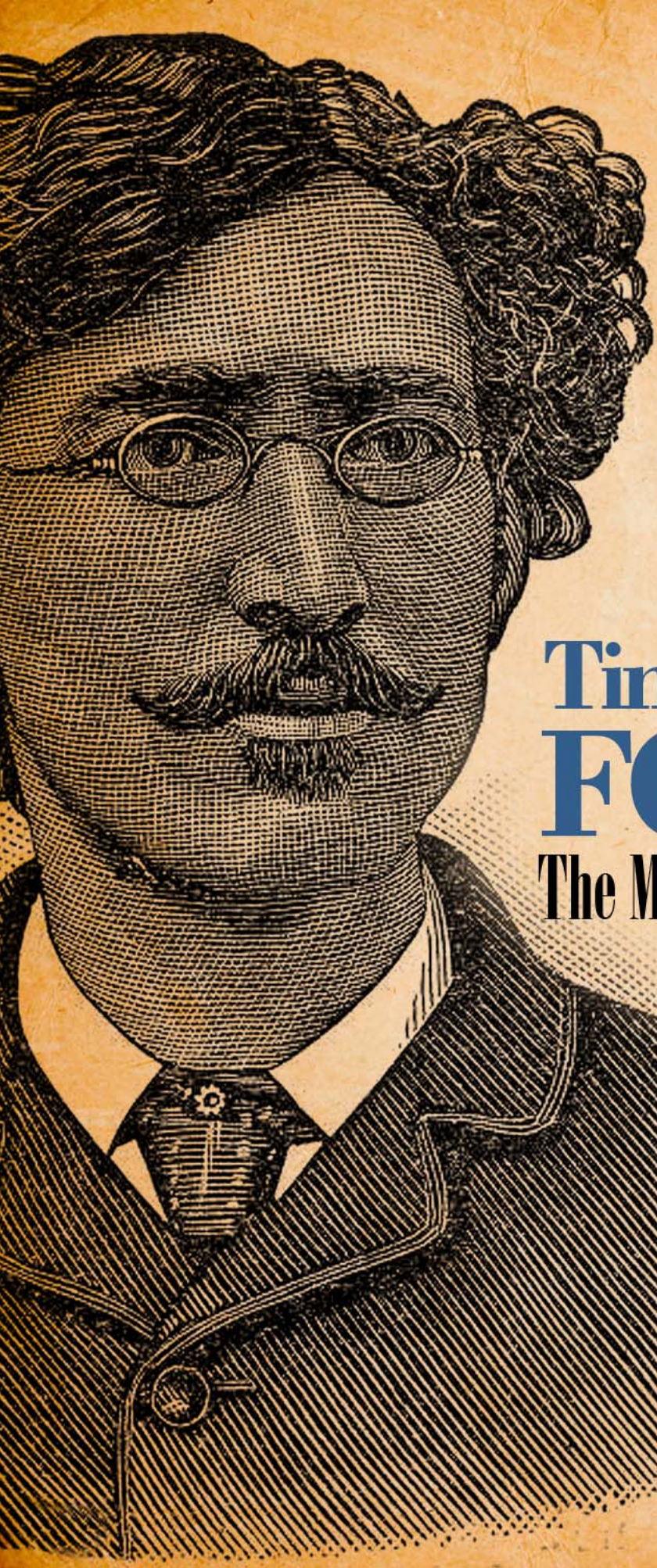


T. Thomas Fortune House c.1976

# Timothy Thomas FORTUNE

## The Man, The House, The Legacy

### By Lorraine Stone

How a Civil Rights Pioneer's Once Abandoned Red Bank, NJ Home is On Track to Finding a Second Life as a Cultural Center.

**Timothy Thomas Fortune, c.1902**
http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/18772

In August 1901, the *Red Bank Register* newspaper proclaimed, that "one of the most noted colored men of the country" had purchased and moved into a home on Beech Street in Red Bank, New Jersey. Indeed, an announcement of this caliber that welcomed the African American, journalist, and newspaper publisher, T. Thomas Fortune and his family to town, was a long way away from his slave beginnings, in Marianna, Florida, where he was born in1856.

Champions for human rights and social justice, Mr. and Mrs. Timothy Thomas Fortune were looking to relocate their family to the country from Brooklyn, New York, and, as reported in the *Register,* bought the home for $4,000. The Fortune's, along with their two children, moved into the three-story Second-Empire style home, sporting a French Mansard roof like a man's fancy top hat, that Fortune later dubbed "Maple Hall."

