

Nick Pavlik:

From the Center for Archival Collections at Bowling Green State University libraries. This is Archival Encounters where archives come alive and past voices meet our present moment. The Center for Archival Collections, or the CAC collects, preserves, and provides public access to unique historical records documenting BGSU, the Northwest Ohio region, the Great Lakes, and National Student Affairs, as well as an extensive rare book collection.

I'm Nick Pavlik, an archivist at the CAC. In this podcast, we'll be sharing some of the captivating stories that our archival collections have to tell, from those that have loomed large in local histories to those that have been long forgotten. We'll be especially focusing on oral histories, recorded personal remembrances of historical and biographical events, as told by those who lived them.

Ann Bowers:

You moved to Toledo in 1922. What made you move to Toledo?

Ella P. Stewart:

Well, I understood there was not any drugstore that was owned and operated by Negroes here. I was in Detroit and I did not like Detroit so I decided to come over here one day and look it over. I came over and when I got off of the bus to go to a friend's house, which was next door to this building that we purchased here at the corner of Indiana and City Park, they were putting the for sale sign on. I went up and told them about what I wanted. I said, "They're putting a for sale sign on the building and I'd like to see that building." Then, we went down and looked at the sign and we looked around. I liked it very much because it had cement floors and a steel ceiling. It was a big building and it had nine rooms above the drug store. I said then, I'd bring my husband over in a couple of days. Of course, then he decided if I liked it and wanted it, it was all right.

Then, we decided to buy the building and we put the money down, that was on... about the 15th of April. Then July 1st, we opened up the store in Toledo. The building was really in my name, of course he had to sign for it but I owned the building and we both owned the drugstore.

Nick Pavlik:

That was the voice of Ella P. Stewart, one of the most remarkable individuals in the history of Toledo, Ohio. Shortly before her death in 1987 at the age of 94, Stewart recorded an oral history of her life with CAC archivist Ann Bowers. Stewart donated the oral history recording to the CAC, along with several of her personal papers and scrapbooks. Since that time, the entire Stewart collection has been available at the CAC to all who wish to see it. As we heard just a moment ago, Stewart moved to Toledo in 1922 where she established Stewart's Pharmacy in the neighborhood of Lenk's Hill. Six years earlier, in 1916, Stewart had been the first Black woman to graduate from the University of Pittsburgh's School of Pharmacy. After passing her state exam that same year, she became one of the first professional Black female pharmacists in the United States.

In Toledo, Stewart's Pharmacy became central to life in Lenk's Hill, where it operated for nearly 25 years. But, this is only one aspect of Stewart's remarkably accomplished life. Her far more enduring legacy is as one of 20th century Toledo's most pioneering civil rights activists and community leaders. To better understand the significance of Stewart's life story and the context of her times, we enlisted the historical expertise of an instructor here at BGSU.

Shirley Green:

My name is Shirley Green. I am an Adjunct Instructor at Bowling Green State University. I received my PhD from BGSU, as well. I also am the part-time Director of the Toledo Police Museum, which is located in Toledo, Ohio. One of my responsibilities as a second year PhD candidate down at Bowling Green State University... I work with a local historical society here in Toledo, Ohio.

Nick Pavlik:

Which organization was that?

Shirley Green:

It was the African American Legacy Project. We were capturing the oral histories of senior members of the African American community and what their experiences were, how they remembered the Black community that they grew up in. It's really funny because thinking back on that particular oral history project, which is in the early 2000s I believe, I remember many of them talking about Stewart Pharmacy. A lot of them talked about Stewart Pharmacy. I remember going in there. I remember sitting at the soda fountain bar. I remember getting prescriptions there. They had very fond memories of Mr. and Mrs. Stewart and that pharmacy, that pharmacy was a focal point of their community. One of the things that... you can look through all those oral histories, and that's one of the common themes that would pop up in their memories.

Ella P. Stewart:

The people there just got very fond of us because we were so much interested in their home, their children and whatnot... people had a lot of children. We got to be known as just probably a member of the Lenk's Hill group. As a Negro people began coming in, well, of course they would come from their various churches, a distance, after Sunday school or church. Of course, on Sundays we were very busy. We always had to have extra help to help serve them because we had tables in there for ice cream... drug stores had soda fountains. We had a large 16 foot soda fountain, so we had a lot of business. We kept busy and we opened up at eight o'clock and would close at 11. Sometime between 10 and 11 there were hardly anybody in the store, but we stayed open in the event they needed something. Most of it was probably cigarettes or something that they had forgotten, however... then, they could ring our bell because we lived upstairs in the nine rooms that were upstairs

Nick Pavlik:

Before listening to this interview, I had never heard of the Lenk's Hill neighborhood in Toledo. Had you heard of that neighborhood before? What can you tell us about it?

