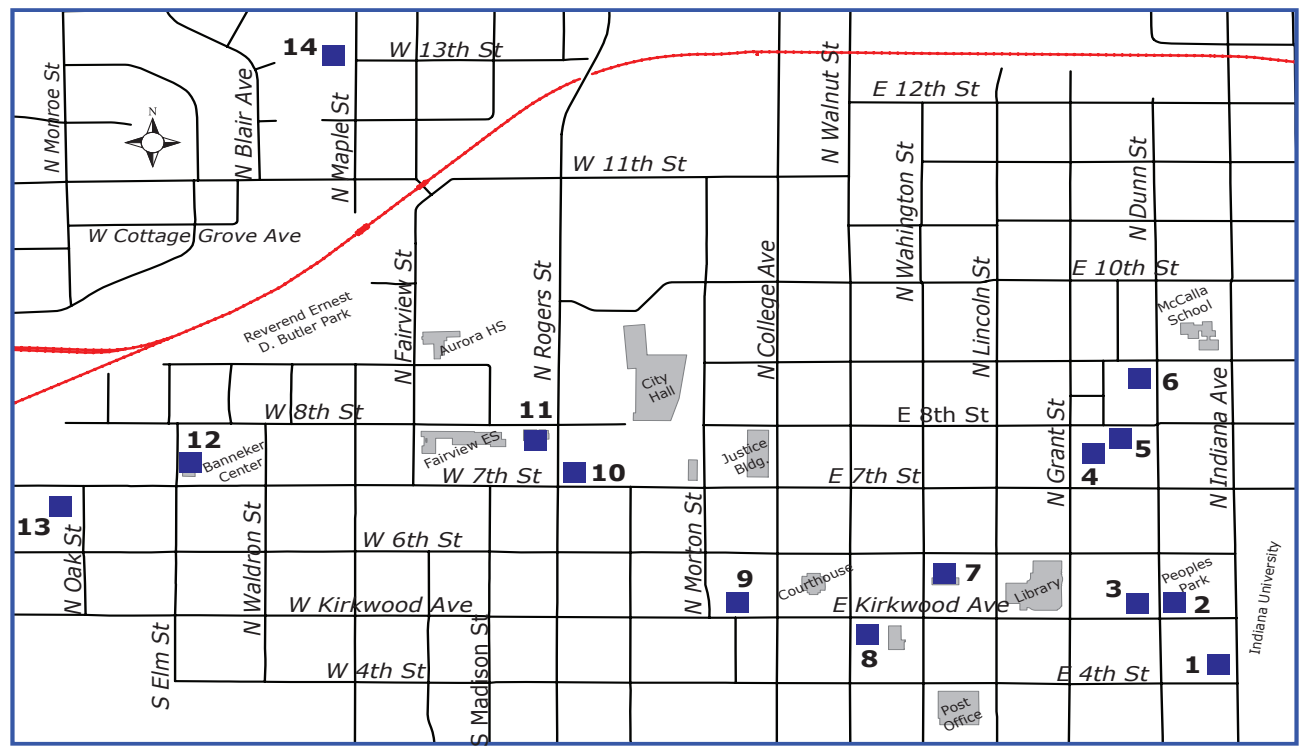


A Walk Through Bloomington's African American History

Historic Tour Guide No.14



City of Bloomington, Indiana



African American Walking Tour

Since its inception, the city of Bloomington has maintained a deeply rooted African American history. Two African Americans, William Cooley and Aaron Wallace, purchased lots in the November, 1818 land sale. Literally, it was the second such sale of parcels in the city's short history. No more information is available about these families, but census data from the 1860's through the 1880's document that the city attracted many African Americans primarily from Virginia, North and South Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, and Kentucky in the first waves of migration to the north. Although the Indiana State Constitution of 1816 outlawed involuntary servitude and African American citizens were free to live and work anywhere in the state, there were still those born into slavery in the south who fled to the north and were returned for bounty.

