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AFRICAN AMERICANS IN PORTLAND, A HISTORY OF DISPLACEMENT AND  
EXCLUSION

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January 14th, 2018

## AFRICAN AMERICANS IN PORTLAND, A HISTORY OF DISPLACEMENT AND EXCLUSION

Portland is commonly known for having a rather active body that is unafraid to lead by example in standing up for what they believe is right and or just. However, within this interpretation of Portland's inhabitants rests a great cloud of misconception, a misconception built upon the fact that throughout most of the city's history, Portland has not been an area rooted in doing the right thing. Within this shroud of misconception rest the stories of African American hardship, untold stories in which African Americans in Portland must have felt anything but their supposed freedom as they were wrongfully discriminated simply for the color of their skin by Whites. Here lies the basis for the story of the racially selective displacement and dismissal of the African Americans living within the Albina district of Northeast Portland.

Within a city commonly regarded for its progressive qualities, it may seem that an issue so blunt and obviously racially motivated would receive lots of attention. However, given that African Americans have represented a fluxuating, but relatively stable, five percent of Portland's entire population since WWII, their capability to combat any of the discrimination they have both faced and face to this day is relatively insignificant due to their significant minority status.

While this paper will mainly focus upon the details of the displacement of the African American community into the uppermost reaches of Northeast Portland in the Albina District, it is important to note that Albina to this day is not an entirely African American district. Instead, Albina should be viewed as a district with a history of being home to immensely dense pockets of African American communities surrounded by a pre-dominantly White population. While the most recent revitalization efforts have shown beneficial effects on the Albina district, beneath the newer appearance of Albina lies a history of hardship and discrimination.

For this reason, examining a larger time period of African American history within Portland accomplishes two goals. It serves to expose a repetitive history of unjust and unequal treatment towards African Americans in the city of Portland. This is significant because it portrays a history of intentional displacement of African Americans living within the city to the far reaches of the Albina District. Therefore, a context of deliberate displacement provides a tangible foundation upon which the reality, that the series of construction projects that came in the 1960s to Lower Albina were really the results of a continued attempt to move African Americans as far out of the city center as possible, is impossible to ignore. Next, it shows the progression of discriminatory practices that were used against African Americans throughout the history of the city. With the civil rights movement starting up in the 1950s, an increased recognition of African American rights within America created a hostile environment for discriminatory Whites in Portland. Blatant discrimination against African Americans met more and more societal blowback over time, as a growing number of Portlanders began to support the idea of equal opportunity within the city for African Americans. Resultantly, those still in support of discriminating against African Americans within the city turned to the “Urban Renewal” and gentrification of the densely populated African American communities within the

Albina district. Accomplishing the task of displacing African Americans by socially acceptable means like “Urban Renewal”, these projects display the evolution of racism in Portland.

Although the African American community was forced into the Albina District following 1919, Albina has been commonly associated with the African American community within the city of Portland for a very long time. Beginning just decades after the city of Portland itself was founded, Albina built up a reputation for being home to African American communities following the original platting in 1873. However, Albina did not simply end up a hub for African American culture and community in Portland by chance. In a report upon the district produced by the Oregon Historical Society, it is recorded that the Albina District was initially “laid out in 1873 by developers with railroad interests”.<sup>1</sup> With the push for railroad expansion within the later decades of the nineteenth century in the United States, African Americans found work in railroad towns like Albina. In fact, a U.S. Census report showed that the number of African Americans living in Oregon nearly tripled between 1880 and 1890 increasing from 487 to 1,186.<sup>2</sup> While this influx of population was not specified to Portland only, it is within reason to say that the overall increase of African Americans in Oregon brought a proportional increase of African Americans to Portland, and more specifically Albina. As years passed, African Americans who performed the laborious task of rail road construction at Union Station decided to settle down within walking distance of the Station east of the Willamette River. When the city of Portland annexed the company town from Union Pacific Railroad, African Americans that had developed

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<sup>1</sup> Roy Roos, “The Real History of Albina,” *The Oregon Historical Society*, (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Department of Commerce, *Black Population in Oregon 1880-1970* (1970 Census of Population: Washington D.C., 1970) U.S. Census. State of Oregon.

a pocket of community were inducted into the city limits in what is now referred to as the Eliot District, one of three districts that make up Lower Albina.

