



Newsletter of the Wintonbury Historical Society

Bloomfield, Connecticut

February 2021

CONSTRUCTION OF NEW RAMP COMPLETED!

The Fanny Gabriel History Center may be just over ten years old, but the original ramp was already getting unsafe because of wood rot. After much discussion and examining a few bids, the Board of Directors voted to replace the ramp at a cost of \$15,000, drawing upon invested funds. Regan Total Construction of Peters Road in Bloomfield built a new ramp and a new back step, both made of weather-proof Trex planks, completing the job soon after Thanksgiving. When the current pandemic is over and public access to the History Center is restored, the new ramp will be much appreciated.



Ramp construction photos

By Bill Weissenburger

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BOARD OF DIRECTORS HIGHLIGHTS

The Board of Directors met via Zoom on November 18 and January 13. In November, the 2020-2021 budget was approved (see page 7), and an expenditure of \$2,800 was approved for removal of an old tree on the property of WHS Park Avenue neighbor, Mr. Cowell—a tree that could damage the Old Farm School if it fell. Attorney Aaron Romano prepared the legal permission form. The work is scheduled for February 25.

In January, the treasurer reported income of \$5,500 as of December 31 and expenses of \$4,300. Our assets total \$315,000. The year-end appeal brought in \$3,751 from 58 donors. Ruthanne shared tentative program plans. Wendy Wolcott will present a March program on her aunt, Lydia Wadhams. In April, Walt Woodward will present a Zoom program on his book, *What Makes Connecticut Connecticut?* Hopefully we'll be able to gather in person in September and have Walt's Band of Steady Habits. A 2021 house tour might be a possibility on October 17 or 24.

The state of Connecticut asks that, before we open our doors, that we self-certify that we are following strict safety guidelines to keep our volunteers and visitors safe from the coronavirus. Bill, Diana Barnard, and John Cappadona will meet to discuss this and ensure that we are in compliance.

ATTENTION!

The Wintonbury Drummer invites readers to contribute articles, personal reminiscences, book reviews, photographs, etc. Materials for publication in the April issue should be received by March 10, 2021. (Or better yet—do it now!) Send directly to the editor at 14 Julie Lane in Bloomfield or attach to an email. Thank you.

OUR BUSINESS MEMBERS*(renewals currently on hold)*

Bloomfield Garage, 986 Park Avenue
 Bloomfield Village Pizza, 34 Tunxis Avenue
 Geissler's Supermarket, 40 Tunxis Avenue
 Ginza Japanese Cuisine, 14 Wintonbury Mall
 Isaac's Bagel Café, 16-B Mountain Avenue
 Pasticceria Italia, 10 Wintonbury Mall
 Thai Palace, 18 Wintonbury Mall
 Sir Speedy Printing, 21 Old Windsor Road
 Wade's Farms, 498 Simsbury Road

*(And there's room for more!)****The Wintonbury Drummer***

is published five times a year by
 Wintonbury Historical Society, Inc.
 151-153 School Street, P.O. Box 7454
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ASPECTS OF BLACK HISTORY IN BLOOMFIELD



20th Century Citizens

Editor's Note: When Bloomfield's new Alvin and Beatrice Wood Human Services Center opened in 2019, the *Wintombury Drummer* included an article about Mr. and Mrs. Wood in its September issue. In its recent November 2020 issue, the *Drummer* explored the growing population in southeast Bloomfield following the introduction of the trolley in 1909. This article looks at a few items of Black history in Bloomfield in the years prior to World War II. Most of this article was written by Fred Hesketh in 2001. Beatrice Llewellyn proofread and contributed some information. Additional facts from U. S. Censuses have been added by the editor. Reader responses are welcomed.

It is noticeable that these Bloomfield families all have roots in the South. Between 1916 and 1970 some six million African Americans migrated from the South to the North. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, at the beginning of the 20th century, 90 percent of Black Americans lived in the South. By 1970 nearly half of all African Americans lived in Northern cities. These families share that history.