Bloomington's citizens were active participants in what has come to be known as the Underground Railroad, a conduit of escape organized by citizens who opposed slavery and assisted in hiding individuals fleeing to freedom in the North. The path of escape led from Walnut Ridge, south of Bloomington, to northern stops in Martinsville, Morgantown and Mooresville. In 1917, Henry Lester Smith, the son of an abolitionist, recounted his relative's stories of these harrowing times. Bloomington was also the destination of a generation of Scotch Irish Presbyterians from South Carolina who belonged to the Covenant Church and settled here in the first half of the nineteenth century. Their houses, the Faris and Smith homes on the southeast side, now are landmarks along the trail to freedom. The stories of Lester Smith also recount the heroics of a Mrs. Myrears an African American who lived on the west side of town. It was on the west side, in a house that still stands at the corner of 7th and Rogers, where the local

Knights of the Golden Circle (southern sympathizers) purportedly met. Another prominent early resident, Robert Anderson, has a grave located in Covenant Cemetery. Once an escaped slave, he chose to stay in Bloomington after emancipation. He joined the Presbyterian Church that supported his freedom and his heirs still reside on land near the cemetery at High and Hillside Streets.

After the Indiana legislature passed legislation in 1869, "colored" students were required to be educated in public schools. Prior to this, the Bloomington's Center School had been integrated and "colored" students occupied the upper floor. In 1874, "colored" students first began to attend a segregated grade school in Bloomington, in the same Center School building on the south east corner of 6th and Washington. White students moved to the recently completed "Central School" on South College. In 1881, there were 54 students under the age of 21 at Center School. T.C. Johnson, an eminent educator was the last principal of the Center School and first principal of the Banneker School which replaced it. He later went on to teach at Crispus Attucks High School in Indianapolis, now a National Historic Landmark. Elementary education in Bloomington remained segregated until 1951. Three early African American churches were founded in Bloomington, two of which date from the 1870's. In the early twentieth century the congregations prospered and built impressive architect-designed limestone edifices on the west side of town. Taylor Chapel, which remained on the east side, closed in the 1930's. The city's African American community shifted from the east side to the west after the Shower's Brother's Furniture Factory fire of 1884 and the relocation of the University to Dunn's Woods from Seminary Square. An early urban neighborhood that was commonly called "Bucktown" was located in the area between Grant to Indiana and south of 10th Street to 8th Street. Many of the residents in this area rented. It was also where Hoagy Carmichael visited house parties near his childhood home and heard the indigenous jazz that proved so influential in his music. These lives, filled with hard work, play and striving for the future, were a catalyst for creativity. George Shively, the left handed lead hitter for the Indianapolis ABC's, lived in this neighborhood. Later, following an opportunity to purchase their own homes, many in the African American community settled into an area north of Kirkwood and west of College, occupied primarily by the working classes of Bloomington.

A second but parallel story is that of African Americans at Indiana University. Marcellus Neal was the first African American student to graduate from IU in 1895. Preston Eagleson, a Bloomington native, was the first to play football and baseball at IU, graduating in 1896. The Eagleson family moved from Orange County, Indiana to Mitchell and on to Bloomington in the early 1890's. Preston Emmanuel Eagleson (AB 1896; MA 1906) was later the first of his race to receive a Master's Degree at Indiana University. It is thought that more degrees were conferred upon the Eagleson family from Indiana University than any other African American family—20 degrees and 2 honorary degrees. Wilson Vashon Eagleson (BS 1922; MS 1926 in Chemistry) married Frances Marshall (AB 1919, English), the first African American female to graduate from IU. The Marcellus Neal-Frances Marshall Black Culture Center on IU's campus is named for her. After rearing 9 children, Elizabeth Eagleson Bridgwaters (AB 1930) became a civic leader and was the first African American elected official in Monroe County. She served on the Monroe County School Board and was instrumental in the establishment of the Aurora Alternative High School.

