
LEARNING LESSONS FROM H.T. BURLEIGH and Review of
Harry T. Burleigh: From the Spiritual to the Harlem Renaissance, Jean E. Snyder, Ph.D.
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By Cheryl Rush Dix and Sarah Thompson¹

Sarah Thompson and Cheryl Rush Dix, two Pennsylvania educators of long acquaintance, were eager to collaborate and share their observations on Dr. Jean E. Snyder's recently published biography of Erie's own Harry Thacker Burleigh.

Harry T. Burleigh: From The Spiritual to the Harlem Renaissance holds within its pages, connections to the familiar, surprising, and awe-inspiring. It takes up the challenge to see Erie's past and present race dynamics in unflinching, realistic clarity, coming to terms with Burleigh anecdotes from the many strata he occupied, crossed, and transcended over the arc of his life. Snyder's Burleigh biography weaves together the competing narratives born of different points of view to show the lived reality of an African-American phenom in real time and real social dynamics. The scope and depth of the biography spares the music and social history student the shortcomings of myopic historical portraits that lack inclusion and complexity. The author diligently sets the stage with the family's origin story and descriptions of Old Erie.

¹ For Cheryl Rush Dix, life-long Erie resident whose childhood home was two doors down from the Burleigh family residence on East 3rd Street, the Burleigh legacy is a personal treasure. Burleigh advocacy is sown into the fabric of every decade of her life. She credits her commitment to civic engagement to an early memory of her elder sister Adrienne's forthright, albeit unsuccessful, entreaty to city council to preserve from the wrecking ball the Burleigh residence, as an historical landmark. Throughout her formative years, Dix could encounter Burleigh music and memories at St. James A.M.E. Church, whether as printed in the church's connectional hymnal, as practiced by a choir that learned his spiritual arrangements or in a community that identified him as their very own. So, when life-long friend, vocal performer and Burleigh re-enactor Charles Kennedy Jr. reached out to Dix to join the founding board of the H.T. Burleigh Society, he found an enthusiastic supporter. Board membership offered affirming opportunities, to be invited to serve by accomplished people one respects, welcomed as a colleague by a former scholastic teacher, namely Sr. Mary Lawrence, RSM and having the honor of meeting Dr. Jean Snyder with her compelling scholarship. Though Rev. Charles Kennedy Jr. is deceased, his friendship lives in every effort of extolling Burleigh's legacy; it lives in this work, as well.

Sarah Thompson first encountered the H. T. Burleigh story as an educator, researcher, and enthusiastic promoter of Erie History at the Erie County Historical Society. In advance of Erie's 1995 Bicentennial and encouraged by Don Muller, the Historical Society's director, Thompson focused her efforts on finding and sharing treasures of Erie's African-American history. Thompson's research and writing journey made her a Burleigh legacy advocate. Her research brought her to amazing colleagues in the drive to produce a long-overdue bicentennial history of the city's African American community.

Snyder builds on important scholarship previously produced about Burleigh's legacy. Published in 1996, *Journey From Jerusalem: An Illustrated Introduction to Erie's African American History, 1795-1995*, by Sarah S. Thompson, served as an overview and reference piece that was designed to reach a broad age range of people beyond the old guard. Not surprisingly, colleagues in the *Journey From Jerusalem* effort are also cited in the biography by Snyder, namely the indefatigable researcher Karen James, educator Johnny Johnson, and Rev. Charles Kennedy, Jr. The work of Jean Snyder has raised the bar for local history research and analyses significantly with significant implications for understanding the Erie community of Burleigh's time and his experiences that reflect events in U.S. and world history.

Through Burleigh's story, one can explore what the story of the best of us tells us about all of us. Events like "The Heritage and Legacy of Harry T. Burleigh" academic conference at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania in 2003 confirm the potential for the Burleigh legacy to serve as a common point of celebration for our mosaic community and the potency of the opportunity to draw all attending under the sonorous wings of the spiritual in triumphant harmony.

