In 2001, an effort to capture the history of the African American community in the Lehigh Valley began with Byron Crudup, Betty Carson, Gwen Adams, and Donald Gunn. They turned to Dr. James Jackson of the Psychology Department of Muhlenberg College for assistance. Dr. Jackson approached Rick Daugherty, Executive Director of the Lehigh County Senior Citizens Center about a collaborative venture. Mr. Daugherty was enthusiastic about gathering the stories of the “oldest of the old” and sought to bring the Lehigh County Historical Society and Dr. Ethel Drayton-Craig, the former President of the Board of Directors of the Senior Center and current Director of Multicultural Life at Muhlenberg College, into a grant seeking endeavor.

Dr. Jackson, Rick Daugherty, and Dr. Drayton-Craig brought members of the community together with Jan Ballard, archivist of the Lehigh County Historical Society, and Andree Mey Miller, the assistant director/curator of the Historical Society, during the summer of 2001 to plan an oral history project that would get the stories of the “oldest of the old” and highlight the Lawrence Street community: Allentown’s once (and only) African American community. The project focused on the Little Lehigh Urban Renewal plan that was begun in the 1960’s and 1970’s, and it would become part of the recorded history housed at the Historical Society…a first for the Lehigh Valley.

At the earliest planning sessions were members of the community: Ella Green, Phyllis Alexander, Duane Tolson, and others. After a few meetings a core committee emerged that was committed to the project.

Dr. Margaret Jerrido, Archivist and Head of Urban Archives at Temple University Libraries, came to the Senior Center to give the committee a full day workshop on the essentials of conducting community-based oral histories.

Rick, Jan, James, Ethel, and Duane were the architects of grants that were received from the Pennsylvania Humanities Council ($7,920) and the Charles H. Hoch Foundation ($5,000). Dr. Jackson and Dr. Drayton-Craig served as the Humanities Scholars on this phase of the project for what has now been referred to as Phase I of the Lehigh Valley Black African Heritage History Project: A joint effort of the Lehigh County Senior Citizen’s Center (the Project Sponsor), Muhlenberg College, and the Lehigh County Historical Society.

During the implementation of this project, Dr. James Jackson prepared fifteen Muhlenberg College student researchers to conduct two - 1 ½
hour interviews per interviewee. Dr. Drayton-Craig gave them a training session on interview techniques and the cultural psychological aspects of being effective interviewers.

Mark McKenna, Producing Artistic Director of Touchstone Theatre, trained these students to be good listeners and observers utilizing theatre techniques. It was then that Dr. Jackson asked Touchstone Theatre to turn the research into a living history to be performed for the community. Touchstone agreed to join the project as a long-term collaborator.

Students interviewed community residents over the year. While some interviews were done on campus, others were in the homes of the interviewees. Students worked in groups of three: A video camera person, an interviewer, and an observer. In addition to video tapes, audiotapes were also produced for each interview. Eighteen interviews were completed during Phase I.

Dr. Judith Ridner of the History Department of Muhlenberg College joined the project to research the Little Lehigh Urban Renewal Project. With the assistance of one of her students, she combed the archives of the Morning Call and the Allentown Redevelopment Authority for information about Blacks in Allentown. Retired Morning Call reporter, Dick Cowen joined the efforts and lent tremendous support.

On February 19, 2003, The Office of Multicultural Life at Muhlenberg College hosted a discussion and preliminary exhibit with presentations by Dr. Jackson’s students, Abby Schwartz and Elissa Mannion. This included a poster presentation as an attempt to present the public with some of the findings of this project, in its preliminary phase. The poster presentation first appeared as part of Healing Stories/Transforming Lives: Celebrating Our Community Voices, presented in November 2002 at the Banana Factory, in Bethlehem by Touchstone Theatre and The Community Exchange Program.

