

APPLETON, WISCONSIN



XLAN KLONVOKATION
OSHKOSH

Courtesy of the Oshkosh Public Museum

WORDS TO KNOW

sundown town

vagrancy

bigoted

restrictive covenants

Black Aristocracy

Freedom Rides

emancipation

motorists

FROM THE “FREE AIR OF LIBERTY” TO SUNDOWN TOWN— STORIES OF RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

The story of Appleton, Wisconsin, shows how residents of color maintained their determination to secure their right to live in the city, despite obstacles put in place by White residents.

After the Civil War, the Black people that moved into northeast Wisconsin forged a strong community. Some were entrepreneurs and others pursued professions such as education and social work. One group of Black Appleton citizens referred to themselves as the “**Black Aristocracy.**” African Methodist Episcopal (AME) churches in nearby Oshkosh and Fond du Lac were centers of Black community life. In 1913, the AME Zion Church in Oshkosh celebrated the 50th anniversary of **emancipation** with a festival. In 1899, Mary Cleggett, a Black resident of Appleton, wrote to the *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate* (a Black newspaper), saying that Wisconsin had the “free air of liberty.”

Despite the deep roots they had planted, by the late 1800s Appleton’s Black residents were facing a rising tide of discrimination and violence. A strong effort was underway to make Appleton an all-White city. Racial harassment was everywhere. Black residents were barred from many local businesses. People who owned their homes were falsely arrested under **vagrancy** laws. Under this pressure, Black people left. By 1916 the Black population had declined to zero.



Embroidered on this redwork quilt made by Teresa Wagg in 1900 is “Mrs. Hollensworth Shampooing Manicuring Hair-Dressing” promoting a Black-owned business. Emma Hollensworth was part of Appleton’s “Black Aristocracy.”
Courtesy of the History Museum at the Castle

NEGROES ARE BARRED IN LOCAL HOTELS

THREE PLACES REFUSE TO ALLOW TUSKEGEE SINGERS ADMISSION

The members of the double quartet from the Tuskegee institute were barred from Appleton hotels. Dr. John Faville announced from the pulpit at the Congregational church yesterday morning that application had been made at three hotels and all refused the negroes admission. Twenty-four people offered to take the singers to their homes for entertainment, but it was decided last night that they return to either Neenah or Menasha, where they had spent the previous night. Today they left for Kewaunee.

Their leader stated last night that there were a lot worse places than Appleton. That in some cities they could not even get into a lunch counter and were forced to go all day without food.

1915 *Appleton Evening Crescent* headline "Negroes Are Barred in Local Hotels."
Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society

Appleton's **sundown town** customs had become so well known that many White residents assumed the city had an official ordinance. In 1923, residents formed a chapter of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). In 1946, Appleton's Riverview Country Club rewrote their deeds to deny Black people the opportunity to purchase homes there.

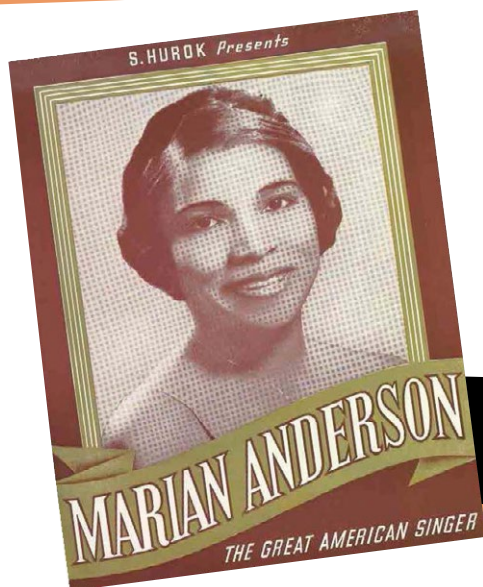
During World War II, Black workers returned to Appleton when local employers faced a labor shortage, arriving from the U.S. South and the Caribbean. They had trouble finding housing due to discrimination. Appleton employers hired Black laborers during times of crisis but returned to sundown practices when the labor shortage was over. In 1952, factory owner Victor Bloomer refused to hire Black people and shared there is an "unwritten law that evidently keeps negroes out of Appleton even for an overnight stay."

UNSAFE TRAVELS

The Appleton area was also a tourist destination.

The Chicago Defender newspaper occasionally promoted the area as a vacation spot for Black Chicagoans. But getting there was difficult for Black **motorists** who weren't sure they could stay safe on road trips. Travelers relied on the established Black community for information and safe passage. Tourist homes and hotels were opened by women who were the last members of Appleton's earlier Black communities. Black motorists used *The Negro Motorist Green Book* to plan stops at tourist homes in Oshkosh and Fond du Lac, and one hotel each in Oshkosh and Green Bay. The guests and owners were often harassed by police and the public.

Groundbreaking singer Marian Anderson was one of the most famous performers of her day. Even so, when she visited Appleton in 1961, she was allowed to stay in the Conway Hotel but was not permitted to eat in the hotel restaurant. Instead, she had to eat in her room to keep her presence unknown to guests.



