

From Americus, Georgia to Hartford, Connecticut

The Roots of Hartford's Black American Community

The Hartford News
7/25-8/15
1990

by Steve Walsh

Boce Barlow was born in Americus, Georgia in 1915. His family moved to Hartford when he was a year old.

John Stewart, Sr. was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1907. Together the two men provide an interesting perspective on black migration and the development of Hartford's black community.

"My family came here in 1916 as a result of World War I. In that year the National Guard was federalized and as a result there was a drain on the brute labor force. My father came here to work on the railroad, and later he owned a restaurant and pool room that was principally patronized by blacks from the South," said Barlow.

1915 was a watershed year. Until that year the Northern black population was made up mostly of freed and escaped slaves who had lived there for generations. Most had service

jobs such as barbers, waiters, cobblers and carpenters.

In 1915, great numbers of blacks came north on trains to work in war-related industries, and in Connecticut, on tobacco farms. A typical pattern was from Americus, Georgia to Hartford. Today, many black families from North Hartford have parents and grandparents who came from Americus.

Stewart remembers the first impression Hartford's black community had of the immigrants from the South.

"At first most of them worked on the railroad. The men came up alone first and only sent for their families when they had a place to live and had set something aside. They slept in the train cars and got salt pork and molasses along with their wages. We thought that was no way to live so our first impression was negative," Stewart said.

Later, as Southern blacks started to move up the economic ladder other negative



John Stewart, Sr. (left), and Boce Barlow Kevin Williams photo

feelings set in.

"The people who got it together to leave the South and come up here were more highly motivated. They came up here to make something better of themselves, so nothing was going to stand in their way. There was competition for jobs with the blacks who were already here. Naturally, people who had been here for a long time felt bad when they saw people come from the outside and build up from nothing to doing pretty well for themselves," said Barlow.

Blacks from Americus started Bethel AME Church at the corner of Clark and Westland streets. Today the church is on Main Street.

Barlow was one of many blacks from the South who achieved academic and professional success. He graduated from Howard University before serving in New Guinea during World War II. After the war, he attended Harvard Law School, graduating in 1949.

Barlow was a prosecutor and a municipal court judge during the 1950s, and by the 1960s he was devoting full time to his private law practice. He served as State Senator between 1967 and 1971. He remains active in state politics today — he is the Democratic State Central Committee member from the 2nd senatorial district.

Barlow lives on Canterbury Street in Blue Hills. His

neighbors are political, professional and business leaders of Hartford's black community.

"We were the first black family to buy a house on Canterbury Street. When the neighbors found out that the family had sold this house to me they could have crucified her and her husband," Barlow said.

Stewart followed a different path. He had to go to work before he finished high school, and was one of three black vulcanizers in Hartford by the time he was 17.

"The shop I was working for in East Hartford closed down, and I went to work in a shop in Hartford. That's when I had my first experience with racism. Most of the vulcanizers at the time were from the South, and after I got the job, the boss came up to me and said they refused to work next to a black man. So I gave up the trade," he said.

Later, Stewart travelled around the country in a sales position and got an Associated Negro Press Card from the Indianapolis Recorder, a black newspaper still in publication. During the 1930s, he covered events like the 1930 Kentucky Derby, the Chicago World's Fair in 1932-33, the Texas Centennial in 1936 and the San Francisco Exhibition in 1939.

During the 1940s, he was associate editor and advertising manager for the Hartford Chronicle, also a black newspaper.

Stewart is still active in advertising sales and publishing and is the father of Fire Chief John Stewart, Jr.