The number of students continued to grow but were barred from university housing until 1947, when returning soldiers began to attend college on the GI Bill. A small enclave of private houses on the east and west sides opened up for boarders, along with an unofficial dining hall and several sorority and fraternity houses. In 1911, one of the first African American fraternities in the United States, Kappa Alpha Psi, was founded and incorporated on the IU campus by Elder Watson Diggs. Samuel Dargan, curator of the IU Law Library for 40 years, owned several properties near 8th and Lincoln where students resided. George Taliaferro lived in this neighborhood at May's House with other student athletes in the 1940's. Upon returning after his service in World War II, he worked with Herman B Wells, then president of the University, to integrate restaurants and theaters in Bloomington.

The small community of African Americans who raised their families in Bloomington made use of the opportunities provided by IU. Many sent their children to the university and many had to leave Bloomington to pursue professional careers. With dignity and patience, individuals like Reverend Ernest Butler, a civil rights activist who marched with Martin Luther King, and Elizabeth Bridgwaters, Bloomington's first African American school board member, became part of the city's political conscience. Others like Clarence Gilliam, a chemist by profession and long-time president of the NAACP, struggled to provide opportunities for advancement and a better quality of life. Three landmarks on the Westside, Second Baptist Church, Bethel A.M.E.Church, and the Banneker School, hold many stories and are monuments to Bloomington's African American community which thrived through the 1960's and faded as broader opportunities appeared and the local culture of lodges, clubs and social organizations began to dissolve. The legacy that remains is a testament to this community's achievement in the face of significant obstacles.

In Appreciation:

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Tour Sites

1. The Gables 114 South Indiana Avenue

Arguably the most historic campus restaurant in town, the Gables remained segregated until 1947 when IU football player George Taliaferro, gazing at a picture of himself inside the building, decided that the situation needed to be rectified. He and IU president, Herman B Wells, convinced the restaurant owner, George Poolitsen that it was time to integrate his business. George Taliaferro and his date planned to dine there daily. By the end of the week, other couples would join and the restaurant was integrated without incident. The Book Nook and Indiana Theatre followed.



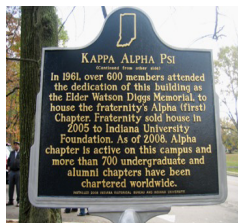
2. The Black Market NE corner of Dunn and Kirkwood Avenue

In Bloomington, a seminal event of the turbulent 1960's was the firebombing of the Black Market on December 26, 1968. African-American students and faculty had opened the Black Market in the fall of 1968 to sell books, records, artwork, clothing and jewelry imported from Africa or made by African-Americans. In that year, students formed the Afro-American Student Association and occupied the Little 500 stadium for 38 hours with demands to increase the number of black students and faculty and to start a Black Studies program. In 1969 two local men confessed to starting the Black Market fire. The area was donated to the city in 1976 and is maintained as People's Park.



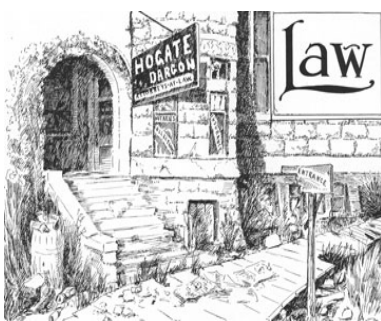
3. Kappa Alpha Psi 425 East Kirkwood Avenue

Only one fraternity was founded on Indiana University's campus and this is the Alpha Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi in 1911. Organized by a group of African American students in Mrs. Spaulding's boarding house on East Kirkwood, Kappa Alpha Nu, later renamed Kappa Alpha Psi in 1915, has a significant national presence with over 150,000 members. Among the organizers was Elder Watson Diggs. He remained in the house when it moved to 830 West Kirkwood, the home of William Profit, a local barber. After serving as chapter president for six years, Diggs enjoyed a lengthy career in education, serving as a principal in the Indianapolis Public School system. The fraternity moved to several locations in Bloomington during its tenure and is still active today. In 1961 the chapter moved to a site at 1469 East Seventeenth Street which was dedicated as Elder Watson Diggs Memorial house. An Indiana Historical Bureau marker was placed there in 2008.



