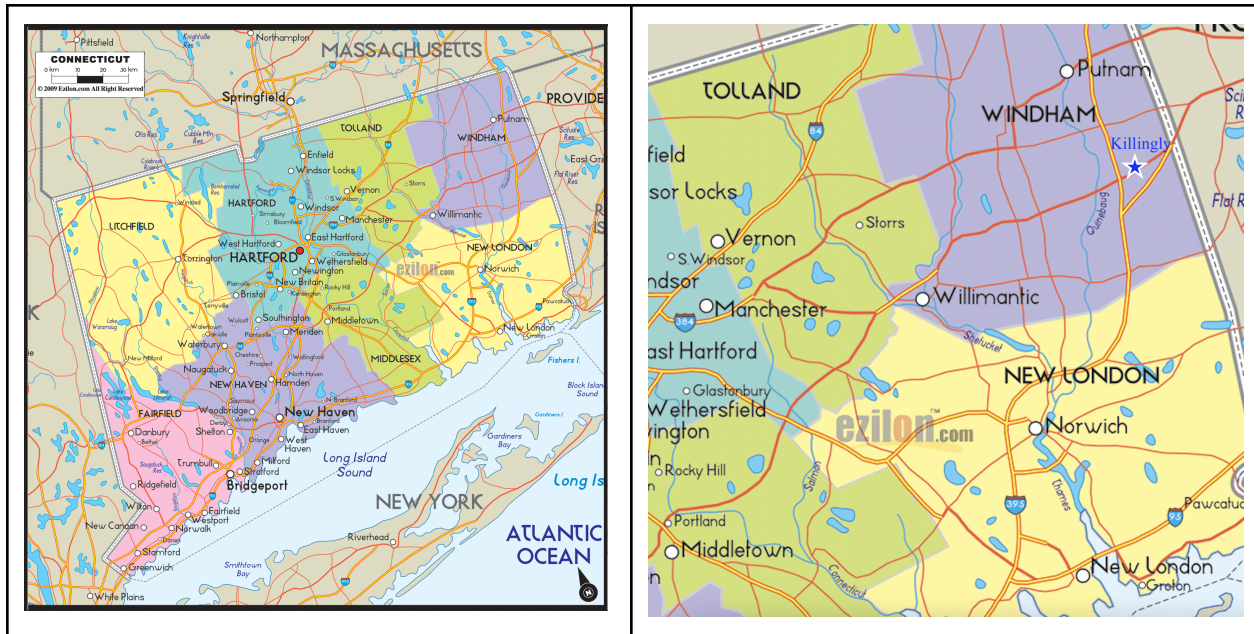


# Migration Lessons: Puerto Ricans and African Americans Come to Eastern Connecticut

You are going to look into the similarities and differences (compare and contrast) for the migration of two groups to eastern Connecticut, Puerto Ricans to Willimantic/Windham, Connecticut and African-Americans to Norwich, Connecticut. You will first consider why people migrate in general and why these two groups in particular migrated. You will then examine each group's experience in eastern Connecticut and conclude by presenting what you have discovered. As an additional activity you may separately compare and contrast the information you learned about the migration of these two groups with your own family or someone else you may know who migrated from elsewhere in the United States or immigrated from another country.



## PART 1 - Initiation and Background

**DISCUSS:** Why do people leave one place for another? How do their experiences in a new location affect them and those they have left behind? What accounts for groups who have migrated from one place having similar experiences to groups who migrated from a completely different location? Why might their experiences be different?

**Push Factors**—Factors that make you want to leave a place

<u>Economic factors:</u> Lack of employment Natural disasters (earthquakes, floods) Lack of food or shelter Lower standard of living	<u>Social Factors:</u> Lack of health care Lack of educational opportunities Lack of religious tolerance	<u>Political Factors:</u> Unfair legal system Disenfranchisement (Not being able to vote) or lack of governmental tolerance War and terrorism
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**Pull Factors**—Factors that draw you to live in a place

<u>Economic Factors:</u> Hope for better employment More money and food Better shelter Hope for family to have a higher standard of living	<u>Social Factors:</u> Encouragement from family and friends Better health care Better educational opportunities Religious tolerance	<u>Political Factors:</u> To gain protection under the law Right to vote and freedom from persecution Safety
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Source:

<https://geoalliance.asu.edu/sites/default/files/LessonFiles/GeoHistory/VonPriskImmigration/VonPriskImmigrationS.pdf>

**1898 - U.S. takes control of Puerto Rico (The History Channel)**

Only one year after Spain granted Puerto Rico self-rule, American troops raised the U.S. flag over the Caribbean nation, formalizing U.S. authority over the island's one million inhabitants.

In July 1898, near the end of the Spanish-American War, U.S. forces launched an invasion of Puerto Rico, the 108-mile-long, 40-mile-wide island that was one of Spain's two principal possessions in the Caribbean. With little resistance and only seven American deaths, U.S. troops were able to secure the island by mid August. After the signing of an armistice with Spain, the island was turned over to the U.S forces on October 18. U.S. General John R. Brooke became military governor. In December, the Treaty of Paris was signed, ending the Spanish-American War and officially approving the cession of Puerto Rico to the United States.

In the first three decades of its rule, the U.S. government made efforts to Americanize its new possession, including granting full U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917 and considering a measure that would make English the island's official language. However, during the 1930s, a nationalist movement led by the Popular Democratic Party won widespread support across the island, and further U.S. assimilation was successfully opposed. Beginning in 1948, Puerto Ricans could elect their own governor, and in 1952 the U.S. Congress approved a new Puerto Rican

constitution that made the island an autonomous U.S. commonwealth, with its citizens retaining American citizenship. The constitution was formally adopted by Puerto Rico on July 25, 1952.

Movements for Puerto Rican statehood, along with movements for Puerto Rican independence, have gained a growing number of supporters on the island. In a 2020 referendum on the island's status, a majority voted for statehood.

*Source: <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/u-s-takes-control-of-puerto-rico>*

### **African-Americans: The Great Migration (US National Archives)**

The Great Migration was one of the largest movements of people in United States history. Approximately six million Black people moved from the American South to Northern, Midwestern, and Western states roughly from the 1910s until the 1970s. The driving force behind the mass movement was to escape racial violence, pursue economic and educational opportunities, and obtain freedom from the oppression of Jim Crow.

The Great Migration is often broken into two phases, coinciding with the participation and effects of the United States in both World Wars. The First Great Migration (1910-1940) had Black southerners relocate to northern and midwestern cities including: New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburgh. When the war effort ramped up in 1917, more able bodied men were sent off to Europe to fight leaving their industrial jobs vacant. The labor supply was further strained with a decline in immigration from Europe and standing bans on peoples of color from other parts of the world. All of this afforded the opportunity for the Black population to be the labor supply in non-agricultural industries.

Although the migrants found better jobs and fled the South entrenched in Jim Crow, many African Americans faced injustices and difficulties after migrating. The Red Summer of 1919 was rooted in tensions and prejudice that arose from white people having to adjust to the demographic changes in their local communities. From World War I until World War II, it is estimated that about 2 million Black people left the South for other parts of the country.

World War II brought an expansion to the nation's defense industry and many more jobs for African Americans in other locales, again encouraging a massive migration that was active until the 1970s. During this period, more people moved North, and further west to California's major cities including Oakland, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, as well as Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington. Within twenty years of World War II, a further 3 million Black people migrated throughout the United States.