Shirley Green:

Well, I did not grow up in that area of town. I grew up in the north end, but I do know people who grew up around that area so I had heard about the term Lenk's, but not Lenk's Hill. However, having said all that, I did a little bit of research and talked to some individuals and understood that this area in Lenk's Hill... when Ella P. Stewart moved to that area... in 1922 they came here, it was primarily a German-American neighborhood. It was named after a German immigrant who started the first winery and brewery in Toledo. He purchased a block of land in that south Toledo area and started to build homes for other German immigrants to Toledo. I think they also had a park there. There was a park that was located at a period of time in the 1870s, late 1800s, that was called Lenk's Park.

Then, it would eventually become City Park, which is where the pharmacy was located there at Indiana and City Park. Toledo is... and growing up, this is the way I remember it. I don't think it's that way as much anymore, but Toledo like any other urban setting had distinct ethnic neighborhoods. You had this German-American neighborhood that grew out of Lenk's Hill. Right next to that German-American neighborhood was a Polish-American neighborhood. Then, you had pockets of Black communities and neighborhoods sprinkled throughout the city. One of the largest during the Great Migration period was something called the Pinewood District. Then, there was a community in the north part of Toledo. It is not unusual that Lenk's Hill grew out of one German immigrant and that they all collected together to make their own communities over there.

Nick Pavlik:

Contrary to what I would've expected, Lenk's Hill being a predominantly German-Irish neighborhood, she doesn't indicate that she had any difficulty at all establishing her drug store there and indicates more that she was quickly welcomed by the community and that the pharmacy was pretty successful within a short time. I was just wondering if you were also surprised to hear this?

Shirley Green:

Well, not entirely but somewhat. Listening to the history of the German-American neighborhood and the Polish-American neighborhood being right next door to each other, there were some tensions there sometimes. I was surprised to see that she was so accepted by the German-American community there.

Ella P. Stewart:

We'd open the store and we had such a crowd out there that they were lined up on both sides, on the City Park side and Indiana side to get in. 90% of the people were White, Caucasians, either Irish or German... they were Caucasians and a few Spanish people. There were not many Spanish people here then, and not many other ethnic groups here

then, except the Caucasian people. But, we were busy all day long. You never saw so many flowers... we had, really, tubs of flowers, just flowers all over the place and people could hardly get around in the store for the many flowers that people had sent. It was really a wonderful occasion. In fact, one of the editors of The Blade was there, one of the reporters said that they had never seen so many flowers at an opening. I was so shocked that I said to my husband that night... we didn't get to bed until about two o'clock in the morning.

But anyway, I said to him, "Well, my dear, I hope you're pleased now." He says, "I'm not pleased until the money starts coming in." He says, "Those people are just coming in and sight-seeing." However, we opened up the store and we began to do business and we had a very good opening of the business. That was my opening of the drugstore in Toledo.

Ann Bowers:
It sounds like it.

Shirley Green:
Now having said that, maybe she was the only game in town, maybe that pharmacy was the closest one. As soon as they figured out that they were doing good work there, they could overlook some things if Mr and Mrs. Stewart were a good Pharmacist and welcoming them in their store. It was easier for me to walk down half a block to get my script than go all the way over here to get my script, so just the fact that they were there in the neighborhood could have been why she was successful.

Nick Pavlik:
Ella P. Stewart arrived in Toledo toward the beginning of what is now known as the Great Migration, in which from the 1920s to the 1970s six million Black people fled the rural south to the cities of the Northeast, Midwest, and West in the hopes of escaping the state sanctioned anti-Black racism of the south and finding better economic opportunities. Toledo was among the several Midwestern cities that Black southerners moved to during the Great Migration. I asked Dr. Green about the effects that this seismic demographic transformation had on the city.

Nick Pavlik:
What can you tell us about Toledo's place in the history of the Great Migration and what it would've been like for a Black person from the rural south arriving somewhere like Toledo?

