

Harrisburg's Historic African American Community: An Interview with Calobe Jackson Jr.

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# HARRISBURG'S HISTORIC AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

AN INTERVIEW WITH CALOBE JACKSON JR.

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**ABSTRACT:** This excerpted oral history with Calobe Jackson Jr., prominent citizen and local historian, discusses Harrisburg's African American community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, relationships between the city's black and white population, the City Beautiful movement, and the Commonwealth Monument Project.

**KEYWORDS:** Harrisburg, Commonwealth Monument Project, African American history, oral history, City Beautiful

Calobe Jackson Jr. is a Harrisburg institution, known and appreciated by many for his work as a postal supervisor, his service on the Harrisburg School Board, and his indefatigable work as a historian of his city. A native and life-long resident of Harrisburg, he was born on April 20, 1930, in Harrisburg Hospital to parents Calobe Jackson Sr. and Lena Jackson. At the time of his birth, his parents lived at 10 Aberdeen Street, immediately east of Capitol Park, where his father had a barbershop and pool hall. James LaGrand and David Pettegrew interviewed Mr. Jackson on July 24, 2019, in the Juniata Room of the Pennsylvania State Archives. Rachel Williams transcribed the two-hour-long interview, and a complete transcript is available via the Digital Harrisburg website. In the excerpts below, Mr. Jackson speaks about his education, neighborhood, friends and classmates, and

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work as a postal clerk and local historian. We have included excerpts where Mr. Jackson speaks of the influential figures in Harrisburg's African American community, the City Beautiful movement, and the Commonwealth Monument Project.

**James Lagrand** (hereafter JL): What strikes you now about all of your growing up years? What are the most vivid, important, influential memories and experiences?

**Calobe Jackson** (hereafter CJ): During the Depression, they discontinued kindergarten . . . so we started school in first grade . . . Some of the black kids in the area went to Wickersham School, which was segregated, or Calder School, which was in the Sixth Ward on Calder Street, which was segregated. But I was sent to Boas Building . . . on the corner of Green and Forster Street. . . . There were at that time only maybe three . . . black children in the school. I was one, Dr. Oxley's son was one,<sup>1</sup> and Scott Warwick, who is still living, was another. . . . I'm not sure why I was sent to that school. It seemed like it was a more prestigious thing to go to that school. . . . At least somebody thought I should go there so that's where I went. And it was quite an experience because I got to meet a lot of very smart girls and different ethnic groups. Some of them were Jewish, Greek, Italian, a lot of ethnic groups. And when I had the chance, growing up with them at school, I'd go to visit their houses and one of the things I noticed was that most of them had encyclopedias . . . especially *The Book of Knowledge*. So from there on, I was always inquisitive about books. Another thing we did was music. Almost everybody played some type of instrument. I played clarinet, very briefly, and took music lessons. Bobby White lived across the street from me and was a butcher's son. He was a white boy, and he had one of those big xylophones, the old wooden ones, which was as long as this table. He became very good at that. On Saturday mornings, the Rio Theater downtown would have amateur hour. That was a big thing in the thirties. So, it was fun growing up. In elementary school we didn't have a lot, but kids had fun. They made their own scooters, made their own things. At this time Harrisburg had six elementary schools and we had a junior high school (7 through 9) and high school (10 through 12). I remember distinctly in sixth grade they gave us a lot of tests. They were testing pretty vigorously for where we were going to be placed with the seventh grade. And I was lucky. I was placed in the first section. They would number 7-1, 7-2, 7-3, up to 7-14. The first



**FIGURE 1.** Calobe Jackson Jr., on the grounds of the Pennsylvania State Archives, July 24, 2019. Photograph by David Pettegrew.

three or four sections were all academic; maybe the fifth through eight or nine were commercial, and the other ones basically were called shops or industrial. The grade schools in uptown all fed into Camp Curtin. On the [Allison] Hill, the grade schools all fed into Edison.

**David Pettegrew** (hereafter DP): And all this time, you were living on Aberdeen?

**CJ:** No, I can hardly remember living on Aberdeen. My dad moved his barbershop [to near] Sixth and Boas. That is basically the block that I really remember from ages five through seven. I remember playing in that area.