Black people who migrated during the second phase of the Great Migration were met with housing discrimination, as localities had started to implement restrictive covenants and redlining, which created segregated neighborhoods, but also served as a foundation for the existing racial disparities in wealth in the United States.

Records in this topic cover migratory information and trends captured by various branches and agencies of the government, including employment and housing. There are also records reflecting cultural and social aspects of the lives of those who participated and were impacted by the Great Migration.

*Source:*

*<https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration#:~:text=The%20Great%20Migration%20was%20one,the%201910s%20until%20the%201970s>*

## **PART 2 - Puerto Rican Migration: The Experience in Willimantic, Connecticut**

**Read** *Memories of Puerto Rican Migration*, Karen Ali, CT Explored, Summer 2023 (<https://www.ctexplored.org/memories-of-puerto-rican-migration/>) and answer the following questions based on the article. Be sure to include as many details as possible.

When did the migration of Puerto Ricans to Willimantic begin?

What were the pull factors that encouraged Puerto Ricans to migrate to Willimantic?

What challenges did migrants face in Willimantic (employment, housing, language, etc.)?

**View** In 2013 The Windham Textile and History Museum in the Willimantic section of Windham created an exhibit entitled “Latino Migration”. It was described as follows:

“In 1955, people from Puerto Rico and elsewhere in Latin America began coming to Willimantic seeking jobs, following family, and looking for a better way of life. By the beginning of the 21st century, Latinos comprised about a third of Willimantic’s population. Here is the story of that migration, told through four videos: religion, politics, history of labor migration, and culture. The videos were created by Eastern Connecticut State University and Professor Ricardo Perez to accompany an exhibit at the Mill Museum, and were funded by the ECSU Foundation.”

Source: <https://millmuseum.org/latino-migration-to-willimantic/>

Divide into small groups, view one of the four assigned videos and report back to the class. Your report must at least allow other students to answer the provided questions but additional information that you find important should also be provided.

Latino Migration Exhibit - Religion (<https://youtu.be/hGkkCNkQ47c>)

Why were churches helpful to migrants/immigrants?

How well did the existing Roman Catholic churches meet the needs of Latino migrants?

Latino Migration Exhibit - Politics (<https://youtu.be/UqKDt3hFp5w>)

By what measures are Latinos part of the fabric of Willimantic?

For Puerto Ricans, what were some issues that made their transition to mainland American political life challenging?

Why did Puerto Ricans develop a community organization for themselves?

How did Latinos eventually achieve a role in political life? What is holding Latinos back in participating?

What steps are suggested to get Latinos more engaged in Willimantic’s political life?

Latino Migration Exhibit - History of Labor Migration (<https://youtu.be/4l7y4LKSCGQ>)

Why were many people optimistic about the economic situation in Willimantic in the 1950s?

(The speaker uses the word “chimera” to predict that the optimism might have been unrealistic.)

Which particular industries drew Latinos, especially Puerto Ricans to Willimantic?

What did Puerto Ricans hope to gain by coming to Willimantic?

What two things were happening in Puerto Rico in the 1950s that prompted people to move from the island?

Which agricultural industry drew farm labor to Connecticut from Puerto Rico?

Why were many members of the Puerto Rican population of Willimantic forced to move from the downtown area in the 1960s and 1970s?

How did the closure of major employers in Willimantic affect the Puerto Rican community?

Latino Migration Exhibit - Culture (<https://youtu.be/E11cArDSfPw>)

From what regions and places in Puerto Rico did migrants to Willimantic mostly come from (also see the maps below)?

What were the differences between the Puerto Rican migrants based on their regions of origin?

Did the regional differences between Puerto Rican migrants have an effect on the community in Willimantic?

What activities were used by members of the Puerto Rican community in Willimantic to maintain their cultural identity in the 20th century?

How have cultural celebrations changed in the 21st century? What are some examples of those celebrations?

What event does the *Cinco de Mayo* celebration commemorate? What are some elements of the celebration?

Why are all these celebrations important to the Latino and broader community in Willimantic?



### **PART 3 - African-American Migration: Connecticut and Norwich, CT**

**Read** the article below, *Southern Blacks Transform Connecticut* by Eastern CT State University's Stacey Close in the fall 2013 edition of Connecticut Explored (<https://www.ctexplored.org/southern-blacks-transform-connecticut/>) to learn more about African-American migration to Connecticut. Use the information in this and the two news articles that follow to complete the chart indicating the similarities and differences between the Puerto Rican and African-American experiences in migrating to eastern Connecticut.

#### **The Norwich NAACP**

Source: <https://walknorwich.org/freedom-trail/>

In the early 1960's, Linwood Bland, New London Branch NAACP President, and Amanda Braboy of Norwich, gathered memberships to form the Norwich Branch NAACP after receiving discrimination complaints from Norwich citizens. Among the complaints received from Blacks was that an eatery on West Main Street would require Blacks to pay in advance for their meals and then would break the glasses they used in their presence.

On October 14, 1963, the Norwich Branch NAACP received its charter from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People with a total of 111 chartered members. Reverend Joseph Schneider, Minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church was the first President and meetings were held at the Evans Memorial AME Zion Church in Norwich.

The Norwich Branch NAACP has had several presidents since its inception, most notably Jacqueline D. Owens, the longest serving Branch President with a term of 30 years.

Since 1963, the Norwich Branch NAACP has advocated and worked tirelessly to address discrimination and inequities in the areas of housing, education, jobs, voting, healthcare and criminal justice. Their annual community celebrations like the Martin Luther King Jr. Luncheon, the Sweet Potato Festival and their Juneteenth Celebration bring members of the community together while celebrating unique aspects of African-American history, culture, and life in Norwich.

The Norwich Branch NAACP has partnered with the Norwich Historical Society, Norwich Area Clergy Association, the Greater Norwich Area Chamber of Commerce, Norwich Public Schools, Norwich Free Academy and United Community and Family Services to provide quality programs and services to the residents of the Greater Norwich Area.



Since 2007, the Norwich Branch NAACP has received seven First Place National NAACP Thalheimer Awards, the highest award an NAACP Branch can receive for its yearlong accomplishments.

## Lottie B. Scott legacy, dreams and all, preserved in paper

August 01, 2021 12:00 am • Last Updated: August 02, 2021 10:04 pm

By Elizabeth Regan, Day Staff Writer

[e.regan@theday.com](mailto:e.regan@theday.com)



Norwich — Lottie B. Scott has always been a dreamer.

That creativity and insight helped shape her rise from Longtown, S.C., farm girl to a host of leadership positions over more than half a century, including president of the Norwich Branch of the NAACP and chairman of the Backus Hospital board of trustees.

Now, the 84-year-old is donating to the University of Connecticut Library a legacy in paper that surprises even the visionary herself.

Rebecca Parmer, head of the UConn Library's archives and special collections, said the Lottie B. Scott collection includes personal history as well as letters, meeting minutes and newspaper clippings chronicling the Norwich Branch of the NAACP from the 1960s through the early 2010s. Other folders contain documents from her years with the state Commission on Human

Rights and Opportunities, her time with various organizations and boards, and mementos from a lifelong fascination with the arts.

The collection includes hundreds of pages, photos, binders and scrapbooks.

Scott, the eldest of eight children, was born in 1936 to Estelle Stone Bell and Joe Bell Jr. She said her mother taught them by example to work hard and keep praying.

Scott recalled being bedridden with rheumatic fever when she was 12 years old, at the same time her father became too ill to tend fields heavy with clay.

"My mother had to plow the fields," she said. "She was pregnant, but yet she had to plow."

