



The Civil Rights Movement in Pennsylvania

“They have a right to live the same as any other American. The violence last night was horrible. I hope it ends.” This is how a neighbor of a black family moving into Levittown, Bucks County, responded to protests by whites on August 15, 1957. The Levittown incident resurrected Pennsylvania’s long history of racial discrimination; an issue not confined to the American South.

Despite Pennsylvania’s Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 abolishing slavery, society in the Quaker-founded Commonwealth remained deeply divided racially and ethnically throughout its history. In one example free blacks were prohibited from worshipping with white Methodists. Richard Allen, therefore, founded Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1794 in Philadelphia. It was the first of many all-black institutions created as a response to racial discrimination. The Keystone State’s concern with civil rights fostered the growth of the Underground Railroad. Pennsylvania’s legisla-

ture passed a law in 1820 to protect free blacks from kidnapping by slave catchers and in 1826 and 1847 giving legal protection to fugitive slaves. The state legislature, in the early nineteenth century, became the target of African Americans’ petitions for the right to vote. These petitions, along with one African American’s attempt to vote in Luzerne County, unfortunately culminated in the Commonwealth officially disenfranchising blacks in 1838. The right to vote was not restored to blacks until the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870. Women, however, would not be enfranchised until the twentieth century. Despite having the right to participate in the electoral process, African Americans continued to face discrimination and even violence in polling places. Philadelphia educator Octavius Catto was shot on his way to cast his ballot in 1872.

African Americans did not have access to equal education either. In May 1881, Elias H. Allen, a Meadville black man, sued to have his children

admitted to a white grammar school in their neighborhood. The Crawford County judge agreed with Allen that the 1854 Pennsylvania school segregation law, requiring “separate but equal” schools for black and white children, violated the Fourteenth Amendment. Although Pennsylvania outlawed school segregation in 1881, the legislation unfortunately, did not end *de facto* segregation.

The 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* heralded the beginning of the “Jim Crow” era not only in the South but in Pennsylvania as well. In the case *Commonwealth of Pennsylvania v. George*, for example, Athens George, owner of Harrisburg’s Victoria Theater was found guilty of racial discrimination in Dauphin County court. George appealed the decision to the state supreme court, which reversed the lower court ruling. Pennsylvania subscribed to the spirit of Jim Crow when its high court ruled that “the law dealt only with the

admission of blacks to public places, and not the accommodations for them, once inside.” The policy was not reversed until 1935 when the Commonwealth enacted a statute banning discrimination in public places.

The contemporary civil rights era began with the 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education*, Topeka, Kansas. It put an end to the “separate but equal” doctrine in education and other areas of American life. The following year Pennsylvania became one of the first states to enact a Fair Employment Practices Act and to establish Fair Employment Practice Commission (FEPC). The new law, signed by Governor George M. Leader, was over twenty years in the making and prohibited “practices of discrimination in employment because of race, color, religious creed, ancestry, age, or national origin.” Its main support came from a coalition of Democrats, moderate Republicans, African Americans, Jews, labor unions, and community-based fair employment advocates. In 1961 the act was amended to prohibit discrimination in schools, public accommodations and housing and FEPC became the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission. The amendment was precipitated by various cases of housing discrimination in Pennsylvania. The Levittown case was one of the earliest and most publicized of these cases. The *New York Times* interviewed the black homeowner, William Edward Myers Jr.:



William and Daisy Myers experienced weeks of violent harassment when they moved to Levittown. Urban Archives, Temple University (right) and Library of Congress (below). ▼ Photo by Charlotte Brooks



I knew all the reaction wouldn't be favorable. I expected trouble, but I never thought it would be so bad. I don't believe these demonstrations represent the true feelings of the people of Levittown . . . We've had some weak moments but we've never been near the point of packing up and clearing out . . . We are church-going, respectable people. We just want a nice neighborhood in which to raise our family and enjoy life.

Similar scenarios in western Pennsylvania in 1957 and 1958 caused the Pittsburgh city council to pass a fair housing ordinance. Other Pennsylvania cities soon passed similar laws. The Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, charged with enforcing the Commonwealth's civil rights laws, heard many charges of housing discrimination.



Martin Luther King Jr. and Emanuel C. Wright celebrate National Freedom Day at the Liberty Bell, 1959. Urban Archives, Temple University

By 1960 the national civil rights movement was in full stride as numerous “sit-ins” were staged in places like Greensboro, North Carolina, Nashville, Tennessee, and Tallahassee, Florida. The purpose of the sit-ins was to open up public places such as drugstores, theaters, and public recreation venues to all races. Such discrimination was common in Pennsylvania although the battle against it was fought not through sit-ins but in the courts. In a 1957 case in Pittsburgh, a judge ruled in favor of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) against the Lexington Roller Rink. The judge declared that the skating rink was pretending to be “in fact, a [private] club . . . to deny

Negroes admission.” In June 1962, the owner of the Leopard Skating Rink in Chester was found guilty of racial discrimination. Similar cases were heard involving public swimming pools and in 1963, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court said that no person could be turned away from a public swimming pool masquerading as a private club.

