

A RESTRAINED MILITANCY: JOHNSTOWN'S POSTWAR BLACK COMMUNITY

The evening before Armistice Day in 1947, Dr. Burrell Johnson, a dentist and president of the Johnstown branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), addressed his membership. Johnson presented a summation of the status of Johnstown's black population, a postwar balance sheet.

On the assets side, Johnson judged that the school systems were good ones and most teachers were sympathetic to the problems of race relations. There was even one black instructor in the Johnstown system (then employing almost four hundred full-time teachers). Some community chest agencies had non-whites on their boards—the Teen Canteen, Girl Scouts, YWCA and Family Welfare Society. Johnson stated that the black community had good media relations. Race was not mentioned in crime reports. Newspaper editorial policy was described as fair. There was no discrimination in public theaters. There were African American officials in some labor unions. Two black instrumentalists performed in the Johnstown Symphony Orchestra.

On the liabilities side, Johnson detailed some significant items: Local blacks were experiencing poor industrial job opportunities with little chance for upgrading. There was segregation in housing, including a number of "restricted areas." Most restaurants refused service to blacks. (Seven restaurants in Johnstown were open to them.) Many office buildings would not rent to African Americans. There were no black women in training at Johnstown hospitals. Many labor unions practiced discrimination.¹¹⁸

There were other indications of subtle discrimination Johnson might have added. Johnstown had no black lawyers and only one black physician, Dr. Moses Clayborne. The hospitals employed no black nurses or medical technicians. (Marion Holton Patterson, trained in Pittsburgh and hired by Mercy Hospital in the early 1960s, became Johnstown's first black hospital nurse.)¹¹⁹ Local stores and shops hired no African American sales attendants or office staffs. Indeed, when the Glosser Brothers Department Store hired non-white women to serve in its coat check room, the change created a sensation. All the good hotels were closed to blacks, as were the public and semi-public swimming pools.

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Diminutive Enclaves

The Johnstown black community has always remained a small fragment of the overall population. When the city's census count peaked in 1920 at 67,323, there were 1,650 African Americans, about 2½ percent of the population. As the central city lost population from decade to decade, the overall black population rose slightly, except from 1980 to 1990. The following tables depict these trends in Johnstown, its urbanizing area as a whole and all of Cambria County:

Summary Data about Black Community

| Johnstown City | Population | Number of Blacks | Percentage Black |
|----------------|------------|------------------|------------------|
| 1950 | 63,232 | 2,218 | 3.50 |
| 1960 | 53,949 | 2,655 | 4.92 |
| 1970 | 42,476 | 2,688 | 6.33 |
| 1980 | 35,496 | 2,705 | 7.62 |
| 1990 | 28,134 | 2,517 | 8.95 |
| 2000 | 23,906 | 2,561 | 10.71 |

| Johnstown Urban Region ⁴²⁰ | Population | Number of Blacks | Percentage Black |
|---------------------------------------|------------|------------------|------------------|
| 1950 | 110,180 | 2,936 | 2.66 |
| 1960 | 112,641 | 3,377 | 3.00 |
| 1970 | 99,494 | 3,152 | 3.17 |
| 1980 | 92,508 | 3,194 | 3.45 |
| 1990 | 79,379 | 3,010 | 3.80 |
| 2000 | 72,520 | 3,075 | 4.24 |

| Cambria County | Population | Number of Blacks | Percentage Black |
|----------------|------------|------------------|------------------|
| 1950 | 209,541 | 3,093 | 1.48 |
| 1960 | 203,283 | 3,600 | 1.77 |
| 1970 | 186,785 | 3,454 | 1.85 |
| 1980 | 183,263 | 3,378 | 1.85 |
| 1990 | 163,029 | 3,734 | 2.29 |
| 2000 | 152,598 | 4,322 | 2.83 |

One can readily discern from the data above that the vast majority of blacks both in the urban region and in Cambria County have lived in Johnstown.

Political Powerlessness

The comparatively small size of the black population has served to work against its members getting elected or appointed to public office. Those who were first to be successful are discussed below:

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In March 1947, Percy Johnson, a black restaurant proprietor, was appointed to serve as Fourth Ward alderman (magistrate) to fill a vacancy caused by the death of Edward Levergood. Unopposed in the November election, Johnson became the first black person ever to occupy a governmental position in or near Johnstown. After Johnson died in office in November 1956, Governor George Leader named Miss Pauline Gordon, a black mortician, to succeed him.⁴²¹ In 1963 Raymond Hemphill, then a city street worker, won a Republican Party nomination for school director in the primary, but he was defeated in the November election.

On July 30, 1979, James Malloy Jr. resigned his seat on the Johnstown City Council to become city recreation director. On August 8, Saul Griffin was appointed by the remaining council members to fill the vacancy. Serving until the reorganization meeting in January 1980, Griffin became the first black city councilman.

