Welcome aboard on this journey through the history of African Americans in Erie County. This project, a joint endeavor between the Edinboro Area Historical Society and the Mercyhurst University Public History program, is designed to invite local residents and visitors to northwest Pennsylvania to discover the richly fascinating and important history of African Americans in this region. This history is not simply African American history—it is American history. The places, persons, and events you will learn about on this tour are vital to understanding the larger economic, political, and cultural history of northwest Pennsylvania and, in turn, its place in the overall history of the nation.

This heritage trail includes both tangible, existing structures and places and those which have long disappeared to the ravages of time and demolition. Even in the case of those buildings which are no longer extant, the visitor will discover what took place there, or the persons linked to that site, and will—this author hopes—feel the spirit and significance of that time and place in Erie and American history.
City of Erie

Sites Outside of the City of Erie
Sites of Importance

A. African Americans in the Battle of Lake Erie State Historical Marker/ Maritime Museum
B. Soldiers and Sailors Home
C. Harry T. Burleigh Homestead
D. Vosburgh Barber Shop
E. Vosburgh Mansion
F. Jerusalem
G. Lawrence Homestead
H. Lawrence Cleaning and Dyeing
I. Bayview Park
J. Reverend Ernest Franklin Smith’s Good Samaritan AME Zion Church
K. Negro Welfare Mission
L. Lawrence Music Studio
M. John S. Hicks Home and Ice Cream Factory
N. Pope Hotel
O. St. James African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church
P. Franklin’s Gem City Ice Cream Company
Q. Gospel Hill Cemetery
R. Old Stonehouse
S. Bladen Farm
T. McLane Church
U. First Universalist Church
V. Smith Family Farm
A. African Americans in the Battle of Lake Erie State Historical Marker: Maritime Museum-150 East Front Street

The Maritime Museum is the first stop on the tour. Once inside the museum you will learn about the Battle of Lake Erie and the sailors who fought bravely. Don’t miss the Flagship Niagara! When outside near the Niagara you will see a state historical marker dedicated to African American sailors who fought alongside Oliver Hazard Perry. The number of African American sailors who participated in the Battle of Lake Erie in September 1813 was approximately 20% of the total number who served in the fleet.

B. Soldiers and Sailors Home- 560 East 3rd Street

Construction of what would be the Soldiers and Sailors home began in this spot in the year 1867 soon after the Civil War. It was originally only for Marines but soon became a place for all veterans who needed a safe haven. The first generation of veterans to inhabit the Soldiers and Sailors Home were American patriots of the (Union) Grand Army of the Republic, who fought in the great Civil War to extend freedom for all Americans. Pennsylvania was one of the few states that had this type of service available for their veterans. It was a place for injured or homeless veterans of any branch of the armed forced could live out their lives with staff trained to take care of them.
C. Harry T. Burleigh
Homestead 137 East 3rd Street

Harry Thacker Burleigh is arguably the most famous African American from the city of Erie. His grandfather, Hamilton Waters, was a slave who bought his freedom and found his way to Erie. Making his earnings as a lamplighter, he would take his grandson, Harry, along with him and they would sing the slave songs Hamilton had grown so fond of. These plantation melodies would profoundly shape Harry’s musical sensibilities as he grew to become a famous soloist, composer, and America’s first black concert artist. What set him apart from modern artists was his adaptation and incorporation of plantation melodies and spirituals in his performances. His teacher, the world famous composer, Anton Dvorak especially appreciated this dimension of Burleigh’s artistry. It is very important to note that, “for all their merit, spirituals did not initiate Burleigh’s career as a composer but climaxed an already successful one.”

D & E. Vosburgh Mansion and Barber Shop
314 French Street/ 3rd and French Street

On this site once stood the mansion of Albert Vosburgh, an affluent businessman during his time, was important to the abolition movement in this area. He worked with other prominent African Americans in the western part of the state in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. It is very possible that he helped fugitives to their freedom because of his affluence and ability to help with food, clothing, and shelter and his connections to other abolitionists. It is likely that Vosburgh and others could have helped runaways cross the lake to Canada or make their way through New York to Canada, whichever was the safest and quickest route at the time.
F. Jerusalem—north of Sixth Street and west of Sassafras Street towards the Bayfront

This is not a specific site but a section of the city. Some of the earliest African American residents of Erie lived in this area called Jerusalem. William Himrod, an early entrepreneur in the manufacturing of ironworks, purchased this area for the African American and poor white communities to live on affordable land of their own. It soon became a safe haven for African Americans relocating to Erie. The area covered the west side of 6th street, north to the Bayfront and from Sassafras Street west to Cherry Street. It is hard to imagine today, but others kept the name because it was so difficult to reach from the city.

