



## SMBHS

471 W. South Street  
Suite 42A  
Kalamazoo, MI 49007  
Tel: 269/381-7995

Email:

[heritagesociety@charter.net](mailto:heritagesociety@charter.net)

Website: [smbhs.org](http://smbhs.org)

## SMBHS Mission

The mission of the Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society nurture respect, appreciation, and study of the African American heritage and contributions to southwest Michigan history.

## SMBHS Board

Dr. Romeo Phillips  
Chair  
The Hon. Curtis Bell II  
Secretary  
Alfrelynn Roberts  
Treasurer  
Donna Odom  
Executive Director

## More Inside ...

In Memoriam, p2,3  
Strategic Planning, p2  
Black History Month  
Schedule, p4

# SPECIAL EDITION!

## IN MEMORIAM A SPECIAL TRIBUTE TO TWO TRAILBLAZERS

### SMBHS GIVES TRIBUTE TO TWO LOCAL HEROES IN THE FIGHT FOR RIGHTS OF MINORITIES

#### JOHN JOHNSON

*"He is a book of stories, waiting to be read."*

...so said a student in a poem from our 2009 History Detectives Oral History Project.



John Johnson had deep roots in Michigan. His great uncle, Charles E. Williams, was one of the first African Americans to graduate from the University of Michigan Law School. His grandmother, Margaret Williams, served as secretary to the commission created to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the freeing of the slaves. One of John's proudest possessions was a copy of *Freedman's Progress*, published in 1915 and containing extensive information about his family. He was active in the community at a young age, participating in Boy Scouts and regularly attending the Douglass Community Center. John was extremely proud of his heritage and that respect for his roots led him to join and be ...active in the Kalamazoo County Historical Society, the Kalamazoo Genealogical Society, and the Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society.

...Continued p2

#### ARTHUR WASHINGTON



*"I feel that I cannot hide from problems that present themselves and be fair to myself or any of the people in the community."* {Arthur Washington in a statement explaining his position on the picketing of the Woolworth's store in Kalamazoo in April of 1960.}

Arthur Washington, Jr. came to Kalamazoo after accepting a job at the Family Service Center on Burdick Street. As a part of the job package, he had been offered a house on the west side of the city. Arthur jumped at this wonderful opportunity for a young black man in 1955, only to receive a sharp dose of reality once he arrived. When it was seen that Washington was an African American, the home was no longer available. For the first of many times during his life in Kalamazoo, Art soldiered on despite the challenges. Although he was warned by many that he shouldn't move to the northside, he found that was the only area that was welcoming to his family, and he and his family settled into a home in a mixed neighborhood on the north end of Edwards Street across from, in his words, "a great big field" owned by the paper companies. Very soon afterwards he began his life-long involvement with the churches and the NAACP that would lead him to be instrumental in making major changes in Kalamazoo.

...Continued p3

## Reasons for joining SMBHS and "Upcoming Events" ... p4

## A TRIBUTE TO JOHN JOHNSON

*Continued from p1...*

Much of John's youth was devoted to sports. He was the fastest runner in his class from fourth grade on. Each year of John's Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth grade years there would be a track and field day where all of the elementary schools would come together at Upjohn Field and compete by grades in dashes and broad jump. He found that he was pretty good, winning in all grades. In fact, by the fifth grade he ran faster than anyone in any of the grades. He easily beat everyone else without really training, not only on track and field day, but when they played other games during school and in the summer as well.

By the time he went to Central High School he was winning the end-of-the-year state track meets and was the top

sprinter in the state of Michigan in his junior and senior years. Upon graduation, he received a sport's scholarship that took him to the University of Michigan, where he ran for the varsity track team. Out of about thirty-one track participants, there were two African Americans, including John. In fact, at that time there were only thirty-eight African American students in the entire university of 41,000. Although he was on a sports scholarship, John was aware that the University of Michigan had high standards and required that athletes achieve academically as well, so he worked hard.

John began a successful career at the State of Michigan Department of Social Services in 1965 where he was instrumental in developing regulations governing adult foster care services. After returning to Kalamazoo, he became involved with

the NAACP's Labor and Industry Services, the Vine Neighborhood Association, and worked for seven years at Goodwill Industries in a custodial fathers/prison re-entry program.

John will be greatly missed by members of the Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society of which he was co-chair and an active and enthusiastic member. At a graveside memorial ceremony, friends and family remembered John as fun-loving, gregarious, always willing to help out and ever eager to share his many memories. He passed away on December 12, 2011.



### SMBHS STRATEGIC PLANNING

In June of 2011 the SMBHS applied for and received grant funds from the Kalamazoo Community Foundation to support professionally guided strategic planning. The funds were granted based on our desire to build and strengthen the capacity of the organization to better serve the citizens of southwest Michigan. With the help of the Brose and Brose consulting team, we created a dynamic and inspiring Mission, Vision and Statement of Purpose, and a plan for the development of a Board of Directors that would ensure the resources needed to achieve our goals. Following are the Mission, Vision and Statement of Purpose:

#### Mission

To nurture respect, appreciation, and study of the African American heritage and contributions to Southwest Michigan history.