Between 1880 and 1890, 699 African Americans moved into Oregon. It can be inferred that because of the development of railroads through Portland at the time, most of the 699 who moved to Oregon found their way to Portland. Subsequently, it can also be inferred that a large majority of the new inhabitants of the city settled in Albina because of the pre-existing African American communities there to welcome them. However, Albina was certainly not the only place where African Americans took up residency in the city. In fact, a growing population of African Americans began to emerge in Western Portland. However, the growth of African American communities outside of the Albina district proved to be rather short-lived. By 1940, half of the African Americans living within the city of Portland found themselves living within the limits of the Albina District due to the combination of multiple factors.<sup>34</sup>

While there were many influences, the concentration of African Americans into Albina, the concentration was the result of two major factors: The Great Depression, and severe housing discrimination. In 1919, the Portland Realty Board introduced a change to their “Code of Ethics.” In their revised Code of Ethics, “Realtors could be subject to dismissal for selling real estate outside of certain designated areas of Portland to African Americans.”<sup>5</sup> This rule also

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart McElderry, “The Vanport Conspiracy Rumors and Social Relations in Wartime and Post-War Portland,” *Oregon Historical Society*, 99:2 (1998), 134–163.

<sup>4</sup> Rudy Pearson, *African-Americans in Portland, Oregon, 1940–1950. Work and Living Conditions: A Social History*. (Pullman: Washington State University, 1996), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Office of the City Auditor, *Realty Board Established a ‘Code of Ethics’* (Archives and Records Management: Portland) Article 284517.

targeted Chinese home buyers, but it speaks wonders to the climate of the culture of Portland towards African Americans in the early twentieth century.

Beginning in 1929 and lasting well throughout the 1930's, the Great Depression played a large role catalyzing the forced concentration of African Americans into the Albina District enacted in 1919. As the severity of the economic depression reached even the small African American population of the city, many of the African Americans that were already in rough economic positions due to the discriminatory employers were forced into a state of economic distress. Selling their homes and closing their businesses, a decent number of African Americans were forced into the cheap housing of the Albina district.

Different in their causality but supplementary in their effect, these two factors immensely shrunk the available housing market for African Americans looking to buy a home in Portland, forcing African Americans into Albina. It is important to note that while the effects of the Great Depression were in no way intentional as the effects of Portland Realty Board's alteration to their Code of Ethics, they presented an environment in which the effects of the racially discriminatory housing practices put in place became immensely amplified. The effects of these two factors were indisputably represented when over fifty percent of the nearly two thousand African Americans living within the city of Portland in 1940 into the Albina District. In actuality, the area that African Americans were involuntarily moved to was the Eliot neighborhood which collectively covered the area similar to that of a two-mile by one-mile square, mathematically leaving an approximate .2 square miles per inhabitant excluding any account of all non-residential space.

Albina had undoubtedly built up a significant concentration of African Americans by 1940. However, significance is relative, and this was proven in the early 1940s. As America

entered WWII, an estimated 22,000 migrant African American workers found employment and settled in Portland. While Portland had a history of being awfully unwilling in employing African Americans, besides those who had found work on the railroads, things changed during WWII. With the military still favoring the enlistment of mainly white men, and the blunt necessity of as much labor as possible to maximize war time productions, the African Americans left behind found work. While more than half of the migrant African American workers that found work within Portland left after WWII, those that stayed in the area eventually played a large role in the further concentration of African Americans into Albina.

