

WEST MEDFORD ELDERS PROJECT

**An Initiative of
the West Medford
Community Center, Inc.**



The West Medford Elder Project

The West Medford Elder Project began in 2009, as an attempt to pictorially document living community elders who helped establish and cultivate seeds for the development and growth of West Medford. The photographer, **Otha Sonnie**, assisted by his artist wife **Maureen**, and a community team including Rachel Tanner and Dorothy Elizabeth Tucker, embarked on this project to identify an initial group of individual contributors, who met criteria pre-established by the team. The next phase, which took place over two years, sought to photograph this group of elders. These West Medford residents helped forge the community through their dedication, activism, neighborhood outreach and spiritual guidance. Now these exceptional individuals are represented in a permanent exhibition here at the WMCC.

While there have been other initiatives that document local historical events and acknowledge the founding families, such as the newly installed West Medford Remembrance Project, none have captured the images of some of these contributors, who were born to the neighborhood or who settled in West Medford later. Many community residents stayed close to West Medford and continued to provide stability, whether through obtaining jobs for those in need; providing financial support offering literary and spiritual educational guidance or just offered a helping hand. Like a farmer they tended the West Medford community. Additionally, some residents, like those honored in this exhibit, went on to achieve prominence local and nationally.

This effort is a complement to other completed projects involving the historical documenting of the African-American and minority contributions to West Medford's development. The exhibit is an attempt to begin an ongoing pictorial record of those community figures who paved the way for the neighborhood to develop into the environment it is today. This is the first installment. The hope is for more individuals to be added in the future, as they are identified and agreed upon.

You are invited to view these images and enjoy them as much as Otha Sonnie enjoyed making them.

The narratives were researched and compiled by **Terry E. Carter**, who was also responsible for the concept and design of this booklet. Terry directs Elder Services here at the West Medford Community Center.

The initial components of this project were partially sponsored by a grant from the Medford Arts Council and Massachusetts Cultural Council.



Dorothy M. Bailey was one hundred and three years (103) old when she passed away on January 9th, 2013. Mrs. Dorothy (Wilson) Bailey was born in Lawrence, MA in 1909 and moved to West Medford at an early age. She completed her education in the Medford Public Schools and furthered her schooling at Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge, where she became an LPN, specializing in new born infant care. She was also employed by Boston Lying-In Hospital. Mrs. Bailey was one of the first nurses to assist in the patients at the Co-coanut Grove nightclub fire in Boston, where 492 people perished. She was one of the most beloved and respected "mothers" of the West Medford community and a long-standing member of the historic Shiloh Baptist Church.

1.



2.

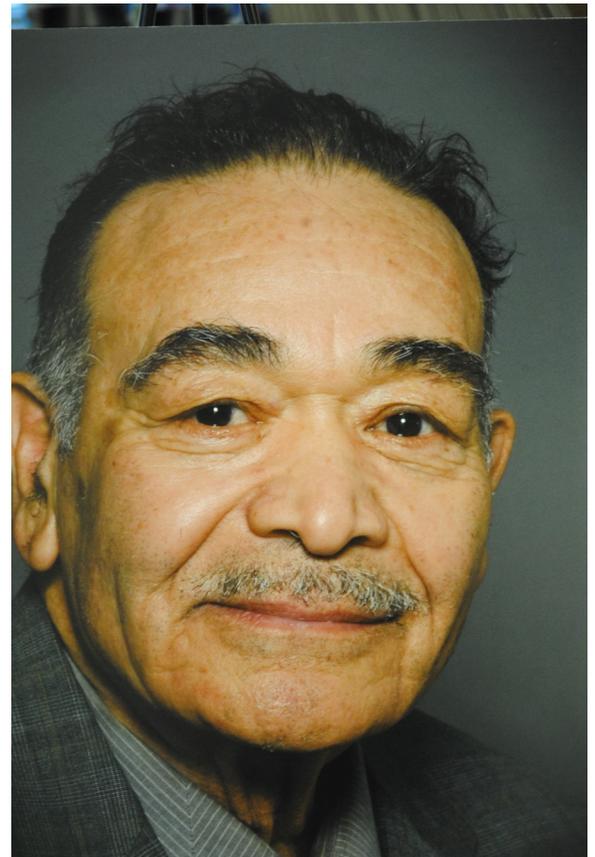
Billy Thompson is a consummate musician and performer whose reputation as a jazz saxophonist has earned him considerable accolades and a dedicated local following. His bluesy solos of old gospel hymns and standards are well remembered by the churches in the greater Medford area. His rendition of Precious Lord, Take My Hand, performed on many occasions with pianist Conrad Sharpton (dec.) and soloist Johnny Collins (dec.) are well remembered by the surviving elders of the Shiloh Baptist Church family.