This biography shows just how it is possible for Burleigh to belong to, be extolled, and loved by the historic St. Paul Cathedral congregation and the historic St. James A.M.E. community, simultaneously. Dr. Snyder takes on the inclusions and exclusions that bifurcate Burleigh's life and legacy head on, with a commitment to clarity and exposition. Snyder explains:

The paragraphs [written by Burleigh's friends] give the rationale for the support of Burleigh's friends and why Erie's citizens, white and black, showed such generosity to this young black singer:

We, the undersigned, hereby subscribe and pay the amounts set opposite our names respectively, towards a fund now being raised for Mr. HARRY T. BURLEIGH of this city, as a testimonial of appreciation from his friends and acquaintances. (62)

Bringing documents like the above into focus make it possible for readers to envision a multi-faceted H. T. Burleigh in the multi-dimensional, social reality of Erie at the turn of the 20th century. The annotated timeline after the preface is a valuable help, orienting readers to Burleigh milestones of the 19th and 20th centuries and giving early evidence of the author's consideration for the reader.

For music lovers and historians, the Burleigh biography elucidates key roiling arguments and tectonic clashes between the titans of the age during the dawn of American music's emergence. Career musicians and social scientists would find ample source material to draw a picture of the times from Burleigh's generative relationships with luminaries and arbiters of the music, culture, and social firmaments, to his forward reaching impact as a colleague and mentor to the famous of the time. Snyder explains:

In April 1894 Washington, D.C., black music critic Walt B. Hayson responded to the controversy stirred by Dvorak's advocacy of an American school of music based on Negro music. Dvorak's statements, he said, were "a recognition of and a compliment to the musical nature of the Negro-American." For white Americans, this was too much.... backlash. (110)

Snyder's compelling narrative takes full advantage of Burleigh's career and social action connections of the time, while maintaining an insightful take on the Burleigh family story. Its value as a resource for historians is not limited to Harry T. Burleigh as a nineteenth-century-born

African American, but also for the many carefully drawn relationships, interactions, and inner workings of the progressive movement within and between African-American communities.

The biography creates a vivid picture of old Erie's social landscape and landmarks long since vanished with fulsome descriptions of the newspapers, concert halls, city commerce, segregated neighborhoods, and residences both grand and humble. Just as with the accounts of events in Erie's bygone grand edifices like the Grand Army of the Republic Hall and Park Opera House, the pages of this book usher readers into lush experiences of the nascent Harlem Renaissance in its breadth of storytelling. For example, Snyder writes:

Hours before the doors were opened ... Black Manhattan began its trek to the Hippodrome. From Striver's Row in limousines, from Sugar Hill in taxicabs, from Seventh Avenue in motorbuses, from Lenox and upper Fifth on the I.R.T. and from San Juan Hill on trudging feet, the descendants of Verdi's Ethiopian princess converged on the world-famous theatre. (138)

Time over time, Snyder proves the portrait she paints of Burleigh as a lamplighter and culture bearer, whose work as an arranger of spirituals and mentoring colleague to succeeding generations of famous American musicians made others' steps into the continuum of American song and African-American life possible. Notably, Snyder points to the examples of "Georgia-born tenor, Roland Hayes, another of Burleigh's early protégés, [who] came to Boston with the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1911" (165). Additionally, Snyder sheds light on Burleigh's *intime*, formative relationship with the famed Marion Anderson. In the biography, she explains:

In her letter, [Marion] Anderson asked whether Burleigh had some new spiritual Arrangement for her use. He ... closed his letter saying, "Have a 'dandy' new song for you too. Langston Hughes' words. 'Lovely, dark and lonely one.' Thought of you and your voice when I wrote it." This was Burleigh's last published art song and one of the most enduring. (171)

Regrettably relevant to current blackface controversies in politics and media, the biography offers detailed and unapologetic looks at the pernicious influence of minstrelsy on the portrayals of African-Americans as well as the commercial pressures on African-American musicians and performers. The biography sheds light on the collateral damage of minstrelsy on the spirituals' reception by the upper echelons of music and African-American church leadership. Both Parts I and II of the text offer incisive accounts of what it took for an African-American artist to navigate the corrosive, stereotype-laden environs of late nineteenth and early twentieth century successfully, and what it cost (303).

