



## ***Black history in the Philadelphia landscape: Deep roots, continuing legacy***, by Amy Jane Cohen

*Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2024*

**Menika B. Dirkson**

To cite this article: Menika B. Dirkson (28 Aug 2024): *Black history in the Philadelphia landscape: Deep roots, continuing legacy*, by Amy Jane Cohen, Journal of Urban Affairs, DOI: [10.1080/07352166.2024.2391675](https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2024.2391675)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2024.2391675>



Published online: 28 Aug 2024.



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## BOOK REVIEW

***Black history in the Philadelphia landscape: Deep roots, continuing legacy***, by Amy Jane Cohen, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2024

*Black History in the Philadelphia Landscape* explores how “ordinary people” have altered our landscape through “grassroots activism” to acknowledge, preserve, and memorialize Philadelphia’s Black history from the 1600s to the present day. Since 2017, there have been numerous political debates about teaching critical race theory and antiracist Black history in K-12 schools and colleges in order to make American history more inclusive and representative of the historical experiences of marginalized people. Additionally, there have also been incidents of racial violence like the August 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where white supremacists protested the city council’s decision to remove Confederate statues of Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee from a local park. A white supremacist rammed a car into a crowd of people, killing one person and injuring 35 others.

Amy Jane Cohen argues that since historical narratives have the “power” to shape our identity, we need inclusive histories to solve serious debates on issues that matter, like “gentrification, affirmative action, structural racism, reparations, voting rights, and mass incarceration” (p. 2). The book utilizes newspaper articles, photographs, maps, National Park Service (NPS) reports, oral histories, interviews, historic building preservation applications, and walking history tours to demonstrate how history is always evolving and public interpretations of our past should reflect our “highest ideals of liberty, justice, and equality.”

*Black History in the Philadelphia Landscape* contains a foreword, introduction, and 19 “stand alone” chapters divided into 3 parts that chronologically cover the 17th through the 20th centuries. However, the text immediately opens with maps highlighting where 85 historic sites, historical markers, and murals are publicly available for sightseeing so that readers can take self-guided tours of Black history in Philadelphia. At the end of every chapter, is a “To Do” list instructing the reader how to learn more about a particular topic by visiting a museum, archive, public landmark, or digital resource. For example, the To Do list for Chapter 3 that is focused on the formerly enslaved domestic servant Dinah who convinced British soldiers not to burn the Stenton estate home during the Revolutionary War suggests that readers explore this history further by touring the house museum, visit parks that contain murals and memorials to Dinah, and view documentaries that highlight her story. Some chapters even conclude with a “Reflections” section in which the author spotlights a brief oral history from an activist, artist, or politician about their personal connection to the historic people, places, and events presented in the chapter. Reflections like state representative Chris Rabb’s remarks at the February 2022 celebration to rename a train station to honor the formerly enslaved 18th century bishop and abolitionist Richard Allen, instead of Philadelphia’s 22nd mayor and local enslaver William Allen, describe how a descendant of Black abolitionists who worked with Frederick Douglass and the Vigilance Committee was instrumental in the “reimagining” of honored spaces in one’s community (p. 43). Overall, the organizational structure of this book reflects Cohen’s desire to educate and inspire readers to understand and actively engage in Black history and culture.

Cohen’s introduction and first chapter argue that teaching African American history in Philadelphia’s public schools and memorializing multiple aspects of that historical narrative in public spaces has been a challenge for generations. In 2005, Philadelphia became the first city in America to implement a school district mandate that all high school students must complete a year-long course in African American history upon graduation. This groundbreaking initiative is the product of over 50 years of community activism stemming from the November 1967 Black Student Walkouts where thousands of middle and high school pupils and community leaders held a demonstration at the Board of Education building to demand more African American History classes in their school curriculum.

