

Here I Stand

**A 75th Anniversary Commemoration of the Peekskill Riots
& Tribute to Paul Robeson**



The Robeson Peekskill Project

Inaugural Event 2024

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In March of 2021, I was invited to chair the North Cortlandt Residents Vision Committee – a working group of residents in conjunction with members of Cortlandt’s Town Council, Planning and Zoning Staff. We were chartered to take stock of the current state of this section of Town and articulate a future vision for North Cortlandt consistent with the goals of Cortlandt’s master plan.

Part of this effort included a study of the history of the area and it was then that I first discovered the story behind the Peekskill Riots and more importantly, learned about this Paul Robeson’s momentous legacy, both as an artist and a relentless advocate for social justice.

Considered a dark chapter and an emotionally charged subject, in the aftermath of the 1949 Peekskill Riots many locals chose to avoid talking about it. With decades of silence, this history had been all but lost to many who live here today.

Peekskill today is a vibrant and diverse community where people from many cultural backgrounds live and work together. The Robeson in Peekskill project is a grassroots initiative led by dedicated volunteers from Peekskill and its surrounding communities. As proud members of this community, we believe it is time to commemorate the Peekskill Riots, not only as a significant chapter in Peekskill’s history but also as a reminder that freedom of expression is a fundamental right of every American citizen.

Our project serves as both a testament to this right and evidence of Peekskill’s transformation from a town marked by violent intolerance of Paul Robeson’s political views to one where citizens – left, right, and center – can respectfully and peacefully agree to disagree.

While acknowledging that progress does not mean there is no room for further improvement, we are proud to be part of this community and grateful for the enthusiastic support our project has generated in Peekskill and its surrounding areas.

–*Wendy Talio*

www.robesson-in-peekskill.org

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Photo Credit (Cover & Page 2): Yousuf Karsh



Photo Credit: Library of Congress from a 1939 press conference.

The Robeson in Peekskill Project

What We Do?

The Robeson in Peekskill Project promotes Paul Robeson's legacy as the consummate artist-citizen. Through annual events and educational outreach, we inspire tomorrow's peace-makers and amplify the impact of those doing the work in our community today.

Why We Do It?

"I shall take my voice wherever there are those who want to hear the melody of freedom or the words that might inspire hope and courage in the face of fear. My weapons are peaceful, for it is only by peace that peace can be attained. The song of freedom must prevail."

Paul Robeson



Photo courtesy of Frank Goderre. The sign announcing "Here is Being Built Westchester's most beautiful drive in theatre, locates the concert grounds on what is now Blue Jay Estates in Cortlandt Manor.

Paul Robeson (1898-1976) was a true renaissance man excelling as a scholar, athlete, and artist against the tide of Jim Crow. Through his powerful voice and impassioned activism, Robeson paved the way for the American civil rights movement.

On August 27, 1949, a concert headlining Paul Robeson to benefit the Harlem chapter of the Civil Rights Congress was planned at Lakeland Acres (currently Hollow Brook Golf Club) just outside Peekskill, NY. Met with a violent mob that swelled to many hundreds, the event was canceled.

Undeterred, Robeson rescheduled the concert to September 4th near what is now Blue Jay Estates in Cortlandt Manor. The mob again came equipped for violence and attacked the estimated 20,000 concertgoers as they left the grounds. Hundreds were injured.

This episode in local history was a pivotal moment in our nation's history. Today we are inspired by Robeson and all who attended the concert in solidarity for human rights despite great adversity.

Our Goals

1. Raise awareness of Paul Robeson on the 75th anniversary of the Peekskill Riots.
2. Secure funding to establish the Robeson in Peekskill scholar's fund to be used for educational outreach, annual events, and financial assistance for artists and arts organizations promoting social justice.
3. Implement a permanent, visible, and accessible memorial to commemorate the Peekskill Riots and those who stood in solidarity with Paul Robeson.



Paul Robeson with Dudley Diggs in a 1933 film adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's 1920 play, *The Emperor Jones*. Robeson had performed this role on stage in a production by the Provincetown Players in 1924. The film marked the first time an African American was cast in a lead role on screen.

Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

Our Mission

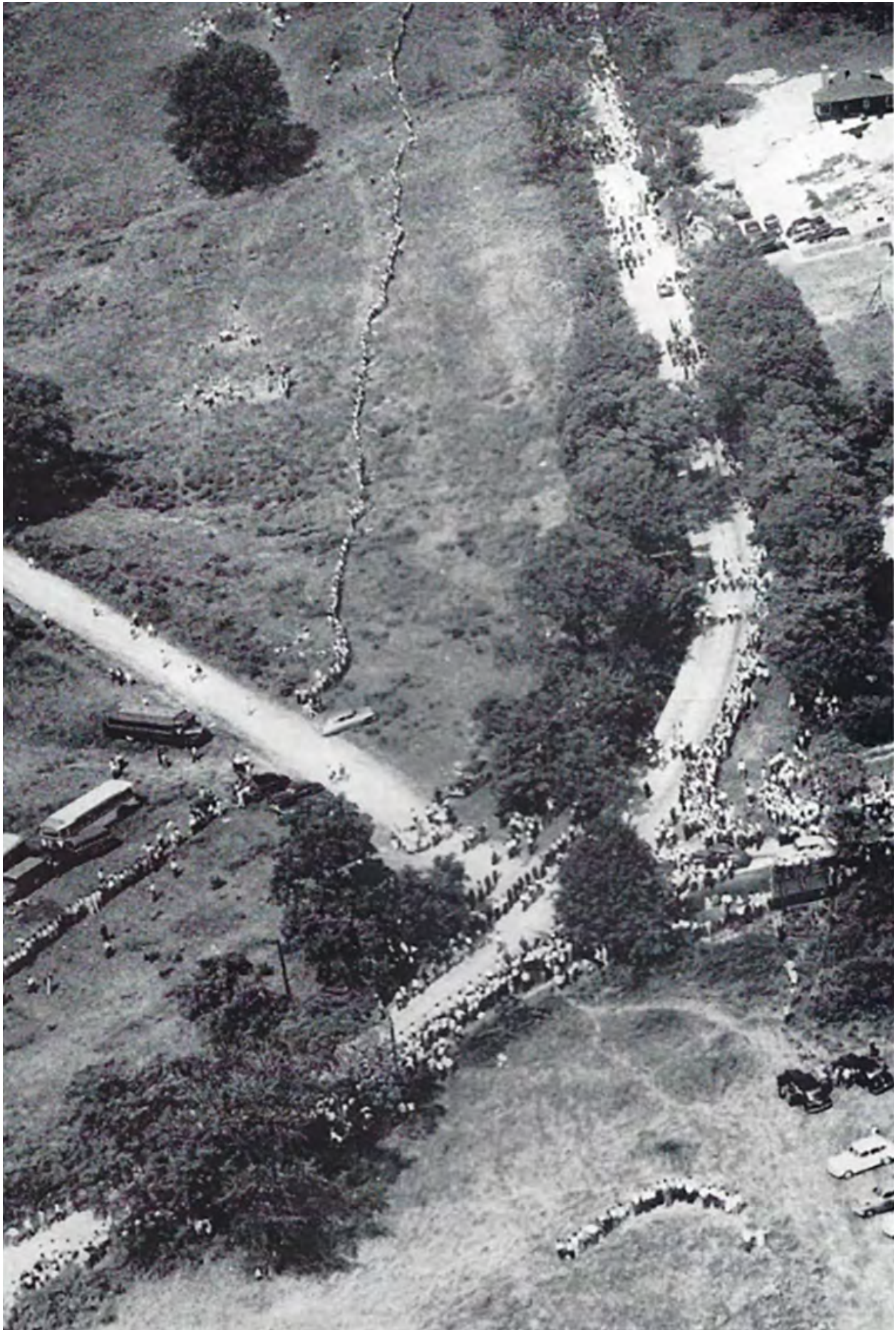
Our mission is to inspire new generations of changemakers and amplify the efforts of those doing the work today to challenge injustice and champion equality in the spirit of Paul Robeson.

