



Lawnside Legacies: Delving into History and Community Contributions



(L to R) Welcome to Lawnside; (R) Genealogist, Shamele Jordon and Lawnside Historical Society President, Linda Shockley/

Shaniele Brown, South Jersey, Information Equity Project

Black History Month is when often-overlooked narratives of resilience, perseverance, strength, and community get spotlighted. In the heart of New Jersey, you will find Lawnside, the first independent, self-governing Black municipality in Northern America (Incorporated in 1926), a town enriched in history and holds a special significance within African origin.

"The history of Lawnside is the History of Black culture in South Jersey," said Genealogist and Project Manager for Lawnside Historical Society, Shamele Jordon.

In 1840, Free Haven, now known as Lawnside, developed once abolitionists purchased the land for freed and escaped enslaved people. The town was established well before 1840, but now it was time for those enslaved to have somewhere to feel safe.

According to Linda Shockley, president of the Lawnside Historical Society since 1994, the early origins of Lawnside was founded by Quaker Ralph Smith, a member of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee. Smith worked alongside Jacob C. Wright, Sr., a prominent African American barber, physician, dentist, and community leader, to purchase the land for freed and escaped enslaved people, calling it "Free Haven." Shockley explains that Jacob Wright, Sr. was a Black man from Philadelphia who donated land for the first school for the children of Lawnside. Also, many people had property given to them by Quakers.

"Ralph Smith and Jacob C. Wright, Sr. wanted people to be owners of their houses, to have deeds," said Shockley.

As we explore the story of the historical Lawnside, a town whose impact on Black culture has set its blueprint for liberation, Genealogist Shamele Jordon sheds light on the contributions of the people. Jordon is work-

ing on green book and underground railroad projects funded by the New Jersey Historical Commission (NJHC). The green book highlights Black businesses from Lawnside in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, and the underground railroad project will talk about the town's place in the secret network. According to Jordon, Lawnside was the place to be around the 1920s to the 1960s. The Philadelphia Encyclopedia shares that the town had nightclubs, barbeque spaces, food, and the most notable attraction, Lawnside Park, an amusement park and picnic area with two manufactured lakes.

Having glimpsed into Lawnside's deep, rich Black culture, let us shift focus to a personal experience from a resident. Born in 1957, Alfred J. Toliver Sr. was the youngest of eight boys and the grandson of Richard, an enslaved person who worked on Dobbs' farm. Toliver remembers having a fun childhood when the circus came every year, and the children enjoyed time playing outside on the dirt roads. "This was the only place we could live and be at peace," said Toliver. With Lawnside being a free haven, the people still faced uncertain times; according to Toliver, as a young child, he saw Klansmen riding down Warwick Road, calling the people in town racial slurs.

"It was scary; you're a little kid, looking at these big horses with these men with sheets on them. It was scary, like the Wild West back then," said Toliver.

After hearing about Alfred Toliver's experience, let us explore the profound impact of individuals and historical places.

Peter Mott was an African American Preacher who, along with his wife, Elizabeth Mott, provided safety for escaped enslaved people by using their home 'as a station along the underground railroad.' The Still family was the town's first settlers, living in New Jersey since the early 1700s, dating back to William Still, an African American Abolitionist from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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