C. Sylvester Jackson lived on the 400 block of Boas Street going down the hill, and I remember his wife was a black woman, but she was from England and she had a different accent. I don't know if she was influential in getting me to go to Boas School or not. I often thought about it. But C. Sylvester Jackson was at that time very vital. First of all, he was an accountant, and he was in charge of the Boyd Estate and he was on the Harrisburg Planning Commission and the Harrisburg Authority. He's one of our 100 names on the pedestal.<sup>2</sup> He was the one that named the William Howard Day Homes. He was on the Authority when they built those buildings in the late 1930s, and he named it for William Howard Day because he remembered William Howard Day. He was a graduate of Harrisburg High, I think, 1904 or 1905.

**JL:** You mentioned going to Boas elementary—

**CJ:** And then to Camp Curtin.

**JL:** And then to Camp Curtin. But at Boas you said you were one of three black students in the class?

**CJ:** Yes. And I was the only one in my grade. There was one in the grade behind me...and then there was one in the grade behind him.

**JL:** So, what was that situation at Camp Curtin.

**CJ:** Well, at Camp Curtin, it was different because the students coming out of the black elementary schools Wickersham and Calder went to Camp Curtin. . . . [where] you had black students in every grade, and almost every class, and same thing on the [Allison] hill. We didn't have any black teachers at that time. And that's probably worth noting. Now, at the black elementary schools, they had black teachers. But at the so-called white elementary schools, there were no black teachers. There were no black teachers at Camp Curtin or at William Penn at that time. There were some later, but not at the time I was going there.

**JL:** You mentioned some teachers and family members and certainly schools that you remember as being important in how you were formed and shaped here. Any other people or groups or organizations that you think played an important role in your growing up years?

**CJ:** Growing up in a barbershop, you get to see a lot of prominent people and you hear them speak and talk: the ministers, the doctors. You hear discussions about politics and history and different things. A lot of things I picked up just from being around, being in a barbershop, hearing the elders talk, hearing the men talk about things that they did when they were in school years ago. So, we'd get an understanding of the perspective, an

appreciation of what had happened before you. Dr. [Charles] Crampton lived right next to Messiah [Lutheran] Church on Forster Street. Well, every morning he'd have my dad come down and shave him. Now, no black lived like Crampton did. He had his own chauffeur, garage. My dad would shave him every morning. He would go to his house. A lot of times when his chauffeur wouldn't be there, I would go down and sweep the pavement, especially in the summertime, sweep the pavement, hose it down. He was particular about his doorknobs being shiny. He had brass doorknobs. So, I would do that, it would take maybe an hour and a half to two hours, and he'd give you a five- or ten-dollar bill [which] was a lot of money. I did get to talk to Crampton. He was quite a historian; he talked a lot about old Harrisburg. He eventually talked me into going to Lincoln University by giving me a senatorial scholarship. See, I took all the academic subjects, and I really liked math and science more than anything else, but I really probably just intended to be a barber. And Crampton says my senior year, "You have to go on to college." And I said, "No, I never thought about it." And he said, "Have you studied academic subjects?" And I told him, "Yes." So, he said, "I'll get you a senatorial scholarship." Now, a senatorial scholarship is given from a state senator. I don't know if they still do that or not. But a senatorial scholarship pays all of your tuition at a state college. . . . Well, as it turned out, Harvey Taylor was the Dauphin County senator. . . . But, apparently at that time all the ones had been given out, so Dr. Crampton said, "Well, don't worry about that, I'll get you one from Senator [George] Wade." And of course, Senator Wade was the senator in Cumberland County. So, I don't know if that was illegal or not, but anyway, I got one. I got one from Senator Wade.<sup>3</sup>

**JL:** Over the course of your life, what's your sense of the relationships between blacks and whites in Harrisburg? What stands out?