Our Vision

The Robeson in Peekskill project will create a shared common knowledge throughout our community of a story that for many has been a missing link in our historical chain that made this corner of the county what it is today. Discovering this history together will be a catalyst for dialogue to shape our next chapter. Our progress will be accelerated and inspired by Paul Robeson's unwavering commitment to freeing the oppressed despite whatever adversity came his way.

Whether you are a 5th generation resident or a new transplant from NYC, strengthening our connections to this place and to each other will add wind in the sails of our continued efforts to undo the impact of decades of social and environmental injustices.

A permanent, visible, and accessible memorial will be a destination for residents and visitors alike; a place to experience the history, a place to inspire generations to come. This public exhibit will demonstrate the resilience of our community and encourage others to stay on a just path wherever they are.



This aerial view of the site of the 2nd riot shows the parade coming down Oregon Road and the long line of concert guards standing shoulder to shoulder.

Photo Credit: INP = International News Photos

Paul Robeson | A Brief History

Early Years

Paul Robeson was born on April 9, 1898, in Princeton, New Jersey. His father, Rev. William Robeson, had escaped slavery in 1860 in North Carolina at age 15. His mother, Maria Bustill, was a teacher. Robeson's early life was marked by academic excellence and athletic prowess. When he was a high school senior, he won the statewide academic test and received a scholarship to Rutgers. As a first-year student at Rutgers College during fall 1915, Robeson was the sole African-American student on campus and only the third to be enrolled in the 149-year-old school.

When Robeson tried out for the Rutgers Scarlet Knights football team, his resolve to make the squad was tested as his teammates engaged in excessive play, during which his nose was broken, and his shoulder dislocated. Blessed with a dogged determination that would mark his entire career, Robeson persevered and made it onto the team. Despite, or perhaps because of, his unmatched talent, Robeson kept encountering various forms of racism, both subtle and overt. When a Southern team refused to take the field because the Scarlet Knights had fielded an African American, Robeson was benched.

In addition to being an exceptional football player, Robeson possessed remarkable singing abilities. He secured a place in Rutgers's Glee Club, where, much like on the football field, he frequently encountered racism. As Martin Duberman, Robeson's foremost biographer, has written: 'His bass-baritone was the chief adornment of the glee club—but only at its home concerts; he was not invited to be a "traveling" member, and at Rutgers sang only with stipulation that he not attend social functions after the performance.'

After a standout junior year of football, he was recognized in *The Crisis* for his athletic, academic, and singing talents. Robeson finished university with four annual oratorical triumphs and varsity letters in multiple sports. Academically, he was accepted into Phi Beta Kappa and Cap and Skull. His classmates elected him valedictorian and, in his speech on graduation day, Robeson exhorted his classmates to go forth and work for equality for all Americans.

Between 1920 and 1923, Robeson attended Columbia University's Law School, balancing his studies with teaching Latin and playing professional football on weekends to cover his tuition. In the winter of 1923, Robeson completed his law degree and secured a position as the sole Black attorney in the law office of a Rutgers alumnus in New York. However, he ultimately abandoned his legal career entirely after a stenographer refused to take dictation from him, reportedly expressing her prejudice with a racial slur.





“Photograph of Paul Robeson with fellow Cap and Skull inductees,” Scarlet and Black Digital Archive, Rutgers University, accessed August 18, 2024, <https://scarletandblack.rutgers.edu/archive/items/show/626>.

Road to World Fame

Following the end of his legal career, Robeson redirected his focus entirely towards the stage, spurred on by his wife and manager Eslanda. Swiftly establishing himself in the theater realm, he garnered praise for his leading roles in Eugene O’Neill’s provocative “All God’s Chillun Got Wings” in New York City in 1924 and “The Emperor Jones” in London the subsequent year. Delving further into the realm of entertainment, Robeson ventured into film, taking on a starring role in Oscar Micheaux’s “Body and Soul” in 1925.

In addition to his theatrical talents, Robeson possessed an extraordinary bass-baritone singing voice. His rendition of “Ol’ Man River” in the musical “Show Boat” catapulted him to worldwide recognition. Further acclaim followed for his portrayal of “Othello,” both in London in 1930 and on Broadway in 1943, with the latter production setting a record for the longest run of a Shakespearean play on Broadway.

In the 1930s, Robeson traveled to the Soviet Union, where he deepened his appreciation for Russian folk culture and learned Russian. It was during this time that Robeson, perhaps with a touch of naivety, found himself deeply impressed by the egalitarian principles embedded within Soviet society. This admiration would, in time, be his downfall.

Left, page 7: Robeson attended Rutgers on a full scholarship, becoming the university’s third black student and its first black football player.

Enemy of the State

In the early 1940s, Robeson's fame reached its pinnacle. Time Magazine described him as "probably the most famous living Negro," and a year later, over 8,500 people gathered at a public celebration of his forty-sixth birthday. A beloved international figure, Robeson used his platform to speak out against racial injustice and advocate for social and political causes. He supported Pan-Africanism, sang for Loyalist soldiers during the Spanish Civil War, marched in anti-Nazi demonstrations, and performed for Allied troops during World War II.

As tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union escalated after World War II, Robeson's involvement in leftist causes and his criticism of racial injustice in the United States drew the attention of anti-communist authorities.

His visits to the Soviet Union and his praise for its social system further fueled suspicions about his political allegiance, resulting in intense scrutiny from government agencies, including the FBI, which surveilled and monitored his activities closely.

In 1949, the witch hunt against Robeson escalated into a violence. In April of that year Paul Robeson traveled to France where he gave a speech at the Soviet Union-sponsored Paris Peace Conference. Robeson spoke about racial injustice in the United States and made the point that World War III was not inevitable, as many Americans did not want war with the Soviet Union. Prior to his appearance on stage, his speech had been transcribed and promptly sent back to the United States by the Associated Press. Within a day, journalists and politicians had condemned Robeson as a traitor to his country, accusing him of insinuating that black Americans would refuse to fight in the event of a war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although historians would later find compelling evidence that Robeson had been misquoted, the damage had been done.

