

LIVING ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Walking tour of an historically Black neighborhood in Ann Arbor

PRESENTED IN PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL & HISTORICAL MUSEUM OF WASHTENAW COUNTY AND THE ANN ARBOR DISTRICT LIBRARY



Walking Tour Points of Interest

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Note: Maps are not to scale



To access this resource online, please visit <http://aadl.org/AACHMwalkingtour>

Historically Black Neighborhood



About the Living Oral History Project

The Living Oral History Project interviews African Americans who have lived in the Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti areas all or most of their lives. An outgrowth of these interviews is the Living Oral History Walking Tour. During many of these interviews, we heard about predominately Black neighborhoods and the Black Business District; these businesses were owned and/or run by Black entrepreneurs. In addition, we also heard about community centers, churches, schools, and more.

This LOH Walking Tour will give you an opportunity to walk around and see these actual sites or where they were once located. This project supports AACHM's mission to gather the documents, artifacts, and stories of African Americans in Washtenaw County and to pass them on to the greater community.

LIVING ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
<https://aadl.org/aachmvideos>

LOH DIGITAL COLLECTION
https://aadl.org/aachm_loh_digitalcollection

The shaded area shows the largest predominately Black neighborhood in Ann Arbor from the 1940s through the 1960s. Other areas with a high percentage of Black residents included Woodlawn Avenue, Sheehan Avenue, Greene Street, John A. Woods Drive, and Pontiac Trail. This data is based on Ann Arbor city directories and Living Oral History Project interviews.

1 BLACK BUSINESS DISTRICT

109-121 E. Ann Street

From the 1930s to the 1970s, Ann Street was a hub for Black-owned businesses in downtown Ann Arbor. Barber shops, shoe shine parlors, dry cleaners, restaurants, blues bars, and pool rooms formed the backbone of Black social life. Longtime establishments such as Sanford's Shoe Repair and Easley's Barber Shop opened in the 1930s. Black Ann Arbor residents who grew up in the 1940s and 50s remember visiting Midway Lunch and a pool hall run by David and Mozelle Keaton. Johnnie Rush ran his barber shop for almost 16 years.

During the 1960s, police officers referred to Ann Street as "the Block." A rising crime rate centered around the bars and pool rooms, leading to the closure of many Black-owned businesses on Ann Street in the 1970s. By June 1977, all the storefronts were closed and boarded up. In the 1980s, a new wave of small businesses with little connection to Ann Street's history as the Black business district signaled the end of an era.

READ MORE:

<https://aadl.org/annstreetblackbusinessdistrict>

LISTEN TO AUDREY LUCAS:

https://aadl.org/aachm_loh_20160913-audrey_lucas

LISTEN TO JOHNNIE RUSH:

https://aadl.org/aachm_loh_20161004-johnnie_rush

“

That's where people got their hair done, on Fourth Avenue. The barbershops were up there. The beer garden was there. The pool hall was there. Where you could get your shoes shined was there. And so Ann Street was the Blacks' business district as far as I knew.

”

— AUDREY LUCAS



Johnnie Rush in Barber Shop, November 1960. *The Ann Arbor News*



100 Block of E. Ann St., March 1954, *The Ann Arbor News*

2 COLORED WELFARE LEAGUE

209-211 N. Fourth Avenue

Around the corner from Ann Street, the Kayser Block, built in 1899, was another hub for Black-owned businesses. At one time the building was a hotel owned by Black heavyweight champion Hank Griffin. In 1921 the Colored Welfare League purchased the building to provide rooms for Black workers in the area. They used funds raised from send-off parties for Black World War I soldiers for a downpayment. Over the next few decades, the League rented storefronts to Black businesses. Sadie's Beauty Shop and Julia's Tea Room were popular hangouts. The upper floors hosted social organizations like the early Dunbar Center and the Elks.

In 1966, a young barber named J. D. Hall purchased the Colored Welfare League building. He rented space to the Women's Crisis Center and the Community Leaning Post, a nonprofit established by his sister Lucille Hall Porter. Ms. Porter also founded the African American Downtown Festival. The annual festival celebrates the Black business district, which was thriving from the 1930s through the 1970s.

