

Black History Profiles in the Metuchen Area

by Tyreen A. Reuter, February 2025

SLIDE: INTRO EVENT FLYER SLIDE

Good Evening and thank you for having me here tonight.

My name is Tyreen Reuter and I am a Director of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society. We were delighted when the Library asked if we could share some of our research about notable figures for Black History Month. I hope you are all likewise delighted!

A couple of things first...

Number #1. I am not a professional presenter, so please bear with me in terms of the public speaking portion of this evening.

Number #2. The profiles presented here are not exhaustive or comprehensive of our local Black history. The people and topics mentioned here are ones I've come across while doing various projects and then dug into them. If someone has been overlooked, please let me know later about them! There's always room for more! I make many mistakes and you will hear about some of them!

Number #3. My initial forays into local Black History research were done as part of a graduate course nearly 25 years ago. The task was to explore an episode in your town's local history that was NOT positive, nor a source of pride. For that I looked at 1920s Ku Klux Klan activity in Metuchen. An amended version of that presentation is on the historical society's website, but that is NOT the focus of this evening. Tonight we are going with the wisdom that presenting the triumph is as important, if not more, than the trauma. There are many, many terrible events that could be presented, and they are not being ignored, just not being elevated tonight.

So, speaking of mistakes I've made – here's a great example... and a reason why this image was used for the event flyer.

Several years ago, I bought the photograph shown here at a book and postcard show because it had “J.L. Grimstead” stamped on the reverse along with the date “Jul 29, 1937.” As you may know, Grimstead lived in Metuchen and his thousands of photographs taken almost a century ago form the spine of our historical society’s collection.

Without any other information on file, we guessed it could be a group picture possibly from the Potter’s Crossing section of Edison, about which we knew a great deal.

However, in 2011 a local resident spotted a copy of the image and let us know that it is in fact of a group of congregants from Metuchen’s Second Baptist Church on a church outing. Not only were both her father and grandfather in the photograph, but she knew the names of many of the others and generously provided the names of those she was able to identify.

**SLIDE:
SUNDAY SCHOOL PICNIC (1937)**

Now, this is local history gold! And is proof that you shouldn’t be afraid of mistakes, as someone may come along with excellent information that can lead to wonderful discoveries...

This leads to one of my other big mistakes – Black Churches of Metuchen. Based on what we had on file, we believed that there had been THREE Black churches in Metuchen... well, after sharing information about the churches a couple years ago, we were told of a FOURTH... how exciting!

**SLIDE:
METUCHEN’S BLACK CHURCHES**

That there were three – actually four - is a testament to the vibrant and thriving Black community that was here more than a century ago.

The oldest of these churches, and sadly no longer extant, was the Bethel AME Church at the corner of Central and Durham.

SLIDE:
BETHEL A.M.E. CHURCH (1891-1999)

Although demolished more than two decades ago to make way for condominiums, the Bethel A.M.E. Church that sat at 163 Central Avenue is not forgotten!

Records indicate that the congregation was established in 1890 and officially incorporated the next year as part of the New Brunswick District of African Methodist Episcopal Churches. Some of the last names associated with the church over the years include those found in the 1891 article shown here as well as Titus, Fareira, Chambers, Grant, Hallman, and Bauknight. The congregation appears to have been notably led by women throughout its history. A 1991 Centennial for the church was held; it would be wonderful to find photographs or documents from that event!

At the time that the developers, SDY Enterprises of Manalapan, launched plans to tear it down, they said they planned to put up a historical marker where the church stood. That has not happened, even though I do make a point to remind them every couple years. Probably time to do so again!

The second oldest, congregation (that we know of!) is the Second Baptist Church, now located on Durham Avenue, and happily it still exists and just celebrated its 110th anniversary.

SLIDE:
SECOND BAPTIST CHURCH OF METUCHEN

According to a 1938 compendium of New Jersey's houses of worship, the first services of the Second Baptist Church of Metuchen were held around 1909 in the homes of its various members. Another source indicates meetings in 1913 were held in a small building at the intersection of Middlesex and Amboy Avenues, meaning approximately where the Manning Freeman Lumber Yard was then. This source also states that for a short time they met in a blacksmith shop on Middlesex Avenue, approximately where The Hub development (former Cryan's) now stands.

