

Introduction

Journey to My Distinct Research Mythological Approach

At the end of May 2002, I had just completed a visiting professorship at the University of Memphis. While in Memphis, I found it difficult to conduct research and also be a full-time teacher who could give the students the high-quality education they deserved. The summer ahead was a long-awaited time for research. But what could I research? I did not want to follow the path of many historians and rehash what was already known, giving my interpretation of history without contributing to scholarship and knowledge of past events for current and future generations. I wanted to concentrate on African American history, considering it to be a field in need of more intensive work. Major scholars in the field had recently died, including Benjamin Quarles, John Hope Franklin, John Blassingame, Ira Berlin, John Henrik Clarke, C. Vann Woodward, Louis R. Harlan, and Monroe Fordham, leaving extensive records of their important pioneering works. How could I follow in their footsteps?

In mid-June, I found an article that quoted Monroe Fordham, who was both a fine historian and a great archivist. Fordham noted that of all the articles he reviewed over twenty years for the journal he edited, *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, none had covered the history of Black Niagarans. He considered it odd. This lack of attention to Black Niagaran history intrigued me. From my graduate training, I imagined that some professionally trained historians might consider such a project unworthy, partly because Niagara Falls, a small city, just can't boast of having the same sort of overtly eventful history as major cities. Yet, the history needed to be told. After all, Niagarans must have contributed to Underground Railroad endeavors; it is common knowledge that fugitive

slaves traveled through Niagara Falls on their way to Canada. Surely some of them were aided by local Underground Railroad agents. Some probably also stayed in Niagara Falls rather than relocate to Canada. What happened in the ensuing years? What specific circumstances led to the increase in the Black Niagaran population? Were the experiences of Black Niagarans similar to those of African Americans who relocated to other northern urban locales? Consideration of these and other thoughts ensued.

I went to the Niagara Frontier region eager to engage in some meaningful research to uncover unknown histories. I visited the Earl W. Bridges Public Library in Niagara Falls, thinking that the library would have a profusion of sources on Black Niagaran history. What I found was that few sources were available, not only about Black Niagarans but also about other ethnic groups. There were three or four notebooks full of newspaper clippings that highlighted individuals or events associated with African American history. Over the years, the librarians had recorded a number of newspaper articles written on Black Niagarans from the *Niagara Falls Gazette* (the main local newspaper) and recorded these data in their card catalogue. Also available were the following: a 1950s Niagara University master's thesis, the papers of local resident R. Nathaniel Dett, and a box of papers from the Human Rights Commission from the 1960s and 1970s. Although I had expected much more primary and secondary data, what was available was extremely helpful, and the librarians aided me tremendously.

I began my research by searching the card catalogue. Then I read the articles on microfilm, a process that took years. I noticed that the *Niagara Falls Gazette* had only superficial accounts of events that occurred in the African American community, especially in the years before the civil rights movement. The how, when, and what questions could not always be answered, and connections and generalizations were usually difficult to make. African Americans were definitely on the margins in their coverage. Criminal activities involving Black Niagarans, in contrast, garnered more attention, which helped to perpetuate existing racial stereotypes. By the end of that first summer, I had accumulated enough data, including four interviews, to write an article: "Blacks in Niagara Falls, A Survey, 1865 to 1965." At the time, I had no intention to write a book because the sources seemed too scarce and because researching and writing a book on Black Niagarans would be a long and painful process. I merely wanted to encourage other more experienced researchers to pick up the ball and run with it.

I submitted my article to the editors of the *Journal of Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, knowing they had not previously published anything similar to it. To my delight, Dr. Fordham agreed to publish it. Several Niagarans read the article, and most agreed that much more work needed to be done on the history of Black Niagarans. William Bradberry, a Black Niagaran lawyer and writer, informed me that he appreciated the article; however, in his view, it did not have the “voice of the people.” He further explained that the history lived by Black Niagarans needed to be told through all sources but especially through the voices of Black Niagarans themselves, particularly because the local newspaper did not adequately record their history. I quickly agreed with him, and although I included four interviews in my article, his critique motivated me to seek out more oral sources because the conventional sources were insufficient in the “recording” and “housing” of data on Black Niagarans. Thereafter, I implanted myself in the local community, meeting with many Black Niagarans. My research method makes my study’s sources vastly different from those of most African American urban studies. William’s critique motivated me to take up the call I had issued to others: to uncover more about the history of Black Niagarans through their own voices.

