

# THE 1940s


## ***The Best of Times***

By Larry Glasco, University of Pittsburgh



For black Pittsburghers, it was the best of times, or at least the best it had been until that time. It was a time when industries, without government prodding, posted job openings in the *Pittsburgh Courier* for skilled, semiskilled, and unskilled workers. A time when African Americans flocked to the region to secure some of those jobs. A time when newly opened, racially integrated housing projects thrilled local residents with their amenities. A time when flourishing businesses stayed open, sometimes all night, and dance halls brought in local as well as national bands. A time when the “Double V” campaign made fighting racism a patriotic act, and when churches, synagogues, radio stations, and schools sponsored campaigns for interracial and religious tolerance. And a time when picketing and marching forced downtown department stores to integrate their sales force.



A full-page photograph of a smiling African American man, likely a worker at the Carnegie-Illinois Steel's Farrell Ordnance Plant. He is wearing a dark cap with goggles, round glasses, and a mustache. He is dressed in a light-colored, textured work jacket over a collared shirt. He is holding a large, heavy-duty industrial tool, possibly a grinding wheel or a part of a machine, with both hands. The background is a blurred industrial setting with red and white horizontal stripes, suggesting a patriotic theme or a specific factory environment.

African American workers were among the skilled employees who fabricated armor plate for Sherman tanks at Carnegie-Illinois Steel's Farrell Ordnance Plant in Farrell, Pennsylvania, near Sharon in Mercer County.

Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Archives Center, Russell Aiken  
U. S. Steel Collection.





The smiles on the faces of black Pittsburghers in the 1991 WQED documentary *Wylie Avenue Days* reflect this upbeat mood in the 1940s. Blacks were still struggling for equality, but now felt that they were making progress on two key fronts—jobs and racial discrimination. Their optimism was the by-product of an unprecedented war. America marketed its participation in World War II as part of a struggle for democracy abroad. Blacks rejoiced that the fight for democracy abroad softened public opinion toward the fight for racial democracy at home.

On February 7, 1942—just two months after Pearl Harbor—Pittsburgh's black newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier* (the largest circulation African American paper at the time) found a patriotic way to point out the contradiction of fighting a war for freedom abroad while denying freedom to some Americans at home. The *Courier* launched its famous "Double V" campaign linking those two struggles. The ingenious marketing strategy featured a logo consisting of an eagle, two interlocking V's, and the insignia "Democracy: Victory at Home — Abroad." Editorials, letters, telegrams, and photographs carried the message. Double V pins, Double V Clubs, Double V girls, Double V hats, Double V dresses, and even Double V hairstyles were sported by thousands of citizens—white and

black—as well as by mayors, movie stars, and even U.S. senators.

A key part of that struggle involved employment. During the war, job prospects for blacks, locally as well as nationally, improved markedly. One reason? In 1941, A. Philip Randolph, leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, had threatened a massive march on Washington over hiring bias, and forced President Roosevelt to issue an Executive Order banning racial discrimination in war-related hiring.

Roosevelt's executive order, and *Courier* protests, were important, but it was chronic labor shortages that caused local industries to advertise in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. "Essential War Industry Needs Unskilled Workers; 75¢ per Hour; Higher Rate Paid Experienced Furnace Men," read a 1943 ad from the Duquesne Smelting Corporation. "Wanted: Chippers and Molders. Apply at Union Steel Castings, 43rd and Butler Streets," read another.<sup>1</sup>

The prospect of full employment caused blacks to stream into the Pittsburgh region. Over the course of the decade, the city's African American population grew from 62,000 to 86,000, and neighboring

## The Pittsburgh Courier found a patriotic way to point out the contradiction of fighting a war for freedom abroad while denying freedom to some Americans at home.

The Afro-American was reporting on U.S. employment and military issues the day before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The Afro-American, December 6, 1941.

### Enlistments Drop, Yet Navy Won't Take Colored 35,000 Men Work in Steel

#### Colored Officers Work with Whites at Ft. Eustis

Only Flaw in Experiment Is That Whites Know Less Than 260th Lieutenant They Coach  
on the post—barely 1200 in all. They are mostly in the Fifteenth Coast Artillery Training Battalion, which has approximately 1,000 men.  
By OLLIE STEWART  
FORT EUSTIS, Va.—This is a place where recruits intended for coast artillery units get the rough edges knocked off. Fort Eustis is the nation's largest Coast Artillery Replacement Training Center. There are, however, only a few colored soldiers stationed

#### Gets Draftsman's Post



Mrs. Annetta West, wife of a steel worker, is shown in a photograph. She is a woman with dark hair, wearing a patterned dress, and is smiling.

