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The Monroe Fordham Regional History Center

By Chris Root

Just about everyone who has frequented the halls of the History & Social Studies Education Department has seen signs for the Monroe Fordham Regional History Center. The door to the computer lab has the signage for the center. For many students this is the extent of their knowledge of the center. But the room across the hall is home to the archives and collections of the center. Hidden here are priceless primary sources pertaining to local Buffalo and Niagara history free for use to all scholars. The center's collections and history date to the career and scholarship of former professor and department chair, Dr. Monroe Fordham.

While Dr. Fordham was completing his doctoral program at the University of Buffalo in the early 1970s, he began to seek a project that would keep his scholarship engaged for years to come. As a result, he decided to pursue local history, and more specifically, local African-American church history. At the project's conception, Dr. Fordham attempted to gather material not for the purpose of compiling an archive, but gathering materials in order to preserve for the long term and provide material for future research. He hoped to achieve this by conducting oral interviews.

Shortly after graduating from the University of Buffalo in 1973, Dr. Fordham was looking for a research project that would engage him for a few years. He chose to focus on local history because of the proximity of sources. One day, while conducting an interview with an older church member at Bethel A.M.E., a prominent African-American church on the East Side where Fordham was a member, he began a conversation with the husband of the initial interviewee, Dr. Nelson. Soon thereafter, Fordham realized that he was talking to a man who

attended the famous Tuskegee Institute and attended medical school at Boston University. Upon graduation, Dr. Nelson moved to Buffalo and established his practice. Later on, he would help start up a cooperative market that ran for nearly forty years on the city's East Side. Much to the surprise of Dr. Fordham, Dr. Nelson still had all of the entire cooperative's records stored in his garage. Dr. Fordham became so excited with what he discovered that, as he stated in an interview, "He quickly forgot all about the interviews for the church".¹ Soon after, he began organizing and indexing the records in his own home. One of the questions that quickly arose was of how to preserve these materials and where to store them. Monroe decided that the material should be converted to microfilm, and that said microfilm would be stored at the E.H. Butler library on campus as a way to make it accessible to the public.

Over the following year, more people approached Dr. Fordham with material in their possession for archiving and microfilm. This sparked the creation of the African-American Historical Association of the Niagara Frontier. The first meeting took place in the living room of Dr. Lillian Williams, former chair of African American Studies at the University of Buffalo. Soon after, the AAHNF began publishing a semiannual journal titled *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* in 1977, dedicated to the research and contributions of this group not only in Western New York, but also the entire state. The journal is still published semiannually, and all back issues are in the possession center. These events would set the wheels in motion that would lead the collection that makes up the Monroe Fordham Regional History Center. Over the next twenty five years until Dr. Fordham's retirement in 1998, he continued to arrange materials to be microfilmed in order make the papers, photographs and interviews of not only African-American individuals and organizations, but also material dedicated to regional local history.

¹ Richardson, Jean, ed. *A Conversation with Dr. Monroe Fordham*. Buffalo, NY: Monroe Fordham Regional History Center, 2002. p.4

To recognize Monroe Fordham's local and national contributions to the study, preservation and promotion of African-American history, former Buffalo State President Dr. Muriel Howard established the Monroe Fordham Regional History Center in 1999. The mission of the Center is to promote understanding of regional history and foster its inclusion into local school curricula, and to make historical resources accessible to students, scholars, and community groups. This mission is sustained through collaboration with community groups and other local archival resources to actively preserve and disseminate historically significant documents of persons and institutions that contributed to western New York history. In his vision for the center, Dr. Fordham strongly supported its African-American emphasis, but also advocated for the archiving and preservation of all local history. This is the model that the center has followed for the fifteen years since its inception. During this time, the center was directed by Dr. E.O. Smith, former History and Social Studies Education department chair and assisted by Dr. Jean Richardson and Dr. Felix Armfield, former department faculty. With these three leaders and their connections to numerous groups in the community, the center became engaged in a number of archival projects that have been used by researchers and students not only on the Buffalo State campus, but also for scholars throughout western New York, United States, Canada and even England.

One of the most popular and most frequently browsed by researchers and students are the papers of the Reverend Dr. Jesse Nash, longtime leader of the Michigan Avenue Baptist Church, located on Michigan Avenue on the near East Side near downtown. Nash was arguably the most important leader in the African-American community of his era. Due to the demographic changes that Buffalo was experiencing because of the Great Migration, Dr. Nash became the spiritual and civic leader for hundreds of African-Americans in the late nineteenth and early

twentieth century. He was well respected and heavily involved in many programs that aimed to sustain a better quality of life for people in his community. Research conducted by the Fordham Center has even found connections between Dr. Nash and Father Nelson Baker, an equally important leader in the Diocese of Buffalo at this time. A selection of Dr. Nash's sermons were compiled by adjunct professor Adjunct Professor Terrence Henry and published by the center in 2004.

The historical significance of Dr. Nash and also the contributions of his wife and son to the Buffalo community led to the restoration of his home and its conversion into a museum. The Nash House, tucked behind the Michigan Avenue Baptist Church on Nash Street opened in May 2007. The Fordham Center was heavily involved in this project. The Fordham Center is heavily involved with the revitalization and development of the African-American Heritage Corridor and holds one of the seats on the non-profit's board. This board is continually working to develop the heritage corridor and promote its anchor tenants such as the Colored Musicians Club, the Nash House, the Michigan Avenue Baptist Church and the Langston Hughes Institute. The board aims to create a tourist destination that promotes the history of African-Americans in Buffalo while creating an environment in which the corridor can once again flourish economically.

