



the

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The Legacy of Illinois' African-American Lawmakers

About seven years ago, Dr. Erma Brooks Williams' daughter was working on a school report about Carol Moseley Braun, the first African-American female to be elected to the U.S. Senate (where she served from 1993 to 1999), a former member and assistant majority leader in the Illinois House of Representatives, and a former U.S. Ambassador to New Zealand and Samoa. "To my surprise, she was not able to find much information about her," says Dr. Williams, Associate President for Communications and External Relations at Chicago State University.

That sparked a seven-year quest for Dr. Williams, which culminated in last year's publication of her book, "Political Empowerment of Illinois' African-American Lawmakers, 1877 to 2005" (published by the University Press of America). She wanted to publicize the history of Illinois' black lawmakers and their contributions to state and national public policy.

"I didn't want others to experience what my daughter had experienced and I was concerned about the legacy of African-American lawmakers in Illinois being lost," she says.

As a thirty-year veteran of the Illinois House of Representatives and Illinois Senate staffs, Dr. Williams, who now lives in Chicago, knew where to get information about her topic. She searched through libraries and archives in Chicago and Springfield for information in news-

papers, journals, letters, and meeting minutes and interviewed some of the lawmakers herself. "There was no one place that housed all that information," she says.

Her research stretched back to 1877, when John W. E. Thomas from Chicago became the first black elected to the Illinois General Assembly. His election was no small feat given the post-Civil War racial tensions of the time, but Thomas was "very prominent in the community," says Dr. Williams. He owned a grocery store and "was liked by the white merchants... At the time Chicago only had a small percentage of African-Americans, so he had to have the support of whites to be elected." (Black males had received the right to vote only seven years earlier, in 1870 when the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was approved.)

Thomas introduced legislation outlawing segregation in hotels, railroads, theatres, restaurants, and other public places; it passed in 1885 as The Illinois Civil Rights Act, making Illinois "the first state to pass a civil rights law," according to Dr. Williams. However, the law was not enforced for about 75 years.

"What people don't know and what I share in my book, is Illinois' African-American lawmakers have done some outstanding things in terms of public policy," she adds. Former

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POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF ILLINOIS' AFRICAN-AMERICAN STATE LAWMAKERS FROM 1877 TO 2005



ERMA BROOKS WILLIAMS

Dr. Williams says she will write a sequel to this, her first book, to focus on the success of Barack Obama and other African-American lawmakers from Illinois who followed those included in the first book. Photo courtesy of Dr. Erma Brooks Williams.

The Legacy of Illinois' African-American Legislators

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state Representative Lewis A. H. Caldwell passed legislation establishing the state lottery. Illinois Senator Donne Trotter sponsored the Safe Haven Law, which allows parents to relinquish newborns safely at firehouses and hospitals. Former state Representatives Paul Williams (Dr. Williams' husband) and Anthony Young, and former state Senators Howard Brookens and Miguel del Valle sponsored the judicial sub-districting law which increased the number of black judges by more than 200 percent. "That law is now used as a model in other counties and other parts of the state," Dr. Williams says.

"I was concerned about the legacy of African-American lawmakers in Illinois being lost," says Dr. Erma Brooks Williams.

"The book highlights that Illinois is a training ground for leadership, especially for African-American lawmakers," she adds. As examples, Dr. Williams cites previous Illinois General Assembly members such as Harold Washington (whom she worked for while he was a state senator) who became the mayor of Chicago, Carol Moseley Braun, Jesse White, who's Illinois' first African-American Secretary of State, and Barack Obama, who became a U.S. senator and is now the U.S. president.

"When I started the research (for the book) I had no idea Barack was going to become president," says Dr. Williams. Since the book was published in August of last year, she wasn't able to include much about him. She plans to write a second edition of her book so she can include information about his presidency and legislation passed by recently elected African-American lawmakers.

A photo exhibit that Dr. Williams created to accompany her book is on permanent display on the third floor at the Chicago State University Academic Library, 9501 South King Drive in Chicago.



Dr. Erma Brooks Williams' recently published book highlights the history and accomplishments of Illinois' African-American lawmakers. Photo courtesy of Dr. Erma Brooks Williams.

New Philadelphia Named National Historic Landmark

On January 16, the site of New Philadelphia in west-central Illinois joined a select group of historic sites deemed so important to telling our country's history that they are named National Historic Landmarks. There are less than 2,500 such landmarks in America; each is chosen by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior based on recommendations from the National Park System Advisory Board.

