

Music and Memories: The Story of the Main Line's Maple Grove Inn

Penny L. Washington

Say the words “Philadelphia’s Main Line” and images of Gilded Age mansions, Jazz Age parties and decadent debutante balls may surface. Perhaps you would think of picturesque towns with Welsh names. You might even conjure up scenes of solicitous servants silently attending the needs and wishes of men and women of privilege. All of these thoughts would be correct. However, there exists another Main Line, and that place is one where African Americans have lived for generations.

Jesse Walter Vause (1906-1969) was an individual who left an impact on the African Americans of his community. Vause was to become the instrumental force behind the creation of two entertainment venues during the segregation era. Segregation compelled African Americans to create and patronize their own establishments. The Maple Grove Inn, once located in Devon, Pennsylvania, and the Rosedale Beach resort of Millsboro, Delaware are historical sites worthy of our remembrance.

To fully appreciate Vause’s accomplishments, we must consider the obstacles African Americans faced as they sought to create a life for themselves. The story of Pennsylvania’s African American citizens is a narrative of a people meeting challenges with courage. The harsh realities of slavery, segregation, political disenfranchisement, unequal education and economic suppression have been barriers African Americans have sought to surmount by developing a number of strategies. Music would provide comfort and become a cultural emissary showcasing the talents of African Americans to the world.

In the nation’s formative years, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania would greatly benefit from the labor of enslaved and indentured Africans. Their labor created an economic foundation that made possible the prosperous farms and towns that would mark progress during the Colonial era. With the help of this vital labor force the European settlers of English, Swedish, and Welsh descent were able to transform the vast wilderness into viable communities. During the Main Line’s Gilded Age era, African Americans worked as cooks, chauffeurs and maids in the homes of wealthy residents. African Americans would establish enclaves at Mt. Pleasant and also settled in neighborhoods in Paoli. They would attend separate churches in Devon, Malvern, and Wayne. Berwyn’s African Americans would bravely fight school segregation in the 1930s. Older African Americans would recall segregated seating at Berwyn and Wayne movie theaters.

Despite these realities, longtime African American Main Liners remember other things. Many of them will express gratitude for the homes they obtained and maintained. Some of them will speak with awe of the ancestors who made their way North via the Underground Railroad. Others will recall the glory days of the Elks Lodge and the Main Line branch of the NAACP and the Negro Business and Professional Women’s League. Mildred Burruss and Louise Biggers will be recalled for the beauty shops where they practiced their trade.

Regardless of adverse conditions on the national and local levels, African Americans would forge ahead. Vause would be remembered for his vision, practicality and his many business ventures. His efforts became part of the long narration of African Americans seeking to participate in the business affairs of the nation. The most well-known African American entrepreneur was Madame C.J. Walker, who was born Sarah Breedlove. She established a successful beauty empire in the twentieth century. A 1910 Negro Business Directory reveals that throughout the state, African Americans were engaged in diversified fields of commerce, including funeral parlors, grocery stores and barber shops. The word diverse would be an apt one to use when considering Vause’s activities. According to Vause’s daughter Dr. Audrey Womack, her father was a truck driver for Berwyn’s Fritz Lumber Yard. She would go on to share that her father built homes exclusively for Berwyn’s

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African Americans on Maple and Potter Avenues. Family member Mildred Burruss also relates that there had been no new affordable homes available for African Americans on the Main Line. Vause built homes that remain today. Vause was known for employing family members in the running of his venues. He was also a weigh master and had obtained his credentials for this important position. The work required the verification of the weight of ore coal or grain. Again according to Vause's daughter, her father was very practical and knew that it took five gallons of water to flush a toilet. Vause was a local businessman and supported



"Participating in the recent ground-breaking ceremonies at the new Suburban Housing Development in Berwyn, (l. to r.) Benjamin Glazer, construction superintendent; Jesse W. Vause, owner and developer, Mrs. Gertrude Anderson of Tuskegee, Ala., George Billingslia, the designer; Mrs. Geoffrie Vause, and Alfred Anderson, Chief Aviation Instructor at Tuskegee Institute, who is associated with Vause in the new Development." (from a newspaper clipping dated Tues. Dec. 27, 1949). *Courtesy Penny L. Washington*

other local employers. Dr. Womack tells that her father used ice from Berwyn's Ice House and that he used Berwyn's African American printer Primus Crosby for his printing needs.