In the autumn of 1984, Dr. Levi Hollis was named acting school superintendent for the Greater Johnstown School District. Soon afterward he was confirmed as superintendent. Hollis was the first African American to hold a major public office in the Johnstown area.⁴²²

In the general election on November 3, 1987, Victoria King and Julius Porcher both won elections to the Greater Johnstown School Board. As such they were the first African Americans ever to win against opposition in a runoff election for an ongoing position anywhere in the Johnstown area.

In July 1991, James McMillin resigned his seat on the Johnstown City Council. In a bizarre action, the remaining councilmembers appointed Allen Andrews to replace him. (The matter was bizarre because the councilmembers did not realize that procedurally they had actually made the appointment.) Meanwhile Andrews was already a candidate for the two-year seat. On November 5, he won. When this happened, he became the first black person to win an elected seat on the Johnstown City Council.⁴²³

As of this writing, there has never been an African American elected to a row office in Cambria County, the county commission or to a judgeship. No black person representing Cambria County has ever served in either the Pennsylvania Legislature or the U.S. Congress.

The NAACP Johnstown Branch

There had been organizations of blacks in Johnstown extending back to the early part of the twentieth century. During World War I, the Johnstown branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was formed.⁴²⁴ By 1934 the local branch had become sufficiently rooted to host the Pennsylvania State NAACP Convention.

Indications are Johnstown's NAACP organization was nonmilitant in its approach, especially in the Depression, wartime and early postwar years. Newspaper accounts of the meetings gave the names of new officers as the rosters changed. NAACP meetings often consisted of a speaker to discuss a timely topic. Clergymen always played a leading role.

By the late 1960s there were about five hundred members, roughly half being white, although most white members were inactive. When the national dues were increased in 1970, the membership dropped precipitously to just over three hundred. The "Black Community Survey" (1969) had stated that all people generally viewed as leaders of Johnstown's black community were board members of the local NAACP.⁴²⁵

The Turbulent Years

In December 1955 a black seamstress, Rosa Parks, refused to yield her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama. Her defiance precipitated a twelve-month bus boycott by the community's blacks. The protest ended when the company reversed its segregation policy. Through a form of civil disobedience, a black community in the Deep South had overturned a timeworn practice offensive to its members.

Through the bus boycott, the civil rights movement had taken on a nonviolent, civil disobedience approach championed by Martin Luther King and his newly formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Sit-ins, boycott demonstrations and various voter registration drives followed throughout the late 1950s and 1960s.

When the Black Panthers and other more militant groups in the mid-1960s began to espouse black power and more revolutionary and potentially violent strategies, the Johnstown NAACP branch adopted a resolution rejecting these approaches. "The local branch does not condone, advocate, or support this type of action (i.e., black power and violent protest), nor does the branch recognize or adhere to the philosophy underlying this action."¹²⁶

On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis. Riots erupted in forty-one major cities. Throughout the tense week, Johnstown remained calm. A curfew had been imposed. Liquor stores, bars and clubs were ordered closed for a short while. King was eulogized at an Interfaith Memorial Service conducted on Tuesday, April 9 at the Franklin Street Methodist Church. Perhaps in response to reliable rumors that Black Panther and Black Muslim members from other cities were visiting the community and reaching out to Johnstown blacks, the local NAACP once again publicly reaffirmed its nonviolent policy.¹²⁷

Employment Betterment and General Human Relations

In the 1937 steel strike in Johnstown, most black workers endeavored to continue working. They apparently had little use for unions at that time. One concludes that black steelworkers employed in Johnstown during the Great Depression were uniquely fortunate compared to most non-whites in general. The idea of going on strike in the mid-1930s at the urging of union leaders they did not trust probably seemed absurd to them.

Franklin Roosevelt's Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) was created during World War II by a presidential executive order. Its purpose was to prevent racial and other discrimination in the execution of federal wartime contracts. The FEPC probably had beneficial effects for Johnstown's blacks but there is no ready documentation. Truman's postwar efforts to legitimize and strengthen the FEPC by statute were consistently defeated in the U.S. Senate. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, however, became landmark legislation. Through this law, far-reaching fair employment practices were made mandatory. Full-time equal opportunity staff directors and support personnel began to be hired by the larger employers in Johnstown.