### THE AFRO-AMERICAN

You Know Because You Read the AFRO  
Baltimore, Md., December 6, 1941  
50th Year, No. 16  
Published by the Afro-American Press, Inc., 1000 Broadway, New York, N.Y.  
Price: 10c

### College Prexy Suspended

James and His Assistant  
Court Rules  
Cassell Suit  
Was Too Late  
Boy, 16, May  
Be Saved  
from Chair

OUR "Democratic" NAVY  
N.A.A.C.P.  
REJECTED  
BY THE U.S. NAVY

Body of Wilberforce  
Prof. Found at Cal. Y  
Teachers of 8  
States Fighting

### They Saw Lincoln Defeat Howard in Philly



### Colored, White Officers Both at Ft. Eustis

(Continued from Page One)  
The other colored unit, a quartermaster detachment, had about 200 men. The quartermasters are post maintenance troops. The colored officers are first lieutenants, and six are second lieutenants.

### Short of Men, Navy Still Won't Take Colored Men

(Continued from Page One)  
The Navy Department denied that there was any color discrimination involved. In view of the present shortage of men, it is revealed that colored men were welcomed into the navy during the War of 1812, when casualties at sea seriously curtailed the enlistment of white seamen.

### S.S.C. Election Officials Face Vote-Ban Trial

(Continued from Page One)  
Lillian Homer and Ken Man Dawkins, said to have been victims of intimidation which prevented their registering in September, 1940.





## During the war, job prospects for blacks, locally as well as nationally, improved markedly.

Cartoon depicting the United States' entrance into WWII as the impetus for allowing African Americans to enter the Navy.  
*The Afro-American, December 20, 1941.*



mill towns saw substantial growth in their population as well. Most of these migrants came from Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina, the same states that furnished the bulk of black migrants during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

As blacks settled into better jobs, federal programs provided new and better housing. In 1940, a massive, 3,000-unit housing project, Terrace Village, opened in the southern part of the Hill District; President Roosevelt himself attended the ceremonies. Hill residents saw Terrace Village as a hopeful sign. The *Courier* raved that “Children who had played in the alleys ... now played in properly supervised recreation rooms,” and “The same dollars which had paid the rent in a house with no yard and an outside shanty for a bath was [sic] now paying for three and sometimes four clean, well-painted rooms with a bath.”<sup>3</sup> Terrace Village had both black and white residents, a feature that drew so much national attention that in 1947 it attracted a major study by Robert Merton of Columbia University.

With better jobs and better paychecks, black customers had money to spend. As a result, black businesses thrived in the 1940s as never before—or since. Wylie Avenue, the Hill’s main commercial corridor, boasted Goode’s Pharmacy, McEvoy’s jewelry shop, Nelson’s Cleaners, Trower’s Tailoring, Pernell’s Printing, Woogie Harris’ Crystal

Barber Shop, Nesbit’s Pie Shoppe, Ma Pitts’ restaurant, Payne’s and Poole’s funeral homes, and the Colonial, Palace, and Avenue Hotel. Patrons flocked to dance halls and night clubs like the Musicians’ Club, Gus Greenlee’s two Crawford Grills, and Stanley’s. Doctors, lawyers, and dentists opened offices on Wylie Avenue, along with tailors, dry cleaners, shoe repairers, shoe shine parlors, barber shops, pool rooms, sandwich shops, and barbeque places.

The Hill at that time was not the all-black ghetto it became later. In the war years, whites made up 40 percent of the residents, and white-owned businesses catered to an interracial clientele. Jim Crow prevailed downtown and in outlying neighborhoods but not in the Hill. Centre Avenue housed many Jewish-run businesses and institutions such as Fireman’s Department Store, the Irene Kaufmann Settlement, Benkovitz Fish Market, Gordon’s Shoes, and Center Builders Supply. Wylie Avenue boasted Yellins and Eisenberg’s, while Logan Street (affectionately known as “Jew Town”) had a plethora of Jewish stores and sidewalk vendors. When one includes the many Jewish businesses on Fifth Avenue, it becomes evident why residents bragged “You didn’t have to leave the Hill to buy almost anything.”

