In Pursuit

PHILADELPHIA
AND THE MAKING OF AMERICA
A 10-part documentary series by History Making Productions that explores 400 years of history, democracy, and identity through the lens of Philadelphia.

Episode 8: Revolution (1962-1968) and social justice

by Jeff Meade



Lawyer, social activist and Philadelphia NAACP President Cecil B. Moore (left), with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



Frank Rizzo was Philadelphia's police commissioner from 1967 to 1971, and mayor from 1972 to 1980.

In Philadelphia from 1964 to 1968, dramatic societal changes were underway, radical changes that centered on the contentious issues of racial justice and equality. In this, the transformations in question mirrored the ongoing tumult in cities throughout the North. One might even call it a revolution.

In fact, Episode 8 of "In Pursuit: Philadelphia and the Making of America" is called just that: "Revolution." The episode will be screened Wednesday, Nov. 4, at the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, 8000 St. Martin's Lane, in Chestnut Hill. Doors open at 6 p.m. The screening is free and begins at 6:30 p.m., followed by a question-and-answer session.

One of the featured panelists will be photographer Tieshka K. Smith, of Germantown, whose work explores race, memory and identity through the "Racism is a Sickness" community-engaged art project.

If there is a key difference between Philadelphia and other cities, it lies in the conflict between the central protagonists: lawyer, social activist and president of the Philadelphia NAACP Cecil B. Moore versus police commissioner and future mayor Frank Rizzo. Philadelphia was ripe for confrontation.

In Moore, Smith says, Rizzo met his match.

Black people in the city were already angry against the backdrop of Black migration from the South, white flight and the gross inequities and racial prejudice separating the city's Black citizens from the better lives they deserved. But at a higher level, she says, "You had Cecil B. Moore duking it out with Frank Rizzo, which becomes part of the narrative of what happened."

One of the most telling illustrations of that contentious relationship was the violence visited by Rizzo and Philadelphia police upon Black protesters who picketed the then all-white Girard College, a boarding school for orphaned boys, as the protesters advocated for integration. And yet, with the assistance of a high-profile stopover by civil rights icon the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Moore ultimately won the day.



In the 1960s, "you had Cecil B. Moore duking it out with Frank Rizzo, which becomes part of the narrative of what happened," Tieshka K. Smith says.

To put things in perspective, Smith looks back to the bigger picture.

"In the '60s, the climate of the country was shifting," she says, "and I think it was all due to the inequities that Black people were beginning to see despite their service, despite their patriotism, despite them attempting to search for a better life at the tail end of the migration. There still wasn't an acceptance extended to them. There wasn't a sense of place for them. So, I think there was a sense of 'We've got to figure out a way to change things.'"

One of the aspects of Episode 8 that drew Smith's attention was a segment featuring President John F. Kennedy.

"His sense of social justice caused people to question what was possible, question beliefs that were held, question the types of opportunities that were once kept from certain groups in Philadelphia. This coincided with this expansion continuing on from World War II," she said.

The road out of this gnawing sense of injustice was an uphill slog — and to a significant extent, remains so.

As white residents of Philadelphia fled for the suburbs, there was disinvestment in the communities they left behind. There was redlining, the practice by which financial resources are withheld from racial and minority neighborhoods.

And underlying it all was racism, both institutional and otherwise. For example, when a new high school was built in the predominantly Black North Philadelphia neighborhood of Strawberry Mansion, all of the laborers were white because the building trades excluded Black workers. Police and firefighters were predominantly white as well.

Racism was at the heart of white flight, too.

"Your decision to leave is motivated by someone moving into your neighborhood who has a skin color different from yours, and that skin color equals the devaluation of where you live, without any proof," Smith concludes.

Of the whites who left the old neighborhoods, she suggests there was a belief that incoming Black residents would bring the property values down. She suspects they believed, "Even if they don't, I'm getting the heck out of Dodge."

The mindset that underlies institutional and personal racism persists today, and Smith contemplates that viewpoint in her contemporary work on the subject.

