The Milwaukee African Americans

Early history in Milwaukee

African Americans were in Milwaukee from the time of Solomon Juneau, whose cook was black. Early in Milwaukee's history, the population was scattered in small numbers all over the city. This changed during the time of the Great Migration (1910-1930) when African Americans migrated from the South to northern cities in greater numbers. It was during those years that African Americans began joining Germans, Jews, and others on Milwaukee's near north side.

Bronzeville

The original Bronzeville region (also known as the Sixth Ward) that comprised all or parts of today's Halyard Park, King Park, Triangle, Triangle North, Hillside, and Haymarket neighborhoods, was once a thriving community of fluctuating, collaborating ethnic groups. It was a place where new immigrants and migrants were able to test and hone their talents. The early residents were mostly Germans who established the early commercial corridors on North 3rd, North Avenue, and Walnut Street. By 1900 some of the Germans in the area were moving to other locations north and west, and new populations were arriving. These included Eastern European Jews, Poles, Slovaks, Czechs, Hungarians, and African Americans.

Juneteenth Day

Businesses: a portrait of Walnut Street in 1930

Walnut Street in 1930 was a polyglot of ethnic merchants. Between 3rd and 8th Streets, African American proprietors dominated. Included among them were Willie Jones Billiards, Chicken Shack, Miss Lulu's Dry Goods, Fred Bobo Dentist, De Reef & Dorsey Lawyers, and Malcolm King Physician. The jazz clubs attracted major artists and were frequented by people from ethnic groups all over the city.

Between 9th and 11th Streets, Jewish proprietors dominated, including F. Perchonok & Sons Coal, Aaron Glusman Meats, Andrew Goldwyn Drugs, Samuel Horowitz Soft Drinks, Philip Raskin Plumber, and Morris Parchefsky Shoes. Most of the proprietors west of 11th Street were members of other European groups—mostly Germans and Slavs.

"My great grandfather came up from Mississippi where they were literally starving on a rented piece of land, and where Jim Crow was the order of the day. He heard about jobs here, came up, then after he got a job, brought up the rest of his family."

"Jazz and blues are from memory and is still like this. With Europeans it's different—succinctly—they will play the same song twice exactly the same. This won't be the case with African Americans. It's how we see the world."

Quotes of African American informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Meet one of your early African American neighbors

Proprietor family: the Malcolm M. King family

Malcolm M. King was a black physician with an office at 625 W. Walnut. Born in the West Indies, King opened his Milwaukee office in the late 1920s and remained until sometime in the 1940s. About the time he set up his Walnut Street practice he married Edwina Smith and brought her teenage daughter Isabel into the union (*see photo of Isabel to the left*). Isabel took the surname of King. The family rented a home on nearby Clark Street, as apparently even physicians had difficulty purchasing homes in Milwaukee during these times if they were black.

The match between Edwina and Malcolm may have been stimulated by common experiences, as Edwina was also college-educated and the daughter of a doctor. Her father, Frank G. Smith, was a general practitioner and her mother, Lena Smith (nee Calhoun), was also college-educated.

Edwina's family was shadowing the movement of the Great Migration. Her parents had roots in Alabama and Georgia and moved north into Tennessee by the time that Edwina was born. Frank may have been a student at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, the first medical school in the South for African Americans. The family then took up residence in Chicago where they purchased a home on Wabash Avenue. Other family members moved on to Milwaukee.

Malcolm and Edwina's daughter Isabel followed the same family pattern, even as the Great Depression loomed on. While Malcolm was practicing medicine on Walnut Street, she received an education at Milwaukee State Teachers College, where she graduated with a degree in exceptional education (the photo is her graduation picture).

It is not known how long the King family remained in Milwaukee. It is unlikely that Malcolm King would have lived into the 1960s where he could have extolled the significance of his Christian and surname in the Civil Rights Movement.

