

THROUGH THE YEARS

AFRICAN - AMERICAN HISTORY IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

FALL 2002/WINTER 2003

Our Stories: Reflections by Doris Hoskins



Doris with parents & family

Growing up in Urbana, Champaign County, was a rural experience as we had no paved streets, no street lights - just brick sidewalks and our homes lacked many of the in-house conveniences taken for granted today; however, we had family, neighbors and friends who made us a close-knit community (neighborhood). As children, we played together, enjoyed meals at our neighbors' houses, and shared and listened to stories from our grandparents. Through this association, we grew to know who we were as children; learned to respect the wisdom given us by our elders; and from that, we also accepted the discipline given us by them.

Getting to know my family's neighbors and friends, I became very interested in their conversations about their childhood experiences and I began to store up my memories of what they had to say. This was the beginning, I believe, of my interest and enthusiasm about their history of themselves, our neighborhood and the community at large.

As a young girl, I attended Sunday school at many churches including the Morning Star Free-Will and Salem Baptist Churches and the Bethel A.M.E. Church. My mother and grandmother attended Salem Baptist Church. In high school I was a regular attendee at Sunday school at the Bethel A.M.E. Church because it was held in the

afternoons. Placement in a class was judged by your grade in school and since I was in high school (at age 12), I was in a class with college students. To me, this was quite a privilege, as I had to compete with them in discussing the Lesson for the day. On Sunday evenings at Salem Baptist Church, the B.Y.P.U., Baptist Young People's Union held a regular gathering for the young adults and this provided another opportunity to meet and associate with the young adults. I was very involved in music, playing the piano, and often appeared on programs as a soloist or accompanying a singer or the choir. These were very exciting and rewarding years because those experiences added to my personal growth and even though I didn't realize it at the time, I learned a lot about character development and the spirituality of the exposure.

As time went by and through the association with more and more friends and families, I seemed to broaden my perspective of what a community was all about - the people and places, streets, buildings, homes and vacant lots. After graduation from high school in 1928, I left the area to pursue a career, returning often to visit family and friends. Eleven years later, I returned with my husband and seven children. The neighborhood had not changed that much. Most or all of the people were still here, although older, still it was a



Doris' Children

close-knit community that had survived the Depression and was beginning to rebuild. I immediately got involved in the J. W. Hays P.T.A. as my older children were enrolled in the neighborhood school, and with that connection, I made many new friends and thus my interest in the families, in particular the children, was reborn. It was such an inspiration to see the families much as they were prior to my leaving as a young person and returning as an adult. It wasn't that difficult to adjust as I remembered fondly the wisdom of my grandmother and her friends who were still here in the neighborhood.

Then on that fateful day of December 7, 1941 - many sons and husbands from families in our communities of Champaign-Urbana were called or enlisted into the services. None of my sons were old enough to be drafted, so my family was left pretty much intact, but the sons and husbands of many of my peers were called. Our communities were blessed to have our loved ones return home with few casualties, but things began to change. Champaign-Urbana became more urban than rural - post-War low income housing developments came into being in areas that were cornfields; subdivisions were organized and built through the efforts of individuals who were my role models and



Morningstar Free Will Church

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mentors; more churches were founded; new streets were named, some old ones renamed; vacant lots became mini or regular parks in memory of someone I knew; and still my enthusiasm to remember remained the same.

Today as I drive through "my neighborhood" and reminisce about those who lived there and whose lives touched mine, I can't help but reflect on how they impacted my life with their contributions to the history of the African American experience in Champaign County. When I venture north on Goodwin past my old grade school, the J. W. Hays (now Dr. Martin Luther King) Elementary School, I wonder, *Who was Mr. J. W. Hays? Most everyone knows who Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was.* We come to the intersection of the new Eads at Lincoln, the former home of the Shelton Laundry business, then on to Ellis Drive which is the eastern end of the Dr. Ellis Subdivision, again – *Who was Dr. Ellis?* Soon I am at Bradley Avenue going west past the new Mount Olive Baptist Church, on to the entrance to Carver Park Subdivision, which includes the Frances Nelson Health Center. Both have quite a rich history. Crispus Attucks is the next subdivision that was organized and built by devoted and concerned citizens. *Who was Crispus Attucks?* Then there is the Douglass Park Area, which was founded in 1943. Many board mem-

bers, both African American and White, put their heart and soul into bringing about the development and construction of an area of recreation for the children and adults of the community. *Who are those people and what are their stories?* As I move along through the neighborhood and through the years, I pass by a new subdivision, the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Subdivision. As I ride through, I notice street signs with the names of my heroes – Foxwell, Holt, Nelson, Phillips. *Who they are? And what contributions did they make to the community at large? What interesting stories can be told about their families?* As I pass by Wesley Park - I remember that family - they too were my heroes – on to the Bridgewater Park. *Who were they?* They too are among my heroes and what stories can be told of their contributions! As I turn to come back home, I am reminded of two new schools in the community, Barkstall and Stratton, that were named for two outstanding community leaders. *Who are they? And what are their contributions to the community?* Finally as I return home, I pass the church of my adult years, St. Mary's Catholic Church and Mercy Hospital now Provena Covenant Medical Center.