G. Lawrence Homestead
221 Front Street

You are looking at the home of the prominent Lawrence family of the late 1800’s. Ada Lawrence, a descendent of this family, meticulously kept her family history preserved and available to those who wished to learn. Ada is an important figure in her own right. As the second black teacher hired in the City of Erie, she was hired in 1946 at Wayne School and worked there for 30 years. Until recently she lived in the home that her family has resided in for generations.
**H. Lawrence Cleaning and Dyeing**

402 West 3rd Street

Emma Gertrude Lawrence was born in 1858, married in 1881, and widowed with four children in 1889. To take care of her family she would wash clothing for a living. She opened Lawrence Cleaning and Dyeing in 1906 becoming the first Black female business owner in Erie.

**I. Bayview Park-500 W 2nd St**

Here at Bayview Park on the northern edge of Jerusalem, African Americans made Erie sports history. Bayview Park was home to the local black baseball team, the Pontiacs. First known as the St. James A.M.E. Sunday School team in the early 1930’s, they were also known as the Gem City Monarchs, Flanders Barbers from the old Lawrence Hotel, and the Empire Athletic Club. They were best known, however, as the Pontiacs, following their sponsorship by Longnecker Pontiac, and keeping that name from 1936-1956. They became part of the Glenwood League. They were the outdoor entertainment of the time. Along with the Monarchs, an independent all black basketball team, they were the best known and most beloved African American teams in Erie Sports history. When visiting the park, check out the historical marker dedicated to the team that played there. It shows the 1941 Pontiac lineup and a brief history of the field.
J & K. Rev. Ernest Franklin Smith's Good Samaritan AME Zion Church and Negro Welfare Mission 1113-1115 Walnut Street

On this site, during the Great Depression in Erie, stood two buildings that have since been demolished. Churches and private charities emerged to help alleviate the extraordinary hardships suffered by local residents during America’s greatest economic crisis. One such individual was Reverend Ernest Franklin Smith, who in 1934 decided to open the Good Samaritan AME Zion Church. Next door he opened the Negro Welfare Mission and established a nursery school, health classes to encourage improved sanitary conditions, and adult education classes. Meals for needy children were also provided, and in 1940 the Erie Daily Times called the mission “the only place in the city where a Negro transient can stop”.

Smith’s reputation was further enlarged when he began traveling into the south to bring African Americans back north. Many families arrived in Erie from Laurel, Mississippi with help from the Reverend. At the time many southern African Americans were poor sharecroppers or worked urban jobs that would not allow them to support their families. At both establishments that he founded on the west side, he would help his recruits in finding homes and jobs in the area.
L. Lawrence Music Studio-11th and State Street

Emma Gertrude Lawrence’s son, Earl E. Lawrence, was the operator of a private music studio and known throughout Erie for his musical abilities. He was a studied musician, having learned to play the flute, saxophone, percussion, harmony, and instrumentation. His studio was located on 11th and State Street from 1916 to 1936.

M. John S. Hicks home and Ice cream "factory"- 1218 State Street

John S. Hicks made his home and ice cream business in a 3-story building on this site in the mid 1800’s. He and his family lived in the 2nd story; Hicks rented out the 3rd floor and used the basement as his “factory” for producing ice cream. Mr. Hicks was not the only confectioner and producer of ice cream in Erie but his business produced a larger quantity than most. He used up to date technology and was one of the first to use steam “power in freezing cream.” He sold most of the ice cream that he produced at events such as church events, parties, and other social functions. He was especially skilled in making “water ices, Roman punches, and Charlotte Russe, a combination of cake and frozen custard.”
**N. Pope Hotel- 1318 French Street**

On this site once stood the Pope Hotel, one of the most important structures in Erie’s cultural history. For 60 years, the Pope was a hot spot of local African American musical culture. It was owned by William and Jessie Pope. They opened it up as a Hotel in 1928. Jessie Pope ran the business after her husband died and she became the sole owner of the business, an impressive feat at this time when black women generally suffered from severe discrimination.

The excellent entertainment featured a live emcee, a band that played regularly, a four-girl chorus line, and on the weekends, a singer or comedian beginning at 9 p.m. The Pope Hotel also featured nationally famous performers including Lionel Hampton, Louie Jordan, Jackie Wilson, Scatman Crothers, Lena Horne, Dina Washington and Pearle Bailey. The Pope was bought by a local business in 1978 and unfortunately, demolished.

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**O. St. James African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church- 236 East 11th Street**

St. James A.M.E. Church is the oldest African American congregation in Erie. Originally part of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, African American congregants broke away in 1874 to establish St. James A.M.E. This church’s place in Erie history was further solidified when it provided a meeting place for the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People after its establishment in 1909.
P. Franklin’s Gem City Ice Cream Company
118 East 10th Street
James Franklin was formerly a slave who escaped his enslavement on a plantation in Maryland at the age of 15. He came to Erie in 1866 after fleeing to Canada for a time. He worked as a janitor before he began his own business, the Gem City Ice Cream Company, which was located on this spot for most of its nearly 40 years. He was very well known during his time. He catered to patrons of prominence in the city of Erie. As the village of Erie grew to a city, so did Franklin’s business. The business sold its confections throughout the city until about 1920.