The growth of African American businesses in Bronzeville

Between 1930 and 1950, the African American population in Bronzeville nearly doubled. While dozens of Jewish-, German-, and Slavic-owned stores remained on Walnut Street, African American business and offices now dominated the street between 3rd and 11th. Included among them were Seven Hundred Tap, Louisiana Fine Foods, Chicken Shack, Howard W. Moore Phonograph Records, O'Bee Funeral Home, Theodore Coggs Lawyer,

"Do you have any idea how many businesses we had along Walnut Street and on either side? Look into the *Negro Yellow Pages* in 1950. Hundreds. These were businesses that had been passed on from parents to children. And what happened to them? Well, some tried to reopen in those other neighborhoods, but the whites never came. If you wonder why there aren't that many black businesses today in Milwaukee, well, here's your answer."

Quote of African American informant from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

John W. Maxwell Physician, Anthony J. Josey Real Estate, and *Wisconsin Enterprise Blade Weekly* Newspaper. Scores of black-run businesses, offices, and clubs also lined the side streets that extended to North Avenue.

Meet another of your early African American neighbors

Proprietor family: Alice ("Alyce") Beatrice Archie & family

Sometime in the late 1930s, a self-determining African American woman opened a clothing store at 904 West North Avenue. Alyce Archie's Women's Clothes remained in operation well into the 1940s and probably beyond. At this time, stores on North Avenue were almost completely run by European Americans, and the overwhelming majority of the proprietors were men.

Alyce lived around the corner, on North 10th Street with her husband James and daughter Mary in a rented house--in the heart of Bronzeville. Her husband worked in an auto body shop.

Alyce was also a product of the Great Migration. She was born in Calhoun County, Alabama in 1917 to parents Doc Swain, a pipe fitter, and Mary Swain, a maid. She married James Archie in Alabama and the young family moved north, most likely in pursuit of better economic and social opportunities.

Mary Archie, Alyse's daughter (see school photo to right) would prove to be just as self-determining. In the early 1950s she attended and graduated from North Division High School, and became one of just a handful of African American students there at the time. She served in several leadership roles, including on the student council.

Alyce and James would divorce and by 1965, Alyce was remarried to a man with the surname of Stoney. She lived to be 85. No information was found on Mary Archie after she left North Division High School.

The residents of the original Bronzeville

In so many ways, the people that tested and honed their talents in the Bronzeville area went on to become trailblazers and icons in various arenas in Milwaukee, the United States, and even on the world stage. Only a handful of these individuals are highlighted here. Two of these are Golda Meir, former prime minister of Israel, and Bob Uecker, Hall of Fame announcer of the Milwaukee Brewers. There was also an Academy Award winning actress.

"My grandmother talked about the large teas that they used to have in the Bronzeville days. These would be feasts to honor people in the black community or raise funds."

Quote of African American informant from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Meet more of your early African American neighbors

Hattie McDaniel

In 1929, Hattie Holbert McDaniel moved to a rented flat on North 7th Street in today's Hillside neighborhood—then Bronzeville. She was born in 1895 in Kansas, the youngest of 13 children of former slaves, Henry McDaniel and Susan Holbert. Her father Henry had fought in the Union Army for the 122nd Colored Troupes during the Civil War. One of Hattie's brothers, Sam McDaniel, developed a career in Hollywood, playing the role of a butler in a Three Stooges' short film, among others. Also interested in the entertainment field, Hattie wrote songs and joined a black touring ensemble in the early 1920s in Denver and Chicago. She briefly became a recording artist for Oheh and Paramount Records.