Veedee Price, a native whose family operated a bar on centrally located Highland Avenue, served as my conduit.¹ At the University of Buffalo in the mid-1990s, he and I had taken a graduate course in education and became friends. Years later we crossed paths again in Niagara Falls. I explained my project to him and that I needed to meet and interview as many Niagarans as possible. Veedee graciously introduced me to some senior citizens who, on his recommendation, granted me an interview. Through Veedee I met several people, including Wilbur Hunt, Edwardo King, and George Hart, all whom I interviewed.

Of these people, George Hart was the oldest, being ninety-five in 2002. Mr. Hart came to Niagara Falls in the mid-1940s. An interesting story he told when he first arrived involved a bar on Highland Avenue. He entered the bar, sat down, and ordered a drink. The White bartender served him. But after Hart finished his drink, the bartender took the glass and violently threw it against the wall. According to Mr. Hart, that was the bartender’s way of letting him know that his presence was not desired. Fifty-eight years later Mr. Hart has still not forgotten this incident and has never patronized that bar since.

In my journey to hear the voices of more Black Niagarans, Arthur Ray helped me immensely. Mere words cannot do justice to his contribution

to this project. In 2002 someone advised me to speak with and perhaps interview Mr. Ray. Mr. Ray was born and raised in Niagara Falls, and he knew much of its history and current events. From the *Niagara Falls Gazette*, I knew that he was a local entrepreneur who had served on the board of education and that he was well known throughout Cataract City. Upon meeting Mr. Ray, it became readily apparent that he possessed a warm, outgoing, friendly personality. He quickly consented to an interview, and on the same day, he (surprisingly) drove me around, explaining key events that had occurred in Niagara Falls. He spoke quickly, and I attempted to write down as much of what he said as possible. Once he paused and reinforced a lesson that I was already aware of. He said, “You really need a tape recorder to get all that I am saying. You’ll never get it all writing it down.” His words reminded me that when I took oral history in graduate school, Dr. Michael Frisch had stressed the importance of having the proper equipment at hand and to be prepared for interviews even on short notice. Although I still have those initial notes today, they do not include all the information conveyed to me that day.

Arthur Ray also invited me to participate in the Black Pioneers of Niagara Falls. The Black Pioneers are a local group whose aim is to preserve, record, highlight, and honor the history of Black Niagarans. I joined this group in 2002 and have actively participated in its meetings and festivities, including its annual picnic held on the first Saturday of every August. This organization allowed me to meet and interview many Black Niagarans—particularly senior citizens—who experienced and made history. A few individuals come to mind. At the 2007 annual picnic, I remember interviewing Carlyle Miller, who was a retired factory worker and very generous with his time. We talked at the picnic, at the Wintergarden Botanical complex in downtown Niagara Falls, and later over the phone. He shared a few stories about his family and what made them leave the South. An uncle on his mother’s side of the family, for instance, had verbally retaliated against racist remarks directed at him in Mississippi. He had to flee for his own safety. He settled in Cleveland, Ohio, about 220 miles from Niagara Falls. Every three years or so he would show up at the Miller household in Niagara Falls and ask, “Do you have room for me?” Carlyle Miller’s parents settled in town, worked hard, and eventually purchased their own home, which was uncommon for most Black Niagarans during the immediate post-World War II years.

