

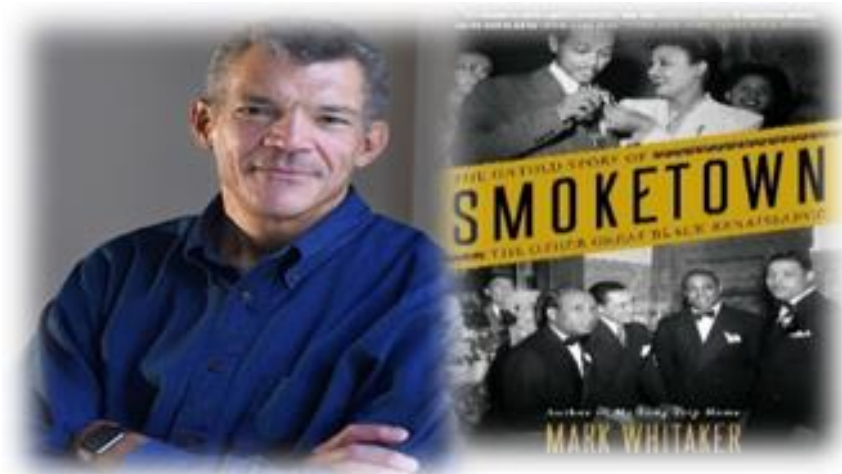
# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Book Notes #201

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### Why Black History Is Important – Part 2: Whitaker’s ‘Smoketown’ Draws Rave Review



If you like a good story (I should say “good *stories*” because there are dozens), then you’ll love Mark Whitaker’s brilliant “Smoketown: The Untold Story of the Other Great Black Renaissance.” I need to thank my son-in-law Gerry for giving

me this terrific read this past Christmas season. As Clifford Thompson said in The Washington Post, “‘Smoketown’ will appeal to anybody interested in Black history and anybody who loves a good story. In short, anybody.” [1]

Or, as George Will opined, “Who knew that Pittsburgh had an African American renaissance as vibrant as Harlem’s and arguably more consequential. Mark Whitaker knew, and he rescues from unjust obscurity an American episode that continues to reverberate.” [2]

As I said last week in Part One of this two-part series on Black history, “If I was marginally clueless about ‘DWB’ (Driving While Black) and sundown towns, then I confess to near total ignorance about the incredible cultural richness of early and mid-20th century Pittsburgh’s Black community in the arts, music, theater, and journalism.” That ignorance is not only on me because I am a “Cleveland guy” whose Cleveland Browns are routinely stomped by Pittsburgh’s Steelers, it’s also because that story had undeservedly been forgotten by almost everyone until Whitaker brought back to life the time when the Pittsburgh Renaissance joined Harlem’s as one of the two cultural capitals of the Black American experience.

No, that is not exactly correct.

Black history is an inextricable and integral part of American history. Given the luminaries whose roots are in Pittsburgh’s smoky hills and valleys, “Smoketown” tells the tale of one, with no hyphenated subset, of America’s great cultural flowerings. An efflorescence nurtured by one of the two foremost Black newspapers of the era – Robert Vann’s Pittsburgh *Courier* and its team of reporters, including Ches Washington, Wendell Smith, Bill Nunn, and Evelyn Cunningham. Working in college admissions in the 1980s, I got to know Nunn’s grandson, also named Bill Nunn, on the board of the Pennsylvania Association of College Admissions Counselors. But I had no idea who and how important his grandfather was. My loss.

The *Courier* promoted the careers of some of the greatest Black athletes of the era with links to Pittsburgh: among numerous others Joe Louis, Josh Gibson, and Satchel Paige. Pittsburgh sported the Negro Leagues’ two greatest teams: Gus Greenlee’s Pittsburgh Crawfords and Cumberland “Cum” Posey’s Homestead Grays.