In 1914, the congregation began renting a building at the corner of New and Pearl Streets (where New Pearl Cleaners is now). This building, known then as Whalen Hall, had been the second of the Franklin Schools in Metuchen, and had been moved to that site in order to build the third Franklin School (that sat where the Franklin Square Condominiums are now). The 1938 compendium states that Rev. Nelson Tate was the congregation's first clergyman, but some other records found indicate that a Reverend Page Beverly, a state Baptist Convention missionary, often preached at the meetings at New and Pearl Street prior to Tate's full-time installation. The congregation officially incorporated in 1916.

By 1924, property at what is now 100 Durham Avenue had been purchased by the congregation, along with an adjacent neighboring residential building, and a new building was constructed and dedicated for their meetings. The compendium states that the cornerstone was inscribed with "Second Baptist Church 1922." This building, which I believe is shown here in this 1956 photograph in our archives, remained in use until the early 1970s when it was replaced with the current church building from 1973-1974. The congregation met at the YMCA, according to newspapers, while it their new church was under construction. A dedication ceremony was held on May 25, 1975 and a program was apparently produced – Another document I would love to see a copy of! And, of course, this is the church for whom that photograph of the Sunday School Picnic was taken.

The third church, New Hope Baptist, also met at one time in the Whalen building at New & Pearl Streets...

SLIDE:
NEW HOPE BAPTIST CHURCH

That 1938 compendium I mentioned also indicates that the first services of New Hope were held in 1927, but I've seen news articles as early as 1923 and 1924 clearly referencing the existence of a New Hope Baptist Church in Metuchen.

The 1924 date would coincide with the Second Baptist Church vacating Whalen Hall after constructing and moving into its own building on

Durham Avenue. Some local residents have mentioned that they understand New Hope split from Second Baptist at this time. 1924, perhaps coincidentally, is also the same year during which - on the night of April 23 - the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross at the intersection of New and Pearl Streets, where Whalen Hall was located. But we are not elevating that here tonight!

New Hope's services, under the leadership of Reverend John Jasper Daly, who had moved here from the South to serve the congregation, continued at Whalen Hall until sometime between 1932 and 1934.

A delightful notice announcing a Chicken Dinner to be held at the church on New Street in 1931 was most likely to benefit the building fund; a couple years earlier, a plot of land had been donated by "Mr. John Breen and Miss Helen Breen" for the congregation's permanent home.

In 1934, a new church building had been constructed on Hampton Street, and in 1967, under Rev. Joseph Dale's leadership, a new religious education wing was begun on the site as well. The addition was completed in 1968, and three years later, in 1971, ground was broken on a new sanctuary for the congregation. The new sanctuary was officially dedicated in 1974.

Shown here are a 1967 sketch of the proposed church, a 1968 newspaper photograph with Rev. Dale, a 1971 newspaper photograph showing congregants preparing for the Metuchen Country Fair, and a 1978 photograph of the church from our archives.

That brings us to the fourth church – again, that we know about!

SLIDE:
CHRISTADELPHIAN CHURCH OF METUCHEN

Happily, a conversation with a local resident clued me into the fact that there have been FOUR, not three, Black churches in Metuchen, and that the one I was missing had been on Orchard Street.

The Christadelphian Church looks like it began holding services in 1928, but the congregation grew, causing members to move on to other, larger locations.

In an obituary for a lady who was a congregant and lived on Orchard, indicates she was the mother of John Cobbs, the artist responsible for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. bust on Middlesex Avenue! More on that later!

Shown here are the 1929 Sanborn map of Metuchen and an image of the church from a 1963 event program.

So, where did Black residents – and indeed those enslaved persons - worship before 1891? Likely in homes, as was the custom, but also there are records indicating that the First Presbyterian Church performed marriages and other rites for Black people in the early 19th century and even earlier. That could be a whole program itself!

Moving on... while historically Black churches have notably been an avenue for organizing for civil rights, organizations like the NAACP eventually were founded, and Metuchen had an early chapter!

SLIDE:
METUCHEN-EDISON BRANCH NAACP

On October 13, 1942, the charter for what is now the Metuchen-Edison Area Branch of the NAACP was submitted. The national organization, founded in 1909, provided local citizens with the guidance, leadership, and strength to bring positive change in discriminatory housing practices, fair hiring procedures, and school segregation.