Eugene Hamilton’s family followed a similar pattern in migrating from the South. Hamilton proved to be an unusual interviewee. He learned how

to fly planes in the US Air Force during the Korean War. He eventually became a commercial airline pilot for Pan Am, and his first assignment was to fly passengers to London, England. Hence, Arthur Ray connected me to these individuals and others, serving not only as a host and guide but also as a mentor and friend. Sadly, he passed away on December 7, 2012, with Miller and Hamilton preceding him. Summer 2011 was the last summer we worked together, coordinating activities for the annual Black Pioneers' Picnic.

After I joined the Black Pioneers and met more Black Niagarans, other people asked me to interview people they knew, or they directed me to people they thought would have something valuable to say about the historical experiences of Black Niagarans. Charlotte Harris, also a member of the Black Pioneers, stressed that I should interview Mabel Smith, who attended the 2010 Annual Black Pioneers Picnic. She was visiting from Chicago. Mrs. Smith had met and married her husband and raised a family in Niagara Falls. Thus, she knew many early Black Niagaran families. Born in 1922, she began to be cognizant of race when she began school at age five.

Other introductions led to more interviews. Many Black Niagarans spoke glowingly about Joe Profit and how his political career had advanced the community. Several individuals stated that his wife still resided in the city and insisted that I speak with her. Veedee Price also took me to places where grassroots gatherings of individuals took place, such as a neighborhood bar, a small eatery on Highland Avenue, and some small parks, among other places. James Walker told me that he came to Niagara Falls from Alabama in 1955 on the advice of his parents who already resided in town. Walker told me about Lodge 34 FM and AM, Free and Accepted Masons, a Masonic organization. In discussing Bloneva Bond and the NAACP, Barbara Smith suggested that I speak with Barbara Williams, who had been secretary of the NAACP under Bond's presidency. Barbara Williams and her husband were listed in the local phone book as "Frank and Barbara Williams." When I called her up, Williams gladly consented to an interview.

In responding to William Bradberry's invaluable comments about hearing people's voices, I collected numerous recorded and unrecorded interviews. Most of my evidence is from these interviews and primary source data such as census reports, state and federal reports, and newspaper articles, mostly (but not exclusively) from the *Niagara Falls Gazette*. During the civil rights movement and afterward, the *Niagara Falls Gazette*

tended to report more deeply on activities of Black Niagarans than it had in earlier years. Civil rights protest activities compelled local (and national) reporters to dig deeper in understanding the complaints of the African American community to help resolve conflicts and explain events to the broader community. Consequently, these articles often contained more data about local people and events.

Still more pertinent information about Black Niagarans probably exists in the attics and basements of local residents' homes. In searching for more Black Niagaran voices, I remember in 2004, 2005, and 2006 that Arthur Ray and I spent hours searching the Niagara Community Center for records that Black Niagarans left concerning their history. Some materials had disappeared. For many years, the Niagara Community Center functioned as a venue where local residents could learn about Niagara Falls history from a schedule of speakers and events, connecting with the African American community and the broader society.

In addition to conducting interviews, future researchers should seek permission from local Black churches to view their historical records.² Most Black Niagaran church histories will not be found in newspapers, libraries, or archives. In my research I examined some of the records of two major Black churches—St. John's AME Church and New Hope Baptist Church. I also consulted secondary sources on Shiloh Baptist Church, Union Baptist Church, Trinity Baptist Church, Second Baptist Church, and a few other churches in the Niagara Falls area. More church records should be examined, considering the fact that Niagara Falls has many Black churches that have been around for decades. This important duty I leave for future researchers, in the hopes that my pioneering work can serve as a foundational study.