**CJ:** I mentioned going to the movies. . . . Blacks would tell you, "Well, if a gang of eight of us go down to the movies, they won't let us in. But if I go down with a group of three or four white guys, nobody says anything." So, there's that type of thing. Some of the stores, Pomeroy's for instance, they'd say Blacks couldn't eat at the lunch counter. Well, if one went in, he probably could. Groups of them would be denied even though they knew it was wrong. Things started to change, though, during the civil rights era. . . . Pomeroy's, for instance, put in a special restaurant on the bottom floor where they went out and hired all black women to work. In other words, they'd run a lunch counter with all black women working, then all

the blacks knew they were very welcome to go to that lunch counter. Also, I remember Oliver Rowland as a buyer in the boys' department.<sup>4</sup> He was probably the first African American I know to be a buyer for Pomeroy's department store. . . . See, young men dressed a lot differently than they do now. And it was common for almost everybody to wear suits at least once or twice a year, especially for Easter. Doutrich's was a very famous store for boys. Doutrich's had a boys' department on the second floor where they not only sold boys' clothing, they sold Boy Scout equipment, they sold model airplanes, hobby shops, and things like that. There, we saw no discrimination, at least not that I saw. . . . One of the problems I see now [is] there are groups that want to reflect back on things that can't be changed, that happened. We know a lot of bad things happened in slavery times and happened years ago, but they keep bringing it up, and I realize that we don't want to forget it, but there are some people that that gives them a chance, an opportunity, to make their living, you might say, to push their thoughts. I see that happening. It's not a good thing. I think we need to all sit back and say, "All races came through different things, and now we've got to get along together."

**JL:** As you think back on your life, what aspects of life in Harrisburg would you say have remained more or less the same? And what areas of life do you see change from the time you were a boy going to elementary school to today?

**CJ:** Well, in fact, this morning, I went to the barbershop to get a haircut. I've probably been going to black barbers all my life. The black barbers, lawyers, undertakers, especially undertakers and barbers and . . . ministers have somewhat remained the same. I'm trying to pinpoint some things here. . . and maybe I don't see discrimination that other people see. I don't know. Maybe it's because of my background and the things that I've done, and I don't see the discrimination they see. And maybe for whatever reason it wasn't exposed to me the way it was with others.

**JL:** One aspect of your life that I haven't asked you about yet is your work for the postal service. Tell us about that.

**CJ:** That was quite an experience. I started there in 1955. Really, I didn't have a job for whatever reason, so I got a temporary job at the post office. So, I started as a mail carrier, and at that time, the temporary mail carriers did everything. I mean, you carried mail, and in the evening you'd go and make all the routes and go around and collect all the mail from all the boxes and take it into the main office and then put them on a sorting table

and then if there was not mail there you'd go into the cases and start sorting mail. So, once they saw that I was a very good mail sorter, they said "Well, if you want to become a permanent clerk, we'll transfer you over." So, I transferred over and became a permanent clerk. And then . . . about six years later, I became a supervisor and I was the second black supervisor at the post office.

**JL:** Which branch was this?

**CJ:** This was at the main office in Harrisburg. When I first started, the post office was located where the Federal Courthouse is now . . . Third and Walnut. . . . And then, in 1963, they built the building on Market Street. I was a city clerk, so I had to learn all the streets in Harrisburg and the carriers that carried those particular streets. And every year you'd examine your case examination, and 95 was passing. So, those guys really had to be good.

**DP:** So, this is one of the main ways that you got to know Harrisburg, right? And at a certain point, you became this person that everybody knows as the historian of African Americans in Harrisburg. When did that begin?

**CJ:** After I retired from the post office . . . I ran for City Council. I didn't make it. It was about . . . when . . . Jim Pianka was our manager, and we actually walked every ward in the city, and we really got to know where the wards were, and which wards voted. Now, the Fifth Ward and the Fourteenth Ward are high voting areas. The Fourteenth Ward is everything above Division Street. And the Fifth Ward is Midtown. And the people in those wards vote more than some of the other ones. So, you start concentrating on the areas that people are going to vote, where people come out. It's surprising in Harrisburg probably 20–25 percent of the registered voters especially in the primary actually come out and vote. But those are the wards that are heavy voters. So, we got to walk the streets, and we learned things, but somehow when I retired I started doing things and the next thing I know I become Harrisburg's historian [*laughter*]. I don't know if you have seen this book.