4. Samuel Dargan House 316 North Grant Street

This house, and the larger one at 318 North Grant, were owned by Samuel Dargan. On this site Dargan operated the first private residence hall for African American women, commencing as early as 1925. His own home was located behind the dormitory in a modest house. Dargan was Indiana University's first African American law school graduate, acclaimed for his oratorical skills. He was immediately hired as curator of IU's Law Library upon his graduation in 1909. Such were the students' deep affection for him that they gave him the honorary title "Father of the School of Law." Governor Paul V. McNutt (A.B. 1913) is quoted as saying "...Sam commanded the respect and admiration of everyone who met him."



5. Mays House 418 East 8th Street

For over twenty years, Ruth Mays opened her small bungalow on the east side to African American male students enrolled in the university, but barred from its housing. When black students were refused service at local restaurants, Mays also served meals providing a kind of informal student union for that community. Mays is remembered fondly by athletes of the era before 1947 when the dorm system was finally opened to all students. George Taliaferro, famed Indiana University running back, stated that the small home held up to 16 people during this time, as many as four to a room. Along with Dargan House, the Elms, and the now demolished "Do Drop-In" House this area of the east side was the focus of African American student life in the 20's, 30's and 40's.



6. The Elms 425 North Dunn Street

In the era before dormitories at the University were integrated, fraternity and sorority chapters were loosely located on the northeast side of town. "The Elms" primarily served as a female dormitory, but for several years it was an early location of Kappa Alpha Psi. The Kappas also occupied properties at 417 East 9th Street and had their initial meetings at 527 East Kirkwood. Ultimately they purchased a permanent location. Samuel Dargan's property at 318 North Grant was called the location of Alpha Kappa Alpha, but in fact housed women students not in the sorority. It wasn't until the 1960's that many of the Greek organizations found permanent quarters.



7. Center School 202 East 6th Street

After it reopened as the "Colored School" in 1874, the brick school house on 6th and Washington became Bloomington's first segregated grade school. Now this location is the site of the Monroe County History Center, housed in the Old Carnegie Library that dates from 1915. The school was sold to the library board for \$12,000. According to statistical records of the time, the school building measured 40.5 feet by 26.25 feet and still had "dry closets" outside the building. Students remember that the older children were taught upstairs and the younger downstairs.



8. Mattie Jacobs Fuller The Allen Building 108 East Kirkwood Avenue

Following the Civil War, Mattie Jacobs Fuller was indentured to an Indiana physician although this was considered illegal. She was released when she was 14 years old and trained in Louisville as a beautician. After selling cosmetics for awhile she was able to open a beauty salon in The Allen Building, believed to be one of the first in town. But her greatest fame came from her service as a devoted member of the Bethel A.M.E. Church. In order to raise funds to help pay off its construction debt, Ms. Fuller played a portable organ on the square and at fairs and rallies, wherever people gathered. She did this for 7 years, singing gospel songs and raising more than \$13,000 towards the mortgage. People placed money in a loving cup on the top of the organ. She was 82 years old when her story was archived by the Federal Writer's Project.



9. Evans Barber Shop 210 West Kirkwood Avenue

Pleasant Evans arrived in Bloomington in 1884 and spent the following sixty years in the barbering business on Kirkwood. He was called the "Dean of Bloomington Barbers" and was active in republican politics. In 1914 he purchased his own building just west of the square. He was the first African American to own a downtown building in Bloomington, one that initially housed the First National Bank. Many local families, including the Eaglesons, the Drakes and the Evans were originally in this business. Clientele were segregated because proprietors feared that their business might be affected. Herman B Wells integrated the student union barber shop in 1948 hiring John Plew as its first black barber.



10. Bethel AME Church 302 North Rogers Street

The African Methodist Episcopal Church had its national origins in Philadelphia. It was founded by Richard Allen who had purchased his freedom and led a movement to secede from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816. The Bloomington AME Church was organized in September of 1870. Members met in the United Presbyterian Church on West 6th Street for many years before building a new stone edifice in 1922. The church was designed by John Nichols, Bloomington's earliest architect and cost \$35,000. It had, according to contemporary articles, "everything that should go with a strictly modern house of worship." The congregation is storied with past members: Mattie Jacobs Fuller, Maurice and Pleasant Evans. In the 1930's the church was famous for its Thursday night chicken dinners which attracted white neighbors from the west side as well.



