

The aking of ilwaukee Stories

Historical Time Period : 1835-Present

African Americans Lead the Way in Milwaukee



*Vel Phillips,
Milwaukee's First
African-American &
First Woman on
Common Council*



*MUSIC Anti-Segregation
Demonstration with Lloyd Barbee*



Ezekiel Gillespie

Connecting to "The Making of Milwaukee"

Video Chapters: #5 - Neighbors and Strangers, #13 - The Roaring Twenties & #16 - City Under Siege

Curriculum Chapter: Gr. 5-12 - Modern Milwaukee

African Americans Lead the Way in Milwaukee

African Americans have lived in Milwaukee since the early 1800's. Many provided extraordinary leadership. One of the first, Joe Oliver, came to Milwaukee in 1835 when Milwaukee was just a small settlement. He worked with a French-Canadian fur trader named Solomon Juneau who became Milwaukee's first mayor. Joe Oliver voted in the first election held here. It is likely the case that Joe was able to cast a vote because the village was just in its infancy and the territory of Wisconsin had not yet become a state with a constitution. Voting rights for African Americans became a controversial issue in Wisconsin about a decade later.

Sully Watson, his wife Susanna and their children came to Milwaukee in 1850. Sully was born into slavery in 1772. He labored hard as a slave in the state of Virginia for many years. Eventually he was able to buy his freedom for \$500. When he arrived in Milwaukee, Sully was seventy-eight years old. Yet he worked as a whitewasher and painter to help support his family. There weren't many African Americans living in Milwaukee in 1850 but a decade later there were more than one hundred free African Americans here.

Ezekiel Gillespie was another early African American settler. He came to Milwaukee in 1854 and worked as a grocer. Ezekiel served his community in other important ways. Like many African Americans who came to Milwaukee, he faced discrimination because of his skin color. At this time, the state of Wisconsin did not let African Americans vote even though the state had passed a law in 1849 guaranteeing African Americans voting rights. In 1866, Ezekiel fought for his right to vote in Wisconsin. He sued the state and his case went to the Wisconsin Supreme Court, the highest level of our state judicial system. Eventually the Supreme Court ruled in Ezekiel Gillespie's favor. This occurred four years before the United States constitution was amended to say that no United States citizen or any State could be denied the right to vote because of race or color. *[It was not until 1919 that the United States constitution was amended to allow women to vote in Federal elections. In 1934 the Wisconsin constitution was amended to give women full voting rights.]*

Ezekiel Gillespie was also a founding member of Saint Mark's African Methodist Episcopal Church. Like other ethnic groups who migrated to Milwaukee, African Americans formed their own churches. Saint Mark's originally met to worship in a blacksmith shop. In 1869, the congregation built Saint Mark's African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Milwaukee on Fourth Street and Kilbourn Avenue. This church became an important center for African American worship and community meetings. St. Marks has since moved to Atkinson Avenue. It continues to actively serve Milwaukee's African American community.

During the 1920's, Milwaukee businesses urged African Americans to move here to work in the city's factories. However, these new workers were often the first people to be fired or laid off from their jobs when businesses were not making money. Things were also difficult for African Americans because of so called Jim Crow Laws. These laws, in the Northern United States, promoted segregation or separation of African American people from white people. So even though the right to vote in Wisconsin was finally upheld, it took African Americans many decades before they were able to gain other rights.

In spite of discrimination, African Americans joined together to form productive communities. One such community just north and west of downtown was called Bronzeville, a generic or common term given at the time to African American communities within a city. Milwaukee's Bronzeville had bakeries, custard stands, clothing stores, restaurants, barbershops, grocery stores, doctors and dentists. There were well-known theaters and nightclubs that attracted both African and European Americans to the area. African Americans also created their own religious and social organizations to support each other with child care, job opportunities, money lending, and medical assistance. They also created a newspaper in 1916 called the *Milwaukee Enterprise*. In 1919, the Milwaukee Urban League was established and focused on fighting for the civil rights of African American workers and businesses. Sully Watson's great granddaughter, Mabel Raimey, the first African American woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Later she became a board member of the Milwaukee Urban League. This organization continues to help African Americans become

successful in Milwaukee's economic and social life. Another prominent African American businessman at this time was Wilbur Halyard. He started the Columbia Building and Loan in 1925. His bank lent money to other African Americans to help them buy homes and start their own businesses.