This historic event provided a foundation for Temple University historian and collector Charles L. Blockson and urban education professor Bernard C. Watson to exert pressure to increase the number of historical markers documenting Black history across the city. Pennsylvania's historical marker program began in 1913. However, by 1990 there were only two markers related to African American history. In 1991, Blockson and Watson acquired a \$92,000 grant (with assistance from the William Penn Foundation) to research and develop applications for historical markers. Their efforts yielded success in convincing the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) to approve 74 markers honoring 30 individuals that included "musicians, artists, and business leaders," 20 landmarks that included "churches, theaters, and hospitals," along with other aspects of Black history throughout Philadelphia. Since then, many more applications for historic preservation have been filed and as of 2022, 107 of the 332 "state-authorized markers" in Philadelphia document Black history.

In chapters 2 through 18, Cohen features a general yet intersectional history of African Americans in Philadelphia. These chapters detail social, economic, political, religious, cultural, and queer histories about the Black experience during the slavery and abolition periods, the Great Migration, the civil rights movement, and the Black Power movement. Although Cohen uses a wide variety of primary sources, she relies heavily on newspapers to create her narrative. Cohen's use of historic Black newspapers and magazines like the *Philadelphia Tribune*, the *Philadelphia Sun*, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's *The Crisis*, and the Nation of Islam's *Final Call* guarantee that her narrative is highlighting Black history from a variety of Black perspectives, while recent articles from newspapers like *Chalkbeat Philadelphia* and *Education Week* demonstrate how this book is centered around public education. Cohen does, however, offer disclaimers in the introduction to explain why this book is unlike a traditional academic monograph and she recommends that readers seek out additional secondary literature from scholars who specialize in advanced research on the topics she presents in the text.

Chapter 19 functions as the conclusion of the book. Cohen discusses Philadelphia's Black Power movement and its legacy. Throughout Part III (covering chapters 10–19), there are numerous stories about well-known Black activists like Alain Locke and organizations like the Black Panther Party, but also about the efforts everyday people made to rename public schools, streets, and transit stations after prominent Black figures like Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, Malcolm X, and Cecil B. Moore. While not all of the efforts to remove the names of white supremacists from public institutions and structures were successful, Cohen emphasizes that when communities and city officials did agree to rename public spaces it was a serious commitment, particularly with street names, because it "requires residents and business owners to change addresses on mortgages, drivers' licenses, bank loans, and other official documents (p. 184)." Chapter 19 wraps up this book by detailing one major success in removing racist monuments from public spaces, particularly one that symbolized "police brutality and white supremacy": the June 2020 removal of Philadelphia police commissioner and mayor Frank Rizzo's statue from in front of the city's Municipal Services Building. Clearly, Cohen worked closely and effectively with teachers, archivists, public historians, and students to research and write this book, and is able to offer creative ways to learn more about Black history in Philadelphia.

This is an accessible and sweeping history that serves as a bridge between historical archives and the community. This book encourages readers to be knowledgeable about the historical significance of their neighborhoods and instructs them to be advocates in the preservation of historic landmarks. Stories like the creation of the Christian Street/Black Doctors Row Historic District in July 2022 that honors the Black community, Black medical institutions like Douglass Hospital and Mercy Hospital, and Black doctors who lived and worked on that street from approximately 1910 to 1945 demonstrate how historic districts under the threat of erasure from public memory in gentrified communities like Graduate Hospital can acquire historic designations and pass moratoriums on demolition when residents, historic preservation organizations, and politicians work together to protect historic sites. Embedded in this text are numerous stories of how community activists and everyday

people have protected Black history in Philadelphia, and have successfully nominated and acquired historical markers, murals, and monuments in their communities by collaborating with academics, archivists, museum educators, artists, and even politicians to change their city's historical landscape and "repair the past" when Black history was often invisible, forgotten, or devalued. Moreover, this book is fitting as a guidebook, antiracist teaching manual, or simplified textbook for students in sixth through twelfth grade, college students, and everyday people who want to learn intersectional African American history through a public history lens.

Menika B. Dirkson

*Morgan State University*

✉ [menika.dirkson@morgan.edu](mailto:menika.dirkson@morgan.edu)

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2024.2391675>

