

# African American Heritage Pittsfield • Massachusetts



**1 Margaret Hart Library**  
Reid Middle School,  
950 North Street

The Library was named after the highly regarded Black educator, Margaret Hart. After graduating from Williamstown High School in 1930, Miss Hart became the first black graduate of the North Adams Normal School (later the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, or MCLA) in 1935. She completed her master's degree at Columbia Teachers College (NYC) and was the first Black teacher in the Pittsfield public school system. Beginning her career in Pittsfield at Hubbard School, she also taught at the former Mercer School and retired in 1976 from North Junior High (later Reid Middle School), where she taught social studies as well as arts and crafts. Hart was always interested in the lives of the young people she met; she was able to engage students in conversations that bridged the gap between generations, speaking frankly in contemporary language.



**2 Pittsfield Cemetery**  
203 Waconah Street

The cemetery opened in 1850 in response to a petition from a local citizen who did not want his family's dead to be moved. The city's first cemetery, located near what is now Park Square, filled rapidly, and a second cemetery was built near what is now the Pittsfield Common. The graves from the first cemetery were moved to the second. As the second began to fill, a local citizen who didn't want his dead moved only to be moved again, petitioned and won to have the town buy a more substantial piece of land that would last the city for a long, long time. The town bought the land off Waconah and Onota, and then sold it for \$1 to the private non-profit agency that still runs it today. The new location seems to have been readily accepted by people as they bought 44 lots at \$15 a lot in the first offering. There are now more than 27,000 burials in the cemetery with an average of 150 each year (though it was twice that in 1918 during the Great Influenza Epidemic). A historic cemetery added to the National Historic Register in 2007. There are a number of African Americans buried there including the Rev. Samuel Harrison, his first wife Ellen, and a number of their children. Part of the 54th regiment, a black regiment from Massachusetts that fought in the Civil War, is buried here. There are 72 Revolutionary War veterans. And though many of the older graves are in the old section, others were moved to family plots throughout the cemetery.



**3 Berkshire Medical Institute**  
725 North Street

The Berkshire Medical Institute in Pittsfield, Massachusetts was, by the standards of its time, a prestigious and venerable institution, which during its tenure from 1822 to 1867 saw between fifteen hundred and two thousand students pass through its doors. One of these was Henry Jenkins Roberts (c. 1821–1863) in the class of 1847. Three who followed him were James E. Brown (class of 1850), Randolph C. Cooper (class of 1857), and Samuel B. DeLyon (class of 1857). These young men all shared the mutual distinction of race and citizenship, being free Blacks from Monrovia, Liberia.



**4 The NAACP Office**  
467 North Street

The Berkshire County Chapter of the NAACP was organized in 1918 functioned until the mid-1920s and was reactivated in 1945. The local offices were located at 467 North Street in Pittsfield. The height of activity for the organization came in the 1960s and 1970s when the organization picketed the Woolworth's on North Street attracting some fifty blacks and white demonstrators; participated in the 1963 March on Washington; sent residents to register voters during the Freedom Summer of 1965 in Alabama and Mississippi; created opportunities for affordable housing in Pittsfield; set up a community library; supported the election of the first black school board member; organized annual black festivals; and sponsored nationally prominent speakers.



**5 Samuel Harrison House**  
82 Third Street

Reverend Samuel Harrison House still stands at 82 Third Street as of this writing. The Samuel Harrison Society's mission is restoration of the house as a museum of African American history. A resident of Pittsfield, Samuel Harrison served both as a soldier in the Civil War and a minister at the Second Congregational Church. While in the army, he rose to the ranks of chaplain of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment in 1863, where he was refused pay by the federal government for his service because of his race. He pleaded his case to the Governor of Massachusetts, who pushed the army to give Harrison his pay. His example led to an U.S. Congressional Bill in 1864, which provided equal pay to African American troops. Samuel Harrison became licensed to preach in 1850 and became the first minister of the Second Congregational Church in Pittsfield.