Later that year, it would become painfully clear that Robeson had been labelled an enemy of the state when he was scheduled to perform a concert in near the town of Peekskill, New York. The concert, set for August 27, turned violent as a local mob attacked concert-goers with baseball bats and rocks before Paul Robeson even arrived. Despite the chaos, local police arrived hours later and provided minimal intervention. Thirteen people suffered serious injuries, Robeson was lynched in effigy, and a burning cross was visible on a nearby hillside.

However, Paul Robeson was not a man to be silenced; six days later, he returned to perform in Peekskill, drawing a crowd of 20,000 attendees. Despite the presence of anti-Robeson protestors outside the venue, the concert proceeded as planned. Although Robeson performed without incident, the aftermath of the concert was far from peaceful. Fueled by racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Communist sentiments, protestors attacked concertgoers, many of whom were African American or Jewish.

Within a few days, hundreds of editorials and letters appeared in newspapers across the nation and abroad by prominent individuals, organizations, trade unions, churches and others. They condemned the attacks and the failure of the police to protect the concert-goers. Despite condemnation from progressives and civil rights activists, the mainstream press and local officials overwhelmingly blamed Robeson and his fans for "provoking" the so-called Peekskill Riots.

Kinship among All Peoples

In 1950, Robeson's passport was revoked, obstructing him from performing abroad and ruining his career. It took eight long years for his passport to be reinstated, after which he attempted to restart his career by performing in England and Australia. But the yearlong prosecution and relentless investigations had taken their toll. After several bouts of depression, he was admitted to a hospital in London, where he was administered continued shock treatments. When Robeson returned to the United States in 1963, he was misdiagnosed several times and treated for a variety of physical and psychological problems.

Realizing that he was no longer the powerful singer or agile orator of his prime, he decided to step out of the public eye. He retired to Philadelphia, where he lived in self-imposed seclusion until his death in 1976. During his funeral in Harlem, which was attended by thousands of his admirers, the pastor opened his statement with the following words:

'We have come to this to memorialize an Ambassador of Justice and Equality. An Ambassador who stood as a giant in a society rocked by social prejudice. He possessed a universal philosophy which transmitted a kinship among all peoples. Through this he drew his basic concern for mutual respect and brotherly love.'





Wake Up America Parade on September 4, 1949.

Photo Credit: Westchester Committee ACME



Photo Credit: CBS News

Peekskill Riots

“Peekskill bears the same relationship to the Civil Rights Movement as Fort Sumter does to the Civil War.”

Charles H. Wright

In 1949, Peekskill, New York, became the unexpected epicenter of a turbulent chapter in American history. The world-famous actor, singer, and civil rights activist Paul Robeson was scheduled to perform a concert in the area. The concert, set for August 27, turned violent as a local mob attacked concert-goers with baseball bats and rocks before Paul Robeson even arrived. Despite the chaos, local police arrived hours later and provided minimal intervention. Thirteen people suffered serious injuries, Robeson was lynched in effigy, and a burning cross was visible on a nearby hillside.

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The Peekskill Riots of 1949 played a crucial role in laying the groundwork for the American civil rights movement. As Robeson biographer Charles H. Wright later wrote, “Subsequent events suggest that Peekskill bears the same relationship to the Civil Rights Movement as Fort Sumter does to the Civil War.” However, where the bombardment of Fort Sumter is viewed as a pivotal moment in American history, the memory of the Peekskill Riots has gradually dissolved into the mists of history.

The Robeson in Peekskill Project endeavors to resurface the significance of the Peekskill riots by commemorating this pivotal moment in history and shedding light on its enduring impact. Through various initiatives such as public events, educational programs, and artistic endeavors, the project seeks to raise awareness about the events surrounding the Peekskill riots and their implications for civil rights and social justice. By documenting and sharing the stories of those involved, the project aims to ensure that the lessons learned from this dark chapter of the past are not forgotten and that future generations understand the importance of standing up against bigotry, intolerance, and injustice.

Did You Know?



William Drew Robeson and Maria Louisa Bustill

Maria Louisa Bustill

The Bustill family was an early pioneering African American family with a lineage that traces back to colonial Philadelphia. They proudly contributed to the war effort during the Revolutionary War as loyal supporters of the Continental Army, and risked their lives to secretly transport wagon loads of bread to feed George Washington's hungry troops. As early abolitionists, the Bustills were actively involved in the Underground Railroad, and were leaders in several early anti-slavery organizations.

William Drew Robeson

Paul Robeson's father was born into slavery as William Drew Robeson in 1844 to Benjamin Robeson (1820 – c. 1889) and Sabra (1825 – c. 1885). They were enslaved on the Robeson plantation near Cross Road township in Martin County, North Carolina.

In 1860, when he was 15 years old, Robeson escaped slavery with his brother Ezekiel through the Underground Railroad and they made their way to Philadelphia in the free state of Pennsylvania. During the American Civil War, Robeson served in the Union Army as a laborer, entering in 1861 at the age of 16 to join the effort to end slavery in the South.

Afterwards, Robeson studied at Lincoln College (now a university), where he earned an A.B. in 1873 and Bachelor of Sacred Theology in 1876.

William Drew Robeson and Maria Louise Bustill married in 1878.

The Stone Wall, Queensmen, Rutgers University, 1917

The Rutgers University football team, known as the Queensmen, had an impressive season in 1917, finishing with a record of 7-1-1.

Securing a spot on the Queensmen wasn't an easy feat. In 1917, football players were generally not as tall and hefty as they are today. Paul Robeson stood out at six feet, two inches, and 190 pounds, making him significantly taller and more imposing than most of his peers.

Robeson's reputation as a "giant" had preceded him. Rutgers coach G. Foster Sanford had been impressed by Robeson's performance at Somerville High School in New Jersey. However, the Rutgers first-string players were less welcoming, knowing of Robeson's athletic prowess—and his race. On the first day of scrimmage, they ganged up on him, leaving Robeson with a broken nose, a sprained right shoulder, and numerous cuts and bruises. He barely managed to limp off the field.

That evening, Robeson confided to his father that he wasn't sure he could endure such treatment. His father urged him to persevere. And persevere he did. In the next scrimmage, a varsity player stomped on his hand. Though the bones remained intact, Robeson's patience did not. During the next play, as the first-string backfield approached, Robeson used his powerful arms to take down three men, grabbed the ball carrier, and lifted him into the air—intending to slam him to the ground. He was stopped just in time by a yell from Coach Sanford. After that, Robeson was never roughed up by his teammates again.

By the end of his freshman year, Paul Robeson had earned a spot in the starting lineup. By his junior year, he had become the star of the Rutgers team and gained national prominence. In 1917 and 1918, Walter Camp, the legendary Yale coach, put Robeson on his All-American football teams, describing him as "a veritable superman." Robeson also excelled as a center on the basketball team, a catcher on the baseball team, and a talented javelin and discus thrower on the track team. By the time he graduated, Paul Robeson had won fifteen varsity letters across four different sports.