READ MORE:

<https://aadl.org/africanamericandowntownfestival>

LISTEN TO ESSIE SHELTON:

https://aadl.org/aadl_aachm-20180306-essie_shelton

“

Everything that we needed was on those streets. Yes. I remember where I used to get my hair done up there on Fourth Avenue and the barbershop was upstairs from the beauty shop.

”

— ESSIE SHELTON



Lucille Hall Porter at the Community Leaning Post, 1993, *The Ann Arbor News* (Photographer: Phil Rezek)



Wolverine Barber Shop and Pool Room, May 1944, *The Ann Arbor News* (Photographer: Eck Stanger)

3 JONES ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

401 N. Division Street

Replacing an outdated school building, the new Jones Elementary School opened in 1923. As Ann Arbor's Black population grew in the 1940s and '50s, Jones School increasingly served Black students. The school hosted recreational groups like Boy Scout Troops 9 and 18, the Hashatuaya Camp Fire Girls, and the Twilight Softball league. In 1951, Jones transitioned from a combined K-9 school to an elementary school. Leadership of clubs and organizations began to reflect the diversity of the school's neighborhood. But most teachers were white. In 1954, Harry Mial became the first full-time Black teacher hired by the Ann Arbor school board. He taught at Jones School for three years before becoming principal at Northside School. Mr. Mial was an important role model for students.

In 1954, the landmark Supreme Court verdict on *Brown v. The Board of Education* ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Discriminatory housing practices restricted Black families to Ann Arbor's North-Central neighborhood and a few other areas. In 1964 the Ann Arbor Board of Education acknowledged that, with over 75% Black students, Jones was a "de facto" segregated school. Jones School closed in 1965, and students were bussed to other schools in the district. Several years later the building reopened as Community High School.

READ MORE:

<https://aadl.org/jonesschool>

LISTEN TO HAROLD SIMONS:

https://aadl.org/aadl_aachm_20190315-harold_simons



Jones Elementary School Lightweight football team, 1948, (Photo courtesy of Maggie Jewett)



Jones Elementary School, 1935, *The Ann Arbor News* (Photographer: Attributed to Eck Stanger)

“

I did get introduced for the first time—and it left an everlasting memory, and it gave me the encouragement and made me begin to think a little bit as I look back on it that maybe I could do it also—was my Black teacher at Jones Elementary, and that was Harry Mial.

”

— HAROLD SIMONS

4 DUNBAR COMMUNITY CENTER

420 N. Fourth Avenue

The Dunbar Community Center was a major hub of social life for Ann Arbor's Black community through the 1950s. It was first established in 1923 as the Dunbar Civic Center, named for the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. Early on, the community center rented space from the Colored Welfare League. Both organizations provided housing for Black laborers in the segregated North-Central neighborhood.

In 1937, the Center purchased the 420 N. Fourth Avenue site. Director Douglas E. H. Williams and program director Virginia Ellis took the helm. Their leadership increased the services and the activities offered to Ann Arbor's Black community.

During this era, the YMCA in Ann Arbor was still segregated. The Dunbar Center was an essential community space for Black residents, especially children. The Center offered art and cooking classes, tutoring, a lending library, and space for community meetings. They also hosted a Boy Scouts troop, summer camps, and several musical groups. In 1958, the Dunbar Community Center changed its name to the Ann Arbor Community Center. They expanded services to the entire populace. A new building on Main Street became its permanent home.

READ MORE:

<https://aadl.org/dunbarcenter>

LISTEN TO SHIRLEY BECKLEY:

https://aadl.org/aachm_loh_20150505-shirley_beckley



Dunbar Community Center: a Place to Play and Learn, October 1951, *The Ann Arbor News* (Photographer: Eck Stanger)



Dunbar Center, May 1944, *The Ann Arbor News* (Photographer: Eck Stanger)

“

That's where we all went when we got out of school, until our parents got out of work....We would go upstairs, and Ms. Ellis would tutor us. We would do our reading, our writing, and our arithmetic first. And then after that was done, then we would go down in the basement where there was a ping pong table and a pool table....On Friday nights we'd have dances.

”

— SHIRLEY BECKLEY

5 THE SEELEYS' HOUSE

203 Beakes Street

Johnnie Mae Seeley and Howard M. Seeley moved to Ann Arbor from Sarepta, Louisiana in 1954. Mr. Seeley worked as a handyman and window washer at the University Hospital. Mrs. Seeley was a caterer, and became very well known for her Southern cooking. She was a Deaconess of Bethel AME Church and an excellent gardener.