**6 Persip Park**  
Corner of North Street and  
Columbus Avenue

The Park was dedicated to the Persip family in March 1883. Alfred K. Persip Sr. (1895–1983) continued the tradition of military service started by the black enlistees in the famed Massachusetts 54th Regiment during the Civil War. (His maternal grandfather, Charles Hamilton of Lanesboro, served in that regiment.) Alfred was the first black man from Berkshire County to enlist at the outbreak of World War I. He was assigned to the 372nd Regiment that fought with the French 157th Division the "Red Hand," since the American army did not want a black unit under its command. His unit was at the front during the Allied Meuse-Argonne offensive in the autumn of 1918. The all-black unit earned the Croix de Guerre with palm leaves, the highest unit decoration bestowed by the French military. Back home, Alfred Persip was a landscape gardener and an active member of the American Legion, serving three times as commander of Pittsfield Post 68.



**7 Woolworth Protest Site**  
137 North Street

This was the scene of a civil rights march in the 1960s. The Woolworth's chain of variety stores refused to serve African Americans at their lunch counters in the South.

The Berkshire County NAACP organized a peaceful march to support the southern boycott of Woolworth's North Street store in the 1960s attracting some fifty black and white demonstrators.



**8 Park Square Intersection**  
of North and South Streets

Park Square is the site of a plaque memorializing a notable elm tree, the Pittsfield Elm. Three and a half centuries old, it was standing when militia rallied nearby to march to Bennington during the Revolutionary War.

Elkanah Watson exhibited merino sheep in the country's first agricultural fair in the tree's shadow in 1808. The Marquis de Lafayette passed beneath its branches when he visited in 1825. Herman Melville alluded to it in Moby Dick. But by 1863 the lightning-scarred tree was in dangerous condition, and Pittsfield selectmen engaged a skilled woodsman to cut it down. That man was Sylvanus Grant (1844–1927), a black man who still has descendants in the county. It was certainly a challenge for one man: the tree stood 128 feet tall with a 28-foot circumference.



**9 Berkshire Athenaeum**  
1 Wendell Avenue

The Berkshire Athenaeum maintains the county's major local history collection. A private Public Library Association was founded in 1850 and the name was later changed to the Berkshire

Athenæum. Later still, Thomas F. Plunkett, Calvin Martin and Thomas Allen, were "instrumental in forming it into a free library." "In 1874, by means of a bequest from Phinehas Allen, and the gift of [the 1876] building from Thomas Allen, a railroad builder and later a member of the United States House of Representatives from Missouri...., the Berkshire Athenaeum was placed upon a firm foundation." The Berkshire Athenaeum is now Pittsfield's public library and contains a collection of more than 150,000 items. The library's special collections include an extensive collection of local history on blacks in Berkshire County including the original sermons and an autobiography of Rev. Samuel Harrison. The 1876 building became the Berkshire County Registry of Deeds in 1975 when the Berkshire Athenaeum moved to the current library building two doors away.



**10 Charles A. Persip American Legion Post 68**  
41 Wendell Avenue

The American Legion Lodge Post 68 was named in honor of the man who was a two-time commander of the American Legion Post 68 and the grandson of Massachusetts 54th regiment, Civil War veteran Charles Hamilton. The post was named for Charles in 1983 (1892–1982), a charter member, one-time commander, and first life-member. Charles, a farmer and caretaker, nicknamed "Mr. American Legion" by his comrades, was also a veteran of World War I, as was another brother, John "Poppey" Persip (1887–1983), a cook and caterer. All of the Persips were active in community and veterans' affairs.



**11 Dorothy Amos Park and Pre-School**  
310 and 340 West Street  
(formerly the West Side Park)

Mrs. Amos graduated from Pittsfield High School, received her BA from Central Ohio State College, and her master's degree from North Adams State. She married John Amos of North Adams, Massachusetts who ran a trucking business and was an amateur boxer. She became the first black guidance counselor in the Pittsfield school system. In 1970 she was named to the Massachusetts Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. In 1971, she founded the Early Childhood Development Center with her sister the Rev. Fannie Cooper in Pittsfield. It was the first public day-care facility for low-income mothers operated in Pittsfield. An effective community leader, innovator and educator she died prematurely at forty-five. The child development center she founded now bears her name—the Dorothy Amos Community Preschool, and Pittsfield West Side Park where she grew up was renamed in her honor.



**12 Pitt Park**

Located next door to the Dorothy Amos Pre-School, This is a community park used for the annual African American Gathering ceremony in the summer. The park includes a mural of famous African Americans in the Berkshires.



