Blacks in Germantown
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Blacks in Germantown

By Sherry Stone
Tribune staff

Photographs, paintings, antiques, and period clothing from Germantown's history bring the past closer to the present at the Germantown Historical Museum, 5503 Germantown Ave.

Although the area, as evidenced by its name, was settled by German Quakers in 1683, the museum also has considerable information on file about the role of Blacks in Germantown history. The museum is also seeking to record more current information on Blacks as they become a growing part of the Germantown population.

"We are now collecting twentieth century history and African-American history, reflective of Germantown today," said museum Managing Director Barbara Warnick Silberman. The museum also wants to collect more artifacts from African-American families from the area.

The effort is part of a project funded by the Pennsylvania Historical Museum. "We are collecting oral histories; we have them on tape in our library. So far we have been talking with people who grew up here between the two World Wars. We worked through some of the churches in the community," said Silberman. "The next step is to transcribe the tapes."

> *'He was one of the first Blacks to graduate from the University of Pennsylvania, and his son and grandson followed.' Barbara Silberman, managing director Germantown Historical Museum*

Through The Pennsylvania Historical Museum Commission, the Germantown Historical Museum is also helping to develop an African-American curriculum. The project is expected to be completed within six months.

African-Americans listed among the archives of the Germantown Historical Museum library are easy to find. Museum officials encourage African-Americans from the area to make an appointment to read or hear about people like themselves who lived in early Germantown. The museum is open Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays, and by appointment.

Expect to read about the William Warricks family. "He was one of the first Blacks to graduate from the University of Pennsylvania, and his son and grandson followed," said Silberman.

Germantown was also the home of many historic Black churches in Philadelphia.

Founder of Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church, Rev. James D. Brooks, lived in Germantown, according to The 1984 "Germantown Crier" a souvenir book published by the Germantown Historical Society. Brooks was born a slave in Virginia. He joined the Union cavalry at age 11, and was educated by an officer's family. He eventually graduated from Howard University's theological department, and began building Enon Tabernacle in 1879.

Bethel AME Church was organized in 1859; it is now located at

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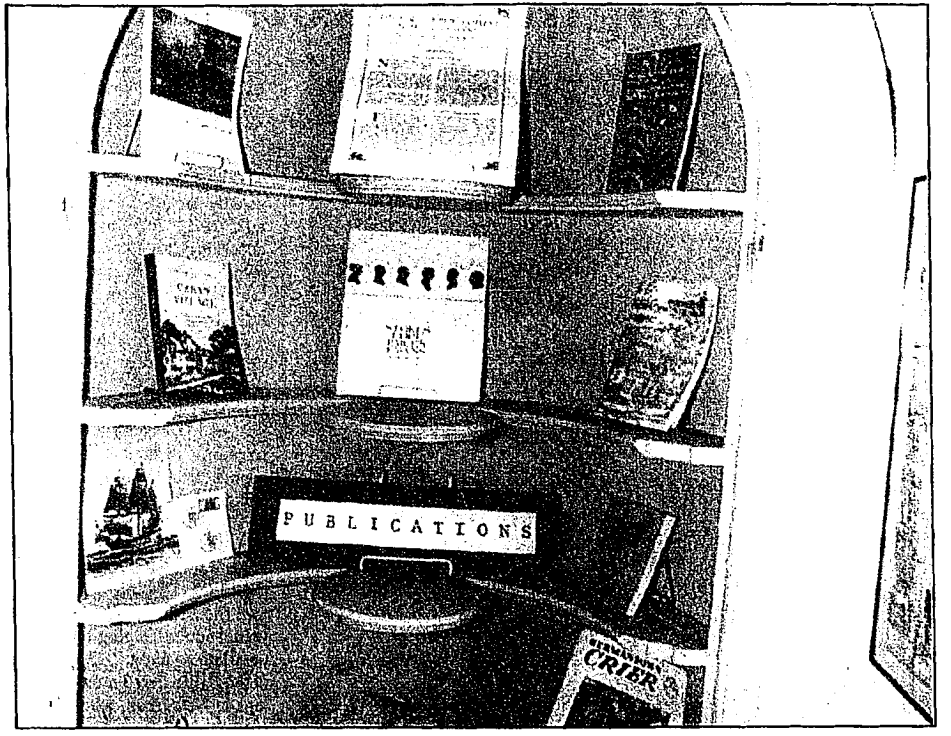

The Germantown Historical Society is encouraging African-Americans to share the history of their families in Germantown. The museum already has considerable information on file about African-Americans in the area's past. — James O'Neal photo

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Blacks' role in Germantown history

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Tulpehocken Street and Germantown Avenue. Grace Baptist Church, West Johnson Street, and Canaan Baptist Church, 21st Street near Godfrey Avenue, are also among the historically Black churches in the Germantown Area.

Institutions of learning for Blacks in Germantown are also on record at the museum. There is information, for example on "The Germantown Industrial Home for Colored Women."

"It was a school for women coming from the South who needed a job — they were trained to be domestics," said Silberman.

In 1892, the Joseph E. Hill Public School was named in honor of the pioneer Black educator from Philadelphia. Most Black students from the area went there, except for a few from wealthy families. The school was staffed by six Black teachers, and had a Black principal.

'We are now collecting twentieth century history and African-American history, reflective of Germantown today.'
Barbara Warnick Silberman

According to Silberman, Germantown was also the site of the first written protest against slavery in America, in 1688. The Germantown Quakers are said to have questioned the morality of slavery in Germantown and in the greater Pennsylvania colony.

The colony was settled by William Penn — himself a slaveholder. A paper which denounced slavery was sent by the Germantown Quakers to three larger legislative bodies of Quakers in Pennsylvania and South Jersey. The protest was unsuccessful, but did draw attention to the issue.

Pennsylvania became the first state to pass a law leading to the eventual abolition of slavery within its borders.

The site where the protest paper was signed was said to be at the home of Thones Kunders. Francis Pastorius, founder of Germantown, wrote and signed the paper. The "Freedom Square" shopping mall — still under construction — will be built at the historic site.

There is still more to learn about African-Americans in early Germantown history.

A plaque located at The Germantown Historical Society, 52nd Street and Germantown Avenue, commemorates protests against slavery by Germantown Quakers.

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