#### Vision

Everyone in Southwest Michigan values the heritage and history of African Americans in our region.

#### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

**We serve and empower residents of Southwest Michigan to appreciate the heritage and history of African Americans in our region as a meaningful part of their contemporary lives.**

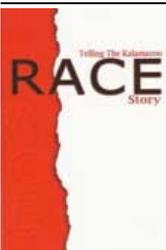
- We aspire to be the premiere resource that illuminates and connects the past, present, and future of African Americans in Southwest Michigan.
- We recognize the opportunities that

our varied audiences present and the challenges we have to communicate the stories of African American heritage in ways that engage and have meaning for each learning style, each age group, and each personal history.

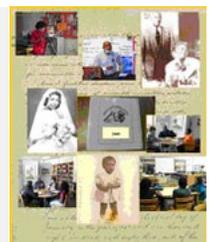
- We realize the need to communicate the stories of the African American people from pioneer settlers to present-day residents as they are related to each other and

even to history as yet unmade.

- We understand that the material in the Society's archives have intrinsic value beyond their connections to our ancestors.
- We accept our responsibility to current and future generations to curate those archival objects we accept, and to accept only those objects we can curate appropriately.



**Copies of SMBHS publications, like *Telling the Kalamazoo Community RACE Story* and *The 2009 History Detectives Oral History Project* can be purchased on the "Shop the Heritage" page of the SMBH website, [www.smbhs.org](http://www.smbhs.org).**



## A TRIBUTE TO ARTHUR WASHINGTON

...Continued from p1

Arthur Washington was born in St. Louis, Missouri, the second of eleven children and raised in Springfield, Illinois. After graduation at the top of his class in high school, he served in World War II from 1943-1946. He went on from there to the University of Louisville, where he graduated Magna Cum Laude with a Bachelors Degree in Sociology and later a Master's of Science in Social Work. During those university years, he met and married his wife, Marjory, to whom he was married until her death in 1972. He and Marjory had three children, Steven, Marjory, and Tiffany. Four more children, Frank, Jerome, Kenneth, and Nancy were added with his second marriage to Spencer "Toni" Curly.

Arthur was a devoted family man and loved children. It was evident to him that, although blacks were treated fairly well in Kalamazoo, there was a strict understanding that you would stay in your place. Not content with that state of affairs, he wrote to the City Commission saying he'd never before been in a community where there were no programs for youngsters. That was the beginning of his civic work that led to his activism in the school system and the NAACP. Four years after his arrival in Kalamazoo, he ran for the City Commission and became the first black elected to public office in Kalamazoo. Still remembering his original experience in Kalamazoo, he pushed for fair housing. He described how city realtors were going to come to Commission meeting to oppose his stand on housing, but by the time they got there northside residents had filled the place and there was nowhere to sit.

One of the main problems on the north side was the lack of adequate housing. Because blacks were pretty much confined to that side of town, conditions were overcrowded and people were moving into unfinished and easily condemnable housing. The battle with the realtors was a long one. People were pretty much entrenched in the idea of separation and just weren't ready for change. When open the occupancy law finally came about they were forced to accept it.

When the Civil Rights movement began in the South, it had an influence through-

out the country. Washington participated in the picketing of the Walgreen's in Kalamazoo in support of the incident in the South where students were refused service in a Walgreen's. The picketing in Kalamazoo only lasted for one day, but the point was made. Walgreen's agreed not to discriminate. As a result of his activities, Art was told by a very prominent man in the community, who in the past had always presented himself as a strong advocate of equal rights, that he'd never be elected to the City Commission again and that "we don't have this sort of thing in Kalamazoo."

Another racial discrimination incident was reported in Selma, and this time the nurses from Nazareth College, the NAACP, and Raymond Hightower, the then mayor of Kalamazoo, marched with him. When the next City Commission election came about, although he hadn't been invited to any of the events surrounding the election, he still won. The first person who came to see him after the election was the one who had told him he'd never be elected to the Commission again. He served four for four terms.

Up to the early to mid-60s, the major form of employment for blacks in Kalamazoo was construction. The union was run by an African American at that time. When the Brunswick company came into Kalamazoo, they were not hiring any blacks, so Art repeatedly went to their offices for about a week before he was able to speak with anyone. Finally, they brought in a caddy from the country club to clean in order to show they'd hired a black. Art didn't accept that and threatened to go public. He sent a couple of people who had degrees to apply for employment and they were turned down. He called the Federal Employment Agency in Lansing. They came in and Brunswick finally ended up hiring some blacks.

Hotels were another of Art's targets. When he first came here, you could only stay in one hotel in town, the Harris. After a couple of protests and NAACP meetings, the hotels opened up. Gibson's didn't hire blacks. Art met with the management. Two months passed and they still hadn't hired anyone. Finally the company president and others came to Art's house and told him they wanted six people and that if

he sent them they would hire them.

