

COLUMBUS, OHIO



Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection

WORDS TO KNOW

public housing

enclaves

Great Migration

redlining

***Negro Motorist
Green Book***

gerrymandering

Great Depression

restrictive covenants

Cover: Dated May 13, 1940, photograph of two men carrying a bed frame into one of the units at Poindexter Village in Columbus, Ohio.

Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection

A PLACE TO CALL HOME

Throughout the 1800s, many Black **enclaves** developed in the Columbus area. During the years of the **Great Migration**, thousands of Black citizens arrived in Columbus from the South, following the promise of jobs and freedom from racial violence and terror. Many quickly learned that opportunities for Black people in the North were also limited, and it took time to build thriving communities. By the 1940s, Columbus's Near East Side was a popular migrant destination and a hub for Black businesses, churches, and social organizations.

As Columbus's Black population increased, White residents created new barriers. They used **restrictive covenants**, violence, and threats to limit the settlement of Black newcomers. Though Ohio's Civil Rights Law of 1884 banned racial segregation and discrimination in public facilities, it was weakly enforced. White businesses openly disregarded the law. Some posted "Whites Only" signs in their windows and refused to hire or serve Black residents. Civic associations worked to block construction of Black housing near traditionally White neighborhoods. Schools were segregated by using **gerrymandering** to divide neighborhoods by race. When Black families attempted to move into White neighborhoods, they were met with intimidation. Like many places in the country, Columbus in the 1920s saw the rise of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and white supremacy. For two years, the pro-KKK film *Birth of a Nation* played twice a day at the Hartman Theater. The KKK located a headquarters on the Near East Side, close to a synagogue. Black community life thrived in Columbus despite the intense discrimination.

THE RISE, FALL, AND REBIRTH OF POINDEXTER VILLAGE

In the early 20th century, the lack of housing choice meant that Columbus's Black neighborhoods were crowded and living conditions were declining. On the city's Near East Side, a neighborhood of makeshift housing called the Blackberry Patch sprang up. Most of its houses were older and had potbelly stoves and outhouses, but the community was tightly knit.

In 1937, the Federal Housing Act supported the creation of affordable public housing for Americans suffering from the impacts of the **Great Depression**. The act stated that **public housing** developments must match the racial makeup of the neighborhoods where they were built. Still, housing projects were more often built in White neighborhoods,



Left: Old houses in the Blackberry Patch being demolished to make way for Poindexter Village. Right: Poindexter Village under construction in 1939. Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection

leaving people of color out. In 1940, the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority opened Poindexter Village, the city's first affordable public housing project and one of the earliest in the nation constructed for Black residents. It was named to honor the memory of Reverend James Preston Poindexter, a prominent church pastor and abolitionist. The 400-unit low-rise apartment complex was built exclusively for Columbus's Black population.

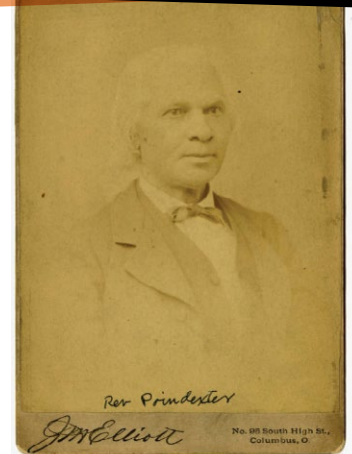
Though many inhabitants of the Blackberry Patch moved into Poindexter Village, there was not room for all. The Blackberry Patch was razed in the 1930s. Because of **redlining** and restrictive covenants, there were only 100 units of replacement housing in the city available to hundreds of former Blackberry Patch residents.

Poindexter Village's residents were economically diverse. Many middle-class Black residents could afford homes in other neighborhoods but were barred by restrictive covenants from renting or purchasing those homes.

Reita Smith grew up in Poindexter Village, a public housing development in Columbus, Ohio. As an adult, she looked back with joy and fondness on her childhood there. One of the first public housing complexes for Black residents, Poindexter Village is at the center of Columbus' fair housing story.

Early residents of Poindexter Village formed a diverse community of doctors, professors, and lawyers mixed with factory workers, domestic servants, chauffeurs, and merchants. Poindexter Village offered its residents a place to call home. It provided a sense of community and amenities they had been previously denied. The units featured steam heat, gas stoves, and other amenities not available in the Blackberry Patch. Residents of Poindexter Village supported a nearby flourishing business district of Black-owned companies and cultural institutions. Residents took pride in Poindexter Village, and it became the center of Black activism, culture, and community life in Columbus.

Reverend James Preston Poindexter, 1870s.
Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection



The community nurtured its residents. Poindexter Village's lively community produced many successful individuals. One notable resident was Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, a world-renowned artist. Robinson brought to life the vibrancy of Poindexter Village in her colorful, mixed-media work.