Shirley Green:
Well, before the Great Migration there were Black communities located throughout Toledo. There were communities located near the downtown area. There was also a community in east Toledo. One of the first Black communities were located in a place called Manhattan, Ohio, which is now where Manhattan Boulevard and Summer Streets come together in present day Ohio, Detwiler Park sits there right now. But, if you're looking at the Great Migration that occurred between the 1920s, and some historians

push it all the way back to the 1970s, there are three main streams of migration patterns, and it depended upon where you lived in the rural south is where you wound up in the north. The patterns that affected Cleveland, Detroit, and Pittsburgh, those individuals came from Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, as well as Tennessee and Kentucky. They're coming to the big city. What this mass migration did was... by 1920 Toledo's Black population was almost at 6,000 individuals. By 1930, it was doubled that number, it was 13,000 people. It doubled in 10 years.

You could see how rapidly the Black population grew. What they were dealing with when they came into Toledo was they... most of them had to live in an area called the Pinewood District. The major thoroughfare of the Pinewood District was Dorr street, basically the junction between present day Dorr Street and Division Streets would come together. One of the streets that a lot of folks who came up from the Great Migration lived on was a street called John R Street. Now, some of those street have been... they were destroyed basically because they had to make way for public housing complexes, which came up in the late '40s and '50s. But for the most part, Blacks who came from the south into Toledo were relegated to live in mostly segregated communities. That was done because the efforts of groups like the Citizens Realty plan. This group supported racial restrictions and property ownership, they often threatened violence against African Americans who attempted to buy homes outside of their designated districts.

They were really constrained to living in certain areas and they are also relegated to low wage, semi-skilled, and unskilled jobs. As the Black population grew as a result of the Great Migration, neighborhoods like Lenk's Hill became more diverse and more Black. What the stewards were able to see at their pharmacy was a neighborhood transition from being a German-American neighborhood, an Irish neighborhood to slowly but surely becoming more diverse and then primarily a Black neighborhood. However, they were still considered the focal point of that community, along with an area on Dorr Street that would become the epicenter of Black culture in Toledo. They were all part of that and Mrs. Stewart saw all that change.

Nick Pavlik:

In what became a common occurrence in 20th century urban neighborhoods, as more Black people moved into Lenk's Hill more and more White people who had been living there began to move out.

Shirley Green:

The original Pinewood District that was segregated off just couldn't hold the influx of new people. They started to push, and as they started to push then the German-Americans and some of the Polish-Americans... I think the Polish-Americans were the last to leave that area and the area I grew up in as well... they just started to leave. They could, not sell their homes, but rent their homes out and things of that nature.

Ella P. Stewart:

People said I was going to starve to death because I was moving in a... well, people were being transferred from one area to another, and then the folks were coming in and it was more or less of an Irish and German neighborhood. Of course, they were selling to the Negro people that could buy and move out of the Canton Avenue section and wherever they were living. It was really a venture on our part to really go into the neighborhood.

Nick Pavlik:

The Great Migration sparked Stewart's career in Civil Rights activism and community leadership. Many migrant families to Toledo, having come from the rural south, struggled to make new lives for themselves in a large Midwestern city. Stewart, being as immersed as she was in her community, witnessed these families struggles firsthand and was moved to help. She became a member of the Enterprise Charity Club, a women's philanthropic organization that provided assistance to migrant families and welcomed them to Toledo.

Shirley Green:

Where do those people work and where do those people go? And organizations like Mrs. Stewart's Enterprise Charity Club help these women who were coming up from the south, never lived in the city before, helped them to understand what they needed to do, where they needed to go, who they could count on to help them, what resources were there.

Ann Bowers:

This Enterprise Charity Club was a women's club, right?

Ella P. Stewart:

It was just a women's club, it was one of the leading charity clubs among Negro's in the city of Toledo. They were doing charity work because there were so many Negro people that were coming from the south that didn't have anything because the various firms were going down, bringing them up, and just giving them probably a place to stay, or big families would be... maybe two or three families in one place. As people would move out, they would rent to them and get the rent. People began to buy in the neighborhood and whatnot, but they're the ones that would go and get baskets of food if they needed food. They would go in and tell them, let's see it there. Some of them... down south they didn't have to have windows, like shades and things like we have here.

They'd have newspapers up. We'd go and get them some curtains and show them how to make the curtains, or else make them form them and take them and put them up, show them how to do the things... the women from the charity club. I was not the only one there was, many of the women did that type of work. Those that weren't working, not that too many of them were working, they were more housewives, they could do it very easily. But, I began to work with them, getting them leadership because they had not been... some of them had worked on the farms. They didn't know how to cut the grass and the weeds and things.