Milbur Whitaker, who passed away on July 12, 2011 at the age of 91, had been a resident of Medford since 1952. As a young child, Milbur aspired to be a missionary and work with children. She fulfilled her dream as a long-time member of the West Medford Baptist Church where she faithfully served on the Board of Christian Education. When she retired several years ago as the Sunday School Superintendent, the church honored her for over 35 years of service and later named her a life deacon. She was an exceptional seamstress, and her hobbies included doll making and crocheting. She was a self-taught pianist and guitarist who often played for her Sunday school children. She was intensely proud of her large family including Marlene Godfrey, Kathleen E. Farmer, Jacquelyn M. Whitaker, Edward E. Whitaker, Jr., Pamela J. Whitaker-Gray, Derrick S. Alleyne, Vicki A. Fanning, and Cecil Galloway.

3.

Varnie Carter was an expert practitioner of the plastering trade for over fifty years in the greater Medford area. His beautiful and distinctive sand-finished ceilings were a point of pride for literally hundreds of local homeowners. A dedicated husband and family man, Varnie loved his family, the Lord, and his wife of over sixty years, Jean Carter. Varnie served his country as a corporal in the US Army during the Korean War, moving to Medford from Pennsylvania following the war with the first two of his five children. His years of distinguished service as a deacon and trustee of both Shiloh Baptist and West Medford Baptist Churches made him a recognizable and respected presence in his beloved West Medford community. He succumbed to cancer and passed away on December 14, 2014.

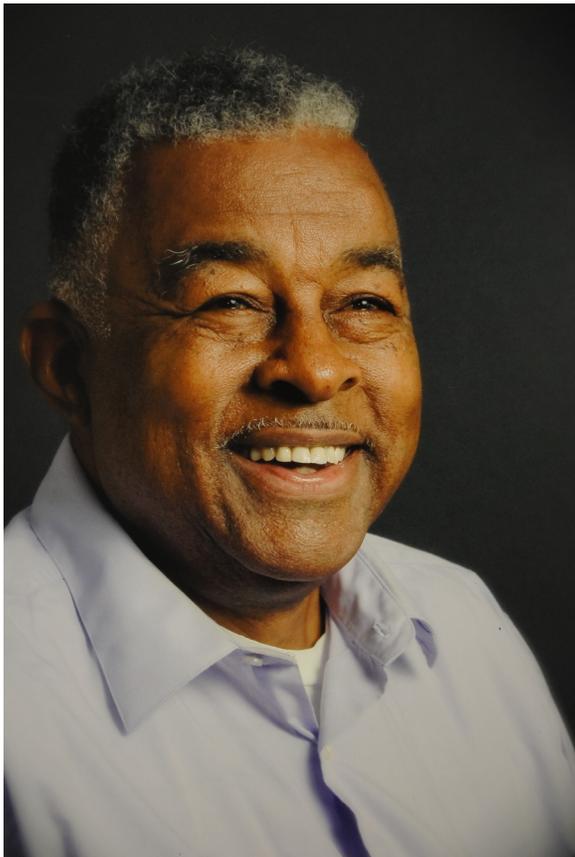


4.

Claretta Kountze is the beloved wife of the late Wally Kountze. She is also the loving mother of Michelle Lattimer and a dear friend to many senior women in the West Medford community. Like many of her friends, she was also a long-time member of Shiloh Baptist Church, where she was considered a wonderful choral singer and a respected, devoted church woman. She led locally in Girl Scouting too.



5.



Henry Archibald is a builder. He has been a tradesman and licensed general contractor for decades. His advice, assistance and skills have benefited countless homeowners from around the corner and across the state. Together with his long-time friend and occasional building associate, the late Varnie Carter, his impact on West Medford homes remains a point of pride in the neighborhood. His business acumen and industry has made his A-Pro Corp. a recognized and respected brand for home improvement and new construction.