Mrs. Seeley established herself as a fixture of Ann Arbor's Black community. She continued her family's tradition of hosting big barbecues and offering hospitality to visitors. At their home on the corner of Beakes Street and Fourth Avenue, the Seeleys hosted Sunday communal dinners and large Fourth of July parties. For years, Mrs. Seeley's garden provided food for the Human Service Project, which donated food to homeless shelters. Her philanthropic model was the inspiration for Zingerman's Food Gatherers program. Mrs. Seeley passed away in 2016.

LISTEN TO JOHNNIE MAE SEELEY:

https://aadl.org/aachmvideos/johnnie_mae_seeley

“

Mr. and Mrs. Seeley. They lived on the corner... They would put any black people up. The Elks sometimes put people up, because they had rooms up stairs. But that was the only place that black people that came here—where they could stay. There were no places.

”

— SHIRLEY BECKLEY

“

Oh, we still had big dinners in our backyard on the holidays and all... Yeah, the police in Ann Arbor, when we'd have the Fourth of July party, they'd close Fourth Street and Beakes Street. They'd block it off...I had as many as 200 right there in my backyard, in and out, you know?

”

— JOHNNIE MAE SEELEY



Howard and Johnnie Mae Seeley's classic barbecue fare, September 2, 1996, The Ann Arbor News (Photographer: Linda Wan)



Johnnie Mae Seeley's annual barbecue, September 2, 1996, The Ann Arbor News (Photographer: Linda Wan)

6 SECOND BAPTIST CHURCH

216 Beakes Street

Reverend E. J. Lewis and a small group of congregants established Second Baptist Church in 1865 in a small frame cottage. Longtime pastor Rev. Charles W. Carpenter attended Tuskegee Institute. When he joined Second Baptist as pastor in 1929, the congregation numbered 150. By the 1950s, membership was over 400. Rev. Carpenter led fundraising for a new church building at 216 Beakes Street.

Second Baptist was an organizing hub for the neighborhood. Rev. Carpenter became a spokesperson for North-Central residents. He opposed urban renewal plans that would result in residents losing their homes to new construction.

By the 1970s, the growing congregation needed a bigger space. After Rev. Emmett L. Green took the helm in 1966, he led the initiative for a new church building at 850 Red Oak Road. The congregation dedicated the new building in 1980. Rev. Green also began the tradition of an annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Unity March from Washtenaw County Courthouse to Second Baptist Church.

READ MORE:

https://aadl.org/aa_news_19530509-new_structure_milestone_for_church_pastor

LISTEN TO LYDIA MORTON:

https://aadl.org/aachmvideos/lydia_belle_morton

“

My family was the founder of that. The Zebbs and my grandmother on my mother's side... Mother was organist for 50 years. So I was at the church before I was born.

”

— LYDIA MORTON



Laying Cornerstone at Second Baptist Church, November 1952, The Ann Arbor News



New Second Baptist Church Features Modern Design, May 1953, The Ann Arbor News (Photographer: Eck Stanger)

7 BETHEL AME CHURCH

632 N. Fourth Avenue

Founded in 1857, Bethel AME Church was an offshoot of the Union Church, Ann Arbor's first Black church. Parishioners built its first permanent home in 1869. It was a wood frame church across the street from founder John Wesley Brooks' cottage on Fourth Avenue. The congregation completed construction of a new building at 632 N. Fourth Avenue in 1896. Many of the craftsmen who added stained glass and intricate woodwork were members of the church.