There was little food in their house or anywhere else, she said. Not when they were poor and everyone around them was, too. The only thing they had to eat was a type of bread that scratched their throats.

"My mother said, 'keep praying, keep praying.' And we continued," she said.

Scott's youngest sister, the one still in her mother's belly while the fields were being plowed during that difficult season, grew up to become a lawyer.

"Our family accomplished dreams that we couldn't dream," Scott said.

A Norwich resident since 1957, she moved north with her son after a failed marriage. She said she made a conscious decision not to remain with a husband she felt was not treating her fairly. So she joined her father and others from South Carolina who had traded the overt racism of the South for a new home where she came to understand "all the tricks people do to discriminate against people."

Amid warnings that there were no jobs for a young Black woman in cities, Scott got her professional start at Norwich State Hospital as a clerk typist before she moved on to become a neighborhood resource worker with the state human rights commission around 1970. She worked there for 22 years, retiring as a regional manager.

Meanwhile, she built her reputation as an advocate for civil rights, education and the arts. In addition to her role as founding member and past president of the Norwich Branch of the NAACP, she served in the same capacities with the Norwich Arts Center. She has been a member of the Norwich Rotary Club for over 20 years and is a lifetime member of the Norwich Historical Society.

One of the strengths that helped establish her as a leader at the time, and which will preserve her legacy in perpetuity, was an affinity for recording history as it happened.

"I was a good secretary. I kept the notes well," she said. "I wrote and I wrote."

Her efforts at preserving history include her self-published memoir, "Deep South - Deep North: A Family's Journey," which came out in 2018.

Among Scott's many recognitions are the University of Connecticut Presidential Humanitarian Award, the Connecticut State Conference NAACP Branch W.E.B. Dubois Lifetime Achievement Award and the Eastern Chamber of Commerce Citizen of the Year Award.

### **Dreaming and talking**

Scott said the turning point in her civil rights activism occurred when she was a 16-year-old in desegregation-era South Carolina. She had just arrived back at school after an absence to find out that police had been threatening Black students with arrest for attending school.

She said the students, who had already identified her as a leader, told her they would have stoned the police if she had been there with them.

"Oh no," she recalled telling the other students, her voice emphatic. "Don't ever go and try to stone the police. You'll get killed."

It changed her life to know that people would listen to her, she said — "and how with one little rock, some of us could've been killed."

"So right then and there, I knew I had a voice and I was going to be careful about how I would use that voice," she said.

Shiela Hayes, the current Norwich Branch NAACP president, was 3 years old when she first met Scott. Hayes said her mother, and then Hayes herself, came to rely on Scott as a key figure when issues of race needed to be addressed in the city.

Hayes highlighted a conflict in the 1970s when local NAACP efforts to talk about changes at Norwich Free Academy were being rebuffed by the school. According to Hayes, Scott was instrumental in opening the lines of communication with an institution that had been closed off on conversations about race.

Scott, who called herself "outspoken" in times of conflict, said she finally had someone to talk with upon the arrival of the school's eighth headmaster, Joseph Levanto.

"Got a problem? Let's talk," she said, describing a philosophy shared by Levanto. "I think NFA and the NAACP have been talking ever since."

The Lottie B. Scott papers, which preserve written remnants of so many conversations on diversity over the years, will be invaluable now that the city has declared racism a public health crisis, Hayes said.

The Norwich City Council on July 19 approved a resolution to address the effects of racism in areas including hiring practices, access to health care, education, housing and city services. The resolution, proposed by Alderman Derell Wilson and co-sponsored by the council's four Democrats, calls for the formation of a health equity committee to work on the 13 action points listed in the resolution.

These are issues Scott has been talking about since the 1970s, according to Hayes. The papers will help the committee move forward with as much history and context as possible.

"It'll be critical that we don't keep reinventing the wheel," Hayes said.

She credited Scott for her foresight in donating the documents. She said there have been other leaders in the city, like 30-year Norwich Branch NAACP President Jacqueline Owens, who had many stories that departed with them.

"When (Owens) passed away all the sudden, a lot of her original work was not saved, or we don't know what happened to it. So we've lost a lot of that history," Hayes said.

### **Opportunity to create**

Parmer, the UConn archivist, said some folders in the Scott collection contain playbills, posters and other items from local cultural productions.

"She was especially interested when Black artists were performing," Parmer said.

Scott, whose home is decorated with paintings, drawings, photographs and sculptures from myriad cultures, said her tenure as president of the local NAACP branch included trips to theaters and museums with kids from the city.

"Playing basketball, doing all these other things are wonderful," she said. "But I find, in my opinion, the arts are a healing mechanism, an opportunity to create."

On one memorable trip, she brought a group of students to a performance of the multiracial Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. She said many of the children who had never seen a live show could not believe the dancers on the stage were real people.

"They were so thrilled," she said. "It's been one of my joys to be able to take these young people to an event, and they are so well behaved. Because they know if you don't behave, you ain't going on another trip."

More recently, Scott served as vice chairwoman of the city's Ellis Walter Ruley Committee, which culminated in 2018 with the dedication of a park in memory of the local African American folk artist whose colorful, dreamlike paintings defied his daily struggles with racism.

In 2014, she was honored by the Norwich Arts Center when it named its first jazz concert series "Miss Lottie's Jazz Cafe."

She laughed when asked if she was an artist herself.

"No," she said. "Just a dreamer."

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## Jacqueline Owens, who led Norwich NAACP chapter for decades, dies at 80

June 11, 2017 12:00 am • Last Updated: June 12, 2017 2:53 pm

Source:

<https://www.theday.com/local/20170611/jacqueline-owens-who-led-norwich-naacp-chapter-for-decades-dies-at-80/>



Norwich — Jacqueline Owens, the woman known to many as “Mother Owens” who oversaw the Norwich chapter of the NAACP as it grew from a handful of people to a group of national prominence, died over the weekend.

Owens, who retired in December after serving 30 years as president of the branch, was 80, according to Dianne Daniels, her successor as president of the chapter.

She grew up on a small town in Iowa, later lived in Milwaukee, and married and moved to southeastern Connecticut in 1961, when her husband worked for the Naval Underwater Systems Center in New London.

She said in 2005 that the experience of being denied a clerk job in 1961 at the U.S. Naval Submarine Base as a recent transplant to Connecticut pushed her into a life of fighting against injustice and racism.

"They took one look at me and, all of a sudden, it wasn't a clerk-typist job. It was pushing a mail cart," Owens said in 2005. She said she felt stunned.

"It bothered me, because I never experienced it before. Where I came from, people were just people. In Milwaukee, a lot of my friends from the South told me about this type of thing, but it never happened to me."

Owens wrote to the commander of the sub base, and to U.S. Sen. Prescott Bush and U.S. Rep. Horace Seely-Brown. She had a hearing before a three-member panel at the base, which did not find evidence for discrimination.

In the meantime, she got a job at NUSC, where she advanced through various positions until retiring as a computer specialist in 1996.

She is predeceased by her husband, Burton Owens, and twin sons Albert and Burton Owens.

Owens, who lived in Lebanon, made her mark on Norwich in countless ways, Daniels said Sunday afternoon.

"She was so very important to so many people," Daniels said. "I called her 'Mother Owens' for all kind of reasons."

Owens launched multiple events that are now celebrated annually in the city, guided young people through mentoring at the now-closed Greenville School and a youth council she formed, rarely missed a Norwich school board meeting and often sat in Norwich Superior Court monitoring the treatment of those charged with crimes.