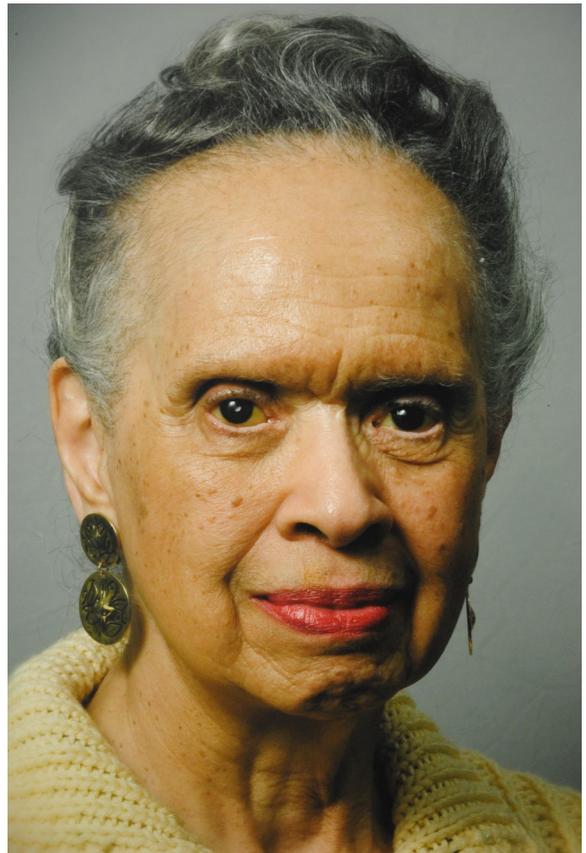
6.



Whitfield Jeffers was one of Medford's first African-American firefighters, serving the community in this capacity for 36 years. He was also a proud Army veteran and a legendary story-teller. Known to his close friends as "Jeff", he was a well-respected member of Shiloh Baptist Church for many years, then later joined the congregation of West Medford Baptist Church. A true pillar of the West Medford community, Jeff was the devoted husband of the late Norma (Parris) Jeffers. Together they raised four children, including Kathleen (dec.), Steven, Norma Jeanne, and Michael. Jeff was a passionate Patriots fan, a candle-pin bowler, a member of the Burlington Mall Walking Club, and an avid fisherman. He also belonged to the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters (Vulcans), the Shriners and the Free Masons. Whitfield "Jeff" Jeffers of Medford passed away on April 28, 2016, following a lengthy illness. He was 95.

7.

Barbara Dawson is a strong and independent woman. Despite a serious accident in 1964, Barbara turned her resulting blindness into a simple inconvenience, rather than a lifelong debilitation. Despite this disability, she was a dedicated wife and a mother to three well-educated and highly successful children. Barbara was born and raised in Boston and spent a great deal of her early adult life volunteering in Roxbury at community non-profits like the historic Freedom House. She was also an avid pianist, a Boston University graduate, and a member of Zeta Phi Beta sorority. She still lives at her family's home on Sharon Street, here in West Medford.



8.

Dorothy Elizabeth Tucker is a living legend among West Medfordites. She has been a respected historian, church leader, social activist, and creative spirit for many decades in her beloved West Medford home. She is still an active dancer, well into her nineties, and remains engaged in community life as a long-standing member of the West Medford Community Center, the West Medford Senior Club, and the Mystic Valley Branch NAACP.



9.



Oscar Greene is prolific journalist and author whose spiritually-based prose and poignant stories have graced the pages of the *Guideposts* Christian magazine for decades. Oscar is grateful for his interesting and varied life. Twenty-eight months after his marriage, he entered the US Army, later serving in the final campaign on Luzon Island in the Philippines during World War II. Following discharge from the US Army, Oscar joined General Electric Company. Going on to become a senior technical writer, he retired in 1981. A highly sought-after writer, his work has also appeared in newspapers, magazines and anthologies. He is the author of *House of Strangers*, *Hampton and the War Years*, *From Homecoming to Twilight*, and most recently (2014) *Ruby: A Love Story*, a memoir of his wonderful 50+ year marriage to his late wife Ruby.