Fortune was editor and publisher of the *New York Age* newspaper, located in New York City, when he became a Monmouth County resident. He was already known nationally as an outspoken journalist, who stood strong not only on the many issues facing Afro-Americans, but for women and the poor as well. While Fortune did not coin the term 'Afro-American' he strongly believed it to be an appropriate designation for those formerly enslaved Africans.

However, he certainly popularized the term in 1890, as a founding member of the National Afro American League, which became a precursor to the NAACP. The term was also included in the formation of The Afro American Business and Investment Company that he founded during this time, so African Americans could purchase homes.

Fast forward, 106 years later, Fortune's stately manor is being restored to its original grandeur and given a new purpose, as The T. Thomas Fortune Cultural Center. The house, now located at 94 Drs. James Parker Blvd., has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1976, when it was designated a National Historic Landmark. It is only one of the two Landmarks in New Jersey devoted to African American Heritage, the other being Hinchliffe Stadium in Paterson.

The Fortune family had fallen on difficult times in 1911, a year after their only son, Frederick, graduated from Red Bank High School. Unfortunately, they lost their home and in 1915 and, according to the National Register of Historic Places nominating application, the home was sold in a sheriff's sale to the Vacarelli brothers, an Italian immigrant family.

The Vararellis raised their families in the house and constructed an addition onto the back of the home, where they operated a successful bakery business until 2005.

Although they remained owners of the property, the Vacarelli family abandoned it in 2006. Subsequently, the home was vandalized and fell into terrible disrepair, becoming an

eyesore to the westside Red Bank community. Eventually the family filed for an application for a demolition permit.

However, the dismal future of the T. Thomas Fortune house was avoided when the grassroots organization, the T. Thomas Fortune Project Committee, formed in 2013. The mission of the Committee was to educate the community and beyond by bringing conscious awareness to the tireless efforts of T. Thomas Fortune and his important contribution to social justice for African Americans in the country.

**The T. Thomas Fortune home when it was still abandoned.**
http://www.redbankgreen.com

Moreover, some committee members along with its co-chairs, educator and journalist Gilda Rogers, and Red Bank architect Mark Fitzsimmons, made an appearance on a segment of NJTV News that brought more attention to the home's fall from grace. An article that ran on Father's Day in *The New York Times* in 2015 caught the eye of building developer, Roger Mumford of Roger Mumford Homes LLC.

Steadfast with the hopes of saving the home, the Committee turned to the state's Green Acres Program for help in purchasing the nearly one-acre property. Under the umbrella of the Department of Environmental Protection, Green Acres stepped in and made a fair market offer to the Vacarelli family, for the National Historic Landmark.

Unfortunately, the family rejected the offer.

Befuddled by the turn of events, Rogers remarked, "The only thing I can do is to turn this over to a higher power, because as a committee we've done everything within our power to save the home." Although giving up was never an option.

In a matter of a few days, having read about the plight of the Fortune House, Mumford reached out to Rogers and asked to meet with her about the matter. During the course of their first meeting, he told Rogers that he might have a solution to the problem.

Mumford's solution involved purchasing the property from the Vacarelli family and in solidarity with the committee's intent to repurpose and operate the home as a cultural center, Mumford would sell the property back to the non-profit committee for a nominal fee.

Clearly, Mumford envisioned a project that would benefit the community and the municipality as well. When the zoning board approved Mumford's plan on July 28, 2016, the green

light was given to him to move forward on the $3-million project. "We are fortunate that Red Bank had the wisdom to understand that being creative with zoning can be appropriate, if you're responsible about it," said Mumford.

Mumford's plan includes erecting 31 apartments, a mix of one- and two-bedroom units, some of which would be designated as affordable housing units, at the rear of the T. Thomas Fortune Cultural Center. Collectively, the site will be known as "Fortune Square." Work has since started on the house to restore and preserve it, with Mumford already incurring over $200,000 for underground engineering and planning for the project.

**Architect's rendering of what is envisioned for the property.**

The Committee is now focused on raising funds to operate the 2,700 square feet historic structure. As Rogers pointed out in a Committee meeting soon after the exciting decision was announced, "Now the hard work begins. We have to work on operational planning and development of the house."

The plan for now includes upcoming summer and fall fundraisers: "Fortune's Midsummer Night," will be held on Thursday, July 27 at The Danish Café, located inside the Galleria at 2 Bridge Ave., Red Bank. While the 5th Annual Fortune Birthday Bash Luncheon will be held on Oct. 1, at the Molly Pitcher Inn, 88 Riverside Ave., Red Bank. This fundraiser has grown from a community gathering to learn about Fortune, to an occasion that now honors his legacy by awarding community members who uphold Fortune's courageous leadership.

