



JIM NANCE MEMORIAL WALK

A self-guided activity to do anytime!

Nance Family Beginnings

James Solomon "Big Jim" Nance, Jr. grew up in a segregated neighborhood in Indiana County PA, called "Chevy Chase." He was one of 10 children (6 boys, 4 girls) raised under the guidance and instruction of caring parents. His father, James Solomon Nance, Sr., born in North Carolina, moved to Florida where he worked in a meat packing plant before migrating to West Virginia during the depths of the Great Depression (1931), and eventually to Indiana County (1933) for work in coal mining. Here he found a home in Chevy Chase Heights, a job in a local coal mine, and a wife--Delia James of Josephine, Indiana County.

Although mining became Nance Sr.'s primary source of income for the rest of his life, he was able to supplement his earnings by purchasing low-cost houses, renovating and renting to others in need of housing. Jim and his brothers would assist their father in completing these restoration projects. While Nance Sr. labored in the coal mines, Delia Nance conducted the daily domestic tasks necessary for sustaining the needs of their large family.



Jim Nance Sr. moves to Indiana County and meets Delia (1933)

Jim Nance Jr. is born (Dec. 30, 1942)

Jim graduates from Indiana Area High School (1961)

Played in the Syracuse vs. LSU Sugar Bowl (1965)

Jim plays for the Patriots (1965-1971)

Jim visits Vietnam to encourage troops (1969)

Jim joins the New York Jets (1973)

Jim joins the World Football League (1974-1975)

Jim passes away at the age of 49 in Quincy, MA (June 16, 1992)

Jim is inducted into the New England Patriots Hall of Fame (2009)

"James Nance Memorial Highway" is designated (2013)

Life in Indiana Borough & Chevy Chase Heights

Because of the discrimination they often experienced, many Chevy Chase residents would not go into Indiana Borough. Local barbers refused to give haircuts to black residents, only one tavern could be patronized by people of color, and the local swimming pool at Mack Park was segregated.

High School & College

At Indiana High School, Jim was the first African American to be elected class president. He participated in a "do-whop" singing group and excelled in football, track and wrestling, where he became the first African American two-time state heavyweight champion in PA history in 1960, winning again in 1961. In Track & Field, Jim was a PIAA qualifier in shot put and won various County Track & Field events. In football, Jim played on the state's "Big 33" football team.

Jim received 11 division one college offers, but ultimately chose to go to Syracuse University because his idol Jim Brown was an alumnus and the school had a rich running back tradition. He became their star fullback, and in 1965 Jim played in the Syracuse vs. LSU Sugar Bowl. Despite his football coach's fear of injury, Jim also continued to wrestle and in 1963 and 1965 he became the first two-time African American NCAA champion with a record of 91 and 1.

American Football League Career (AFL)

After graduating from Syracuse, Jim was drafted by the Chicago Bears (NFL) and the Boston Patriots (AFL). Initially he wanted to sign with the Bears but was told he could not bring his fiancée with him because she was white. Never a man to be intimidated, Jim refused their offer and signed a contract with the Patriots instead.

Jim set an AFL rushing record of 1,458 yards in 1966 and was named the league's most valuable player. Jim was named All-Star in 1967 when he became the only AFL player to have consecutive seasons with over 1,000 yards, this time 1,216. Jim was the Patriots' all-time leader in rushing touchdowns with 45, a record he still holds, and was sixth on the Patriot's career scoring list. He caught 133 passes for 870 yards and one touchdown. In 1972 Jim was traded to the Philadelphia Eagles but he refused to play for them and temporarily retired until he joined the New York Jets the following year.

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