On March 25, 2004, over 100 residents and dignitaries attended the Lehigh Valley Black African Heritage History Project Opening Exhibit and Community dialogue at the Lehigh County Senior Citizens Center. The traveling panel exhibit was at Muhlenberg College, First Presbyterian Church of Allentown, PPL, and the Lehigh County Government Center from April – June 2004. Also in June, RCN Cable TV, Channel 4, Focus Lehigh Valley aired an interview of Jan Ballard (Historical Society), Dick Cowen, Dr. James Jackson, and Dr. Ethel Drayton-Craig. Phase I was complete.
Committee members wanted the project to continue. Susan Clemens-Bruder, who is a Muhlenberg History Professor, Dr. Judith Ridner, and Dr. Ethel Drayton-Craig worked with Deborah Kipp of the Muhlenberg grant office to obtain funds for continued oral histories conducted by history students. **Phase II** of the project began with a $15,000 grant from the PA Historical and Museum Commission in 2006 to have Dr. Ridner and professor Clemens-Bruder continue additional interviews in Bethlehem, Easton, and Allentown, under the direction of professor Clemens-Bruder. This is ongoing effort.


**Phase III** is the creation of the original theatrical production and it began immediately after completion of Phase I. Early in this phase, Touchstone received a $50,000 matching grant from an anonymous donor for the project. A goal of the process was to foster a greater sense of community by bringing people together through a series of story and song gathering sessions. Liz Wheeler and Roberta Meek served as Project Coordinators of these efforts for Touchstone over the years. Beginning in October 2005, New York actor Peggy Pettitt came to the Valley several times to conduct community story-gathering sessions to provide background material for the play. Specifically, the following are dates and locations of story gathering led by Peggy:

- November 19, 2005 – Lehigh Valley Heritage Center
- February 18, 2006 – Touchstone Theatre
- September 23, 2006 – Lehigh Valley Heritage Center
- November 4, 2006 – Touchstone Theatre
- February 17, 2007 – Touchstone Theatre
- March 24, 207 – St. Paul Baptist Church, Bethlehem
- April 28, 2007 – St. Paul Baptist Church
- June 23, 2007 – Grace Deliverance Baptist Church, Bethlehem
- June 30, 2007 – Easton Teen Center, Boys & Girls Club

Linda Parris-Bailey, Executive/Artistic Director of Knoxville’s Carbetbag Theatre, was the playwright and in July, 2007 she came to Touchstone Theatre for a reception and meeting of the leadership committee of the project.
Dr. Ysaye M. Barnwell of *Sweet Honey in the Rock* was the musical arranger. Both came to the Valley several times to gather information and songs from the community at large gatherings. The following are dates and locations of song-gathering events led by Dr. Barnwell:

September 10, 2007 – Shiloh Baptist Church, Easton
September 12, 2007 – Alliance Hall, Allentown
October 1, 2007 – St. Paul Baptist Church, Bethlehem
October 2, 2007 – Grace Deliverance Baptist Church, Bethlehem

Playwright Parris-Bailey and others continued the final community story-gathering sessions and offered public readings and conversations with the playwright as the script emerged:

October 22, 2007 – Shiloh Baptist Church, Easton
October 23 – 26, 2007 – evening drop-in sessions at Touchstone Theatre
November 12, 2007 – An evening of Music, Story, and Conversation
Supporting the Lehigh Valley Black African Heritage History Project
At Broughal Middle School, Bethlehem
February 2, 2008 – Public Reading of scenes from the play at Lehigh University (Linda Parris-Bailey present via video-conference)
March 27, 2008 – Public Reading of scenes at Alliance Hall, Allentown

The resulting play is called *Another River Flows: Stories, Songs And A Celebration Of The Lehigh Valley Black Experience.*

Community auditions were held for actors and singers for the production which culminate in the following performances to complete Phase III:

May 30 – 31, 2008  8 pm  Third Street Alliance, Easton
June 6 – 7, 2008  8 pm  The Ice House, Bethlehem
June 13 – 14, 2008  8 pm  Allentown Symphony Hall

In celebration of the play, artist and founder of Lafayette College’s Experimental Printmaking Institute, Curlee Raven Holton created a limited-edition print, *All Hands Held Together to Know the Truth,* which is for sale at performances.

Ethel Drayton-Craig, Ph.D.
May 27, 2008