Music flourished in the 1940s like never before. In 1941, Mary Cardwell Dawson’s National Negro Opera Company performed *Aida* at the Syria Mosque in Oakland, with funds raised by the local black community and an all-black cast. The quality was such that the director of New York’s Metropolitan Opera conducted, and members of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra also performed. The local white press gave the opera rave reviews, and *Courier* editor Percival L. Prattis likened it to “the knockout punch of Joe Louis” in terms of what it meant for blacks’ pride and self-image.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to classical music, the 1940s was black Pittsburgh’s top decade for jazz, a time when national figures came through town in numbers never seen before or since. In 1946, the Savoy Ballroom, located over the New Granada Theater on Centre Avenue, brought in Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Roy Eldridge, Erskine Hawkins, Jimmie Lunceford, and Billy Eckstine. The Savoy ended the year with a Christmas performance by Ben Webster, Dinah Washington, and Mary Lou Williams.<sup>5</sup> Walt Harper reigned as the up-and-coming jazz star of the tri-state area, while Warren



William W. Goode at his pharmacy, 1303 Wylie Avenue in Pittsburgh's Hill District, October 1942. Detail.

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.  
Heinz Family Fund, 2001.35.8933. ©2006  
Carnegie Museum of Art, Charles "Teenie" Harris Archive.







## The 1940s was black Pittsburgh's top decade for jazz

Performance of *Aida* on stage of Syria Mosque, with orchestra playing in pit and audience in foreground, October 30, 1941. Detail.

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh: Heinz Family Fund, 2001.35.1384, ©2006 Carnegie Museum of Art, Charles "Teenie" Harris Archive.



Watson, the Honey Drippers, Leroy Brown, Honey Boy Minor, John Hughes, Joe Westray, and Ruby Young all enjoyed success.

Blacks made political gains in the 1940s, but these were more limited than gains in the cultural and economic spheres. In 1941, the Democratic Party appointed Wendell Stanton as assistant to the U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Pennsylvania, the first black to hold such a position.<sup>6</sup> In 1942, Republicans named Oliver S. Johnson as Assistant District Attorney, also becoming the first black ever in this office.<sup>7</sup> The local Democratic Party made Harry Fitzgerald Hill District alderman and Robert "Pappy" Williams ward constable. But the local Democratic Party never endorsed blacks for more consequential positions, such as city council or the court of common pleas.

Black Pittsburghers also benefited from a softening of white attitudes toward racial bigotry as Jews, Catholics, and liberal whites began to join African Americans in opposing racial discrimination. In 1945, Pittsburgh's Interracial Action Council held an unprecedented interracial picnic that included swimming in South Park's traditionally white-only pool.<sup>8</sup>

While many pools remained segregated, this interracial picnic heralded subsequent attacks on segregated swimming pools.

Before the 1940s, the fight against racial discrimination had been viewed as un-American, perhaps even Communist-inspired. Once the fight was seen as patriotic and all-American, anti-discriminatory efforts continued, even accelerated. In 1946, Mayor David Lawrence established the Civic Unity Council to promote interracial understanding. KDKA, the city's leading radio station, promoted racial and religious harmony with broadcasts sponsored by the (African American) Centre Avenue YMCA.<sup>9</sup> Local schools and churches organized "Brotherhood Week" programs.<sup>10</sup> The American Legion passed an anti-bias resolution and erected a "Tolerance" billboard downtown.<sup>11</sup> Leading judicial and political figures, such as the highly regarded Judge Henry Ellenbogen, publicly expressed opposition to racial bias and segregation.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, life was not always easy for whites who supported integration. In 1949, Dr. Benjamin Arshans, an optometrist in suburban Mt.

Lebanon, hosted an interracial party, and had to move after vandals pelted his home with tomatoes and plastered it with a sign reading "Commies live here."<sup>13</sup>

In the 1940s, blacks became ever more insistent in pressing their demands for racial justice. Troops serving overseas were the vanguard of this new attitude. They came home determined not to accept traditional race relations. Samuel Golden, who served in Burma, recalls fellow black troops telling him, "When we get home, we're not going to put up with that crap." A soldier wrote the Courier from "somewhere on Okinawa" asking the paper to notify its readers that "a different American is coming home from the one who left," one emboldened with "a new spirit" to fight for the "equalization for all men, regardless of race, color or creed."<sup>14</sup>

The war effort also changed the attitude of white troops toward race, as can be seen in a 1944 letter to the editor of *The Pittsburgh Press* by a white G.I., who wrote:

The things that they [Americans] strike for are so damn insignificant: wage increases, hiring of Negroes (I'm refer-





Billy Eckstine and Lena Horne standing behind cake, with Miriam Sharpe Fountain in background on left, in Loendi Club, for reception in honor of Horne, October 1944. Detail.

