

A Brief Overview of Muncie's Early African American Residents

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It's not uncommon to find contemporary views that Northern states of the Union were hospitable to African Americans before, during, and after the Civil War. Even a cursory inquiry into the historical record suggests otherwise. The states north of the Mason-Dixon line, including Indiana, had active abolitionists working to help freedom seekers escape the bonds of southern slavery through the Underground Railroad. However, very few Northerners opposed slavery because of moral principles. It common to find early references suggesting that Northerners were flat-out hostile to those of African descent. Northern farmers, who worked themselves on small homestead plots of land in places like Indiana, hated the institution of slavery primarily because their products simply could not compete on the market with what was produced by slaves in enormous Southern plantations. For many Northerners, the issue of slavery was more about economics and less about human rights.

Indiana was no different. In 1831, the state legislature passed an exclusion law, which limited the right for those of African descent to settle in Indiana. When Indiana revised the constitution in 1851, Section 1 of Article 16 "Negroes and Mulattoes" reaffirms the original 1831 law bluntly: "No negro or mulatto shall come into or settle in the State, after the adoption of this Constitution." Section 2 voided all contracts with those of African descent and instituted a fine for whites that employed African Americans.

Nevertheless, free black men, women, and children settled in Indiana throughout the 19th century, albeit with significant hardship. In the Muncie area, it is likely that freemen of African descent had traveled through the Lenape villages around 1800. The Moravian Missionary diaries noted as such. The first *documented* African-Americans in Muncie who settled were members of the Edward and Maria Scott family. Edward was a barber and was originally from Virginia, having been born in 1810. Edward's extended family had slowly moved to east-central Indiana throughout the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s and settled as farmers. Edward and Maria had eight children, three of whom survived into adulthood. In the 1850s, around forty different African American families had moved to Muncie with the following surnames: Shoecraft, Hurdle, Evans, Collins, Jones, Williams, Roberts, Walker, Trimble, Poindexter, Baxter, Carey, Stokes, Artist, Sizemore, and Ferguson. African Americans engaged in similar trades as their white counterparts working as barbers, laborers, restaurant owners, blacksmiths, launderers, and teamsters.

According to Hurley Goodall's and J. Paul Mitchell's *A History of Negroes in Muncie*, Muncie's African American population was 187 in 1880. By 1900, the population grew to 739. In 1930, the number had doubled to 2,646 individuals, roughly 5.7% of the city's overall population. In 1950, 4,400 African-Americans appear on the census, another huge jump due in part to the

growing need of factory workers during the Second World War. By way of comparison, Muncie's 2015 African American population was listed at 7,655 - 10% of the total population. Historically, African Americans lived in all parts of the city, but primarily in neighborhoods on the east and south side.

Despite decades of racism, Muncie's black population has had a long history of creating vibrant social and religious organizations in the city. In 1868, prominent community leaders organized the African Methodist Episcopal Church of the City of Muncie, Indiana, with Jason Bundy as pastor. In 1880, the Garfield and Porter Club - Muncie's African American Republican club - invited Frederick Douglass to speak at the courthouse. The crowd was so large, the event had to be moved across the street to the Wysor Opera House. Along with several other churches, Muncie's African Americans formed a Masonic Lodge, a barber's union, baseball teams, and bands.

For those that are interested in learning more about Muncie's African American history, or an overview of recent decades, I encourage you to read *The Other Side of Middletown: Exploring Muncie's African American Community* and *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black*.

Bibliography

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