She also worked in the 1980s to amend a strained relationship between the city's racial minorities and its police officers, arranging discussions about officer training and community relations that led the department to improve training, hire more minority officers and adjust its approaches to policing.

When she retired in December, Norwich Free Academy Diversity Director Leo Butler said he remembered looking up at the city's Haitian Flag Day celebration to see Owens, then in her late seventies, "with her sleeves rolled up, handing out snacks and water bottles."

As news of her death spread throughout the Norwich community Sunday morning, Daniels said those who knew her have been reflecting on Owens' persistence and the "breadth and depth" of the mark she made on the city.



“She had such a huge impact on so many people,” Daniels said. “She just spread that love that she had in her heart all over everybody. Anyone who spent any time around her at all could feel it.”

U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-Second District, released a statement about Owens on Sunday.

"A giant has left us. The passing of Jackie Owens is a sad loss to all of us who were inspired by her integrity, compassion, and iron willed advocacy for education, fairness and democracy. It was a privilege to know her," Courtney said.

**PART 4 - Compare & Contrast Activity**

<p>HISTORICAL, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL EXPERIENCES UNIQUE TO THE WILLIMANTIC PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY</p>	<p><i>HISTORICAL, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL EXPERIENCES COMMON TO BOTH THE WILLIMANTIC PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY TO THE NORWICH AND CONNECTICUT AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY</i></p>	<p>HISTORICAL, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL EXPERIENCES UNIQUE TO THE NORWICH AND CONNECTICUT AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY</p>

**PART 5 - Supplemental Activity:** compare and contrast the information you learned about the migration of these two groups with your own family or someone else you may know who migrated from elsewhere in the United States or immigrated from another country.

## PART 2 READING

# Memories of Puerto Rican Migration

LATINO & PUERTO RICAN HISTORY, SUMMER 2023, THE SAMPLER

(c) Connecticut Explored, Summer, 2023

By Karen Ali

Source: <https://www.ctexplored.org/memories-of-puerto-rican-migration/>

In 1955 residents of Puerto Rico began coming to Windham looking for a better way of life. Word started spreading of plentiful job opportunities in Willimantic, a city that merged with Windham in the 1980s. Some came directly from Puerto Rico, while others moved from other parts of Connecticut and New York. A declining mill town in the 1950s, Willimantic was slated for urban renewal, a movement that accelerated in the 1960s with the creation of the Willimantic Redevelopment Agency in 1966 and grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to redevelop the central business district in 1969. In 1968 Willimantic applied for a Model City Initiative and included Puerto Rican voices in the process. According to historian Anna D. Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann in her 2021 article “Urban Renewal in a New England Mill Town: Willimantic’s Puerto Rican Community and Redevelopment,” published in Connecticut History Review, those responsible for redevelopment were determined that there would be “no Puerto Rican ghetto.” The people of the island did not want their community to become an island in the midst of their chosen city. They wanted instead to play a vital role in shaping the culture and economy of Windham, and in particular Willimantic, as it transformed itself.



*Catina Caban-Owen at the Three Kings Festival in January in Willimantic. The event drew hundreds of residents to the event. photo: Ninoshka Alba photography*

Several residents shared their memories and knowledge of how the town changed over the years. Many of their memories focus more on the growth of the community and the challenges it faced than on the urban renewal process itself. Windham resident Dr. Catina Caban-Owen, who in the 1980s became the first Latina person ever to serve on the board of education in Windham, said that in 1955 one person came to work in Willimantic from Juana Diaz, Puerto Rico, and the rest,

as she puts it, was history. “And he started bringing other families,” said Caban-Owen. “And here we are.” As of 2020 about 70 percent of the school population in Windham was of Hispanic or Latino heritage, according to the Connecticut State Department of Education’s district profile. The Puerto Rican community’s efforts to become part of the larger Willimantic community focused on hard work and education. At the same time, ties to Puerto Rico itself, the place and its culture, remained close.

## Early Challenges



*Dr. Ricardo Pérez professor at Eastern Connecticut State University, speaking at Eastern. photo: Yolanda Negrón*

In the 1950s those who began migrating to Windham and Willimantic found work with two employers: Hartford Poultry, a chicken-processing plant, and American Thread Company, then one of the largest thread manufacturers in the United States. Dr. Ricardo Pérez, who was born and raised in Puerto Rico, is now a professor of anthropology at Eastern Connecticut State University (ECSU), located in Willimantic. He remembered, “Together, those two companies employed most Puerto Rican migrants in Willimantic.” Hartford Poultry ceased operations in 1972, and American Thread Company in 1985.

Dr. Elsa Núñez, ECSU’s President, said factory managers took advantage of “Puerto Rican workers and their strong work ethic, and workers usually found themselves doing very hard work, and often very dangerous work, for little pay. And what money they did earn often wound up going back to the company officials who hired them in the first place, usually through repayment of loans, room rentals, laundry services, or even meals. Núñez emphasized that having so many Spanish speakers at the factories had the effect of discouraging workers from learning English, keeping Puerto Ricans isolated from the rest of the community.

When Hartford Poultry and American Thread Company shut down in the 1970s and 1980s, respectively, high levels of unemployment among Puerto Rican residents ensued. Pérez said,

“With the onset of the post-industrial economy in Willimantic, some workers were re-trained and found employment in several factories that still operated in eastern Connecticut. Others found employment in low-skilled positions at the University of Connecticut, Eastern Connecticut State University, and the Windham Community Hospital.”



*Promotion Day at North Windham Elementary School 2018. Approximately 70% of Windham Public Schools students' population is Latino. photo: Yolanda Negrón*

Pérez added that “some of the major challenges faced by the initial Puerto Rican migrants in Willimantic related to the cultural and linguistic differences” between the two. “Learning the English language was surely difficult.” Yet some hurdles were more basic, Pérez explained, including “adapting to the harsh winters in the United States and the inability to keep constant communication with their families back in Puerto Rico.” Pérez recalled, “Many Puerto Rican homes at the time lacked telephones, and mail service between the United States and Puerto Rico was slow-paced.” Perhaps the most difficult obstacle was the crowded and inadequate housing stock available to them in downtown Willimantic.



*From left: Sister Doris Ríos, Sister Cecilia Feliciano, Sister Iris (Yolanda Negrón's mother), and Rev. Ramon Luis Negrón, praying for Mariana Pedraza, at Iglesia Cristiana Pentecostal in Willimantic, founded by Yolanda Negrón's father Rev. Ramon Luis Negrón. photo: Yolanda Negrón*

There were also instances of discrimination, said Yolanda Negrón, who moved with her family in 1974 from Hartford to Willimantic, where her father founded a Pentecostal church that still exists. In 1992 Negrón became the first Puerto Rican elected to serve on the town's board of selectmen. She recalled a disturbing incident after she was elected: When she was grocery shopping with her father, an angry man came up to her, mentioned her name, hurled racial slurs at her, and then spit at her, telling her to go back to Puerto Rico. The event was upsetting, but Negrón recalls being gratified by the outpouring of support she received from everyone else at the store. "People started yelling at him," she said, adding that several women took her to the bathroom to wash the spit off her face and comfort her. "What I took away was that not everyone was that way," said Negrón, who was born in Hartford in 1963 and now lives in Willimantic. The manager called the police and told them he never wanted that man in the grocery store again, she noted. He also refused to let her and her father pay for their two carriages full of groceries.