In these beginning "reflections" of my communities of Champaign and Urbana, I

hope I have communicated my interest and passion for the history of the contributions of African Americans in Champaign County and how the residents remembered here have impacted my life and inspired me to want to work for the betterment of the community as well. I proudly share "our stories" – African American history in Champaign County from yesteryear to today and beyond – with you today. All of our children need to know this history – not just from my reflections however, but from any who were here from the beginning to those who came later and who are still coming today.

I urge you to take the time to locate these places and to find out more about these people. Talk to your parents, grandparents and neighbors. I plan to continue to share "our stories" with you in coming issues. History is an integral part of our lives and these stories should be shared. There IS so much to be told.

Doris Hoskins' contribution to and knowledge of the community was recognized by the Champaign County Board in 2002 with the creation of the Doris K. Hoskins Prestigious Community Service Award at the first countywide Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Celebration.



History is ALL Around You - Why not Visit these Places and Learn about these People?



Shelton Laundry Building, (now Bush Brothers), 1111 Eads, Urbana

After the stock market crash of 1929, many families found themselves in dire financial crisis. Seeking a means of support for her family, Arah Mae Shelton started bringing in laundry to her home. Beginning with a cast iron kettle and scrub board, she did the washings on the back porch. From this humble beginning in 1934, the Shelton Laundry grew to a state of the art business spanning more than five decades. *For more information, see Through The Years newsletter Spring/Summer 2000.*



Dr. Ellis Subdivision, northwest of the former Shelton Laundry Building, Urbana

Dr. Harry D. Ellis was a prominent Champaign physician with offices

on North Walnut Street in Champaign. A veteran of WWI, he served in the 37th infantry regiment, the most decorated regiment of the war. He was a charter member of the William F. Earnest American Legion Post 559. Active in community affairs, Dr. Ellis served as president of the Frederick Douglass Civic League and treasurer of the committee that raised funds for the Douglass Park Community Center. He also served on the Advisory Committee of the Center.



Carver Park Subdivision, north off of Bradley Avenue, Champaign

Charles Phillips was a grandson of David Johnson, an ex-slave, who came here after the Civil

War and was one of the founders of the Second Baptist Church, now Salem Baptist, in Champaign. Deeply involved in community activities, Mr. Phillips was a fore-runner in promoting low cost housing at Carver Park, Burch Village, Dunbar Court, and Attucks Place, from tar paper shacks to decent housing. He was active in the Boy Scout program through Arrowhead Council and Troop 11 for 25 years. He was appointed a member of the Champaign Housing Commission and served as honorary vice president of the Champaign County Urban League. He also served on the board of the Frances Nelson Health Center.



**Frances Nelson
Health Center,
Carver Park Subdi-
vision, 1306 Carver
Drive**

Although unschooled in social work, Frances

Nelson became so well known for her work with homeless black children in need that the Optimist Club built a children's home for her in Carver Park. She lived at the home in Carver Park as supervisor of the children from the time it opened until her retirement. Later the building was renovated and occupied by the Health Center.



**Bridgewater Park,
corner of Bradley and
Market Streets,
Champaign**

In 1939, the City of Champaign created the Department of Recreation to replace the

W.P.A. programs and Erma Bridgewater became Director of the program at Douglass Center. She was later employed as Relocation Officer for the Urban Renewal Program and named Housing Specialist for the Community Development Program. She served on various boards and committees through the years and she is a charter member of the local chapters of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and the National Council of Negro Women. Bridgewater Park in Champaign was dedicated in her honor on July 8, 1992.



Barkstall Elementary School, 2201 Hallbeck, Champaign

Vernon L. Barkstall was the Director of The Urban League of Champaign County for 28 years. He served on the founding committees of the Don Moyer Boys and Girls Club, Champaign County Opportunities Industrialization Center, and the Frances Nelson Health Center. He was a board member of the Concerned Citizens for a Better Neighborhood, charter board member of the Champaign County Chamber of Commerce, board

member and past Vice President of the Champaign-Urbana Convention and Visitors Bureau. He was a long-time member of the NAACP and a member of the American Legion Post 559 of Champaign. Mr. Barkstall was a senior-active member of Champaign Rotary and was a Paul Harris Fellow. He was also a member of the Illinois Community Action Association.