**JL:** You're showing us *African Americans of Harrisburg* by [John Weldon] Scott and [Eric Ledell] Smith. Yes.

**CJ:** Yes. Now Eric Ledell Smith worked at the State Archives . . . and he was called a "trained historian." He had a degree as a historian. And he one time worked in the African American museum in Philadelphia. He died about twelve years ago, very young. He's from Detroit and he and Ben Carson were in the same room in the seventh grade. Ben Carson went and became a surgeon. And John Scott, of course, is the grandson of the



famous teacher, John P. Scott. His primary interest in this book is just to tell the story of the Scott family. John P. Scott and William Marshall were the first two blacks to graduate from the high school in 1883. I started going down to the Historical Society [of Dauphin County]. Of course, I was on the board for a while, and I worked with Ken Frew and before Ken Frew the other librarian that was down there. . . . And you get to meet a lot of people. . . . I've worked with Mary Bradley. Do you remember Mary Bradley? See, back in the days when everybody was going into the library, before everything was digitized, [*laughter*] you'd get to find out what this person is looking for. Dave Houseal is there, and he's looking for fires, and Mary Bradley's looking for this and Paul Beers is looking for this and I'm looking for this, so if we see something that the other person would like, we tell each other.<sup>5</sup>

**DP:** And there's a little community of historians doing work together, right?

**CJ:** Yes!

**DP:** Can I ask you a question that kind of goes between the digital and the analog, but also your own experiences? One of the things we're celebrating in the Commonwealth Monument Project is the 100 Names,<sup>6</sup> and as I understand it, you're the primary architect of this list of people. Some of these people must have been alive when you were a kid.

**CJ:** Yes, yes. Some of the people I knew like Sylvester Jackson, Harry Burrs, some of those people I knew. Initially, Lenwood [Sloan] was going out to Riverfront [Park]. There are a lot of little monuments out on Riverfront, just little things saying, "This is dedicated to so-and-so," And "this is dedicated this and that." He counted like seventy different little things, and he said, "There's none of them mentioning African Americans." So he wants to do something to honor African Americans and bring his own group up front. So he gets the idea of putting these four figures up. And two [of them], [T. Morris] Chester and [William Howard] Day, are very, very prominent. [Jacob] Compton is not that well known, but we all know that the commissioner likes Compton, so he puts Compton in [*laughter*]. Because the commissioner controls funding. . . . And then they wanted to get a woman on. . . . He picked Frances Harper. I wanted to pick Agnes Kemp. And, of course, Agnes Kemp is a white woman. And he didn't like that. Agnes Kemp was an abolitionist, in fact, she's one of the 100 Names. We have a book on her at the Historical Society. . . . She was born in Harrisburg. Her father owned most of northern Harrisburg. Her father was Antoine Ninninger, and he owned all the land

from the [Susquehanna] River to Wildwood Park, all that. He was very wealthy, and she was an abolitionist. She graduated from medical school when she was fifty-nine years old. She was on the circuit with Susan B. Anthony and Julia Ward [Howe] and all those, and even with Sojourner Truth. And then later on she was on the circuit with Frances Harper, so I wanted to use her and actually we did. She's one of the 100 Names.

Initially, the 100 Names would be bricks, and perhaps somebody would pick out a name they knew and would buy a brick in honor of that person. So it was a fundraiser. And then the city told us that if you build this monument, you have to have a fund to maintain it. You can't just build it and let it go. If you accept this gift you have to maintain it. . . . So then, we changed the idea, but I already picked 100 Names, [starting] from 1850, starting with Joseph Popel who was involved in the riots, the fugitive slave that was at the courthouse, up through 1920. But then when we decided to put it in the Eighth Ward. . . . Somebody said, "Well, all these people lived in the Eighth Ward." And I said, "No, they did not live in the Eighth Ward."

**DP:** So, the list preceded the interest in the Old Eighth Ward?

**CJ:** Yes. Now, a lot of them did [live in the Old Eighth Ward]. Because of the 15th Amendment [Monument], I went through the city directories from 1870 to 1913. I looked at the people that were elected to council and so forth, and I picked out as many African Americans as I could by name, and almost all of them were in the Eighth Ward. Now, I didn't do a definitive study. There could have been somebody in another ward that had a name that I had never heard of or a name that I didn't remember, maybe an African American that I missed. But I picked up the ones like [Benjamin] Foote and . . . [John] Simpson . . . [William] Jones. There's a whole list of them. I picked those up because the Shipley Act of 1912–13 changed the city code. Instead of the council being elected by wards, they were elected at large, and once that happened, Harrisburg did not have an African American councilman until Stanley at last in the 1960s. It's very obvious to me that a lot of these people [on the list of 100] were prominently known in the Eighth Ward, but they didn't live there.