*Luis Diaz (R), pictured in the photo with his goddaughter Yolanda Negrón (L), was one of the first Puerto Rican teachers hired in the 1970s. He taught Spanish at Windham High School. The first Puerto Rican/Latino on the Board of Finance in the 1980s, he served for 10 years. photo: Yolanda Negrón*

Catrina Caban-Owen moved to Willimantic in 1979 at age 25 with a Master of Social Work degree from the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Puerto Rico. When Caban-Owen first arrived, she began working as a social worker for an agency that helped anyone who needed counseling. She left that position in 1992 to work in the public school system as a social worker. Pérez, who has been living in Connecticut since 1994 and in Willimantic since 2001, noted that "social networks already in place allowed them to bring more family members, relatives, and even neighbors from their home communities in Puerto Rico to Willimantic. Today "a good number of Puerto Ricans are homeowners, especially those who also own their own businesses, are self-employed or work in the public school system and the local

government,” Ricardo Pérez said. Many Puerto Ricans also work in retail and the service sector in supermarkets, fast food franchises, gas stations, and stores, he added.

Caban-Owen, who works for ECSU and the UConn School of Social Work as part-time faculty, recalls that in 1979 there were only a handful of Puerto Rican residents of Willimantic who were educated middle-class professionals. Many were working-class poor, working manual jobs and in factories, she said. Today there are more professionals in town, many having earned four-year degrees, master’s degrees, and doctorates, said Negrón.

Puerto Rican migration to Windham continues to this day. “As it happened during the second half of the 20th century, Puerto Rico is struggling with the economic slowdowns and the fiscal crisis of the Puerto Rican government,” Pérez said, adding that the 2017 hurricane season and a series of earthquakes since 2019 have exacerbated the economic woes of many Puerto Ricans. “Taken together, the current unfavorable economic situation and the recent environmental catastrophes have pushed Puerto Ricans to migrate to Willimantic and other Connecticut cities,” Pérez said. “Over the years, the Puerto Rican community in Willimantic has maintained an important presence and influence in town.”

### **Despite Challenges, the Puerto Rican Spirit Lives On**

Negrón remembered the Puerto Rican community as being much more tight-knit in the 1980s and 1990s, when it would organize festivals and dances. “Sadly, some of this has been lost,” she said, adding that as the generations assimilate, the cultural element is not as strong as it once was. Pérez concurred: “To me, this case is typical of immigrant communities assimilating to mainstream U.S. culture. For second- and third-generation Puerto Ricans in Willimantic, it is easy to assimilate in the absence of community organizations that can promote Puerto Rican culture. Despite the watering down of Puerto Rican culture over the years as new generations of Puerto Ricans assimilate, the culture and contribution from the Puerto Rican community remains important.



*Group photo at the Three Kings Day Celebration in Willimantic in January, which hundreds of Puerto Rican residents attended. photo: Ninoshka Alba photography*





*The Puerto Rican Day Parade, 1987. photo: Catina Caban-Owen*

Xiomara Bruder, an employee of the town of Windham who organized the town's first Latin multicultural festival, said that the events in town such as the Windham Latin Multicultural Festival, Music Pa'l Pueblo, the Three Kings Day celebration hosted by the board of education, and the Cinco de Mayo Parade preserve the Latin heritage for future generations. The town, through its Department of Economic and Community Development, has tried to highlight Latino businesses and promote that community's events.

“By participating in these celebrations, people of all ages are exposed to the culture, history, and tradition of the Latin American community, which helps to keep the culture alive and vibrant,” said Bruder, who came from Puerto Rico as a toddler with her family in 1981.

Núñez said that Latino culture in general, and Puerto Rican culture in particular, is reflected in local restaurants, markets, and stores, in numerous places of worship, in the music one hears throughout town, and in community events. “Puerto Rican-owned businesses have created countless local jobs throughout the area, and Willimantic may be one of the most diverse and inclusive communities of its size in all of Connecticut. The Latino community has an enormous presence here and has made a huge impact on the intangible qualities that give Willimantic its overall vibe that is part eclectic, part quirky, and a lot of fun.”

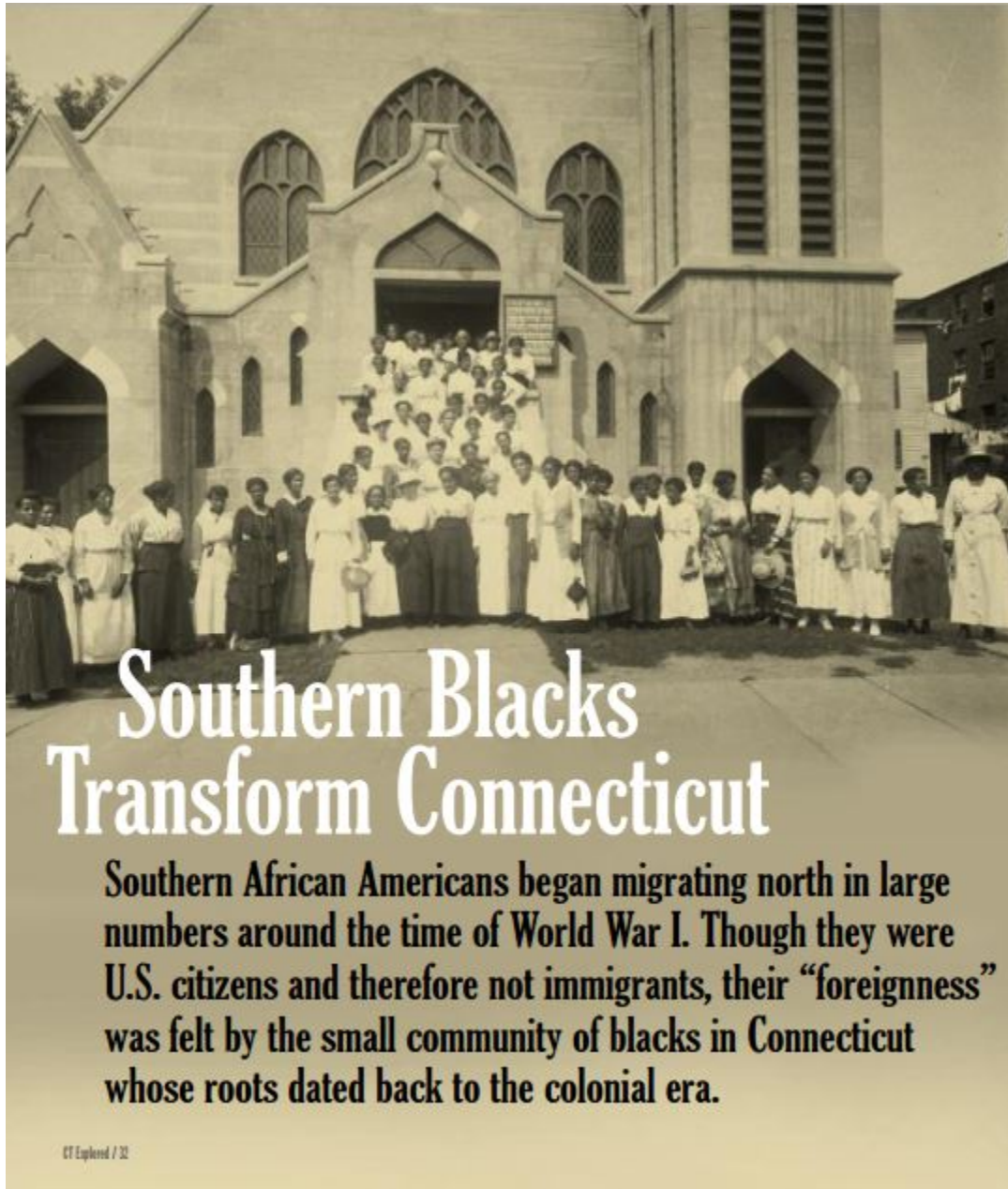
*Karen Ali is a writer, editor, and media strategist. She was born and spent her childhood in Windham County.*