Alvin and Beatrice Wood

WHS archives photo

Alvin Wood's father, James Wood, moved from Virginia to Hartford in 1903; and about the same time his mother, Pearl Robinson, also moved to Hartford from Virginia. James and Pearl married in 1907, and Alvin was born in 1909. When Alvin was in the sixth grade in 1920, the family moved to 28 Greenwood Avenue in Bloomfield. In 1934, Alvin married Beatrice Morris on the day when they both graduated from Howard University, Washington, D.C. The couple moved to Bloomfield, where they rented for two years before moving into his parents' home on Greenwood Avenue. They lived on Greenwood for about thirty years before moving to a new home on Wadhams Road. Alvin became well known in town for his contributions as a leader in neighborhood, school, and town affairs.

When Alvin Wood and his parents moved to southeast Bloomfield in 1920, there were four families across Blue Hills Avenue who had been neighbors on Martin Street in Hartford: Hughes, Wheeler, Willis and Early. We can learn a few things about these neighbors by checking public sources such as U.S. Census records.

Neighbors

Alexander and Emma **Hughes** owned their home at 27 Hubbard Street in 1920. He was born in 1879 in Virginia and died in December 1958 in Bloomfield. The 1920 census says they had a boarder, a single man named Don Early, who was born in Virginia in 1870. By 1930 they had moved across Blue Hills Avenue to 37 Gilbert Avenue. In the same household in 1930 were seven other people: son John, 27, and his wife Helen, 22, and their infant children Blanche and Emma; daughter Sarah, 25, and her husband William Willis, 25; and boarder George Early, age 42. (continued on next page ►)

In 1920, Mary L. **Wheeler**, 45, and her husband, William, 57, were living in a rented home on Martin Street in Hartford. Mary had been born in North Carolina in 1875. By 1930, Mary was a widow and owned her own home at 223 Central Avenue in Bloomfield (off Cottage Grove Road). By 1940 she had moved to nearby 81 Cross Street and shared her home with grandchildren Dorothy Wheeler, 16, and Royse Wheeler, 14.



Frances Willis Cornwall
Obituary photo, *Courant*

In the 1920 Census, James W. **Willis**, 42, and his wife Nellie (Robinson), 34, lived on Martin Street in Hartford with their son, William, 15. On November 15, 1921, they welcomed a baby daughter, Frances Jeanette, of whom more later. As we saw above, by 1930 William was married to Sarah Hughes and living with his in-laws. In 1940, William and Sarah were still living at 37 Gilbert Avenue, but he is head of the house. They rented the property, and he was a truck driver. Their children were Evelyn, 10, William, 8, and Lorraine, 3.

Frances **Willis**, James and Nellie's daughter, graduated as Bloomfield High School Salutatorian in 1939, the first black in Bloomfield to be so honored. After college and nursing school, Frances married Leon A. Cornwall on August 30, 1952 and lived at 38 Brookline Street until her death at age 80 on July 4, 2002. She outlived her husband and their only child, Noel. Frances was a head nurse at St. Francis Hospital and then worked for the state Department of Health Services. She was a lifelong member of St. Monica's Episcopal Church, Hartford.

Scott and Anna **Early** lived at 16 Harding Avenue, Bloomfield, in 1930, along with Scott's father Alfred. They were both born in 1896, he in Virginia and she in North Carolina. Scott was a janitor at an insurance company, and she seems to have done housework in private homes.

Other neighbors were Philip **Peterson** and his wife Eliza (Gwynn). He was born about 1885 in Virginia and married on August 17, 1921. He died in February 1937, and the funeral was at Shiloh Baptist Church. His 1937 obituary says he lived on Taft Avenue off Cottage Grove Road. Philip and Eliza had four daughters (Mildred, Dorothy, Gertrude, Harriet) and a son, Rufus, of Hartford (see article on pages 5-6).

High School Activities

Bloomfield High School's orchestra, chorus, and glee club were well known, and some individuals went on to musical careers. Marion Jackson (1936) went on to the Boston Conservatory of Music. Emma and Arlene Williams and Barbara Canns (1937) formed a trio. Mrs. Mabel Mann, Bloomfield's music director from 1921-1943, wrote in her memoirs, "We were proud of our Girls' Trio. They sang beautifully together, many Negro spirituals, and I pushed them into programs in Bloomfield and Hartford, several times on the radio."



