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ENGL 105

Westfield's Own Philip A. Payton Jr. : "*The Father of Colored Harlem*"

How did Harlem change from an area littered with segregation, hate against the black community, and a place where black people were forbidden to live; into a thriving center of African-American art, music, literature, and culture? A barber and custodian by the name of Philip A. Payton Jr. was the unexpected contributor to this great achievement; a humble and rural man who would go on to make a profound impact on many black families. Payton Jr. was born on February 27th, 1876 right here in Westfield, MA (*Williams*). Being the eldest of four, Payton Jr. did not seem to have the knack for schooling or business, dropping out of high school to become a barber like his father. With the need of wanting to make more of himself, Payton Jr. went off to Livingstone College, and after completing his degree in 1899 he would move to New York City (NYC) in search for work ("*Payton, Philip A.*"). Early on in NYC, he was a custodian for a real estate company, making very little wage, and not living in the best area of the city. He would quickly come to notice the great discrimination and arrogance of white landlords not wanting to have black tenants to live in their apartments: leading to the spark of a great movement (*The Move to Harlem*).

In 1900 Payton Jr. would become a realtor, making sure the housing problem in Harlem would be remedied. Payton formed a partnership with African-American businessmen to form Harlem properties with the intention of renting them to black families living in Harlem. By 1904 he had an entire black neighborhood rented full, and began to buy his own buildings, rather than leasing them (O'Donnell). The white landlords would bicker over having black tenants, leaving vacant apartments; letting Payton Jr. take the apartments off their hands, and sell them to black

tenants. He would go on in 1904 to incorporate the real estate business, *Afro-American Realty Company*: the company would help him purchase more building in Harlem, filling them with black tenants and causing the white landlords to sell their own buildings away to him due to the decrease of the white population in Harlem. Regardless that Payton Jr. himself was African-American, white business owners would recognize him as an influential individual and would invest in his business, transforming a once local barber into a millionaire (*Spheres of Influence*). By 1914, 75% of New York's black population lived in Harlem due to Payton Jr.'s commitment to change ability to support black families with housing (*Williams*). The Harlem Renaissance would be invoked in the coming years with a rush of new music such as Jazz, new forms of writing, and even a push for more African-American rights. Payton Jr. would work alongside civil rights activist, Booker T. Washington in helping African-Americans migrate from the Jim Crow south to the North, where there are more opportunities for black families to be prosperous (*The Great Migration*). The Harlem community would flourish due to the efforts done by Payton Jr. and his vision of expanding a free market containing bigots with prejudices, making the town a Messiah for many families for decades to come (*The Population Shifts*).

Philip A. Payton, doesn't have a monument, not a plaque, not even have a sign commemorating his contributions in Harlem nor in his hometown here in Westfield. The entire family had somewhat of a lasting mark on Westfield with his father, Philip Payton Sr., owning and operating a barbershop on Elm Street here in Westfield, and his sister attending the Westfield Normal School, and go on to graduate (Professor Diana). The only place that we can find Payton Jr.'s single-handed importance within the town is in the Westfield Athenaeum on *The Story of Westfield* mural, depicted as a child in Westfield, playing his favorite sport of football. He is buried at the Pine Hill Cemetery in Westfield, and his own brownstone home in

Harlem still stands today (Gray). For those who recognize the home as Mr. Payton's residence, they can imagine a man wanting to make a difference, challenging segregation and racism, and creating an opportunity for African-American families to have a roof over their heads.

With Payton Jr. needing some type of true and commemorating form of thank you for all his work within the residential workforce, and artistic community, we as the town of Westfield could look back and know that "Old places help us remember. Old places... trigger memories people already have, give specificity to memories, and arouse curiosity about memories people don't yet know." (Mayes). Places like his old home and the Westfield mural still allows us Owls and Westfield citizens to identify a man's miraculous adventure to NYC and how he shaped an entire society. The areas that are still impacted by his influence and should unquestionably know about his greatness and how he has affected us today without even realizing it today. He hasn't been greatly recognized, we can associate his actions of creating Black Harlem with causing the start of the Harlem Renaissance directly after his death. The Harlem Renaissance would introduce great music like jazz, and even great writers such as Langston Hughes; music and writers that we study today at Westfield State. We even have a Jazz Studies major which is amazing to think about due to a local being a huge reason on why jazz even started in the first place, and schools all over the country and including Westfield study writers and poets like Langston Hughes for their amazing pieces of work. Even if Payton Jr. hasn't had a direct impact on Westfield, we can definitely see his impact throughout our campus, in and out of the classroom for years to come. We could, as a town, commemorate this brave individual by something as humble as a plaque on Elm street where he began his journey, as a barber, and let all residents and students know that even a former barber was able to make a difference and begin a life of service.

Image



(Abbot, et.al)

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