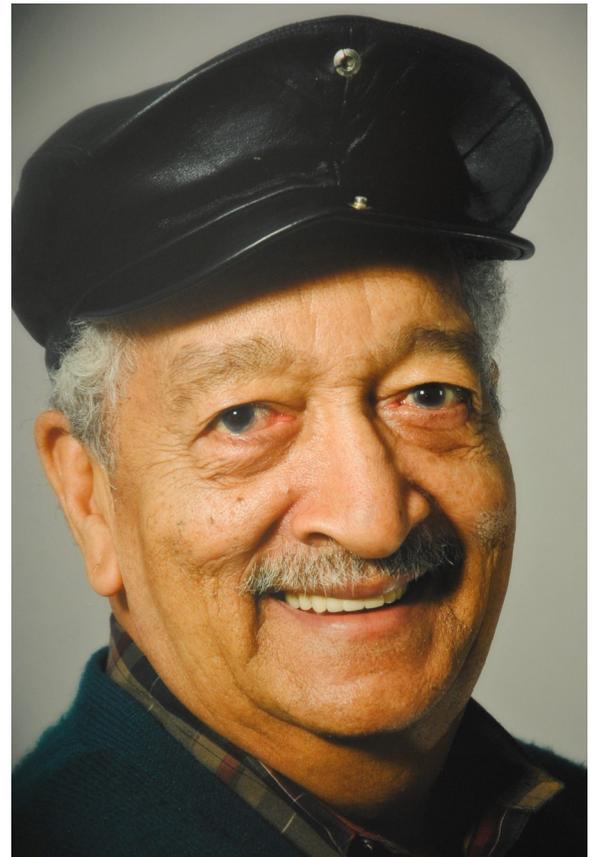
10.



Rev. Veronica Lanier was an American Baptist Minister, an international missionary, a tireless worker for Jesus Christ, and an inspiration to many in West Medford. Most recently, she was Pastor Emeritus at First Baptist Church of Lynn and also served as itinerant pastor at many other churches. She received numerous awards and citations including an honorary doctorate from the American Baptist Seminary of the West in 2012. Ronnie, as she was more familiarly known, was born on September 12, 1918 and passed away in June of 2014.

11.

Edward "Buddy" Clayton was one of the Commonwealth's first African-American postmasters. He was also among the handful of men responsible for assembling the old army barracks that housed the first West Medford Community Center on this very site. Buddy was also a proud veteran of the Korean War and served his country with distinction. He was a stalwart member of Shiloh Baptist Church, and later joined the congregation of West Medford Baptist Church as a trustee.

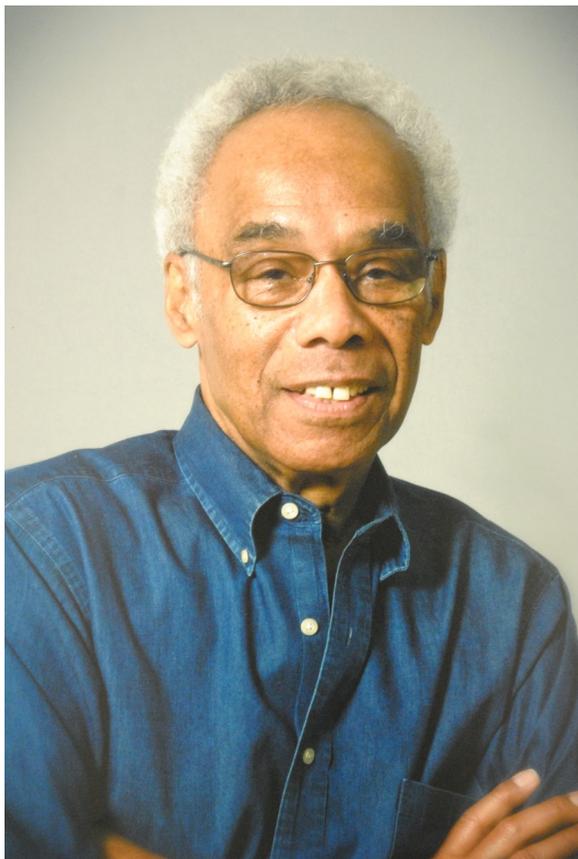


12.

Evelyn Tyner passed away on April 11, 2014 in her 97th year. She was the beloved wife of the late Charles W. Tyner (deceased) and the devoted mother of Leona (Langford) Martin, Harold F. Langford Jr. and Mary E. "Betsy" Taylor. She was highly regarded in the West Medford community as a small businesswoman, a civil rights activist and a pillar of the neighborhood. She was considered a very bright and feisty woman, as well as a stern disciplinarian by her own children and the kids in the community. Evelyn was a born leader and she worked with both the local Girl Scouts at the WMCC and in church school for the youth of the Shiloh Baptist Church.