"These are actual sites where significant historical events occurred, places where prominent Americans lived or worked, as well as sites that represent the ideas that shaped the nation," according to the

Secretary of the Interior press release that announced New Philadelphia's landmark status.

"New Philadelphia provides material evidence for understanding life in multi-racial communities of the era," the press release adds. "At New Philadelphia, researchers have an opportunity to investigate both the relationships of formerly enslaved individuals, free-born African Americans, and people of European descent who lived together in a small rural community, and the effects of interaction between the groups..."

All of the town's structures are long-gone and their features are buried under farmland. Archaeologists and historians have studied the site and its past for years. Christopher Fennell, a University of Illinois archaeologist and principal investigator for a continuous dig at the site, says the National Historic Landmark status should help New Philadelphia supporters raise funds for additional research and help develop it into a more visitor-friendly site.

New Philadelphia, in Barry, Illinois was the first town in America planned and legally registered by an African-American. It was the creation of "Free Frank" McWorter, a slave for 42 years who bought his freedom, according to "Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier" (University Press of Kentucky, 1983), written by Free Frank's great-great-granddaughter Juliet E. K. Walker. "By 1810 Free Frank began hiring his own time, and with markedly shrewd enterprise he set up a saltpeter manufactory during the War of 1812," she writes. With the monies he earned, Free Frank bought his wife's freedom in 1817, his own two years later, and 14 other family members' freedom subsequently.

In 1836 Free Frank established New Philadelphia on 42 acres with proceeds from his farm. He sold lots to whites, blacks, and biracial pioneers at a time when national racial strife was high. At its height, New Philadelphia's population hovered around 160, but the town's demise began in 1869 when a new railroad bypassed it.

"Free Frank's New Philadelphia town site is one of only a few National Historic Landmarks that recognizes black business activities before the Civil War, particularly, too, the historic contributions of a slave-born antebellum black who never learned to

read or write," says the website of the University of Texas at Austin's Department of History, where Juliet E. K. Walker, teaches.

Work is continuing at New Philadelphia, according to Christopher Fennell. "An ongoing collaborative project of archaeologists, historians, and mem-



This painting depicts "Free Frank" McWorter and his family, former slaves, in the racially mixed west-central Illinois town of New Philadelphia, which Free Frank established in 1836. Illustration courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

bers of the local and descendant communities is undertaking to further research the social history of this demographically integrated town and to enhance its focus in our national memory and heritage. Participating organizations include the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Springfield, the Illinois State Museum, DePaul University, the University of Maryland's Center for Heritage Resource Studies, the University of Central Florida's Public History Program, and

the New Philadelphia Association. Sprague's Kinderhook Lodge has also provided generous support."



Calendar Change

**Governor Pat Quinn's
Budget Address will be given
on Wednesday, March 18,
2009.**



Transitions

Special primary and general elections will be held, on March 3 and April 7, respectively, to determine a successor for **Rahm Emanuel**, former Democratic Illinois Congressman, who left that position to become Chief of Staff for **President Barack Obama**.

The Illinois Senate voted to impeach former governor **Rod Blagojevich** on January 9. The same day, former Lieutenant Governor Pat Quinn was sworn in as the new governor.

Former **Illinois Senate Minority Leader Frank Watson** retired from the Senate on February 16. The Greenville Republican has served in the Illinois General Assembly since 1983.

On February 9, **Governor Pat Quinn** named **Jerome Stermer** his Chief of Staff. Stermer is the former president of Voices for Illinois Children, a child advocacy group, and has worked in some of state government's social service agencies.

On the same day, Quinn also chose **Theodore T. Chung** as his General Counsel. Chung is a Chicago litigation lawyer with background as an Assistant U.S. Attorney and First Assistant Corporation Counsel to Chicago.

Governor Pat Quinn announced the appointment of Iraq War veteran **Dan Grant** as Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs on February 9. He replaces **Tammy Duckworth**, whom President Barack Obama nominated to be the Public and Intergovernmental Affairs Director for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Grant had been senior policy adviser for military and veterans affairs in the Office of the Lt. Governor.

Marc Miller became the new Director of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources on February 5.

Former Illinois Comptroller **Roland Burriss** was sworn in to the U.S. Senate on January 15, replacing now President Barack Obama's Illinois Senate seat in Congress.

On January 9, Democrat **Eddie Lee Jackson, Sr.** took over **Wyvetter Younge's** seat representing District 114 in the Illinois House of Representatives. Former Rep. Younge died in December, 2008.

On January 5, **Toi Hutchinson**, a Democrat from Olympia Fields, was appointed to replace **Debbie Halvorson** in the fortieth district of the Illinois Senate.

