

AFRICAN AMERICAN LEADERSHIP IN PHILADELPHIA A Retrospective View

Philadelphia has a rich history of African American community leadership dating back to a time when there were virtually no community based social service organizations to address community needs. Religious and charitable organizations offered assistance to the poor and disadvantaged, but their capacity to help was greatly limited. Current leadership builds on the experience of key individuals and key events that were instrumental in shaping today's community leadership landscape.

The leadership has long sought ways to address social and economic conditions in the African American community. The great scholar, Dr. W.E. B. DuBois documented the social and economic life of African Americans in the City in the late 19th century in his classic study entitled The Philadelphia Negro. He described and analyzed the broad, deep, persistent racial disparities in employment, income, wealth, business ownership, health, civic participation, the administration of justice, and other features of the African American experience in Philadelphia near the end of the century.

Despite their best efforts to generate change, community leaders met with only limited success. In 2007, the Urban League of Philadelphia published a report on the State of Black Philadelphia. The report, modeled after the National Urban League's State of Black America, revealed continuing wide, deep, racial disparities in social and economic conditions that were little changed from the conditions described by Dr. DuBois a half century before. About 27 percent of black families were poor--- double the rate of poverty among white families. The unemployment rate among black workers was twice the rate for white workers; the jobless rate for black youth was more than 50 percent. Wealth, or net worth, among black families was less than \$10 thousand, compared with more than \$90 thousand among white families.

Following is an account of Philadelphia's black leadership from the 1940's to recent years. A key point in the analysis is the evolution of black leadership style from quiet diplomacy in the 1940s to militancy and self-help in the 1950s and 1960s, as the leadership worked to address the challenges the community faced.

The 1940s

In the 1940s, leadership was concentrated among a group commonly known as “the 400”, a group of prominent, middle class, black professionals in law, medicine, business, higher education, and the church. Many were graduates of elite higher education institutions including the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, Yale, and prominent historically black colleges (HBCU) including Howard University, Hampton Institute, Fisk University, and the two local HBCUs, Lincoln University and Cheyney State Teachers College. The Presidents of Lincoln and Cheyney State were among Philadelphia’s black leadership elite.

Among individuals who loomed large in leadership were Raymond Pace Alexander and his wife, Sadie Tanner Moore Alexander, both attorneys; attorney Austin Norris; Rev. E. Luther Cunningham; and Dr. James P. Ramsey, a physician in South Philadelphia. Leading organizations were the NAACP, and the Philadelphia Urban League (founded as the Armstrong Association, 1908).

The pastors of prominent black churches also were among the leadership elite: Rev. John D. Bright of Mother Bethel A M E Church, the historic founding church of the A M E denomination (Center City); Father John Logan, of St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, another historic black church (West Philadelphia); Rev. William H Gray, Jr., pastor of Bright Hope Baptist Church (North Philadelphia); and pastors of Tindley Temple Methodist Church, and Frist African Baptist Church, both in South Philadelphia.

Two non-mainstream religious institutions also were important in African American community life, though their pastors were not part of the leadership elite, and exerted little influence beyond their membership. Included in this group were Daddy Grace, whose headquarters was located at 16th and Fitzwater Streets, and Father Divine, head of the Peace Mission, with headquarters at Broad and Catherine Streets. Father Divine’s organization operated several restaurants, grocery stores, and two hotels in different parts of the City. The Divine organization was known for charging low prices, and providing quality products and services. Their members displayed strict obedience to the teachings of the order, were excellent in housework, and scrupulously reliable.

The NAACP leadership was dominated by the “400” who followed the lead of the national NAACP headed by Walter White and his successor Roy Wilkins. The NAACP took a legalistic approach in attacking racial discrimination, as demonstrated by the work of Thurgood Marshall, which resulted in the U S Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. Most of the local NAACP’s effort was focused on pronouncements against segregation and discrimination, including police brutality and misconduct directed at the black community.

Three black newspapers were regularly published: the Philadelphia Tribune, the oldest, continuously published black newspaper in the U.S.; the African American, based in Baltimore, MD; and the Pittsburgh Courier. The Tribune provided most news on black people and events in Philadelphia, with crusading editorials strongly advocating change in local conditions, and repeated demands for greater black political participation. E. Washington Rhodes and his successors as publisher and President of the Tribune were among the top leaders of the black community.

The Urban League was the main black employment referral organization. Most referrals, however, were for entry level clerical or service work. Because of widespread employment discrimination, few business establishments contacted the Urban League seeking employee referrals. The Urban League also provided guidance on home ownership and offered limited job training in clerical skills.

Berean Institute, founded by Rev. Matthew Anderson in 1889, offered training in cosmetology, several skilled trades, clerical, and administrative occupations. Many black young adults attended Berean in preparation for careers in non-menial jobs. Berean Institute's President also was a prominent member of the black leadership class in the 1940s.

