

# THROUGH THE YEARS

BLACK HISTORY IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

SPRING 1995

## BLACKS IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY, 1865-1970

Since emancipation, Blacks in Champaign County have experienced a rich and interesting history. In order to study and understand their history, it is important to know how and why the bulk of the Black population arrived during this 100 year period. The first wave arrived after Blacks were granted their freedom in 1865. The immediate postbellum period saw many Blacks migrating to different sections of the country, hoping to provide better lives for their families. Later, in the early twentieth century, Blacks migrated from border and southern states (primarily Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Indiana, Mississippi and Georgia) seeking jobs in the industrialized northern society.

Since the primary mode of travel was by train, and Champaign County was located along major railway routes, both major migrations resulted in Blacks deciding to reside in Champaign County. To illustrate the change in the number of Blacks in Champaign County, the census shows that the "first wave" of Black migration (late 1860's through 1880) resulted in an increase from 48 Blacks in 1860 to 233 in 1870; and 462 by 1880. Further, from 1900 to 1920, the number of Blacks in Champaign County tripled from 551 to 1,620.



As significant numbers of Blacks arrived in Champaign County, they began to build and develop their own institutions (i.e. churches, businesses, social groups, etc.). This happened primarily for two reasons. First, many of the established institutions in Champaign County excluded Blacks from joining them. Second, Blacks migrated to establish economic and social freedom; thus, separate institutions were not necessarily problematic for Blacks in Champaign County.

The church was a primary institution for Blacks to achieve social independence and stability. The two earliest churches in Champaign County were Bethel A.M.E. Church and Salem Baptist Church.

Another institution established for the social welfare of Champaign County Blacks was Douglass Community Center. Dedicated on September 23,



1945, the center was founded in response to social segregation and inadequate recreational facilities in the Black community.

Economically, Blacks in Champaign County were more restricted. Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Blacks were limited mostly to railroad, domestic, and day labor. However, some Blacks were successful in establishing their own businesses and owning their own farms. For example, George W. Smith of Raymond Township purchased 80 acres of land around 1876, and eventually owned 437 acres. Blacks also established smaller scale businesses such as barbershops, stores, and cleaners.

The significant contributions the Black community has made to the development of Champaign County is evident in all aspects of life. The diversity that Champaign-Urbana is famous for can be attributed in great part to its Black history. From business, to the arts, to religion the African-American heritage is alive and thriving.

## BUSINESS

Although Blacks in Champaign County have always experienced limited economic opportunities, an entrepreneurial spirit continued to surface, especially at the turn of the century and around World War II. The first decade has been described as the "period of industrial advancement," and as a result, Blacks entered into manufacturing jobs. World War II brought about more industrial and technological advancement, and also a shortage of available labor; thus Blacks were given a chance in jobs previously closed to them. Compared to the conditions that they had grown accustomed to, both of these eras were opportune times for Blacks to open businesses. Some Blacks were beginning to secure better paying jobs, resulting into more expendable income in Champaign County's Black communities.

Although the economic conditions of some Blacks improved during these periods, the overall

economic development of Champaign County's Black communities was stagnant when compared to white communities. Thus, for Blacks who did own and operate businesses, the tenure was usually short or seasonal. Further, most of the businesses were run out of homes or places with low overhead costs. For example, some Black entrepreneurs operated fruit and food stands in the summer while others operated corner stores, laundries, and barber-shops out of their homes.

One example of a longlasting Black-owned business that started in the first third of the twentieth century was Van's Barber Shop. Started in 1937, Van's original owner, Mr. Van Thompson, remained actively involved in the barbershop well into the 1970's. Although he received only an eighth grade education and had no formal barber training, Mr. Thompson's shop prospered for many years in the basement of a building located at 29 Main Street.

Another Black owned business with a long tenure was Tinsley's

cleaners. Opening in 1951, Tinsley's Cleaners was owned and operated by Mr. and Mrs. Roscoe Tinsley. Some of the services offered were cleaning, pressing, and alterations. The cleaners also provided a pickup and delivery service to it customers. Tinsley's Cleaners was in business until it closed its doors in the early 1970s.

## THE FAMILY

The rich heritage and tradition of Champaign County Blacks expands beyond the boundaries of Champaign and Urbana. As far back as the postbellum period (after the Civil War), Blacks have been a significant part of Champaign County's development. An example of a Black family achieving high status before the 1900s is Broadland's Smith family. More than one hundred years ago, George Smith, an escaped slave from Tennessee, migrated to central Illinois to become one of the first Black landowners in the state. Starting with the purchase of eighty acres in 1876, Smith increased his land holdings to four hundred thirty seven acres by the early 1900s.

The amount and value of the Smith land continued to grow throughout the early 1900s. After his death, his youngest son, John Smith, took over the farm and increased the land holdings to approximately six hundred acres. John Smith maintained the farm for about forty years before retiring and passing it on to his son Charles in the 1950s. Charles managed the farm until his death in 1968. Despite the farm's activity declining after the death of Charles, the last remaining ancestors of George Smith decided to keep the property in the family. The family is not only committed to keeping the farm, but also sharing the accomplishments of their history with young people in hopes of keeping George Smith's tremendous achievements alive.

