

## *The Legacy of Paul Robeson*



One hundred years ago, in 1919, Paul Robeson graduated from Rutgers College, New Brunswick at the top of his class. Academically, he was a member of Phi Beta Kappa and Rutgers Cap and Skull Honor Society, and he was named valedictorian of his class. He received an unprecedented twelve major athletic letters in multiple sports, and later played for the NFL's Milwaukee Badgers while attending law school at Columbia.

Robeson was the 3<sup>rd</sup> African American in history to graduate from Rutgers, and through his ongoing work he became one of the greatest Americans of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was an exceptional athlete, lawyer, actor, singer, cultural scholar, author, and political activist, advocating for the civil rights of people around the world. Enduring unjust strife and inequality and using it for positive social change and justice was a true testament to his integrity, character and spirit.

In the mid-1920s, after a short legal career, he returned to his love of public speaking in American theater, and through the 1930s, he was a widely acclaimed actor and singer. His "Othello" was the longest-running Shakespeare play in Broadway history, running for nearly three hundred performances. With songs such as his trademark "Ol' Man River," he became one of the most popular concert singers of his time.

While his fame grew in the United States, he became equally well-loved internationally. He spoke fifteen languages, and performed benefits throughout the world for causes of social justice. More than any other performer of his time, he believed that the famous have a responsibility to fight for justice and peace. Robeson was a national symbol and a cultural leader in the war against fascism abroad and racism at home.

Paul Robeson passed away in 1976 at age 77. His role in the history of civil rights and as a spokesperson for the oppressed of other nations had not been rightfully acknowledged for many years, but today is appropriately and respectfully given wide

acclaim and especially celebrated in New Brunswick. In 1995, his athletic achievements were recognized with his posthumous entry into the College Football Hall of Fame. Paul Robeson is being commemorated in our City on this 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his graduation for all the roles he mastered, for the dignity he brought to the rich history of Rutgers University and New Brunswick, and for the courage with which he struggled for his own personal voice and for the rights of all people.

At a Carnegie Hall tribute to mark his 75th birthday in 1973, Robeson was unable to attend, but a taped message said: "Though I have not been able to be active for several years, I want you to know that I am the same Paul, dedicated as ever to the worldwide cause of humanity for freedom, peace and brotherhood." Today, we celebrate the life of a man who became a champion for human rights and social justice with the roots of his efforts here in the City of New Brunswick, and continuing forth to change the world.