**13 St. John's Masonic Temple**  
176 Robbins Avenue

Many Black social events were held at the St. John's Masonic Temple in Pittsfield and Walker and Sumner halls in Great Barrington. Some men from the county were active in St. John's Lodge #10 Ancient Free and Accepted Masons (A. F. & M.) in Pittsfield; and women, in the Beulah Chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star, also in Pittsfield. St. John's Lodge was chartered in Pittsfield in 1898 with Amos Hamilton, Josiah Gardner, and William H. Clarkson, the first three officers. The lodge was always small (with less than fifty members) and relatively isolated from other Masonic lodges. The lodge owned its own room and by the 1950s had enough members that it could purchase its own building in 1954, at 173 Robbins Avenue in Pittsfield. The lodge then became a primary venue for African American dances, banquets, and civil rights meetings. It drew people from the entire county and beyond. A declining membership led the Grand Lodge to take ownership of the building and in 1993 it was sold to the Association for Basic Community Development, although St. John's Lodge continues to exist.



**14 The Christian Center**  
193 Robbins Avenue

The Christian Center is a community center for interdenominational worship established in the 1960s. In 1982 Rev. Williard Durant became director of the Christian Center, which he and his wife, Rosemary, codirected until 1997. Established in 1896 as a mission by the Epworth League of the Methodist Church, the Christian Center is a nonprofit, educational, and social service agency. Under the Durants it was staffed mainly by volunteers. It provided food for the poor, ran after-school and housing programs, offered a clothing service, and constructed the Erworth Arms housing for senior citizens at 350 West Street. Today the Center includes daycare facilities, after-school, and Saturday programs for children.



**15 Second Congregational Church**  
50 Onota Street

Second Congregational Church is the oldest Black religious organization in the county. It was at first located between 101 and 109 First Street (1846–1940), then at 373 Columbus Avenue (1941–1969; the remains of this building were demolished on 2 April 1981), and as of this writing at 50 Onota Street (1969–present). Prior to 1846 the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ (UCC) in Pittsfield was the principal religious institution for blacks living in the area. Owing to racial intolerance, however, there came a time when seven of the Black congregants decided they should form their own religious institution, one that would be free of the racism they experienced. John L. Brown, Morris Potter, William Potter, David S. Thomas, Catherine Fields, Delilah Potter, and Mary Richards established the first of the region's Black churches in February 1846. It is reportedly the second oldest UCC-affiliated church in Massachusetts and the eighth in the nation to continuously serve a predominantly African American congregation.



**16 Victory Temple**  
154 Dewey Avenue

Victory Temple United Church of God in Christ, one of three predominantly African American churches founded in the 1960s. The church was dedicated in 1977 with James Parker as its first minister.



**17 Price Memorial A. M. E. Zion Church**  
163 Linden Street

Price Memorial A. M. E. Zion Church is the second predominantly black church founded in Pittsfield. The church was founded by Rev. Fannie Cooper, sister of Dorothy Amos. Members met in her home until they could find a permanent space. In March, 1958, they worshipped on the 2nd floor of flatiron big, with 137 Onota Street as a parsonage. In 1971 they moved to an old synagogue that is its present location.



**18 Berkshire Historical Society**  
780 Holmes Road

The Berkshire Historical Society is a non-profit corporation dedicated to collecting, preserving, and disseminating the history of Berkshire County in

western Massachusetts. In addition, the Berkshire Historical Society is committed to the preservation and interpretation of Arrowhead, home of author Herman Melville, the first National Historic Landmark to be so designated in Berkshire County. It includes a small oral history collection of local African Americans as well as some photographs. The Berkshire County Historical Society initiated the "Invisible Community" Project in the 1990s to collect, preserve and research the history of African Americans in Berkshire County.



**KEY**

- Accessible Sites
- ◆ Inaccessible Sites or Private Residences
- ◆ Local Archives and Resources

Please respect the privacy of the owners of these properties today.

Map prepared by Rachel Fletcher. 15 May 2006. GIS datalayers provided by Berkshire Natural Resources Council

The African American Heritage Trail encompasses 29 Massachusetts and Connecticut towns in the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area. The trail celebrates African Americans in the region, ordinary people of achievement and those who played pivotal roles in key national and international events – W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Rev. Samuel Harrison, James VanDerZee, and others.

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