Sports, however, takes a distinct second place to the wealth of artistic talent that graced Pittsburgh, particularly in music. Who knew – someone must have, but it never got the attention it deserved until Whitaker told the story – that Pittsburgh gave the world such jazz and popular music greats as Earl “Fatha” Hines, Lena Horne, Billy Strayhorn, Billy Eckstine, Roy Eldridge, Ray Brown (arguably the greatest jazz bass player), and Erroll Garner. They also, through their

connections, relationships and sometimes love affairs, nurtured others such as Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Sarah Vaughn, and Ella Fitzgerald.

One of the great vignettes in “Smoketown” is how Pittsburgher Billy Strayhorn, back in Pittsburgh after a trip to New York City to visit Ellington for a job interview, “banged out a bouncy tune based on the subway directions to Harlem that Ellington had given him.” [3] That tune became Ellington’s signature song and a classic of American jazz — “Take the ‘A’ Train.”

Two questions immediately arise: How did “Smoketown” happen? And why did that history slide into obscurity? But, first, what does “Smoketown” mean?

As historian, cultural critic, and frequent consultant to Ken Burns, Gerald Early said when reviewing “Smoketown” for The Wall Street Journal:

The title ‘Smoketown’ is a double entendre. It refers to the soot and the industrial smokestacks of Pittsburgh, the city which, during the days of Andrew Carnegie, was the leading producer of steel in the world. But it also refers, derogatorily, to the African-American part of town, the equivalent of, say, ‘Darktown.’ (‘Smoke’ was a common white slang term for Blacks in the early part of the 20th century.) I assume that Mark Whitaker hoped at least some readers would catch this double meaning of ‘black Pittsburgh’ and be both amused and provoked by it. His book is, after all, the tale of two cities, or a city within a city, or race as the urban doppelgänger. [4]

A city of neighborhoods, the “Hill” District to which Early refers is the pre-urban renewal Pittsburgh neighborhood between downtown and Oakland to the northeast. It was “once a mecca of arts and culture, with a strong sense of community ... it was known by many names: Little Harlem, Little Haiti, and ‘the crossroads of the world,’ it was Pittsburgh’s first Black district.” [5] Alive with churches, clubs like the Loendi for Pittsburgh’s Black upper-middle class, and the Crawford Grill from which Gus Greenlee held court, the Hill was the heart of Pittsburgh’s Black community. It was a community characterized by hard work, sharp dealers, a great newspaper, and incredible artists.

When asked how it happened and why in Pittsburgh, Whitaker, in an interview on WESA, Pittsburgh’s NPR news station, noted three things that made Pittsburgh’s Black community different from other cities. First, it was who Black Pittsburghers were and where they came from. They came disproportionately from Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, and North Carolina. If formerly enslaved or descendants of slaves, they were more likely than other Blacks from the Deep South to have either been free Black people or house slaves. As a result, they

arrived “in Pittsburgh knowing how to read, playing instruments, reading music. ...” [6]

Whitaker makes an observation that resonates today amid the many right-wing attacks on public education. He says, “Then there were educational opportunities available in Pittsburgh that were quite rare for Black folks in that era.” [7] Western University of Pennsylvania, which became the University of Pittsburgh, admitted Black students through a fund created by abolitionist Charles Avery. More importantly, as attested to in the stories of several jazz greats, Pittsburgh had superb public schools open to all students and “they were better funded than any public high schools in the country, thanks to all of the Gilded Age money around at the time.” [7]

In short, for Black people in Pittsburgh in the early 20th century, public schools did what they did for many Americans – they provided them with a first-class education. Every one of those musical luminaries from Pittsburgh talked about the education they received and the great teachers they met at Schenley, Peabody, and Westinghouse high schools. Not all of them flourished in high school (Roy Eldridge and August Wilson dropped out), but many did. Like the great jazz bassist Ray Brown, who wanted to play piano, but with 28 pianists (28! count 'em), there was no time. So, he asked the teacher if he played the bass could he be in the orchestra. When he got “Yes” for an answer, he seized the opportunity.

