

# THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

OPINION

## To Create a More Inclusive Future, Philanthropy Should Examine the Overlooked Chapters From its Past

By *Kathleen W. Buechel*

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Suffragist, philanthropist, and NAACP leader Daisy Lampkin fused mobilized support and funding for civil- rights causes and as a major shareholder in the *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper, she brought media savvy and community clout to her philanthropy.

Stories are powerful teachers. Every culture, region, field, and institution has its own origin story that captures cautionary tales and inspiring sagas. In philanthropy, our stories have skewed far too narrowly. They've emphasized the philanthropy of the famous and the ultra-wealthy, crowding out the lessons from the work of everyday philanthropists and grassroots giving.

We know a great deal more about Rockefeller or Carnegie, and, more recently, donors like MacKenzie Scott, Bill Gates, and Michael Bloomberg, than we do about the equally consequential giving of lesser known philanthropists. Rankings by asset size and media profiles of mega donors feed our fixation on scale and notoriety. This tendency has constricted our stories and, in turn, shortchanged our craft.

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The current moment offers a chance to revisit our collective history. Today the field of philanthropy is looking back at the sources and uses of its wealth and grappling with the need to address systemic injustice and redress its own role in sustaining inequities. History's lessons can be instrumental levers for change. If we look across time to see philanthropy more expansively, we can also uncover the footprints of many diverse players who laid the groundwork for our field today.

I've seen this up-close as the editor of a new book on the history of organized philanthropy in one city — Pittsburgh. [\*A Gift of Belief: Philanthropy and the Forging of Pittsburgh\*](#) chronicles the work of everyday philanthropists and their foundation peers in a city where commercial titans and their charitable legacies loom so large that many people think they created organized philanthropy in the region. In fact, they did not.

As in other cities and towns across the country, these wealthy industrialists and their successors joined an existing tradition of individuals, religious congregations, and entire communities that contributed their often far more precious personal resources for the public good. Women, African Americans, immigrants, and religious groups from every neighborhood and social strata forged critical forms of philanthropy in

Pittsburgh. These donors preceded and continued on long after the titans.

Pittsburgh's history is not unique. What happened there offers lessons for a broader re-examination of the philanthropic field as it creates narratives for a more inclusive future. The following overlooked chapters of the Pittsburgh story should be considered in any community's accounting of its own philanthropic legacy.

**Women were often left out.** Denied the vote, eclipsed from civic engagement by social norms or laws that ceded control of property to husbands, women donors were often overshadowed by male relatives or by prominent benefactors like Andrew Carnegie or Henry C. Frick. Nearly invisible to the chroniclers of their age, they didn't fit the philanthropic iconography of their times. Yet initially as individual and religious congregation donors, and then as institution builders and foundation founders, they shaped Pittsburgh's philanthropy.

Women created, staffed, and supported Pittsburgh's [first hospital](#), its schools, [respite care facilities](#), and [residences](#). Women [donated land and parks](#). Their [sewing and canned goods sustained](#) agencies that served communities. Working through service and civic clubs, they lobbied for [clean drinking water](#), [green open spaces](#), and environmental reforms that became hallmarks of the Progressive era. This work offers a road map for policy efforts still underway today. For example, [Pittsburgh's Shade Tree Commission](#), which supports urban forestry initiatives and the maintenance of the city's trees, traces its origins to women environmental reformers from the city's [Twentieth Century Club](#), founded in 1894 as a center for "women's work, thought and action."

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Similarly, the city's United Way movement grew out of a decades-long push for coordination of services for the poor, with women playing prominent roles both behind the scenes and in public debates. Yet even today, their philanthropic stories, and their enduring legacies, remain hidden in plain sight.

**Philanthropy flourished in African American communities.** In Pittsburgh, as in cities like Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and Indianapolis, religious congregations, women's service clubs, benevolent societies, and individuals worked together to build a grassroots safety net in the Black community. Driven by faith,

social bonds, and necessity in the face of racism and segregation, Black philanthropists sustained orphanages, funded educational and youth development initiatives, and helped newcomers adapt to urban life during the Great Migration.

They also worked for social change, mobilizing resources within the community and in Pittsburgh more broadly. For example, Black activist Bernard Jones, who in 1966 founded Urban Youth Action to help young people develop life and job-readiness skills, also galvanized Black-led philanthropy. In 1980 he launched [Poise Foundation](#), which nearly two decades after his death continues to fund programs that support Pittsburgh's Black community.

By downplaying or leaving out efforts of this kind from the philanthropic annals, we fail to acknowledge the diversity of work that was always there and that needs to be built on today.

**Activism and advocacy were key components of giving.** While these tactics are more closely associated with contemporary grant making, earlier philanthropists found agency and voice through their giving. Pittsburgh philanthropists advocated for social reforms such as the abolition of slavery, clean air, and civil rights, and they magnified their messages in newspapers and other publications.

Suffragist, philanthropist, and NAACP leader [Daisy Lampkin](#) fused multiple roles when she mobilized support and funding for civil-rights causes. A major shareholder in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the nation's most influential Black-owned newspapers, she brought media savvy and community clout to her philanthropy. More recently, historians have traced New Deal programs and later welfare policies to women's philanthropic and advocacy work in the 1910s and 20s for programs that benefited mothers and children like the [Mothers' Pensions Movement](#), which provided cash payments to widows with young children.

There is much discussion today about the importance of engaging those who need nonprofit services as active participants in their design. But this is not a recent philanthropic invention. In Pittsburgh in the 1920s, Black and white working parents pressed orphanages to provide their children with [temporary shelter or affordable child care](#) when needed, expanding service areas and generating fees for service. And immigrants, who were shunned by mainstream charities, forged their own mutual-aid societies — a self-help approach that continues today in immigrant communities.

**Scientific methods drove systemic change.** More than a century ago, some philanthropists based their giving on scientific research and data — despite resistance to such methods. Donors like John D. Rockefeller in New York, Julius Rosenwald in Chicago, and the [Falk family in Pittsburgh](#) sought to solve society's problems by understanding their root causes rather than papering over them with short-term solutions. Their efforts fueled emerging fields like medical and industrial research, urban planning, and economics.

The [Pittsburgh Survey](#), begun in 1907 and was funded by the brand-new Russell Sage Foundation, catapulted social-science survey methodology forward through its assessment of the effects of industrialization and urbanization. Advocates of the Pittsburgh Survey used the social-media equivalents of their day to share their conclusions via exhibitions, public meetings, speeches, journal articles, and six published volumes. The landmark effort raised hackles in Pittsburgh for its unvarnished account of local conditions and the shortcomings of capitalism, but the survey influenced the tools philanthropists currently use when tackling tough, interconnected issues.

More than a century ago, some philanthropists were already putting the pieces in place to understand and confront systemic inequities. To become better grant makers, we need to liberate our history from a one-dimensional view of philanthropy's past. Only then can that past become an instructive prologue for a better future.

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DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

PHILANTHROPISTS

### [Kathleen W. Buechel](#)

Kathleen W. Buechel is executive director of the Benter Foundation and the editor of “A Gift of Belief: Philanthropy and the Forging of Pittsburgh.”

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