Mixed-media artist Aminah Robinson's work *A Street Called Home* is her tribute to the community of Poindexter Village. Robinson used old city directories and photos to capture all the businesses on the street. Courtesy of the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio: Museum Purchase with funds donated by Wolfe Associates, Inc.

THE VANGUARD LEAGUE

In 1947, the Ohio Supreme Court refused to hear a case about restrictive covenants, deeming “the question of the covenant was not one of great public interest.” Journalist Wilhelmina Jones, in the Black newspaper the *Ohio Sentinel*, pushed back, writing that the public was interested in her coverage of unfair restrictive covenants and housing shortages due to racial discrimination.

One group that was interested was the Vanguard League. An active women’s reform club, the league began meeting in the home of Mrs. Constance C. Nichols in 1940 to discuss solutions to racial discrimination. League members united under the motto “For equality, opportunity, liberty, and democracy for Negroes.” Their campaigns secured jobs for Black women at the Curtiss Wright aeronautical plant and desegregated many theaters in Columbus. However, the group’s efforts to desegregate schools were unsuccessful. By the 1950s, more civil rights organizations formed on the Near East Side. The league joined the Columbus chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), whose mission was to “bring about equality for all people regardless of race, creed, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion or ethnic background.”

DECLINE AND RENEWAL

As Columbus’ civil rights leaders organized, Poindexter Village deteriorated. In the late 1960s, fair housing acts and ordinances eased some restrictions on middle-class Black families, spurring them to buy houses in previously restricted areas. In 1952, six Black couples purchased abandoned farmland east of Poindexter and created the Livingston Heights Place subdivision. Ten years later, two couples purchased vacant land to the northeast, creating Teakwood Heights, a Black subdivision that eventually expanded to 77 houses. These homes sold by word of mouth to professionals and upper-middle-class Black families, though some had to go as far away as New York to secure financing. A racially mixed East Side suburb, Berwick, also developed.

As residents left public housing, people with fewer financial resources remained behind. Their choices were still limited by redlining and neighborhood isolation caused by highway construction. Maintenance to older public housing dwindled as government investment turned to high-rise buildings. Poindexter’s vacant units deteriorated and invited crime. It was never able to regain its footing as an aspirational place to live. The homes of Poindexter Village were gradually boarded up. The community called for demolition and redevelopment. More recently a coalition of former residents and preservationists fought to preserve and restore the buildings. Of the 37 buildings that once made up this thriving community, only two were saved.



Constance C. Nichols’ 1943 membership card for the Vanguard League. Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection

Please Mention the "Green Book"

| COLUMBUS | |
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| HOTELS | Helenas's, 384 Carson's Ave. Vrs. 231 N. 18th St. The Ave. Beauty Shop, 881 Mt. Vernon Shingle House, 1169 Granville St. Our Beauty Shop, 1163 Atchison The Classics, 523 Mt. Vernon Ave. Jutta Marie Beauty Shop, 345 N. 20th. Gladys, 414 N. Monroe Ave. Blanche's, 372 Lexington Ave. Men's Classic, 920 E. Long St. |
| HOTEL ST. CLAIR <i>Service and Comfort Is Our Motto</i> Completely Air Conditioned Dining Room Service - Elevator, Valet Laundry - Telegraph A. J. McKinnon, Manager 338-46 ST. CLAIR AVE. Tel. FAirfax 1181-2-3 | BARBER SHOPS Sugg & Denote, 421 Long St. Whaley's, 614 E. Long St. Hareza's, 453 E. Long St. |
| Hotel St. Clair 338 St. Clair Ave. Phone: FAirfax 1181-82-83 | GARAGES Smith, 482 Charles St. |
| Frank, 112 N. 8th St. Lexington, 150 Lexington Ave. Macon Hotel, 363 E. 20th St. Chastion, 419 Hamilton Ave. Hawkins, 45 N. Monroe Ave. Litchford, N. 418 Mt. Newford, 152 1/2 E. Long St. Deahler-Wallich, Board & High Bks. Fort Hayes, 31 W. Spring St. Garden Manor, 91 Miami Ave. South House, 415 High St. St. Clair, 338 St. Clair Ave. | AUTOMOTIVE SERVICE STATIONS Kline, E. Long & Minor Boston Sobole's, E. Long & Monroe Brooks, 446 S. Washington Ave. |
| TOURIST HOMES Hawkins, 76 N. Monroe Ave. Cooper, 150 N. 17th St. | DAYTON Y.M.C.A., 367 W. 5th St. TOURIST HOMES H. Lawrence, 204 Norwood St. |
| RESTAURANTS Collage Restaurant & Sandwich Shop, 146 W. 26th St. B. & H., 218 Barthman Ave. Southern 768 Room, 411 Long St. Brown Latham, 117 Hoosier St. Belmont, 485 E. Long St. Turner's, 442 1/2 E. Long St. Edwards, 318 Barthman Ave. Atchison, 1234 Atchison St. Duck Inn, 312 E. 5th St. Beale's, 421 W. Goodale St. | RESTAURANTS Palmer House, 1147 Germantown Pinner's, Ohio, 1299 W. 5th St. |
| Taverns Mickey's, 425 Goodale St. Lincoln, 319 W. Goodale St. Royal, 161 E. Long St. Paradise, 178 Mt. Vernon Ave. Duck Inn, 312 E. 5th Ave. Novelty, 741 E. Long St. Polonsky, 755 E. Long St. Village, 1219 Mt. Vernon Ave. | TOURIST HOMES Sol Downing, 1154 W. Spring St. Edward Hall, 406 E. High St. Mrs. A. Turner, 1219 W. Spring St. George Cook, 216 S. Union St. BEAUTY PARLORS Nancy's, 1431 Norval Ave. |
| NIGHT CLUBS Club House, 772 1/2 E. Long St. Belmont, 459 Long St. Skurdy's, 1474 Mt. Vernon Ave. Club 169, Cleveland Ave. Club Royal, 722 E. Long St. Yatch, Cor. 10th & Mt. Vernon | TOURIST HOMES Mrs. Alex. Cooley, 114 W. 24th St. Mrs. W. H. Hedmond, 201 E. 12nd Westington, 209 W. 14th St. Porter Wood, 1759 Broadway H. P. Jackson, 1353 Apple Ave. |
| BEAUTY PARLORS McCraw's, St. Clair & Mt. Vernon Long's, Charles Mack's, 925 Mt. Vernon Ave. | INN Wood's Social Inn Beer, Wine, Food & Liquor 1759 Broadway |
| | MANSFIELD HOTELS Lincoln, 737 N. Bowman St. DRUG STORES Mayer, 243 N. Main St. |
| | MARIETTA TOURIST HOMES Mrs. E. Jackson, 211 Church St. |



