

## Irving Georges, Photographer



Irving Georges is an amateur photographer who lived in Plainfield in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His images document the city's Black residents in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. It is the only photograph collection the Library has that centers on the Black community.

The collection of nearly 5,000 photographs highlights adults and youth engaged in athletics, community events, and a variety of everyday activities. His series *Ironbound Avenue Family and Neighbors* documents the harmony that existed here in the years following the civil disturbances of 1967, in contrast to the negative racial stereotype that others often attributed to Plainfield. In these images we see a diverse community engaging together in neighborhood block parties, local races, and basketball tournaments.



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### Image Credits:

*City Hall Cupola Construction, 1918, by Paul Collier.  
Mt. Olive Baptist Church Elders, circa 1911, by Paul Collier.  
Gloria Carpenter, "Courier News," August 14, 1944, p. 6.  
WWII Enlistees, 1944, by Paul Collier.  
Joseph Judkins & Family, 1944, by Paul Collier.  
Sisters Margaret & Thelma Lambert, Moorland Membership Drive, circa 1940s. Marjorie Patterson Collection.*

# Black History In Plainfield



Since the city's beginning, Black residents have influenced its building and development. Although some may have been brought here as slaves, many stayed to build families, homes, and businesses. Both men and women worked in a myriad of fields – everything from domestic help and drivers to restaurateurs and doctors. There were numerous social, religious, and professional organizations as well. Plainfield boasts several notable firsts in New Jersey, with accomplishments in education and athletics. To be sure, the city has produced brilliant minds, talented artists, and influential activists.



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## Slavery in Plainfield

Unfortunately, slavery is an inescapable reality in Plainfield's past. Not only the well-known **Caesar**, who served the Drake family, lived at least part of his life in slavery, but many others whose names are unknown to us today.

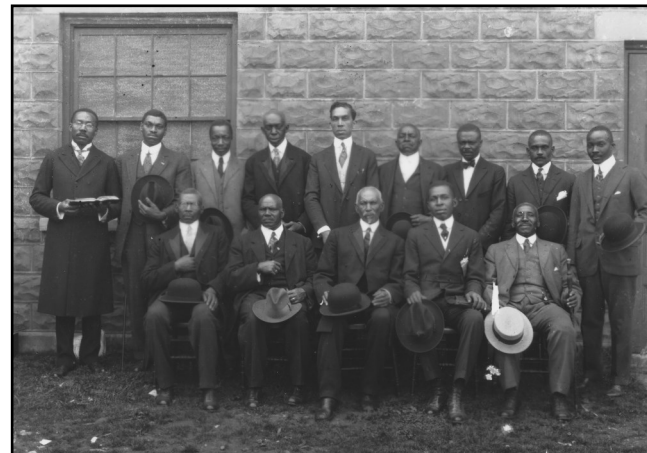
Early records are difficult to interpret because Plainfield was not formed as its own township until 1847. Slaves living in the location of the city of today are hidden among the records of Elizabethtown, Connecticut Farms, Springfield, Westfield, and Essex County, New Jersey. At the highest point during the census-keeping years of the 1800s, that are available, there were 1,521 slaves in Essex County. The count dropped to six for the county in 1850.

In 1849 the *Plainfield Gazette* advertises a twelve-year-old girl for sale, listed casually beside the latest prices for flour and potatoes. Her fate is unknown. Census records reveal only a single woman of 57 years classified as a slave in Plainfield in 1850; her name was **Hannah Vermuele**.

By 1860 not a single slave was enumerated in all of newly-formed Union County. But former slaves are known to have lived in Plainfield as recently as 1915, their pasts in slavery identified in their obituaries.

## Early Clubs and Organizations

Plainfield's Black community has had numerous clubs and groups over the years. These have included social, religious, fraternal, and sports clubs. In the 1920s, there was an all-black, Inter-City League baseball team, called the Colored Giants; **Diamond Powell** was their manager. It was around this time that the City Directories begin to list the clubs by race or creed (Colored, Jewish, Polish, and others). In 1921, eleven black clubs were listed; there were 20 in 1927. Mount Olive Baptist Church (photo below) was the first Black church in Plainfield; it was established in 1870.



