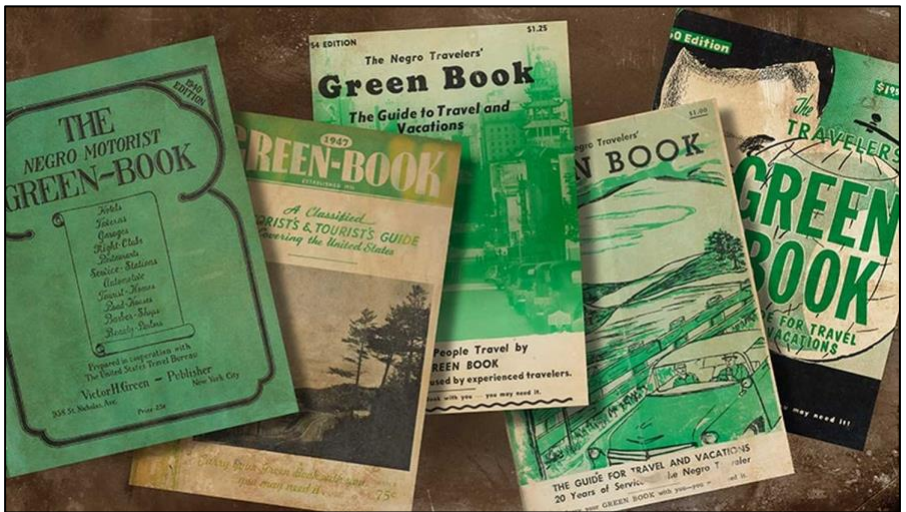


A Brief History of Racism in the State of Oregon and the Town of Ashland

Where We've Been, Where We Could Go



COVER: The *Negro Motorist Green Book*, known as simply the *Green Book*, was a guidebook for African American road trippers published from 1936 to 1966. Black travelers faced hardships including white-owned businesses refusing to provide accommodations, food, or car repair. They also endured threats of physical violence, and forcible expulsion from whites-only “sundown towns.” Victor Hugo Green, a NYC postal worker, founded and published the *Green Book*, compiling resources to give the Black travelers information that would help them avoid such problems. *(compiled from Wikipedia)*

FOOTNOTES & RESOURCES: For footnotes throughout this brochure and for a list of resources, use this QR code to take you to the Ashland Together website or go to www.ashlandtogether.org



“A Brief History of Racism in the State of Oregon and the Town of Ashland” is printed and distributed by the Ashland Sunrise Project, in collaboration with Ashland Together and Oregon Remembrance Project, 2024.

Remembrance

Understanding the harm that was caused

The Oregon constitution, adopted in 1857, banned slavery. This is what many people believe and honor, but the rest of the story paints a different picture.

Racial Exclusion in Oregon

When Oregon entered the Union in 1859, it was the only state that both abolished slavery and included pre-existing Black exclusionary laws in its constitution, thus making it a “Whites Only” state. It was advertised in the east as a “White Utopia.”

The first “Whites Only” Black exclusion law was adopted in 1844 with sharp teeth – the “lash law.”¹ The law was repealed before the grace period expired so no one was whipped under this law according to documented records. The second Black exclusion law made it unlawful for any negro or mulatto to enter into or reside in Oregon. This law was adopted in 1849 and repealed in 1853.²

Despite both of these laws being repealed, in preparation for writing the state constitution, the issue was put to a vote in 1857. About 89% voted to reestablish the Black exclusionary law which stated, “No free negro or mulatto, not residing in this state at the time of the adoption of this Constitution, shall come, reside, or be within this State, or hold any real estate, or make any contracts, or maintain any suit therein.”³

The exclusionary amendment was not formally removed from the Oregon Constitution until 1926.⁴ Discriminatory laws were not limited to the Black population. In 1862, the Oregon Legislature passed two bills: one enacted an annual tax of \$5 for all people of Black, Chinese, Hawaiian, and Mulatto descent; the other prohibited mixed marriages.⁵

The federal Oregon Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 added to the exclusion of the Black population by declaring that land would be granted only to white settlers and American half-white Indians.⁶

Somewhat concurrently, Oregon forcibly took land from Native Americans. The Rogue River Wars of 1855-1866 resulted in the forced removal of several Rogue Valley Tribes to what would become the Siletz and Grand Ronde reservations in northwest Oregon.⁷

Oregon, a rebellious new state, was adamant in its discrimination. After the Civil War, Oregon refused to approve The Fourteenth Amendment, passed in 1868, granting citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States. Oregon also refused to ratify the Fifteenth Amendment, passed in 1870, granting Black men the right to vote. Although Oregon could not overrule federal law, the 15th amendment was not formally ratified by the Oregon legislature until 1959, almost 90 years after its passage, and the 14th amendment was not officially ratified until 1973.⁸

The **resistance vs. racist** efforts were a continuing theme in Oregon history. Those who promulgated racist exclusion laws, such as Peter Burnett, were met with resistance from those such as Jesse Applegate and later Beatrice Cannady who fought to repeal those laws.⁹ After a number of unsuccessful attempts to repeal the exclusion laws, NAACP pressure eventually succeeded, and the Black exclusion laws were finally removed from the state constitution in 1926. The vote was 108,332 to 64,954.¹⁰

