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Brian Brook is the current owner of E.E. Ward Moving and Storage, the oldest, continuously operating Black-owned business in the United States. It was founded by John T. Ward, who has ties to the Underground Railroad in Whitehall.
PHOTOS BY COURTNEY HERGESHEIMER/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

'A story like no other'

E.E. Ward Moving & Storage's legacy on the Underground Railroad goes back to the mid-1800s

Céili Doyle Columbus Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

Jerome Davis has moved a lot of prominent families. • From the Schottensteins two weeks ago, to former Mayor Michael B. Coleman a few years back, the 63-year-old has been a tiny part of Columbus history for more than three decades. • As a long-haul truck driver, local delivery man, warehouse stocker and inventory taker, Davis has done it all in his 35 years working for E.E. Ward Moving & Storage – the oldest, continuously owned African American business in the United States recognized by the Department of Commerce, according to the U.S. Congressional record. • His former boss, the late Eldon Ward, was the fourth-generation to operate the company, which has evolved from a local horse and buggy operation in 1881 to a cross-country moving company. **See WARD, Page 14A**



ABOVE: A photo of Eldon Ward and his niece, Dolores White. Eldon was the last Ward to own E.E. Ward Moving and Storage.

Commission at odds on mayor's pay lobbying

Bill Bush
Columbus Dispatch
USA TODAY NETWORK

A city panel signed off on substantial pay-raise recommendations for Columbus elected leaders Wednesday, but not before arguing whether it should disclose that Mayor Andrew J. Ginther's office had lobbied it for a pay raise for whomever is the next mayor.

The panel, absent one member, voted unanimously to finalize recommended 2026 base-pay raises of: 40% for the City Council president; 14% for the mayor; 13% for council members other than the president; 10% for the city attorney; and 5% for the city auditor, all in addition to annual cost of living adjustments for 2026-29.

The panel was in conflict over a single sentence in the commission's draft report to city leaders that read: "The mayor's office shared information and

See COMPENSATION, Page 14A

Lawmakers debate bill that would trigger abortion ban

Jessie Balmert
Cincinnati Enquirer
USA TODAY NETWORK

If the landmark abortion decision *Roe v. Wade* is overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court, Ohio Republicans want to make sure abortions aren't performed here.

House Bill 598, introduced by Rep. Jean Schmidt, R-Loveland, would penalize doctors who perform abortions if the landmark decision were overturned – an increasingly likely scenario. It's called a trigger law because the ban is triggered by a court decision or a constitutional amendment.

See ABORTION, Page 10A

More, 10A

Ohio lawmaker sparks outrage in abortion debate.



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Compensation

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asked the commission to consider increasing the mayor's salary such that it would create a larger differential in salary between the mayor and the city attorney and city auditor."

The language was included at the request of one of the five commissioners, Sarah Ingles, a labor attorney who wasn't present for Wednesday's meeting. Another commissioner, Fred Ransier, a retired attorney who had chaired the last compensation commission in 2018, had asked that it be deleted, according to the discussion.

"Sarah's view is that we should include it because it was part of our conversation, and an important part," said Michael Kasler, a retired city administrator who is the commission chair. "I tend to agree with her."

Ransier argued that the 14% raise the commission approved for the mayor was unrelated to the lobbying.

"It was that simple," Ransier said during the meeting Wednesday. "... This would suggest that for future commissions, it's all right for everybody to come in, all the elected officials to come in and make their points. If the elected officials could handle this on their own, we wouldn't exist."

Ransier said he's concerned that the report language may suggest that the commission exists for the benefit of politicians, not the public.

"I think it's setting up something that I don't recall having happened in the prior commission. I can't speak to the one before. But I didn't have that sense of the elected officials lobbying us."

"I don't feel I would want to give that



The panel was in conflict over a single sentence in the commission's draft report to city leaders that read: "The mayor's office shared information and asked the commission to consider increasing the mayor's salary such that it would create a larger differential in salary between the mayor and the city attorney and city auditor." BARBARA J. PERENIC/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

impression to the public that the elected officials appointed us, then pressured us," Ransier concluded, noting the panel was appointed by Ginther and the City Council, whose salaries are in play.

In the end, the four members present agreed to add an additional sentence to the report stating that even though lobbying from the mayor's office occurred, it wasn't germane to the panel's final decision-making, which was based on data.

The pay raises now head to the City Council, which isn't required to accept the recommendations, but can't approve raises higher than them. The raises take effect in 2026 under the principle that voters will get an opportunity to decide who gets elected to receive the raises. A City Council vote has not been set.

Robin Davis, spokeswoman for Ginther, said the mayor did not engage

directly with the commission, but his office provided written data supporting expanding the salary differential between the mayor, city attorney and city auditor.

The report said that "analysis identified what could be described as wage compression" when comparing the base salaries of the mayor, city attorney and auditor. The separation in pay is "at a historic low when examining salary history over the last two decades," with the mayor currently making \$204,683, about 2.1% more than the city attorney and auditor, who are paid \$200,339 each.

The report pointed out that the Columbus mayor oversees a \$2 billion budget and almost 8,000 employees, and is "similar to a chief executive officer in the private sector, (being) ultimately responsible for the entirety of the enterprise."

"The city attorney and city auditor serve important roles in support of the mayor and the city but are more equivalent to the chief legal and chief financial officers within a corporation. And, like the private sector, it would be customary for the chief executive to be compensated commensurate with the responsibilities assumed as the leader of the organization."