A project established over six years ago by retired faculty member Dr. Jean Richardson is the ongoing digitization of Niagara Falls Church documents. Through the Fordham Center and its contacts at the grassroots organization, Friends of Local Niagara Falls History, the center has digitized and archived the records and other important documents of over a dozen churches from the city of Niagara Falls. Many of these churches are closed and without the Fordham Center, these records would not be available for the public. Instances of research in these particular

collections are usually family genealogists. The center has received emails from people all over the United States expressing their gratitude that these records are readily available to the public. A large part of the success of this project is that the center has stopped archiving on microfilm and has switched to digital scanning. With this change, once a church collection is completed, it can be uploaded to the center's website, monroefordham.org. All collections that are completed now digitally are uploaded to the website and are able for download.

In recent years, the Monroe Fordham Regional History Center has expanded into other multimedia projects aside from being an archive for research and scholarship. These projects have fallen under two categories, print and exhibit design. The most recent publication of the center is *Frank Lloyd Wright's Walter V. Davidson House: An Examination of a Buffalo Home and its Cousins from Coast to Coast*. Written by Frank Lloyd Wright expert and President of the Graycliff Conservancy, Pat Mahoney, this book introduces the public to the Walter V. Davidson house, a Frank Lloyd Wright designed home on Tillinghast Place in Buffalo's Parkside neighborhood . It provides many devoted fans of Frank Lloyd Wright the opportunity to experience the home, which unlike the popular Darwin Martin House, has remained a private residence for its entire existence and has been rarely opened to the public. The center assisted the author through the process of writing, researching and publishing the text. The book was released in the autumn of 2012 and has been selling well. A second Monroe Fordham center-Pat Mahoney collaboration in progress is a book on the William Heath House. This Frank Lloyd Wright designed home has remained a private residence, and for some years served as a dentist office. Like the Davidson House, it too has remained largely hidden from the public.

The Fordham Center has also published a number of other pieces in the last decade. Many of them have been articles for publications such as WNY Heritage and Afro-Americans in

New York Life and History. Other smaller books published by the center have been *Report of the Negro Apostolate in Lackawanna, NY* by Paul Lubienecki in 2011, an edited reproduction of reports of the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo on conversions of African-Americans and social aid projects during the Depression in South Buffalo and Lackawanna. *Buffalo as an Architectural Museum: The Rehabilitation of the Buffalo State Hospital and the New York Central Terminal of Buffalo* by architectural designer Christyn Mobarak appeared in 2009. According to the author, this book “examines and proposes the reuse of these structures within the context of today’s preservation capabilities”²

On top of all the aforementioned, the Fordham Center also takes part in the design and installation of exhibits and in some cases, small grassroots museums. Most recently in the spring of 2013, the Fordham Center celebrated the completion of a permanent historical gallery compiled and installed at St. John Baptist Church. This church is one of the largest congregations; its history has spanned for nearly a century. Due to these factors and its place as an anchor in the African-American community, it was ideal that the Fordham Center assist the church’s historical committee in providing professional consultation in the design and installation of the gallery. The project, which took over one year, was completed in time for the celebration of the church’s 87th anniversary and Founders’ Day. The event was capped with a proclamation from Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown, a member of St. John, stating that May 4, 2014 to be “St. John Baptist Church Day” in the city of Buffalo.

Other exhibits in the city designed by the Fordham Center that can be seen around the city include one commemorating the 125th anniversary of the Assumption Church in Black Rock.

² Mobarak, Christyn. *Buffalo as an Architectural Museum: The Rehabilitation of the Buffalo State Hospital and the New York Central Terminal of Buffalo*. Buffalo, NY: Monroe Fordham Regional History Center, 2008. Xiii.

The church's iconic dual towers across Scajaquada Creek from Buffalo State College are easily visible from campus. The exhibit is located in the rear nave of this historically Polish church, which has been an anchor for that community for over a century. Currently, the center is also working on developing another permanent historical gallery for the centennial celebration of First Shiloh Baptist Church on the city's East Side.

Finally, the Fordham Center has even assisted in the establishment and opening of museums. In the spring of 2012, the center helped set up the Waterfront Memories and More Museum located at Mutual Riverfront Park in the city's Old First Ward. The museum is operated by a number of volunteers, most of whom are retired, aiming to preserve the history of the community that they grew up in. The center applied and secured funds from grant through the Seneca Gaming Corporation to purchase computers and furnishings to properly house the museum's archives. In the time since the museum has opened, the center has continued to provide assistance for a number of projects such as digitization and archival organization. The museum now hosts a number of events and speakers.

The projects and history of the Monroe Fordham Regional History Center narrated above are just a small sample of the work that the center has done in the past decade. The center has also hosted guest speakers at Buffalo State such as historians Darlene Clark-Hine and Milton Sernett along with Nobel laureate Betty Williams. Every day, the center is continuing to expand its place as a valuable community resource as an innovative center that fosters the college's connections with the community through active participation in scholarship, and discovery of the region's rich history through shared resources. When Dr. Fordham began his local research over forty years ago, he had no intentions of creating what would become the Monroe Fordham Regional History Center. When the center was being created, the parties involved did not tell

Dr. Fordham that it would be named after him. All who knew him were well aware of his humility and that he would object to having anything named after him. Such thing he dismissed as “hubris”.

Dr. Fordham’s research and preservation of local African-American history was pioneering for the time period. This type of historical scholarship was often overlooked, even by those in the African-American community. But decades of organization, archiving and preservation of these materials formed the foundation of what the center has become today. It is well imaginable that far less of our local history and heritage would have been preserved today and had Dr. Monroe Fordham not come to Buffalo from Wichita in the early 1970s.

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