Source: Paul Robeson, by Martin Duberman

I think if we care for the preservation of our liberties we must allow all people whether we disagree with them or not, to hold meetings and express their views unmolested as long as they do not advocate the overthrow of our Government by force.

Eleanor Roosevelt on the Peekskill Riots

September 3, 1949

Source: The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers



Eleanor Roosevelt

Copyright: National Portrait Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, USA

Eugene Bullard Story

World War I erupted in August 1914, and by October 19, American Eugene Jacques Bullard had enlisted in the French Foreign Legion as a foreign volunteer. By 1915, he served as a machine gunner in various Marching Regiments of the Legion, where he sustained serious battle wounds during a military campaign.

On October 2, 1916, Bullard transitioned to the French Aeronautique Militaire (French Air Service) as a gunner. He subsequently trained to become a fighter pilot, flying over 20 combat missions. Bullard is credited with downing one or more German aircraft in air combat. His valor earned him numerous honors, including the Croix de guerre, Médaille militaire, Croix du combattant volontaire (1914-1918), and Médaille de Verdun.

Despite his distinguished service, Bullard faced racial barriers upon America's entry into the war. The United States Army Air Service, maintaining an all-white policy, denied him the opportunity to fly. Bullard had sought to join the Lafayette Flying Corps under the American Expeditionary Forces but was ultimately excluded due to his race.

After World War I, Bullard returned to Paris. In 1923, he married a French woman from a wealthy family, fathered two daughters, and ran a popular nightclub, "Zelli's." He managed various nightclubs and athletic clubs across Europe until the outbreak of World War II. After the German invasion in May 1940, he re-enlisted in the French Foreign Legion, fighting in an Infantry Regiment until wounded on June 15, 1940, during the defense of Orleans. He then fled to neutral Spain.

By July 1940, Bullard had returned to the United States, settling in New York City. Following a 1935 divorce, he purchased a Harlem apartment with compensation from the French government for his wartime injuries.

In 1949, Bullard attended Paul Robeson's first concert in Peekskill. Before Robeson's arrival, a mob attacked concert-goers with baseball bats and stones, leaving thirteen seriously injured, including Bullard. Graphic photos captured the assault on Bullard, showing state and local law enforcement officers among the attackers, yet none were prosecuted. These photos were published around the world.

A decade later, in 1959, President of France, Charles de Gaulle, visited the United States and insisted on meeting Bullard before seeing U.S. officials. American authorities, unaware of Bullard's legacy, found him working as an elevator operator. De Gaulle was appalled at the treatment of France's decorated war hero in the U.S.



Lynching an effigy of Paul Robeson during the Peekskill Riots

Following the brutal Moore's Ford lynchings of four African Americans in Georgia on July 25, 1946, Paul Robeson confronted President Truman, urging him to enact anti-lynching legislation. In the Oval Office, Robeson began reading a statement, but was interrupted by Truman before he was even finished with the first paragraph. Truman, referring to the recently ended World War II, then lectured the group that the U.S. and England were the "last refuge of freedom in the world." Robeson replied that England had been "one of the greatest enslavers of human beings." Truman then declared the meeting over. Undeterred, Robeson took his fight public, urging all Americans to demand civil rights protections from Congress and later founding the American Crusade Against Lynching (ACAL) in 1946.



London Plaque

Plaque commemorating singer and actor Paul Robeson at Branch Hill,
Hampstead, London, United Kingdom

Eyewitness Accounts



Chair Bonfire

Photo Credit: SNIP/ACLU

Peekskill Riots - the First Riot

Eyewitness account of the violence during Paul Robeson's first concert on August 27, 1949, as published in a report by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU):

“At least half the concertgoers who got into the picnic grounds were women and children. When the attack started, the children were pressed together on the inside and the women in a close ring around them. The men formed a circle with their arms linked, like a buffalo circle, to protect the women and children. I saw the veterans throwing sticks and stones and rocks and anything they could lay their hands on inside this circle and I saw them charge repeatedly to try and break the line of men defending the women and children.

“The attackers numbered about 450 or 500 inside the grounds and of course there were hundreds more out on the highway. “I heard cries like these all about us: “ ‘After this the Jews are going to get out of here and stay out!’ “ ‘ ‘The Jews are all Reds and they started this, and now they’re getting what’s coming to them.’

“We left about 10:15 because the traffic started to move then. Just before we left, we saw a woman, a man and another woman carrying a baby-the baby was about six months old-come running up out of the concert ground. The circle, I think, had been broken by this time. And the men and many of the women had been beaten.

There were young women as well as men in the mob. When they saw this woman with her baby, they started to yell at her: “ ‘Look at that goddamned Communist hiding behind a baby!’ “On the following day, two little girls who knew me and who had been told I had been injured, came to see how I was. When they found me all right, they were surprised and one of them said, “ ‘You were at that place with the n****rs, weren’t you ?’

Source: Violence in Peekskill – a report of the violations of civil liberties at two Paul Robeson concerts near Peekskill, N.Y. August 27th and September 4th, 1949 – American Civil Liberties Union.



Peekskill Riots—The Second Riot

On September 4th, 1949, near Peekskill, New York, 20,000 people attended Paul Robeson's concert. To protect the concertgoers and Paul Robeson himself from anti-Robeson protesters, 1,500 attendees formed a human chain around the concert grounds. While this barrier successfully safeguarded those within, it could not shield them from the violence awaiting outside. As concertgoers attempted to leave the area, their cars and buses were mercilessly attacked by a violent mob.

A few victims' accounts:

C. Max B., N. Y. City: "Suddenly a rock shattered the closed window on the right side where I was sitting. I was in the front seat. I immediately took off my glasses. This was followed by another rock which hit the windshield directly in front of me. The third rock crashed against the side window nearest me. I found blood on my face, my left ear, my right elbow. There were fine particles of glass around my eyes, both arms, and my chest."

D. Bernice B., Brooklyn: "Our driver tried to drive as quickly as he could, but the police kept slowing us down. "One of the men in the bus yelled, 'Duck!', but before she could duck she saw a rock come through the window and felt both her eyes, her mouth, and her right hand burn. As soon as possible one of the people bandaged her eyes, and had her spit out saliva combined with blood and glass fragments."

E. Robert A., Bronx: "I took the bleeding woman to the Peekskill Hospital. When I tried to go upstairs and inquire about her, I was almost thrown out bodily. I cannot actually describe this entire affair, because it was like a nightmare. Block after block the crowd was throwing rocks and laughing. It was unbelievable. It's only a miracle that every passenger in the car was not killed."

Eyewitnesses: Quoted by Westchester Committee
Howard Fast, Peekskill USA, Inside the Infamous 1949 Riots







Our Guest of Honor

Dr. Gregory Robeson Smith

Dr. Smith is truly the renaissance person who has successfully integrated a successful career as a businessman, public servant, and a religious leader. He has more than twenty years of successful management in senior management positions with responsibility for \$2+ Billion in revenue, and marketing of multi-national organizations and multi-million-dollar fund-raising campaigns. Along with a proven track record of success leading non-governmental, private voluntary and religious agencies and Fortune 100 companies, he also has strong expertise in the development of strategic alliances between public and private sectors.