How does this foundational study relate to other northern African American urban studies, and why is it important? It is a study that belongs to the genre initiated by W. E. B. Du Bois's groundbreaking work *The Philadelphia Negro*.³ Like Du Bois's work and most African American urban historical studies, this book underscores the process of community formation at each critical stage of its development—along with sociological themes—examining such topics as early community beginnings, employment, migration, institutional building, intragroup and intergroup relations, and conjugal and family patterns. Like Gilbert Osofsky's well-researched critical study *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*, my study analyzes the spatial location of most of the African American community and ghetto formation along with the forces that drove such events: mainly race

prejudice.⁴ Although Osofsky's study is an early major historiographical work that encouraged others to write urban historical studies, this study embraces the pattern established by Joe William Trotter in his important work *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915–45*.⁵ Trotter's work describes the formation and development of Milwaukee's African American community, arguing that African American industrial workers experienced "proletarianization."⁶ More specifically, his portrayal does not depict Black residents or the Black industrial working class as reactive subjects in the construction of their histories; Trotter defines them as proactive agents, planning and shaping their destinies in the Milwaukee milieu they resided in. This study is also specifically written in the tradition of the community formation and development frameworks demonstrated by Richard W. Thomas in his study *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915–1945* and Lillian S. Williams in her work *Strangers in the Land of Paradise: The Creation of an African American Community, Buffalo, New York, 1900–1940*.⁷ Both studies support Trotter's approach of underscoring external variables that impacted their respective communities interplayed with internal community agency. Moreover, like Thomas's and Williams's studies, this study represents a borderland community, located next to Canada, through which thousands of fugitive slaves traveled during the days of slavery.

In contrast to the crucial similarities noted above, this study differs from much of the literature on African American urban history. Niagara Falls was/is a small northern city compared to New York City, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, and other northern metropolises, whose recorded African American population ranged from 33 people in 1840 to 9,634 people by 1990.⁸ In 1920 and 1950, for example, years that reflected African American population increases for the city of Niagara Falls, census enumerators counted 509 and 3,585 individuals respectively, with Niagara Falls located a little over eighty-one miles southeast of Toronto, Canada.⁹ During much of this study's timeframe, the Niagara Falls economy was driven by the tourist and hydroelectric industries. Peaks in the economy attracted more people to Cataract City, whereas depressions and recessions compelled many to seek employment elsewhere. These economic factors greatly impacted the development and reformation of the Black Niagaran Community. With Niagara Falls being a borderland community whose borders operated as a "fluid frontier," African Canadians and African Americans often relocated to each other's neighboring country or interacted on foreign soil for spiritual, recreational, or business purposes.¹⁰ Unlike the

prejudice and discrimination found in large northeastern and Midwestern cities during and immediately following the First Great Migration, Black Niagarans experienced similar forms of racism during and after the Second Great Migration (1941–45).¹¹ This study rejects the characterization of post–First Great Migration African American entrepreneurs formulated by early studies, beginning with *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890 to 1920*. Many urban historians incorrectly label many of the successful entrepreneurs as practitioners of Booker T. Washington’s economic philosophy because they believed in racial solidarity and the support of African American businesses within a segregated economy, which often was interpreted as a “protected market.”¹² Niagara Falls had a local branch of Washington’s Negro Business League, whose members supported many of Washington’s business ideas. Nonetheless, contrary to popular belief, Washington advocated conducting business in the general “open market” and patronage of businesses that warranted support, not just through pleas of racial solidarity. This was part of his “Indispensable Asset Theory,” in which Washington foresaw African American entrepreneurs (and others) as being able to manifest merit to all citizens by offering high-quality goods and/or services. This would contribute toward ending the American race problem, the rationale being that human beings will accept entities that are integral to their welfare. Nonetheless, concerning racial patronage, Washington did believe, partly due to White racism, that African Americans would naturally support entrepreneurs of their own race if they offered high-quality goods and/or services. A different term should be used to define African American entrepreneurs who embraced many of Washington’s economic ideas and were compelled, due to racism, to conduct businesses solely in a segregated, “really unprotected market.”¹³ This foundational study lacks the extensive primary and secondary source base clearly evident in the urban historical studies done on major cities. Therefore, it can be aligned with such studies as *Race and Kinship in a Midwestern Town: The Black Experience in Monroe, Michigan, 1900–1915* by James E. DeVries, *Black Bangor: African Americans in a Maine Community, 1880–1950* by Maureen Elgersman Lee, and *Lord, Please Don’t Take Me in August: African Americans in Newport and Saratoga Springs, 1870–1930* by Myra B. Young. These works confirm that all communities have a story that can be conveyed, provided that researchers are willing to use creative or nontraditional methods to supplement small source bases.¹⁴ In embracing this mindset or “inside-out approach” as opposed to the “outside-in approach” utilized by most African American urban studies,