Shirley Green:

It's always interesting to me how these women groups also want to tell you how to keep your house. We're going to find some curtains for you. We're going to do all these things. I think it probably was helpful to these women because they just wanted to be accepted, I'm sure. These are the little things that Mrs. Stewart and others tried to give them. They had teas, they had parties, they had contests. They did all of the Christmas parties. They did all of these things to make these women feel, and their families feel, welcome. That was very important to her. It really was.

Nick Pavlik:

The Enterprise Charity Club marked the beginning of an illustrious career in activism and philanthropy for Stewart. Having been recognized for her leadership in the Enterprise Charity Club, in 1944 Stewart was elected President of the Ohio Association of Colored Women. She was then elected President of the National Association for Colored Women, a role she served in from 1948 to 1952.

Shirley Green:

The National Association for Colored Women, what an amazing group and collection of people. But to understand that group, you have to understand the women's club movement that originated in the late 19th century, early 20th century, among upper and middle class women. They were trying to provide a way for women to improve their own lives through education and to improve their own communities through public service. They were also trying to help the lives of poor women that lived in their communities. These clubs started to work on a number of issues. Some of these local clubs opened private libraries, which were eventually taken over by local governments. Some of them even expected schools, they lobbied for building playgrounds, they campaigned for kindergartens in preschool, and they brought in nurses and hot lunches into schools, especially the schools where poor children were attending.

Then, some of these club women also fought to improve sanitation and public health services. They did a little bit of everything, and this is in the late 1800s, early 1900s. Eventually, these individual groups would come together under a national umbrella. In 1890, they formed something called the General Federation of Women's Clubs. These were mostly White women in their local White clubs, but there was a parallel kind of movement going on as well among the African American community. The African American groups, the local groups like the Enterprise Charity Club, they were also dealing with the same type of issues that the other women's clubs were dealing with, but they're also dealing with issues of race. They were dealing with issues of education and community improvement, but also how race affected all of those things for Black children and Black families.

One of the founding members of the Black woman's club movement was a woman by the name of Mary Church Terrell. She's also a friend of Mrs. Stewart, there are several pictures of her and Mrs. Stewart together in Ella P. Stewart's collection. So, like the White counterpart group, the Black women's club movement also started their own

national organization in 1896. That was the beginning of the National Association for Colored Women. That first version, the founding members were... listen to the names of these founding members, and this was pre Ella P. Stewart, of course, because they were formed in 1896. Harriet Tubman was a founding member, Ida B. Wells-Barnett was a founding member, and Mary Church Terrell was a founding member. The original motto, and I think it is still the motto of the association was "Lifting as we climb".

They focused on child care, fairness in wages, education, and they raised money for libraries and retirement homes. They were also very strong advocates for the anti-lynching campaign because if Ida B. Wells-Barnett is involved, they're going to be a strong advocate for the anti-lynching campaign. They also fought against segregation in public transportation, public accommodations, which Mrs. Stewart would be involved in on a local and a national level. When she became president in 1948, she served a four year term and she took over all the responsibilities that Mary Church Terrell and others had before her. It's really interesting if you look at any of the histories or any writings about the National Association for Colored Women... and they eventually added clubs to their names, and you read about Mary Church Terrell and some of the other organizers and founding members and other presidents that were very impactful during their term.

You don't read a lot about Ella P. Stewart, which has always been very surprising to me that more people haven't latched onto her story. She really needs to be recognized, concerning her work as president of that association. One of the things that Mrs. Stewart had the responsibility of was the maintenance of the Frederick Douglas... his last homestead. It's a historic site and that association took over its maintenance and upkeep, they actually purchased it to make sure that it maintained a historic site. It wasn't until the 1960s that they turned it over to the National Park Service, and now the National Park Service runs it as a historic site. She was also president when they were organizing campaigns against segregation on public transportation. During her presidency, the group lobbied effectively for many progressive measures. They lobbied for the passage of an anti-lynching law, an anti poll tax law, fair housing, fair employment practices. They also supported Black-owned businesses, as well. They established scholarship funds for young Black women. When she was president of the organization, she did a number of things. She's amazing.

Nick Pavlik:

As Dr. Green notes, the National Association for Colored Women played a significant role in the larger history of the Black freedom struggle, one that has still been under-acknowledged.

