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## 01 Remarks on Racial and Cultural Conflict in Chester County for the Discussion of the 1845 edition of "The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave"

James Jones

*West Chester University of Pennsylvania*, JJONES@wcupa.edu

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**Remarks on racial and cultural conflict  
in Chester County for the discussion of  
the 1845 edition of the  
Narrative of the Life of Frederick  
Douglass, an American Slave**

Sponsored by the Frederick Douglass Institute  
and delivered by Jim Jones at the West Chester  
Community Center, April 13, 1999

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Dr. Trotman has asked me to make some remarks about cultural and racial conflict in Chester County. I am pleased to be able to do so, but I also feel some hesitation. This is a sensitive subject, and it forces people to examine themselves in ways that are not always pleasant. It is also possible to lose one's perspective, so I feel that I should add a disclaimer at the outset. Throughout their history, the people of Chester County have responded to racial and cultural differences in ways that sometimes deserve credit, and other times require condemnation. A catalog of the negative should not obscure the positive, and vice versa.

As someone who lived in the small African nation of Swaziland in the 1970s, I traveled through apartheid South Africa and saw firsthand the surface characteristics of institutional racism. To my knowledge, Chester County has never used police armed with automatic weapons and bulldozers to enforce zoning laws designed to separate people based on race. However, Chester County was the site of the last lynching in Pennsylvania history, it has hosted Ku Klux Klan marches in the past ten years, and there are many recorded instances of less dramatic forms of racism and xenophobia.

My remarks are based on information that I found in a variety of public documents, and include commentary and insights from a number of local historians and community leaders. I would particularly like to thank Dr. Trotman for his input, Ms. Penny Washington for her insight and encouragement, Ms. Bernie Taylor and Ms. Alice Hammond for their comments, and everyone who shared their recollections of racial attitudes in the 1950s and 1960s with me.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF CHESTER COUNTY'S CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

Chester County was originally home to Native Americans of the Lenni Lenape. In the 17th century, they were approached by northern Europeans from Sweden, Holland, Germany and the British Isles who came in search of trading opportunities. Swedes commenced the invasion when they built the first permanent European settlement at Upland in 1637, and the Dutch followed with their own permanent settlement at Tinicum in 1641. For the next two generations, there was little activity until the first English settlers arrived with William Penn in 1681. They were followed almost immediately by Welsh, Scots-Irish and Germans.

Subsequent waves of immigration included Germans in the 1840s, Irish in the 1850s, various southern Europeans in the period following the Civil War to just after World War I, Puerto Ricans just after World War II, and Mexicans since the 1960s. Many other groups are also represented. According to US Census figures for the period from 1980 to 1990, nearly 3,000 people classified as neither white nor black moved into the area and now represent 2.3% of the County's population. [Note: The white population of the County increased by about 56,000 (to 91.6%) and the black population declined by just over 900 (to 6.4%).]

The earliest references to racial strife concern relations between the European and Native American population, but the available information is scanty. Native Americans protested their enslavement by European settlers, and the colonial assembly passed an act prohibiting the importation of "Indian slaves" into Pennsylvania in 1705. Despite this, the Native American population quickly vacated the region, to be replaced by people of African descent who became the next victims of discrimination and cruelty.

The name of the first African to reach Pennsylvania is unknown, but by late 1700s, there were plenty of African-Americans in Chester County. Nearly all were former slaves or their descendants, and most came from the southern states, rather than directly from Africa. Large migrations of people of African descent occurred prior to 1850, again after the close of Civil War Reconstruction, and once more after World War I. In the twentieth century, there has been additional immigration directly from Africa and the Caribbean.

## **THE ORIGIN OF THE REPUTATION FOR TOLERANCE**

In the standard history books of Chester County, much space is devoted to the anti-slavery movement, the Underground Railroad, and the heritage of

Quaker religious tolerance, particularly in West Chester. For example, in 1898, W. W. Thomson wrote in his history of Chester County that "West Chester was known far and wide as being friendly to the slave ... it is largely for this reason that so many colored people have made and now make this city their home." Or as Daniel Webster Nields wrote in 1901 to James Spence (a prominent West Chester African-American entrepreneur), "I am glad to have been born and raised in a community where prejudice found no foothold, where a man's worth in the community was not established by the color of his clothes or the shade of his skin, but by his deportment."

No doubt, their authors believed they were reaffirming a fundamental truth. It is true that Chester County was created out of land granted to William Penn on March 4, 1681, and that Penn's goal was to create a place where people of all religions could live together in security and tolerance. However, the preexisting Dutch and Swedish settlements, coupled with rapid immigration of non-Quakers to Penn's colony, meant that not all of the early settlers shared Penn's ideals.