Further, the biography recapitulates the Burleigh legacy "value proposition" in chapter 18 titled, "The Impact of a Life," covering in brief why one should know Burleigh's work and where one can see his imprint on contemporary culture. Anyone in need of the short version of the Burleigh story is well served by two embedded recapitulations of Burleigh's life and times: the chronology presenting an historical scope in the preface materials and the concluding chapter containing the essentials to secure Burleigh's place of honor, the continued interest of scholars and the continuing efforts of legacy advocates. As evident in this section, the community of advocates, scholars and enthusiasts continues grow.

With the Spirituals, one never knows who has been changed by them. The very month of the book's release, Cheryl Rush Dix spoke with an accomplished documentarian and made a gift of the book to him. Far from an intrusion, he exclaimed, "Oh! I needed this so much"

(02/11/2017). During his last project, he had encountered the Spirituals as a deep, abiding fascination and practice of his latest subject, a civil rights strategist and protest leader. He felt drawn to and touched by the genre's affect and efficacy and was looking for a deeper connection with the origin story of this American music and its impact on Americans. Jean Snyder's H.T. Burleigh biography is a much-appreciated closer look at a compelling interest. For many, it is an occasion to connect Erie history and African-American history with vibrant, viable, appreciative, creative people and projects with reach around the world.

Snyder has earned appreciation for this culminating work of scholarly focus and insightful story-telling. The biography is manifest proof of her academic fidelity, unwavering confidence in the merit and efficacy of the Burleigh legacy for historians and music lovers alike, as well as work of restorative justice for an under-represented story of an overcoming, Erie-born, cultural contributor.

This eminently lucid, readable, and engaging text rewards each reader with a wealth of facts and insights about the quality of life in a developing Erie, the forces that shaped Burleigh's artistic and social success in the United States and abroad, and his legacy that reverberates through today's performers and scholars. It is and continues to be an inspiration to witness the enthusiastic reception of Dr. Snyder's contributions by historians, music scholars, and lovers of the spirituals. Gratitude is justly due for both the medium and the messenger.

The hope, sparked by *Journey From Jerusalem*, that Erie's research-based Black history would be woven into the fabric of our community through classroom lessons that offer learners vibrant, place-based experiences is re-ignited by Jean Snyder's *Harry T. Burleigh: From the Spiritual to the Harlem Renaissance*, which lights the fires of opportunity and interest in this history, once again.

Burleigh, the Humanities Classroom, and Pedagogical Opportunities

From the vantage point of a classroom educator with a devotion to research, primary sources, and local history, Sarah Thompson recommends the Burleigh biography for providing opportunities to tap in to students' interest in the world around them and illustrating the process of constructing history from the ground up through its structure and references. Extensive use of local primary sources provides invaluable context for both professional researchers and budding history students. Because the biography illuminates the story of someone who made it big beyond the parochial hometown hero, it is a learning resource for career path and opportunity lessons. Burleigh's story, replete with overcoming--from slavery to opportunity and from racism to renaissance--is an amazing path to international acclaim that starts right here, in Erie, PA.

Included with this article are two lesson options based on a Hometown Hero theme: "Finding H.T. Burleigh in Erie and in the World" for elementary learners; and "Meeting the Man--A Visit with Harry T. Burleigh through Primary Documents of his Time" for secondary learners. Both demonstrate how content drawn from Snyder's book can build academic skills and rigor, engage learners with real-world connections, and enrich classroom experience.

WHAT ARE SOME KEY WORDS AND PHRASES?

Write a citation for one of the readings

_____ _____ _____ _____
Author's Last name, first name Title of the book in italics. Publisher Year published Page(s)

A person from Erie can go on to

_____.