13.



Wallace H. Kountze was born on October 29, 1931. His family resided in West Medford, MA where he quickly came to be known as an active and passionately devoted member of the community. A proud veteran, Wally served in the US Army from 1950 to 1952. He then earned a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration at Western New England College, followed by a Masters in Education from Boston State College, a Masters in Urban Affairs at Boston University and a third Masters in Public Administration at Suffolk University. In 1961, Wally married his second wife, Claretta Lattimer, and they made their family home in West Medford with daughters Michelle, Jocelyn and Vallery. In an extraordinary public service career of 40 years, Wally blazed new trails working for the city, state, and the federal government. Wally was also one of the driving forces behind the Kountze Family Archives at Brandeis University, The West Medford Remembrance Project and the establishment of the local NAACP Chapter in 1977. After a lengthy illness, Wallace passed away on August 13, 2015.

14.



Rev. Dr. Florence King is an American Baptist Minister, a graduate of Andover-Newton Theological Seminary, and a consistent presence in many of the Baptist churches of Massachusetts where she has preached, trained and served as itinerant pastor. She has received numerous awards and citations for her dedicated church and charitable work. She's a past president of the West Medford Senior Club and In 2012, received her Life Membership from the Mystic Valley Branch of the NAACP.

15.

Rachel Tanner is the loving wife of Willie Tanner and a long-time supporter of her beloved West Medford Community Center, where she is a highly engaged Board Member and a leader of the West Medford Senior Club. She is a mother and grandmother who also helped raise several grandchildren. She also serves as a lay leader and key servant at West Medford Baptist Church and works diligently within Medford's active church women's movement. She was one of a handful of community activists responsible for construction of the new building here at 111 Arlington Street.



16.

Willie Tanner is a lifelong Teamster and a former truck driver. He drove for the Stop and Shop Supermarket Company for many years and loved to be on the road. In retirement, he has devoted extensive time and resources to the upkeep of the West Medford Community Center, serving as a volunteer custodian and handyman. Bill, as he is more familiarly known is a car guy and loves to tinker with the family vehicles. He's a dad, and a grand-dad, and believes in family first.



17.

Carol Sharpton is a legendary figure in contemporary Medford history. She was the first woman of color in the the Guidance Department of the Medford Public Schools and was a tremendous advocate for equity and diversity in the city's education system. She became a "go-to" resource during some tense racial times at Medford High School in the 1980s'. After a distinguished career in education, she became the Executive Director of the WMCC and led the Center, as a chartered United Way agency, for a number of prosperous and productive years. She was married to the late Conrad Sharpton and is the mother of three grown children, including David, Jocelyn, and Dana (deceased) Carol is also an artist and well-known for her beautiful silk flower arrangements.



18.



George D. White, Jr. settled in Medford after coming to the Bay State from Virginia following 20 years in the US Navy. He retired as chief petty officer went to work for the federal government at the FAA. He also enjoys the distinction of having been only the second-ever person of color ever elected to Medford's School Committee, serving four terms. Always very active in the Medford community, he became involved with the Wellington-Glenwood baseball league, ultimately becoming league president. During this time, he also helped Medford Boy Scout Troop 416 for a number of years. He was happily married to the late Margaret E. (Jones) White, who passed away on Aug. 19, 2012, at the age of 82. Together they raised five adult children including Sheila L. White-Jackson, Gregory S. White, George D. White, III, James R. White,