Probably the most famous incident of picketing in Kalamazoo history was at the Van Avery drugstore in 1960. The NAACP position was that the drugstore, located in a predominantly black neighborhood, the site of what is now the Ecumenical Senior Center, was mainly patronized by blacks but had never hired any. Every year they hired two students from nearby Lincoln School to work in the store, but never a black. The protestors couldn't understand how out of a school of 90% black students, they couldn't find one or two to work there. The drugstore's position was that at the time, "because of business conditions," the store was not hiring anyone, white or black and they were not going to lay off people who had been working there for years. Their reason for not hiring any in the past was that there weren't any who were qualified. The protestors met at a church and decided to picket the store. The store finally hired two girls and agreed to not discriminate, but they went out of business soon after that, saying that business was bad. Art was not actually the leader of this protest, but he worked along with others.

According to Arthur Washington, when he arrived in Kalamazoo, there were two black doctors, one black attorney, four social workers, two policemen, one teacher, and a few post office workers. His work changed the picture of Kalamazoo forever. In 2003, in recognition of his unprecedented service, added to his many awards and honors, the Crosstown Center, the home of the Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety and some county courts was renamed the City of Kalamazoo Arthur Washington Jr. Crosstown Center.

When Arthur Washington died on November 29, 2011, the Kalamazoo Community lost a hero and a legend.

*Thanks to the Kalamazoo Valley Museum for the information from its 1993 oral history interview with Arthur Washington.*



# The Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society



Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society  
The Connection to Yesterday

We invite you to join SMBHS. As a member, you will receive advance notice of all programs and events and discounted rates on workshops, seminars, and official publications. Be a part of the Society and socialize and share information with others who share your interest in the African American heritage of our region.

## Membership:

- Adult Membership - \$25
- Family Membership (2 adults and children under 18) - \$50
- Senior (65 years old and older) and Student Membership - \$15
- Institutional Membership - \$150
- Lifetime Membership - \$250

## Donations: please circle one of the following

- Friend* (up to \$99) | *Supporter* (\$100 - \$249) | *Patron* (\$250 - \$499)
- | *Benefactor* (\$500 - \$999) | *Sponsor* (\$1000 and up)

NAME(s): \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

CITY/STATE/ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_ E-MAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

Make checks payable to: **SMBHS**

## To join or donate with credit card, Submit to:

Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society  
471 W. South Street, Suite 42A  
Kalamazoo, MI 49007

OR log on to [www.smbhs.org](http://www.smbhs.org) and click on "Membership."



## Reasons to join Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society

- \* Would you like to know more about your **heritage**?
- \* Would you like learn more about **the first African Americans to settle in southwest Michigan**?
- \* Have you always wanted to write a **family history**?
- \* Are you thinking of writing your **memoirs**?
- \* Would you like to learn more about **genealogical research**?
- \* Would you like more information on having your **DNA traced**?
- \* Would you like to meet others who have those same interests?
- \* As a **family historian**, would you like to know what resources and tools are available to you?
- \* Would you like to find ways of inspiring the youth in your family?

If you answered yes to any of the above questions, then you have a reason for joining the **Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society**.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### BLACK HISTORY MONTH SCHEDULE

#### SUNDAY FEBRUARY 12

##### READ ALL ABOUT IT! 2012

Join the statewide discussion of *Arc of Justice*, the book chosen by the Michigan Humanities Council as The Great Michigan Read for 2011-12. The program will feature a Skype interview with Kevin Boyle, author of the 2011-12 Great Michigan Read book selection, "*Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights and Murder in the Jazz Age*, explore the story of the novel and the historical events that surround it, and examine related local events.

2:00-4:00pm

Portage District Library

300 Library Lane

Portage, MI

Free and open to the public.

#### FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 24

##### AFRICAN AMERICAN BOOK FAIR FUNDRAISER

Join us for book signings, storytelling, and Starbucks coffee. A percentage of your Barnes and Noble purchases will benefit the Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society.

10:00am - 9:00 p.m.

Barnes and Noble Bookstore

6134 South Westnedge Ave.

Portage, Michigan

3:00pm - Poetry readings by Denise Miller

4:00pm - African American Music

- Dr. Romeo Phillips

5:00pm - Storytelling with Sid "the Rock" Ellis

From the Black Arts and Cultural Center

6:00pm - A Discussion of *Arc of Justice*, the

Great Michigan Read for 2011-2012

7:00pm - Alfrelynn Roberts sings

#### TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28

##### THE AFRICAN AMERICAN QUILTING TRADITION

SMBHS is partnering with the YWCA of Kalamazoo to present this small exhibition of quilts designed and executed by local quilters. Come out and meet the quilters and hear about this enduring tradition. This is a brown-bag lunch program. Dessert and coffee will be provided.

YWCA

353 E. Michigan

Kalamazoo, MI