

Preserving the Past

New documentary forges a link with Syracuse's black history

History's roots allow the branches and foliage of community to grow. In Syracuse, the link between present and past is tangible when you stand in Clinton Square looking at a photograph of the scene as it appeared a century ago — then see the Gridley Building and the Syracuse Savings Bank building exactly as they were, reflected in the pool that mimics the Erie Canal as it once cut through downtown.

Central New York's rich history includes the commerce along the canal, the birth of the women's rights movement in Seneca Falls, and the Underground Railroad that led slaves to freedom before the Civil War. But history is more than the major developments and dramas of bygone days. It also resides in the stories of ordinary people that enrich the present and offer guidelines to the future.

The history of people of color in Syracuse extends back to the city's earliest days. African-American migration from the South contributed to Syracuse's growth. In recent years, the Black History Preservation Project has accumulated a rich historical record. Last year, the Onondaga Historical Museum displayed part of this growing archive during Black History Month.

The preservation project was sparked by Syracuse University's South Side Initiative, which since 2006 has been stitching connections between the university and its neighbors. Other collaborators include the historical association, the city of Syracuse, the Dunbar Center, the Matilda Joslyn Gage Foundation, the county library system and Umi & Associates.

One of the group's initiatives focuses on Syracuse's old 15th Ward, an ethnically diverse neighborhood where most of Syracuse's black families once lived. They sent their children to Washington Irving Elementary, Madison Junior High and Central High. There were a handful of grocery stores, three bakeries, a meat market, a pool hall, restaurants



Onondaga Historical Association

A LANDMARK of the old 15th Ward was Schor's market at 604 Harrison St. The site is now the southbound exit ramp of Interstate 81.

and the open-air Cedar Grove on Brighton Avenue.

The tight-knit 15th Ward was fractured in the 1960s to make way for Interstate 81, the Everson Museum, a new housing complex and other projects. Now the Black History Preservation Project has produced a documentary on the old neighborhood and its surroundings. "Syracuse's 15th Ward and Beyond" premiered Saturday at Syracuse Stage, with original neighborhood residents in the audience for the red-carpet affair. "In the 15th Ward, everybody knew everybody," recalled Richard Breland. "It was a real village . . . and we all got along."

Writing nearly a decade ago, former Post-Standard staffer Sandra Smokes had bittersweet feelings about her first home in the 15th Ward. "There is something uncomfortable about a group of people defined mostly by the boundaries in which they lived," she wrote. She also recalled the warmth shared by her family and neighbors — and when urban renewal changed everything. "It was replaced with a four-lane highway and some empty promises of better days," she noted.

By 2013, the Black History Preservation Project hopes to have a "virtual museum" of black history in Syracuse, including the documentary, available for worldwide access. It's a promise worth keeping.

For more information or to share your history, call the Syracuse University South Side Initiative at 443-1916.