The report pointed out that Ohio's governor makes considerably more than the state attorney general and state auditor, but did not note that all three Columbus officials are making substantially more than the state officials, who answer to 11.8 million Ohioans. Gov. Mike DeWine makes \$165,230, while state Attorney General Dave Yost and Auditor Keith Faber make \$122,060 each.

Also, the report to the commission noted that the mayor was the only Columbus official "prohibited from holding outside employment, effectively limiting the ability to earn additional income."

There is no prohibition for the city attorney or city auditor from being employed elsewhere, and historically, individuals holding these positions have supplemented their income through other work.

City Attorney Zach Klein's only other job is as a referee for college basketball games, his office spokesman Pete Shipley said Wednesday afternoon.

City Auditor Megan Kilgore had no outside employment other than teaching a public affairs class for one semester each year at Ohio State University, carrying on a tradition set by former longtime City Auditor Hugh Dorian, said her spokeswoman, Amber Epling.

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Ward

Continued from Page 1A

The company's origins date even further back than its late 19th century start. Eldon's great-grandfather, John T. Ward, who was born to a free Black family, had a wagon transportation business from 1842 to 1858.

The elder Ward was also a conductor on the Underground Railroad, using his business to help freedom seekers who sought refuge by hiding out on his Truro Township (now Whitehall) farm before traveling north to their next stop in Westerville or Worthington about 15 miles away.

The Ward farm was a well-known Underground Railroad station and John was a pivotal figure among the movement in central Ohio, according to the Columbus Free Press and exhibits in the Martin Luther King Jr. Performing and Cultural Arts Complex in Columbus' King-Lincoln Bronzeville neighborhood.

The company's legacy is a personal point of pride for longtime employee Jerome Davis.

"I am proud to be working here on account of this history, really," he said. "And I mean you wouldn't believe all the people that prided me or praised me for being at E.E. Ward for as long as I have."

When Brian Brooks was in elementary school, his godfather, Eldon Ward, would rise before the sun – 4:15 a.m., every morning – pick up his godson and teach him how to swim at the East Side YMCA on Woodland Avenue.

This was their weekday routine for years: laps around the pool before Ward would drop Brooks off at school.

And long before Brooks took over E.E. Ward from his godfather – buying the company in 2001 – Eldon Ward and the legacy of the moving company were a source of inspiration for Brooks. His father was Eldon's attorney. Their families were close, especially because Eldon Ward and his wife, Elsie, didn't have any children of their own.

"Eldon was known as the historian," Brooks said. "He could rattle off stories and one of his special talents is that he was a great orator of the history of Columbus."

Growing up, Brooks watched his godfather dedicate his life to giving back to the community. He sat on the boards of and contributed to over 40 community organizations. And, he became the first African American to serve as the Columbus Foundation's chairman, Brooks said.

That work ethic made an impression on Brooks and later inspired him to buy E.E. Ward Moving & Storage over 20 years ago after Eldon had retired in 1996 and his niece, Dolores White, needed more help managing the operation.

"There's this saying in business, 'Don't buy something based on emotion,'" Brooks explained. "But this company was flushed with goodwill. This story is like no other. It's unique – one of a kind."

Inside the King Arts Complex on



Brian Brooks is the current owner of E.E. Ward Moving and Storage. PHOTOS BY COURTNEY HERGESHEIMER/COLUMBUS DISPATCH



E.E. Ward Moving and Storage is depicted by local artist Aminah Robinson on a three-piece mural.

Mount Vernon Avenue, a set of three wall-length murals, painted by local artist Aminah Robinson decorate a hallway in historic splendor.

In 1982, Robinson, the late Columbus native known for capturing African American history in her art, donated the three-piece display to Eldon Ward, who gave it to the King Arts Complex.

The murals depict the story of E.E. Ward Moving & Storage, beginning with Eldon's great-grandfather, John T. Ward. John, who, in addition to being an ardent abolitionist and conductor, was also a member of the Second Baptist Church – the oldest Black Baptist church in Columbus.

Several members of the congrega-

tion, including John, championed the anti-slavery movement.

After the Civil War, John's wagon transportation business eventually became the Ward Transfer Line – formed by John and his son, William, in 1881. Later, William's son, Earl Edgar, renamed it the E.E. Ward Transfer & Storage Company.

When Eldon, Earl Edgar's son, took over as president of E.E. Ward, from 1945 through his retirement in 1996, the late Ward continued the family legacy of fighting for equality. During the civil rights movement, Eldon and a group of NAACP members demanded white businessmen in Greater Columbus hire Black employees.

Their efforts paid off, and banks, cab companies and media executives began diversifying hires shortly after, according to the exhibit in the King Arts Complex.

When Brooks, who co-owns the company with his wife, Dominique, bought E.E. Ward in 2001 he made it his mission to not only keep the company's story alive, but also to modernize the business.

The goal has been growth, expansion and sustainability," he said.

With warehouses in Grove City and Charlotte and Raleigh in North Carolina, the business has expanded, conducting both residential and office moves along with corporate relocations.

Brooks sees the future in building the E.E. Ward brand by constantly evolving and staying relevant, while also paying homage to the company's history of service.

"We want to continue to be humble and never stop being curious about how we can serve customers," he said.

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