Shirley Green:

This is a precursor, all of the stuff that she and these club women were in and members, these individual associations that were members of the national group, they're all precursors to the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s with the Montgomery bus boycott. The Civil Rights leaders were able to plug into all of these other things that were going on before there was a major push in the '60s.

Nick Pavlik:

Though she became recognized at the national level for her Civil Rights work, Ella P. Stewart maintained a deep commitment to her home community of Toledo. In 1961, she became a founding member of the Toledo Board of Community Relations, where she fought for fair employment and fair housing for the Black community.

Shirley Green:

I think when they started the Board of Community Relations in the 1960s, I think the one thing... and it's still the case today, whatever version there is of it now is that they were just trying to improve the racial climate, and making sure that the city was doing the right thing by different minority communities within the city of Toledo. I think for the most part though, the issues that were still pressing in the 1960s in Toledo for African-Americans were the issue of jobs and the issue of fair housing. Those are the major pillars that Mrs. Stewart and others on the board were trying to fix.

Ella P. Stewart:

We worked for years before and worked for trying to get people jobs, more or less it was getting people work and locating them... where they could live. We'd take them out... go out here where they had the boxcars, they were sleeping in boxcars out here on Hill Avenue and places. Well, we'd go out and bring them in when we find... the kids look forward to do it.

Shirley Green:

That's hard because now you have to deal with private industries, private businesses. As a city, you can say, "We're going to hire more of this." It's going to be difficult to pressure private corporations to do the same thing, which is why I believe one of the reasons that Mrs. Stewart worked behind the scenes.

Nick Pavlik:

Despite these challenges, the board enjoyed its share of victories throughout the 1960s, one of which was the employment of Black nurses at local hospitals.

Ella P. Stewart:

The Board of Community Relations worked and got nurses, Negro nurses, as they would come in. They'd see the hospitals here would not accept Negro's to go in for training, they'd have to go south. The first woman that came in was Mrs. Virginia Ford, whose father... he was a dealer dealing with coal. We got people interested... this is his granddaughter. We sent her down to Providence Hospital in Kansas City. When she came, she was the first person to come into Toledo and do field work for them, the District Nurses Association.

Nick Pavlik:

While the Board of Community Relations was ultimately concerned with breaking down barriers for racial minorities in public life, its work toward achieving this goal was mostly done behind the scenes. Stewart recalled how much of her work on the board was

comprised of meeting and cultivating relationships with the White leadership of Toledo's businesses and civic institutions to convince them to end their discriminatory practices.

Ella P. Stewart:

The Board of Communities did a lot of individual work, talking to the people as individuals.

Ann Bowers:

You might go to a hospital and talk with the administration about hiring Negro nurses?

Ella P. Stewart:

Yes. If they give you some negative answer or whatnot, then you would find out who was on that board that you doing, and then you go to them as individuals and talk to them. Of course, they controlled the hospital.

Ann Bowers:

If you got them to say you're right, then that would change the policy?

Ella P. Stewart:

Yes. We'd have to go to Toledo U, it's just a small school then, and we'd have to go and talk to the president about certain students that were there, they weren't getting the grades real high because right away they'd feel that the professors were prejudice. We'd have to go and talk to the professor to find out. Then, we'd have to talk to the individuals and go into families and talk to them.

Ann Bowers:

You did a lot of talking to people.

Ella P. Stewart:

Yes, it was all personal.

Nick Pavlik:

Stewart was naturally suited for this behind-the-scenes approach to activism, personable, compassionate, and patient, yet doggedly persistent and assertive. She possessed a quiet power about her that never faltered under the magnitude of the task at hand. But as Dr. Green explains, Stewart was also forced into working behind-the-scenes by 20th century gender norms and had to balance her role as a Black female activist with societal expectations of proper womanhood.

Shirley Green:

Well, I think you first have to keep in mind that Ella P. Stewart was a woman, and that she not only had to deal with issues of race but also issues of gender when trying to deal with city leaders and city politicians. You had Black female leaders and other professional women at the end of the 19th century. They were seen within their community as nurturers and guardians, they were not the thinkers and the leaders of the Black community, they were not thought of as such. Now, that would change over a

period of time. Mrs. Stewart and people like Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells-Barnett were an example of that, but it's something historian Shirley Carleston calls it dual womanhood. She said that most of these women rejected the whole notion of domesticity and submissiveness, either because they chose to or they had to... they were compelled to by their economic circumstances.