I intermixed within the Black Niagaran community over an eighteen-year period by actively participating in community events, conducting and recording sixty-two oral interviews, as well as by speaking with over eighty Black Niagarans to gain a more in-depth understanding of their history. This approach makes this study vastly different from most black urban historical studies whose evidentiary bases are predominantly from written sources. These interactions assisted me in my efforts to authentically depict the thoughts and voices of the people. Finally, this study utilizes critical concepts to better explicate the history of Black Niagarans, such as borderland, transnational, fluid frontier, self-liberators, collectivist behavior, politics of respectability, institutional building, redlining, an enduring civil rights movement originating well before 1954 and continuing long after 1968, the Cold War's impact on African American movements, and urban renewal as "Negro removal," etc.

Moreover, to interpret the Black Niagaran historical experience, this study uses a conceptual framework that demonstrates proactive leadership in orchestrating community development. Like the power dynamics outlined in most African American urban historical studies, Black Niagarans operated within a broader community setting that they did not control. They mainly sought to live and function within this broader community, becoming an integral part by gaining power and influence as well as by enjoying full citizenship rights on paper and in practice. Racism served as a structural barrier. However, Black Niagaran leadership vehemently refused to settle for a low place within the social stratum.

This study, in essence, conceptualizes community and leadership, offering key characterizations for each term. *Community* is defined by its membership and what said members did to sustain and advance themselves.¹⁵ More specifically, a community consists of two or more individuals who are generally but not exclusively of the same racial and/or ethnic group.¹⁶ This group could include family members, friends, associates, neighbors, or people residing in specific areas. For the community to sustain itself and advance, its members practiced maintenance behaviors, such as working, seeking housing, building institutions, seeking political rights or political power, and fighting against adverse activities, groups, or forces.¹⁷ Black Niagaran leaders usually represented the desires and wants of their racial group. Their racial group influenced them, and they, in turn, impacted their racial group by initiating and heading new institutions, directing established institutions, or spontaneously leading individuals to impact events or to abate crises.

In this study, “[l]eadership can be [broadly] defined as the self-conscious capacity to provide vision and values, and produce structures, programs and practices which satisfy human needs and aspirations and transforms persons and society in the process.”¹⁸ More specifically, I assert the following:

1. Regardless of class or gender, and influenced by structural barriers, Black Niagarans arose to proactively serve as leaders, operating “intra-racially” within the Black Niagaran population or “interracially” within the broader community where Black leadership functioned as a minority agent vis-à-vis a community controlled and dominated by a majority White Niagaran leadership. They could also operate simultaneously in both settings.
2. “Leadership . . . proceeded from the collective interests and concerns of people of African descent—including involvement in historical events defined by a ‘racial uplift’ tradition, and leadership to overcome the impediments to the full enjoyment of every aspect of American life (such as slavery, prejudice and discrimination, institutional racism, and any pattern of exclusion of racial inferiorization of Black humanity).”¹⁹
3. Most Black Niagaran leaders fit Booker T. Washington’s conception of the “captains of industry.” They became successful, and then they geared many of their efforts toward aiding others to be successful.²⁰
4. Black Niagaran leadership mainly strove to integrate their racial group into the mainstream of the broader community.
5. Black Niagaran Leadership managed activities aimed at building and maintaining institutions, some wholeheartedly supported by the Black Niagaran community and others supported by municipal, state, and/or federal funding.
6. Most Black Niagaran leaders in this study fit middle-class status based on their educational and/or economic achievements. Most migrated or emigrated into the Niagara Falls milieu. All leaders functioned as role models, demonstrating

respectable behaviors conveyed to Black Niagaran community members and the broader Niagaran community. Although a range of epochs existed throughout Black Niagaran history—varying from stormy to calm—Black Niagaran leaders never ceased to agitate for first-class-citizen rights.