“Despite the state’s hostile history, Black individuals and families did make lives for themselves here. The Oregon Black Pioneers Organization has documented the stories of Black Oregonians, the resilient brave residents including Black rodeo riders who made their mark in this “peculiar paradise.”¹¹

Effects of Whites-Only Culture on Oregon

Population

In 1890, 17 of Oregon’s 32 counties had 0-10 African Americans living in them. However, by 1930, 28 of Oregon’s 32 counties had 0-10 African Americans living in them. African Americans were pushed from rural communities into condensed urban settings. “Sundown towns” (explained on the back cover of this booklet) became common and it is estimated that most of Oregon was once comprised of sundown towns.¹²

Individuals

In 1851, Jacob Vanderpool, a Black hotel owner in Oregon City, became the only Black man arrested and expelled from Oregon because of the color of his skin.¹³

In 1902 in Coos Bay, a Black man, Alonzo Tucker, was lynched. His lynching inspired the Sunrise Project.¹⁴

Ku Klux Klan¹⁵

In the 1920’s, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) had successfully established the largest chapter west of the Mississippi. The KKK was active in Ashland as

well as Medford and Portland in the 1920s. The KKK installed their own Oregon governor, Walter Pierce. Pierce wasn't a Klansman but rode the KKK support to victory. Electing Pierce was one of the Klan's biggest Oregon accomplishments. Pierce installed Klansman across state offices, including Robert Baldock, the architect of Oregon's interstate highway system, which displaced Portland's Black community. "It is something that Oregon has really tried to forget, but we can't begin to understand this place that we live in without this information."¹⁶

In 1922, the KKK kidnapped and "necktie" lynched (meaning that the men were cut down before they died) three men including one Black man in Southern Oregon.¹⁷

Created to suppress the influence of Black and Jewish jurors, non-unanimous jury verdicts were used during Jim Crow to maintain the power of a white judicial system. Oregon was the last state with racially motivated non-unanimous verdicts until 2020 when the US Supreme Court finally declared the defendant's right to a juried unanimous decision. Out of 750 retroactive cases that were reviewed by the Oregon Department of Justice Appellate Courts, 450 were sent back for review.¹⁸

African Americans are still wary of traveling throughout much of Oregon, and those who are brave enough to settle where they were once unwelcome continue to experience the lingering ramifications of communities that have not yet reconciled their history of racial exclusion. (Taylor Stewart, Oregon Remembrance Project).¹⁹

As late as 1956, only three establishments in the entire state -- one hotel, one restaurant and the YWCA (all in Portland) -- were listed as accepting places in the Green Book.²⁰

In the late 1980s, a violent skinhead movement targeted Oregon, particularly Portland, as one of several locations in the Pacific Northwest suitable for a white homeland, and Portland became a very real danger zone for Blacks.²¹ Ashland, Medford and Central Point have had instances of hate crimes, including cross-burnings.²²

Known as Portland's most infamous hate crime—An Ethiopian student named Mulugeta Seraw was murdered by skinheads in Portland in 1988.²²

And in Ashland ...

In 1950, a Black woman named Patricia Norman was the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's first Black company member when she was cast in a production of *The Company of Errors*. Due to Ashland's sundown town status, Norman was unable to find a place to stay over the summer and had to stay in

a dorm at Southern Oregon College. Norman had to be escorted to and from the theater by bodyguards from the company for her own protection that, at times, became precarious due to the hostility of local residents.²⁴

In June 2016, in Ashland, Christiana Clark, a Black Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) actor walking her dog was threatened by a man who said, “I could kill a black person and be out of jail in a day and a half. Look it up. The KKK is alive and well here.”²⁵ Clark also remembers being called the n-word by a random driver at a stoplight, “So this is not a one-time thing.”²⁶

In November 2020, a 19-year-old Black man, Aidan Ellison, was shot to death by a white man in the parking lot of an Ashland hotel where they both were staying. Robert Keegan, who thought Aidan was playing his music too loud, was convicted of manslaughter, and sentenced to 12 years in prison for killing Aidan Ellison.²⁷

As recently as 2021, the former OSF artistic director, a black woman, and another black, female senior management team member required security whenever they were in public because of documented death threats.²⁸

What Oregon’s Black residents have to say:

Gina DuQuenne, the first Black lesbian woman to be voted onto the Ashland City Council: “Most residents assumed Black people do not live in Ashland, we only belong on the stage or are just visiting from out of town. It was not even in their consciousness that Black people could be their neighbors.” (Ashland Daily Tidings, April 21, 2021).

Keith Jenkins of Southern Oregon Black Leaders, Activists, and Community Coalition (SOBLACC): “Ashland is not a friendly place.”²⁹

DL Richardson, a longtime Ashland resident and Board Member of the Black Southern Oregon Alliance (BSOA) has seen ugly racism himself. Someone yelled the n-word at him on the golf course and in a restaurant. It shocked his white friends, but not him (“History of Racism,” NBC, July 23, 2020).