The public sector, including city government and the public schools were bastions of racial discrimination in the 1940s. In mid - decade, however, the door of opportunity opened slightly in the public sector when a few black workers were hired in clerical jobs, and in a few skilled trades jobs in the Navy Yard; and garment manufacturing jobs at the Army uniform distribution center in South Philadelphia. Opportunities in the defense facilities opened after President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued executive order 8808, which created the Fair Employment Practice Commission. The President issued the order after A. Philip Randolph, the prominent union and civil rights leader, threatened a march on Washington in the midst of World War II.

In the 1940s, the dominant leadership style was quiet diplomacy aimed at improving race relations through collaborative work with sympathetic white supporters. Quiet diplomacy was based on the view that rational persuasion and patience have their own reward, and sustainable change requires greater enlightenment and appreciation for social justice among leaders of the white community. From time to time, legal challenges to overt discrimination were filed with the Philadelphia Human Relations Commission. But the black leadership more often emphasized ways to improve race relations through inter-racial discussion, advocacy, and persuasion.

Black leadership was self-assured, while pursuing professional success. There was social class diversity in most predominantly black neighborhoods, rooted in rigid housing discrimination. That contributed to a sense of community social control, while providing diverse role models for youth. Black fraternal and social organizations thrived, and many churches did well with active, supportive membership. Black professionals mainly served the black community, the base of their financial success.

The Fellowship Commission, a private, voluntary organization headed by a prominent Jewish attorney, Maurice Fagan, had a number of the "400" on its board, and emphasized efforts to break the iron grip of housing discrimination, while promoting broad interracial collaboration.

The Commission worked hard to expand black home ownership in West and Northwest Philadelphia. In the 1940s, the black population was heavily concentrated in South and North Central Philadelphia, and West Philadelphia east of 52nd Street.

Black housing penetration west of 52nd Street, and in Germantown, Tioga, Mount Airy and the Oak Lanes did not begin in earnest until after World War II.

In the 1940 decade, despite widespread racial inequality, there was no organized or aggressive leadership effort to break the barriers to equal employment opportunity. Black workers experienced frequent bouts of unemployment. When employed, black men were concentrated in low wage, unskilled, non-production jobs. Most black women did domestic work in the City and suburbs, or held low wage service jobs.

The 1950s and 1960s

In the 1950s, the black leadership style evolved from quiet diplomacy to militancy, a change influenced by two developments (1) local response to the civil rights movement in the South, and (2) the arrival of two black leaders who took a more militant approach to race relations.

In 1954, the U S Supreme Court issued the Brown decision, which declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. That was the death knell for racial segregation in all spheres of public life.

Three years after the Brown decision, the Montgomery Improvement Association was founded in Montgomery, Alabama, and the Montgomery bus boycott was launched. Black people refused to ride the buses in protest against the arrest of Mrs Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat to a white man---a seat in the black section of the bus! The boycott, which lasted more than a year, ended when a court ruled that passengers could not be segregated by race in public transit.

The damaging financial impact of the boycott on the bus company demonstrated the impact of black collective action and purchasing power as a tool for generating social change. The boycott also thrust Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, into national prominence as a civil rights leader.

The direct action challenge to segregation in the South was followed closely by the African American community in Philadelphia. Most had family in the South, and were encouraged by the prospect for change that was generated by direct action.

Rev. Leon H. Sullivan

In the late 1940s, Rev. Leon H. Sullivan arrived in Philadelphia to assume the pastorate of Zion Baptist Church. He was born and reared in West Virginia, graduated from West Virginia State University, and as a teenager, was called to preach the gospel. He left West Virginia for New York, where he studied at Union Theological Seminary, and worked with Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, who was both pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church, and a member of the U.S. Congress. Rev. Sullivan also met and became acquainted with A. Philip Randolph, the renowned union and civil rights leader. Those contacts and experiences taught Rev. Sullivan the importance and technique of direct action in confronting racial discrimination. He brought those views with him to Philadelphia.

Rev. Sullivan was not immediately embraced by the 400, the dominant black leadership group in Philadelphia. He went his own way in building church membership, and developing a number of church programs to address the economic challenges his congregation and the community faced.

Early in his pastorate, he organized a program to address youth unemployment. He discovered the widespread, unyielding discrimination against black youth, and was struck not only by the refusal of firms to hire black youth, but also the refusal of many business executives even to meet with him and his associate, Rev. Thomas Ritter, to discuss hiring youth. The iron wall of disrespect and rejection helped persuade Rev. Sullivan to launch the Selective Patronage Campaign, a consumer boycott against firms that practiced employment discrimination.