In addition, the committee's mission is to establish and maintain the Cultural Center through philanthropy and fundraising as a vibrant, educational center dedicated to diversity, social justice advocacy and tolerance. The committee also intends to play a prominent role in the social cultural revitalization of Red Bank, Monmouth County, the state and beyond.

Equally important to the mission and goal of the Committee is determining what the Center will offer both culturally and educationally to the community. Outreach in that direction has already started and includes the T. Thomas Fortune Cultural Center becoming a site for the 2018 *Residential Summer Training Institute for Teachers* in Central Jersey, under the auspices of the Amistad Commission. The Amistad legislation mandates that African American History must be infused in the

curriculum throughout all public schools in the state.

At the training teachers will learn about the work and life of T. Thomas Fortune so that he will be included in their arsenal of great African American leaders. They also will be engaged in how to connect the works of African American writers and historians to today's zeitgeist, so students can understand the relevancy of this history.

Gilda Rogers and Roger Mumford

As a matter of fact, the committee has already begun cultivating students for its "Fortune Tellers" program, which came into existence in 2015. This program, according to the education committee chairperson, Donna Kosenko, is designed to "create a relationship between today's youth and the compelling under-reported history of the man and his message"

The Fortune Tellers have already started to learn the story of Fortune and they have started to bring him to life, through essay writing, poetry, journalism and photography. Kosenko further explained that "the goal of the program is to instill in community youth, leadership and team building skills, via mentoring provided by the Cultural Center."

The newest Fortune Tellers introduced at a recent fundraiser were, Carla Ortiz, Jacklyn Arevalo, Luis Santamaria Delgado, all of whom will be part of the incoming freshmen class at Red Bank Regional High School in the Fall.

However, the first inductee into the Fortune Tellers program was Suubi Mondesir, who is a junior at Red Bank Regional High School. She was hired as an intern by the committee in the summer of 2016 to create a T. Thomas Fortune Blog, and to post updates on all social media platforms, while bringing Fortune into the 21st Century on Instagram—reaching a younger audience and educating them at the same time on a very important figure in American History.

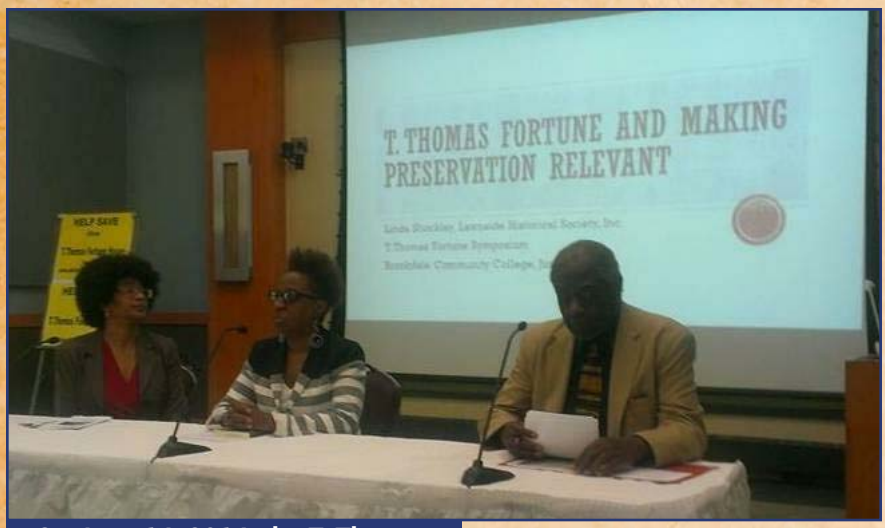
Considering Fortune was one of the most profound journalists of his day, scholarship and writing are extremely important to the committee. Last summer the committee hosted a luncheon for the students of the Hugh N. Boyd Journalism Diversity Workshop, held at Rutgers University, New Brunswick.

The students travelled to Red Bank with their advisor, Karyn Collins, for a day, where they toured the grounds of the house with committee co-chair, Rogers and developer Roger

Mumford, who explained the new plans for the Cultural Center. They talked about how the house looked when the Fortunes lived there and the changes that had been made by the Vaccarelli family.

In retrospect, Fortune's memory of the cruel and peculiar institution of slavery and Reconstruction remained vivid. His recollections were published in a recent book, *After War Times,* by Daniel Weinfeld. Among the poignant personal memories was how Fortune's parents, Sarah and Emanuel, were not able to marry until 1865, after the end of the Civil War.

During Reconstruction, however, Emmanuel Fortune became a Florida State Senator. The elder Fortune was a staunch fighter against injustice and ill-treatment of Africans and African Americans. Young Timothy learned those lessons well, not only from his father but also from his time working as a Senate page in the Florida State House at the impressionable age of 13.