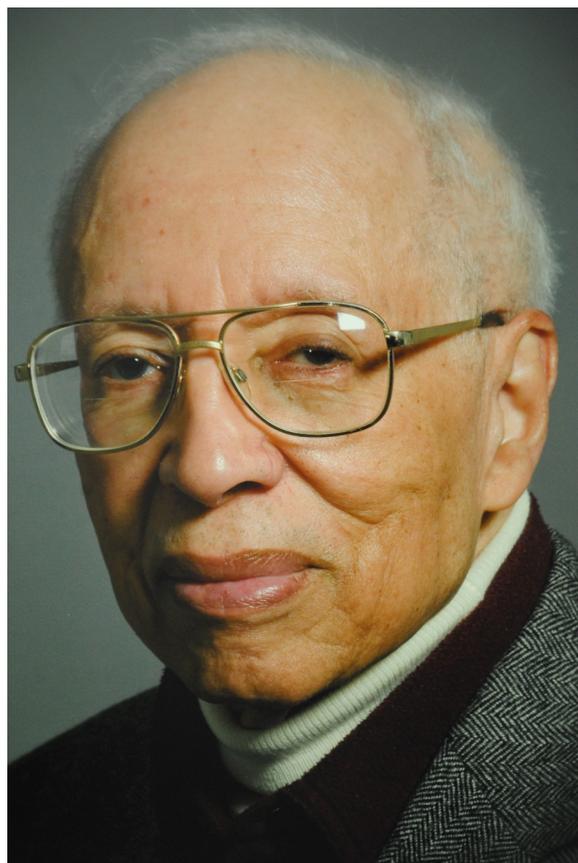
19.

Gwendolyn Blackburn is a community activist and radio talk show personality and the voice behind the highly-respected and long-running public affairs show "Minority Counterpoint" - JAMN 94.5, Boston - exploring minority issues and celebrating minority achievement. She has been a pivotal figure in grass roots advocacy for the black community of West Medford, particularly in the areas of education, cultural awareness, and municipal diversity. Her background includes many years of service in city government and the Medford Public Schools, as well as a deep commitment to her beloved Shiloh Baptist Church and her own local family.



20.

Kenneth F. Holmes, a long-time resident of West Medford was a civic-minded businessman and ran for public office in the City of Medford on more than one occasion. He has three very successful adult children with his beloved wife Mary; Michelle, Kenneth David, and Phillip. A fixture in his home on Harvard Avenue for many years, Ken was a trusted voice in the community and served on the Board of the WMCC. He also worked closely with Wally Kountze and Rev. O.G. Phillips to charter the Medford Branch NAACP Chapter in 1977. Later this Chapter changed its name to Mystic Valley Branch, as it began to incorporate members from the surrounding towns of Arlington, Malden, Everett, Winchester and Woburn.



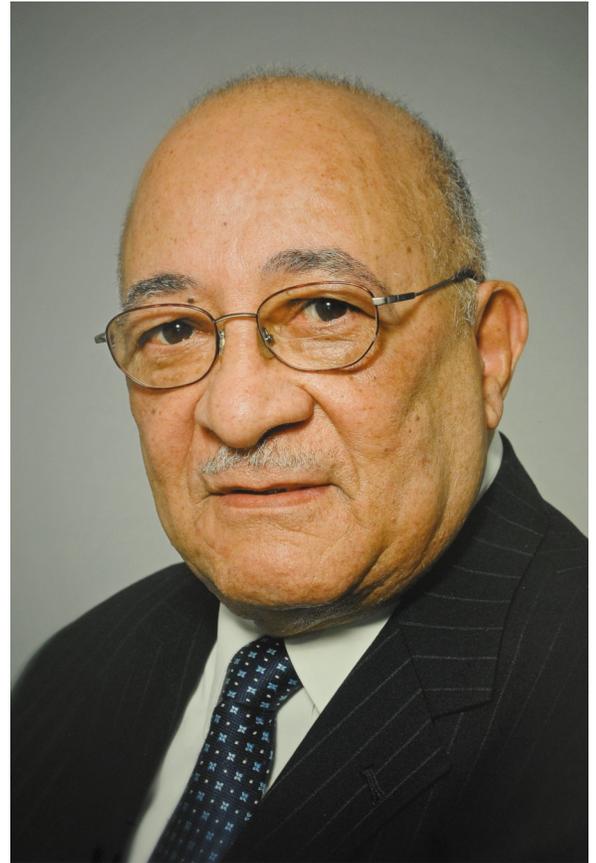
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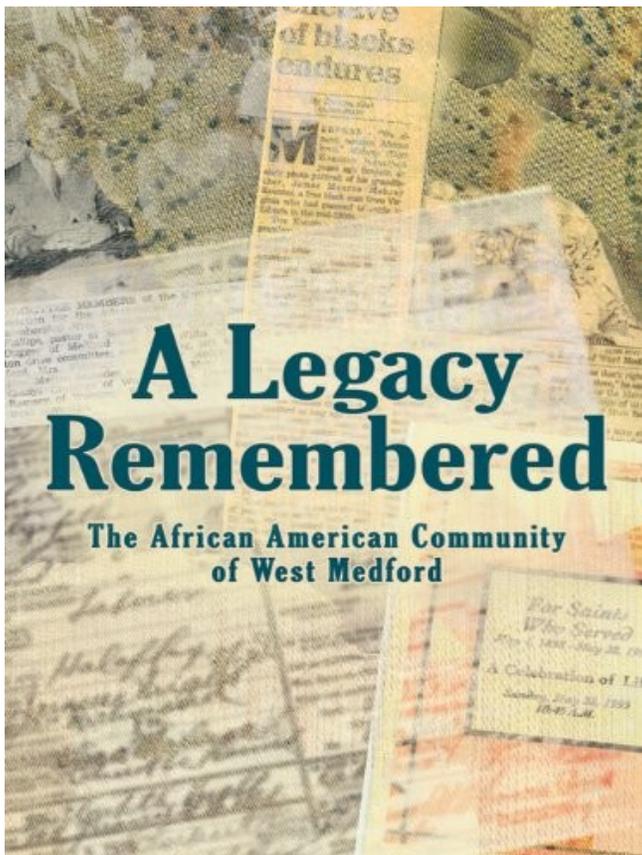
Marion Phillips walked regularly and briskly walk along the streets of West Medford, pretty much right until she passed away in June of 2015. She raised her children with discipline and care and was a friend to many here in her beloved neighborhood. She had two grown daughters, Gail and Lynne, both of whom have established exemplary lives beyond her passing, but always under her loving eye. She was a pillar of the city, with a strong community voice and a genuine concern for the lives of her fellow citizens during the many decades that she lived just down the street from the WMCC.