Bloomfield High School on Park Avenue

WHS archives photo

A number of high school students, black and white, (Williams, Canns, Cromwell, Wimbush, and Murray), took part in an outdoor re-creation of Frances Gillette's underground railroad station stop in conjunction with the 1935 centennial celebration in Bloomfield Center. The scene depicted several horse-drawn carts arriving covered with straw. After they stopped, the drivers surveyed their surroundings to be sure it was safe for the hidden passengers to come into the open to be fed. Overjoyed that they had safely completed this portion of their journey undiscovered, they broke into song to the delight of the assembled crowds.

Sources used: CT Death Index, 1949-2012; U. S. Social Security Applications and Claims, 1936-2017; U. S. Censuses, 1900-1940; *Hartford Courant* obituaries; Mabel Mann, *Music for Every Child* (WHS publication, undated)

BHS ALUMNUS FINDS SUCCESS

Rufus Peterson, the only black graduate in the BHS class of 1929, was an outstanding student. He played soccer, basketball, and baseball and performed in the orchestra, glee club, and chorus. In addition, he served two years as class president. He wrote, "One kind word spoken at the right time and in a spirit of true sincerity can do much toward making the earth all that its creator intended it to be." He added, "Think of this large world of ours peopled with beings of diversified nationality and eccentricities, suffering people, people with aching hearts and troubled minds. What would a kind word mean to them, a pat on the back, a bit of encouragement?"*

Rufus Mertley Peterson was born in Virginia in 1910. His parents were Philip and Eliza (Gwynn) Peterson, ages 25 and 18 at the time. The 1930 U.S. Census reported that the Petersons owned their home at 223 Central Avenue in Bloomfield and that Philip worked for the trolley company. By the time of his death, they were living on nearby Taft Avenue. Philip's funeral at Shiloh Baptist Church, Hartford, was held on February 18, 1937. The family's association with Shiloh continued into the next generation.

Records show that Rufus Peterson, age 20, was married on January 5, 1929 to Edith Crosby, age 19. About ten years later in 1940 the young couple was living at 129 Brown Street, Hartford, with Edith's parents, Benjamin Crosby, 69, and his wife Anna, 66. The young couple had four sons (Raoul, Gerard, Manning, and Rufus Franklin) and one daughter (Anne).



Rufus Peterson, 1929

High School yearbook photo

On his World War II Draft Card, Rufus Peterson is described as weighing 156, with a height of 5'11", brown eyes, and a dark brown complexion. His employer was First National Bank of Hartford. His wife was Edythe [sic] Crosby Peterson.

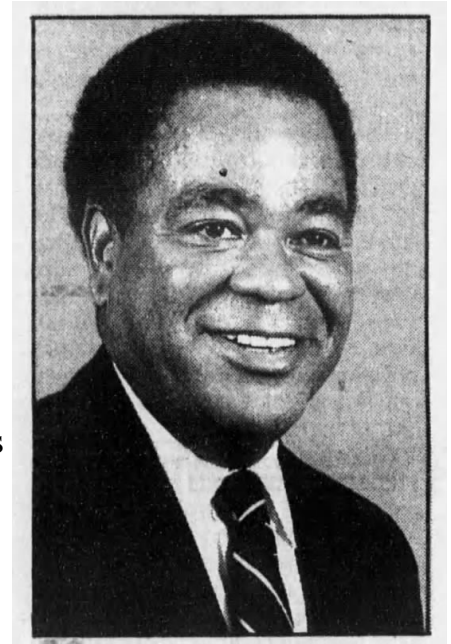
Rufus took part in numerous musical performances at Shiloh Baptist Church, and in March 1958 was part of the cast for a performance of the opera *Aida* at the Bushnell. He continued his interest in sports, for we read that he played basketball on a *Courant* team in December 1955.