Dr. Smith is the senior Pastor of the oldest African American Congregation in Westchester County organized in 1827, the Mt. Hope A.M.E. Zion Church. He is currently the President of the Mt. Hope Community Development Corporation; Prince Hall Housing Development Fund Inc. & Prince Hall Fund Inc., a multi-million dollar not-for-profit 501(c)3 foundation providing program funds/grants to entities to relieve the poor, distressed, and underprivileged in the State of New York with regard to professional, financial, physical, educational, and emotional needs. It also serves to further the standard of living of underprivileged areas in the State of New York by encouraging community engagement through housing and community services and economic development programs.

He holds and has held several major positions in the A.M.E. Zion Church: President Presiding Elder's Council, Connectional Budget Board Committee, and the denomination's Director of Public Affairs and Convention Manager, the youngest person to ever be elected a Worldwide officer. He has served 8 terms as Executive Director of the AME Zion Church Ministers & Lay Association.

He was appointed December 1990 by President Bush as President and Chief Executive Officer of the African Development Foundation, an independent Federal agency in Washington, D.C., with offices in 25 African nations and staff of 3000+. Dr. Smith continued to serve in this position in the Clinton Administration. The Agency effectively works with the most vulnerable in communities. USADF awards small grants (up to \$250,000) for technical assistance and capacity building to grassroots organizations, cooperatives and community enterprises that strengthen local institutions and achieve lasting impact.

He was also Director of International Disaster Response for Church World Service, an entity of the National Council of Churches. His responsibility was to direct worldwide international relief assistance and aid on behalf of its 30-member Protestant denominations. At the CWS-NCC he raised more than \$200 million in program support.

A graduate with honors from Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina, Dr. Smith also earned two Masters and two Doctoral degrees; an MBA Degree in Marketing and Finance; a Master of Divinity Degree; a Doctorate in Higher Education Administration and Finance; and a Doctorate in Ministries.

Dr. Smith is a 33° Mason and Past Grand Master of the 10,000 member Prince Hall Grand Lodge of the State of New York and was designated one of the Outstanding Men of America; Member of Sigma Pi Phi – Beta Zeta Boulé; Omega Psi Phi Fraternities; and a member of Kappa Delta Phi National Education Honor Society. He serves as an officer and member of numerous boards of directors, including the White Plains NY Housing Authority, and Westchester Community College Board of Trustees.

Dr. Smith was interviewed and videotaped by “The History Makers” who designated him as one of the “Outstanding Men of America.” He was the first African American in New York State to be selected by a major political party as their mayoral candidate; and continues to be active in local, State, and national political arenas.

Under his leadership, a \$40 million 56-unit apartment senior citizens affordable housing project that will consist of 48 one-bedroom units and 8 two-bedroom apartments is being built. In 1987, Dr. Smith lead The Mt. Hope Congregation in completing the multi-million-dollar construction of the current church, and upon his return as pastor in 2019 he eliminated a \$690,000 mortgage. Part of his new plan is a million-dollar renovation of the church.



“Here I Stand” encapsulates the rich tapestry of music that defined Paul Robeson’s artistic legacy and rise to stardom.

From the spirituals and folk songs rooted in his personal life and church upbringing, to the powerful Russian and recital repertoire showcasing his linguistic prowess and emotional range, each piece is a testament to Robeson’s unparalleled versatility and impact on the arts. The inclusion of works by Black composers highlights his dedication to elevating African American culture, while selections from movies, opera, oratorio, and musical theater reflect his broad appeal and influence across diverse genres.

Program

Personal Life, Family, and Church

- “There is a Balm in Gilead” - arr. by Mark Hayes for piano and string quartet
“Song of Gladness,” Opus 99 -- from Antonin Dvorak’s Biblical Songs {Sung in Czech}
“I Feel the Spirit Moving Medley” - arr. by Mark Hayes for piano and string quartet

Russia

- Gremin’s aria from Eugeni Onegin by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky {Sung in Russian}
“Song of the Volga Boatmen”, Russian Folk Song {Sung in Russian and English}
“Pjesne a blaxe” (Song of the Flea) - Modest Mussorgsky - arr. by Karen Hakobyan for piano and string quartet {Sung in Russian}

Recital Repertoire

- “In questa tomba” - poem by Giuseppe Carpani -- Ludwig van Beethoven
“Erlkönig” by Schubert arr. by Karen Hakobyan for piano and string quartet (Sung in German)
“Songs My Mother Taught Me”, B. 104, Opus 55 - Antonin Dvorak {sung in Czech & English} Wds
by Natalie MacFarren
“Ballad for Americans” by Earl Robinson, Excerpts {In 76 the sky was red... old Uncle Sam was born}

Black Practitioners

- “Deep River” - arr. by Harry T. Burleigh
“Go Down, Moses” arr. by J. Rosamond Johnson
“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” -- arr. by J. Rosamond Johnson
“I’m Go’n’ter Tell God All o’my Troubles” – Hall Johnson

BRIEF INTERMISSION

Black Practitioners (continued)

- “John Henry” – Spiritual
“Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho” - - arr. by Margaret Bonds
“All God’s Chillun Got Wings” - Traditional
“Oh, Glory!” - arr. by Hall Johnson
“Hold On” -- arr. by Margaret Bonds

Black Composers

- Three Selections from “Songs of Separation” by William Grant Still
“Idolatry” (poetry by Arna Bontemps)
“Poéme” (poem, in French, by Philippe Thoby Marcelin)
“Parted” (poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar)

Movies, Opera, Oratorio & Musical Theater

- “Herr, Gott Abrahams”, Op. 70, MWV A 25 from Elijah by Felix Mendelssohn arr. by Karen Hakobyan
for piano and string quartet {Sung in German and English}
“When Villains Ramble far and Near” from Trimonisha by Scott Joplin
“Lawd Jesus, Heah my Prayer” from Emperor Jones by Louis Gruenberg
“Ol’ Man River” from Showboat by Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern arr. by Karen Hakobyan
for piano and string quartet
“He’s Got the Whole World in His Hand” - arr. by Stephen A. Taylor for string quartet (after Margaret
Bonds)



The Artists

MARK S. DOSS

Grammy Award winner Mark S. Doss's most recent engagements include the lead roles in Matthew Aucoin's *Eurydice* with Boston Lyric, Leoš Janáček's *From the House of the Dead* with Rome Opera, and Germont in Welsh National Opera's *La Traviata*. This past season also saw him at Lincoln Center's Geffen Hall with New York Philharmonic players in a program entitled, *Here I Stand: Paul Robeson's 125th Birthday Celebration*. Over the past two seasons, he has sung the bass-baritone part in Beethoven's 9th with the Minnesota Orchestra, the Houston Symphony, and the Teatro La Fenice in the Piazza San Marco, Venice, Italy. Other engagements include Creon and the Messenger in Opera Company of Philadelphia's *Oedipus Rex*; Balstrode in *Peter Grimes* with La Fenice; Alfio in *Cavalleria Rusticana* at London's Royal Opera; Nicholas Lens' *Shell Shock* with the Philharmonie of Paris; Scarpia in Puccini's *Tosca* and the title role in Verdi's *Rigoletto* with Welsh National Opera.