Despite statutory remedies banning discrimination, problems continued. In 1963 the Philadelphia NAACP protested the fact that construction crews, building a school in the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood, were not integrated. The pickets and demonstrations by both white and blacks resulted in bloody confrontations with the Philadelphia

police prompting President John F. Kennedy to issue an executive order cutting off federal funds to employers who discriminated. During this same time, the black community in Erie held a rally in downtown Erie's Perry Square to demand an end to job discrimination.

In May 1963, the NAACP began picketing a Chester school because of segregation and soon other groups such as the Chester "Committee for Freedom Now," and the Philadelphia NAACP joined the protestors. In March 1964, less than a year before his death, Malcolm X attended a school board meeting in Chester. The following month, at least 104 people were arrested for demonstrating in Chester and the city was so tense that Pennsylvania Governor Bill Scranton visited to calm citizens. Finally the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission and the Chester school board agreed to desegregate the Chester schools.

In Philadelphia, another school became the target of picketing and national media attention. Beginning in 1965, Cecil B. Moore, Philadelphia NAACP chapter president, led the picketing of Girard College, a school for white orphan boys. With daily NAACP demonstrations, Girard College became a focus of national media attention. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. came to Philadelphia to address the protesters. Father Paul Washington, an African American minister from Philadelphia recalls those days in his autobiography:

From May 1 to December 17, 1965, there were daily demonstrations outside the massive Girard College wall, a structure that became a perfect symbol of continuing segregation and exclusion in our city. Cecil B. Moore, the flamboyant, cigar-smoking criminal lawyer who was president of the Philadelphia Branch of the NAACP, led the marches, assisted chiefly by young people like "Freedom George," "Freedom Smitty" "Freedom Frank," Mary Richardson, Dwight Campbell, and a long list of others whom I came to know and

love over the years. A North Philadelphia street gang called the Moroccos also participated; delighting in running along the wall, shouting that they would go over it. Philadelphia police responded brutally at times, on one occasion knocking out Freedom George's front teeth.

But the clergy were present, too, often organized for picket duty by the Rev. Layton Zimmer, who was on Bishop DeWitt's staff as urban missionary. America's best known clergyman, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., put in an appearance in August even though Cecil Moore had told him to stay out of town. What need did Cecil or "Cecil's people" have of outside assistance? Moore relented and joined King on a flatbed truck when he proclaimed, as only Martin Luther King could, that the walls of segregation would come tumbling down. I took my turn in the marches and pickets, and was proud indeed of my bishop, who resisted great opposition from white clergy and laity who thought that "wills are sacred and inviolable."



In 1948 marchers in downtown Pittsburgh protested discrimination at the Highland Park Pool. Photo by Charles "Teenie" Harris, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

After numerous incidents of violence involving both demonstrators and police, the Philadelphia NAACP agreed to call off its picketing of Girard College in December 1965. The civil rights group then successfully pursued the case through state and federal courts to the United States Supreme Court. In 1968, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the Girard College case that Girard and other Pennsylvania schools must desegregate.

In 1964 President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, the most comprehensive national civil rights bill passed to date. Civil rights leaders concentrated attention on insuring compliance with federal law which banned discrimination. Among these leaders were prominent Pennsylvanians including Kennedy Administration official and later U.S. Senator Harris Wofford and civil rights activist Bayard Rustin. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, while aimed specifically at Southern states, won the support of several public officials in the Keystone State including former Governor David Lawrence who served as head of the President's Committee on Equal Housing and Opportunity under President John F. Kennedy. The 1965 Voting Rights Act resulted in a surge of African American voting registration in Pennsylvania, especially among young people.

Bayard Rustin (left), civil rights activist and organizer of the 1963 March on Washington meets with Martin Luther King Jr. Photo by Bert Andrews, courtesy of Bayard Rustin Fund.

