

# The SAGE Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America

## Michigan Street African American Heritage Corridor, Buffalo, New York

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Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America

Chapter Title: "Michigan Street African American Heritage Corridor, Buffalo, New York"

Pub. Date: 2015

Access Date: September 09, 2015

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781452258218

Online ISBN: 9781483346373

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346373.n204>

Print pages: 601-604

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346373.n204>

Buffalo, New York, has a strong history of free African Americans living within its city limits. When Buffalo was incorporated in 1832, Michigan Avenue was the heart of the African American neighborhood because of its rich history as the site of the first recorded African American settlements in the area. It was also a thriving commercial and residential neighborhood where African Americans lived in concert with Polish, Jewish, Russian, Chinese, German, and other immigrant cultures. Located on the East Side of the city, the neighborhood now designated as the Michigan Street African American Heritage Corridor represents a rich compendium of the life and experience of the African in America.

The history of the Michigan Street African American Heritage Corridor encompasses the survival savvy of Africans who escaped the earliest forms of American chattel slavery to help settle the Niagara Frontier; the dauntless courage of Underground Railroad conductors and passengers, and the abolitionists who championed them on; and the unfettered hope of the throngs of disenfranchised who came in two waves of migration to escape Jim Crow oppression in the rural South and find their American Dream in the newly industrialized North.

## Early Life and Experience

The earliest recorded Buffalo village settler, other than Native Americans, was Joseph Hodge, also known as “Black Joe,” a former slave who had been captured by Seneca Indians during the Revolutionary War and released around 1784. [p. 601 ↓ ] He married a Seneca Nation woman; they settled along Buffalo Creek near what is now the Waterfront area of the city, and together ran a log cabin tavern and trading post.

In 1816, there were 16 Black residents included among a Buffalo village population of 400 that settled near the intersection of Michigan Avenue and Broadway. Nine of these were listed as “slaves.” In 1828, that number had grown to about 60. By 1849 the African American settlement had expanded from the Michigan–Broadway intersection to include the areas east and west along Broadway and north and south along Michigan that still define the primary parameters of the Heritage Corridor. During the period before the Civil War, the neighborhood was home to about 500 formerly enslaved

African Americans who participated in a hub of Underground Railroad and abolitionist activity. They included:

- Tennessee-born fugitive William Douglas, “Uncle Dug,” who made his way to Buffalo sometime in the 1830s and became the independent owner of a popular waterfront saloon and boarding house named “Dug’s Dive.” He earned a reputation as a good samaritan who provided food and shelter to fugitives who found their way to his door.
- George Weir, Sr., pastor of the Vine Street AME Church from 1838 to 1847, who was a prominent founder of the National Negro Convention and cofounder of the Buffalo Anti-Slavery Society.
- Prominent abolitionist William Wells Brown, who opened his home at 13 Pine Street as a safe house and helped fugitives escape to Canada across the Niagara River when he worked for the Lake Erie Steamship Company. A historic plaque now marks the approximate location of his former home.

From 1900 to the 1920s, during the first wave of mass migration, African Americans flooded into the Buffalo Lower East Side from the Carolinas and Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida, and founded businesses and established social services and civic groups to support their segregated community. Black-owned hotels, boarding houses, nightclubs, funeral parlors, cleaners, drugstores, and restaurants operated in and around what is now the historic Michigan Street Africa–American Heritage Corridor, often commingling and doing business with immigrant populations that shared the thriving community there during the early 20th century. Among them were:

- Physicians Ivorite Scruggs, Ezekial Nelson, Theodore Kakaza, and H. H. Lewis, who established medical practices, and attorneys Clarence Mahoney and Julian Evans, who had law offices along William Street in the 1920s.
- The Douglas Grocery Company, one of the city’s first African American cooperative enterprises, which opened its first store at 132 William Street in the fall of 1920.
- On Exchange Street, Dan Montgomery’s Manhattan Hotel and Supper Club, which catered to Black porters and became a favorite meeting place for intellectuals of the day.
- The area around Michigan Avenue and William Street, which was home to the Sims and Towne New and Used Furniture Store, the Jones Brothers

Mortuary, and the Maloney School of Beauty Culture. In 1921, Robert Joplin opened the McAvoy Theatre at Broadway and Madison to offer “high-class pictures and up-to-date vaudeville” to the Black community.

- *The Buffalo Heritage*, founded in the 1920s, which helped the community develop a collective identity, and promoted self-help and racial solidarity.

From the years immediately before the turn of the century through its first 2 decades, the Michigan Avenue neighborhood emerged as the place where the descendants of enslaved Africans gathered to discuss constitutional politics and chart their collective future. The Michigan Street Baptist Church, its pastor Jesse Edward Nash, and prominent parishioners William and Mary Burnett Talbert were instrumental facilitators of early civil rights advocacy.

## *Michigan Street Baptist Church*

Organized in 1836, the Michigan Street Baptist Church has been a central part of the history and culture of the African American community in Buffalo for more than 150 years. It is one of the city’s oldest properties continuously owned and occupied by African Americans. The building was erected in 1845 by its African American congregation, and became an Underground Railroad station that provided final sanctuary for hundreds of freedom seekers before they crossed the border to Canada. During the early 1900s, the church was a central meeting place for civil rights and antilynching activists.

