

IN MEMORIAM



Eric Ledell Smith

*William Sisson, Chief, Curatorial Division
The State Museum of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Historical
and Museum Commission*

Eric Ledell Smith, historian at The State Museum of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, died June 15, 2008. He was 58 years old.

A native of Detroit, Michigan, Eric earned a B.A. in humanities in 1971 and a M.A. in philosophy in 1973, both from Michigan State University. He received his M.L.S. in library science and archival administration from the University of Michigan in 1980. Eric also earned a M.A. in theatre history from New York University in 1985. After graduating from New York University, he returned to Michigan where he worked as an archivist at the R.E. Olds Museum, a library assistant and accounting assistant at the University of Michigan, and junior education curator at the Dossin Great Lakes Museum and the Detroit Historical Museum. In 1992, Eric moved to Pennsylvania to become Director of Collections

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at the African American Museum of Philadelphia. He was responsible for managing over 400,000 artifacts and documents in the African American Museum's collections, and assisted in exhibition planning and installation. In 1993, he was appointed historian at the Pennsylvania State Archives, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Here, Eric focused on researching and authoring articles and books on African American life in Pennsylvania. Among other duties, he was also responsible for programming the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission's Annual Black History Conference. In 2001, he became a historian at The State Museum of Pennsylvania, where he continued his publishing and researching, and writing scripts for the museum's exhibits.

Eric's passion was researching and writing history. Eric wrote, "I was inspired to write by my grandmother, Florence Brown, who was a poet. Bert King, also a poet and family friend, was a role model for me, too." He believed firmly that the study of history should be inclusive. He specialized in African-American history and the history of performing arts to add to our knowledge of these previously neglected sub-fields, and correct errors and biases in earlier publications. Eric stated, "There is no 'black history,' 'women's history,' or 'Native American history.' There is only human history. These sub-fields have developed in order to remedy the deficiencies in current publications that have always been racist, sexist, or otherwise biased. That is part of the reason I wrote *Bert Williams*—so much of what had been written about [American comedian] Williams was wrong, and I felt I had to set the record straight. In the areas of classical music and regional history, the situation is somewhat different: not enough has been written about blacks. I believe we need solid, scholarly writing, rather than 'celebrity-type' books that tend to be biased and self-serving."

Eric was a prolific and nationally recognized author. He authored *Bert Williams: A Biography of the Pioneer Black Comedian* (Jefferson, NC.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1992), which garnered a Pulitzer Prize nomination in biography and a Theatre Library Association Award nomination, both in 1993. Joe William Trotter, Jr. and Eric edited *African Americans in Pennsylvania: Shifting Historical Perspectives* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1997). Among his other books, *African American Theater Buildings: An Illustrated Historical Directory, 1900–1955* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003) was named the best reference book

of 2003 by the Popular Culture Association. John Weldon Scott and Eric wrote *African Americans of Harrisburg* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2005). His most recent book, *The State Museum of Pennsylvania: A Centennial History, 1905–2005* is available on The State Museum of Pennsylvania's Web site (www.statemuseumpa.org).

Eric was devoted to writing and speaking about the history of his adopted home state. Most of the more than thirty articles he published pertained to Pennsylvania, African-American, and performing arts history, including articles in *Pennsylvania History*. His 1998 contribution to *Pennsylvania History*, "The End of Black Voting Rights in Pennsylvania: African Americans and the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1837–38," won the Philip S. Klein Pennsylvania History Prize for 1997–1998. One of his most recently published articles, "The 1917 Race Riot in Chester, Pennsylvania," appeared in the spring 2008 issue of *Pennsylvania History*. Eric also wrote articles on African-American history and performing artists for *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* and *Pennsylvania Heritage*, among other Pennsylvania journals and magazines. In addition, Eric spoke frequently across the state at various conferences and forums. He presented papers or was a commentator at Pennsylvania Historical Association annual meetings in 1994, 1996, 1997, 2000, and 2007. He also contributed his expertise to exhibits at The State Museum of Pennsylvania. In 2003, he won an award from the Pennsylvania Federation of Museums and Historical Organizations as curator of the 2000 civil rights exhibit, "The Daisy Myers Story." Eric held Pennsylvania and its history close to his heart.

Part of Eric's passion for history was helping others learn about our Commonwealth's shared past. He strived to enable all people to learn more about Pennsylvania history. At the time of his death, Eric was steadfastly authoring *Trailblazers: Innovative African Americans in Pennsylvania History*. In keeping with Eric's passion, this book's core purpose is to shed light on the historic accomplishments of others in a highly accessible format for youth and readers just introduced to African-American history. His enthusiasm for teaching others was Eric's motivational force.

Eric was thoroughly dedicated to the historian's craft and profession. Although soft-spoken in person, he spoke loudly through his written words. He leaves a legacy of research and writing that will greatly enrich our understanding of Pennsylvania's past for many years to come. For those who knew him as a friend and colleague, he also leaves memories of a kind

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person. Eric was very much a gentle man, considerate and thoughtful of others, slow to anger or criticize, and quick to listen to others' ideas. Soft-spoken in his ideals, he was dedicated to including all in our study of history—our human history. He held steadfastly to shedding light on our history, so others could see the past.