

# AFRICAN-AMERICAN STEELWORKERS IN YOUNGSTOWN

## African Americans in the Youngstown Steel Industry

By: Amanda Richey



One of the most interesting aspects of Youngstown's history is that of the life of a steel worker. Unfortunately, often when people think of steel workers, an image of a white man comes to mind. In fact, the symbol of a typical steel worker in the United States was most often a well built, white man, in overalls. This is an unfair portrayal, as there were steel workers of all different races, not only in Youngstown, but throughout the United States. I believe that African Americans deserve recognition in for the work that they did in the steel industry. People have a right to see and hear their stories just as they have seen and heard stories of the white steel worker.

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From Dennis C. Dickerson's book, *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1980*, I found that African American laborers started coming to the Mahoning Valley steel mills between 1916 and 1930 (31) They came for various reasons which included search for better paying jobs and to get away from the cotton fields of the South, as well as in hopes of less discriminatory working conditions.

African Americans were hired only as a last resort. Sometimes they were hired to replace white workers who had gone to war. Other times they were recruited to work as strike breakers (12.) According to a web site, [Birmingham-Pittsburgh Traveler](#), "Newspaper ads and personal visits by labor agents, steel companies enticed African Americans with the promise of higher wages, opportunities for travel, and the excitement of change." But, what they found when they became steel workers was often not what was promised.

Most of these companies paid them a decent salary and offered them protection. Still, when the strikes were over or white workers returned from war, they had to deal with white union members who were dissatisfied with them and called them scabs.

Because of the distrust and skepticism of the white workers, conditions in the steel mills were sometimes less than perfect for the African American workers. However, to get revenge on the steel companies, some, although the numbers were very few, African Americans were asked to join the unions. Even though they had union membership, they still found themselves holding some of the most undesirable jobs. Most often they were never allowed to join at all, and even if they did, they were never able to advance out of their mediocre, at best, jobs. For this reason, many quit the union and were in essence back where they started, and now even more distrusted than before by their white co-workers.

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Some of the difficulties with union segregation was alleviated during the Kennedy years. In Robert Bruno's book, *Steelworker Alley: How Class Works in Youngstown*, John Barbero, a Steel worker from Youngstown Sheet and Tube said, "In the open hearth, we didn't work successfully to end discrimination until the Kennedy years.... somehow, the same people who harassed blacks in the Truman and Eisenhower years, under Kennedy, their sense was to do the decent thing, accept it, and not struggle at all. I didn't hear any complaints at all" (72.)

Of course, this was not the end of segregation in the work place for African Americans. They continued to not be able to advance and to get jobs that were less desirable than those held by their white and at times, even less qualified, coworkers. Dickerson explains in his book that the "real power to change working and union conditions came in 1974" (4.) This was when the Department of Labor and Justice issued the Consent Decree. This was a series of agreements designed to end racial discrimination in the hiring and promotion of workers. This was a huge step for African American steel workers, because it had finally publicly been announced that their treatment was unfair. To get a first-hand look at what the Consent Decree meant to a Duquesne steel worker, check out this [Interview: Ray Henderson](#).

However, this action came too late for many African Americans because many of the steel mills in the Mahoning valley began closing in 1977, and the steel industry became almost nonexistent in the Valley by the 1980's.

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Life was hard for African Americans outside the mill as well as inside. They faced discrimination in several different aspects. One of the biggest problems facing African Americans was that of racist bank lending policies. This made it much harder for African Americans to move into the suburbs as their white coworkers easily did. According to Bruno, residential redlining was rampant in Youngstown and helped turn integrated neighborhoods into racially segregated sections of town (35).

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It is important to remember that these men worked every bit as hard as their white coworkers. Still they faced discrimination in many different ways, in the mill, in the unions, and even in their daily lives.

On the right is a picture of Walter Black taken from *The African American Experience in Ohio, 1850-1920*, who held several positions including: common laborer, cinder sharper, scrap man, stove tender, assistant blower, and blast furnace foreman, at Youngstown Sheet and Tube. He was one the first African Americans to be promoted to foreman in the Youngstown area. He even saved the life of one of his coworkers who was overcome by poisonous gas.

Hopefully, as more people become aware of the great African Americans, like Walter Black, who helped to impact the steel industry in Youngstown, their preset image of steel workers being all white will change. It is my hope that by viewing this web page, more people will realize and come forward with their own stories of the importance and impact of African Americans in the Youngstown Steel Industry.

