

2020

Rhythms of Resilience in the Eighth: from Abolition to Suffrage

Jean Corey
Messiah University

Katie Wingert
Messiah University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://mosaic.messiah.edu/women>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [United States History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Permanent URL: <https://mosaic.messiah.edu/women/4>

Recommended Citation

Corey, Jean and Wingert, Katie, "Rhythms of Resilience in the Eighth: from Abolition to Suffrage" (2020). *Women of the Eighth Ward*. 4.

<https://mosaic.messiah.edu/women/4>

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.

Rhythms of Resilience in the Eighth: from Abolition to Suffrage

Voices of Historic Harrisburg



The Old Eighth Ward was a thriving, diverse community in historic Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The neighborhood was located between the Pennsylvania State Capitol Complex (to the west) and the Pennsylvania canal (to the east). The Pennsylvania Railroad line connecting Philadelphia to Pittsburgh ran directly through the Old Eighth, stopping at the train station just to the southeast of the ward. This meant that the Eighth Ward was one of the first areas of the city that travelers encountered. In addition, the Eighth Ward served as a central business location and cultural hub (See the map of historic Harrisburg above; the area outlined in yellow is the Eighth.). The Old Eighth served as home to activists, artists, writers, reformers, intellectuals, businesspeople, religious leaders, and other historic figures. In 1910, the Old Eighth Ward was the most diverse ward in Harrisburg; its population composition was 37 percent African-American (representing over one half of African Americans in the city) and 63 percent white. Twenty percent of those individuals were also European immigrants.

However, after the completion and dedication of the new state capitol building in 1906, many individuals in other areas of Harrisburg identified the neighborhood as “The Bloody Eighth” - a place of poverty, violence, and ill-repute, an image that conflicted with this view of the Eighth Ward as a cultural hub. In 1911, lawmakers proposed to demolish the Old Eighth Ward in order to create a park adjoining the State Capitol. As a result, from 1911 to 1917, the state took Eighth Ward properties by eminent domain. Although property owners were compensated, most of these individuals actually lived outside of the Old Eighth. On the other hand, 80% of the population living in the Eighth Ward rented property. These individuals were displaced from their homes and in need of new, affordable housing within a city that restricted where African-Americans could live and offered few low-cost housing options. By 1918, the Old Eighth up to North Street had vanished, and plans were underway for new construction of the capitol complex. In total, 541 buildings were destroyed, displacing 1885 individuals from their homes, businesses, gathering spots, and places of worship.

This exhibit seeks to honor the spirit of perseverance and resilience demonstrated by many individuals who fought for their rights and contributed positively to the community of the Old Eighth, Dauphin County, and beyond. In this year, we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the 15th Amendment and the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment. 2020 is also the year of our nation's 24th census.

Amid the systemically imposed vulnerabilities of the 1800s and 1900s, numerous African-American women in Harrisburg lifted their voices through speaking, teaching, and the arts. In the process, they created, for themselves and their community, a radical, unique kind of security - the kind that history seldom remembers.

Women like Jane Chester, Anne Amos, and Harriet McClintock provided food, clothing, and shelter to fugitives escaping slavery. After emancipation, those same women turned their efforts to expanding human rights to all people. Gifted poets, including Gwendolyn Bennett and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, used the power of the pen and spoken word to protest injustice and assert their agency. Musicians, including Hannah Braxton Jones, leveraged their talents for emerging Civil Rights activism.

Although the Old Eighth no longer stands today, in the year 2020, the voices of the community still resound. May we all listen well to their rhythms of resilience.



This photo depicts the present-day capitol complex juxtaposed with a photo of the same area, where children played baseball in the Old Eighth, courtesy of the Dauphin County Historical Society.

Scan code for more information about the Eighth Ward and Harrisburg history on the Digital Harrisburg Initiative website

