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50th Anniversary of the Black Construction Coalition and “Black Monday”

In August and September 1969, the Civil Rights Movement coalesced in Pittsburgh around the fight for employment in the numerous capital construction projects that did not employ African American men or women. That year, Pittsburgh had more than a dozen major construction projects changing the cityscape. Protests occurred at many of the iconic buildings we see today that were built with almost no African American workers.

On Monday, August 25, 1969, members of the Black Construction Coalition that included the North Side-based organization Operation Dig, the NAACP, the Bidwell Training Center, the Democratic Association of Black Brothers, and several other groups, marched from the Hill District through downtown headed for the construction site of Three Rivers Stadium. The march protested the racial discrimination by construction and operating engineers’ unions against potential African American membership. On Wednesday, August 27, marchers staged a sit-in on Grant Street and 45 protesters were arrested.

Construction companies would not hire black tradesmen if they did not have a union

card. Unions discriminated against African Americans and contractors exclusively hired union members. If you were not a member of a union you could not get training or work. In addition to the Three Rivers Stadium project, the other developments protested included the U.S. Steel Tower, Pittsburgh National Bank, and the Bell Telephone Company. In all, ten major construction projects were shut down due to Black Construction Coalition protests.

After demonstrating at the stadium site, marchers traveled back to downtown to demonstrate at the U.S. Steel Tower. They were met by Pittsburgh Police in full riot gear ready for confrontation—reminiscent of the Edmund Pettus Bridge assault on the Selma to Montgomery marchers in 1963. After that day of violent police attacks on marchers, the leaders of the BCC began negotiating with the city, unions, and contractors, but hostilities and frustrations abounded. The city decided to close all construction jobs but workers at the U.S. Steel Tower were still on site and, as marchers demonstrated on the streets, white steel workers dropped tools and other objects on the people below. In their book, *Race and Renaissance: African Americans in Pittsburgh Since World War II*, Joe Trotter and Jared Day assert:

During the BCC demonstrations, one white truck driver for the Calig Steel

Drum Company responded to chants for employment and jobs by yelling out the window of his truck, “Want a job niggers? Join the Army!” Some black activists recalled confronting members of the John Birch Society anti-civil rights marchers on downtown streets. In some cases, members of white crowds wore Nazi symbols.

White steel and construction workers countered with their own protest of the work stoppage and challenged the qualifications of African Americans to become union members. As the BCC progressed in negotiations, it became apparent that the unions and contractors were setting up a program destined to fail and not provide quality training for participants. Ninety men received union books at the end of Operation Dig I. However, Operation Dig II members were denied the journeyman’s union book clarifying them as members of the union and only offered a referral book that designated no union status, thus making them ineligible for employment. Operation Dig members and Nate Smith saw this as a ruse to undermine the progress of the program. That is when the Three Rivers Stadium protest began.

The leaders of the Black Construction Coalition included Nate Smith, a World War II veteran, former boxer, heavy machine operator, and one of the few black men with union

Black Construction Coalition hand painted flag.

HHC Collections, gift of George Simmons, 2018.148. Photo by Liz Simpson.





"Black Monday" demonstration with Mike Desmond, Rev. Jimmy Joe Robinson, Nate Smith, and Byrd Brown in front, and others including Lloyd Bell, Dr. Norman Johnson, Aaron Mann, Louis Boykins, Vince "Roots" Wilson, police officer William "Mugsy" Moore, James "Swampman" Williams, and Matthew Moore, Freedom Corner, Lower Hill District, September 1969.


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membership. Smith and his fellow activists held numerous demonstrations to bring attention to these issues. Those fellow activists included Vietnam veteran James "Swampman" Williams, labor negotiator Mike Desmond, Reverend Jimmy Joe Robinson, attorney Byrd Brown, Reverend Alfred Pugh, Vince "Roots" Wilson, Aaron Mann, Lloyd Bell, Dr. Norman Johnson, Louis Boykins, David Epperson, and Pittsburgh's first African American Police Chief, William H. "Mugsy" Moore. On "Black Monday," September 15, 1969, over 2,500 demonstrators assembled a few blocks north of Freedom Corner, across the street from St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Church, and were captured by Teenie Harris in a photograph. The march was a peaceful assembly and noted as one of the more peaceful marches in the city's history. The procession traveled from the Hill District via Fifth Avenue toward Wood Street. As the procession reached Wood Street, it stretched all the way back to Grant Street and snaked its way back up into the Lower Hill District.

Tennie Harris' photo became an iconic image of Civil Rights in Pittsburgh. A closer look at the photograph and film of the march

reveals some of the participants carrying flags representing the BCC. Painted in the center of the black canvas flag is a green laurel wreath representing peace set upon a bright red sun burst and a clenched fist.

George Simmons, of Monongahela, Pa., was a law student and a courier for the BCC at the time. He carried flags and other tools of the march in the trunk of his car. Simmons saved a flag, knowing its importance to African American history. Fifty years later, that flag has made its way to the African American collection at the History Center through Simmons' recent donation. A special assistant to Pittsburgh Mayor Pete Flaherty, Simmons worked on the Model Cities Program, and was director of construction compliance for the Pittsburgh Human Rights Commission. His roles positioned him on both sides of the dispute, one as a city employee working for the mayor and as a devoted activist for the black community. His involvement also provided the opportunity to gain valuable experience for his professional career that followed. Simmons went on to serve as Regional Director of the Pennsylvania Human Rights Commission from 1974 to 2010.

Eventually union reps agreed to the BCC proposal and finalized it in October 1970. The result was the Pittsburgh Plan that guided the recruitment, training, and employment of minorities in the trades. Nate Smith became president of the Pittsburgh Plan executive committee. The BCC initiated the Pittsburgh Plan that was later studied by other cities around the country. It called for 450 African American men for apprenticeships over four years. Overall, 1,760 minorities including African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics benefitted from the marches, protest, arrests, and struggle of Nate Smith and those in the African American community to change the economic and employment landscape in Pittsburgh. Roughly 17% of skilled craftsmen in Allegheny County resulted from the Pittsburgh Plan. August 25-27 and September 15, 2019 mark the 50th anniversary of the Black Construction Coalition protests to open the construction and building trades to African Americans, and this BCC flag is proof of the determination to secure economic rights through mass civil activism. 

Logo: Spirit Form Freedom Corner Monument, Pittsburgh, Pa., © artist Carlos F. Peterson.