**DP:** Were you combing through city directories?

**CJ:** Yeah, Rachel [Williams] and I were going through it, and she was like, "Well, where do these people live?" And I would find an address for them, and it's obvious to her that . . . all of them did not live in the Eighth Ward. See, they've been pastors at Wesley [Union AME Zion] Church, they

went to the churches over there [in the Old Eighth Ward]. For instance, the one, [J.] Steward Davis is an interesting one. He's the one that lived on Derry Street, and he went to Wesley Church. He went to Dickinson College around 1910, and after two years he went to the law school (which you could do) and he graduated from law school, and supposedly he was the first black valedictorian from a law school. I guess you've probably seen more things on him. He was an officer in World War I, and he came back to Baltimore and practiced law, and was very prominent. In 1929, he disappeared. I don't know what happened.

**DP:** Did you already have the list in your head because you knew these people?

**CJ:** I knew these people, yes.

**DP:** Did you aim for representation [in the list of the 100 Names]?

**CJ:** Yes. I was aiming for the whole city, and not just the Eighth Ward. The Sixth Ward was very popular. Verbetetown. Do you know much about [William] Verbeke? He's a person that nobody has written a definitive biography on. A lot of us think it's because he was held in high esteem by African Americans. He went and sold houses to anybody and everybody at [however] much a week you could pay. And I know the Grand Army of the Republic post marched at his funeral. He was very well known in the African American community. That's the Sixth Ward primarily. The streets over there are named for his children, Marion and William.

**DP:** What have you learned that surprised you in your research into these 100 people that you didn't know or that you weren't expecting? Anything really catch your attention?

**CJ:** A couple things that come up. Well, an awful lot of them are graduates of the old Harrisburg High School. Horace Payne, for instance, he went to Harvard. Aubrey Robinson was a . . . Harrisburg High graduate. He was a great football and track star. He went to Cornell [University]. And of course a lot went to Dickinson [College]. [Luther] Newman went to Dickinson, [J. Steward] Davis went to Dickinson, and Esther Popel was the first black female to graduate from Dickinson. And so, along with the black colleges—Lincoln and Howard [University] and the others—a lot of them are going to prominent white colleges. The two doctors went to the University of Pennsylvania: [A. Leslie] Marshall and [Morris H.] Layton. . . . They're all related—the Marshalls and the Laytons. There's probably at least six of that family in the 100 Names.

**DP:** So, most of these 100 people are pretty accomplished?

**CJ:** Yes.

**DP:** So it may not be typical of, you know, the broader population in the census. There are probably also a lot of more ordinary citizens [in the list of 100 Names] who have done good things?

**CJ:** That's it, yes. You've talked before about Frisby Battis. Well, now, both his sons became physicians. And Frisby Battis, he was always in trouble [*laughter*]. He had a pawnshop and a pool room or something. He was accused of stealing votes, this type of thing. In fact, he left Harrisburg. I read in his obituary that he died in Philadelphia in the 1920s. But he was one of those old political czars. I have yet the chance to see the play [that features him], *The Eighth Ward*. That was a very interesting play. I don't know why somebody doesn't redo it. There's scripts there.<sup>7</sup>

**DP:** I also wanted to ask you about the City Beautiful [campaign] and the African American contribution. When you look at the patterns of the precincts that went the most for City Beautiful, the Old Eighth Ward is the most in favor of that urban improvement vote in 1902 that funded the bond issue. What's the politics behind this?

**CJ:** Well, you know, Dr. [William H.] Jones. Have you read [George Lauman] Laverty's *History of [Medicine in] Dauphin County*? He talks a lot about Dr. Jones in there. A lot of the City Beautiful was just cleaning up the waste. [They were] dumping sewage in the [Susquehanna] River. Dr. Jones was very influential in the Eighth Ward, and I think he was able to convince people [that] City Beautiful would stop some of the disease. Dr. Jones fell on the steps of the new capitol in 1905. He was only forty-four years old. He caught pneumonia and he died. About ten years later, they put a fountain up [to honor him] at the entrance to the Eleventh Street Park and Cameron [Street] and Forster [Street]. We have pictures of the fountain, but we don't know what happened to it. It's not there now.

