

Keeping Heart

A MEMOIR OF FAMILY STRUGGLE,
RACE, AND MEDICINE

Otis Trotter

Introduction by Joe William Trotter Jr.

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JOE WILLIAM TROTTER JR.

KEEPING HEART OFFERS A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE on the twentieth-century African American experience. This memoir by my brother not only illuminates the personal life and struggles of a black man, born with heart disease in the southern Appalachian coalfields, but also reveals the dynamics of African American family formation and community relations during the era of the Great Migration. Organized around the life history and recollections of Otis Trotter and his thirteen siblings, the story begins in 1914 with our parents, Joe William Trotter Sr. and Thelma Odell Foster Trotter, in rural Pike and Crenshaw Counties, Alabama. Joe and Thelma were born, raised, and married in Jim Crow Alabama. In 1936 the oldest of their fourteen children was also born in Alabama, but within a year after her birth the family moved to Valls creek, McDowell County, in southern West Virginia. Joe secured a job in the coal mines and Thelma worked exclusively inside the home. Most of the Trotter children were born at home, but the youngest three siblings, beginning with Otis, were born in a hospital in nearby Richlands, Virginia.

Following our father's death in 1957, our mother, as a widow with a large family, struggled for four years to make ends meet before moving to northeastern Ohio. As Otis notes in his memoir, it was a "bittersweet" departure: "After saying our good-byes to friends and neighbors, we all got in the cars and headed up the hill and down the road toward a future in Ohio that we hoped would be brighter." The Trotter family joined what some historians call

the Second Great Migration of southern blacks to the urban North. The percentage of all blacks living in cities rose from just over 50 percent during the 1940s to over 80 percent by the 1970s. Almost half of the African American population in the United States now lived in the urban North and West.

While millions of southern blacks migrated from farms and fields to the major metropolitan areas of the urban North, other blacks like the Trotter family moved to small communities outside the large centers of black urban migration. Thelma Trotter moved her family to small industrial towns in northeastern Ohio—Newcomerstown, Tuscarawas County, in 1961 and Massillon, Stark County, in 1974. Valscreek, Newcomerstown, and Massillon provided the setting for most of Otis Trotter's life. Except for his college years at Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio, Otis lived in these towns until he moved to Highland Creek, an avenue in nearby suburban North Canton, Ohio, in 2007.

Beginning with his birth in West Virginia in 1954, multiple heart operations and procedures to save his life emerge at the center of Otis Trotter's narrative. A careful student of his own health condition, Otis gives close and detailed accounts of his medical history, along with the ways that he coped with life growing up as a young black male in a large, poor family in predominantly white towns. The Modern Black Freedom Movement of the 1950s and 1960s opened up new opportunities for Otis and some members of his family, along with other twentieth-century southern black migrants, to gain access to better education, jobs, housing, and health care than their parents had had. After earning his BS degree in psychology from Central State in 1978, Otis obtained employment as a special education teacher and vocational trainer at the Stark County Board of Developmental Disabilities in Massillon, from which he retired after thirty years of service in 2009.

As newcomers, the Trotter family faced the added difficulties of integrating into sometimes hostile local black as well as white communities. However, by telling his story alongside the experiences of his parents as well as his siblings, Otis in his memoir underscores intrafamilial, generational, and regional diversity in the lives of black people in Deep South Alabama, Upper South West Virginia, and small-town urban Midwest. When the Trotter family moved

to northeastern Ohio in 1961, they entered a shifting environment of class and race relations in the northern reserve. Both Newcomerstown and Massillon had their beginnings during the nation's nineteenth-century struggle over the future of slavery, but few blacks lived in either town until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when both towns experienced the transition from early commercial to industrial capitalism. By the early twentieth century, new industrial firms—including the James B. Clow and Sons Company in Newcomerstown and the Union Drawn Division of Republic Steel in Massillon—were producing for national and international markets.

As Newcomerstown and Massillon made the transition to industrial production, they also gradually turned toward the recruitment of black workers to meet their labor needs. After a Clow Company plant burned down in nearby New Philadelphia in 1895, city officials gave the company 20 acres of land and \$30,000 to relocate in Newcomerstown. Between the late 1890s and the early 1920s, the Clow Company recruited a small ethnically and racially diverse workforce, including Italians, Hungarians, and southern African Americans from Kentucky, North Carolina, and particularly the town of Rock Run, Alabama. Massillon industrialists also recruited blacks alongside immigrants from southern, central, and eastern Europe to staff their expanding steel plants.