## Firsts in Civil Service

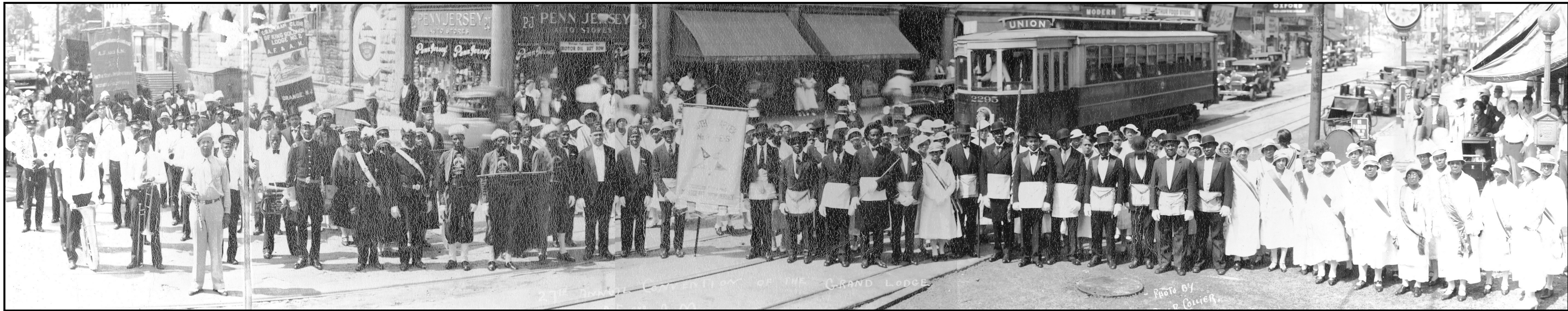
Back in the 1880s, **Nixon Morris**, messenger, became the first black post office employee in Plainfield; in 1915 **Edward Urquart** became the first black postal carrier (a "regular" employee). **James A. Saunders** (photo below) was the town's first black police officer, and also the treasurer of the city's Emancipation Day committee in 1891. He was a member of the force from 1895 to 1917. **Cecil Allen** became the first black chief of the Fire Department in 2004; he left in 2011. He gave 39 years of service to the department, and was a P.H.S. graduate and Marine Corps veteran.



## Firsts in Education

Plainfield holds several firsts in education specifically for Black Americans. **Maud E. Mitchell** was the first Black graduate of Plainfield High School in 1889; **Alfred Presto White** was the first Black, male graduate of P.H.S. **Anna Broadnax** was the first Black valedictorian in 1904. **James Malcolm (Mack) Davis** was the first Black athlete at P.H.S. His classmates voted him the Biggest Flirt in 1906! **Gloria Carpenter** (left photo) was the first Black teacher in a Plainfield school in 1944; she taught at the Washington School. **Marshall Brown** was the first Black head coach of any high school in New Jersey! **Russell Carpenter**, Gloria's brother, was the first Black Superintendent of Schools in Plainfield. **Dr. Richard F. Nesblett** was the first Black member of a Board of Education in all of New Jersey.





This is a rare 1934 photograph of African-American Masonic lodges. Inscription reads, "Oriental Grand Lodge, Ancient Free & Accepted Masons and Orient Grant Chapter, Order of the Eastern Star annual state convention on June 27, 1934." The groups are posed along West Front Street in Plainfield. Standing prominently in the middle is the Montclair Chapter, whose banner reads, "Ruth Chapter / No. 310 E.S. / Organized May 1, 1913 / Montclair, New Jersey." According to the *Courier-News*, that year's sessions began with a parade including both organizations. The Masonic body met in the Moorland Branch YMCA and the Eastern Star organization met in Mt. Zion Church. Fifty-one Masonic lodges across the state were represented. Both male and female members appear in ceremonial dress. *Part of the Paul R. Collier Collection.*



### Military Service

During the American Revolution, **Caesar**, the freed slave of Nathaniel Drake's family, served as a teamster with the Continental Forces. Several African-American men from Plainfield enlisted as soldiers in the Civil War, including **John W. Van Horn** and **Edward S. Dow**.