Under the Selective Patronage campaign, many black preachers urged their congregation not to buy the products of companies the campaign leaders identified for refusing to hire black workers. Tasty Baking Company was the first target.

In a meeting with CEO Paul Kaiser, Rev. Sullivan was told the company did not hire black driver/salesmen, production workers, or clerical workers because the firm could not find black men and women qualified to fill the jobs. After nine months of the boycott, however, Mr. Kaiser requested another meeting with Rev. Sullivan, and agreed to hire 7 driver/salesmen, a number of production workers, and a few secretaries and clerical workers.

The company's capitulation to the campaign demands was widely reported in the print and TV media, and Rev. Sullivan was thrust into the forefront of black leadership in addressing black employment problems. Following Tastykake, boycotts were directed toward the Philadelphia Bulletin newspaper, Sunoco home heating oil and gasoline, and a few other prominent business firms. **The business community took note, and some, without the damaging PR effects of a boycott, started to hire a small number of black workers in jobs from which they had previously been excluded. It's fair to add, however, that equal employment practices were also advanced by Title 7 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed employment discrimination.**

After a year or so, Rev. Sullivan shifted gears, suspended the boycotts, and organized the Opportunities Industrialization Center, the City's first community based job training organization. OIC recruited black and Latino, unemployed and underemployed youth and young adults who sought better jobs. The goal was to prepare them to take advantage of the job opportunities that opened following the Selective Patronage campaign.

After breaking ground on employment, Rev. Sullivan expanded his reach and organized a broad-based, self-help economic development program focused on housing and business ownership. In his church, he organized the 10-36 plan, a quasi-investment pool of funds for business development. He also created Zion non-Profit Charitable Trust, which invested in multi-unit housing projects. With the assistance of the First Pennsylvania Bank, he assembled the deal that built Progress Plaza, the nation's first black-owned urban shopping center. Rev. Sullivan's leadership on these issues marked a vivid departure from the past, and thrust him into the forefront of black community leadership in Philadelphia.

Cecil B. Moore

Cecil B. Moore, another West Virginian, came to Philadelphia and attended Temple University Law School, following service in the U.S. Marine Corps. After law school, he pursued private practice and became involved in community affairs, notably the NAACP. Moore's outspoken, often profane, style made him anathema to the 400, an association he had no desire to pursue. He led a membership drive, ran for leadership, and deposed A. Leon Higginbotham as President of the local NAACP chapter.

Influenced by the rise of direct action playing out in the South, Moore moved the NAACP toward a more militant approach in attacking employment discrimination. He organized demonstrations at construction sites to protest the failure of building contractors to hire black workers. He also organized mass demonstrations at Girard College, the racially segregated, private secondary school located in the heart of North Philadelphia, a predominantly black neighborhood. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. attended one of the demonstrations during a speaking engagement in the City.

The demonstrations at Girard College proceeded simultaneously with an anti-discrimination legal case that was drafted by two members of the 400, William T. Coleman, and Raymond Pace Alexander. In time, the Orphan's Court issued a ruling ending racial discrimination at Girard College. Today, the institution has a predominantly minority student body, and is headed by a prominent black attorney, Clarence Armbrister. The board chairman is another black leader, attorney Bernard Smalley.

Cecil Moore's controversial leadership was unsettling to Roy Wilkins, executive director of the national NAACP. Wilkins suspended Moore as local president in response to charges of financial misconduct. Although the investigation failed to confirm the charges, the citywide chapter was divided into several parts based on membership residence in different parts of the City. The obvious intent was to diminish Cecil Moore's power among black leadership in Philadelphia.

As a result of the reorganization, the local NAACP lost substantial influence and effectiveness as a community organization. Cecil Moore left the organization, returned to private practice, and entered local politics. He ran and was elected to the City Council, where he served many years while continuing to advocate on behalf of constituents in the North Central Council District and the black community throughout Philadelphia.

Charles W. Bowser

Charles Bowser was a native born Philadelphian, who embraced the militant leadership style. An outstanding student athlete at Central High School, one of the City's top secondary schools, he graduated from Temple University and its Law School. He entered private practice, and early in his career, helped develop the black independent political movement.

Before the 1950s, African Americans were, at best, marginal players in the City's political life. But with increasing population, the African American vote became more important in the electoral domain. The Philadelphia Tribune long advocated for greater black political participation, but slow progress was made in getting black people into elected or appointed office.

Black voter registration rose during the 1950s, but remained relatively low. Still, with high turnout, the black vote could make the difference in the outcome of local elections.

Herbert Millen and Theodore Spaulding were appointed to state courts, and Raymond Pace Alexander was elected to City Council. He was later appointed, and then elected to Common Pleas Court, where he served with distinction until his death in the 1970s.