## PART 3 READING

### **Southern Blacks Transform Connecticut**

By Stacey Close

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When thousands of Polish, Lithuanian, and Czech workers left Connecticut to return to Europe to fight in World War I, New England tobacco growers urgently tried to locate a replacement labor force. After some initial missteps, the association turned to the National Urban League, one of the nation’s major human rights organizations, for help. Seeing opportunity to aid the educational

pursuits of young people, Urban League officials sent inquiries to the presidents and leaders of historically black colleges in the South. One of the first people they contacted was John Hope, president of Morehouse College. An astute academician and politician, Hope was among the first to recognize that blacks were migrating away from Southern states. While traveling in New England in 1916, Hope saw first hand Southern African Americans working as “section men with pick and shovel” for Northern railroads. The New York, New Haven, and Hartford railroad lines each had a visible African American presence in their workforce.

While Hope would have preferred to have working-class African Americans remain in the South, he tossed the blame for the exodus into the political lap of Southern white leaders. He knew that most leading Southern white politicians remained silent on vigilante violence directed at innocent African Americans. In addition, landowners had no qualms about using guns to maintain sharecropping, the economic system that dominated the lives of most African Americans. Although people worked for a share of the crop to be used to offset yearly expenses, most sharecroppers found themselves sinking deep into debt, never receiving enough in compensation to rise to land ownership.

However, Hope’s immediate focus was on his students. He carefully oversaw the hiring of 25 young men for tobacco work. While these students labored in Connecticut tobacco fields, other Morehouse men toiled in summer jobs in the Midwest, other parts of New England, and Pennsylvania. Fellow college presidents from African American colleges and universities followed Hope’s lead. In pursuit of jobs, poor and working-class African Americans soon followed the wave of college students. [For more on Southern student tobacco workers in Connecticut, see “Laboring in the Shade,” Summer 2011.]

Migrants’ survival depended on their building relationships with people who were already knowledgeable about life in Connecticut. New Haven minister Rev. Edward Goin, concerned about the plight of new arrivals, organized to meet their needs by building a social center in a boxcar and enlisting African American students at Yale to provide support. Migrants adopting New Haven as their new home now had advocates from the city as part of their network.

Given the terror many dealt with daily in the South, Connecticut seemed like an oasis. In Southwest Georgia, for instance, an area from which large numbers of African Americans made the exodus to Connecticut, brutal lynchings were common. Some labor recruiters capitalized on this fear to lure workers northward.

Not all the blacks who moved to Connecticut were from the South. Black immigrants, primarily from the Caribbean islands, also came to urban areas such as New Haven and Hartford to work. The 1920 census lists the birthplaces of such immigrants as Jamaica, Bahamas, and the Virgin Islands. For other Caribbean immigrants, the census lists the immigrants simply as “West

Indian.” The census also documents the presence of a small group of Puerto Ricans, some of whom may have been of African ancestry. Cape Verdeans further helped to increase Connecticut’s black population. Most of these immigrants found steady, though low-paying, working-class positions, with occupations that in many cases were similar to those of African Americans from the South.



*Legendary civil rights attorney Constance Baker Motley. Connecticut Historical Society*

The family of Constance Baker Motley, the legendary civil rights attorney from New Haven, came from the island of Nevis. Her father immigrated to that city in 1906—a decade before the Great Migration. Motley’s mother followed a year later, paying the tidy sum of \$25 for travel via a ship’s steerage-class fare. While her family resided in a mixed neighborhood of Caribbean

people, Greeks, German Jews, and Italians, most African Americans in New Haven called the Dixwell Avenue area home.

Although World War I opened employment opportunities in some areas, African Americans from the South soon discovered what many local blacks already knew: Their race worked against them in the job market. While unskilled and skilled white immigrants found work at Winchester Repeating Arms Company, New Haven Clock Company, and New Haven Box Company, these places remained off limits to African American workers. Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor loudly supported the rights of white skilled laborers but not those of African Americans working in any capacity. In Connecticut's larger towns it was well known that law enforcement jobs "belonged" to Irish people and sanitation jobs to Italians. As Mary White Ovington noted in *Half a Man* (Hill and Wang, 1969), sanitation, gardening, and housekeeping fell to African Americans throughout the South, but not in Connecticut.

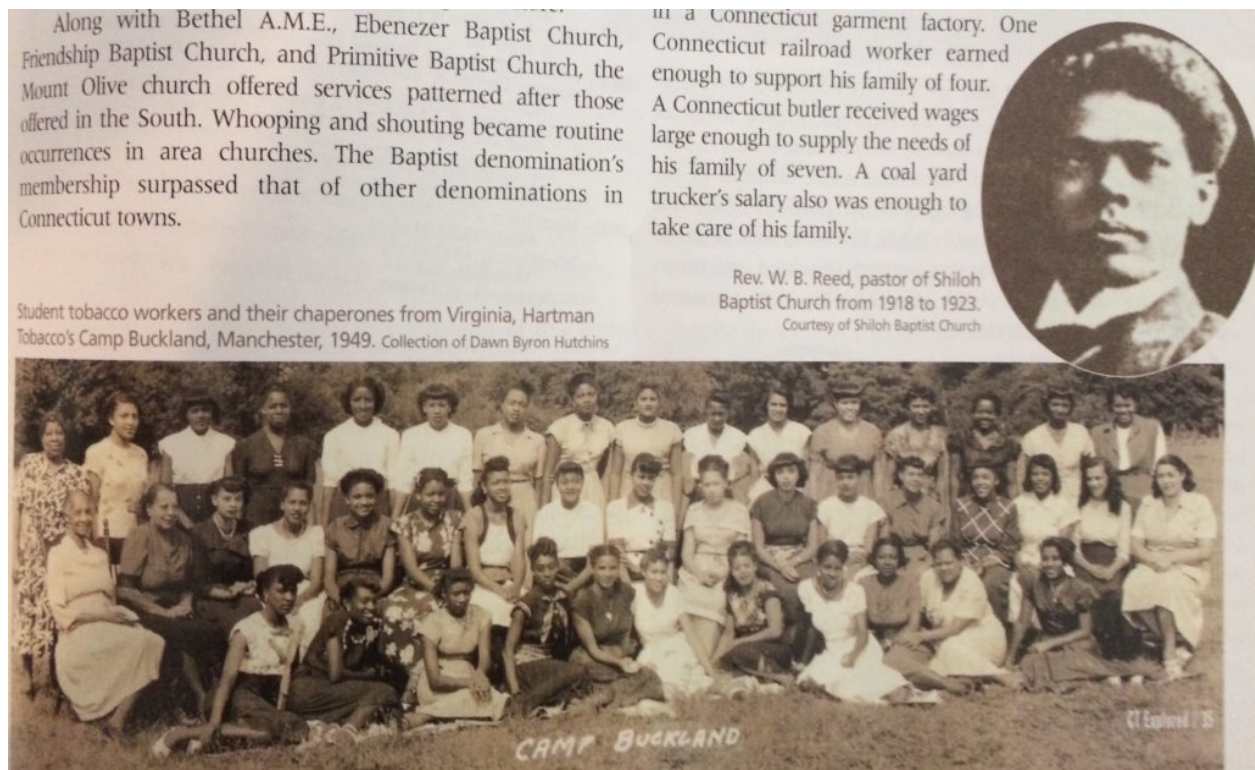
While Southern migrants clearly welcomed the job opportunities that tobacco growers and other companies offered, they eagerly searched for higher-paying work, often only making inroads in certain service occupations. But higher-paying jobs generally were available only to those with union connections—and unions often denied membership to African Americans. That denial ultimately benefited tobacco growers and companies that used non-union labor.