These women managed to combine these two opposing qualities. They adopted a stance that was aimed at defending Black womanhood and showing its strength in central focus in the struggle of advancing the Black race. But, they also conformed to this image of a lady. They knew their strength, they knew their worth, and they would push to defend all that for themselves and other Black women. But, they also were able to project, some of them, this image of being a lady and being accepted. I think for Mrs. Stewart, working behind-the-scenes was typical for women in the early 20th century. There were different styles of leadership that grew out of that Black woman's club movement, you had more people that were a little bit more outspoken. But, I think that Mrs. Stewart was comfortable working her connections and working behind-the-scene.

Ella P. Stewart:

I go to these individual board members and talk to them and tell them... when you get in with the organizations you can really do much because you can make personal friends. I'm a person that likes to make personal friends, not just go into a meeting and sit down, but I make myself known. I get up and introduce myself, and I'd go up to the individuals that I think, especially if they smile and some of them wouldn't smile, some of them would pass you by like you were a wall or something, but it didn't matter to me because I felt that I was human and belonged to the human family. It didn't concern me too much how they felt because I felt sorry for them that they felt that way. I always said, "If you go in with a smile, I think it means more than anything else if you can smile through really some very sad things that would probably... most people would get angry or be really sad about it and probably never go back." But, I'd go back.

Shirley Green:

I think working behind-the-scenes, as long as she was getting things done, worked for her.

Ella P. Stewart:

That's the way I got to be so popular with the women because I knew so many people. As I come up, I done know so many is because I had nerve enough to go and make an appointment and see the manager of the various stores. I would call ahead of time and they didn't know whether it was going to be a White face or a Black face showing up. Sometimes, the girls would say, "Are you sure you had an appointment?" I said, "Yes, I have an appointment." Well, he's going to be busy for the next half hour. I said, "That's all right, I'll wait." I have a lot of patience, things that you have to wait on people. Having come up in Virginia with discrimination and knowing about discrimination, I knew that some of it was probably they didn't want me to see me anything.

Ella P. Stewart:

If they tell me that Toledo's [inaudible 00:35:57] I wouldn't be able to leave. I'd go in, they wouldn't get to see me. But, I would wait anyway. I have never been turned down by any of them that I made contacts with at all, and got to be known.

Nick Pavlik:

Though it wasn't as explicit as in the south, anti-Black racism was still pervasive throughout the Northern United States, and Toledo was no exception. Black people still faced daily racial discrimination in Toledo, particularly in public accommodations such as movie theaters and restaurants. But, as she makes clear in her oral history, Ella P. Stewart refused to be subjugated by such treatment.

Shirley Green:

Mrs. Stewart, on a very personal level, dealt with discrimination in public accommodations, especially in downtown theaters.

Ella P. Stewart:

Now, the discrimination that you find is when you go to the theater or go to the movie... [inaudible 00:37:10] and other things they're called and whatnot and they want to go to the balcony, that's where you find the discrimination.

Shirley Green:

Some of the downtown theaters had segregated seating. There was a point, I think, in her oral history she talks about the fact that she went to a movie and she was asked to move. She said, "No, I'm not going to move." She didn't, and they couldn't make her move.

Ella P. Stewart:

I never did go up, they never did seat me upstairs unless I want to go up there. But, I would go in... one time I just went in and sat down and the ushers came to kick me out. I said, "You're going to have to drag me out because you'll never kick me out on my feet, you'll drag me out."

Ann Bowers:

Did they leave you alone?

Ella P. Stewart:

Yes, they went and got some more men, a couple more. They said, "Well, we'll get the police." I said, "Get the police, it would be all right with me." My husband always said he had to keep extra money to bail me out of jail.

Shirley Green:

Then, also you had some of the restaurants that provided only carry-out services for Black's. Those are the types of very specific things that were going on in Toledo.

Ella P. Stewart:

If you went to a restaurant and you wanted to get a sandwich or you want to sit down and get a meal or a bowl of soup, they would turn you down. They'd say, "If you want a sandwich we'll fix you a sandwich, you can take it out."

Nick Pavlik:

Stewart never allowed businesses to evade accountability for racial discrimination. She confronted them and she did so with the same approach she took to her activism work. She personally met with management behind the scenes, refusing to be turned away until they agreed to meet with her.

Ella P. Stewart:

Well, I'd always ask to see the manager. Of course, if he's out, I'd see the assistant. Sometimes, I would see either one and then I'd go back. I'd make us go home and call and make a special appointment to see them.