Built upon the banks of the Willamette River and in close proximity to the Columbia River, Portland served as a perfect location for the construction of Naval shipyards. Henry J. Kaiser capitalized upon this opportunity with his creation of the Kaiser Shipbuilding Company that developed three shipyards close to Portland, with one on Swan Island itself. These three shipyards, along with others nearby, served to provide thousands of employment opportunities for African Americans within the Portland area. In other words, WWII provided African Americans with promising enough employment opportunities assuring significant wages that came with the booming wartime economy to overcome the racist sentiment of the cities inhabitants and legislature.

While Portland did see a large influx of African American population as more and more shipyards sprouted up to match the military production quotas it was not just African Americans that heeded the call. Alongside an influx of African Americans, Portland also saw a dramatic increase in the population of whites in the city during wartime. As the migratory workforce of WWII swamped Portland, the tens of thousands of African Americans alongside the hundreds of thousands of whites flooded the city left Portland with a large housing issue. Where they were to



be housed was an issue that quickly had to be solved, and it was solved by the Vanport Housing development.

Vanport was a project that embodied the quick construction of public wartime housing in 1942 to provide a place to stay for those working in the Kaiser shipyards. Commonly referred to as Kaiserville, the city of Vanport housed 40,000 ship-yard employees, of which forty percent were African Americans. This, provides an insight into the situation of African American housing in Portland that is very important to note. With census records attesting to an increase of relatively 20,000 African Americans,<sup>6</sup> and given that Vanport's population was forty percent African American, we can see that a solid quarter of the African Americans that moved to Portland for work when the war began were housed in Vanport. On the other hand, that leaves only room for about 25,000 Whites to be housed in Vanport, while more than that number of whites worked in the Kaiser shipyards.

While the leftover hundreds of thousands of whites taking up residence throughout the city or in its suburbs, African Americans were left to rent or buy either within the Albina District through the private housing market or outside the city limits. Interestingly enough, there is much more evidence attesting to the concentration of African Americans into the Albina District in the years following WWII rather than during it. By 1950 Portland's African American community boomed as the number of African Americans living in Oregon nearly quadrupled,<sup>7</sup> an occurrence that had a massive effect on the Albina District. With nothing more than racist bias against African Americans, whites living in Albina rejected the influx of African Americans and sought

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

out government officials demanding, “absolutely no more Negroes in our neighborhood or anywhere else in Portland”.<sup>8</sup> white Portlanders living within Albina were angered by the increasing numbers of African American residency brought to their home by WWII, and in turn requested the development of public housing in the upper reaches of Albina. Answering to the complaints of white Portlanders, local and federal officials began building “special housing reservations”<sup>9</sup> to create a solution to the white fear of African Americans entering their neighborhoods through the private housing market with public housing options. However, white inhabitants of areas such as those around Williams Avenue were still infuriated at the fact that African American migration into Upper Albina had not been stopped by public housing projects, but simply slowed down. In turn, racist whites turned to alternative methods. As African Americans continued to move into Albina, settling nearby or within white neighborhoods, the anger of the racist whites living within Albina did not settle. Taking even further measures to try to prevent African Americans from moving into their communities, white Portlanders, predominantly those living within Albina, divided out an area with clearly defined boundaries as a “black area”. These boundaries became to serve as the spearhead of the red-lining real-estate policy in which every agent in Portland had agreed only to sell to blacks within this designated area. This area was Albina, with the exception of white neighborhoods within the district.<sup>10</sup> However, not even their red-lining practices prepared the exclusionist whites still living within Albina for what was to come nearing the end of the 1940s.

