

African Americans in Columbus, Ohio

Franklin County started taking shape as a metropolis in 1797 when Franklinton, the area's first settlement, was established, and it didn't take long for the county's African American citizens to become a prominent segment of society. It was also in 1797 that Arthur Boke became the first black person to settle in Franklinton. Ever since, African Americans have contributed to our central Ohio heritage as members of civic organizations, government agencies and religious institutions.

Columbus's African American population increased slowly at first – by 1810, the population numbered only forty-three. But 100 years later, the City's African American segment totaled 12,739. World War I provided many new job opportunities, doubling the black population by 1920. Two early black communities included the American Addition, platted in 1898 before its eventual annexation to Columbus in 1959, and Urbancrest, which was settled in 1896 and incorporated in 1948.

Historic black churches included St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in 1872; Shiloh Baptist Church, dating back to 1868; and Second Baptist Church, founded in 1836. Second Baptist Church has a proud heritage which is well documented in the souvenir program for its 145th anniversary in 1981. Among the highlights in the publication are the humble beginnings of the church, an outgrowth of the integrated First Baptist Church. On January 7, 1836, "the Colored Baptist" was formally recognized as the Second Baptist Church; and in 1844, ground was broken for a new brick edifice at 105-115 E Gay St.

Also featured in the publication are the careers of its pastors, including the Reverend James Preston Poindexter, the city's "most articulate and vociferous voice against slavery" who became the first African American member of both the Columbus City Council in 1880 and Columbus School Board in 1884.

The oldest black business in the United States, E. E. Ward Moving and Storage Co., was founded in Columbus in 1881. In fact, the 1880s and '90s saw many Columbus black firsts including firefighter (Pleasant Higgenbotham, 1888); doctor, (James A. Tyler, 1895); police officer (Nelson R. Tate, 1895); lawyer (Wilbur King, 1899); and college graduates (Sherman H. Guss, The Ohio State University, 1892; and William H. Fouse, Otterbein College, 1893).

During the first half of the 20th century, the Columbus Urban League and the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP] were established, and African Americans enjoyed increased participation in local government. In 1918, Robert Lowery of Hanford Village was elected the first African American Mayor in Franklin County; and in 1942, Sandy Ray became the first African American citizen in Franklin County to be elected to the Ohio House of Representatives.

The 1960s, a volatile decade in American history, brought Robert M. Duncan to the bench as Franklin County's first African American appointed judge on May 13, 1966. [James Pearson became the first African American elected judge in 1975.] Later developments in the government arena include Robert M. Duncan's groundbreaking appointment as our county's first African American federal judge in 1969. Ellen Craig's election as mayor of Urbancrest in 1971 gave her the honor of being the first elected African American woman mayor in Franklin County and by 1975, Helen Evans became the first African American woman in the United States to serve on a governor's cabinet. More barriers fell when Janet E. Jackson became the first African American woman appointed as a Franklin County Municipal Court judge in 1987 and when Michael B. Coleman became the first African American Mayor of the City of Columbus in 2000.

The literary arts have been enriched by the contributions of Anna Bishop, Anita R. Bunkley, Edith Clark, Charles Lyons, Benita Porter and Clarressa Thompson, while Columbus's artistic heritage has benefited from the creations of Elijah Pierce, Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson (see related article), Barbara Chavous and many other talented artists.

Well-known African Americans from Columbus who made significant contributions to music include Sammy Stuart, Carl Kenney, Harry Edison, Carolyn Utz, Larry Darnell, Hank Marr, George James, and William "Cozy" Cole. Rusty Bryant featured Nancy Wilson early in her career and his recording of "Night Train" topped the charts in 1952.

Whether discussing the arts, religion or government, there's no doubt that Columbus owes much to the contributions of its African American citizens.

SOURCES:

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