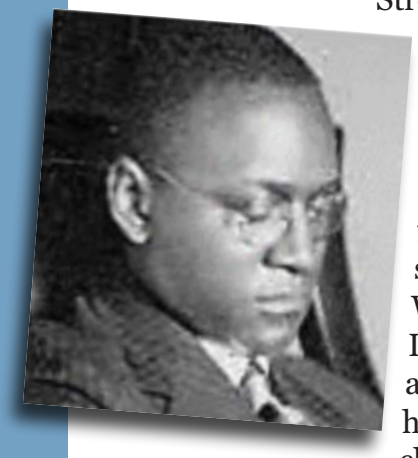
However, the advent of the Great Depression changed the course of Hattie's career. In 1929, the only job she could find was that of a restroom attendant for the Madrid Club on 126th and Bluemound, just outside of Milwaukee. The Madrid Club had a reputation for excellent music and food, but was chiefly known as a speakeasy with access to gambling. Having rented a flat in old Bronzeville, Hattie added to her income by taking in a roomer named Robert Ray, who worked as a street laborer. This liminal time in the neighborhood no doubt spurred Hattie to reflect on future aspirations.

By 1931, Hattie joined her brother Sam and sisters in Los Angeles. She managed to get small roles in several films, including one with Mae West (another former Milwaukee connection). Her pay was so low that she continued working as a maid.

Hattie's major break came when she auditioned for and won the role of slave Mammie in *Gone with the Wind*. The movie, released in 1939, became an instant blockbuster and received many Oscars. Hattie McDaniel won in the Best Supporting Actress category, becoming the first African American to win an Oscar.

The Halyards

When the Halyards first moved to Milwaukee, they settled on North 9th Street just outside of the Halyard Park neighborhood, which today bears their surname. By 1940, Wilber and Ardie Halyard had moved to the Old North Milwaukee area. Like many former residents of Bronzeville, the Halyards were trailblazers. Together the couple founded the first African American-owned savings and loan association in the State of Wisconsin. They opened Columbia Savings & Loan with only a $10 bill in 1924, just one year after they arrived in Milwaukee. The institution helped black families secure home loans—a radical change from the policies of mainstream banks that usually denied loans on the basis of race.

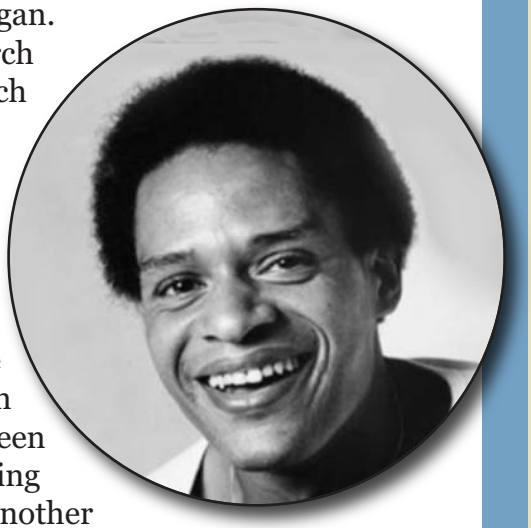


Both Wilber and Ardie came from humble beginnings. Born in South Carolina in 1895, Wilber completed high school and moved north with the Great Migration, taking a caretaker's job in Beloit in 1920. Ardie (nee Clark) was born 1896 in Covington Georgia, the daughter of sharecroppers. She had graduated from Atlanta University, moved north, and married Wilber in Wisconsin.

While the two were running Columbia Savings & Loan, Ardie worked as a social worker for Goodwill Industries during the days and donated her time at the S&L at night. In 1951, Ardie became the first woman president of the Milwaukee chapter of the NAACP. In the 1960s, she worked with Father James Groppi to establish the NAACP Youth Council, a group responsible for most of the fair housing marches in 1967. Ardi Halyard also served on the Wisconsin State Board of Vocational, Technical, and Adult Education for more than eight years.

Al Jarreau

In 1940, the Jarreau family moved to 336 W. Reservoir in the Halyard Park/Bronzeville neighborhood. The father, Emile Jarreau, was the descendant of Creoles from Louisiana, and the mother, Pearl Walker Jarreau, was born in Florida. Emile and Pearl raised six children on Reservoir. Both Emile and Pearl were spiritual organizers in the Negro Seventh-day Adventist movement. According to the 1940 census, both had completed two years of college, possibly at the Andrews University Seminary in Michigan. Emile was an ordained pastor and church singer and Pearl an accomplished church pianist. Emile also supplemented his income as a welder.