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh: Heinz Family Fund, 2001.35.11056, ©2006 Carnegie Museum of Art, Charles "Teenie" Harris Archive.

ring to that little incident in Philadelphia [protesting Negro transit workers]). Too bad that some of those people back there couldn't have observed the landings over there on D-Day where they would have seen plenty of Negroes landing along with the rest of us. I wonder if their prayers included those colored boys? What are those people going to do when these colored fellows get back and demand some of the rights that they've been fighting for?<sup>15</sup>

Blacks on the home front protested Jim Crow practices in places of public accommodation. The *Courier* sent reporter/photographer Edna Chappell (McKenzie) and Charles "Teenie" Harris to test service at eating establishments throughout the metropolitan area. They reported massive non-compliance with Pennsylvania's non-discriminatory public accommodations law.<sup>16</sup> Other *Courier* reporters exposed the "white only" policy of local automobile clubs, the existence of racially

separate toilets at certain local plants, Isaly's practice of serving whites on china and blacks on paper plates, and the sad fact that the Salvation Army ran the only summer camp that accepted black children.<sup>17</sup>

Blacks in the 1940s increasingly spoke out against derogatory portrayals. Black students protested "darky" songs at Herron Hill Junior High School, walked out of a "black face" play at Penn Township High School, and forced the cancellation of a racially offensive school play at McKeesport High School.<sup>18</sup> Black adults took offence at a performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the Syria Mosque and forced its cancellation. They also forced the removal of "mammy" ads from the windows of local A&P grocery stores.<sup>19</sup>

The highlight of black job protests came against local department stores.<sup>20</sup> The downtown "big five"—Kaufmann's, Gimbel's, Horne's, Rosenbaum's, Frank & Seder's—refused to hire blacks for anything

except janitors and elevator operators. No doubt they were aware that some places had witnessed fierce opposition to hiring black clerks. In 1947, the nearby town of Monaca suffered a cross burning by the KKK after a grocery hired two black clerks.<sup>21</sup> In Pittsburgh such fears proved unfounded, but stores still refused to budge. A survey by the Urban League showed that white patrons had no strong feelings one way or another about black clerks.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, when Urban League staffer K. Leroy Irvis sent pickets to protest discriminatory hiring practices, owners stalled until after the Christmas shopping season before reluctantly agreeing to hire black clerks.

To portray a brutal and bloody war—one characterized by a Holocaust and the use of atom bombs—as the best of times for anyone may, at first glance, appear ironic or even insensitive. Yet in context the war years were indeed that for many blacks, nationally as well as in Pittsburgh.





**A photomontage of woman posing with the Double V.**

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh: Heinz Family Fund, 2001.35.5822,  
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**The Ink Spots, with James G. Thompson, Doc Wheeler, and Ken Bryan at right holding sheet music for "A Yankee Doodle Tan," Savoy Ballroom (Hill City Auditorium), 1942.**

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh: Heinz Family Fund, 2001.35.11056, ©2006 Carnegie Museum of Art, Charles "Teenie" Harris Archive.



War-time advances continued after the war. Nationally, black patriotism and wartime service were rewarded in 1948 when President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, declaring “there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.” Locally, the city’s first black radio station WHOD—the forerunner of WAMO—opened in 1948 in Homestead. The station captured the hearts of many white as well as black Pittsburghers’ when it began carrying Porky Chedwick and Mary Dee, the latter spinning records and interviewing

celebrities like Sarah Vaughn, Cab Calloway, and Jackie Robinson.<sup>23</sup> And in 1949, William Goode opened his second drug store. Located in the heart of the Hill at Wylie and Fullerton, Goode’s well-appointed pharmacy boasted a handsome soda fountain where young people could gather and socialize. The opening drew so many patrons that it never closed that first night, and thereafter became a 24-hour store with free delivery.<sup>24</sup>