22.

Cecel Furey was born on April 12, 1935 to Armon Sr. and Dorothy (Johnson) Furey in West Medford, MA. He was the youngest of five children. Cecel was well-known in the neighborhood as an active and athletic young man, even playing some basketball in high school. He graduated from Medford High School in 1952 and later earned an Associate's Degree in Engineering from Northeastern. Cecel was a very industrious young man and enjoyed a career of 46 years work in Raytheon's Engineering Dept., as well as a 36 year part-time career with the US Postal Service. Away from the workplace, Cecel was a Cubmaster for Boy Scout Troop #428 for 10 years and also enjoys music and singing. Cecel and his first wife Betty (Chisholm) had four daughters, Denyce (and twin sister Diane, deceased), Karen and Linda, and one son, Peter. He has been happily retired since 1998.



23.

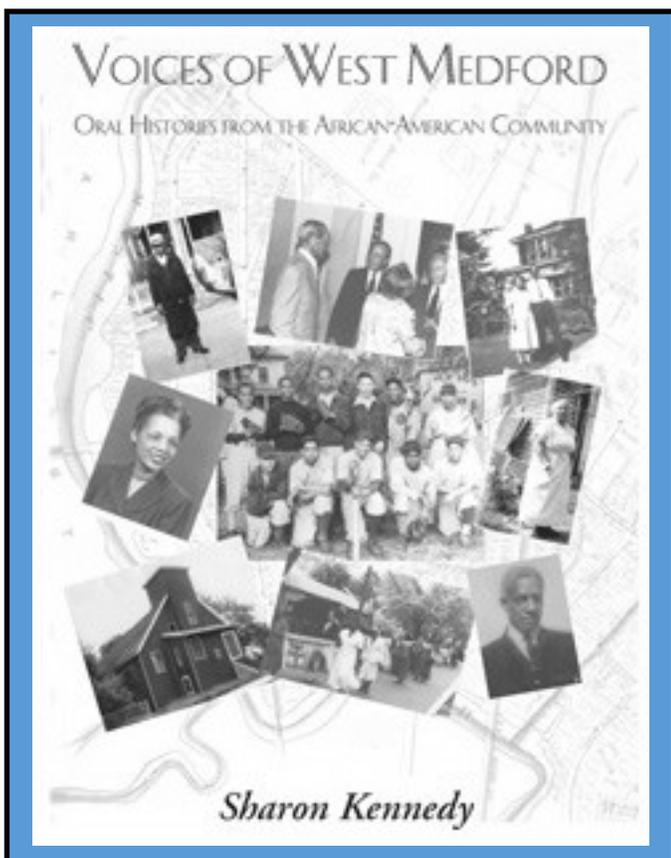
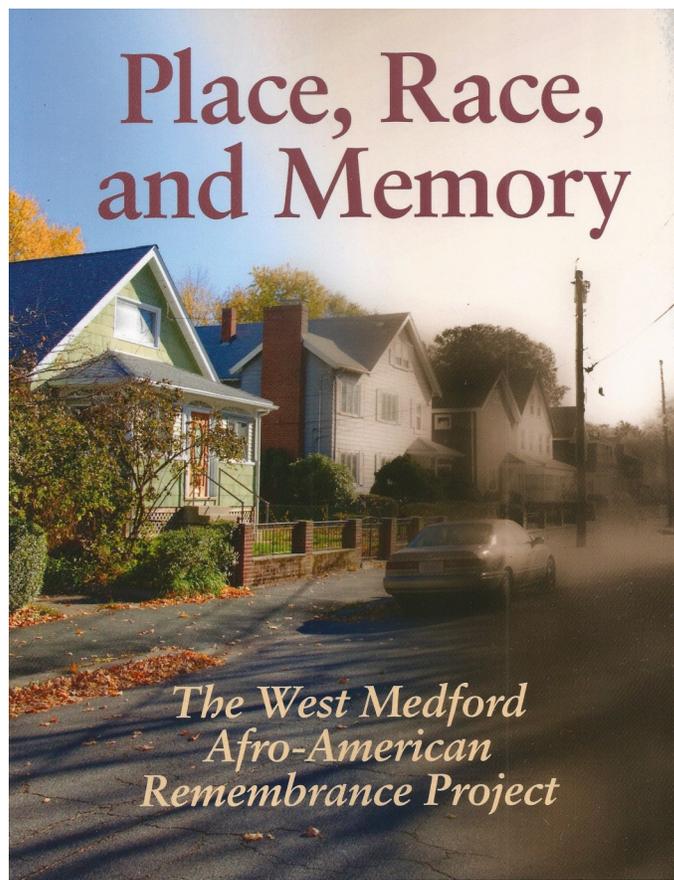


Other Resources:

West Medford, Massachusetts has been home to a thriving African American community, where families have lived for generations since the end of the Civil War. The stories of its residents have been fading as elders die and families move away. Most of the history of this neighborhood resides within the memories of these few remaining elders. The discovery of over one hundred funeral programs, saved and collected by residents since the mid-twentieth century, tell the stories of residents who have passed on but made countless contributions to the community. These funeral programs, along with supplemental interviews, illustrate how past residents developed community resources and used ingenuity to help create a strong neighborhood of their own. Within these pages are stories of personal perseverance and tenacity, humor and resiliency. Through portraits of individuals, West Medford's African-American neighborhood of the past is documented, through the sharing of the lives of men and women, and how they interfaced to create a solid community, despite societal and economic obstacles.