Rather than destroying public education, as many neo-theocratic right-wingers seek to do in 2025's America, if they really want to “Make America Great Again” it begins by reinvesting in high-quality public education built around high-quality, well-paid teachers invested in their students and who are held to account. Buildings are nice, but it is teachers who make the difference.

Lastly, Whitaker says the third factor “was that Pittsburgh was really a city built around business.” [8] The great enterprises the famous names of Pittsburgh history built – Carnegie, Frick, Mellon, and Heinz – attracted Black people from the South seeking jobs. When those jobs turned out to be hard to get, “a lot of them started businesses of their own.” [7] Whitaker tells the tale of several of those who started their own businesses in a chapter titled “The Negro Carnegies.” It begins by telling the tale of a child of slaves.

Cumberland “Cap” Posey, father of “Cum” Posey, was that child. At the age of 19, he got a job on a steamboat working out of Belpre, Ohio. He set his sights on doing something no Black man had done before. He wanted to run a steamboat's engine room. Posey made himself an expert on the mechanics of steamboats. Then he got a break. A riverboat owner named Stewart Hayes took a chance on him. Posey succeeded. He later moved up the Hocking River to Athens, Ohio, where he met

his schoolteacher wife, Anna. After a Black man was lynched just outside of Athens, Cap Posey moved to Homestead, Pennsylvania, just east of Pittsburgh.

It was in Homestead that Andrew Carnegie built a steel mill. After the bloody strike of 1892, Cap Posey invested in coal boats. He later organized a small mining company, and then Posey Coal Dealers and Steam Boat Builders. Hauling coal for Carnegie and building steamboats, Posey became the wealthiest Black man in Pittsburgh. Posey, Lewis Woodson, and others formed a Black elite. They built large homes, founded fraternal orders to promote Black life, founded the Loendi Club on the Hill as a sort of Black version of Pittsburgh's elite Duquesne Club, and supported other ambitious Black entrepreneurs.

One such entrepreneur was Nathaniel Harleston, who moved north from South Carolina and worked as a security guard and messenger at the H.J. Heinz Company. Harleston's first love, however, was poetry. He began selling copies of his poems on the Hill. Then he founded a literary journal that he called the Courier. Seeking support from Posey, Harleston put together a group to help him fund it. Being businessmen, however, they wanted the relationship formalized. They approached one of Pittsburgh's few Black attorneys, Robert C. Vann, to set up its legal structure. They created a new journal – the Pittsburgh Courier. It began as a simple and money-losing arts miscellany. Although Posey liked the dreamy poet Harleston, he wanted the paper to make money. He decided he wanted the practical, hard-driving lawyer Vann to run the paper. Vann turned it into one of the most influential Black newspapers in the country – The Pittsburgh Courier.

Whitaker tells the story of the Pittsburgh Courier in a chapter he titles “The Calculating Crusader,” because Vann was on a mission to not only make a living by running a newspaper but also to fight the good fight for the total inclusion of Black Americans into American society. Being a practical sort, Vann first focused on sports, which then, as now, was a cultural obsession. He began by having two of his young sportswriters champion the cause of Joe Louis. Louis was known as “The Brown Bomber.” During the 1930s' rise of Nazism, the Courier cast Louis as the archetype of American success in his fights against German Max Schmeling. Although not a native Pittsburgher, Louis considered Pittsburgh his adopted hometown.

Then Vann created a Women's Activities section to detail events in the social life of Black Pittsburgh. When Julia Jones Bumbry and Edna Chappell tired of that, they began to cover the challenges of Jim Crow America. Later, in the 1950s, Evelyn Cunningham would become a nationally known reporter for both the Courier and The New York Times for her fearless coverage of the Montgomery bus boycott and the emerging Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South. She became a close friend of Martin Luther King Jr.

It was Vann who during the late-1930s and later throughout World War II convinced Black Americans to abandon the Republican Party, which they had supported since the Civil War. He told them their future lies within the Democratic Party. When war broke out, Vann's support of Franklin D. Roosevelt proved pivotal in gaining Black support for the war effort. During the war, Vann ran a Double Victory ("VV") campaign seeking victory at war against the Axis and at home against Jim Crow. That made FDR and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover more than uncomfortable. Still, Vann persisted. Obviously, it only partially succeeded, but it did demonstrate that no politician should ever again assume the unthinking support of the Black community.