## DOUGLASS COMMUNITY CENTER

Blacks in Champaign County not only suffered economic restriction, but experienced social segregation as well. In response to having separate and inadequate communal facilities for Champaign-Urbana Blacks, the Douglass

Community Center was founded in the early 1930s. Named after Frederick Douglass, the Center was known as the "Neighborhood House" until the early 1940s. With

the help of public funds and private donations, a new building was built in 1945. Since beginning in the 1930s, the Douglass Community Center has not only served as a place for recreational activities, but also as a structural reminder of Champaign-Urbana Black community unity.



Ground breaking ceremony November 1944

# THE CHURCH

Throughout history, the church has served as a political, social, and spiritual home for Blacks in the United States. Certainly this was the case for Champaign County Black communities. Champaign County established a rich and prosperous church community in the second half of the 1800s, and continued to grow and develop with the addition of more churches throughout the 1900s. Two of the earliest predominately Black churches founded in Champaign County were Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Salem Baptist Church.

The earliest record of the founding of Bethel A.M.E. Church dates back to the Civil War period of 1863-64. In the church's beginning, the members pooled together funds to build a small building on Park Avenue. About a decade later (1877), the church purchased some property and moved the church. Growth in membership of the church was gradual, resulting in the building of a new church in 1892. As this new church became older and the membership continued to increase, it was decided in the 1940s that Bethel would be rebuilt. After a long and committed effort, a new and improved Bethel was dedicated in 1959. Bethel has undergone considerable physical change since 1959, but more importantly, the church continued to serve the many needs of its members and the overall Champaign County Black community. For example, over the years Bethel established a church orchestra, library, a park where children could play, and a meeting place for university students.

The present-day church known as Salem Baptist was founded around 1867 under the name of Second Baptist Church. Although the first church burned down in



Bethel A.M.E.



Salem Baptist Church

the 1870s, its members demonstrated their commitment to serve by using a rented facility until a new church was built on East Clark Street in Champaign.

The church remained Second Baptist until a name change to Salem Baptist Church occurred at the beginning of the 1900s. Also during this time a new church was erected at 500 East Park Street. Although the

name and building changed, the church kept its religious vision by serving the needs of its members and those outside of the church. The church's continual growth and development reached an apex with the building of an education annex in the late 1950s.

While Bethel and Salem were two of the earliest, some churches such as Canaan Missionary Baptist Church, Jericho Missionary Baptist Church, Morningstar Freewill Baptist Church, Mount Olive Baptist Church, New Freewill Baptist Church, and St. Luke's CME, Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church and Church of The Living God have all contributed to the growth and development of the Champaign County Black communities.

## TRIVIA TIME

Trivia Question: Can you name the members of the 1957 Champaign Eagles Baseball team? Answers are on the right.



Left to right:  
 Fred Now,  
 Charles Ross,  
 St. Roberts,  
 Lavender, James,  
 Lee, Jim,  
 Franklin,  
 Brian Jordan,  
 Robert Gordon,  
 Warren Jackson,  
 Manager,  
 Reggie Now,  
 Edw. L. Now, Sr.,  
 Fred, Jr.,  
 Gordon, George,  
 Raymond J.,  
 Bill Johnson,  
 Willie,  
 Manager,  
 From left to right:  
 Charles,  
 Gordon, Terry,  
 Edw. L. Now,  
 Fred, Jr.

## ANNUAL AFRICAN-AMERICAN EVENTS

- C-U Day - second Saturday in August
- Martin Luther King Celebration - Sunday on or before his birthday (January 15)
- Douglass Senior Style Show - fourth Sunday in September
- Cotillion - second week in April
- Black Read In - first Sunday in February
- SummerFest - Saturday, June 17 this year
- Cotton Club - held in February (this year Feb. 25)
- Black Expo WBCP - first weekend in April
- Black Dollars - Labor Day weekend

## WHO WAS THE FIRST IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY?

Black doctor, Black dentist, Black teacher, Black barber, Black business, Black city councilman, Black U of I student, Black hairdresser.

We are interested in gathering information on "firsts" in the Black history

of Champaign County. If you have any information you would like to share with the Black History Committee, please contact Barbara McGee at the Douglass Annex, 217-398-2572.

## WHO WE ARE...

The Champaign County Black History Committee, a volunteer committee under the sponsorship of the Early American Museum and the Champaign Park District, is compiling a historical pamphlet tracing African-American history in Champaign County. It is the committee's mission to gather, chronicle and preserve the heritage that has been such an integral part of the establishment and growth of Champaign County. There is information that needs to be recorded before it is lost forever. We are asking your help. We are interested in pictures, documents, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, family chronicles - whatever you have that would help trace the Black community in Champaign County from 1865 (or before) to 1970.

Oral histories can also play an extremely important part in establishing a link to the past. Please help us pass on your history to the children so it will never be forgotten. If you have information you would like to share with the committee, please contact Barbara McGee at the Douglass Annex, 217-398-2572.

The Champaign-Urbana Convention & Visitors Bureau is proud to produce the first Through the Years newsletter. It is of vital importance to preserve our past for future generations. This is just a small beginning. We look forward to continued involvement with the Champaign County Black History Committee. The Convention & Visitors Bureau is committed to this project and we hope you will feel as strongly as we that this committee is doing an invaluable service to the community. But, they can't do it alone - they need your help.

We would like to thank everyone who volunteered their time to make this newsletter a reality. A special thanks must go to Russ Wigginton who devoted many hours of research for this project. It is much appreciated. 02-29-95-1500



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