In 1940, the Seventh-day Adventists had 206 African American churches and 14,537 black members. Music had always been very important among black Adventists. Early on there was the commitment to bring in African musical patterns and genres that had been brought over by slaves, such as embracing the juxtaposition of one rhythm upon another and modal scales in which the melodies were often interwoven.

The Jarreau children of Bronzeville were brought up with these musical traditions, singing together at church concerts. The fifth child, Alwin Lopez Jarreau ("Al"), was particularly talented, developing unique musical expressions at an early age. After graduating from Lincoln High School, he attended Ripon College where he sang with a group called the Indigos. He graduated from Ripon and went on to receive a master's degree in rehabilitation therapy from the University of Iowa. Working as a rehabilitation counselor in California, he often moonlighted as a jazz singer in nightclubs. He was eventually spotted by Warner Brothers and was offered a recording contract.

His unique vocal sound ultimately earned Al Jarreau seven Grammy awards and over a dozen nominations. Perhaps his most popular album was the 1981 *Breakin' Away*. In 2005, Jarreau returned to Milwaukee to give the keynote speech at the UW-Milwaukee graduation ceremony. Jarreau died in 2017 at age 77.

The loss of the original Bronzeville

During the 1950s and 1960s, two government programs displaced most of this commu- nity. One program was the Urban Renewal Administration, which had been designed to improve central city housing. Many blocks in Bronzeville were slated for revitalization, and residents on these blocks were forced to sell their homes or were offered alternative housing in other areas of the city. During the same time period, the Milwaukee County Expressway Commission was building two major freeway corridors in the heart of the City. One cut directly across Bronzeville, discarding Walnut Street as the center of the community. Over 8,000 homes were lost as were nearly all of the scores of businesses, clubs, and organizations on or near Walnut Street.

Post Bronzeville

With the loss of Bronzeville, black families sought housing in other areas of the city. How- ever, in most areas, white landlords refused to rent to blacks and the banks rarely gave them loans. Despite continuous efforts by the only black and only woman elected member of the Common Council, Vel Phillips, open housing proposals were constantly voted down in Milwaukee. During 1967 and 1968, the NAACP Youth Council, Father James Groppi, and other volunteers marched for 200 days, demanding open housing ordinances. The highpoint of the marches culminated with the crossing of the 16th Street Viaduct to Kosciuszko Park in August of 1967. There marchers were confronted by counter demonstrators hurling rocks, eggs, and broken glass. It was only with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 by the federal government that Milwaukee finally passed its own fair housing bill.

But through all of this, the one thing black families could usually rely on was good jobs in the industrial sector. Many African American families moved northwest into the areas that had once been Granville Township, but were annexed by the City of Milwaukee in the 1960s. The area was teeming with industrial jobs. However, beginning in the 1980s, major industries began moving out of Milwaukee. This city, like so many others, was transitioning from an industrial to a service economy.

To get a visual glimpse of some of what has been lost (but also what has been gained) of the African American history in Milwaukee, readers might enjoy the following walk.

A literal walk through Milwaukee's African American history

Our walk begins at the Lapham Park Apartments and Senior Center at 1901 North Sixth Street. You will be visiting a re-creation of Walnut Street as it existed in the 1940s and 1950s. (It is best to call the center ahead to ensure access.) The senior citizens of Lapham Park, working with the center's management, helped to replicate several sections of Old Walnut Street from memories and photos and some actual belongings of the residents.

"The loss of Bronzeville was the breakdown of the village. The whites had people moving them [African Americans] into the projects and those with a little money moved to the suburbs. It was then the image of who we were that came from the whites. Before that it had been a localized culture. Before that you took care of your own—you watched other people's kids, made sure your neighborhood was nice and safe. After the move, we lost that."