In the postwar period, Pennsylvania was off to an early start in efforts to end discrimination. In 1955 Governor George Leader signed into law the Pennsylvania Fair Employment Practice Act, which sought to outlaw all forms of discrimination in employment. It also created a Pennsylvania Fair Employment Practices Commission with rulemaking, subpoena and broad enforcement

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powers. The commission was also authorized to "create such advisory agencies and conciliation councils, local or state-wide, as will aid in effectuating the purposes" of the law. In 1961 the legislature created the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC) and assigned to it all the powers, duties and staff of the Fair Employment Practices Commission. In that same 1961 session, the legislature also enacted the Pennsylvania Fair Educational Opportunities Act, which sought to end de facto segregation and discrimination in education, a responsibility also assigned to the Human Relations Commission. The commonwealth was unifying all anti-discrimination programs and agencies under its PHRC, which continued to create and work with local human relations advisory councils.⁴²⁸

In Johnstown, the local Human Relations Committee had been set up as an advisory group to the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC). In the mid-1960s nearly all its members were affiliated with the Johnstown branch of the NAACP. This committee would hear complaints, identify discriminatory situations and refer them to the PHRC for remedial action.

By 1971 the Johnstown city government decided to create a Human Relations Commission of its own, an action it could have taken earlier when the 1965 legislation became law. The city's commission accomplished little. Whether its creation as a toothless tiger was an effort to weaken the advisory committee set up by the PHRC was problematic.⁴²⁹ The latter continued to function.

The NAACP Public Housing Desegregation Posture

Among the first aggressive pursuits ever undertaken by the Johnstown NAACP branch were its efforts to desegregate public housing. As early as 1940 and 1941 at the inception of public housing in Johnstown, it had largely been the low-income and slum-dwelling conditions of local African Americans that had first justified the public housing program and the authorizations of federal funds to finance it. Nonetheless, when the first placements were made, the tenants' selection committee was assigning only a small number of units to non-whites. Dr. Burrell Johnson persuaded Walter Krebs to help rectify the situation. Krebs contacted federal housing officials, who ordered that there be an equal unit allocation among whites and blacks in Prospect Homes.⁴³⁰

The severe wartime shortage of housing at all social and income levels became the basis of a policy to make public housing units available on a priority basis to meet wartime needs—accommodating workers employed in war-related industries and housing military families.⁴³¹

Although there were 111 units available in the Prospect Homes Project by early 1943, the Johnstown Housing Authority (JHA) had difficulty getting a full quota of whites to occupy them. While never explained, one can only conclude that many whites were reluctant to move into a housing complex with blacks. As of January 1943, there were forty-six white and twenty-nine African American families approved for occupancy. When the white applicants were presented with leases to sign, some backed off. The African American families, eager to move in, readily signed the lease papers. The authority's need to maintain a set racial quota of blacks to whites was creating a backlog of blacks but an insufficiency of willing whites. This basic situation was contributing to public housing units going vacant even in housing-scarce, wartime Johnstown.⁴³²

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The public housing program in Prospect was followed by the first Oakhurst Homes Project, creating one hundred new units in the city's West End. This general neighborhood was virtually all white and was located near the heavily ethnic Cambria City section.

With Oakhurst Homes expected to be available for occupancy in May 1943, the Johnstown Housing Authority (JHA) rescinded its quota limitations on black families in Prospect Homes. The other families who needed and qualified for public housing would then be assigned to Oakhurst Homes. A number of black families would be occupying new (safe, sanitary and decent) housing at rents they could afford. Eligible white families, reluctant to move into Prospect Homes, then began occupying the new units in Oakhurst. The JHA justified these assignments with arguments that the new projects were helping to meet wartime needs.⁴³³ While a pattern of racial segregation was forming in Oakhurst Homes, no one dared to challenge it in wartime. The Prospect Homes project was somewhat integrated, but the initial racial quota plan was ignored.

After the war, the NAACP Johnstown branch began slowly to address the housing issue. By 1953 the organization was urging the JHA to "allocate homes in all projects on the basis of need—regardless of color, race, or creed." Various quota formulas were preventing some African Americans from moving into the projects. The JHA and its staff maintained there was no discrimination.⁴³⁴

In 1965 the JHA and the Johnstown branch of the NAACP reached an agreement following a complaint the branch had made with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission. The agreement provided that the JHA would strive to attain a racial balance among the tenants in each of its public housing projects. The NAACP was never satisfied that the agreement was taken seriously. A JHA policy preventing lateral transfers of tenants from any one complex to another explained why a more aggressive racial balancing program had not been implemented.

In late May 1970, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC) reviewed the entire JHA program in a quasi-judicial proceeding. Testimony was introduced establishing that there was racial segregation in all public housing projects except Prospect Homes. Old Oakhurst had 1 black and 99 white families; New Oakhurst had 4 black and 296 white families; Coopersdale had 9 black and 153 white families; while Prospect Homes had 57 black and 53 white families. Very subtly, a pattern of segregation had set in.