Beginning his career on the roster of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, Mr. Doss' illustrious career has taken him to the most prestigious opera houses in the world, including numerous roles at La Scala, Lyric Opera of Chicago, San Francisco Opera, the Teatro Regio in Turin, and La Monnaie in Brussels. Additionally, he has had important debuts with the Vienna Staatsoper (*Amonasro* in *Aida*), the Berlin Staatsoper, Madrid's Teatro Real, and the Theatro of Sao Paulo in Brazil (*Jochanaan* in *Salome*), and the New National Opera in Tokyo (*the Hoffmann Villains*).

This season will see him in performances of *Jochanaan* in *Salome* with the Houston Symphony, and he'll open the 2024/25 season featured in a project to celebrate the contributions of Paul Robeson and commemorating the 75th anniversary of the horrific events surrounding his 1949 concert in Peekskill and the Town of Cortlandt. Following that he returns to La Monnaie to sing the Original Cast revival of *The Time of Our Singing*, and in December, he joins the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra's New Year's Eve Gala performance. A Grammy Award Winner for his participation in Handel's *Semele* (Best Opera Recording), he also is a recipient of the National Institute for Music Theatre's George London Opera Prize, and Planet Africa's Entertainment Award.



KARÉN HAKOBYAN | artistic director, principal conductor, & piano

Described as “a musician of abundant gifts and bountiful ideas” by New York Concert Review, and “an immensely talented and dynamic performer” by Deseret Morning News, Armenian American conductor, pianist and composer Karén Hakobyan is a versatile force on the international music scene. Since his Carnegie Hall debut at the age of seventeen, he has performed in major concert halls in Armenia, Argentina, Mexico, Germany, UK, Belgium, France, Japan, and the US. Karén regularly appears in prestigious festivals and concert series. Some of his festival performance highlights include: the “Lille International Piano(s) Festival” in 2005 (Lille, France), “The Pianist as Composer” Festival in 2008 (New York), Keys to the Future” Contemporary Music Festival in 2009-2010 (New York), the Gina Bachauer International Festival in 2015 (Utah), Festival Musique d’Abord in 2017 (Barbizon, France) and the Philip Lorenz International Keyboard Concerts in 2018 (California).

Karén is the Founder, Principal Conductor and Artistic Director of Pegasus: the Orchestra, based in New York. As part of Pegasus’s Fifth Anniversary Season in 2022-2023, Maestro Hakobyan conducted all five Rachmaninoff Piano Concertos with five soloists in a single night in Lincoln Center to great critical acclaim. Hakobyan also conducted a special program featuring Glenn Dicterow, the legendary former concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic, and Pegasus’s concertmaster, Eiko Kano, performing Bach’s Concerto for Two Violins. In his New York Classical Review article, David Wright said, “Hakobyan and his players punched out an incisive ritornello and snappy answers to the soloists, while Glen Dicterow and Eiko Kano played an exhilarating game of stretto tag.” Notable conducting engagements include: Hakobyan conducting Armenian National Chamber Orchestra in Armenia and Ryuku Symphony orchestra combined with top principals from Tokyo in Japan.

Upcoming conducting engagements include concerts featuring virtuoso pianist Sergey Babayan performing Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 3 in Carnegie Hall and 2007 Tchaikovsky International Competition gold medalist, cellist Sergey Antonov performing Tchaikovsky’s Rococo Variations at Merkin Hall. A multi city tour in USA with its program “Americana” celebrating Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue Centennial is planned.

Karén is a top prizewinner of multiple international piano and composition competitions and holds degrees from the Manhattan School of Music, Mannes College of Music, and the University of Utah. He has appeared as a soloist with major orchestras across several continents. His recordings have been broadcast on WQXR Radio (New York City), WMFT Radio (Chicago), WSKG Radio (New York), Argentine National Radio, Monterrey’s (Mexico) Op. 102 station, Armenian National Radio, Al Jazeera TV, Public TV of Armenia and Voice of America TV (International).

www.karenhakobyan.com



EIKO KANO | Violin I, concertmaster

Praised as an artist with “electrifying intensity and lyrical expression” by Kyoto Newspaper and “mesmerizing interpreter” by Ongakuno-Tomo Magazine, Japanese violinist Eiko Kano is known for her sensational and dynamic performances. Eiko has a thriving international career as a soloist as well as a chamber musician frequently collaborating with distinguished artists such as principal oboist of the Berlin Philharmonic Albrecht Meyer, Eugene Drucker of the Emerson String Quartet, and violinist Ani Kavafian while also working closely with living composers and premiering new works. She is a top prizewinner of multiple international competitions such as the 4th International Competition of Tokyo. As a result of winning the prestigious Forval Scholarship, Eiko was granted the Stradivarius “Reinville” violin for 2 years. She currently serves as an assistant concertmaster in the Grammy Award-winning Albany Symphony Orchestra and regularly plays in the New York Philharmonic.



STANI DIMITROVA | Violin II, principal

Stanichka Dimitrova, whose playing has been described as “wonderfully full in tone and exuberant in performance” by the San Francisco Classical Voice, was a winner of the 2010 Concerto Competition at Stony Brook University, which resulted in a solo performance of the Sibelius Violin Concerto. She has also been a First Prize winner in the “Barbara Krakauer Scholarship Award” Competition at the Associated Music Teachers League in New York City, “Hopes, Talents, Masters” International Competition in Dobrich, Bulgaria, “Svetoslav Obretenov” National Competition in Provadia, Bulgaria, and was a Top Prize winner of the National Competition for Austrian and German Music in Burgas, Bulgaria. Ms. Dimitrova is a graduate from the Juilliard School, where she studied with Sally Thomas. She received her doctoral degree at Stony Brook University, studying with Philip Setzer, Pamela Frank, Soovin Kim and Philippe Graffin. In 2017 Stanichka made her Carnegie Hall solo debut in Weill Recital Hall under the auspices of St. Cyril and St. Methodious International Foundation. She is founder and artistic director of PhiloSonia chamber music series, designed to create a personal connection between audience members and classical music. For more information visit: www.PhiloSonia.com Currently appointed as a Teaching Artist for the New York Philharmonic’s Philharmonic Schools Program, Stanichka participates in a variety of outreach activities and performances in public schools throughout New York.



ANDREW GONZALEZ | Viola, principal

Hailed by *The Strad* magazine for his “warm hearted playing and mellow tone”, New York-based violist Andrew Gonzalez lives a fulfilling career as both a soloist and chamber musician, performing in prestigious venues throughout the United States, Asia, and Europe.

As a sought-after chamber musician, his playing has allowed him to collaborate with respected ensembles such as the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the Sejong Soloists, as well as members of the Guarneri, Juilliard, Tokyo, Orion, Borromeo, and Vermeer quartets. Also an accomplished teacher, Andrew served as a fellow of Carnegie Hall’s Ensemble Connect from 2016-2018 and teaches chamber music in the Heifetz Institute’s “Program for the Exceptionally Gifted.” In the fall of 2020, Andrew became the new violist of the Jasper String Quartet.