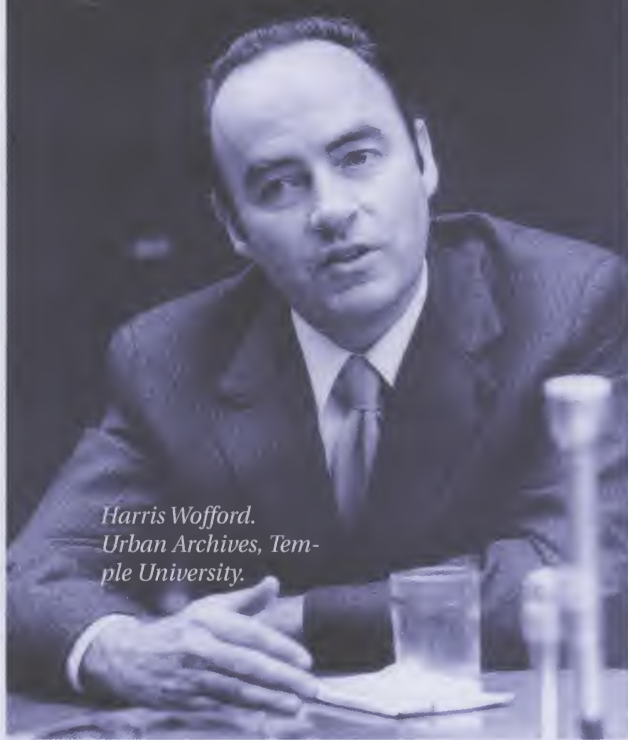


The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 brought violence to some Pennsylvania communities such as Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. To some the non-violence movement exemplified by Dr. King, died with his death; some turned to radical leaders such as Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panthers to promote social change. Others led continued integration efforts. Pennsylvanians leaders such as Reverend Leroy Patrick, K. LeRoy Irviss, Daisy Lampkin, C. Delores Tucker and others were at the forefront of integration efforts in government, public accommodations, and public places such as swimming pools, department stores, theaters, and schools. By the 1970s and 1980s increased participation of minorities in politics resulted in the election of black mayors such as Wilson Goode of Philadelphia and Mrs. Willie Mae Leake of Chester; and prominent black state legislators such as David Richardson of Philadelphia.

Public policy continued to evolve to embrace civil rights through the remainder of the twentieth century. In 1974 the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act was amended to ban discrimination based on handicap or disability. That same year six Pennsylvania steel companies and the United Steelworkers of America entered into a landmark consent decree with the federal government that recognized endemic racial discrimination in the hiring and promotion of blacks and Hispanics. In addition to cash settlements, a program was established to hire and promote previously discriminated-against workers, including women. For the first time in American history, a major industry and labor union recognized and worked to address discriminatory past practices.

In 1980 Governor Richard Thornburgh signed another amendment to the Human Relations Act prohibiting employers from discriminating against job seekers who held a general educational development (GED) certificate rather than a high school diploma. And, in 1987 Governor Robert P. Casey signed an executive order creating the Office of Minority and Women Business Enterprise (OMBWE) to ensure that qualified minority-owned businesses receive a more equitable share of Commonwealth-awarded contracts.

In the latter part of the twentieth century Pennsylvania communities witnessed the



Harris Wofford.
Urban Archives, Temple University.

immigration of more people of Asian and Hispanic origin or descent. Population changes have resulted in more efforts to protect the rights of Pennsylvanians of all national origin. The Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission now monitors compliance not only of racial equality but for victims of sexual harassment and persons discriminated against because of age, religion, national origin, or disability. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people are not covered under the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act but are protected by ordinances in nine Pennsylvania communities: York, Harrisburg, State College, Erie County, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Lancaster, Allentown, and New Hope. Organizations representing these groups are currently seeking to

amend the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act to include such protections. Pennsylvania has come a long way in extending civil rights to its citizens. Yet more remains to be done to ensure the rights of *all* Pennsylvanians.

Text by
Eric Ledell Smith and Kenneth C. Wolensky

FOR FURTHER READING

- Cashman, Sean Dennis. *African Americans and the Quest for Civil Rights, 1900–1900*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1991.
- Collier-Thomas, Bettye and V. P. Franklin. *A Chronology of the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. and in Philadelphia 1954–1975*. Philadelphia: Packard Press, 1994.
- Dickerson, Dennis C. *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875–1980*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1986.
- Goode, W. Wilson with Joann Stevens. *In Goode Faith*. Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1992.
- Harris, Richard E. *Politics and Prejudice: A History of Chester, Pa. Negroes*. Apache Junction, Arizona: Relmo Publishers, 1991.
- Washington, Father Paul M. with David Mcl. Gracie. *Other Sheep Have I: The Autobiography of Father Paul M. Washington*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.
- Wofford, Harris. *Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980.

To order additional copies of this leaflet, or to receive a list of other Historic Pennsylvania Leaflets and ordering information, write: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Publications Program, Keystone Building, 400 North St., Harrisburg, PA 17120-0053, or call (717) 783-2618 or (800) 747-7790. Persons who are deaf, hard of hearing, or speech impaired who wish to contact a hearing person via Text Telephone may use the PA Relay Center at (800) 654-5984.

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
Edward G. Rendell, Governor

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL AND MUSEUM COMMISSION
Wayne S. Spilove, Chairman
Barbara Franco, Executive Director

Copyright © 2004 Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
www.phmc.state.pa.us