Vause's grandson, Robert Walls, shares that his grandfather was born in Grifton, North Carolina and migrated to the area with the help of a family member Creola Murray. Vause's daughter provides information concerning Murray: she ended up in Devon as a result of her efforts to better herself. Murray answered an advertisement for "girl wanted." Her future employers lived in Devon. It is worthwhile to note a few details concerning Murray's life on the Main Line. Reviewing 1920 United States Federal Census data tells us that she was born in North Carolina and that she was able to read and write. Her occupation was listed as laundress for a private family. Murray's experience is informative. The 1930 census reports that she owned her home at 589 Poplar Avenue. The home was valued at \$3000. Her occupation at the time was listed as maid and cook for a private family. Murray's story illustrates a pattern many other Southern transplants would employ: family members would move North, maintain connections with friends and loved ones, and when others wished to migrate North, they would provide much-needed support. Vause lived with Murray when he moved North. Vause had Southern roots. He was born in North Carolina, and, according to his daughter, at six months of age he moved to Arkansas with his family. The dictates of Southern tradition mandated that African Americans were only allowed to obtain an eighth grade education. Vause wanted more, and a fresh start on the Main Line combined with hard work would grant him an expanded life. Vause was one of many who fled their Southern homeland.

Vause's personal decision to leave his Southern home is an example of a life-affecting choice that many other African Americans made in the years following Emancipation. Tens of thousands of people sought opportunities for a better life. Relocating to Northern cities and towns would offer Southern African Americans that chance. This internal voluntary migration reached a peak around 1915. The escalation was fueled in part due to Europe's World War I. The global conflict spurred an economic boom in the United States. Industrial jobs in Northern cities and towns were desirable because they offered higher wages than what Southern agricultural workers could earn. Between 1915 and 1930 at least 1.25 million African Americans resettled in places like New York, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Philadelphia. The Great Migration lessened during the Depression of the 1930s. However, African Americans resumed moving North during World War II. The Great Migration continued during the 1950s and 1960s. Political and economic changes brought about by the Civil Rights Movement caused many African Americans to return to their Southern roots. The Great Migration had a profound impact on American demographics. Due to this demographic shift, changes would occur in politics, economics, and popular culture. The Southern transplants would carry music with them and in doing so would bring an appreciation of the blues, jazz and rhythm and blues to the whole nation. Pennsylvanians of all races would enjoy music made by African Americans.

Life for the Commonwealth's African Americans would prove to be a challenge. Scholars Leroy Hopkins and Eric Ledell Smith have studied the Great Migration and its effect on the state and the African Americans who would call it home. They report that Pennsylvania provided higher wages in the growing coal, railroad, and steel industries than could be secured in their Southern homelands. Many African Americans moved North because it offered them a chance to live relatively free from the most egregious aspects of Southern racism. Another factor of Pennsylvania's Great Migration must be considered. Enhanced railroad transportation between the state and the South influenced the mass migration of people. The Pennsylvania and Baltimore and Ohio railroad started around 1916 to bring large numbers of people North. Companies induced the railroad to provide free train rides to newcomers who upon arrival would permit the employer to deduct transportation expenses.

Life in the North presented its own set of new challenges. Southern migrants were excluded from labor unions and were given the most dangerous and lowest paying jobs. They found themselves in competition with European immigrants for housing in already over-populated neighborhoods. Segregated accommodations also prevailed in many places throughout the North in the early days of the twentieth century. Music would provide comfort for the Southern migrants, and the places where music was performed became important sites within the African American community. The Maple Grove Inn and Rosedale Beach Resort reached their peaks of popularity during the time music historians refer to as the Big Band Swing era. Big band jazz came of age during the 1930s. Big band music was known for its polished, complex, and masterful style. Big bands employed intricate arrangements and used highly proficient players. The music provided people of all races a welcome diversion from the uncertainties of the Depression and World War II.

Places like the Maple Grove Inn and the Rosedale Beach Resort were part of the celebrated Chitlin' Circuit. The Circuit was a nationwide network of entertainment venues where African Americans performed in the days before desegregation opened these places to African American artists. According to music historian Nelson George, this network included the "Howard" in Washington, D.C., the "Royal" in Baltimore, the "Uptown" in Philadelphia, and the "Apollo" in New York City. These theaters were the premiere African American entertainment venues. However, smaller places located outside of major cities were also a part of the circuit. All people develop their own entertainment venues. The Borscht Belt, a network of summer resorts, theaters, and nightclubs located in the Catskill mountains of New York State, served a similar purpose for the Jewish community. These places declined as the Jewish population became more assimilated into the American mainstream. The Chitlin' Circuit and the Borscht Belt served important cultural functions as places where talent was nurtured, but they became less popular as changes took place in American society. Ethnic institutions would never again hold the dominant positions they once held in their separate societies.