Pictured here are news articles from 1948 (meeting at the Borough Improvement League/Old Franklin Schoolhouse) and 1963 (installation of new officers). Note some of the underlined names of people to be mentioned later - The photograph is from the Society's archives and shows a portion of a 1968 protest organized by the NAACP outside Metuchen Borough Hall. This protest was inspired by the Mayor and Council's refusal to hire a qualified Black police officer. Quite happily we have

evolved from that, and our current Mayor and Council would in no way stand for such things!

The Metuchen-Edison Area Branch (NAACP-MEAB) is still very active today as a membership organization, serving Edison, Highland Park, Metuchen, Piscataway, and South Plainfield. It is currently led by Reggie Johnson and hosts frequent programs, informational sessions, and events. More information about this chapter is available online. Consider becoming a member!

No doubt the local NAACP was aware and involved in this next topic, but it was the Central Jersey Civil Rights Council that organized peaceful protesting at a new Woolworth's at Menlo Park Mall.

**SLIDE:
WOOLWORTH'S PICKETED**

Anyone with a basic knowledge of the struggle for civil rights should be aware of the Woolworth's lunch counter protests in Greensboro, North Carolina starting on February 1, 1960. Thankfully my family and I had the chance to visit the International Civil Rights Center & Museum established in that building this past September! (Show Bag! Give postcards!)

Locally, Woolworth lunch counters were not formally segregated, but in 1960 – when a Woolworth's opened at the recently constructed Menlo Park Shopping Center– local residents made a demonstration of solidarity with their fellow citizens in the South.

The Woolworth opened in early April 1960, and picketers were on hand to express their frustration with the company's policies in segregated locations. According to news reports, the picketers were dispersed by local police on opening day after being summoned to remove trespassers from private property. The publicity chairman for the picketers reportedly said that it was the first time outside the Deep South that the police halted “a peaceful demonstration against F.W. Woolworth's policy of refusing lunch counter service to Negro customers in Southern stores.”

However, after productive and civil conversations between the protest organizers, store representatives, law enforcement, and local government officials, the protests were allowed to gather and continue. News reports indicate successful protests without incident continued throughout the month.

Note that this information is gathered entirely from local newspaper articles. Recollections and photographs from those who may have been there would greatly add to this part of our history – as we know, newspaper reporting isn't always correct! It would be wonderful to hear from someone who was actually there!

Another example of local activism, believe it or not, was the construction of the Metuchen Municipal Pool, at a time when too many were resisting desegregation and building private pool clubs to avoid efforts at integration.

**SLIDE:
MUNICIPAL POOL, 1967**

On March 6, 1967, a total of 3,234 Metuchenites went to the polls and voted in the issue of building a public pool. The final tally was 1,748 in favor, 1,477 opposed. Councilman (later Mayor) Donald Wernik said he was “never more proud of Metuchen than I am today” and that he was overjoyed that the community didn't “fall prey to the last-minute injection of racial and religious” arguments.

Compared with what was happening nationally in the 1960s, that municipal pools were being constructed in New Jersey was apparently unusual. To try and put this in perspective, I reached out to nationally renowned historian Jeff Wiltse, author of *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, to get a sense of where this fit into the story.

Wiltse graciously responded, and noted that, when viewed within the national context, it would have been unusual indeed for white residents to support the funding of a public pool in 1967 that they intended to be racially integrated, and “that it occurred in Metuchen and other

surrounding communities, there must have been a pocket of progressive-minded people and strong progressive leadership in the area.”

Let’s take that as a win!

Another win was the establishment of King Park outside this library!

SLIDE:
REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. STATUE

On January 15, 1976 the Borough of Metuchen officially renamed Borough Hall Park in honor of the slain Civil Rights leader, thanks to the hard work of the Civil Rights Commission in Metuchen that had been established in 1964. A small marker was later added to the site indicating this dedication.

In the late 1980s, attention was needed in the park, and community leaders worked to raise money to improve the memorial. In 1989, a design for a bust of King by artist John Cobbs (pictured here and mentioned earlier) was revealed to the Borough Council.

In 1990 the bust, made of concrete with a preservative added to extend its lifespan, was installed on a base with lighting.