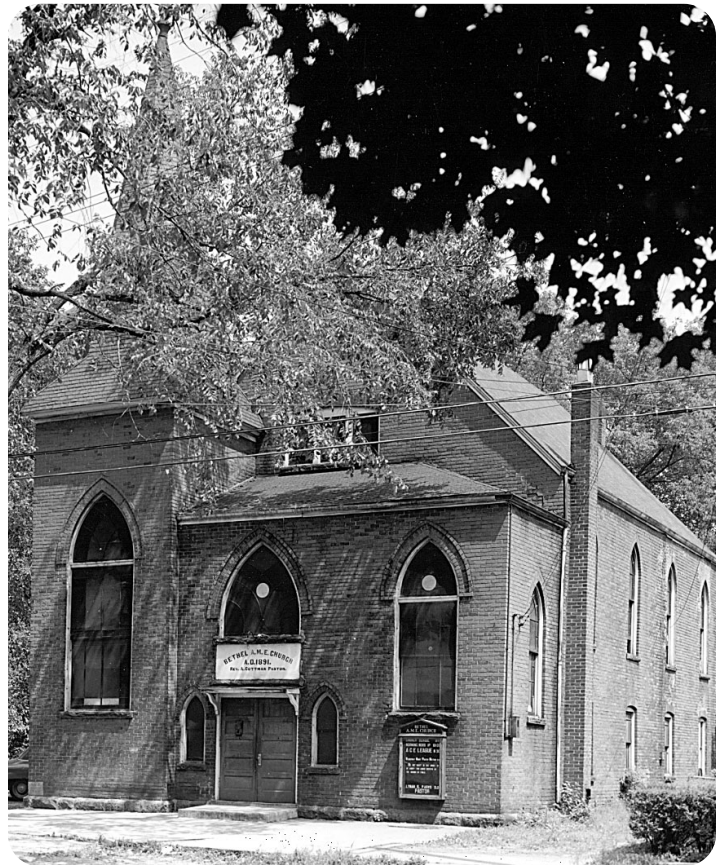
For most of the twentieth century, the Bethel AME Church was a community anchor in the North-Central neighborhood. This was one of the only areas in Ann Arbor where Black residents could buy property. Longtime pastors including Rev. Lyman S. Parks and Rev. John A. Woods led the church's activities and outreach. Residents remember attending Sunday school, choir rehearsals, outdoor dinners, and youth groups. In 1972, the congregation dedicated a new building at 900 Plum Street (now John A. Woods Drive). By the 1990s, the old Bethel AME Church building was converted into condos.

READ MORE:

https://aadl.org/bethel_ame_church-centennial_souvenir_program

LISTEN TO AUDREY MONAGAN:

https://aadl.org/aadl_aachm-20190702-audrey_monagan



Bethel AME Church (Photo courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library)



Bethel AME Church Groups and Leaders, July 1944, The Ann Arbor News (Photographer: Eck Stanger)

“

You came in, you had the kitchen and they had a couple of rooms for Sunday school. Then you went upstairs in the big sanctuary. And that's where we served the Lord. And we opened up the windows in the summertime so we wouldn't smother up there for the heat. In the wintertime, it was comfortable. So we had it all....And we just had a good time in the Lord up there.

”

— AUDREY MONAGAN

8 HISTORICALLY BLACK NEIGHBORHOOD

See map on page 2

Ann Arbor's neighborhoods were racially segregated until the 1960s. Most Black residents lived in the North-Central and West Side neighborhoods now known as Kerrytown and Water Hill. This area was a former industrial site near the Huron River and the train station. North Fourth and Fifth Avenue, Beakes Street, Depot Street, and Fuller Street had nearly all Black residents, and several families lived on Kingsley Street. The neighborhood also ran up the hill to include Felch, Hiscock, West Summit, Pearl, Sunset, Daniel, Spring, Fountain, Hillcrest, Miner, Gott, and Brooks Streets. This area had about 80% Black residents.

Most realtors would not show houses to Black families outside the North-Central area. Some mortgage contracts in other subdivisions prevented owners from selling to non-white buyers. It was not until 1968 that these covenants became illegal due to the Fair Housing Act.

Until the late 1960s, the North-Central neighborhood featured remnants of industrial businesses. Lanksy's Junk Yard and Peters Sausage Company remained for decades. Concerned residents finally convinced the city to buy the lots. This area became Summit Park (now Wheeler Park) on Depot Street. In the 1960s, the city planned to build a Beakes-Packard bypass. The road would have divided the neighborhood. Residents stopped the bypass, but the city had already purchased many homes from Black families. Within a couple decades, the demographics shifted. Black churches relocated to areas with more room for growth. Younger, white-majority residents took the place of Black homeowners and renamed the neighborhoods Kerrytown and Water Hill.