The Maple Grove Inn in Devon was important to the African American community of the Main Line. It represented a vision brought to fruition and demonstrated what was possible to achieve with hard work. It provided a venue for local and national entertainers and housing for African American Southern migrants. The Maple Grove Inn also offered the Main Line African American community a meeting space and a place of employment. According to Mildred Burruss, the Maple Grove Inn was a place where African Americans could go to eat, drink, and socialize. The Berwyn Thimble Club, made up of African American domestics, would meet at the Maple Grove Inn on Thursdays, the women's usual days off from work. The Maple Grove Inn was important to Burruss for very personal reasons. Her sister Theophilus Hopkins migrated from Arkansas to Pennsylvania in 1934. Burruss followed in her sister's footsteps and came to the Main Line in 1939. Burruss, like her sister, lived at the Maple Grove Inn for a time. Burruss tells an interesting story. Many years later a White woman and she were having a conversation and the woman told her Whites in the area would sit on their porches to hear the music coming from the nearby Maple Grove Inn. By all accounts the Whites did patronize the Maple Grove Inn, which was located in a racially mixed neighborhood. However, the possibility



A social gathering of the Berwyn Thimble Club at the Maple Grove Inn in the 1940s. Mildred Burruss may be seen on the left, holding the sign, with her husband Charles to her right. *Courtesy Penny L. Washington*

of violence occurring was real. The racial climate in the state could turn hostile as evidenced by the brutal 1911 lynching of Zachariah Walker in nearby Coatesville.

The nation would move forward and music would help dismantle racial barriers. The Maple Grove Inn is primarily recalled as the premiere entertainment venue in the area for significant performers of the Big Band and Rhythm and Blues era, including such notables as Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, and Ray Charles.

The Maple Grove Inn was also relevant to the African American community in that it provided a showcase for local talent. Christine Hill recalls performing at the Maple Grove Inn with a group of friends known as the Swing Queens in the 1950s. Members of the group included Ann Reese, Barbara Saunders, and Hill. “Deck” Walker served as the group’s manager. Reese, in addition to a talent for singing, had a talent for sewing and made dresses for the group. The group once wore red dresses and these dresses were fondly remembered by Hill. According to Hill, the group acted as “fill ins” and used the ladies’ restroom as a dressing area. Dennis Reynolds, a local musician, recalls that the Maple Grove Inn was a place local musicians used to practice in the 1960s.

An exact address for the Maple Grove Inn initially proved to be somewhat elusive. Oral histories put it in the vicinity of the Devon Horse Show Grounds with Poplar Lane, Valley Forge and Sugartown Roads most often cited as markers. According to Mildred Burruss and Carrie Barnes—both have connections to the Vause family through marriage—the Maple Grove Inn was located at 321 Valley Forge Road in Devon (the property on the SE corner of South Valley Forge Road and Poplar Lane). It was recently confirmed that this is the correct address, and that the building is still standing at that location.

It has been reported earlier in this text that Burruss lived at the Maple Grove Inn when she came to the Main Line in 1939. Oral histories also tell us that during the 1930s the area was sparsely populated. Today the area is known for a large apartment complex, supermarkets, and retail stores.

Editor’s Note: Public records show that the business named “Maple Grove Inn Inc.” was incorporated in Pennsylvania on 11 October 1949, on Valley Forge Road in Devon, Chester County.