Marvin Woodard, coordinator of SOU’s Multicultural Resource Center related the time when he and two other Black men were walking at night and heard the unmistakable click of people locking their car doors.³⁰

Lew Frederick, Oregon State Senator: “For me, every time I see a police officer behind me, I wonder if I’m going to live the rest of the day.” (KGW News).

Repair

Putting an end to the harm as it continues

A solid base on which to build

The Ashland High School Truth to Power Club created a mural on Mountain Avenue honoring significant BIPOC people from the community including a large painting of Aidan Ellison whom the club has vowed never to forget.



Members of the Truth to Power Club, an Ashland High School student organization, sign up to provide support for Aidan Ellison's family during his murder trial.

Say Their Names Memorial in Railroad Park restored multiple times.

After Aidan Ellison’s death, the Say Their Names Memorial was created in Railroad Park with more than 300 T-shirts commemorating Blacks who have been killed by violence. It has been vandalized three times and has been repaired each time better than the last.



A community-driven effort to create a permanent, public art installation inspired by the Say Their Names Memorial is a collaborative project supported by individual community members and SOARB, as well as BASE, SOBLACC, and SO Equity, which are Black-led organizations.

After the restoration of the Say Their Names Memorial, Keith Jenkins stated, "There are people who care. It is one of the reasons I like living here."³¹



“Ancestor’s Future: Crystallizing Our Call,” the sculpture proposed by beloved local artist, teacher and coach, Micah BlackLight, has been approved by Ashland City Council to be installed in Ashland Creek Park.

More Repair

Ashland's MLK Jr. Day is celebrated with public events in the Historic Ashland Armory including a public broadcast of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

In 2020, The City of Ashland appointed a Commission for Social Equity and Racial Justice (SERJ).

Ashland High School, Ashland Middle School, and Southern Oregon University have Black student unions.³²

Redemption

Creating good from a story of harm.

"I grew up with a redemption that was supposed to ransom me from sin and evil. [My friend] is talking about a little different kind of redemption. But it is one I can embrace, because at its heart is the notion that anything is possible. that any of us can grow, any of us can change, any of us can head off in a new and hopefully better direction."

David B. Seaburn, "What is Redemption After All?"³³

There are many people working to acknowledge and understand the past and its impact on the lives of people in the present. It's up to each of us to learn what is needed to create a welcoming environment where we can share space, meals, and our stories.

"We have the power to rewrite the ending to Ashland's story of being a sundown town by creating an ending where we are known as one of the communities most intentionally committed to inclusivity because of our history."

Ashland Together is partnering with the **Oregon Remembrance Project (ORP)**, a Portland based organization dedicated to helping communities with truth and reconciliation based projects, to create the Ashland Sunrise Project.



The Ashland Sunrise Project
is sponsored by the
Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

ABOUT OREGON REMEMBRANCE PROJECT

ORP was founded in 2018 by Taylor Stewart to memorialize Alonzo Tucker, Oregon's most widely documented African American victim of lynching. Stewart started ORP after taking a life-changing trip to the American South where he first encountered the history of lynching at the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice.

Stewart was inspired by this encounter with history to get involved in the Equal Justice Initiative's **Community Remembrance Project**, which aims to work in the communities where the lynchings of African Americans took place to find healing and reconciliation through a sober reflection on history. Originally titled the "Oregon Community Remembrance Project," ORP credits its origin to the work of the Equal Justice Initiative.

Coos Bay, Grants Pass, and an Oregon City residents have each created actions recognizing past racist injustices. Ashland Together is working with ORP to bring Ashland Sunrise Project to our community.

ABOUT ASHLAND TOGETHER

Ashland Together is a community organization with a vision of an Ashland community that welcomes all, a circle of support dedicated to racial and social healing.

What We Do

With a focus on kinship, Ashland Together brings attention to groups and organizations doing vital social and racial equity work in Ashland, and beyond. We engage white people to be active participants in creating a socially just community.

How to get involved

Visit ashlandtogether.org to join our e-newsletter mailing list, volunteer, or donate and find out about programs and events.





Ashland Sunrise Project is a truth and reconciliation coalition addressing our community's history as a Sundown Town.

What is a Sundown Town?

Sundown towns were communities that purposefully excluded African Americans and other racial minorities from living in, or simply passing through, their community through a culture of fear, violence, and intimidation. Sundown towns denied African Americans the freedom to settle in many parts of the country and have contributed to our disbursement of racial demographics today.

What is the Sunrise Project?

The Sunrise Project aims to help former sundown towns develop new identities as "sunrise communities," the opposite to a sundown town. Sunrise communities are places in which everyone can feel safe and respected and can call this space their home.

The 3 Rs of Reconciliation

Remembrance: Understanding the harm that was caused.

Repair: Putting an end to harm as it continues today.

Redemption: Creating good from a story of harm

How can I help create a SUNRISE Community?

- Be caring and curious – start a conversation with someone different from you and listen to what they say.
- Be welcoming – break the ice with a friendly greeting when someone new enters your circle.
- Learn history – learn our local history and talk about it.
- Share stories – share your own story and listen to the story of others.