

## Twentieth Century Settlers in the Blackstone Valley

Museum of Work & Culture, Woonsocket, Rhode Island

### A Family Affair: From South Carolina to the Blackstone Valley

**Employment** opportunities motivated groups of people already living in the States to migrate to other parts of the country. While there have been people of African descent living in the Blackstone Valley since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in 1940 a new group of African-Americans settled in Woonsocket to work at places like Jacob Finkelstein and Sons, a clothing manufacturer on Singleton Street. Originally residents of Newberry County, South Carolina, these African-American settlers encouraged friends and family to join them. They were participating in one of the largest movements of Americans in history: the Great Migration.



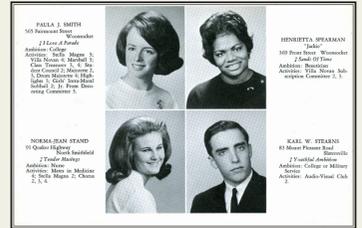
Herbert and Henrietta Spearman Johnson, c. 1942, courtesy of Jackie Dandy

Henrietta (Spearman) Johnson moved to Woonsocket because her sister Daisy Greene had come to the city a few years earlier. Eventually, five Spearman siblings moved there. Daisy helped Henrietta find a job at U.S. Rubber Company in Woonsocket. Later, Henrietta worked for Miller Electric, manufacturers of electric cords, from which she ultimately retired. Her husband, Herbert Johnson, worked for a time at Kornstein's on Main Street in Woonsocket and then in the mills. When local mills closed, Herbert worked at a mill in Whitinsville, Massachusetts, doing iron and metal casting.



Choir members of St. James Baptist Church, 1999, from *The Woonsocket Call*

Racial prejudice sometimes made it difficult for African-Americans to find jobs and suitable housing. But Henrietta's family found a landlord who would rent them an apartment on River Street. In fact, most African-American families lived on River Street, as well as on Front and Sayles Streets. Her children, Jackie and Eddie, attended Woonsocket High School, and Jackie was among the first African-American students to graduate from the school.



Henrietta "Jackie" Spearman's High School senior photo, 1965, from *The Woonsocket High School yearbook, the "Quiver"*



Woonsocket High School Senior Prom, 1965, from the *Woonsocket High School yearbook, the "Quiver"*

### Churches Cradle Communities

Like ethnic social clubs, churches provided social, cultural and religious activities for new residents in the Valley. Although there was a Baptist church in Woonsocket, the traditions at that largely white parish differed from Baptist churches the Spearmans and other African-American settlers had attended in the American South. Southern African-American Baptists organized St. James Church because they wanted a place for their own cultural traditions.



St. James Baptist Church and founders, 1980, from *The Woonsocket Call*



St. James Baptist Church choir, 1999, from *The Woonsocket Call*