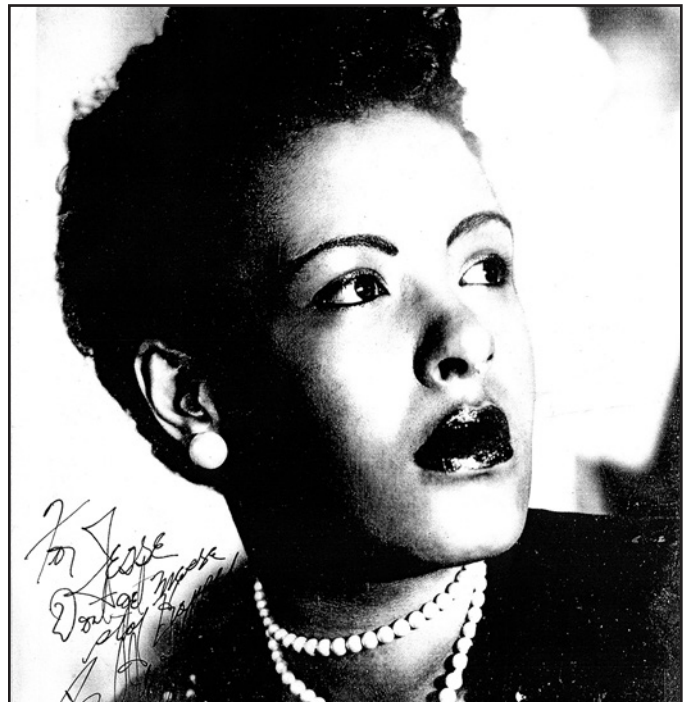
https://opencorporates.com/companies/us_pa/218211
<http://www.companies-pennsylvania.com/maple-grove-inn-inc-4f0s/>

Editor’s Note: A Pennsylvania Historical Marker was erected near Coatesville to remember Zachariah Walker the victim of this tragic event. The text on the marker reads:

“An African-American steelworker, Walker was burned to death by a mob on August 13, 1911. He was accused of killing Edgar Rice, a white security guard and former borough policeman. Fifteen local men and teenage boys were indicted for their involvement in Walker’s death but were acquitted of all charges. Nation-wide outrage led to the NAACP’s national anti-lynching campaign [sic] and inspired Pennsylvania’s 1923 anti-lynching law.”

More about this sad story can be found at:

<http://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-3DB>



Billie Holliday in an autographed promotional photo, inscribed to Jesse Vause. Courtesy Penny L. Washington



The Swing Queens. From left: Christine Hill, Ann Reese, Barbara Saunders (deceased), in their early twenties; location unknown. They were known to perform at the Maple Grove Inn. Courtesy Penny L. Washington

The Maple Grove Inn would remain relevant for decades. America would change greatly during the time of the club's existence. Desegregation would put an end to places like the Maple Grove Inn.

Vause was hard-working and turned his sights toward new challenges and opportunities. According to research compiled by Tamara Jubilee-Shaw, Rosedale Beach located in Millsboro, Delaware was once the premiere entertainment and resort destination for African Americans during the times of segregation. Rosedale Beach became a popular meeting place for African Americans on the East Coast. There were few places they could go to have access to a beach or enjoy picnic and camping grounds. African Americans greatly appreciated having decent hotel accommodations.

Today Rosedale Beach is best remembered as a premiere entertainment venue during the 1940s through the 1960s. Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton, Ella Fitzgerald and Ray Charles performed there.

The early history of Rosedale Beach illustrates complex racial dynamics and the changing uses of property. The area that would later be known as Rosedale Beach was once owned by a mixed race family, Isaac Harmon and his wife Sarah Jane, connected to the Nanticoke Indian community of Millsboro. Isaac was a successful businessman who sold lumber and ran a crabbing enterprise. He acquired a large tract of waterfront acreage along the Indian River, and his son Noah later inherited a portion. This site was used for bathing, religious activities, and sports events, and locals referred to the area as "Noah's Park." In the early 1930s the land was sold to a local entrepreneur named David E. Street, sometimes called "Dale." His wife's name was "Rosetta" and their names were combined to create "Rosedale." Jesse and wife Geoffrie Vause acquired the property in 1937, and incorporated Rosedale Beach on April 14th, 1937. When Vause purchased the property it included a building that was used as a bar and had rooms for lodging. A new hotel was under construction by 1946. Dr. Womack, Vause's daughter, tells that her father helped with the building of his 32-room facility. The hotel thrived, and by 1955 it was referred to as a "summer resort." The hotel was popular with locals as well as out-of-state individuals, college students, church members, and fraternal groups. Early rhythm and blues luminaries performed at Rosedale Beach during the 1950s and 1960s. Entertainers there included Aretha Franklin, James Brown, Jackie Wilson, Sam Cooke, Ruth Brown, and Fats Domino.

Remembrances of the Maple Grove Inn

At this point in our narrative it is beneficial to quote from the oral histories of those who patronized Maple Grove Inn and Rosedale Beach.

