

## **Jefferson County Black History Preservation Society, Inc.**

It has been said that there is a depth of rich Black history in Jefferson County. However, most of that information had never been compiled or shared with anyone outside this small county located in the eastern panhandle of West Virginia.

In 2000, after years of discussing the need to document Jefferson County's Black history, four African American men decided to take on the challenge. James L. Taylor, Nathaniel F. Downing, Sr., George C. Rutherford and James A. Tolbert, Sr., all life-long residents of Jefferson County, agreed to combine their private collections, collect other little-known or unknown information, develop exhibits and publish their findings. They decided to name their group, the Jefferson County Black History Preservation Society (JCBHPS). Because of this new sense of urgency, they decided to meet weekly and have continued that tradition since September 2000. The JCBHPS was granted 501©(3) status by the Internal Revenue Service, and was incorporated by the State of West Virginia. Today, the JCBHPS gratefully accepts all tax-deductible donations.

One of the Society's first observations was the lack of any Black history in the Jefferson County Museum, located in Charles Town. After discussions with the museum officials, the JCBHPS donated a picture of Martin R. Delany, who was born in Charles Town in 1812. As a young man, he met with Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War, and later with President Abraham Lincoln. Both men were so impressed with Delany's intellect and professionalism, they decided to commission him as a Major in the Union Army. At that time, he was the highest ranking Black field officer in the Civil War. Delany later became known as the "first Black Nationalist," and later became a physician and co-editor of the *North Star*, along with Frederick Douglass.

Another observation was the absence of significant information about the Black men who joined John Brown during the 1859 raid on the Federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry. The five Black men with Brown were John Copeland, Shields Green, Osbourne Anderson, Lewis Leary and Dangerfield Newby. They played major roles in the raid, but very little had been written about them by the Civil War historians. The Society conducted extensive research, and published their findings on everyone, except for Anderson. However, the ancestors of Osborne Anderson have documented his role in the 1859 raid.

With an eye toward the future, the Society had been looking for a site which could serve as a research center and exhibit hall. A major milestone was reached when the Society acquired property that had its own unique Black history. In 2003, the family of John Blessing sold to the Society its ancestral property, consisting of two adjoining homes located on East North Street in Charles Town. The smaller stone structure, originally built and owned by free Blacks, was purchased by John Blessing, who prepared meals for abolitionist John Brown while he was being held in the Jefferson County jail. The last Blessing descendent, Ms. Ollie Blessing, had operated a kindergarten in the home for many years. The purchase of the property was achieved through the generous donations of many contributors, including philanthropist Vincent Groh of Hagerstown, Maryland and the Charles Town Moose Club. Plans are underway for a grand opening in the near future, which will include a tour and several exhibits.

The Society has been a major voice in the community since its inception. The organization requested the Jefferson County Board of Education rename the Opportunity Learning Center. In May 2012, the building was renamed the Martin R. Delany Opportunity Learning Center. The Charles Town City Council sub-named South Lawrence Street to Martin R. Delany Place, also at the request of the Society. In addition, the Jefferson County Board of Education named the former Page-Jackson High School athletic field the Ernest M. Dandridge Sports Field, in honor and memory of Mr. Dandridge, who was the last principal of the all-Black high school. The school was closed in 1965, in compliance with the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court desegregation decision.

The Society has received numerous awards for its fine work. The Eastern Panhandle Alumni Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta recognized the group with its coveted Arts and Letters Award for its commitment to Black history. In February 2010, the West Virginia Senate adopted Senate Resolution 29, recognizing the accomplishments of the Society. The Resolution was signed by then Senate President Earl Ray Tomblin. One of the Society's major publications is *African Americans of Jefferson County*, which is a pictorial history of the County's Black citizens. The forward was written by the late U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd.

The Society has assembled several exhibits on a wide range of topics including, *Black Education; The Old Charles Town Colored Horseshow; Jefferson County Black Churches; The Green-Copeland American Legion Post #63; Page-Jackson High School Drill Corp Cadets; Martin R. Delany, First Black Nationalist; Military Veterans who served in the Civil War, Spanish-American War, and World Wars I and II; World War I and II Draftees Group Pictures; a World War I Combat Helmet; and a World War II Civil Defense Helmet.*

Without the support of countless organizations and individuals, the Society's work wouldn't be possible. Our sincere gratitude goes to Dr. Wallace Boston and the American Public University System; the Jefferson County Board of Education; the Jefferson County Historical Society; the Jefferson County Commission; the Charles Town City Council; West Virginia Senators Herb Snyder and John Unger; House of Delegates Tiffany Lawrence, Stephen Skinner and Paul Espinosa; and former Delegates John Doyle and Robert Tabb for their support and encouragement. Also lending their full support are the Jefferson County Branch of the NAACP; Star Lodge #1; Free and Accepted Masons; the Page Jackson Alumni Association, Inc.; the Storer College National Alumni Association; the Marshall-Mason-Holly American Legion Post #102; and the African-American Community Association of Jefferson County (Fishermen's Hall).

Some of our publications are listed below, however, we encourage you to explore the entire website and send us your comments. The Jefferson County Black History Preservation Society website is located at [www.jblackhistory.org](http://www.jblackhistory.org). Take care, be blessed and enjoy your Black history journey!

- 1) *Black History Tour Guide of Charles Town, WV* (Brochure)
- 2) *Charles Town Black Schools* (Poster)
- 3) *Jefferson County Black Schools* (Poster)
- 4) *The Capture, Trial and Execution of Shields Green and John Copeland*
- 5) *A Collection of Black History News Articles and Events in Jefferson County, WV*

- 6) *The Black Book, Jefferson County, WV Directory of African American Facts*
- 7) *The Life and Death of Dangerfield Newby*
- 8) *Jefferson County African American Heritage Trail (Map)*
- 9) *African Americans of Jefferson County, Images of America Series, Arcadia Publications*