**On June 14, 2014, the T. Thomas Fortune House Project presented the Symposium, " A Window into the World of Post-Reconstruction, at Brookdake Community College, Lincroft. Panelists pictured above are joutnalists Linda Shockley, Gilda Rogers and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, Les Payne. Dr. Walter Greason, Monmouth University, delivered the keynote address.**

Young Fortune left Florida with the experiences of the Florida State House etched soundly in his mind and some work experience that helped set him on the path of his life's work. He had picked up knowledge of the printer's trade from time spent with the *Marianna Courier,* the first of several newspapers where he spent time learning the trade. He landed at Howard University in Washington D.C. in 1876, intent on studying law, but as it turned out, he did not complete his studies there to earn a degree.

He continued to sharpen his editorial skills while in D.C. where he also married his childhood sweetheart, Carrie, and began testing some political opportunities. However, approaching the turn of the new decade, the young couple headed for New York City, where Fortune's newspaper work began in earnest when he became editor at *The Globe* in 1881, at age 24. From then until 1907 his three newspapers (*The Globe, The Freedman,* and the *New York Age*) gave him an unwavering voice against oppression of all people, but most staunchly against the oppression and subjugation of Afro-Americans. Fortune's newspapers were widely read by both blacks and white in the North and South and by other journalists as well.

He authored his first book "Black and White Land, Labor and Politics in the South" in 1884 at the age of 28. After the publication of the book, Fortune was sought after as a speaker and logged as many as 10,000 miles traveling to engagements

throughout the South. The book might have been lost to history had it not been for Lehigh University professor Seth Moglen, who edited it and added an introduction for a 2007 Simon and Schuster release.

"The leading black journalist of the late 1880s and 1890s, Fortune was also a militant activist, who founded the Afro-American League, the first national political organization to

Leading Negro Newspaper

The New York Age.

Has Largest Circulation

VOL. XXV. No. 15. THE NEW YORK AGE, THURSDAY, JANUARY 11, 1912. PRICE, 5 CENT

NEGRO ALSO A MAN IN AMERICA

MAYOR BLANKENBURG TO AID NEGRO CITIZENS

COLORED DEMOCRATS TO HOLD ANOTHER PRIMARY

EMANCIPATION DAY OBSERVED

PROF. LYDE ON ORIGINAL COLO

***The New York Age* masthead, 1912.**

fight for full equality for black Americans." Moglen describes how the book presents a socialist analysis of racial capitalism.

Fortune was known as an agitator regarding Afro-American civil rights, education, and work, but he was also an outspoken critic regarding women's rights. In 1895, he attended the first meeting of the of National Association of Afro-American Women, where he was one of three male speakers.

His editorials always allowed him to be someone who shaped public opinion. Professor Claire Serant, of CUNY's York College, described Fortune this way, in her work: "Writing Racial Wrongs":

> *"The bespectacled editor spent most of his career pointing out the inequalities that African-Americans endured regarding employment housing and jobs across the nation with the three newspapers he established . . . Fortune also challenged Afro-Americans to lessen their dependence on political parties and make decisions for themselves to improve the race. Fortune welcomed African-American women, such as anti-lynching crusader, Ida B. Wells, to write for him. However, few historians notice that Fortune's periodicals also highlighted the mistreatment of other ethnic groups; Asians, Cubans and Italians. The latter were the targets of lynch mobs in the south. Through his writings, Fortune gave a voice to the voiceless, regardless of their color, through his pen."*

Fortune also wrote speeches for his friend and financial backer, Booker T. Washington, leader and founder of Tuskegee

Institute in Alabama. Although their views on Afro-American advancement differed widely, the two men maintained a close relationship for many years, with Washington the financier for the *New York Age,* until a final falling out that caused him to withdraw funding, forcing Fortune to sell the *Age.*

