

HISTORY OF BENNETT-WELLS
AMERICAN LEGION
POST # 1780

Recorded By: Carol A. Cole

The American Legion is the largest Veterans Organization in the United States.

In 1945, when World War II ended, there were 103 African-American veterans that were not welcome to join any of the existing American Legion post in Buffalo, NY. On June 2, 1946, these veterans decided to work together, and form a new post.

First, they needed an official name. Mr. Charles Mischaeu, the first Commander, and Mr. Horice B. Johnson, the Councilman, visited the families of James Bennett and Johnson Wells to obtain permission to use their names for the new post. The families gave them permission.

The post was named for veterans Private James Bennett, and Lieutenant Johnson C. Wells. They were the first two African-American soldiers from Buffalo, NY, killed in WWII. The organization was founded in 1946, the Post applied for a charter, but Bennett-Wells post 1780 did not receive the charter until april 10, 1954 and the auxiliary received their charter in 1955.

Private Bennett, was a member of the Quartermaster Corps. He entered the service on July 22, 1942 and was shipped overseas shortly thereafter in November 1942. The State Department disclosed that shortly after arriving in Italy, Private Bennett was killed. He was awarded the Sharpshooters Medal in Fort Devens, Massachusetts.

Second Lieutenant Johnson C. Wells lived at 44 pine street in Buffalo, NY. Lieutenant Wells was killed when his army fighter plane crashed. He was on a routine training flight a few miles East of Selfridgefield, Michigan. Lieutenant Wells graduated from Public School #6 and Hutchinson Central High School in Buffalo, NY. He was a student at West Virginia State College, before enrolling into the Armed Forces on October 21, 1942. Johnson C. Wells was an aviation student

and had just completed his basic training with the United States Air Force when he was killed.

The Bennett-Wells post 1780 began holding their first meetings on Clinton Street, upstairs over the Jones Funeral Home. Next, they moved to a building on William near Pine Street. Finally, they found a building located on Jefferson Avenue in the 1400 block. The post remained there for many years until the building was destroyed by a fire. Ten years before Bennett-Wells was able to purchase another building, Mr. Beard, the Commander at that time, kept the post going. He held membership meetings in his home until they were able to purchase the building located at 463 Riley Street, the former Club Coronado. Mr. Thomas Swimp discovered this new location for sale and Bennett-Wells purchased the building for \$6,500. At the Riley Street location, Bennett-Wells was very active and were involved in many county functions and celebrations. They formed a color-guard composed of members from both the legion and the auxiliary. They participated in many parades and many Erie County Legion ceremonies. The American Legion post had over 200 members during that time and 28 Auxiliary members.

Every summer the post sponsored an Americanism Cook-out program that took place on the side street next to the post. The post transported youngsters by bus from a community youth program in Rochester, NY. A group of 50 youngsters were bused in from Rochester, plus all the young people from the neighborhood in Buffalo would participate in this celebration. There were games, competitions and Americanism contests. The post served the young people, a lunch of hotdogs, pop, ice cream, fruit and snacks. A fire-engine from the neighborhood fire station would park outside the post for the children to explore and learn. The children were taught how to handle the flag, how to fold the American flag, and what each fold represents. Information about the U.S. Government was available to the young people, and any questions regarding American Government were eagerly answered by some of the senior Legionnaires, such as Mr. Leeland Jones, Councilman.

Unfortunately, 463 Riley Street post was destroyed by a fire in 1995. The Post had some fire insurance, which provided money to purchase 1356 east delavan ave property. At a cost of \$10,000 from the city of Buffalo. On June 22, 1996 the Post celebrated the grand opening, beginning with a ribbon cutting ceremony, presentation of awards and gifts ending with a serving of dinner prepared by “the Friends of Bennett Wells”. In our new post home the Post continued with our annual americanism celebrations with closing off the block of Courtland Ave. Every year the Post sponsored Halloween parties and Easter egg hunt for children of the neighborhood. Every Christmas Holiday, the members donated non-perishable items and purchased 20 turkeys for distribution to needy families in the community. The Auxiliary was active, the Post began having a Annual Black History celebration followed by a soul food dinner.

In 2009, the Auxiliary was approached by a member of Junteenth committee. She shared with us the fact that there are 14 African American Civil War Veterans buried in Forest Lawn cemetery, with no identifying marker *stating they are Civil War Veterans.*

The Auxiliary and American Legion joined forces to raise funds to have a plaque constructed in honor of these 14 Veterans. After much hard work , the Post raised over \$4,000 to have a beautiful plaque constructed. When you visit Forest Lawn cemetery, please visit the *Army of the Grand Republic*, located near the Main Delavan entrance.

On Sunday, May 30, 2010 the Post had a dedication ceremony to erect the commemorative plaque in Forest Lawn cemetery. Both the American Legion and the Auxiliary have been working together and have formed a bond to achieve our common goal which is a strong Bennett-Wells American Legion and Auxiliary Post #1780. Working together to help the veterans, the military, and the community.

This history was compiled by Mr. Russell Guthrie, Mr. Thomas Swimp, Mrs. Helen Roddy-Gray, Mr. Jessie Washington, and Mr. Walter Cole. All the contributors are long standing members of Bennett-Wells Legion and Auxiliary. They all graciously allowed me to interview them to compile this valuable history.

Contributors:

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Mr. Jessie Washington

Mr. Thomas Swimp (deceased)

Mrs. Helen Roddy-Gray

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