Robert N.C. Nix Sr. was tapped by the Democratic Party organization to run for Congress, where he served for two decades before being deposed by Rev. William H. Gray, III.

Charles Bowser was a leader of the black independent political movement that produced a number of black state elected officials, among whom were Hardy Williams, an attorney; David Richardson, a social worker; Roxanne Jones, a former welfare recipient; and Dwight Evans, a young community activist. Several other black elected officials were selected by the Democratic City organization to run for office, but in contrast to the independent endorsed candidates, the Party machine-endorsed officials often seemed to pay more obeisance to Party interests than to the needs of the community.

Most African Americans were attracted to the Democratic Party in the 1950s, following the victory of Joseph S. Clark and Richardson Dilworth and the reform movement which ended decades of Republican Party dominance in City government. The adoption of the Home Rule Charter created the civil service system and other institutional changes that introduced a somewhat more progressive stance toward racial tolerance and opportunity in the City government, though it did not obliterate racial discrimination.

Charles Bowser took advantage of the new opening, seized the opportunity, and built a base on which black community organizations rest today. His campaign for Mayor in 1975, as the nominee of the Philadelphia Party, showed the potency of the black vote, and set the foundation for the election of W. Wilson Goode, Sr., as Philadelphia's first black mayor in 1983.

The War on Poverty

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a “War on Poverty”. In hindsight, the battle was more a skirmish than a war, and with the inauguration of Richard M. Nixon in 1969, the nation beat a rapid retreat from the LBJ level of conflict in fighting poverty.

The Johnson administration greatly increased federal spending for primary and secondary education, social security, health care, and community development. The economy was growing at a rate above the long-term average, spurred by both increased domestic and military spending. Economic growth undergirded the upward spike in the federal budget that fueled the Great Society.

A major part of the spending was directed toward urban areas. The newly created Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) funded the development of local community action programs through which local residents could design ways to address employment, housing, and health care needs. Some national programs, like the Neighborhood Youth Corps, were reminiscent of federal programs created during the Great Depression. A key initiative was the Model Cities Program, through which municipalities could submit proposals for funding to support a range of economic development ventures.

Mayor James H.J. Tate appointed Charles Bowser “Deputy to the Mayor”, a title that in common parlance quickly morphed into “Deputy Mayor”, a position not provided for in the City Home Rule Charter. That was the highest appointed position ever attained by an African American in Philadelphia City government.

Bowser was given responsibility to organize and implement the City’s newly acquired resources to address urban poverty. He developed a system for certifying and funding neighborhood community action agencies that provided housing rehab, job training, health services and other activities authorized by OEO. He also had oversight to assure that the organizations spent the funds in compliance with federal regulations.

In the process, Bowser attained recognition and a reputation as the City’s preeminent black leader. His experience gained him high credibility with the business community, as well as the political establishment. That stature served him well when in response to civil unrest in the City in the late 1960s, he was sought out to recommend a mechanism for generating sustainable improvement in community conditions.

In response, he organized the Philadelphia Urban Coalition, a tri-partite community/business/government organization to provide a range of social and economic development services aimed at improving the quality of life, and strengthening economic opportunity for low-income people.

Black leadership also emerged from organized labor. Henry Nicholas, born in Mississippi, migrated to Philadelphia where he rose to leadership of Local 1199C, the Hospital Workers Union. The union, with predominantly black and Latino membership, not only negotiates and implements labor agreements setting wages and working conditions, also developed the most effective job training program in the City. Nicholas is one of the leading black political power brokers in Philadelphia.

Samuel Staten emerged as the leader of the Laborers Union, a key worker organization in the construction industry. His leadership helps secure job and income opportunities for thousands of African American and Latino working people.

In conclusion, the review of black leadership in Philadelphia in the last three decades might be helpful in setting the context for an assessment of community organizations and black leadership today. By the 1980s, Philadelphia's black community leadership had become more pluralistic than it was in the 1940s. The not-for-profit sector now looms large in the constellation of organizations attempting to improve the quality of life in the black community.

There are lessons to be learned from past leadership experiences: the efficacy of quiet diplomacy vs. militancy in generating change; the impact of social class on the effectiveness of African American leadership; and the necessity of black self-help, coupled with interracial cooperation as a sine qua non for achieving black economic progress.

Most important, there must be clear, measureable goals for achieving success. The old Talmudic proverb says, "if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there". The goal for leadership should be to identify ways to eliminate racial inequality in Philadelphia's economic and social life.

The author, Bernard E. Anderson, Ph.D., a 4th generation Philadelphian, and scholar/practitioner, grew up in South Philadelphia. He pursued a diverse career in academia, philanthropy, and public service. An economist, he was the first African American to earn tenure at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. In 1989, he helped merge the Philadelphia Urban Coalition and the Urban Affairs Partnership to create the Urban Affairs Coalition.