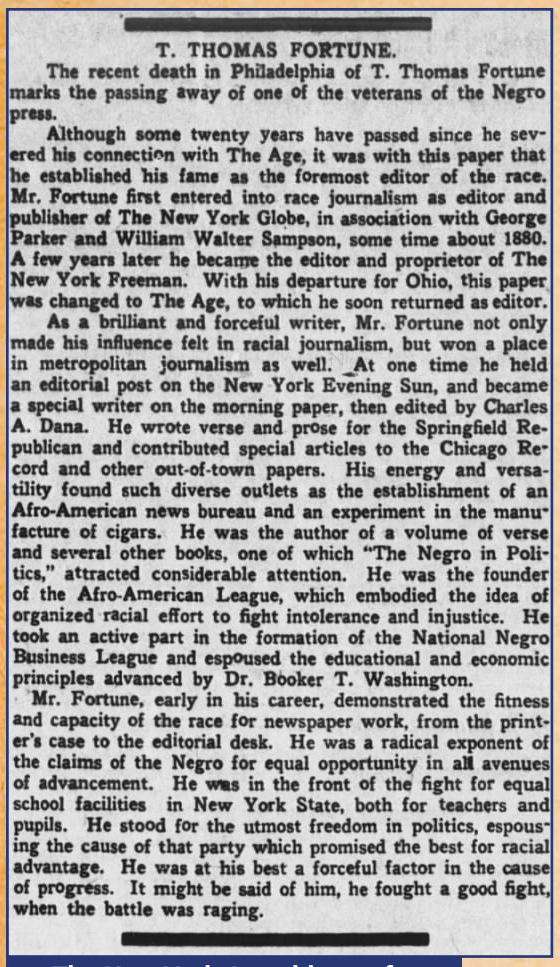
This left a void in Fortune life. He had been at the helm of newspapers for over 30 years. This contributed to Fortune's downward spiral. The *Age,* however, continued successfully without Fortune until it ceased publication in 1960.

In the years following the loss of the newspaper in 1907, the Fortunes separated and Maple Hall was lost. Fortune is said to have fallen into depression, suffered failing health and bouts of alcoholism. He continued to write sporadically until he became editor of the *Negro World,* the publication for Marcus Garvey's organization, the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1923.

Known as a crusader for social justice, Fortune literally wrote until the day he died. His last editorial appeared in the *Negro World* on the same day as his obituary. "T. Thomas Fortune died in Philadelphia, PA, June 2, 1928, where he had been under the care of his son, Dr. Frederick Fortune." When Fortune died, the Dean of Howard University, Kelly Miller wrote: "His pen knew but one theme, the right of man."

Politically astute, Fortune declined political life, because he did trust politicians. Monmouth University Dean, Dr. Walter Greason, sums up the importance of Fortune life in a context that makes him a trailblazer when it comes to civil rights.

> *"Fortune carried the Banner for Booker T. (Washington). He inspired W.E.B. (Dubois). As the founder of the NAAL (National Afro-American League) he set the agenda for Black land and business ownership. This was the basis of the Black Economy, that lasted until 1929, the Great Depression. What he built made integration possible; all future Black organizations sprang from the NAAL."*



T. THOMAS FORTUNE.

The recent death in Philadelphia of T. Thomas Fortune marks the passing away of one of the veterans of the Negro press.

Although some twenty years have passed since he severed his connection with The Age, it was with this paper that he established his fame as the foremost editor of the race. Mr. Fortune first entered into race journalism as editor and publisher of The New York Globe, in association with George Parker and William Walter Sampson, some time about 1880. A few years later he became the editor and proprietor of The New York Freeman. With his departure for Ohio, this paper was changed to The Age, to which he soon returned as editor.

As a brilliant and forceful writer, Mr. Fortune not only made his influence felt in racial journalism, but won a place in metropolitan journalism as well. At one time he held an editorial post on the New York Evening Sun, and became a special writer on the morning paper, then edited by Charles A. Dana. He wrote verse and prose for the Springfield Republican and contributed special articles to the Chicago Record and other out-of-town papers. His energy and versatility found such diverse outlets as the establishment of an Afro-American news bureau and an experiment in the manufacture of cigars. He was the author of a volume of verse and several other books, one of which "The Negro in Politics," attracted considerable attention. He was the founder of the Afro-American League, which embodied the idea of organized racial effort to fight intolerance and injustice. He took an active part in the formation of the National Negro Business League and espoused the educational and economic principles advanced by Dr. Booker T. Washington.

Mr. Fortune, early in his career, demonstrated the fitness and capacity of the race for newspaper work, from the printer's case to the editorial desk. He was a radical exponent of the claims of the Negro for equal opportunity in all avenues of advancement. He was in the front of the fight for equal school facilities in New York State, both for teachers and pupils. He stood for the utmost freedom in politics, espousing the cause of that party which promised the best for racial advantage. He was at his best a forceful factor in the cause of progress. It might be said of him, he fought a good fight, when the battle was raging.

***The New York Age* obituary for T. Thomas Fortune, June 9, 1928.**

Please visit www.thomasfortunehouse.weebly.com for more information about upcoming events and fundraisers. Visit the blog at www.tthomasfortunehouse.wordpress.com And you can reach the organization at thomafortunehouse@gmail.com