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<sup>8</sup> Diane Pancoast and others, *Blacks in Oregon an Historical and Statistical Report* (Portland: Black Studies Center and the Center for Population Research and Census Portland State University, 1978) 55.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

White Portlanders living within the Albina district did not feel the full influx of African Americans until they would be met with an instantaneous 5,000 African Americans in search of a home in 1948. When the raging Columbia River swelled fifteen feet over its normal height when it flooded on May 30, 1948, the city of Vanport sitting very close to the banks of the river stood no chance. Although the number of African Americans living within the Portland area had stabilized, there were still approximately 5,000 African Americans living in the city of Vanport at the time of the flood. It was at this point the African American population of Portland felt the full force of deliberate displacement with the intent to keep them in the farthest reaches of the city as possible. Even with their red-lining and other discriminatory measures in place, more and more African Americans moved into Albina. Whites living within the area left in similar manner as that of an evacuation protocol, as their numbers within Albina diminished immensely as an approximate 21,000 whites moved to Suburbs or other areas of the city.<sup>11</sup>

By the early 1950s, African American residents within the city of Portland had become highly concentrated into the areas of Upper and Lower Albina. However, as if the African American communities had not been through enough hardship, the Eliot and Lloyd District of Lower Albina fell within the scope of a government-based construction project. Claiming the cause of Urban Renewal, these projects were proposed with the intent of investing within what were deemed “deteriorated communities” through a series of large construction projects. The projects included the construction of a Legacy Meridian Park Hospital, a Veteran’s Memorial Coliseum, and the expansion of the Interstate 5 Highway. While there are those who will make the argument for Urban Renewal, it cannot compete with the truth of the matter. As has been

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<sup>11</sup> Karen J. Gibson, “Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000,” *Transforming Anthropology*, 15:1 (April, 2007), 7.

previously referenced, throughout the history of the city of Portland, white Portlanders have time after time pushed African Americans as far away from the heart of the city center as possible by any means necessary. Furthermore, white Portland had achieved in focusing African Americans into Lower and Upper Albina after decades of discriminatory housing practices. For this reason, when the projects were proposed for Lower Albina, there cannot have been a single person that was unaware of the relocation of hundreds of African Americans that was the result of this project.

With the civil rights movement catching wind in the 1950s, a growing number of white Portlanders supporting equality for African Americans surfaced within the city. Because of the surfacing support for African Americans, it was not safe anymore for racist whites to simply force African Americans to live in certain districts of the city. Instead, behind the cause of Urban Renewal, white Portlanders achieved the displacement of African American communities farther into Northeast Portland and out of Lower Albina. For this reason, no matter whether it was proposed as reinvestment or urban renewal, it is easy to see how the story remained the same throughout the 1950s and 1960s -- African Americans were being displaced by white Portlanders.

Although the Urban Renewal movement began within the 1940s, it did not reach full implementation within the city of Portland until the 1950s and 1960s. At face value, it may seem normal that a movement of large-scale urban construction projects took a decade to reach implication. However, there was much more than time at play when the Urban Renewal movement caught wind in the 1950s. By the 1950s, a significant number of Portlanders supported racial equality. Due to this, groups like the Urban National league developed a large umbrella of influence fighting for African American equality in Portland. With their influence,

the Urban National League was able to shift the way that the public majority saw the treatment of African Americans. African Americans received their first glimpse of empowerment as they had finally received a channel to voice their disparity and be heard. African American newspapers began to frequently publish articles reporting the progress that was being made by groups like the Urban National League towards equality. In a publication of the *Portland Challenger* in 1952, the titles “Conference Reports Given at Urban League Meeting” and “Washington Gets Negro Council” on the front page highlighted a statement from a local neighborhood secretary John H. Holley declared that the Fair Housing Association doubled its employment of racial advisers to combat restrictive housing covenants and restrictive loan financing used against African Americans.<sup>12</sup> By the early 1950s, a divide in the dialogue of white Portlanders became identifiable. While discriminatory whites were far from nonexistent at this time, an increasing number of whites began to align themselves with the cause of African American equality as they gave in to the screaming moral calling to do the right thing. It is this very divide of Portland’s white inhabitants that is the reason that discriminatory actions had to shift to the far less blatant form of Urban Renewal within Portland, as it was no longer just whites opposing African American discrimination.