Rufus and Edith Crosby were divorced in 1944. At some point he married another Edith, Edith Mae Taliaferro Chafin, who was the organist at Shiloh Baptist. This Edith had five children of her own, making ten children between the two of them. About 1971 the couple retired to a home on Martha's Vineyard and became active in the First Baptist Church, Vineyard Haven.

Rufus died in Hartford in 1993 at the age of 83. (continued on next page ►)

"Before retiring from Hamilton Standard Division of Pratt & Whitney," his December 28, 1993, obituary stated, "he resided in the Hartford area for 57 years. He graduated from Bloomfield High School in 1929. As a superb student athlete, he played soccer, baseball, and was Captain of the basketball team. He was an editor of the "Tattler," the school yearbook, and lent his melodious tenor voice to many glee clubs and choral groups. In addition, he was co-author of the Bloomfield High School song. He served Shiloh Baptist Church in many ways including the Sunday School and many musical programs. With his devoted wife Edith, he served many congregations in Hartford and on the island of Martha's Vineyard during their past 22 years of residence there."

One of the sons of Rufus and Edith Crosby was Gerard, born in 1933, who would grow up to work in the insurance industry and become the first black Executive Director of the Hartford Civic Center. A search of *Hartford Courant* archives yields several mentions of Gerard: (1) April 13, 1951: he was married to Carole Minor (divorced in 1983). (2) On March 19, 1966, Gerard Peterson "of Bloomfield" is a speaker at the Second Annual Negro History Program at AME Zion Church. (3) An article on April 27, 1977, says he is a member of the Bloomfield Town Council. (4) By May 30, 1985, he is mentioned as director of the Hartford Civic Center, and (5) on May 2, 1993, as "Executive Director of the Hartford Civic Center," it is said that he "has a good reputation in the industry." (6) An August 8, 1993 story describes Gerard Peterson as an avid golfer who was the first Black member of the Keney Park Golf Club.



Gerard Peterson, 1993

Hartford Courant photo

Gerard's younger brother, Rufus "Butch" Peterson, graduated from Bulkeley High School and attended the University of Hartford. He served eight years in the U.S. Navy, after which he worked for the Department of Defense. He also worked for the Hartford Civic Center and the Metropolitan District Commission. After moving to Martha's Vineyard, he joined the staff of the Steamship Association. He enjoyed talking to people and helping visitors to the island. He celebrated his recovery from alcoholism every day. "His consuming joy in life was golf, becoming a caddy at age 12" and being Connecticut State Champion at age 16. He died from cancer in 2003 at the age of 66, and his memorial service was at First Baptist Church, Vineyard Haven.

*Quoted by Fred Hesketh in his 2001 article

Notes from My Reading: "We do not usually think of climate reconstruction as part of the work of historians. Nor do we think of past climates as part of historical preservation, in the same way [that] we preserve traditional architecture and landscapes or place historical objects in museums. However, with global warming we are losing a part of our heritage, just as surely as when monuments are destroyed or artifacts lost. Climates have always changed—but not with the speed they are changing now. [. . .] We risk becoming cut off from the rhythms of past seasons, their patterns of weather, the timing of their freezes and thaws, frosts and flowerings, and the feel of their extremes."

From Sam White, *A Cold Welcome: The Little Ice Age and Europe's Encounter with North America*. Harvard UP: 2017. (page 256)

The September 2020 issue of the *Drummer* asked readers what they thought about the push to remove statues of dubious historic men from public places. At the right is one reader response from Marilyn Johnston. ►

Wintonbury Historical Society Annual Budget
July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021

Income

Dues.....	\$3,500
Fundraising.....	0
Donations.....	4,000
Memorials.....	0
Program support.....	0
Publications.....	250
Bank interest.....	20
Endowment withdrawal (if needed).....	<u>3,420</u>
Total income.....	\$11,190

Expenses

Utilities:

Electricity.....	\$1,600
Telephone/internet.....	1,400
Water.....	1,000
Heating oil.....	300
Natural gas.....	<u>1,700</u>
Total utilities.....	6,000
Post office box.....	120
Memberships.....	120
Meetings/speakers.....	600
Printing.....	1,200
Postage.....	800
Office/State filing fee.....	400
Building maintenance/repairs.....	1,500
Collections.....	150
COVID protocols.....	200
Curators.....	<u>100</u>
Total expenses.....	\$11,190

Bruce Bidwell, who died at age 91 on November 9, 2020, shared his memories of Bloomfield with a Prosser Library audience a year previously on November 8, 2019. He had recently published a memoir in book form, and copies are still available at the Gabriel History Center.