**Wesley Park, north
of Martin Luther
King Subdivision,
Champaign**

In 1946, Odelia Wesley began teaching first grade at

Lawhead Elementary School and in 1951, she moved to Washington Elementary School. She was named Principal of Washington Elementary in 1954. Ms. Wesley served on the Board of Directors of the Frances Nelson Health Center; was recognized by the Delta Sigma Theta sorority for her literacy work; and was recognized by Parkland College for her outstanding services to the Program for the Long Living. In 1970, Wesley Park in Champaign was dedicated in her honor.



**Stratton Elementary School, 902 N.
Randolph, Champaign**

During his career with the Champaign Unit 4 School District, Kenneth Stratton served as both a teacher and an administrator. He served as president of the Champaign Education Association as well. Mr. Stratton was a member of the William F.

Earnest American Legion Post 559; served on the Board of Directors of United Way and the Frances Nelson Health Center. He was a charter member of the Don Moyer Boys Club, and the Champaign County Urban League. Mr. Stratton was active in the civil rights movement; was a member of the Black Coalition for Equal Opportunity Employment and helped organize for integration in the Champaign school system, Champaign housing, and the hiring practices in the downtown Champaign stores and at Burnham Hospital. In 1961, Stratton was elected the first black Councilman in the City of Champaign.

Once again I urge you to take the time to locate these places and to find out more about these people.

More importantly, we would love to hear your neighborhood stories!
Send your stories to Through The Years, Early American Museum, P.O. Box 1040, Mahomet, IL 61853.

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In Remembrance

It is with great sadness that we share the loss of a piece of our own history with the death of Carrie Pope Banks, in August of 2002. A member of the African American History Committee, Carrie's involvement began with the initial meeting at the Early American Museum in 1992.

Born in Champaign, the daughter of Cecil and Carrie Alice Lee Pope, Carrie attended Gregory School, Champaign Junior High (now Central) and Champaign Senior High (now Edison Middle School). She attended the University of Illinois for two years. She married Nathaniel Banks on June 2, 1946. To this union was born three children: Nathaniel C., Deborah and David Banks. Carrie was a stay-at-home Mom until 1962 when her children were at an age that she felt she could work outside the home. She started her career with Illinois Power Company in 1962 and retired in 1987 after 25 years of service. As a member of the Bethel A.M.E. Church, Carrie was active in the Choir, the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Lay Organization and the Lou Anna Riley Missionary Society. She was also a member of the Deborah Chapter #27, Order of Eastern Star which was founded by her grandmother Louetta Smith Lee.

African-American History: Today and Tomorrow

The lifeline of any newsletter is the reaction of its readers. Please help us spread the word! Xerox and share this newsletter with others. Send your comments c/o Early American Museum, P.O. Box 1040, Mahomet, IL 61853 or phone 217-586-2612. If you would like to be included on our mailing list, please call 217-586-2612. More importantly, share in our mission by writing and sharing your reflections of our local history. We need YOU!

The Through the Years newsletter is a publication on Champaign County African American history and the result of significant support from community volunteers and donations by local businesses to the Early American Museum, Champaign County Forest Preserve District. Co-Editors: Cheryl Kennedy and Doris Hoskins.

Visit our website at:
www.earlyamericanmuseum.org

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Dear Readers,

Both Doris and I would like to thank you all for your patience. This newsletter has been a long time coming due to a number of complications during the final months of 2002. You will note this newsletter is a 2002-2003 issue and we do hope to get on track with two additional publications this year. As with every newsletter in the past, we urge you to share in our mission by writing to us and sharing your reflections of life in this area – enabling us to then share **your** story with the community as well.

We would also like to take this opportunity to encourage you to note an upcoming program at the Early American Museum on your calendar. Glennette Tilley Turner, author of *The Underground Railroad in Illinois*, is scheduled to share findings from this extensive research on Saturday, April 26th from 2:00-3:00 p.m. Ms. Tilley Turner's research includes not only routes traveled but organizations that assisted in this effort as well. In her book, she reveals she discovered that Illinois had a significant impact on the Underground Railroad, larger issues related to slavery, and ultimately on the Civil War.

Glennette Tilley Turner served on the nine member National Park Service Underground Railroad Advisory Committee. She has written articles on the subject for publications of the National Parks and Conservation Association, The Illinois State Library, and the Illinois Bureau of Tourism; and she has been interviewed on C-SPAN and other cable and network television programs.

Teachers: A workshop is scheduled to run from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. preceding this lecture. Attending both will earn you 4½ hours CPDU credit.

Sincerely,

Doris K. Haskins
Cheryl L. Kennedy