Unfortunately, the bust was damaged in November of 1992 so in April of 1993, a new bust – this time in bronze but also designed by John Cobbs – was unveiled and remains on the site today.

This space has become a gathering place – rightly so – for peaceful social activism. I hope Dr. King would approve!

Speaking of Dr. King... a local resident, who had originally been from Georgia, had been friends with his parents, Martin Luther King, Sr. and Alberta Williams King. And she went on to do great things here in New Jersey.

SLIDE:
MINNIE BELL VEAL (1907-1985)

Minnie Bell was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia and attended Spelman College, where she studied Social Work. Prior to coming north to New Jersey in 1933, she met and married Frank Veal (1900-1979) from Villa Rica, Georgia. While still in the Atlanta area, they had become friends with Dr. King's parents.

Like many who came from the South, they settled in Potters Crossing. Potter's was a self-sufficient Black community in then Raritan Township, now North Edison. Minnie immediately got involved with the Potter's area youth, working as the first Black teacher in the township. She was particularly known for developing classes for the children who lived in Potter's Crossing. She was determined to make sure each child understood the importance of education, with the motto "failure is not an option."

She founded the Potter's Crossing Community Center, which established itself as the headquarters for social, recreational, and cultural activities in the northeast section of the township. She was a member of the Northeast Civic Empowerment Club and the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, where she served as Sunday School Superintendent for more than two decades. She served as a hostess and assistant teacher of the Good News Club, a weekly Bible ministry for children, and was Vice President of the church's Willing Worker's Club as well as the Flower Guild.

She served as a member of the Metuchen-Edison Race Relations Council and worked as the Recreational Director at the township's North Edison Playground. In all, she lived in the area for more than 50 years before returning to Atlanta shortly before her death.

In the early 1990s, a new Community Center was constructed on Grove Avenue in Edison, and it was named for her, with a plaque at the center bearing the words she often would tell the children "Go to the top. Don't stop."

Now, a good example of that motto would be the incredibly significant Paul Robeson...

SLIDE:
PAUL BUSTILL ROBESON (1898-1976)

Yes, it's a true stretch to claim the amazing Paul Robeson for OUR own local history, despite his attending Rutgers University in nearby New Brunswick, but we have found a way! I will not deny that I was partly motivated (to find a way) as well by the fact our younger son is named for him!

How do we do it? On September 18, 1947 Robeson performed a concert in Plainfield for the Benefit of the Potter's Civil Improvement Club. In news articles following the performance, it was reported that Robeson had intended only to sing, but felt compelled to speak out against bans on speech. The Plainfield Board of Education had opened their high school auditorium for the benefit provided that Robeson only performed and did not speak about any political issues. In an interview prior to the concert, he stated he was unaware of this ban on any statements that he might make, and that although he would stick to the concert and let his performance speak for him, in the future he would "not appear anywhere that I can not speak my mind."

Included here is an advertisement promoting the concert and an excerpt of a news article summarizing his performance. It will be noted he made his opinions clear in his performance.

Despite all Robeson did, many know him most for his athleticism – but that's not so bad... whole books could be and probably are written about the role of sports in the struggle for civil rights.

An example of this are the Negro Leagues... and yes, many of its teams played right here in Metuchen!

SLIDE:
NEGRO LEAGUES BASEBALL

Others know far, far more about baseball and the Negro Leagues than I, but I'm sharing this in case there are those that don't know that there were in fact many games against Negro League teams played here locally in the 1930s by the local Metuchen club on a field located where Campbell School is now.

Dr. Richard Puerzer, who resides here in Metuchen, has presented wonderful programs about this. His program, "Big League Baseball in a Small Town: The Negro Leagues Visit Metuchen, NJ" is available online. In it, Dr. Puerzer mentions that there were about 50 games involving the Negro Leagues teams and at times as many as 5000 people attended. Teams such as the Brooklyn Royal Giants, Black Yankees, Newark Eagles, Hilldale Athletic Club, Bacharach Giants, and Detroit Clowns, as well as many more, all played here.

It's really worth your time to watch Dr. Puerzer's incredibly informative presentation! Links are on the historical society's website.

Shifting now to some more of the individuals that I've come up with during the research, the first is Walter Qualls, Metuchen's first Black councilperson, someone for whom – thanks to Phyllis Boeddinghaus and other historical society volunteers, we have a transcribed Oral History for.