### **SLAVERY IN CHESTER COUNTY**

For instance, residents of Chester County held slaves for nearly two centuries. In their History of Chester County, J. Smith Futhey and Gilbert Cope wrote that the Dutch probably introduced slavery to Pennsylvania some time prior to 1640. There is the previously-mentioned record of Native American complaints against enslavement, and the 1705 act which prohibited the importation of "Indian slaves" into Pennsylvania. A similar act concerning Negro slaves passed the colonial assembly in 1712, but was vetoed by the English government. About the same time, local Friends meetings began to pass resolutions forbidding their members to buy or sell slaves.

The first slave census for the County was conducted in 1780, at which time 140 slave owners reported a total of 335 slaves ranging in age from one month to 78 years. An analysis of wills and tax rolls shows that the largest number of slaves were held in the Welsh (Charlestown, Tredyffrin, East Nantmeal and West Nantmeal) and Scots-Irish townships (New London, Londonderry, Oxford and East Nottingham). The central townships, which included Goshen, were inhabited largely by Friends, and they reported few or no slaves.

### **FREE BLACKS IN CHESTER COUNTY**

"Free blacks" also lived in the county from an early date, although records provide few details for the first century. By 1850, African-Americans made up nearly eight percent of the County's population, and were twice as numerous in urban areas like West Chester. They raised families, practiced trades and did all of the same things as their white contemporaries, and apparently prospered, or so the myth goes. Yet several pieces of information suggest that things were not so good, such as the fact that the first three people executed in West Chester were all of African descent: Hannah Miller (1805), Edward Williams (1830) and Charles Bowman (1834). It took eleven more years before a white man (Jabez Boyd) was found guilty of a capital offense, and in all, six of the first nine people executed were black.

Even when a free black person did all the "right" things, his or her life was hard. For instance, Futhey & Cope devoted nearly a full page to the life of James Jackson, who was born a slave near Baltimore about 1778 and escaped to Chester County around 1813. After noting that the industrious Jackson found construction work with many prominent citizens, including Jesse Matlack, Ezra Haines, George B. Townsend and E. M. Hoopes, the authors noted without irony that Jackson "retired" in 1877, when he would have been nearly one hundred years old.

There are other examples. When Moses G. Hepburn, a leader of West Chester's African-American community, started an omnibus service in December 1873, the mostly white railroad passengers boycotted his service. When William Moore became the first African-American to graduate from a West Chester school in 1890, no one would give him an apprenticeship in any of the trades in West Chester. Fortunately for Mr. Moore, he was able to go on and attend Howard University, after which he became a teacher and principal of an all-black school in Cape May, NJ.

## **THE URBAN PRESSURE COOKER**

By the late 19th century, immigration to Chester County became an exclusively urban movement, as the price of land rose beyond the reach of cash-poor immigrants. The only choices open to the newcomers were the enduring poverty of farm labor, or looking for work in factory towns like Spring City, Phoenixville, Coatesville, Downingtown, Oxford and West Chester. Most chose to go to the towns, where black migrants from the south found themselves competing with southern and eastern Europeans for housing and jobs. Long-time residents viewed both groups with suspicion, and responded with an unpredictable mixture of charity and cruelty.

For instance, the iron companies in Phoenixville and Coatesville encouraged black workers to come north in an effort to prevent European immigrants from striking for higher wages. This led one Phoenixville resident to comment, "We would much rather have the colored men than the Hungarians as citizens. The Hungarians are of no benefit to anyone other than themselves. They only patronize the two stores owned by fellow Hungarians, not spending one cent on our native merchants excepting the liquor dealers."

"Negroes" were not treated much better, especially by local political parties. The Democrats were openly racist when they referred to "coons" and "darkies," while the Republicans who controlled local politics connived to get African-American votes without granting them any power in return. During a brief period between 1882 and 1893, the West Chester Republicans nominated African-Americans like Moses Hepburn for a single seat on West Chester's Borough Council [Note: Moses Hepburn, 1882-1883; Isaiah Smith, 1884-1885; John Gladman, 1886-1887; Henry Cummings, 1889; and John W. Brown, 1890-1893], until the reactionary wing of the party revised its nominating rules so that there were no more African-American council members until Fred Beckett in 1968. African-Americans responded by forming their own political action groups, like the Chester County Colored Republican League in Coatesville in 1894, and the Chester County African-American Republican League in Oxford in 1896. African-Americans in West Chester organized to protest school segregation in 1894, and created a group to support the reconstruction of the segregated Gay Street School after it burned in 1908.