LISTEN TO FRED ADAMS:

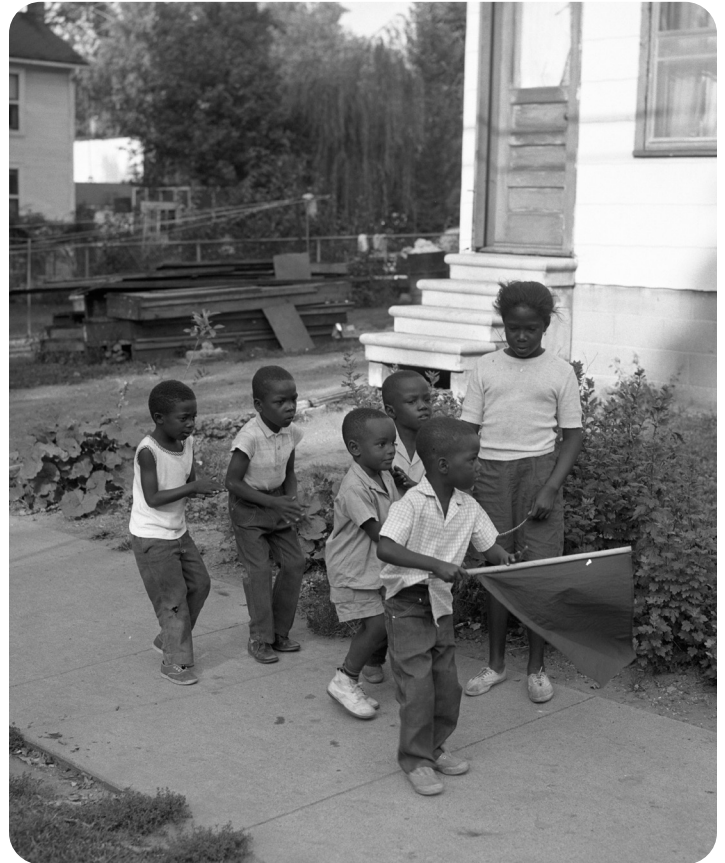
https://aadl.org/aachm_loh_20161111-fred_adams

LISTEN TO LARRY HUNTER:

https://aadl.org/aachm-20180506-larry_hunter

LISTEN TO JAMES ANDERSON:

https://aadl.org/aachm_loh_20150507-james_anderson



"Junior French Dukes" Do A Rhythmic Shuffle In The North Fourth Avenue/Beakes Street Neighborhood, September 1964, The Ann Arbor News (Photographer: Eck Stanger)

“

I was a paper boy as a kid coming up, and I had, as customers, most of the Black families in Ann Arbor. You had Black families living on Beakes Street between Main and the bridge. Summit Street from Beakes up to Hiscock and a little bit beyond had Black families. On Wall Street you had Black families. On Glen Ave and Catherine.

”

— FRED ADAMS

8 HISTORICALLY BLACK NEIGHBORHOOD
(continued)

“

My dad lived over there on Fifth Avenue....And right now, that area is probably some of the most expensive real estate in the city of Ann Arbor right now. All of that North-Central area, all around the farmer's market, and where they've made condominiums or apartments out of our old Bethel Church.

”

— JAMES ANDERSON



W. Summit St. and Ann Arbor Railroad crossing, February 1964, The Ann Arbor News (Photographer: Eck Stanger)



North Fifth Avenue (west side of street just north of Detroit St.), May 1950, The Ann Arbor News (Photographer: Eck Stanger)

“

I have not so many fond memories of Kerrytown because that place began with a place that was left over for the Black folks. There were old grain factories, industrial energy stuff. And it felt back in the day like it was a ghost town. Only Black folks were there.

”

— LARRY HUNTER

About the African American Cultural & Historical Museum of Washtenaw County

The African American Cultural & Historical Museum of Washtenaw County (AACHM) was established by 23 founding members in 1993. The mission of the AACHM is to research, collect, preserve, and exhibit cultural and historical materials about the life and work of African Americans in Washtenaw County.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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About the Ann Arbor District Library Archives

The AADL Archives provides reference services to anyone seeking information about the local area. Questions can be sent to the Archives staff at oldnews@aadl.org. The AADL Archives is always seeking to expand its holdings of local history materials. If you have materials to offer or to lend for digitization, you can contact the Archives staff at oldnews@aadl.org.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

www.aadl.org or 734.327.4200