In World War I, the 369th Infantry Regiment, "Harlem Hellfighters," were the first Americans – Black or white - to reach the Rhine. Among approximately eighteen men from Plainfield (that we have been able to document) enlisted with the Hellfighters: **Charles Bolling**, **William Brown**, **Sidney Butler**, **William S. Daniels (Captain)**, **Ulysses Grant**, **William Grobes**, **Samuel Hall**, **Stanley Hall**, **William Hall**, **Clarence Houghten**, **Foster Voorhees Kline**, **Irving Mann**, **Joseph Parsons**, **Charles Saunders**, **Walter Smith**, **Robert Tate**, **Sidney Warwick**, and **Raymond Wright**.

World War II saw numerous Black enlistees (photo above) into the armed services. **Donald Van Blake** was assigned to the 10th U. S. Calvary, an all-Black regiment comprised of the original Buffalo Soldiers. **Warren Edward Henry**, a Tuskegee Airman, served as a pilot in the 477th Bomb Squadron. More Black Plainfielders served than it is possible to list here.

### Early Black-Owned Businesses

In the early 1900s, several women were dressmakers. **Sadie Brown**, **Maggie Cobbs**, **Lizzie Green**, **Alice Maynard**, and **Mary Sweeney** all ran their business from their homes. **Robert Jones** owned a grocery on East 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, and **William Wright** ran one on Plainfield Avenue. **Edward Byers** ran a real estate business. **William Harvey** and **William White** each owned and ran restaurants on Madison and North Avenues, respectively. **Roscoe Wormley** was a dentist, as was **Preston A. Clay**. There were two Black physicians at that time – **Jefferson Anderson** and **Fred Durrah**. **Chase Holmes** and **Lottie Kearney** were teachers. There were at least four business partnerships. These were Brown & Hill Barbers and Hall & Willis Taxi Cabs on North Avenue, Quinn Bros (coal) on West 4<sup>th</sup> Street, and Rogers & Bolling Barbers on Madison Avenue; the last was located in the same building as William Harvey's restaurant at 115 Madison Avenue. In 1927, **Joseph B. Judkins** (below center) founded Judkins Colonial [Funeral] Home. He was selected in 1943 as one of five "outstanding Negro citizens" of the country.



### Y.M.C.A. Moorland Branch

The first YMCA in the world to serve African Americans was established in Washington, D.C., in 1853. Although interest in starting a similar Association in Plainfield surfaced in 1894, it did not occur until 1923 with the creation of the Moorland Branch of the YMCA. Also known as the "Moorland Y," it was located on the old Hope Chapel property in 1926.

The Central Y set a three-month test period to see if this new branch could obtain public support. The Moorland building campaign was led and championed by **Dr. A. L. Thompson, Sr.**, a prominent Black dentist in Plainfield. A group of citizens from the Black community financed the establishment of the branch. By the end of the test period, Moorland membership grew to 150, and the branch became official and began to receive financial support from the Central Y. It is believed to have been named after Dr. Jesse E. Mooreland (despite the different spelling), the first paid executive of the first Black YMCA in D.C.

**Margaret & Thelma Lambert** (above) were active in the membership drive for the Y. Thelma (R) was a nurse at Hubbard Junior High School and taught pediatrics at Muhlenberg Hospital School of Nursing.

### Plainfield's Black Newspapers

July 29, 1904 is believed to be the date that Plainfield first offered a Black newspaper, known at the time as a "race journal." Called the *Plainfield Herald* by its two proprietors, it is believed to have ceased publication in 1907 and sadly exists today only as a few brief references in published sources.

Coverage focusing on the African-American experience in Plainfield could be found after 1907 in the Plainfield column in *The New York Age*, where a meeting of The Silver Slipper Club or an announcement of the first showing of "talking movies" at the Moorland Y found coverage.



*The Voice* began to "provide a factual analysis and reporting of social, economic and political issues that confront black people in the Plainfield area" on June 22, 1968. At first a bi-weekly, it became a weekly newspaper but is believed to have ceased publication in 1974. Many issues are preserved and/or digitized, and available online or in-house at Plainfield Public Library.