Place, Race, and Memory...

This 2012 publication of the West Medford Community Center, Inc. is the literary and pictorial record of the work done by the West Medford Afro-American Remembrance Project Committee and photographer Will Tenney from which captures the oral histories and associated tangible memories collected by Tufts University Professor Rosalind Shaw and Brandeis Professor Mark Auslander and their students in 2005 and 2006. That work is now displayed here at the WMCC and represents the best aspects of this historical neighborhood in social activism, professional work, spirituality, leadership, business development, and neighborhood preservation.



From Introduction:

"Today, most everyone over the age of 60 agrees that the wonderful, cohesive neighborhood they loved so much is gone. The phrases I heard most often are: "I don't know my neighbors anymore;" "It used to be that if I went to the store and saw another Black person, I knew them. Now I don't;" "The new White people don't say 'Hello', they're not friendly;" "This neighborhood was so tight-knit, so supportive;" and "It was like an extended family." To some extent, most of these changes have occurred everywhere in the United States. They are, perhaps, particularly hard on this community because of its small size, its color, and its ability over the last 120 years to raise and nurture African-American "pioneers" and send them, well-prepared, out into the larger community. The elders of West Medford know how lucky they were, and how lucky their children were to grow up here. They read or listen to stories about the lives of people of color in the big cities of this country, and they shake their heads.

While this book is about the elder members of the community, those who grew up in West Medford in the postwar era feel just as strongly as their parents and grandparents that this community was a very special place..."