It was the Courier's two great sportswriters, Wendell Smith and Bill Nunn, who championed the integration of major league baseball. Smith served as confidant, chaperone, and advocate for Jackie Robinson when the Brooklyn Dodgers' Branch Rickey found the right combination of business savvy and moral righteousness to break baseball's color line.

An anecdote that Erie, Pennsylvania, readers will appreciate, even though it is tinged with a note of frustration: In Robinson's first tryout in Boston, two other Black players accompanied him. One was an unknown who didn't make the cut; the other was Erie's own Sam Jethroe. Rickey did not choose Jethroe to pioneer his great experiment in 1947. He was a bit too old; Rickey chose Robinson. But Sam "The Jet" Jethroe did finally make the major leagues three years later in 1950 with the Boston Braves. He was named Rookie of the Year.

How did the story of Pittsburgh's Renaissance slide into obscurity? There were two reasons. First, in the 1950s, Pittsburgh's leadership sought to clean up the steel mill smoke polluting the region and to "renew" the city as clean and modern. Indifferent to the Black community, Pittsburgh's power elite decided to build public housing for the poor and a state-of-the-art arena for the arts and sports. They chose the Hill District for the location. In the process, to make way for what became known as "The Igloo" – a modern civic arena with a retractable roof – a section of the Hill was leveled and Pittsburgh's Black community dispersed. It was an example of what my friend Fred Rush always says: "urban renewal is negro removal." In Erie, in the 1960s, it happened all along West 11th Street and in the former Central Mall area. In Pittsburgh in the 1960s, it meant the positive culture of the Hill District splintered and then faded.

Secondly, Whitaker concludes his tale with the ambiguous story of August Wilson, arguably the greatest Black American playwright and one of the three or four greatest American playwrights. Wilson ranks with Lillian Hellman, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O'Neill – heady company. Wilson comes to the tale late, after the 1950s' and 1960s' urban renewal had ravaged the Hill District.

Elite Black society had moved on, leaving behind the others to struggle. In his epic cycle of plays, each set in a different decade in the 20th century, Wilson, whose biracial family was one of those left behind, focuses on “the struggle” of Black Americans to survive. As Whitaker says, for Wilson “to be financially successful or socially elite was almost by definition to no longer be authentically black, since the essence of blackness was struggle.” [11] In thinking such, Wilson inadvertently shrank the great success that was the Hill District in its heyday. And, shrinking it, ironically did it and Black culture a disservice by focusing on the “down and out” at the expense of others’ great achievements. Ironically, urban renewal and Wilson’s legitimate but truncated evocation of Black culture sent the great Black Renaissance of the 1920s, ’30s, ’40s, and early ’50s into the shadows from which Whitaker reclaimed them in the 20-teens.

Wilson, who died young, did honor another Pittsburgher’s great contributions. Wilson was not one of Pittsburgh public education’s successes. He was a dropout. School bored him, and he bounced from one school to another before finally walking away. Living in Oakland, another Pittsburgh neighborhood bordering the Hill District, Wilson found solace in its Carnegie Public Library. The first book he checked out was the complete poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar, the first great Black American poet. Wilson didn’t read all the books in the Carnegie Library, but he read most of them. In 1999, he returned to Pittsburgh to speak at the 100th anniversary of the library that “put the world at his fingertips. ...” [12] He said, “Labor historians do not speak well of Andrew Carnegie. ... Among other things, they call him a scoundrel. But I can say nothing bad about a man who made it possible to sit in his library and read the labor historians’ reports. Andrew Carnegie will forever be for me that man who made it possible to stand here today.” [13]

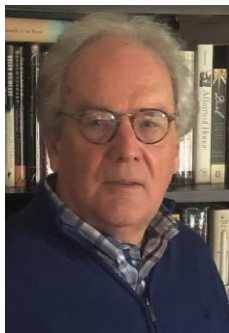
I began this two-part series by arguing that Black history is critical to understanding American history. It is now March and Women’s History month; the history of women in America is as crucial to understanding the totality of American history as Black history. Given the scarcely veiled racism and misogyny currently emanating from Washington, that statement may have never been truer and almost certainly never more important.