However, racism reached new heights in America, as well as in Chester County, at the end of the 19th century. For instance, by the 1890s, the writers for the *Daily Local News* of West Chester regularly portrayed African-Americans as mischievous children who were prone to cause trouble. They referred to the "plague" of rowdy "colored" loiterers who endangered the white women who passed through West Chester's train station. They wrote stories about "mulatto drunks" who spent their nights in jail. They even reported in February 1899 that a crowd of several hundred watched as a "colored lad" was thrown into a snow drift when John C. Hare, a street paving contractor, whipped his horse without warning. The crowd "laughed heartily," and the newspaper, knowing its audience, thought the story was worthy of publication.

Further evidence of the limits of racial tolerance can be found in a story from 1894. On June 23, the dance pavilion at Lenape Park was formally opened. According to the *Daily Local News*, "The orchestra had struck up a catchy polka and the floor was occupied by a half dozen couples when two colored

youths ... mingled with the dancers. Almost immediately, the floor was deserted by the white people." The reporter went on to write that three hundred people watched until the two youths were asked to leave by the company president, William M. Hayes. It is not surprising that the same newspaper reported five years later that African Americans no longer went to Lenape Park, and instead observed that "Castle Rock Park is overrun with their applications for picnic privileges."

The culmination of growing racial tension took place in Coatesville in August 1911, when the lynching of a black worker was viewed by a crowd of thousands. Zachariah Walker killed a popular policeman and tried to kill himself, but was captured alive with a bullet through his jaw. He was dragged out of the hospital, beaten and burned alive. Ten people were charged with crimes, including the chief of police and a deputy who refused to intervene, but after West Chester juries found the first seven innocent, the state dropped its case against the rest.

## **THE INTERWAR PERIOD**

By the end of World War I, Americans were shocked by the violent outcome of cultural antagonisms in Europe, and sought more actively to prevent similar conflicts from erupting in the United States. One approach was to ban further immigration into the country, which led to the 1924 federal law establishing immigration quotas. As always, there were efforts to intimidate members of minority communities. In addition, there were a number of initiatives intended to encourage "gifted" members of minorities to "uplift" their communities, which led future world leaders like Kwame Nkrumah and Nnamdi Azikiwe to study at Lincoln University.

Even those efforts were tainted by discrimination. At the closing ceremonies of the "National Tribute to Bayard Rustin," Mrs. Ethel Closson told the audience how African-American students at the West Chester State Normal School were forbidden to lodge on campus before World War II. Instead, they found places in African-American homes in the community. Since many local African-Americans held blue-collar jobs at the school, this led to an understanding of the economic and racial aspects of discrimination that was invisible to the largely white student body.

## **POST WORLD WAR II**

World War II brought another round of African-American immigration from the rural South to the big northern cities, as well as the beginning of immigration

from Puerto Rico. However, it also brought about a middle-class exodus from larger cities like Philadelphia, and the conversion of eastern Chester County farm land into housing developments. The extended period of economic prosperity led Europeans and African-Americans to seek better jobs, and the resulting shortage of farm labor in western Chester County led to the next wave of immigration. Men from rural Puerto Rico started to take jobs in the mushroom industry that were abandoned by the children of earlier immigrants. In the 1950s, their families began to join them, and by the 1960s, the first generation of Hispanic-Americans began to graduate from local public schools. In the late 1960s, new people began to arrive from Mexico as second-generation Hispanics abandoned jobs in agriculture for more lucrative openings in industry and government.

It was also in the 1960s that the national civil rights movement reached towns like West Chester. The movement began in Chester County with the peaceful desegregation of restaurants, and the integration of school districts to comply with federal law. But other changes faced opposition, so in 1963, the West Chester Human Relations Council, the Student Equality League, and the local branch of the NAACP organized pickets at the banks in downtown West Chester to protest biased hiring practices. The following year, they encouraged a campaign of "selective patronage"--a shopper's boycott aimed against businesses that discriminated in hiring. Two years later in 1966, they picketed the Wyeth Labs for the same reason.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the greatest progress in ending discrimination came from political activism and legal challenges. Local government remained under the control of the Republican Party, which steadfastly blocked the rise of minorities to political power. According to Amos Bassett, the former secretary of the West Chester Area School District school board, there was only one African-American (Cleona Jackson) elected to the board from 1963 to 1984. In 1984, African-Americans challenged the school board over the firing of black administrators Dr. Samuel H. Black (Sr), Dr. John Hewlett, and Dr. William Brantley.