SLIDE:
WALTER QUALLS (1938-1987)

Qualls was born in Louisiana and lived on a cotton farm where his father worked as a sharecropper. At the age of seven, he moved north to New Jersey to live with an uncle in the Port Reading Railroad Camp, and was the first Black child to attend schools in Port Reading and Woodbridge. After school, he served for two years in the Air Force.

Qualls later worked at the American Agriculture and Chemical Company, where he was the first Black worker to integrate his carpenter shop. He began to build his experience with labor unions and became the first

Black president of the International Chemical Workers Union, Local 434 and eventually earned a bachelor's degree in urban studies and labor studies from Rutgers University.

Qualls and his wife Tyrene Lee (Spencer) moved to Metuchen in 1970 and lived on Hampton Street. Soon after their move, Mayor Wernik approached him to run for Metuchen Borough Council, which he did successfully with John Wiley as his running mate in 1973, making him the first Black councilperson in Metuchen. His career also included work at Rutgers University, the Office of Economic Opportunity, the New Jersey Department of Labor and Industry, and work on the President Jimmy Carter and Governor Brendan Byrne campaigns. Thank you, Mr. Qualls!

Another Oral History Interviewee is Gardenia Emanuel.

SLIDE:
GARDENIA EMANUEL (1898-1990)

Born Gardenia Brinney, she moved to Metuchen following her marriage to Anthony Emanuel in 1916. Unfortunately her husband died of pneumonia shortly after the birth of their son Alston, shown here, in 1917.

After her husband's death, she designed and built her own house at 219 Central Avenue – I believe it is still there! This was a noted accomplishment for any woman at that time, even more so for a woman of color.

Mrs. Emanuel was active at New Hope Baptist Church in the choir, chorus, and missionary clubs, and was a Sunday school teacher for fifty years. She was a member of "Black Voices" in Metuchen, and the Metuchen Branch of the NAACP where she served in various leadership positions. In 1988 she was a recipient of the NAACP Freedom Fund Award for Distinguished Service.

Shown here is Mrs. Emanuel, later in life, and an article about her son Alston's service in World War II, as well as his Class of 1935 yearbook photograph.

Another New Hope congregant, and someone for whom we also have an Oral History, is Charles Butler.

SLIDE:
CHARLES LEE BUTLER (1931-2007)

Known as “Charlie”, Butler was the youngest of nine children. He graduated from Metuchen High School in 1949 before entering the military and serving in the Navy during the Korean War. He had spent much of his formative years training at the Metuchen YMCA, and continued boxing in the Navy. In 1951, he lost a controversial decision to become the Eastern boxing champion of the Golden Gloves tournament, losing him a spot in the Olympics. However, he was the 1952 All-Navy light heavyweight boxing champion. He later worked as a corrections officer, and was an active member of the New Hope Baptist Church, the Metuchen YMCA, and the Bethany Masonic Lodge in Newark.

In his oral history interview, he touches on the racial discrimination he experienced during his life both locally and nationally, and his family’s experience at *Rosewood*, Florida during the infamous 1923 massacre.

His 1949 yearbook photo is shown here, as well as his obituary and a Navy document about his boxing accomplishments.

Yet another for whom we have an Oral History is Perry Letsinger.

SLIDE:
PERRY LEE LETSINGER (1903-1993)

Letsinger was born and raised in Scotland Neck, North Carolina where he worked with his father as a farmer. In 1929 he moved with his wife and children to Perth Amboy, and the following year moved to Metuchen. They lived at 663 Middlesex Avenue until purchasing their own home on Sampson Street in 1939.

Letsinger found employment at Camp Raritan (aka Raritan Arsenal), where he worked for approximately thirty years as a laborer, foreman,

and surveillance inspector. He also worked as a salesman for Watkins Products and as a custodian at Campbell School. He was a Deacon at the Second Baptist Church, the Sunday school superintendent, and an advisor to the Missionary Society. He served as president of the Metuchen-Edison Branch of the NAACP, sat on the Board of Directors of the Metuchen YMCA, and was a member of the Masonic Grand Lodge. Letsinger also served on the Borough's Civil Rights Commission and the Borough Advisory Commission during the 1960s and 1970s.