Harborcreek

Q. Gospel Hill Cemetery-4056 Station Road, Harborcreek, PA 16510
Legend engulfs this cemetery. The first story involves Thomas Rees who came to Harborcreek and brought two slaves with him; Robert McConnell and James Titus, aged 6 and 4, it is quite possible that these were Rees’s sons. When they turned 28, Rees freed his slaves and gave them each 50 acres of land to start their new lives. Robert McConnell is buried near Thomas Rees in this cemetery.

During the restoration of this cemetery by the Harborcreek Historical Society there were 183 unmarked graves in the cemetery. These were believed to be the graves of slaves, possibly children. Use the address above in your GPS to locate the cemetery. There is no direct way to the cemetery except through a footpath from a college parking lot on the adjacent property north of the cemetery.
The house you see before you was built by Michael Crowley in 1832. Local legend suggests that it served as a station on the Underground Railroad. Evidence suggests that there was a tunnel leading from the house to the banks of Four Mile Creek. Fugitive slaves could then escape by boat to Canada for freedom.

Bo Bladen, described in an early Erie history only as a “free negro from Maryland,” originated from Guinea and had been brought to a Maryland plantation as a slave. He purchased his freedom soon after he turned 40 years old, after which he purchased a farm on this site in Mill Creek Township on June 1, 1796. His land was located here on the east edge of Glenwood Park, next to what was then the DuMars Farm. He paid $1.25 per acre for 400 acres. Bladen worked the land and built a home for himself; a small log cabin which he lived in until his death in 1829. He lived to be over 100 years old. Bo Bladen’s son, William, lived on the land his father bought and continued to clear the land for his own home. The Bladen Farm secured its place in local history as the only farm in Erie County that remained in the possession of African Americans continuously up until 1895.
This church, known to some locals as the “crossroads church,” has been influential in the community of McKean. It began as a gathering of a few members at schoolhouses until 1866. The land had been donated for their cause. During the Civil War, Elder Devan, a black man, served the church as a pastor.

Formerly known as the McKean Baptist Church, it was rumored to be a station on the Underground Railroad. Much like other sites on this tour, this cannot be absolutely proven due to the dangers of keeping written records for Underground Railroad supporters. There is some unwritten archaeological evidence, however, which seems to confirm the lore. The basement had a hollowed out area that was found while they were working on the building. It may have been for some other, practical use, but given the unusual presence of Devan and the strong oral history tradition, it is entirely possible that this indeed was a “crossroads” station on the road to freedom.
Reverend Charles Shipman served as a pastor in the Universalist Church from 1864 until 1872 and again in 1876. It was under his supervision that countless slaves found freedom in the North. In the surrounding area of conductors of the Underground Railroad, he was considered the “boss conductor” and was in charge of helping escaped slaves throughout West Erie County. He ran five escape routes, primarily one from Albion to Girard and on through Harborcreek, ultimately ending in Canada.
This rural farmhouse, built in 1860, was home to the family of LeRoy and Beatrice Smith, one of only 2 African American families living in this part of the county during the Civil Rights movement. They traveled from New Orleans in 1948 to look for a small farm and a safe place to raise a family. The Smith family is representative of the Great Migration of the mid 20th century. Continuing a tradition that is long standing in this country, many African Americans would relocate from the South to the North searching for a better life and opportunities they would not have in the South.

In their time here, they raised 4 children of their own and fostered 75 children. Bea Smith served as a volunteer for United Campus Ministry. She was instrumental in the first celebrations of Black History Week at Edinboro University and helped to organize visits from Andrew Young, Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, and Pauline Myers. These efforts helped to make the community of Black college students feel welcome in Edinboro. Breaking down the racial barriers put in place for centuries, LeRoy was the first African American to work in the VA Medical Center. When LeRoy Smith was not working in the lab at the Veterans Administration hospital in Erie, he was volunteering his time throughout the community and with his church.
For Further Information and Research

Erie County Historical Society
419 State Street
Erie, Pa 16501
(814) 454-1813
http://www.eriecountymuseum.org/

Erie Maritime Museum
150 East Front Street
Erie, Pa 16507
(814) 452-2744
http://www.brigniagara.org/

Edinboro Historical Society
P.O. Box 18
Edinboro, Pa 16412
(814) 734-6109
http://www.edinborohistory.org/

Hazel Kibler Memorial Museum
522 Main Street East
Girard, PA 16417
(814) 774-3653

Harborcreek Historical Society
(814) 899-4447

North East Historical Society/Museum
(814) 403-8709

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