

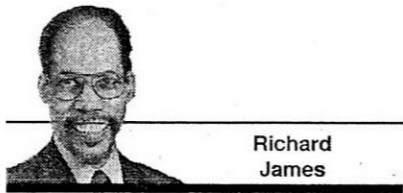
# B-D, P.D. and Overcoming the Legacy of Racism.

Senator Barack Obama's candidacy for President of the United States is certainly historic. Some would say it is incredible or even miraculous. His nomination by the Democratic Party has signaled a shift in racial attitudes in the United States. The possibility of an African-American becoming President of the United States would have been a disturbing joke to many Americans a century ago.

Yet, despite the fact that Mr. Obama is half-White and was raised by Whites, a significant number of Americans distrust him – and won't vote for him – simply because of his dark skin (according to a recent Yahoo-AP poll).

The prevalent belief system that African-Americans are untrustworthy and lazy stem from a history of a racially segregated society that needed a moral justification for its policy of chattel slavery and its general mistreatment of Blacks.

While Pennsylvania slowly weaned itself off slavery in starting in 1780, anti-Black doctrines and attitudes from the southern slave states



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seeped across the Mason-Dixon Line and became entrenched in the middle of the state.

Furthermore, I believe that anti-Black prejudice is really an extension of White supremacist thinking. A promotional brochure entitled, "The Susquehanna Trail Guide Book", published by the Williamsport Chamber of Commerce in 1929 reported that "Williamsport is essentially an American city, the census showing that while 28.9% of the population of the United States and 30.1% of the total population of Pennsylvania are of 'foreign or mixed parentage', the same class comprises but 6.6% of the inhabitants of Williamsport." Evidently, back then, local business leaders thought that an almost pure White (93.4%?) "American city" was a great selling point.

Blacks, it seems, have lived in

Williamsport from its earliest beginnings. In 1918, the local YWCA created a branch for Black women. By 1930, it became the Bethune-Douglass Community Center to serve, almost exclusively, the needs of the small but growing Black population of Williamsport.

Ubiquitous segregationist policies continued to dominate American culture right up to and during World War II. While African-American men were encouraged to join America's armed forces to liberate Europe from Nazi tyranny, they lived in humiliation as second-class citizens at home. Williamsport's restaurants and theaters refused Black patrons and most of Williamsport's Blacks lived in a small section of the city unofficially known as "Browntown".

In June 1943, while American Troops were fighting in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Pacific, racial violence broke out at war plants in the U.S. According to a government website chronicling military history "A serious race riot erupted in Detroit, Michigan. Sparked by a fistfight between a white man and a black

man, the violence was actually caused by increasing white resentment about the growing numbers of southern Blacks migrating into the city to fill war industry jobs. A total of 25 African Americans and 9 whites were killed. The violence was not quelled until President Roosevelt dispatched federal troops to the area."

This is the state of race relations that a 34-year old Black man, Percy David Mitchell, from Greensboro, North Carolina, found in 1943. P. D. Mitchell came to Williamsport to be the first paid director of the Bethune-Douglass Center and with the help of his assistant, Alice Woody, he became a local legend.

P.D. Mitchell set a high standard that few of his successors could match after his retirement in 1976. The Bethune-Douglass Center became well known for its excellent athletic programs winning numerous awards in basketball and boxing. Mr. Mitchell and untold dozens of committed volunteers helped to breakdown racial barriers and build bridges to the wider Williamsport community. Old-timers fondly remember the programs

offered by the Bethune-Douglass Center acknowledged its positive influence in their lives.

Mr. Mitchell was the leading force in the development of a new state-of-the-art recreation center that is known today as the Campbell Street Family, Youth and Community Center. Although, PD, as he is called, passed away in 1981, his essence still walks the halls of "The Center" encouraging all youngsters to excel despite the obstacles that they may face.

The Center is holding its sixth annual P.D. Mitchell Awards Banquet on Saturday, November 1, 2008 at 6pm at the Genetti Hotel's Grand Ballroom. The event entitled, "Honoring a Legacy of Excellence," will have notable speakers and filmed interviews of PD's "youngsters" acknowledging his leadership and strength of character. For tickets and more information call The Center at 570-322-5515.

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