There were many attempts by African-Americans to win seats on Borough Council, but it took the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King to bring about Fred Beckett's appointment to fill a vacant seat, and he failed to win a full term at the next election. In 1973, former West Chester NAACP president Robert Butler was appointed to fill another seat on Borough Council, which he retained for one term at the next election. Finally, in 1986, Ann Aerie won her own seat by running as a Democrat, and became the first African-American to serve as president of Borough Council two years later.

In 1987, community leaders Charles Melton, Norman Bond, and W. T. M. Johnson led a challenge to the borough's political system of electing council members at large. In a case that produced over 1,100 pages of testimony, a legal team headed by Samuel C. Stretton proved that the old system was discriminatory and forced the Borough to create the current ward system.

Recent incidents, such as the march of the Ku Klux Klan through West Chester in 1991, and the brutalization of Mexican farm workers in Kennett Square in 1997, show that discrimination persists in Chester County. But progress has been made, and a survey of those developments leads to the following conclusions about strategy and tactics.

As Frederick Douglass explained in the narrative of his life, an escape from slavery depended on the support of many other people. The struggle against discrimination and prejudice in Chester County has often depended on the formation of local associations for mutual aid. Given the economic weakness of most immigrant groups, this has been the most difficult approach, but nevertheless, there have been positive results.

African-Americans began to organize their own churches before 1820, supported local anti-slavery societies in the 1830s and 1840s, created self-help organizations like the Star of the West Tent No. 6 in the 1860s, organized as a single voting block for local elections in the 1870s and 1880s, and created a variety of independent political, social, and self-help groups since the turn of the century.

The timing was somewhat different, but the process was the same in other immigrant communities. The first public Irish-American organizations were founded in the 1880s, like the Irish National Land and Industrial League and the Irish Catholic Benevolent Union. Italian-Americans formed an "Italian Band" by 1908 and the Italian Social Club of West Chester by 1916. Latinos began to form their own religious congregations in the early 1960s and created secular groups like the Professional Association of Latin Americans in the 1980s.

There are many examples of individuals who provided dignified and effective resistance to discrimination in Chester County. The best known in recent history is Dr. W. T. M. Johnson, whose role as a professor at Lincoln University, as the head of the West Chester Human Relations Council, and as an opponent of negligent business owners, led to tangible improvements in the lives of Chester County citizens. Other people like Professor Ruby Jones, Mr. Warren Burton and Mrs. Mercedes Biddle Greer touched many lives, not

only in West Chester, but through their influence on youth, beyond the region as well.

A second successful approach has been to seek the assistance of outside groups. In 1833, when Abraham Shadd became a subscription agent in West Chester for William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*, he became part of an interstate abolition movement organized around the New England Anti-Slavery Society. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People provided financial assistance for the state's prosecution of Coatesville citizens who were implicated in the 1911 Coatesville lynching trial. National labor unions fought their way onto the railroads and into the steel mills of Chester County, where they achieved significant results for both black and white workers.

The third approach has been to make an accommodation with local powerbrokers. Individual Irish, Italian, African-American and Latino community leaders have all shown a willingness to cooperate with the powers-that-be in exchange for the opportunity to distribute patronage to their constituents. The result has been some high-profile appointments and an occasional electoral victory, a limited redistribution of the wealth of Chester County, and several well-publicized examples to show that in the American-melting pot, any individual can advance with enough hard work.

Unfortunately, the hard work of many other people has gone unrecognized and unrewarded, and these remarks are too brief to give credit where it is due. The fight against racism is not a grand battle--it's a collection of small efforts to educate, to model behavior and to remain strong in the face of provocation. Like the task of abolishing slavery, which must have seemed impossible to Frederick Douglass when he was a slave, the task of ending racism and discrimination appears enormous to individuals in our time. However, Douglass did what he could to achieve incremental change, and after he became a free man, he united with others. That unity, combined with knowledge of the country's political and legal systems, led to the abolition of slavery within his life time.

I can not say what went through Douglass' mind after learning of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, but I was fortunate to observe something similar on the day that Nelson Mandela formed the first majority-rule government in South African history. At the time, I shared an apartment with a political refugee from Soweto, which served as a gathering place for the South African students in this area. A crowd gathered to watch the proceedings on television, and our telephone was in constant use throughout the day. Watching those men and women, and seeing their faces that day, was an

emotional moment that will stay with me always. Those individuals will never enjoy benefits sufficient to compensate them for the pain they have endured, but they have the small relief of knowing that their pain has produced benefits for generations to come.

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