Concert program, 1961.
Courtesy of Lawrence University Archives

Seven years later, student Rosalie Keller documented restrictive policies at businesses, restaurants, and hotels in Appleton. Keller encouraged resistance, saying:

*It is our duty as world citizens and decent people to do something, right now, about this very important problem. Whether it is by boycotting restricted places or by speaking and crusading in our own communities or by just not sitting back and letting people talk in **bigoted**, narrow-minded terms about the ['racial slur,'] I don't know. But we can't be passive any longer.*




Top: Ella Fitzgerald is intentionally photographed in the *Appleton Post-Crescent* having breakfast at the Conway Hotel to illustrate more open access to Black people, 1961. Courtesy of the History Museum at the Castle
Bottom: At Jake Skall's Colonial Wonderbar, Rosalie Keller learned that Blacks could get service, but they had to order outdoors from the kitchen's back door. Only Black businessmen could eat indoors, but they had to stay in the kitchen.
Courtesy of the History Museum at the Castle

SOUTHERN JIM CROW, NORTHERN SEGREGATION

In the spring of 1961, 21-year-old White Appleton resident Jim Zwerg joined civil rights activists in the **Freedom Rides**. In this national protest, Black and White students from all over the country challenged Jim Crow laws in the South by riding buses together. While taking part in a protest in Montgomery, Alabama, Zwerg was violently beaten. The attack sparked new conversations about segregation back home in Appleton. But local support for segregation remained strong. In 1964, Alabama Governor George Wallace launched his presidential campaign at the Appleton Rotary Club, during a special invitation event at the Conway Hotel. Wallace was famous for his rallying cry "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever."

Starting in the 1960s, Black residents began returning to the region known as the Fox Cities, which included Appleton. Students at Lawrence University were some of the first to return. In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., visited the University of Wisconsin at Fox Valley and spoke about discrimination in housing and employment. The local newspaper reported on Dr. King's visit:



 This 1961 news image of James Zwerg's bloodied face brought attention to racial violence in the South. Courtesy of Corbis Images

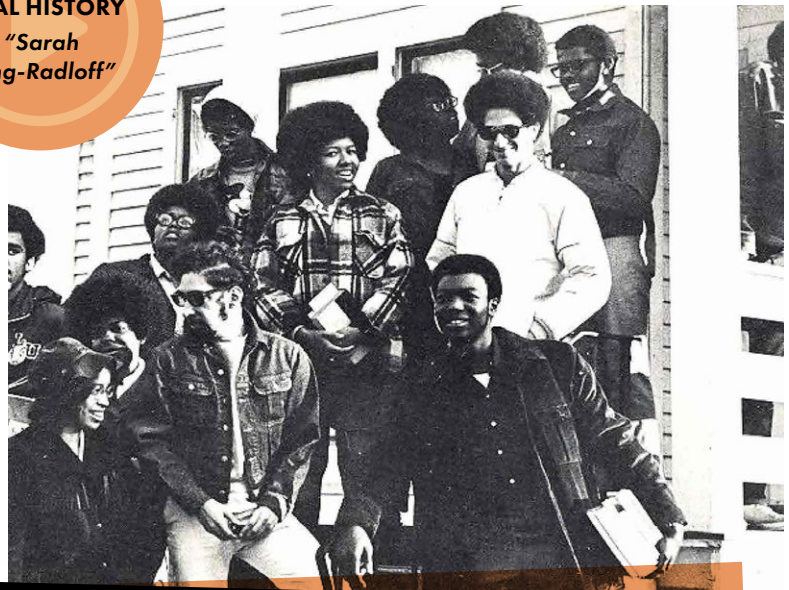
"I am sure that Negroes could get along here if they were sure they could get good jobs" and would be granted privileges equal to those of others in the community, he said. "Such an effort, he added, would help fill local employment needs while relieving the crowded conditions of large city slums."


College students took action. A petition titled "Now or Never" was sent to university leaders, demanding the recruiting of more Black students, the appointment of a Black dean, a campus cultural center, and Black representation on student government and admissions committees. Many of the changes they demanded are now a standard part of university life across the U.S.

King's visit fueled protest against racism in Appleton. In July 1967, the Appleton Housing Authority was established to support housing for low- and moderate-income families. After the passage of the National Fair Housing Act of 1968, Appleton finally passed its own fair housing ordinance.

By 1970, local companies such as Kimberly-Clark Corporation began recruiting people of color to its workforce. Job opportunities for Black workers expanded between 1980 and 2010, and Appleton's Black population grew from just 31 people to 1,179.

**WATCH
ORAL HISTORY**
*"Sarah
Long-Radloff"*



 Students advocating for racial equity picket outside the Lawrence University Administration Building in 1972. Courtesy of Lawrence University Archives

APPLETON TODAY

Appleton today is much more diverse than it was a century ago. But residents of color in the Fox Cities continue to face disparities in employment, housing, and education. A 2019 report showed that people of color received a smaller share of home loans. Some lenders were using “subtle and sophisticated” discriminatory practices that were hard for borrowers to recognize. Today, many area residents continue to advise and work with city officials, schools, and businesses to encourage diversity and inclusion through education, policy, employment, and fair housing efforts. The Black community’s story in Appleton is one of resistance and resilience in the face of racist discrimination.



Appleton’s Juneteenth Festival, started in 2010, celebrates Black cultures and the end of slavery in the United States. Here, Congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis joins Appleton community leaders, 2015. Courtesy of African Heritage Incorporated

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How did businesses participate in making Appleton inhospitable to Black residents and visitors?
- The Black population of Appleton rose and fell many times. Why do you think Black residents continued to return?
- James Zwerg, Rosalie Keller, Dorothy Moore, and Paula Sadler all worked in different ways to end discrimination. What did each of them do? Compare and contrast their strategies.
- Appleton citizens today are working to maintain a safe and diverse community. What advice would you give them to support that effort?