As the development of the renewal projects began, their blueprints called for the demolition of numerous residential blocks inhabited almost entirely by African American residency, forcing the residents out of Lower Albina and most commonly into Upper Albina. It is the undeniable truth that the placement of buildings in such areas that caused the relocation of

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<sup>12</sup> “Conference Reports Given at Urban League Meeting,” *Portland challenger*, 1:12,1 (October 3, 1952).

African Americans that exposes the missing piece of the conversation of urban revitalization within the city of Portland.

While the reality that these projects caused the relocation of African Americans is crucial to understand, the most significant part of these projects was how they targeted some of the most culturally and economically flourishing communities of middle class African Americans within Lower Albina. Persevering through decades of discrimination, the African Americans that ended up in Lower Albina after the enforced concentration following 1919, were unquestionably put at a tremendous disadvantage to develop a community for themselves. Nevertheless, Lower Albina persevered. Following their arrival, African Americans forced into Lower Albina developed a remarkable cultural community and an economically advancing middle class. By the 1940s, Lower Albina was rid of African American owned businesses, stores, theatres, jazz clubs, social clubs, and churches. The image of the thriving communities of Lower Albina in the 1940s is captured within the articles of the African American newspaper the *Portland Challenger*. The *Portland Challenger* portrayed advertisements and covered a wide variety of economic activity in the community: restaurants, social clubs, jazz concerts, dance performances, pharmacies, hotels.<sup>13</sup> There were also announcements of the progress of groups such as The Order of the Pharaohs committed to the advancement of African American socioeconomic and educational statuses within Portland.<sup>14</sup> Without a doubt, examples of an African American community conscious of both educational and economic importance that valued the development of social culture was well developed. However, what African Americans had built within Lower Albina

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<sup>13</sup> “Apology offered after demonstration,” *People’s Observer*, 2:5,1 (August 8, 1944).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

was short-lived. Beginning in the early 1950s, the construction projects that claimed the function of societal investment and urban renewal broke ground.

Upon August 1 and November 3, 1960, the Lloyd Center and Veterans Memorial Coliseum officially opened, making permanent the relocation of hundreds of African Americans and their businesses and community centers. These projects came in many forms, ranging from the construction of new hospitals, coliseums, community centers, and public transportation routes.

Furthermore, the Interstate 5 freeway construction cut a swath through the Eliot, Boise, and Humboldt neighborhoods, displacing many residents and local businesses.<sup>15</sup> Displaced from their homes, these families found new residency, but once again, most of these African American families found themselves taking up residency in Upper Albina, a few miles farther from the heart of the city. As if two projects do not provide enough evidence, in 1970, an already existing project of African American displacement was expanded upon. Built in 1912, the legacy Emanuel medical center was decided to be constructed in the heart of Lower Albina due to the miniscule worth of the value of the African American area at the time. With their expansion in 1970, the medical center constructed Emanuel hospital directly on top of an almost entirely African American community. Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, multitudes of blocks of African American residence would be torn down for the cause of “urban revitalization”, as African Americans were pushed farther and farther out of expanding cultural and economic communities.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Due to the tremendous progress that had been made towards African American equality since the 1960s and 1970s, it can be reasoned that African Americans are treated far better today in Portland comparative to how they were treated in the past. However, it is critical to understand that while their situation might have improved, the improvement of African American equality does not mean true equality. This is clearly seen within the example of the Urban Renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s. Comparative to the 1940s, by 1950 the Urban National League had taken large strides in eliminating restrictive housing covenants placed upon African Americans in Portland. However, when the covenants were removed and Urban Renewal claimed the valiant cause of Lower Albina investment, the common consensus was that things had improved for African Americans. In hindsight we can see that this was not the case as the urban renewal projects brought destruction to a multitude of African American development in the area. With this lesson screaming for attention in front of us, it is crucial that we apply it to our own perspectives today. Therefore, only by deeply questioning the motivation behind our actions may progress be made towards true African American equality in Portland as the general consensus upon the issue appears to be exactly the same as it was in the 1960s.



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