**DP:** So Dr. Jones had some political capital?

**CJ:** He was at that first meeting, at the Board of Trade in 1902.<sup>8</sup> He was at that meeting, and he might have had a lot of influence in getting the Eighth Ward to vote for it.

**DP:** You've done a bit of work to see who got sick during the Spanish influenza epidemic in the African American community, who died.

**CJ:** One of them was Cassius Brown's son. The other one, the famous one, was James Howard's son. His name was Layton Leroy Howard.

He married Jane Blaylock, who was a Harrisburg schoolteacher and the daughter of Reverend Blaylock. And they went to Cuba for their honeymoon in 1918. They got married in April or something, and then in November or December, he died from the Spanish flu. Whether they caught it in Cuba or not, I'm not sure. But there was other people who also died: Newman, that young man who went to Dickinson, he died from the Spanish flu in 1918. So, that was three of them. You have Jones, Newman . . . and Howard, and they were all basically on South Sixteenth Street, in that area.

**DP:** You're out there and you're making all these discoveries [using] digital resources we couldn't access previously. Where do you think we go from here in terms of writing the African American histories of Harrisburg? What would be your advice?

**CJ:** Well, those clippings are good.<sup>9</sup> . . . There was a woman in the 1880s who clipped newspapers and she put them into books. I would say there are ten to twelve volumes that she has. And through the years somebody has indexed them [at the Historical Society of Dauphin County]. And then we have the Chester family clippings. There are about seventy pages of those.

**DP:** And some of the clippings are public too, right? You've made a lot of them public. I think between the resources you are describing at the Historical Society, [and] the clippings that are available, there's really a lot of ground for new historical work on African Americans in Harrisburg.

**CJ:** Yes . . . and I also search other than just in Harrisburg. I've found that Gettysburg and Lebanon carry a lot of African American history, and this Carlisle paper that was recently digitized, the *Carlisle Sentinel*. And, of course, you have the *New York Amsterdam [News]*, the New York agent of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Some of the black papers had correspondents here that sent clippings to the weeklies. So you found a lot of information in the black papers. They had a paper in Baltimore, Washington, Philadelphia, and even Chicago, the *Chicago Defender*.

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## NOTES

1. Dr. George Leonard Oxley was a Harrisburg medical doctor. His son J. Leonard Oxley was a pianist, arranger/conductor of several Broadway and Off-Broadway musicals, including *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Sophisticated Ladies*, *Black and Blue*, *Jelly's Last Jam*, and many others.
2. For the list of 100 Names, visit: <https://digitalharrisburg.com/commonwealth/100names>.
3. A novelization of the life of Dr. Charles Crampton is *The Blue Orchard* by Jackson Taylor (New York: Touchstone, 2010).
4. Oliver is related to James H. Rowland for whom Rowland School is named.
5. Mary O. Bradley (d. 2009) was a journalist for the *York Daily Record* and later the *Harrisburg Patriot News* where she covered many stories and wrote several columns, including the "Cornerstone" column, about local history in central Pennsylvania. David Houseal is the historian of the Pennsylvania National Fire Museum, located in Harrisburg. Paul B. Beers (1931–2011) was a reporter for the *Patriot News*, and author of several books about central Pennsylvania people and politics.
6. For this section on the Commonwealth Monument Project and the 100 Names, see essays in this issue by David Pettegrew and James LaGrand, Rachel Williams, and Becky Ault.
7. *The Bloody Eighth* was an original musical produced 2003–04 by the Capitol Dinner Theatre in Harrisburg based on Michael Barton and Jessica Dorman, *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward* (South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2002). Sharia Benn has written a new play on the Eighth Ward titled "Voices of the Eighth: Rhythms of Resilience." The play is based especially on the newsclips discovered by Calobe Jackson and aims to feature real-life stories that move beyond the 'bloody eighth' image of the ward as a place of vice. Sponsored by Dauphin County Commissioners, the play was performed in early February 2020 at the Gamut Theatre in Harrisburg.
8. This is a reference to the meeting in December of 1900 that helped jumpstart the City Beautiful movement in Harrisburg.
9. This is a reference to digital clippings of historical articles from Newspapers.com.