ARI EVAN | Cello, principal

Born and raised in New York, cellist Ari Evan recently finished his fellowship at Ensemble Connect—a prestigious two-year residency at Carnegie Hall that combines first-class performance opportunities with community engagement and entrepreneurship projects. Prior to Ensemble Connect, Ari studied Timothy Eddy at the Juilliard School, where he received his master’s degree in 2017.

A versatile chamber musician, Ari has performed with renowned artists including Shmuel Ashkenasi, Colin Carr, Miriam Fried, Gary Hoffman, Hsin-Yun Huang, Ani Kavafian, Itzhak Perlman, Robert McDonald, current/former members of the Cleveland Quartet, Artemis Quartet, as well as members of the Berlin Philharmoniker, New York Philharmonic, and Met Opera Orchestra. His festival appearances include the Krzyzowa Music Festival, Ravinia, IMS Prussia Cove, the Perlman Music Program, the Olympic Music Festival, and many others.

Passionate about community engagement and teaching, Ari is the founder of the Forest Hills Chamber Music Series, striving to promote Jewish music and bringing classical music to the community he grew up in. Also a fond traveler, Ari’s musical endeavors have also brought him to Japan, Poland, Portugal, Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Switzerland, France, England, Canada, and throughout the US. He hopes to see more of the world through music in the near future!

Pegasus the Orchestra

KARÉN HAKOBYAN, Artistic Director



PEGASUS: THE ORCHESTRA | Karén Hakobyan, artistic director and principal conductor

Founded in 2017 by composer-arranger and conductor Karén Hakobyan, Pegasus: the Orchestra is a nonprofit professional orchestra with a mission to empower rising musicians with artistic freedom and promote innovative repertoire in an environment of creative thought and expression. Hailed by New York Concert Review as “a truly first-rate ensemble” Pegasus’s recent highlights include performances in Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center, Merkin Concert Hall, on Al Jazeera, Voice of America TV Network, Ardzagang Armenian TV, the Russian Television Network of America, The Voice of Armenians TV program on the NYC Life Channel, WGCH, WQXR, and WSKG Radio. Pegasus: the Orchestra is an ensemble with exclusive Yamaha sponsorship. Noteworthy upcoming events for Pegasus include programs featuring 2007 Tchaikovsky International Competition gold medalist Sergey Antonov, cellist; and award-winning pianist Asiya Korepanova.

Pegasus is passionate about fostering artistic freedom, creating performance opportunities, programming innovative repertoire, weaving a strong community fabric, advocating for the right to music education, and promoting humanity and equity. Tax-deductible donor support helps secure the growth of Pegasus: the Orchestra’s groundbreaking endeavor by providing vital funding for programs and performances. To learn more about Pegasus and support us via tax deductible donation, visit pegasustheorchestra.org



Paul Robeson to the left, Leon Straus of the International Fur and Leather Workers Union standing center, and Howard Fast on the right. The injured man who is seated is Wilson McDowell who was hurt in one of the buses. Paul Robeson holds one of the rocks which crashed into the bus, over a smashed auto window.

- Howard Fast, Peekskill USA, Inside the Infamous 1949 Riots



DR. (Hon) AARON MAIR

Dr. (Hon) Aaron Mair is a retired New York State public health epidemiological-spatial analyst, environmentalist, and 57th national president of the Sierra Club with an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters for his international climate work from the State University of New York at Binghamton. Dr. Mair is the Adirondack Council's "Wilderness Campaign Director" responsible for connecting all New Yorkers to the nation's largest environmental treasure. As a national environmental justice movement pioneer, founder, and activist of the Arbor Hill, NY community in Albany, he was responsible for the creation of the W. Haywood Burns Environmental Education Center and the Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corporation. He currently lives in Schenectady, New York and works for the Adirondack Council.

Strategic leader with a record of success directing programs and campaigns for social change. Background includes strategy, external affairs, brand development, and movement building. Strong operations and management experience. Experienced in working with diverse groups with differing agendas. Accomplished advisor, and coach. Recognized for project management, facilitation, initiative, collaboration, and inclusive leadership. Critical thinker with dedication to ongoing learning and development.

Mair was elected president of the Sierra Club on May 16, 2015, and was the organization's first African-American president. Mair has been a life member of the Sierra Club since 1999. Since that time, he has held many leadership positions with the Sierra Club: National Environmental Justice and Community Partnerships Chair 2010–present; National Diversity Council 2008-2010. New York Atlantic Chapter Chair 2003-2004; International Human Rights/Environment 2003–present; Environmental Justice 2002-2008; Wilderness, Water Quality/Habitats 2006-2011.

He is a graduate of Binghamton University, where he received a Bachelor of Arts in History and Sociology and a certificate in Southwest Asia and North Africa Studies. Mair also trained at Rhode Island's Naval Education and Training Center and attended The American University in Cairo. He participated in Binghamton University's Political Science Doctoral Program, but left the program to begin State service in 1988.

In 1995, Mair founded the Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corporation, which was a member of the White House Council on Environmental Quality from 1998 to 2000. He also founded, served as board member, and lectured at the W. Haywood Burns Environmental Education Center in the Albany Capital region of New York. In 1999, Mair was a founding member of Friends of Clean Hudson. In 2000, Mair received an EPA Environmental Quality Award for cleanup of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) on the Hudson River. Mair also served as a board member at the New York League of Conservation Voters in 2000. Internationally, Mair has participated in the United Nations Climate Change "COP" Conferences since 2015 – 2028.

Aaron Mair (He/Him/His)

Adirondack Wilderness Campaign Director

"Clean Water, Jobs and Wilderness"

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Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/HighSierraAaron>

The Team



WENDY TALIO | Founder Living Artist Society, Inc. and Robeson in Peekskill Event Chair

Wendy Talio has had a multi-faceted career that began as a classical pianist/music educator and organically morphed into the field of data science. An entry-level programming job at Reader's Digest evolved into a management position, bridging Marketing and IT for a major database project. As Director of Consumer Intelligence at Consumer Reports, Wendy led database marketing and provided consumer analysis to support finance, marketing, advocacy, and fundraising.

Wendy took early retirement in 2017 and founded a consulting practice called Living Artist Society to use her data skills to help artists achieve sustainable careers. The pandemic forced a lengthy hiatus, but the need for support services increased. Direct observation of displaced arts and culture workers in Sleepy Hollow led to a pivot.

Living Artist Society is now an incorporated non-profit that focuses on sustainability and resiliency issues more broadly providing support services for the arts and culture sector and leveraging Creative Placemaking methods to integrate arts and culture into community development.

Residing in Cortlandt Manor, NY Wendy is an active volunteer in the community as Chair of the Conservation Advisory Council and resident liaison for the Northern section of Town.

Wendy holds a BM in piano performance from the Manhattan School of Music in New York City and a MM in piano performance from Rice University, Shepherd School of Music in Houston, Texas.