It is crucial that we understand that history is a never finished story, and not for the obvious reason that tomorrow, to quote, I think, Scarlett O’Hara, is another day. No, it’s because through the work of diligent scholars and writers like Alvin Hall and Mark Whitaker, the landscape of American history continues to come into sharper focus. For some people, what it reveals is unsettling and they don’t want to hear it. Freud, I think, said the repress always returns. Denying the past never works. It can be buried, but it always returns. The path to the future lies through knowing the true story of the past – its missteps and triumphs. Those

who close their eyes and ears miss the full story. Missing the full story, they miss the absolute glory and joy of forgotten triumphs like Pittsburgh's "Smoketown."

I've only scratched the surface of the many characters and great stories that Mark Whitaker ensures finally get told. The stories like Lena Horne before she was famous singing at ladies' teas in the Hill District; Wendell Smith and Bill Nunn fighting to integrate major league baseball; Billy Eckstine's career dented by an innocent Life magazine photo misinterpreted in America's racially charged atmosphere; Gus Greenlee's Crawford Grill; and dozens more about the great musical artists who literally made the Hill sing. You need to read them; they are the stories of the people who defined American pop music. Stories about how, along with Cole Porter, a gay white man and scion of an old American family; Irving Berlin, son of Russian Jewish immigrants fleeing persecution; and the grandchildren of slaves now the children of Black Pittsburgh created "The American Songbook." What can be more American than that? What can demonstrate more clearly that America's great strength has always been its diversity: old stock Anglos, immigrants of every conceivable ethnicity, and Black Americans making America *America*.

I highly recommend Whitaker's "Smoketown: The Untold Story of the Other Great Black Renaissance." It is simply outstanding. Whitaker is a superb writer who tells a great story with honesty, energy, and verve. Do yourself a favor – read it! And that's coming from a Cleveland guy praising a great Pittsburgh story, no, a great American story. Maybe Whitaker can, but I can't think of any higher praise.



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## End Notes

1. Thompson, Clifford, “*Pitchers, playwrights, journalism and jazz in black Pittsburgh*” in **The Washington Post** (March 2, 2018) available at [Book review of Smoketown: The Untold Story of the Other Great Black Renaissance by Mark Whitaker - The Washington Post](#) accessed Feb. 24, 2025.
2. Will, George, “*Who knew Pittsburgh...*” quoted at **Book Browse: Your guide to exceptional books** available at [Summary and Reviews of Smoketown by Mark Whitaker](#) accessed Feb. 24, 2025.
3. Whitaker, Mark. **Smoketown: : The Untold Story of the Other Great Black Renaissance** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023), p. 147.
4. Early, Gerald, “*Smoketown’ Review: When the Hill Rivald Harlem*”, in **The Wall Street Journal** (March 9, 2018) available at [‘Smoketown’ Review: When the Hill Rivald Harlem - WSJ](#) accessed Feb. 24, 2025.
5. “*The Rich History of Pittsburgh’s Hill District*” at **Pittsburgh Beautiful** available at [The Rich History of Pittsburgh's Hill District | Pittsburgh Beautiful](#) accessed Feb. 25, 2025.
6. Young, Virginia Alvino, “*Smoketown’ Traces The Rise and Fall of the Other Great Black Renaissance in Pittsburgh,*” **90.5 WESA Pittsburgh’s NPR News Station** available at [‘Smoketown’ Traces The Rise And Fall Of The Other Great Black Renaissance In Pittsburgh | 90.5 WESA](#) accessed Feb. 24, 2025.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Whitaker, cited above, p. 330.
12. Ibid., p. 337.
13. Ibid.

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