In his 1978 oral history interview, he discusses his civic activities as president of the Metuchen-Edison Branch of the NAACP and the Civil Rights Commission.

The photographs included here are of Letsinger in the Grimstead Room during his oral history interview, with his family at his 50th wedding anniversary in 1973, and at the 50th Anniversary of the NAACP in New York City in 1959.

Moving on to some of the many, many notable Black veterans associated with Metuchen, we have Conklin Smith.

SLIDE:
SGT. GEORGE ROSCO CONKLIN SMITH (1886-1918)

Sargeant Smith is one of four Metuchen residents who died in service to our country during World War I. He and the three others (Edward Fugle, Harry Hanson, and Frank Hummer) are honored in Memorial Park.

Smith was the oldest of those from Metuchen, and the only one married. He and his wife, Euretha, lived at 31 Pearl Street, where the Metuchen Plaza is now. His service card indicates he died from Tuberculosis, and a letter from his wife explains that he had become very sick while on duty and was sent home in June of 1918 to convalesce. He never recovered, but was never discharged, and eventually died on December 7 that year.

What a handsome figure he makes in this military photograph! I would have liked to make his acquaintance.

Some veterans whom many of were lucky to get to know are Daniel Robinson and Austin Banks.

SLIDE:
SGT. DANIEL EDWARD ROBINSON (1925-2013) AND
CPL. AUSTIN FRANKLIN BANKS (1923-2021)

Although each of these fine gentlemen are worthy of their own individual entries, they are combined due to their service with the Montford Point Marines during World War II.

In 2012, these two men were presented with the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian honor, during an outdoor ceremony in front of Borough Hall. The following year the two received the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Outstanding Citizen of the Year award through the Metuchen Area Chamber of Commerce, and in 2016 – after Robinson's passing – Banks served as the Grand Marshal of the Memorial Day Parade and Ceremony.

These neighbors and friends had also served on Metuchen's Civil Rights Commission in the 1960s and 1970s, during a time when there was a push to increased fairness in housing and to appoint a Black police officer.

After serving in the Marines, Banks attended Howard University and Rutgers University. He was a longtime member and integral part of the Centenary United Methodist Church.

Robinson also attended Howard University and received a master's degree from the Polytechnic Institute of NYU. He worked as an electrical engineer and was active in the YMCA and with local scouting.

Picture here are Banks and Robinson at the 2012 ceremony, Banks with some children from his neighborhood, and one of Robinson's electrical patents.

File this next profile under “you never know when or where you will find exciting history”... I was in Hillside Cemetery, visiting some graves, as one does, and came across a veteran grave that needed some cleaning...

SLIDE:
QUEEN ESTHER MOORE WOODS (1915-2006)

The name was intriguing, so, knowing nothing more, I looked into this person.

Her obituary from 2006 didn't say much, but I found some articles about her from the late 1990s that mentioned she was featured in a documentary film called "To Serve My Country, To Serve My Race."

Turns out that Woods was one of 800 who volunteered to serve in the first Black unit of the Women's Army Corp. She was named for the Jewish hero honored during Purim, whose legacy she apparently embraced during her life. After her service, she worked as a clerk at Camp Kilmer, a youth corrections officer in North Brunswick, and later as a crossing guard in Metuchen. When some visual impairment issues threatened to slow her down, she instead volunteered as a foster grandparent for disabled children. She credited her skills developed in the military for her ability to work with children experiencing challenges.

I'd like to find and watch that documentary sometime soon! Next time you are Hillside Cemetery, look for the Queen yourself – who knows what you might find!

Speaking of regal individuals, one of Metuchen's most notable figures of any type is Gail Fisher, the Lady of Many Firsts!

SLIDE:
GAIL FISHER (1935-2000)

Many know that she worked at Seldow's store on Main Street, and even though she was born in Orange, she moved to Potter's Crossing when she was only two years old. Widowed, her mother ran a beauty salon for extra financial support for her family, leading to Gail being involved with modelling and beauty pageants.

Gail attended Metuchen High School (Class of 1954), where she was the first Black cheerleader – this was perhaps her first “first.” It was also at Metuchen High that she landed the lead role in the school play, an event which she later credited with sparking her interest in a career in the theatre. She was the first Black person hired to work as a salesclerk for Seldow’s, the first Black semifinalist in the New Jersey State Fair beauty contest, and then was awarded a scholarship to New York's American Academy of the Arts, where she was first Black student admitted.

