

AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLECTION

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Jubilee of Freemen

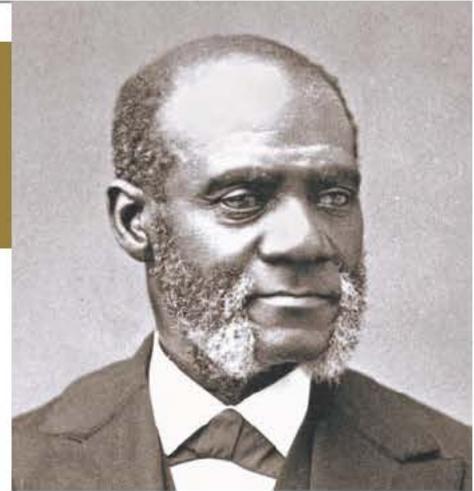
"It is said that we are ignorant; admit it. But if we know enough to be hung, we know enough to vote. If the Negro knows enough to pay taxes to support government, he knows enough to vote; taxation and representation should go together. If he knows enough to shoulder a musket and fight for the flag for 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

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 the new constitutional assembly of 1838. By

Henry Highland Garnet, founding pastor of Grace Memorial Presbyterian Church, Executive Committee member of the National Equal Rights League, and U.S. minister to Liberia.

University Library, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill.



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. Lewis espoused that his "return to land" idea would provide "for greater liberty of movement and richer realization of living."¹ 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.²

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,