Over the years, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Booker T. Washington, among other noted historic figures, have graced the sanctuary or grounds of the Michigan Street Baptist Church. The original structure still stands at 511 Michigan Avenue and is still a congregational home. The building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, offers tours, and is a current integral part of the economic development plans for the future of the corridor.

## *Reverend J. Edward Nash and the Nash House Museum*

Tall, distinguished, and diplomatic, Jesse Edward Nash arrived in Buffalo from Virginia in 1892, at the age of 24, to take the pulpit of the prominent Michigan Street Baptist Church.

During the 60 years he served as pastor, Nash provided spiritual and civil rights leadership for the East Side community and was among the city's most influential Black citizens. He had direct access to the mayor and other local officials, which he often parlayed into benefits for the segregated community as its individual citizens. He was a longtime leader and treasurer of the Western New York Baptist Association, and for 32 years served as secretary of the interracial Ministers Alliance of Buffalo.

Nash was a catalyst for the formation of Buffalo branches of the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a founding member of the Douglas Grocery Company, and an instrumental figure in the establishment of the Michigan Avenue YMCA. Designed by architect John Brent, a graduate of the Tuskegee Institute, the Michigan Avenue YMCA opened its doors in 1928 and provided critical social services to the corridor's African American community until it was demolished in 1977.

Some of the most important unwritten history of the development of the American civil rights movement was most likely conceptualized, discussed, and set in motion in the Nash home, where he and his wife, Frances, hosted many prominent African American leaders of the time, including Booker T. Washington. He retired in 1953 and died in 1957.

In 1999, when the Michigan Street Preservation Corporation opened the deteriorating building at 36 Nash Street, where Reverend Nash had lived with his family behind the Michigan Street Baptist Church, they uncovered a cache of letters, books, photographs, and mementos that included correspondence between Nash and the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., his old classmate at Virginia Union College. The Nash house was

restored, and in May 2007 opened as the Nash House Museum, complete with a lifelike wax figure of Reverend Nash sitting at his desk in the study.

## *Mary Burnett Talbert*

Mary Burnett Talbert was born in Ohio in 1866 and graduated from Oberlin College. She then moved to Arkansas, where she became its first Black high school principal before moving to Buffalo in 1891 as the bride of a prominent real estate broker, William H. Talbert, who had come from California.

Talbert helped to found the Phillis Wheatley Club, and in 1905 hosted W. E. B. Du Bois, John Hope, Monroe Trotter, and 27 others for a secret planning meeting of the civil rights group that became known as the Niagara Movement, a precursor to the NAACP. She served as president, vice president, and director of the NAACP and as chair of the NAACP Anti-Lynching Committee, and she [p. 603 ↓ ] lobbied internationally for passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill. A year before her death in 1922, Talbert became the first African American woman to receive the prestigious NAACP Spingarn Award. She is buried in Buffalo's Forest Lawn Cemetery.

## *Historic Colored Musicians Club*

The story of the Colored Musicians Club actually began in 1917, when Buffalo's American Federation for Musicians Local No. 43 refused to accept Black musicians. When they consequently founded their own Local No. 533 union, it became the first Black union in the city.

In 1918, an independent group of Local 533 union members formed a club where musicians could socialize and relax at night after a gig. The club was incorporated in 1935 as a separate entity and began using the upstairs of its permanent home at 145 Broadway for rehearsal space and the downstairs for union meetings.

During the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, almost any musician who visited and performed in Buffalo checked in at the Colored Musicians Club. Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington,

Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Coleman Hawkins, and a very young Miles Davis are among the many jazz legends who frequented its stage. Louis Armstrong and his wife, Lil, were both members.

The building was designated in 1999 as a historic preservation site, and in 2011 the Colored Musicians Club opened an interactive museum on the lower level to promote research and the preservation of jazz history and the importance of Buffalo in the evolution of the genre. The club is still active; its members offer free lessons to community youth, hold open jam sessions on Sunday nights, and mount an annual jazz festival every summer.

## Looking Ahead

Today, the Michigan Street Baptist Church, the Nash House Museum, and the Colored Musicians Club form the contemporary heartbeat of the Michigan Street African American Heritage Corridor. Its residents and a coalition of committed stakeholders are working to heal the scars of urban renewal and shrug off the long-term malaise of Rust Belt blight. Previously defined boundaries of the corridor, as originally conceived in the planning phase that began around 2007, are being realigned to include many of the cultural institutions, small businesses, and neighborhood shops that continue to help it evolve, as well as many other historically significant sites.

The end goal is the reemergence of the Michigan Street African American Heritage Corridor as a vibrant, mixed-use community supported in part by a cultural and heritage tourism-based economy.

**See also** [African Cultural Revivals](#); [African Cultural Survivals](#); [Africana Sociocultural Heritage](#); [Cultural Identity](#); [Jazz](#)

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346373.n204>

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