In 1961, she was the first Black person to have a speaking role in a television commercial, for “All” laundry detergent. In 1968 she began her role as Peggy Fair on Mannix, for which she won an Emmy Award for Best Supporting Actress in a Television Drama Series – the first Black actor to win that award. She also won two Golden Globe awards, in 1971 and 1973, and was the first Black woman to do so. With Mannix, she was only the second Black woman (after Nichelle Nichols of Star Trek) to show prominently on weekly television – some, though, argue she was the *first*, as she so often was.

Fast forward to modern day, and the realization that a good historical society will work hard to document the present day almost as much as the past, but it’s a much harder job to discern what’s important to document – or not – when it’s happening all around you.

One of these people whose significance is not in the past is Rodney Smith.

**SLIDE:
RODNEY SMITH**

Some may know Rodney from playing music locally, and he is incredibly talented at that, but it’s the world of skateboarding and entrepreneurship where he is a legend! And living in our midst!

Known as the Godfather of East Coast Skateboarding, he cofounded SHUT Skates in 1986, the first street skateboard company on the East Coast. In the 1990s he cofounded Zoo York, a pioneering company in the skate lifestyle brand, and in 2018, he cofounded All One, an eco-friendly action sports apparel brand. There are video interviews with him

online discussing a custom line of Vans shoes he designed, and in the video are shown many people from across the nation who discuss his significance.

Do you have a pair of Rodney Smith Vans in your closet? If so, you are very lucky!

Now, let's go backward again in time to arguably Metuchen's MOST SIGNIFICANT historical figure of any classification.

SLIDE:
THOMAS MUNDY PETERSON (1824 - 1904)

On March 31, 1870, one day after the ratification of the 15th Amendment which secured him the right to vote, Peterson became the first African American to cast a ballot in a U.S. election under the provisions of the 15th Amendment. His historic vote took place at the Perth Amboy City Hall, where the citizens were voting to settle a disagreement over whether to revise the town charter or abandon it in favor of a township form of government.

Peterson's parents, Lucy and Thomas, had been married in 1820 at what is now the First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen. Although his father Thomas' status as freed or enslaved has not been established yet, we know Lucy was still enslaved at the time but was manumitted in 1822, two years before Thomas was born. Although the exact location of his birth is still not determined with certainty – and may never be owing to the dearth of records for people of color at the time - Peterson regular stated that he was born in Metuchen. I have an educated guess where he was born, and I have big dreams for honoring it - if it can be confirmed – but historians disagree about it right now. My friend Gordon Bond, author of "To Cast A Freedman's Vote" (2020), believes it was in a different location. We will figure it out eventually!

Until recently, with the establishment of Peterson Park downtown – thank you Manasquan Bank and the Borough of Metuchen – too many people in the area had no idea who he was. That has happily changed and I know the powers that (now) be are interested in elevating his legacy

even more – as evidenced by their successfully nominating Metuchen to the NJ Black History Trail because of Peterson.

**SLIDE:
SO, WE HAVE COME TO THE END... OR NOT!**

No, it's never the end! Because there are so many more notable people that could be honored, many more to be researched and discovered, and many more whose notable times have not yet come!

To give you an idea of what I mean, here are just some of the many not included, but could have been...

**SLIDE:
SO MANY MORE TO HONOR, SO MANY MORE TO COME!**

- Percy Milligan and his son – a story with many twists and turns
- Bernard Spigner, whom many knew, and whom we lost too soon
- Diane Tate, Metuchen High's first black Majorette and granddaughter of Rev. Nelson Tate.
- Henry Brown, first Black Board of Ed member
- James Dudley, Metuchen second Black councilperson, first black council president, and (as interim mayor for a bit), Metuchen's first Black mayor.
- Lisa Crooms-Robinson, a lawyer and current Howard University professor who is in the midst of an amazing career... who knows what historians will have to say about her 50 years from now?!?

So, thank you for coming tonight to hear me ramble on about my (*sometimes flawed*) research and where it has led. Happily a Princeton-based foundation has provided some grant funding to compile this research into a booklet, so more refining and sharing will be done soon in the coming months.

Again, thank you.