Like their counterparts from larger urban areas, small-town black midwesterners soon occupied racially segregated neighborhoods and formed their own community-based institutions. In Newcomerstown, southern blacks lived dispersed across several different streets until the early 1920s, when the Clow Company completed the construction of about thirty new company houses. Located on land across the street from the plant, company-owned houses attracted increasing numbers of blacks to Clow Avenue (later renamed Martin Luther King Drive) and parts of adjoining College Street. By the time the Trotter family arrived, most African Americans lived on one street. Massillon's African American population also became spatially concentrated in certain areas. Unlike in Newcomerstown, however, African Americans occupied a broader range of streets, including Erie near the Tuscarawas River, Tremont, and further south; Walnut Avenue down to the railroad tracks on 3rd Street; the Cherry Avenue Warwick area; and Columbia Heights.

Although on a much smaller scale than their brothers and sisters in metropolitan America, blacks in small-town Ohio also transformed their segregated spaces into communities of mutual self-help and institutional support. More than was the case for their urban counterparts, however, their lives revolved almost exclusively around their families, churches, and a few service, mainly home-based, enterprises. Established partly with support from industrial employers, African American churches emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Saint James African Methodist Episcopal Zion (1884), Shiloh Baptist (1902), and Friendship Missionary Baptist (1919) in Massillon and Trinity Baptist (1908) and St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church (1920) in Newcomerstown. In addition to churches, black Massillonians and Newcomerstownians also established a number of businesses, including barber and beauty shops, dance halls, and small candy and soft drink concessions to serve the needs of their own small communities. Massillon produced the most outstanding example of black entrepreneurship. John Henry “Big Jenny” Lowry owned and operated the Vahepa Hotel, later named the Globe. Lowry also operated an ice company, a beverage bottling company, a sanitation business, and a brickyard. When he died in 1936, the city lowered the flag to half mast in his honor.

Despite such vibrant institution-building activities, the small communities the Trotter family entered were undergoing gradual economic and demographic decline. Newcomerstown’s total population peaked at 4,500 people in 1940. In 1956, when the Clow Company closed its doors and moved out of town, the city’s population began dropping, gradually declining to a total of 4,150 in 1970. The African American population also declined, from 180 in 1940 to 139 in 1960 and to only 106 in 1980. As Newcomerstown’s African American population declined, however, Massillon’s black population expanded. In 1920 only 2,800 blacks (about 1.5 percent of the total) lived in all of Stark County. By 1950 black Massillonians had increased to 2,100, or 7 percent of the city’s total. When the Trotter family arrived in 1973, nearly 3,000 blacks lived in Massillon. At about the same time, between 1970 and 1980, Massillon’s total population declined by nearly 2,000 (from 32,500 to 30,550, or by 6 percent), as major

industrial firms trimmed their workforces or moved away from the city altogether.

Although the Trotters arrived in Newcomerstown and later Massillon during a period of losses in population and jobs, the moves represented a substantial improvement in the family's well-being. The ten Trotter children who moved to Newcomerstown in 1961—the older siblings having graduated from high school and moved out on their own—for the first time attended racially integrated public schools and participated in a variety of integrated extracurricular activities, including sports, music, and drama. Contrary to widespread stereotypes regarding the capacity of young school-age black migrants to succeed in northern schools, the Trotter children generally performed well in their studies. Most important, however, Otis gained access to life-saving medical care.

As the Trotter family confronted the challenges of making a living—those members not living at home did regularly send money to help ends meet—and integrating into the schools and other aspects of the town's public life, they also struggled to integrate into the established black community. They joined the local Trinity Baptist Church, listened to music and danced at the Chatterbox Club, and patronized the local candy, soft drink, and barber and beauty shops. Nonetheless, in 1973 the family moved to Massillon. Unlike the move to Newcomerstown, the short journey to Massillon, less than an hour away, was “bitter,” not “bittersweet.” The Trotter family had made friends. They had also received and been given help in times of need. But the intraracial tensions and conflicts that had persisted over the years finally precipitated the family's move, and the newcomer cycle started over again. This time, however, the number of siblings living at home was down to three, including Otis. They were all nearing graduation from high school and looking forward to forging independent lives of their own.

After four years at Central State University, Otis returned to Massillon. He worked briefly as a “district manager” for Massillon's daily newspaper, the *Independent*, before securing employment at the Stark County Board of Developmental Disabilities.

Otis lived in Massillon until his recent retirement. He now lives on Highland Creek Avenue, in a new suburban subdivision that opened with a mix of people from a variety of national, ethnic, and

racial backgrounds. But his memoir is more than a tale of three migrations and community and family struggles. It is also literally and figuratively a story about heart—how one man has struggled, lived, and continues to live with heart disease. Otis Trotter found not only a way to survive but a way to educate himself, pursue a professional career, and enrich the lives of his family, friends, and community. At the same time, he developed a profound understanding of and confidence in the efficacy of modern medicine to extend and improve the quality of his life. As his memoir shows, not only has he benefited immensely from innovations in the treatment of heart disease, but he has used his good fortune to improve the lives of others, including thirty years of serving adults with developmental disabilities. *Keeping Heart* thus also reinforces a popular biblical proverb, passed down from generations of African people enslaved in the New World, “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.”