While World War I mobilization led to economic growth for the state as a whole, and the 1920s brought economic growth for the nation, African Americans saw limited economic opportunities in the period after the war. According to Charles S. Johnson, a leading sociologist of the period, African Americans found few opportunities in either skilled or unskilled work. His survey of Hartford, started in 1921, revealed that the majority of Hartford industries (60 percent of those surveyed) did not employ substantial numbers of African Americans. One heavy industry company, Pratt and Cady, had 100 African American workers at the peak of the war; by 1923 that number had dwindled to 25, while white workers remained at the plant. When African Americans did find work, their duties tended to be extremely demanding physically, and the jobs often were seasonal. Hod-carrier duties, coal yard work, and lumber work areas are examples. Colt's Patent Firearms Manufacturing Company, Hartford Machine Screw Company, Pratt & Whitney, Royal Typewriter Company, and Underwood Typewriter Company preferred to hire African Americans only to perform unskilled duties such as custodial work. The apprenticeship program at Pratt & Whitney included no African Americans during the war years. The huge insurance giants surveyed by Johnson were no better than heavy industry in this regard.

Inadequate housing was another perpetual problem for African Americans in urban areas. The influx of thousands of African Americans desperate to find housing gave slumlords ample opportunity to overcharge new arrivals from the South. As Johnson's survey documents, slumlords overlooked poor plumbing, and city policies allowed large numbers of people to be

packed into already overcrowded areas. New Haven's Dixwell neighborhood and Hartford's North End quickly became densely populated. As in larger urban areas, discriminatory local policies played a major role in creating and maintaining substandard housing.

Still, small numbers of African Americans became substantial property owners or found quality housing. The Hartford Courant reported ("The Colored People Who Live in Hartford," October 24, 1915) that in 1915 a master mechanic at the Hartford Machine Screw Works owned both a house for his family and tenement houses in Hartford.



*Rev. W. B. Reed, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church, 1918 – 1923, courtesy of Shiloh Baptist Church and tobacco workers, courtesy of Dawn Byron Hutchins*

The mass migration of Southern African Americans occurred around the same time that leadership among national African American leaders reached a turning point. W.E.B. Du Bois and other members of the Niagara Movement forged an integrated alliance with whites that became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1917 Connecticut cities launched efforts to build NAACP chapters. New Haven citizens were the first in the state to organize; Hartford's local NAACP initially drew its membership from among distinguished members of the African American and white communities, with 20 people meeting to organize at Mary T. Seymour's New Britain Avenue home in 1917. On December 10, 1917, the national organization granted the Hartford branch's charter.

Although key national figures such as DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, and Mary White Ovington visited and spoke to state branch members, local people carried out the organization's daily business. Local members mounted a campaign to eradicate continued discrimination, inadequate housing, racism, and Southern lynching. Statewide membership came from an alliance of native-born African Americans, Southern migrants, and local white supporters. One of the major efforts of the war period was a campaign by Connecticut NAACP members to push the state assembly to pass a civil rights act.

While the NAACP's actions produced some benefits, the migration of thousands of African Americans to Hartford caused class conflict and tension between Connecticut-born African Americans and African American migrants from the South. Alabama native and author Rev. W.B. Reed, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church, a well-established congregation on Albany Avenue in Hartford, criticized Southern-born migrants for organizing independent churches, separate from those attended by African Americans born in Connecticut. Reverend Goode Clark, an ordained pastor from Americus, Georgia, followed his members to Hartford. Clark had drawn Reed's ire in 1919 by organizing Mount Olive Baptist Church two years before.

Along with Bethel A.M.E., Ebenezer Baptist Church, Friendship Baptist Church, and Primitive Baptist Church, the Mount Olive church offered services patterned after those offered in the South. Whooping and shouting became routine occurrences in area churches. The Baptist denomination's membership surpassed that of other denominations in Connecticut towns.

African American churches accorded dignity and respect to people whom mainstream society often dismissed. Domestic workers, gardeners, tobacco plantation laborers, hod carriers, and others received respect as sisters or brothers of the faith in their churches. Some of these members served as deacons, pastors, elders, bishops, or missionaries. Members understood that the church was the one place in which all were equal in the eyes of their God.

Elsewhere, Connecticut lacked true social freedom. White theater owners, for instance, regularly segregated African Americans in the galleries. In 1927, when blacks decided to seek legal redress to end discrimination by the State Theater, they turned to attorney Thomas J. Spellacy to take the case. Owners of Hartford's Observer, a local African American paper, led the charge against the theater. Eventually, the theater opened seating to all.

With the war over, some African American working-class families, even those who needed at least two breadwinners, managed to find small pockets of opportunities. Among typical examples of working-class families documented in the 1920 census, the father in one family of eight worked in the coal yards, while a daughter toiled in a local store. An elevator operator went off to work daily at an insurance company, while his spouse worked for a tobacco firm. While her husband spent his days in a machine shop, one woman worked in a Connecticut garment

factory. One Connecticut railroad worker earned enough to support his family of four. A Connecticut butler received wages large enough to supply the needs of his family of seven. A coal yard trucker's salary also was enough to take care of his family.

In the 1920s, the urbanization and clustering of African Americans in Connecticut allowed for the growth and development of African American businesses and political power. Grocers catering to Southern foodways, barbers, painting companies, dress-making shops, beauty salons, restaurants, saloons, and pool halls dotted the Connecticut landscape. African American physicians and attorneys conducted business in most major Connecticut cities.

The 1920s ushered in the age of jazz. The music roared into Connecticut's African American community as it did elsewhere. One of the most prominent local jazz artists in Hartford was Bessye Fleming Profitt. As noted in Diana Ross McCain's *Black Women of Connecticut: Achievement Against the Odds* (Connecticut Historical Society, 1984), the Atlanta native was a contemporary of Count Basie, Lionel Hampton, and Sophie Tucker. Profitt's first move to New England was not to Hartford, but to Willimantic, where she married a local man. In 1921 she moved to Hartford and gained a solid local following.

For African Americans, the Roaring Twenties was also a time of leadership battles. The Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) formed in 1914 in Jamaica; its founder Marcus Garvey thought W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of integration was detrimental to African Americans and that white racism would never change. Garvey, through UNIA, demanded respect and urged black people to build their own government and large-scale businesses. His message of uplift caught the attention of millions of black people across the world.

By 1922 Connecticut had several UNIA divisions with large memberships, including one in Hartford. Other areas of Connecticut, including New Haven, New Britain, Portland, East Granby, and Rockville, had visible and active divisions of the UNIA. One of the great highlights of the Hartford UNIA was Garvey's 1924 visit to Hartford. While his movement began to decline significantly after he was arrested, convicted, and incarcerated for mail fraud (1925 to 1927), his ideas remained ingrained in the memories of Connecticut members. (In 1927 the U.S. government released an ailing Garvey and deported him back to Jamaica.)