Some racial advances, ironically, had unanticipated, negative consequences. The ability of blacks to eat and shop in white-owned stores undercut the viability of some

black-owned establishments. And the jobs and prosperity of the 1940s enabled black professionals to abandon the Lower and Middle Hill for other neighborhoods such as the Upper Hill (“Sugar Top”) and Homewood. Whites benefiting from wartime prosperity also moved out, and at an even faster rate, such that the Hill’s white population dropped from 40 percent in 1940 to 25 percent in 1950.<sup>25</sup>

By 1950, the boom times were drawing to a close. Employment gains made during the war years began to ebb, and job bias continued to be an intractable issue. During the war, gains had been made because of full employment and the impact of Roosevelt’s order desegregating industries. When the war ended, war production contracted such that, between 1947 and 1954, the number of local steel workers declined by 20,000.<sup>26</sup> The contraction, combined with ongoing job discrimination, hit black workers especially hard.

The effects of these contrary moves would not be felt immediately. Indeed, in the 1950s and ’60s, the struggle for racial justice gained momentum, both in Pittsburgh and nationally. Progress was made, particularly in the area of civil rights. But, unfortunately, no decade has yet matched the 1940s as a period of full employment as well as racial hope. ☼

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<sup>1</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 8, 1943.

<sup>2</sup> See Celia R. Moss, “Social and Economic Factors Affecting the Health and Welfare of a Group of Migrant Families: A Study of 29 Negro Families Migrating to Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, from Americus, Georgia, in 1936, for the Purpose of Employment at the Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation,” Master’s Thesis, School of Applied Social Sciences, University of Pittsburgh, 1939. Moss shows that the migration patterns of World War I and the 1920s continued into the 1930s. Undoubtedly, those same patterns persisted into the 1940s.



A man, possibly musician Elder Beck making the V for Victory sign at a railroad station, c. 1943. Detail.

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh: Heinz Family Fund, 2001.35.4317, ©2006 Carnegie Museum of Art, Charles “Teenie” Harris Archive.



<sup>3</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 20, 1947.

<sup>4</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 23, 1941; September 6, 1941. But Julia Bumry Jones, author of the gossip column "Talk O' Town," lambasted the black "elite" for being "conspicuous by their absence." Jones said: "We had hoped to see the intelligentsia, but we didn't. We had hoped to see the music lovers, but we didn't. We saw the dependable few who patronize everything in Pittsburgh ... while the supposed supporters of all things racial were sitting home ... or sumpin'. Even our professional men, who lambast us to no mean degree when we do not patronize them, were not present. Pittsburgh needs to wake up!" *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 6, 1941.

<sup>5</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 27, 1946.

<sup>6</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 18, 1941.

<sup>7</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 28, 1942.

<sup>8</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 28, 1945.

<sup>9</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 10, 1945.

<sup>10</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 23, 1946.

<sup>11</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 13, 1946.

<sup>12</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 30, 1947.

<sup>13</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 3, 10, 17, and 24, 1949.

<sup>14</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 19, 1945.

<sup>15</sup> From the Letters to the Editor column, quoting an Army sergeant serving in France, *The Pittsburgh Press*, September 20, 1944.

<sup>16</sup> For example, *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 25, 1943; August 30 and November 22, 1947.

<sup>17</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 25, 1943; August 30, 1947; June 14, 1941; July 16, 1949.

<sup>18</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 4, 1946; January 11, 1947.

<sup>19</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 18 and July 6, 1946.

<sup>20</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 2, 1946.

<sup>21</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 4, 1947.

<sup>22</sup> James O.F. Hackshaw, "The Committee for Fair Employment in Pittsburgh Department Stores," Master's Thesis, School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh, 1949, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 4, 1951. DJ Mary Dudley Goode was the daughter of William Goode, owner of the Hill's 24-hour pharmacy.

<sup>24</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 16, 1949.

<sup>25</sup> Jacqueline Welch Wolfe, "The Changing Pattern of Residence of the Negro in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with Emphasis on the Period 1930-1960." Masters Thesis, Division of Social Sciences, University of Pittsburgh, 1964, Table 9, p. 63.

<sup>26</sup> John Hinshaw, *Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), p. 115.



Agnes Watson and Shirley Holmes (Allen) selling war bonds, September 1942. Behind them a poster advertises "The First Annual Double V Water Beauty Pageant." Detail.

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