

# THE JAMES A. DORSEY STORY



Dorsey Collins Tigers football team. Fullback James A. Dorsey sits in the front row second front right with the Collins Tigers football team, c. 1912.

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For many people, time off from work or school is an opportunity for physical activity, whether hunting and fishing, enjoying swings on a playground, or a playing a pick-up game with friends. James A. Dorsey had a passion for sports and recreational activities, and devoted

his life to sharing that love with others.

Born to a large and athletic family in Allegheny City in 1890, Dorsey's interest was sparked as a 9-year-old watching students play basketball in the basement of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. A few years later, he

landed a job as a janitor at the Phipps School of Physical Training, a three story gymnasium and bath house constructed by philanthropist Henry Phipps. Here, on Sundays when the gym was closed, Dorsey gathered other local boys and formed his own basketball team.



“Big Jim” (he topped out at 5 feet, 10-1/2 inches and 240 lbs.) was well known locally for his athletic prowess and played on a number of football and basketball teams in his teens and early 20s. He began working for the Pittsburgh Playground Association as a recreation supervisor at Washington Park in the Hill District and continued working at the park when the city created a Bureau of Recreation and took over the daily operations. Dorsey was the first African American to serve in that capacity.

Wanting more formal training, Dorsey enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh and took classes in physical education, but he wasn’t only interested in sports. Dorsey also won local renown as the only African American to pass the examination required to join the English Folk Dancing Society. Dorsey’s career spanned a full half-century when he retired in 1960. During that time, he served as recreation director at Washington Park, the Crawford Bath House, Centre Avenue YMCA, and the Ammon Center among other places.

The Dorsey-Turfley Collection illustrates the breadth of influence James Dorsey had as a ground breaking African American in the developing field of recreation. Photos show Dorsey in his jerseys for the Monticellos, Delany Rifles, and Collins Tigers teams. They picture drills and volleyball games he supervised at Washington Park, swimmers at the Ammon Pool, and the Rex Racket tennis club. Photos also show that he passed on his love of recreation to his own family. In 1918, he married fellow University of Pittsburgh graduate Zerbie Turfley who had played basketball with the Della Robia girls. Jim and Zerbie had nine children with whom they shared their interest in the outdoors and physical activity. Dorsey captured his growing family when he snapped a handful of photos showing Zerbie and seven of their children on a camping trip to the forest at Sideling Hill.



**The Rex Racket Club, Hill District, 1925.** The Rex Racket Club gathers around the net on their court at Centre Avenue and Morgan Street with the Minersville School in the background.



**Swimmers gather at the Ammon Pool at Washington Park in the Hill District, 1941.** These Pittsburghers are among the many who found summer relief within city limits at public parks, pools, or bathhouses. But most of Pittsburgh’s pools, similar to those in other cities around the nation, were largely segregated. Built in the Hill District in 1940, the Ammon Pool, part of the Ammon Recreation Center, was one of the earliest city pools that permitted use by African American residents.