7. Alliance leadership existed in which individuals other than African Americans proactively championed one or more issues directly supportive of Black Niagarans (or other African Americans). This could include assisting Blacks in fleeing from slavery or helping them obtain American citizenship and all its privileges and immunities.

Although marginalized throughout most of their existence in the city of Niagara Falls, Black Niagarans, guided chiefly by their leaders, operated proactively to settle in the region, seek and create employment, promote individual and collective advancement, build institutions, confront and overcome racism, and become part of the mainstream of society. They strove to make American democracy live up to the true meaning of its creed. During periods of crisis, their efforts to achieve these ends were accelerated. However, during calmer periods, leaders still arose to encourage Black Niagarans not to be content with their unjust lot, and to continue to strive for their fair share of societal opportunities. This occurred during the slavery era when Black Niagarans and their White allies worked together to ensure that all fugitive slaves traversing the area would be safeguarded in their efforts to reach Canada, particularly if they sought assistance. Black Niagarans also rallied together to protect fugitive slaves if they chose to remain in their community, gathering together at a moment's notice to risk life and limb to ensure the freedom of a member of their racial group. They reasoned that all human beings had a natural right to life, liberty, and ownership of the monetary gains from their labor. Black Niagarans demonstrated this same principle in the Post-slavery era. Like those migrating to California during the Gold Rush (1849) seeking economic fortunes, African Americans settled in Niagara Falls looking for the same. To them, as well as to incoming European immigrants, a fortune meant living a better life than they would have experienced in the places they immigrated from and being allowed to grow economically and materially advance themselves and their families. They wanted to establish institutions that expressed a collective will, being able to proactively

participate in creating and implementing laws to govern the city and interact with people from all walks of life. Moreover, parents wanted to see their children get a high-quality education to advance farther in life than they had. These are some of the issues that Black Niagarans, guided by their leadership, strove for in attempting to pull themselves out of obscurity and into relevance, practicing “self-determinism” in shaping the operations of society in more of their “image” and “interest.”²¹

To conclude this introduction and begin the journey, this book is divided into eight chapters, which together chronologically discuss historical themes and events that occurred in Niagara Falls from 1850 to 1985. Chapter 1 covers the early foundational years of the Black Niagaran community from 1850 to 1914, the years of slavery to the dawn of the First Great Migration. Chapter 2 highlights several topics, notably the formation of the Niagara Community Center, a well-coordinated collective effort and momentous event in Black Niagaran community history. Chapter 3 examines the Black Niagaran community during an unstable economic era and how it managed to survive and prosper. Chapter 4 examines the Black Niagaran community’s efforts to fight against marginalization during decades of economic recovery and stability. Chapter 5 examines the local civil rights movement, the impact of national civil rights events on local events, and other local achievements. Chapter 6 covers another critical era in the history of Niagara Falls—desegregation of the public school system and the plan community leaders and local citizens created instead. Chapter 7 highlights several events and impactful people in Niagara Falls during the urban renewal era of 1960 to 1985. Finally, Chapter 8 discusses crucial issues that arose after the age of urban renewal. Collectively, these chapters present Black Niagaran history through the lens of leadership in effecting community formation and development. They argue that Black Niagarans experienced similar forms of discrimination—especially discrimination related to housing both during and after the Second Great Migration—as those experienced by African American communities in major northeastern and Midwestern cities during and after the First Great Migration. This study also looks at how Booker T. Washington’s business ideas filtered into the Black Niagaran community, with the local leadership adhering to a number of these tenets.²² The study also shows how national civil rights activities, juxtaposed with local issues, helped to fuel local events (e.g., civil rights, board of education decisions, urban renewal protest, etc.), and, in essence, how Black Niagaran leaders operated proactively in creating, developing, and maintaining community—thereby constructing their history.