In December 1970, the PHRC issued its ten-part ruling. Among a number of things, the JHA was ordered to assign new black applicants to the four largely white projects until minimum desegregation objectives were achieved. Black residents of Prospect Homes were to be moved at authority expense to any of the other projects of their choosing. The JHA was to report its progress to the commission every three months for the next five years. By 1974 it was evident that the segregation patterns in the several projects were ending.⁴³⁵

The NAACP and Other Johnstown Community Issues

The Johnstown branch of the NAACP challenged Johnstown City's Workable Program.⁴³⁶

The Johnstown branch also sought to have the school board close down the Joseph Johns Junior High School to achieve racial balance. There were three junior high schools in the Greater Johnstown School District. Garfield in the West End and Cochran in the Eighth Ward between

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Hornerstown and Moxham were predominately white. The vast majority of black junior high pupils were attending the Joseph Johns School on Market Street.

The school board took only a limited action on the NAACP request because the fate of the school was settled in the Market Street West Urban Redevelopment Project. Had the school been closed by the school board, its acquisition price through urban redevelopment would probably have been much less. The Johnstown Redevelopment Authority acquired the school in 1970 and demolished it.

The NAACP also sought to keep open the Prospect School, slated for closing as part of the Greater Johnstown School District's desegregation plan coupled with its needs to phase out a number of schools. Many black families, opposed to their children being bused to West End schools, were seeking for a new model school to be built in Prospect with white pupils bused to it rather than black students being bused out. Prospect, however, was eventually closed.⁴³⁷

The Perkins Shooting Incident

At about 9:00 p.m. on Saturday, March 29, 1969, a Johnstown patrolman, Charles La Porta Jr., shot and killed Timothy Perkins, an unarmed fifteen-year-old black youth, in the alley behind the Arrow Furniture Company on Franklin Street. Apparently several black youths had been drinking when a city patrolman, Thomas Ricci, encountered them. He called for help. La Porta soon arrived. Ricci felt the two of them needed more manpower so he went to his police cruiser to radio headquarters. While Ricci was away, La Porta shot Perkins, killing him instantly.⁴³⁸

Word about the shooting spread quickly. There was an immediate fear of a major riot. Rumors also began circulating that mobs of blacks from Pittsburgh were heading to Johnstown to stir up trouble.

Hope Johnson and her close friend, Marion Holton Patterson, drove about Johnstown urging gangs of black youths to calm down. Other NAACP members did the same thing. The Johnstown branch and a new organization, the Black United Front, jointly established a rumor control center. Black churches were scheduling "night of prayer" sessions. In retrospect, Mrs. Johnson believed that the combined efforts were successful. "Some people were ready to set the town on fire," she stated.⁴³⁹

La Porta was immediately suspended. He was later indicted, tried and found guilty of involuntary manslaughter. His conviction was overturned by the Pennsylvania Superior Court.

The Perkins incident fomented bitterness in the community. Sam Cocco, Kenneth Tompkins's police chief, was called a racist. Reverend W.M. Cunningham, pastor of the Cambria AME Zion Church, accused the police department of brutality and harassing young people. "Are churchgoers, teenagers enroute to home, hospitals or dances to be pounced upon and labeled purse snatchers, loud mouth bullies, troublemakers, and so forth, solely because they are assembled or are traveling on the street? It is the past practice of this city," Cunningham charged.

A Black Student Protest

A few weeks after the Perkins shooting incident, a group of black high school students staged a brief student revolt. Black students at Central High School together with a few students at

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Joseph Johns Junior High had been seeking a program of black history and black studies. They wanted books and songs that were offensive to them discontinued from the district curriculum. Male black students pointed out that white students were growing sideburns while they were still forbidden to grow moustaches. They also protested the dress code, then about twelve years old. It forbade loud clothes and tennis shoes. Specifically they sought to be able to wear dashikis, brightly colored African-style shirts. They also wanted the school cafeteria at Central High to prepare black-ethnic food.

The students' demands were not taken seriously. In early May 1969, a student walkout was planned. Dashikis were produced in black households all over Johnstown. Led by Allen Andrews, a champion high school wrestler, together with Alan Cashaw and Daniel Perkins, the group walked out of classes and headed to the nearby Joseph Johns Junior High, where many of the younger black students burned their lunch bags, a protest in quest of soul food. Others joined the walkout. The group went to the Cambria AME Zion Church on Haynes Street where they read *Before the Mayflower*, a black history book.

When the high school principal, Don Irwin, showed up to talk with the group, he was denied entrance. He sent Bruce Haselrig to negotiate. Haselrig was admitted. There had been earlier threats of expulsion and graduation delays. The protest, however, ended with the one-day walkout. There were no reprisals. Students won the right to wear dashikis and tennis shoes. Moustaches were also allowed, although the school curriculum was not altered to include black history and there were no changes in school cafeteria menus. Pastor W.M. Cunningham used the occasion to counsel the group about how to seek and negotiate reasonable demands.⁴¹⁰