Entries in the *Negro Motorist Green Book* for 1953-1954 list Columbus businesses welcoming to travelers of color. Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection

Races CAN Live Side By Side

By WILHELMINA JONES

Why is it that Columbus' lending establishments and organized real estaters will not admit that racial prejudice is the reason for their discriminatory policies?

Could it be that they KNOW there is no basis for prejudice?

One group of executives controlling small outfits yell about pressure without pinpointing the source.

The second group, more important financially and in prestige, blandly denies existence of a discriminatory policy and even refuses to acknowledge its existence in the housing field.

Eighth In A Series

Prejudice is an opinion, emotional feeling which based on fact or reason.

Fear of loss of social status is another baseless attitude. While physicians and lawyers suffer no loss of prestige when they associate with Negro physicians and lawyers.

Fear of intermarriage is completely unfounded. Intermarriage in the U. S. has been at the ultra low figure of less than 1 percent.

country, have had integrated public housing for a number of years.

What about established private-property owned areas?

A case in Teaneck, N. J., illustrates that where rationality prevails there is no need for mass exodus, violence or organized opposition.

When a Negro family began building their own ranch-type

housing development in Sunnyhills in California. The United Auto Workers in Milpitas, Cal., constructed a 1500 unit development after Negro workers in the Ford plant were denied homes when the plant moved to a new section.

Fully integrated, the development offers homes from \$10,000 to \$18,000.

Since 1952 a builder in Madison, Wis., constructed 38 low

about the problem. Krieder stated that one or two builders have thought about it and even made initial steps.

When they ran into the first couple snags with lending institution policies, and other pressure, they quickly dropped the idea of building.

In spite of all the irrationality of racial prejudice, the lending institutions won't lend money, the people won't sell, and the builders won't build-in



Journalist Wilhelmina Jones chronicled the equity battle for the Black newspaper the *Ohio Sentinel*.
Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection

POINDEXTER VILLAGE TODAY

Once restored, the two remaining buildings will begin a new chapter as the Poindexter Village Museum and Cultural Center, part of the Ohio History Connection. The new museum will share the history of a thriving early 20th-century Black community and the legacy of the Great Migration in Columbus.



Poindexter Village's two remaining buildings are preserved.
Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection



Mixed-media artist Aminah Robinson's art was inspired by Poindexter Village, where she grew up in Columbus, Ohio. She captures the historic and vibrant Black neighborhood that was one of the nation's first public housing projects. Photographed here is a terrazzo floor, featured in the Baker Center at Ohio University. Courtesy of Ohio University, Photograph by Ben Wirtz Siegel

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Can a strong sense of community flourish anywhere? What makes people have fond memories of places such as the Blackberry Patch and Poindexter Village?
- Can artists change the way we think about places? How does Aminah Robinson's view of Poindexter Village influence the way you imagine it?
- What objects or displays would you put into the museum at the Poindexter Village Museum and Cultural Center?

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