Although African Americans had lived and worked in Milwaukee for many years, at the turn of the 20th century they were few in number compared to other ethnicities. That changed dramatically between 1905 and 1935 when many African Americans migrated to northern states during the "Great Migration". Milwaukee's African American population grew steadily and by 1960, 15% of Milwaukee's population was African American.

But African Americans continued to face discrimination and prejudice. One practice was called "red-lining". Some banks marked a red line on a map to indicate an area where they would not loan money. Those areas were most often African American inner city neighborhoods. Because of red-lining many African Americans could not get the loans they needed to buy homes. In addition, some Milwaukee citizens refused to sell their homes to African Americans and moved out of the city as more African Americans moved in. This "white flight" created a very segregated Milwaukee that still exists today. These events, along with other forms of discrimination, further influenced African Americans to continue their fight for civil rights.

Vel Phillips became one of those civil rights leaders. She was born in Milwaukee, attended North Division High School and Howard University. In 1951 she became the first African-American woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School. In 1956, she was the first African American and the first woman elected to the Milwaukee Common Council. Vel worked very hard to get the other leaders of Milwaukee to abolish "redlining". Her challenge was difficult as all of the other members on the Milwaukee Common Council were European Americans. Those aldermen were under a great deal of pressure from constituents who did not want African Americans as neighbors.

Vel Phillips fought for equal rights with a Catholic priest named Father James Groppi. Groppi was dedicated to serving God and all Milwaukee citizens regardless of their color or ethnicity. Vel Phillips and Father Groppi led protest marches in Milwaukee for 200 days in a row to bring attention to the way African Americans were treated unfairly. Groppi also led a group of young black Milwaukeeans known as the NAACP Youth Council (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Groppi, Phillips and the marchers walked for justice in all kinds of weather; cold, rain and heat. Many Milwaukeeans supported this cause for justice but others did not. At times, the marchers had to face other citizens who shouted hateful words and sometimes threw bricks and bottles that caused serious injuries. But despite this hostility, the protestors persevered. They continued their protest marches until March of 1968. By the summer of 1968, the Milwaukee Common Council and many suburbs finally passed open-housing laws that made it illegal to refuse to sell homes to African Americans.

Around the same time, Lloyd Barbie, a Milwaukee attorney and state assemblyman, worked tirelessly with an organization called MUSIC (the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee) whose goal was to integrate MPS (Milwaukee Public Schools) classrooms. Those who supported MUSIC believed that school segregation produced significant inequalities in education. After a year of demonstrations, MUSIC failed to convince the Milwaukee school board to change their policies. So, on June 17, 1965, Barbie filed a lawsuit in the United States federal court on behalf of 41 black and white students. It was called *Amos et al. v. Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee*. The lawsuit charged the MPS board with intentionally maintaining racial segregation. Several years later a federal judge ruled that MPS had to design a plan to integrate the schools. Barbie continued his leadership to ensure equal educational opportunities for all students until his death in 2002.

Another great educational leader in Milwaukee at this time was Frances Brock Starms. Mrs. Starms strongly believed in the importance of early childhood or pre-school education. She came to Milwaukee in 1950, taught in MPS, and supervised student teachers for UW-Milwaukee. In 1959, she became the Director of the MPS Head Start Program. Mrs. Starms was a very inspirational leader in the African American community. She was designated "Queen Mother" because she inspired school children and the community with her stories and poetry that highlighted the rich, enduring history and culture of African Americans. Mrs. Starms was the

first living person to have a Milwaukee Public School named after her. Today three schools represent the Starms legacy: Starms Discovery Learning, Starms Early Childhood and Starms Monumental.

African Americans have had a place in Milwaukee's history since its humble beginnings. Over time courageous African American leaders have emerged to advocate for equal rights and improved opportunities. Leaders like Joe Oliver, Ezekiel Gillespie, Mabel Raimy, Wilbur Halyard, Vel Phillips, Lloyd Barbie and Frances Starms led the way. But despite their work, the struggle for equality and a good life for all continues today. There will always be a need for leaders who are strong, fearless and dedicated to justice for all. Who will become our next extraordinary African American leaders in Milwaukee?