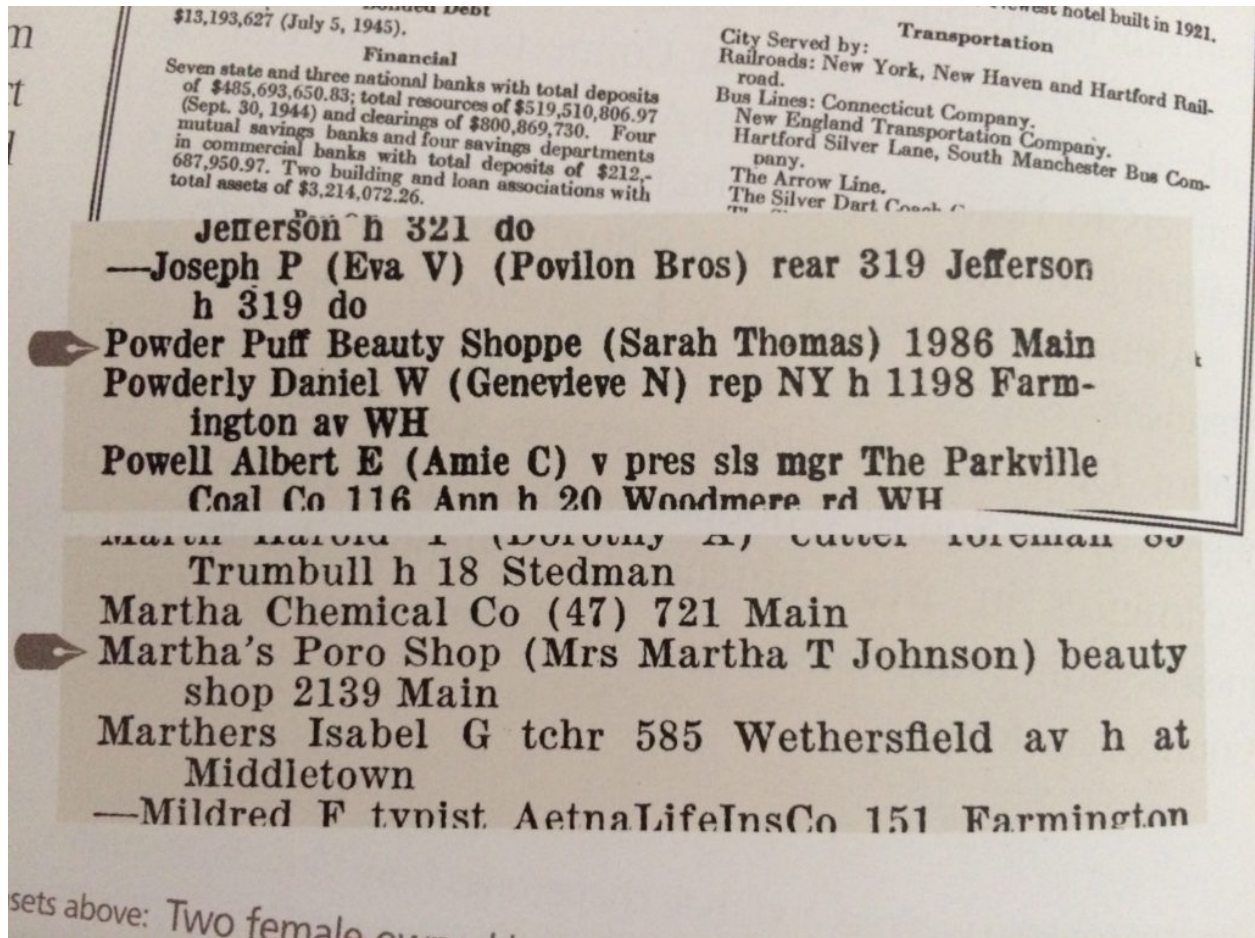
The 1929 stock market crash was followed by a decade-long economic depression that battered poor and working-class people throughout the state. For African Americans, surviving the "Old Hoover Days" often meant living in fear, going on relief, receiving church aid, being uplifted by ministers' sacrifices, and embracing New Deal programs. The election of Democrat Franklin Roosevelt brought fear and dread to the hearts of many African Americans in Connecticut. The Democratic Party's ties to Reconstruction and the Jim Crow South caused many to view it as supportive of terror policies and discrimination against African Americans.





African American churches opened soup kitchens and cooperatives to aid the community. Hartford's Rev. Robert Moody and Shiloh Baptist Church provided food, clothing, and firewood for the needy. Rev. John Jackson, pastor of Hartford's Union Baptist Church and a native of South Carolina, simply decided not to take a salary during the height of the Great Depression.

Although times were difficult, the turbulent 1930s failed to totally derail small African-American-owned businesses. Business owners usually located themselves in the heart of the African American community. Aware of cultural needs and wants, African American grocers sold staples of the Southern African American diet such as black-eyed peas, "side meat," chicken, Argo starch, and vegetables. In addition, African American women operated salons where they pressed hair and provided nail care.



*Hartford City Directory listings for female-owned African American businesses in Hartford, 1930 and 1940*

In Hartford, the owners of Richardson's Beauty Shop, Martha's Poro Shop, and Powder Puff Beauty Shoppe were African American, and they provided important social, psychological, and economic benefits to their African American clients. For African American women, who were often ridiculed for their looks and features, a salon visit both affirmed their sense of their own beauty and strengthened their social network. In salons, women vividly and openly discussed community news, just as African American men did in barbershops throughout Connecticut. Because the owners owed their livelihood to African American customers and patrons, not the white establishment, those customers felt free to express their political views. In addition to these black-owned hair-care facilities, cities such as New Haven, Hartford, and Bridgeport had a small and respected contingent of dentists and physicians of African descent. Throughout Connecticut, African American undertakers conducted solid business enterprises in embalming and burials. In hair care, medicine, and undertaking, African Americans typically chose to deliberately patronize African American merchants.

Connecticut's African American population of this period believed in keeping itself economically and politically aware. In 1938 African Americans from throughout the state

attended the Connecticut Negro and Occupational Conference. John E. Rogers set the tone by articulating the beliefs of African American attendees, arguing that although whites had long held paternalistic attitudes toward African Americans, increased education would empower African Americans to look after their own affairs.

As the 1930s drew to a close, Connecticut's African American community huddled primarily in the state's largest cities, clustering together for strength and survival. Rev. John Jackson met with Governor Raymond Baldwin to highlight the lack of economic opportunity for Connecticut's African American workers, and demanded that the governor provide better treatment of African Americans in the state. As a result, African Americans received appointments working at state tollbooths and in clerical positions.



*(l-r) Rabbi Morris Silverman, chair of Connecticut's Inter-Racial Commission, Dr. John C. Jackson, member, and Hartford Public Library librarian Magnus Kristofferson, February 25, 1950. The Hartford Times, Hartford History Center, Hartford Public Library*

Greater changes would come in the 1940s, and in the process, Jackson and indeed all African Americans in the state would feel the brunt of Southern injustice and bring the civil rights crusade home to Connecticut. Connecticut of the 1940s had a hand in shaping the ideas of a young Martin Luther King, Jr. During the summer of 1944, King, as a young Morehouse College student working on a Simsbury tobacco farm, experienced life in a non-segregated society for the first time. In *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Coretta Scott King recalled that her eventual husband experienced an incredible sense of "freedom" while in Connecticut. She argued that the opportunity to lead devotional services with other students that summer started King on the road

to becoming a minister. Later efforts by Connecticans working closely with King, one of the world's greatest human rights ambassadors and breakers of racial barriers, would make important contributions to the non-violent civil rights movement he led in the South.