

Carver Center

The Carver Center has served Trenton's African American community for over a century as a gathering place, entertainment venue and athletic center. Built in 1923 as an Elks lodge, the Trenton YMCA acquired the building in 1944 renaming it the Carver Center, after George Washington Carver, the famous African American agricultural scientist and inventor. The Carver Center was an important gathering spot for the local civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s.

The Center traces its origins to the Sunlight Elks Lodge, an African American fraternal organization. The Elks raised funds to build a social hall here at 40 Fowler Street where they had been meeting in a private home since at least 1913. They hired J. Osborne Hunt, a prominent Trenton architect, to plan this handsome Colonial Revival-style brick building, completing first an auditorium in 1923 and adding the main building in 1927. When the YMCA took over the building, the first floor contained a lounge, library and gymnasium. A kitchen and meeting room were located on the second floor, and a game room was installed in the basement. The YMCA closed down the building in 1975 due to low enrollment and it was purchased by The State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. In 1981 it was renamed the Carver Youth and Family Center.



Carver Center Colored Marching Band, 1942.



Wink Biddle Quintet, 1948.

This Joint Is Jumpin'!

Music, singing and dancing were common sights and sounds at the Carver Center. The venue hosted plays, cabaret, dances and performers like Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie, Fats Waller and Duke Ellington. The first African American marching band in Trenton, the Carver Center Colored Marching Band, and the nationally ranked Cavalier Drill Team, which was invited to perform at inaugural balls for three U.S. Presidents, practiced inside the building. Willie Williams founded the marching band, led the adult orchestra and mentored many aspiring musicians in Trenton.

Slam and Dunk!

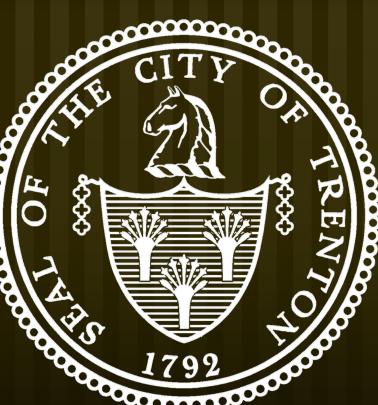
The Carver Center sponsored sports programs for Trenton's African American youth. Children and young adults competed in basketball, baseball, softball and boxing. They also roller skated, swam and danced. Hundreds of athletes had their start at the Carver Center. Ike Williams, the World Lightweight Boxing Champion from 1945 to 1951 and Sammy Goss, a 1968 Olympian and North American Featherweight champion of 1971, trained at the Carver Center. Mel "Big Ten" Groomes became the first professional Black football player drafted by the Detroit Lions in 1948. All-American basketball player Leonard Carmichael led North Carolina's Elizabeth City State University, a historically black college, to a conference championship in 1968-69.



Ike Williams, circa 1950.

Let Freedom Ring!

Many African American leadership groups held meetings at the Carver Center. The local and state branches of the NAACP met here, and used the space for their state conference and to plan strategy for advancing the civil rights movement in New Jersey. Trenton's YWCA, Boy Scouts and various Republican and Democrat groups convened inside the building. New York City Mayor David Dinkins, and Trenton's first African American mayor, Douglas H. Palmer, called the Carver Center home. Another attendee, A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., would later serve as the Chief Judge of the Federal Appeals Court in Philadelphia, U.S. Third Circuit.



This project was funded by the City of Trenton Department of Recreation, Natural Resources and Culture

Content development by Hunter Research, Inc., Beverly Mills and Wanda Lacy McNeill

All images, unless otherwise noted, courtesy of Mayolyn Saunders

Graphic design by Douglas Scott

Background design inspired by Kente textiles