11. Second Baptist Church 321 North Rogers Street

Established in March of 1872, the baptist congregation met only in homes before building their first small frame church at the corner of 8th and Rogers. Two ministers distinguished themselves in length of tenure and influence: Rev. M.M. Porter (1907-52) and Rev. E. D. Butler (1959-2002). Porter, whose wife Georgia taught at the Baneker School, helped his congregation build a new church on the south west corner of 8th and Rogers. The building, designed by African American architect Samuel Plato, was one of the first stone churches built by African Americans in Indiana. At the time there were a little over 400 African Americans residing in Bloomington. Construction cost \$40,000. The stone was donated and members of the congregation helped with the finish work. The structure was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. Reverend Butler led Bloomington through many of its early civil rights discussions regarding discrimination in housing, hiring and education, all while shepherding his church and raising eight children. Ninth Street Park was renamed in his memory in 2005.



12. Baneker School 930 West 7th Street

The Baneker School opened on Dec. 7, 1915 with 93 students and was named by T.C. Johnson, its first principal. Many preferred the name of Booker T. Washington for the school, but their petition to the school board failed. Instead the school was named for Benjamin Baneker, a free black man who had platted the nation's capital. The school gymnasium was completed in 1941 using a New Deal program through the National Youth Administration. The surrounding dressed stone wall was built by the W.P.A. T. C. Johnson was principal at both the Center School on East 6th and the Baneker in its first years. At its height, the school served over 100 students in three, multi-graded classrooms. Mrs. Alice Evans and Mrs. Georgia Porter were long-time teachers. The school's curriculum emphasized basic reading, writing, spelling, and mathematical skills. Graduates went on to Bloomington High School which was historically integrated. In 1955, the building was acquired by the city and renamed the West Side Community Center. In order to reclaim its historic significance, it was renamed the Baneker Community Center in 1994. Since its listing on the National Register of Historic Places, the Parks Department has completed a comprehensive building restoration.



13. Pollard Lodge 1107 West 7th Street

Through the early 20th century, black social and fraternal organizations provided a vital social link in the community. Women joined "The Jolly Bachelor Girl's Club" as early as 1918 and "The Happy Hour Club" in the 1930's. They sponsored fashion shows and gave baskets of food to the sick. Two organizations, the Black Elks and Masons, held meetings on the west side. The Fraternal Order of Elks held community social functions in the basement of The Pollard Lodge on 7th Street which was nicknamed "the Hole" because the only access was from a stairway that descended to the basement. Just down the street, the Masons met in a residential building from 1940-1987.



14. Blair House 823 North Maple Street

One house on the west side illustrates Bloomington's substantial history in the Underground Railroad. James Blair was among a group of families of Scotch Irish descent who moved from South Carolina to Bloomington in the early settlement years. They were members of the Presbyterian church holding strong abolitionist opinions. Called the Covenanters, many settled southeast of town, where their first church was built. The Smith's, Faris's and Blair's were all believed to be activists in the Underground Railroad and harbored fugitive slaves in the years before the Civil War. Blair founded his farm northwest of town in a grove of maples. The house still stands on North Maple Street. A cemetery associated with the church stands at High and Hillside surrounded by dry laid limestone walls and ancient oak trees. Robert Anderson was hiding with the James Faris family when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Lincoln. He decided to stay as a free man and tended



to church property, eventually becoming a member. Although there is a legend that the land was left to them, relatives say that land adjacent to the cemetery was purchased from the church, after the original brick building burned. Anderson, born into slavery in Kentucky in 1847, is buried here. Jared Jeffries, an NBA player born in Bloomington, is his great-great grandson. Relatives of Robert Anderson still make their homes on the land to the north.

Cover photographs clockwise:
Mattie Jacobs Fuller
Elizabeth Eagleson Bridgwaters
Rev. E. D. Butler