

Employment for African Americans in the 1940s and 1950s: Hartford's G. Fox

Department Store

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Overview

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Compelling Questions:

How do employers decide whom to hire? What makes a good place to work?

Introduction

Beatrice Fox Auerbach served as President of the G. Fox Department Store in downtown Hartford from 1938 to 1965. During that time, the

store became the sixth largest department store and the largest privately owned store in the country.

Auerbach was known for her innovative business practices including scheduling workers, her health department, and her cafeteria for workers. She was a hands-on manager, knowing many of her employees' names and visiting different departments in the 11-story department store building on a daily basis.

Auerbach's hiring of African American workers on the selling floor was something new in department stores. Even during World War II, African Americans were not hired as full time teachers in the Hartford Public Schools because of discrimination. One of Auerbach's proudest moments was receiving the NAACP's highest award together with Jackie Robinson in 1958.

Supporting Questions

- What makes a good employer?
- How do employers build community?

Connecticut State Standards

Page numbers refer to the [Connecticut Social Studies Frameworks](#)

- What types of economic, social, and political opportunities were available — or denied — to different groups of people such as African Americans, Latinos, indigenous peoples, and women in the 1950s? HIST 9-12.2 p. 137
- How do people use and challenge local, state, national, and international laws to address a variety of public issues? CIV 9–12.5, p. 127
- How do historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights? CIV 9–12.7, p 127

Purpose

Students will think about the connections between government policy

and workplaces; to understand how loyalty was built at a department store; to evaluate whether African American workers in Hartford felt like they had choices for employment; to understand how one company can buck the trend on racial issues.

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How To

Classroom setup

Activity 1

Homework assignment before the lesson:

- Interview an adult in your household or school about their workplace. Does the racial and ethnic background of the workers in their workplace match that of your town, the state, the country? How does your interviewee interpret that? What factors do they think have an impact on the racial and ethnic background of employees in their workplace?

Activity 2

Have students share what they found out from their interview. On the board, write down the factors which they think had an impact on the racial and ethnic background of employees in their workplace. Have students think about which of those factors are the most important in determining the demographics of the workplace.

Read [Documents 1](#) (“Federal Fair Employment Law”) and [2](#)

([“Connecticut Fair Employment Law”](#)) about the racial situation in employment in the United States and in Hartford in the 1940s. Remember that World War II (1941-5) brought many migrants to cities to work in the war industries. What questions do you have from reading these sources? Write them in your notebook under the heading. Was their fair employment in Connecticut and the United States in the 1940s?

Activity 3

Read [Document 3 \(“Beatrice Fox Auerbach and the G. Fox Department Store, 1940s and 1950s”\)](#). Use this information as background/context to document 4 get to the [1947 article in the Urban League Magazine, *Opportunity*](#), which describes how Auerbach integrated African Americans into her workforce at G. Fox.

- How do these two articles fit with the two you just read?
- According to the article, how did integration work at G. Fox? What factors led to the success they describe?
- Is there anything in the article that would make you question the source? Why might others follow Auerbach?
- Why might some continue to refuse to hire Blacks in anything but menial jobs?
- What questions do you still have?

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What's Next

Informed Action

The government has an impact on the workplace. What laws protect workers' rights today in the workplace? Possible topics of research include:

- Wagner Act, 1935
- Taft Hartley Act, 1947
- Equal Pay Act, 1963
- Civil Rights Act, 1964
- Establishment of the EEOC, 1965
- Age Discrimination Act, 1967
- American with Disabilities Act, 1973
- Civil Rights Act of 1991
- Family and Medical Leave Act
- Janus v. American Federation State, County, and Municipal Employees, 2018

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Related Resources

Resources

- Marjorie Greene, "[Fair Employment is Good Business at G. Fox of Hartford](#)," *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Spring 1948,
- [Connecticut Fair Employment Act \(1943\)](#), as found on "[Awakening The Dream In Simsbury](#)."
- "[President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice \(FEPC\)](#)" *The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed*. Accessed May 31, 2017.
- "[Fair Employment Practices Commission](#)," The Eleanor Roosevelt Paper Project.
- Mark Williams, [Connecticut History on the Web: A World Apart: Connecticut's African Americans, 1914-1970](#).

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Documents

Document 1

Federal Fair Employment Law for African Americans in the 1940s and 1950s

During World War II, African Americans brought pressure on the U.S. government to be sure that Blacks were hired in the defense industry. Spurred by a desire to integrate the military, A. Philip Randolph threatened a March on Washington (with 100,000 Black activists pledged to march) and made a list of demands that his group presented to President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

A week before the march, FDR issued Executive Order 8802 to establish the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) which was established to integrate the armed forces, and fight Jim Crow in workplaces that had government defense contracts. In 1943, the FEPC, FDR strengthened the FEPC with another Executive Order which set up full time staff. By war's end, Blacks made up 8% of the defense industry's workforce and the number of Blacks who worked for the federal government tripled. Yet, often, African Americans were segregated within their factories, paid less than white workers doing

the same job, and restricted in their ability to join and participate in unions.