Nick Pavlik:

Racial injustice did not affect all Black people equally, as Ella P. Stewart knew all too well. Her husband William had a light enough skin color that he often passed for a White person and was able to gain access to spaces from which most Black people were excluded.

Ella P. Stewart:

My husband was much lighter, he was what you would call... well, he was a more of an olive complexion. He could go in... of course, we could never go together because one stayed at the drug store while the other one was always on the business side. Now, William, his nights off, he would go alone, but he never would have to go any place because they just let him on in.

Shirley Green:

I've seen pictures. She called him Doc Stewart. I've seen pictures of Doc, I would recognize him as an African-American man. But, if he carried himself in a certain way he could pass. He could totally pass, which is so unusual. You have Doc who could pass as a White person and his quite vocal wife, who can't. That's very interesting.

Nick Pavlik:

Can you talk a little, just more generally, about the phenomenon of White-passing?

Shirley Green:

That is such an interesting topic. I think if you did a survey of African-Americans of the Boomer generation and older, they could probably talk to you about a story or even know individuals that passed as White. By passing, I mean that you, as a Black person, your skin color is so light that you appear to be of European descent, you have other European physical characteristics like a long nose or straight hair so you can pass as White. If someone looks at you, they would initially think that you were a White person, that's passing. I remember a story that my mother told me, she and her mother, my

grandmother, were going out shopping. This is when... at the department stores, you still had elevator operators. You walk into the elevator, you tell the person who's operating the elevator what floor you want to go on and they take you there. My mother, who was a young girl, was going to go up to this elevator operator and talk to her like she knew her from the neighborhood.

My grandmother, her mother, grabbed her and said, "No, don't talk to her." Because this woman who my mother recognized as being Black was passing as a White person and my grandmother didn't want my mother to mess up her game. She said, "No, honey, come with me." If you look at race as a social construct, so attached to your skin color are all of these stereotypes and these characteristics, if someone who doesn't have that skin color is going to use that against the system. I can gain the system now because they think I am one thing and I'm really the other. There's this better of passing as White because you now are living the life of an American citizen with full rights. You don't have to worry about racial violence. You can get better jobs, you can do all those things.

However, there is the downside of that because now you are an exile of your own community. You're no longer a member of the African-American community, you're an exile of that community. Social scientists don't know... they have no idea the extent of passing. They can't come up with numbers. They don't know how many people vanish... African-Americans just vanish into the ranks of White people. They have no idea, but it is a very interesting phenomenon.

Nick Pavlik:

As we neared the end of our discussion, I asked Dr. Green about some of her more general takeaways from having listened to Ella P. Stewart's oral history.

Shirley Green:

First off, I was amazed about her memory... that she could remember so many small things, how many prescriptions that they sold per day. I like the fact that she called Toledo a quiet town. Now, I know she was comparing it to Detroit but she called Toledo a quiet town.

Ella P. Stewart:

One of the reasons why I came to Toledo was many of the salesmen when I worked at the Youngstown General Hospital in Youngstown they would say, "What a nice town." It was, it was quiet, and I like a quiet town. Detroit was... the people were just coming from the south in droves. Of course, I didn't care a whole lot about Detroit and that is the only city in my life that I ever got lost in, even when I went out of the country I never got lost.

Shirley Green:

I think the one quote that she gives to her husband was that...

Ella P. Stewart:

My husband said I did more social work than I did drug work.

Shirley Green:

I like that. The other thing that I thought was really interesting listening to the oral history was her contact with these national figures again, the people that she opened up her home to that had to stay with her because they couldn't get a room at one of the nicer hotels downtown. You had people like W. E. B. Du Bois, the jazz pianist Art Tatum, and singer Marian Anderson staying at her house. You think about that... these people were in Toledo. First off, I was amazed these people were in Toledo number one, and number two that they're hanging out with Ella P. Stewart. That's great.

Nick Pavlik:

Could you talk a bit about your impressions of Ella P. Stewart herself as a person?

Shirley Green:

Just listening to her voice on the oral history interview, it just reminded me... I just always looked at her as just being this fearless woman. She was fearless. She was relentless, just fearless and relentless. I was really impressed by her ability to network with individuals. She could reach out to these local officials and businessmen and was not afraid to do so, and that was all part of her work as a pharmacist and a business owner, but also she was motivated by her work in the social realm. I just thought that she was doing things at a period of time that most women were not doing, especially Black women.

