“It is said that we are ignorant; admit it. But if we know enough to be hung, we know enough to vote. If the Negro knows enough to pay taxes to support government, he knows enough to vote; taxation and representation should go together. If he knows enough to shoulder a musket and fight for the flag for the government, he knows enough to vote.... What I ask for the Negro is not benevolence, not pity, not sympathy, but simply justice.”

~Frederick Douglass, 1865

Jubilee of Freemen

One of the most important episodes of American history was the culmination of the Civil War and the ratification of the 15th Amendment to grant voting rights to African American males in Pennsylvania and throughout the nation. At no time in U.S. history has such a large number of people had their status transitioned almost overnight. This newfound freedom resulted in a radical shift in democratic ideas nationally and internationally. For African Americans in Pittsburgh, the 15th Amendment was a long time coming to receive justice and the restoration of a right that had been taken away 31 years earlier.

All men in Pennsylvania could vote until 1839, not even sympathetic legislators or the governor could prevent the mostly eastern but definitely rural legislators from stripping suffrage from Black men. Learned men such as Martin R. Delany, Lewis Woodson, Abraham D. Lewis, John B. Vashon, Halston Vashon, Samuel Bruce, George Parker, and John Peck had the skill, knowledge, and fortitude to serve in the legislature but after 1839 were stripped of their right to vote. Not until the ratification of the 15th Amendment would the right of suffrage be returned to Black men in Pennsylvania.

Between 1839 and 1870, a tumultuous struggle ensued for Pittsburgh African Americans around the issues of citizenship, freedom, and suffrage while still fighting slavery. In August 1843, most of the African American leaders in the region convened at the Allegheny County convention of colored men. They did not attend the national meeting in Buffalo, New York, that same month where Henry Highland Garnet gave his famous “Address to the Slaves of the United States of America.” Instead of joining Garnet, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Charles Ray, Charles Lenox Remond, and hundreds more, Pittsburghers convened a meeting to discuss the suffrage issue and options for freedom that included migrating to an isolated and self-governed commune in rural Ohio.

Lewis Woodson was one of the proponents of this self-determined idea based on independent communities for African Americans. Woodson came to Pittsburgh in 1831 from Chillicothe, Ohio, as a minister of the AME Church. He immediately began to organize the community in Pittsburgh, helping to form the Western Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, the African Education Society, the Moral Reform Society, and Temperance Society. He was a mentor to Martin R. Delany and helped lay the groundwork for activism in the African American community. The Pittsburgh Memorial listed 79 names of Allegheny County African American men, and Woodson was one of them.

In 1864, African American men convened in Syracuse, New York, to form the National Equal Rights League. Its first meeting held in Cleveland, Ohio, on September 19, 1865, further defined the mission of the organization and almost immediately began to organize state chapters. In Pennsylvania, the state chapter (PERL) was headed by William Nesbit of Altoona and George B. Vashon of Pittsburgh. One of the charges of the NERL was to use its state chapters to lobby legislatures and congressmen to ratify the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

Upon ratification of the 15th Amendment on February 3, 1870, Allegheny County members of the PERL set out to organize a parade. Called the Jubilee of Freemen, the event was quite possibly the first and largest parade by African Americans in the country. Dignitaries from politics, military, business,
religion, education, fraternity, and the bar helped organize and facilitate the event. On April 23, 1870, hundreds gathered at three locations in the cities of Birmingham (now the South Side), Allegheny, and Pittsburgh. The Pittsburgh Post reported, "Early in the morning the busy note of preparation was sounded, and the newly franchised of every hue, and stature, and sex, moved briskly about, as if the fate of empires was in their keeping." Each division of the three rivers included bands, dignitaries, chariots, wagons, and various groups on horseback. The Birmingham and Pittsburgh division met at Water and Smithfield Streets and traveled to the Allegheny division that was convened at Diamond Square. Over 725 people participated in the procession. The route from Allegheny commenced at Liberty and Wood Streets and crossed into Pittsburgh.

The event was so important that two posters advertising the event—one from the 1870 procession and another from the 1873 procession—were saved by the descendants of Lewis Woodson and donated to the Heinz History Center in 2014 by fifth-generation Woodson, Byron Writt Woodson of Philadelphia. The posters were kept in the barbershop of one of the organizers, Granville S. Woodson. In the 1870 procession, Granville S. Woodson served on the PERL executive committee and as an aide to Chief Marshal George D. Ware. Woodson thought enough of the historic event to save the posters and the family respected their shared history by passing the posters from one generation to the next. The information each poster contains tells much about Black Pittsburgh during the Reconstruction era. The names read like a who's who of the abolitionist movement, and include the sons of anti-slavery activists; there is also a marked absence of women in the organizing of the event and the PERL. From the 1870 Jubilee of Freemen poster we know that Lewis Woodson's son Granville, Henry Highland Garnet's son Henry Stanfield Garnet, and Martin R. Delany's brother Samuel Delany were politically involved. We also know that under the leadership of Henry Highland Garnet, the 1870 Jubilee of Freemen was a well-organized public pronouncement of the euphoria and accomplishment of African Americans and their allies in the freedom movement.

The Woodson family is inseparable from the history of African Americans in Pittsburgh. Lewis Woodson was part of those arguing for the salvation of Black suffrage in 1838 and welcomed the restoration of it in 1870. The Jubilee of Freemen poster is just one indication of the family's understanding of its place and role in that history and opens a window into a period of African American history in Pittsburgh.