JELLE SIMONS | Journalist, Author and Military Historian

I was born in the Netherlands and was raised by parents whose families endured immense suffering under Nazi occupation during World War Two. Consequently, I developed an interest in history at a very young age. When the time came to decide on my education, choosing to study history was an obvious path for me. Today I hold a Master’s degree in Military History from University of Amsterdam and a Bachelor Degree in History from University College London and Erasmus University Rotterdam.

In 2017, I was hired by the Linecrossers Sliedrecht Foundation, a non-profit organization that commemorates the so-called ‘Linecrossers,’ a Dutch resistance group that covertly connected the liberated southern Netherlands with the Nazi-occupied north during the last six months of WWII. For three years, I conducted in-depth historical research on the aforementioned resistance group. In 2021, my findings were published in the book “Linecrossers, Couriers of the Dutch Resistance” (Omniboek Publishers), which has since reached its 3rd printing.

In May 2020, I moved to Yorktown Heights, New York, to be reunited with my wife, Heidi, and my stepchildren, Jacob and Loren. With an innate interest in history, I immediately began delving into the rich local history of my new home. I discovered the pivotal role the Hudson Valley played during the American War of Independence, learned that the Hudson River was part of the Underground Railroad, and—much to my surprise—uncovered the story of the Peekskill Riots.

As a European, I had naively assumed that such racial violence was confined to states like Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi—not a place like New York. I was even more astonished to find that so few people in the area knew about this significant chapter in American history. So, when I was approached to contribute to the Robeson in Peekskill Project, I didn’t hesitate for a moment. I am both grateful and honored to play a part in bringing the story of the Peekskill Riots to light, and, most importantly, in highlighting the iconic legacy of Paul Robeson—one of the greatest artists, and advocates of social justice of all time.



NATASHA CHERNY

Natasha Cherny is co-founder and co-president of The Drozdoff Society (2015) and founder and President of Cherny Concert & Artist Management Ltd. [CCAML] (2018).

In December, 2015, The Drozdoff Society launched a concert series spanning three states. Through managing that series and some of the artists who have performed in it, Ms. Cherny became absorbed with becoming more directly involved in arts management. In June 2018, she incorporated CCAML to expand the scope of her participation in the career development and support of several of the fine artists with whom she had established relationships since 2015, and has since welcomed several more.

Natasha Cherny comes from a family that has had professional musicians in each of five generations since 1870: six pianists, two composers, seven piano pedagogues, a violinist, a trumpet player and pedagogue, and a classical saxophonist. Although not herself a professional, she has studied piano and voice intermittently and is passionate about classical music.

Natasha's 25 years at IBM and Reader's Digest centered on data identification, gathering, integrity, and analysis; on process analysis, design, and troubleshooting; database design and implementation; and project management. As a freelance data analyst and paralegal, she spent 12 years managing a law practice and financial planning firm, and providing analysis to other attorneys for securities arbitration cases.

Natasha is also a published writer whose articles in regional newspapers focused on environmental matters, and whose leadership following the Mamaroneck, New York floods of 2007 (environmental inevitabilities she had long predicted) was valuable to that community. She is presently writing a quasi-autobiographical book that chronicles her family's disintegration in 1917 and reintegration nearly 100 years later, and what she calls the serendipities that led to that wholly unexpected turn of events.

The focus of CCAML is the representation of great artists who work in an atmosphere of mutuality and cooperation; that is our core ethic. CCAML presents them in its own concert productions, and books engagements for them internationally with presenters large and small. We believe we have some of the finest musicians in the world with us and are eager to share them with audiences.

CCAML's concert management extended to The Drozdoff Society's Impromptu! Classical Music Recital Series and Meridian Performances, with concerts in Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey.



SARAH UNDERHILL

Sarah Underhill's love of the Hudson Valley began in the 1980s when she worked on the Hudson River Sloop "Clearwater" as an environmental educator, activist, and sailor. A singer and song collector, her love of music and the arts combines with her dedication to community building. Sarah serves on the Wawarsing Environmental Commission, and on the boards of Clearwater, SeedSong Farm Center, and Slow Food Hudson Valley. She has worked as an RN for Hudson Valley Hospice since 2002, and is a member of the Ethics Committee for Health Alliance Hospitals. Her Quaker heritage, with its emphasis on justice and mercy, informs her work.





LAWRENCE ANTHONY BUKAHN

I first learned about the Peekskill Riots when I moved to Cortlandt Manor, just a short distance from where these infamous events unfolded. Unfortunately, I wasn't surprised. Growing up in New York City during the 1950s and 1960s, I saw firsthand that racism—including violent racism—was not confined to the South.

My family settled in the Wakefield area of the Bronx around 1960. At that time, we were among only three families of color on our block. Our neighbors didn't speak to us, let alone welcome us into their community. Navigating to and from school required careful planning, as some streets were essentially off-limits to people of color.

As a young adult, I became actively involved in efforts to improve our society. I protested the Vietnam War and participated in marches organized by the Civil Rights Movement. But social justice wasn't my only passion; music was another deep-seated interest. As a singer, I had the honor to share the stage with the legendary Intruders and performed in various "Motown Review" shows. Currently, I sing bass with The Shadows of the 60s Tribute to the Temptations. In 2016, I joined the a cappella group The Persuasions, taking over the role of founding member Jimi Hayes.

As an outspoken activist for social justice, as well as an African American, and perhaps even more so as an African American who makes a living as a singer, I feel a deep connection to Paul Robeson, one of the greatest singers of the 20th century who sacrificed everything in the name of justice. Therefore, when approached to help the Robeson in Peekskill project craft their messaging and overall communications strategy, I was happy to contribute. It has been too long since Paul Robeson's legacy and the infamous Peekskill Riots—events that occurred right in our own backyard—have been obscured from history. Let's take this opportunity to shine a light on forgotten truths and ignite a movement that honors the sacrifices of Robeson and the events that shook our community.

—Lawrence Anthony Bukahn

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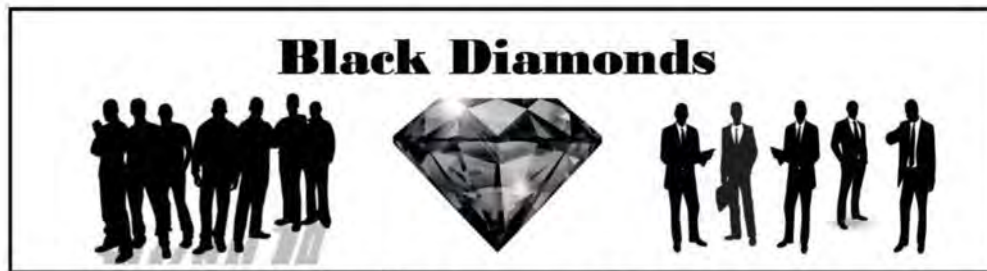


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These two photos are provided courtesy of Frank Goderre.



This 1941 photograph of Paul Robeson was taken by Yousuf Karsh, widely regarded as one of the greatest portrait photographers of the 20th century. courtesy of Karsh.org

