

Black History Month 2023 – Black Resistance



Recognition of Black History Month (BHM) has been observed for 108 years, since 1915, when the [Association for the Study of African American Life and History](#) (ASALH) gave it life. In 1976, President Gerald Ford was the first president to officially recognize its observance, and every year, Black achievements are recognized and celebrated. The ASALH chose [Black Resistance](#) as the theme for this year's Black History Month. For its origin story, you can go to [ASALH](#).

African Americans have a deep history of ongoing oppression, ranging from the racial terrorism of lynching, violent race riots and police killings. It is pertinent to note — despite all of the deplorable history — that with today's polarized politics and cultural division, the teaching of certain Black histories are [legally banned](#) in [seven states](#) as “history that makes people uncomfortable.”

The Pacific Northwest has a history.

In researching this article, early black exclusionary laws in Washington and Oregon and the history of sundown towns were explored. The term “sundown town” — a socially normalized, racist term from the turn of the century — was part of this writer's early experience of Black History and is still in the social landscape today with articles from 2021 and 2022 recounting the history of sundown towns and acknowledging the on-going fear of traveling in the U.S. while Black.

Based on Northwest history, the 1843 provisional government of Oregon was conceived as a white homeland. All the laws passed were “designed to exclude racial minorities.” In 1859, when the state drafted its constitution, it was clear that the state was born as a white racist state. In 1853, seeing where Oregon was headed, the Washington Territory was formed, and Washington did not become a state until 36 years later in 1889.



After the Civil War, during the Reconstruction era, Oregon and what would become Washington and Idaho were open for settlement and Confederate war veterans and refugees moved to and settled the region bringing a deep racist history and anchoring those beliefs for generations to come.

In the early 1920's, the Klu Klux Klan saw a resurgence and found roots in Oregon and Washington and infiltrated the political ranks of both states. In Washington, Congressman Albert Johnson sponsored a federal bill -- the Immigration Act of 1924 — that almost eliminated all immigration from any country where people were not white. Fortunately, it was put down as unconstitutional by a 1925 Supreme Court ruling on *Pierce vs. the Society of Sisters*. Blacks have continually resisted

oppression; and that same year, the NAACP fought to have the 1859 Oregon black exclusion law removed from the books.

Sundown Towns

Sundown towns represented the acceptance of racial segregation that blanketed the country for at least a century and sadly they still exist, reenforced more by tradition and fear than by rules. These U.S. towns made a practice and rule of “unwritten” law to require people of color to leave town before sunset. This was primarily targeted to African Americans and is mainly a Northern U.S. phenomenon. It may not have been codified in law, but many towns had public signage into the 1970s making it clear that all African Americans, Jews, and other people of color were to leave town by sundown to avoid racist violence by white town residents. Police officers would routinely escort and drive African Americans to the outskirts of the city and tell them to leave.

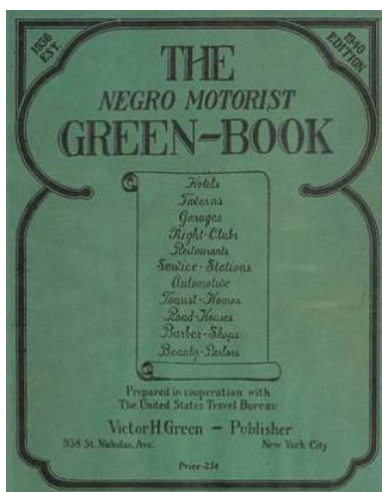


Some of these towns, small and not so small, are now struggling with the shame of their histories. They are acknowledging, and owning up to past racist norms, holding protests for justice and committing to not repeat the past. Some old sundown towns are now integrated, but many still have small Black communities who still endure cold stares and disapproving neighbors.

Today, young Black people are still raised to be aware of certain areas of town, roads, and regions they should avoid. In places still seen as sundown towns today, many Black people now follow their own rules: Avoid them if possible and lock your car doors if you must drive through. If you stop for gas, look for a well-lit gas station with security cameras.

The Green Book

For over a century, our country and our state were divided by segregation. The road was not a safe place for Black citizens who encountered severe prejudice, violence, and disrespect of government-supported and socially normalized oppression. The *Green Book* was a guide to safe passage that opened the country to Black travel and tourism.



First published in 1936, *The Negro Motorist Green-Book* was created by Victor Green. It was a travel guide created to provide African American travelers with critical information on restaurants, gas stations, department stores, accommodations, and other businesses that welcomed Black travelers during the era of Jim Crow and “sundown towns.” It served the Black community during a time when the automobile and roadways represented freedom to travel, freedom to change your situation and perhaps even your destiny. It was looked forward to annually through 1967, when the last book was published.

The [Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibit Service](#) featured an exhibit on “*The Negro Motorist Green Book*,” which was presented at the [Washington State History Museum](#) in Tacoma, in March 2022. The *Green Book* was more than a travel guide and reflected the “...truth and elegance of ordinary African Americans. People being people, leading full lives... The affirmation that we are real people,” commented Marquette Folley, Service Director for the Smithsonian.

If you were Black, it took bravery and a *Green Book* to cross the country safely. It represented the freedom of movement and the right to live a normal life without fear. A life that was not defined by racism and violence. This may just be one of the most powerful, elegant, and uplifting forms of Black resistance. Resistance through exploration, experience and empowerment creates freedom of choice.

Employment Connections on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

There is always good reason to look at the past and do better. Understanding Black history and the experience of our Black colleagues and community members is critical to our commitment as a program ([WA PEAR Plan](#)) and public service agency. It is important for all of us to educate ourselves and each other in ways that reinforce the idea that our histories, realities, and futures are interwoven. We encourage you to take time this month to seek out stories and new learning.

Some great documentary resources have been shared by several ESD teammates on MS TEAMS. Thank you to dr. sarahlloyd, Frank Chafe, Sochil Squaglia, and others for recommendations. Links to those as well as resources used in the writing of this article and more can be found at [InsideESD/BHM](#).

“Telling the truth about the past helps cause justice in the past. Achieving justice in the present helps us tell the truth about the past.” — Dr. James Loewen, renowned sociologist, racial justice activist, and author of *“Lies My Teacher Told Me.”*

“...You can say there is no such thing as slavery and that we are all citizens; but if we are all citizens, then we have a task to do and make sure that is the case and it is not a joke. If some live in houses and others live on the street, the Civil War is still going on. It is still being fought and regrettably it can still be lost.” — Dr. Barbara J. Fields, Historian, Columbia University.

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