At the end of the war, the FEPC dissolved despite President Truman's attempts to keep it going. It was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that these rights were insured by law.

—Adapted from *President's Committee of Fair Employment Practice (FEPC) "The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed"*. Accessed May 31, 2017.

Document 2

Connecticut Fair Employment Law for African Americans in the 1940s and 1950s

Excerpts from Report of the Connecticut Inter-Racial Commission 1944

OBJECTIVES OF THE INTER-RACIAL COMMISSION

The General Assembly of 1943 laid upon the Commission the responsibility "to investigate the possibilities of affording equal opportunity of profitable employment to all persons, with particular reference to job training and placement; to compile facts concerning discrimination in employment, violations of civil liberties and other related matters...to report to the Governor biennially the results of its investigations with recommendations to remove such injustices as it may find to exist."

The Commission feels that progress may be made through education, intelligent recognition of all factors involved, and conferences between groups.

SECTION II. THE PROBLEM

Race Tensions in Industrial Employment

"In Hartford, it is reported that there is much more tension surrounding the employment situation than in other parts of the State. Although many Negroes are being used in plants of Hartford, not as many are being used on skilled jobs as in New Haven. Local observers state that the policy of using Negroes only in unskilled jobs, if at all, was

established years ago by the Hartford insurance companies."

Some public utilities have increased race tension because of the policy of employing Negroes only in menial positions.

Minority -group tensions are found in the employment of many nationality groups. Sometimes a foreign name is in itself a handicap in applying for jobs, particularly in the secretarial and clerical field.

Negro Women

Negro women face severe difficulty in obtaining employment other than domestic. Despite qualifications, Negro girls can rarely obtain positions as clerical workers, stenographers, telephone operators, or saleswomen in stores; but barriers in the employment of qualified Negro girls are gradually disappearing in many places.

HARTFORD

In Hartford opposition to Negro neighbors who purchased homes has created tensions in three neighborhoods. In a certain section, a committee of citizens organized in protest against a Negro clergyman who attempted to purchase a home on a street in that neighborhood. The committee was successful in arousing public opinion of the local neighborhood to such an extent that representatives of the Intelligence Service of the United States Army came to Hartford to investigate the situation. The owner refused to sell the house to the clergyman.

—Found on Mark Williams, [Connecticut History on the Web: A World Apart: Connecticut's African Americans, 1914-1970](#). Go to "African Americans" and scroll to "Excerpts from Report of the Connecticut Inter-Racial Commission, 1944."

Document 3

Beatrice Fox Auerbach and the G. Fox Department Store 1940s and 1950s

As a business woman and leader in the retail community, Beatrice Fox Auerbach (1887-1968) believed in her grandfather's and father's most revered creed: "Honesty, Courtesy, and Service." Her

grandfather, Gerson Fox, started G. Fox, a dry-goods business in 1848. He handed it down to her father, then her husband and then when Beatrice Fox's husband George Auerbach died and her father died, she took over in 1938. By the 1950s, G. Fox was the largest privately owned department store in the United States.

She was innovative by ...

- Establishing a five-day 40 hour work week
- Providing employee benefits unheard of at the time including retirement benefits
- Creating advancement opportunities for African Americans, about 7% of Hartford's population in 1950

She challenged her employees through high expectations, which included ...

- All managers required to be on floor at all times on Saturdays
- Salespersons expected to be extremely knowledgeable of all items sold
- Cleanliness and order were required
- All merchandise had to be in stock in a wide variety of sizes, colors, styles, and prices

She was generous through...

- Instituting daily Family Circle Luncheons so that management could regularly meet with employees
- Establishing the Theresa Stern Fox Fund to aid employees in emergencies or illness
- Establishing the Moses Fox Club to honor employees who worked at G. Fox for more 25 years or more
- Providing an employee cafeteria where all food was sold at cost

For the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the company, Beatrice Fox Auerbach initiated a year-long Centennial Celebration

that included newspaper advertisements detailing the past century of "Connecticut Living," published books, window displays, and a day when all deliveries were made by helicopter. Beatrice Fox Auerbach's presidency coincided with the heyday of G. Fox & Co. In 1956, for instance, the Hartford store was reported to employ between 3,000 and 4,000 staff members, receive as many as 25,000 calls to its switchboard daily, and maintain a fleet of 147 delivery vehicles that delivered over 2,000,000 packages a year.

The year 1965 marked the end of an era when Beatrice Fox Auerbach sold G. Fox & Co., the largest privately-owned department store in New England, to the May Department Stores Co. for a reported \$40 million. She remained President of the company her grandfather had founded until shortly before her death in 1968.

—Adapted from *Connecticut Historical Society Finding Aid "Biographical and Historical Sketch,"* Koopman Family Collection.

Pages 58-59 and 73-75, "Fair Employment is Good Business at G. Fox of Hartford," Opportunity, 1948.