. In his 1976 history, W. Ross Yates notes that local artist Rufus Grider described first seeing Rice in or about 1842. He described “Black Ben” as “leading a roving life, sleeping in barns.” He was primarily noted for the folk wisdom he dispensed in English and Pennsylvania German. Rice died in 1865 in the Northampton County Poor House following a botched amputation of his foot from freezing and exposure.

The U.S. Census for 1860 listed 32 Black people living in Bethlehem. South Bethlehem, which was then a part of Lower Saucon Township, is listed as having 8 Black residents, five men and three women. Allentown had 16 Black residents. Easton with 85 had the largest number. At that time with nearly 10,000 people it was the population center of the Lehigh Valley. As the nexus of several canals, it most likely offered that kind of employment to Black laborers. South Bethlehem’s Black population began to expand with the arrival of the Lehigh Valley Railroad in the 1850s. Some were domestic servants of the new industrial leadership. Among the first to employ black “domestics” was Tinsley Jeeter, (sometimes spelled Jeter) a Virginia born son of a slave holder who developed in the 1860s and 70’s what became Fountain Hill.

Other Black newcomers were attracted to jobs connected with the railroad and other industries. Historian W. Ross Yates in volume II of his book “Bethlehem of Pennsylvania: The Golden Years” described it this way:

“They clustered together originally in the area around Broadway and lower Brodhead Avenue and the lower edge of Fountain Hill. As their

numbers grew, they settled extensively in the poorer sections of Northampton Heights. Eventually they spread the length of the South Side, excluding those sections which remained wholly European, along Second and Third streets, mostly in what used to be Mechanic Street housing and around the coke works near Hellertown.”

From the 1890s Bethlehem’s Black families formed their own institutions, particularly churches. It was one of Jeter’s Black employees who started the drive when she discovered that the Episcopal Church of the Nativity where she had been worshipping did not include her in a list of its membership. On August 16TH 1893 the Moravian newspaper noted the African Methodist Episcopal Church that was forming. “We are glad to note that the colored people of the Bethlehems are likely to have a church before long...Since Spring they have been worshipping in Laufer’s Hall, Third and New Streets, in South Bethlehem.” The church eventually opened on Pawnee Street.

The Black Bethlehem Project will add a welcomed new chapter to the history of our own time.