Hartford Courant
photo

On Writing and Rewriting History

I happen to own a 1960 *Colliers Encyclopedia*. Compiled one hundred years after the Civil War, there is no entry in it for Frederick Douglass, leading abolitionist, writer and orator on the national stage of that era, no entry for Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 19th century's premier activist for women's suffrage. (In fact, the *only* entry under "Women" is "Women's Diseases.") This is evidence of the erasure of history. However, the ever-changing eye of history expands and clarifies our country's record. Our sight gets clearer. Historians for the last sixty years have been researching, coming to grips with our legacy. How quick some are now to call this process "cancel culture" or "erasing history."

In the past, we erected monuments to men like Columbus and John Mason of Windsor who were once portrayed as the characters we wanted them to be. Now time has passed. Descendants of marginal groups raise objections to their exclusion and the falsifying of records. How we can ask children to revere people whose statues represent half-truths?

We now know Columbus and Mason, though men of accomplishment, practiced extreme cruelty and genocide on indigenous people. I do not condone violence in removing historical statues and believe local communities should decide what should be done. I think statues left in public spaces (not moved to museums) ought to have plaques added giving the fuller story. Beyond that, I'd advocate for more statues of better role models drawn from American culture for young people to emulate. There are countless men and woman, of many backgrounds in our history, deserving of that tribute and that emulation. *M J*

2020 Honor Roll of Year-End Donors

(58 donors gave \$3,751)

Albert, Dori-Ann and Roger
 Babal, Gregory
 Baram, David and Paula
 Barker, Michael and Shelley
 Beeching, Barbara
 Bercowetz, Bonnie
 Berman, Robert and Phyllis
 Bernstein, Sara, and Joseph Shortall
 Blackman, Wilfred C.
 Blumenfeld, Louis and Jacqueline
 Isaacson
 Clarke, Ronald A.
 Cobb, Frances A.
 Curran, Edmund T.
 Dahlgren-Dechand, Judith
 Demery, Robert and Edna
 Dudenhofer, Richard and Nancy
 Dworin, Judy, and William Lambert
 Friedman, Arlene K.
 Gough, Kevin, and Paula Jones
 Grisevich, George W.
 Guilmartin, Homer F.
 Hager, David and Lois
 Hesketh, Frederick and Yolande
 Johnston, Marilyn and Ray
 Katz, Tobie E.
 Kelliher, Marion C.
 Kramer, Nancy and Kurt
 Kulpa, Stanley and Marilyn
 Lawson, Alfred B.
 Lobre, John and Gloria
 Marchetti, Ronald and Ruthanne
 McKay, Paul and Elaine
 Merrow, Elizabeth A.
 Miller, Robert and Susan
 Mitchell, Andrew and Joanne
 Nargi, Loretta and James
 Netz, Janice and Ronald
 Novak, Dordre and Andre
 Panke, Nicholas and Carol
 Pepin, Catherine L.
 Pierce, Richard and Jean
 Regini, Charles A.
 Schenck, Phillip
 Schmoll, Ralph and Louise
 Schulman, Sydney and Elba
 Smith, Robert and Sharon
 Stiles, Tonie and Robert
 Stockton, Marilyn D.
 Stout, John and Elizabeth
 Sullivan, Patrick and Kathleen

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Thompson, William and Shirley
 Tinto, Gail D.
 Weissenburger, William and Lois Ann
 Whalen, Robert and Penelope
 Whitman, Mara A.
 Willoughby, Gordon and Dorothy
 Wolcott, Wendy
 Zyla, Barbara

*Thank
 you*