"When you tie it all back to my project, 'Racism is a Sickness,' what I'm exploring are the inner workings of the minds of folks who feel this way," Smith says. "What is it that you're struggling with that then manifests in your decision-making, your interactions, your beliefs, and then how do you reproduce that, not just in your family, but in your social circles, your communities, your schools? It spreads like a virus."

The long-term consequences of the construction of the Strawberry Mansion high school resonate today as well.

Now, we are discussing the state of schools like the one in Strawberry Mansion, schools that are deteriorating, Smith says, "that have outlived their youth, that suffer from low enrollment over time, that suffer from neglect. That, for me, is jarring."

There's a certain cruel irony in the idea that the school built by white laborers in the 20th century is now deteriorating in the 21st, she says.

"We're seeing this kind of stuff kind of crumble," she says. "And I don't know if you want to make a metaphor out of that, but it certainly invites you to think that if you start out with a mindset that is exclusionary, then how do you think that something like this is going to survive? And that's something I think that warrants further discussion because it touches on a whole different level of thinking about segregation, about discrimination, about outright racism, and what gets left behind after that. If you build something and you hate certain people, do you really expect it to withstand the test of time?"

To learn more about the "In Pursuit" project and to view the current episodes, visit: www.inpursuit.tv. Episodes of "In Pursuit" are being screened throughout Northwest Philadelphia and Eastern Montgomery County in sponsorship with the Chestnut Hill Local.

About the 'In Pursuit' film series, local viewing schedule

"In Pursuit: Philadelphia and the Making of America" consists of 10 hour-long episodes releasing throughout 2026 and into early 2027. In partnership with the Chestnut Hill Local — as a public service to educate our audience about Philadelphia's role during this 250th anniversary of our nation — all 10 films are being screened for free in locations throughout Northwest Philadelphia and Springfield Township. Each screening will conclude with a panel discussion led by local experts. Doors open at 6 p.m.; film starts at 6:30 p.m.

The series is directed by award-winning filmmaker Andrew Ferrett, written by author Nathaniel Popkin and produced by West Mt. Airy's Sam Katz, winner of the 2021 Library of Congress Lavine/Ken Burns Prize for Film.

RSVP to attend a screening and discussion, inpursuit.tv/attend-a-screening
So far, future screenings of episodes are as follows, with more being scheduled:

- **Wednesday, Nov. 4**, Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, 8000 St. Martins Lane, Chestnut Hill (Episode 8: Revolution, 1964-1968)
- **Thursday, Nov. 12**, Woodmere, 9201 Germantown Ave., Chestnut Hill (Episode 9: Liberation, 1969-1989)
- **Monday, Nov. 16**, Chestnut Hill College, 9601 Germantown Ave., Chestnut Hill (Episode 6: Wealth, 1876-1917)
- **Thursday, Dec. 3**, Free Library of Springfield Township, 8900 Hawthorne Lane, Wyndmoor (Episode 3: Independence, 1763-1790)
- **Wednesday, Jan. 13**, Germantown Friends School, 31 W. Coulter St., Germantown (Episode 4: Common Ground, 1790-1838)
- **Tuesday, Jan. 27**, Germantown Jewish Centre, 400 W. Ellet St., Mt. Airy (Episode 7: Renewal, 1925-1963)

Episode 8 summary: Revolution (1962-1968)

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In Episode 8 of "In Pursuit: Philadelphia and the Making of America," two West Virginia transplants from the Great Migration attack the racial segregation and subjugation at the heart of American urban life. Rumors lead to an uprising of anger and violence in North Philadelphia, what will be called the first urban "riot" of the Civil Rights era. Students demand African history and the consequences of slavery get taught in their high schools, and men and women stage the first protests for gay rights as a backlash builds against revolution.

This 10-part historical documentary, produced by West Mt. Airy's Sam Katz, explores the complex origins of Philadelphia and the United States, and the enduring tensions around liberty, equality and democracy that continue to shape the nation today.