Esther Long: "The Maple Grove Inn was our entertainment. We had no television. We saw all the greats: Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Lionel Hampton."

George Rodgers: "In the 1940s the Big Bands came to the Maple Grove Inn. I remember seeing Duke Ellington, Ray Charles, Dinah Washington. The Maple Grove Inn was one of the few places we could go on the Main Line for entertainment. It was very exciting. I kept being put out because I was too young to be there, but I kept going back."



Count Basie promotional poster. 1941.

Courtesy Penny L. Washington



Delaware Historical Marker for Rosedale Beach
 "On this site was located the Rosedale Beach Hotel and Resort. The hotel and resort operated from the early 1900s to the 1970s. In the pre-integration era of the 20th century, there were very few places for people of color to go for entertainment and hotel accommodations. Because of this, Rosedale Beach was a destination point for many people along the East Coast. Rosedale Beach was officially incorporated on April 14, 1937. The resort featured a hotel, boardwalk, dance hall, picnic and beach area, campground and amusement park. Well known artists such as Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, James Brown, Cab Calloway, Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Fats Domino, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Aretha Franklin, Jackie Wilson and Stevie Wonder played at the resort. Once Delaware integrated its beaches, hotels and other public facilities, visitation to Rosedale Beach began to decline. The boardwalk was destroyed by the storm of 1962 and was never replaced. Although people still visited the resort until the mid-1970s, the Rosedale Beach Hotel and Resort was eventually sold to Gull Point Inc. in 1983."

Courtesy Penny L. Washington

Paul Eaton: “The Maple Grove Inn was still popular in the 1950s. The food was good and reasonably priced. Weekends were always crowded. Bands came on the weekends. Local bands played there. Whites would come to hear the music. I went down to Rosedale Beach. It was a nice establishment. We took pride in having it.”

Carrie Barnes: “The Maple Grove Inn was beautiful and well appointed. I saw Pearl Bailey and all the big stars of the time.”

Mary Brown: “I went down to Rosedale Beach for day trips. It was fun. I had an interest in it because I had a family connection to Jesse Vause through Mildred Burruss. At the time Jesse Vause was considered a rich Black man. That fascinated me.”

Maxine Washington: “I remember going to Rosedale Beach and enjoying the water. My uncle did a lot of good. He brought family members North. He educated people, built houses, and gave people jobs.”

As the 1960s progressed, Vause began to experience financial problems. In October 1961 a public auction took place and the land owned by Vause was sold. In subsequent years the property would change hands several times and at one point cars would be parked on a portion of the site. In 1976 the Rosedale Beach hotel bar remained open and local bands played weekly. On December 13, 1983 an assignment of rights, title, and interest transferred from the New Rosedale Beach Hotel to Gull Point Incorporated. Today upscale homes occupy the site of the former Rosedale Beach complex.

The decade of the 1960s would draw to a conclusion. The gains of the Civil Rights era would desegregate many aspects of American society. Places like Maple Grove Inn and Rosedale Beach would no longer be the exclusive entertainment option for African Americans. Desegregation and changing taste in American popular music would signal the end of the fabled venues.

Vause spent his later years among family. Perhaps he took time to reflect on the storied days of the Main Line’s Maple Grove Inn and Millsboro, Delaware’s Rosedale Beach. Vause passed away in 1969. His children would pursue other opportunities. Vause’s life was colorful and complex and he accomplished much good. His story is part of our shared Main Line history.

Materials consulted:

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Penny L. Washington. 1910 Negro Business Directory. Private Collection.

Oral Histories:

Mildred Burruss	Paul Eaton
Robert Walls	Esther Long
Dr. Audrey Vause Womack	Christine Hill
Maxine Washington	Dennis Reynolds
Mary Brown	Carrie Barnes
George Rodgers	

Photographs and Other Printed Materials:

Robert Walls
Dr. Audrey Vause Womack
Maxine Washington
Christine Hill

A special thank you to Mildred Burruss for loving support. Thank you to the staff of Easttown Library.

This article is dedicated to Mildred Burruss and Robert Walls.

Thank you both for all your efforts in helping bring this story to light. Blessings, Penny L. Washington

Penny L. Washington is a graduate of West Chester University. She has worked with West Chester’s Bethel A.M.E. Church, the Charles A. Melton Arts and Education Center, and the Chester County Historical Society to document the rich history of the African American community.