Ella P. Stewart:

It was one of the Jewish ladies said to me one time, she saw me at a Catholic funeral and she said to me, "Ella Stewart, where is it you don't go?" I told her there was only one place I didn't want to go, and that started with a Mich. I said, "It's not the itch you think of, I'll be up with another itch."

Shirley Green:

The other thing is she just refused to be treated as a second class citizen, she just refused it. She fought for the rights of other Blacks to be treated fairly. Even though she had to deal with the trappings of being a second class citizen, the way that she went through classes at the University of Pittsburgh she had to sit separate from her male colleagues. None of that stuff stopped her. She said, "All right, I have to sit here, but you're still going to treat me... I'm still going to get my education like everyone else."

Ella P. Stewart:

I feel that... I definitely don't feel like segregation in any way is the right thing for America because it's bringing in all ethnic groups... I think last night I read about the Cuban's, how they're now giving them citizenship. Yet, they haven't given the Negro a real citizenship yet, they haven't. I was thinking, "Well, if I were younger I would be writing an article to the various papers." I used to be always writing to these people.

Shirley Green:

She was just so good at educating herself about the different systems that she had to navigate herself, I think that is typical of what most African-American women did and do.

They probably have a better understanding of the institutional systems than anyone else and they figure out a way to navigate that. She did that by her connections with other groups.

Nick Pavlik:

How would you summarize Ella P. Stewart's legacy? How is she relevant to us today? What can we learn from her today?

Shirley Green:

I think what her story does and what her collection does is it fills in that gap between the 1920s and the Great Migration up to the period of the Civil Rights Movement. What were local leaders doing during that period of time, what were Black women doing during that period of time, and how they interacted with the more national movements. Her story and what she did on a personal level, opening up the first Black-owned pharmacy with her husband in Toledo, and becoming the president of a nationwide organization of Black women can really fill in how the activities that occurred lays the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement that would come after her heyday. I think the other thing is... her story is the story of perseverance, that she never stopped. Early on, she suffered a tragic loss with the loss of a daughter and she never let any of that keep her down.

She went to school when they told her you can't come to this school. She came to Toledo, which was not her home base. Initially they were in Detroit, so they moved around until they found the perfect spot for them. She was just a major contributor to social activism before the '60s. She was a major player on the national stage, she knew important people on the national stage. I think she's relevant because she also provides a roadmap as to how to be a mentor to young women. I know there are individual teachers and things like that, that looked up to her and that she mentored throughout her life and throughout her career. She was just an amazing woman. She was not afraid to make her voice heard, even though she did it in a different way than we are used to.

I always tell people that my favorite picture of her is... there's one picture where she is standing in the doorway of the pharmacy. I don't know if you've seen this picture. She has her glasses on, her hair's pulled back, she's leaning against the door, and she has her Pharmacist clothes on. She's just taking a break from work. It's not one of the real more interesting photos where she's all dressed up and she's at Truman's inauguration, or she's on a train going to the National Convention of the National Association of Colored Women, it's just a... it's almost like it's just as how I look on typical day in the life of Ella P. Stewart. I am a working woman, I'm a working Pharmacist, and I'm a pillar of this community. I love that picture because I think it captures the essence of who she is, is that she did all these other things, but she was grounded in the work that she was doing in that pharmacy and the work that she was doing in that community.

She really didn't think that she was so much better than everyone else. I think, it captures her essence in that photograph and I really like it. It's just a hard-working woman who... I'm just persevering here, I'm relentless, I'm fearless, and I'm going to go

back in here and make a couple more prescriptions now. I love that picture, I think it's a great picture.

Ella P. Stewart:

When America wakes up to the fact that we can accept all nationalities, ethnic groups, regardless of their racial background or their country, I think America will be a real America. But, I'm still very proud that I am an American.

Nick Pavlik:

Archival Encounters is produced by the Center for Archival Collections at Bowling Green State University Libraries. Special thanks to Dr. Shirley Green, Adjunct Instructor of History at BGSU, for her insights on the life and legacy of Ella P. Stewart, and to Marco Mendoza, Media Technology Specialist in the BGSU School of Media and Communications, for his assistance with audio editing. Our music was composed by Connor McCoy, a graduate of BGSU's College of Musical Arts. To listen to the entirety of Ella P. Stewart's oral history and for more information on the Center for Archival Collections, visit our website at bgsu.edu/library/cac.