"Oh, they didn't know too much about what was going to happen and then they found out. And what that did was--they removed 8,000 homes. They wanted to just get rid of them. And they didn't care about the people who lived there, just wanted to make it look better, you know. That didn't change the conditions, you know. . . And after that [urban renewal] they decided to further tear down the so called slum area with the North-South Expressway that removed 8,000 homes and that killed 3rd Street. Third Street was the second largest shopping area in the city at the time. We had downtown, which is the central business district. And we had 3rd Street and upper 3rd Street with Gimbels Schuster's, Home Bank, First Wisconsin Bank, all kinds of businesses—automobile dealers. And all that went with the building of the expressway. It was callous."

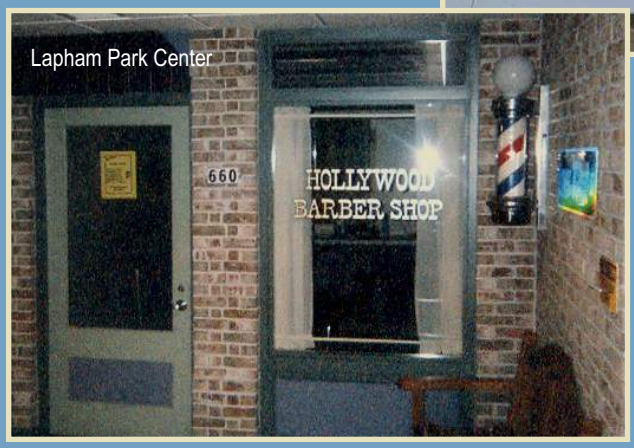
"Neighborhoods would organize to keep us out. I remember once seeing a sign that said, 'If they move in, your neighbors will move out.' I was maybe about twelve at the time and I wondered what was so [grimace] about us that no one wanted to be near us."

Quotes of African American informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Once inside, walk around. Check out the shops. Read the inscriptions. Note the photos of old Bronzeville on the walls. Try and imagine this self-contained black community in its heyday with nearly 500 businesses that thrived on this ground.

When you leave the Lapham Park Center, you will cross North Sixth Street and walk east. You are in the lovely Halyard Park Neighborhood that extends from Martin Luther King Drive on the east to North Sixth Street on the west, and North Avenue on the north to McKinley Avenue on the south.

When Bronzeville was completely leveled in the 1960s, a black real estate developer named Beechie Brooks began plans for this neighborhood. He saw that the City of Milwaukee had erected some housing for low income African Americans to replace the homes they'd lost, but saw little in development for middle class blacks. Brooks began a campaign to raise capital to build a new neighborhood. By the late 1970s he'd raised enough money to build Halyard Park with housing and landscapes that were state of the art for its time.



Lapham Park Center

Walk around Halyard Park. Note the layout and quality of the homes. Stop at the Gaines Triangle on Halyard Avenue and read the inscription.

After you have finished your stroll through Halyard Park, walk north to West North Avenue. Look around. This is becoming the "new" Bronzeville. A number of African American activists have partnered with the City of Milwaukee to create a new commercial and entertainment district that will attempt to mirror the area's past. Some installments are already in place.

"Before you had well-meaning people [that] sold homes to blacks whose rent was going toward the price of the house. But after urban renewal and the expressway, the blacks ended up with nothing then, because the money was paid to the homeowners and did not go to them."

"Redlining in housing is what I remember. We could not get loans at reasonable rates. I worked for a finance company at one time and we clearly circled high danger loans—if they lived in areas where we would not give loans."

"The one good thing that happened after we lost Bronzeville, was the development of Halyard Park, where middle class blacks could claim a piece of what had once been a solid community."

Quotes of African American informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.


Halyard Park

Recent history

New Bronzeville

Beginning in the 1990s, there have been community-wide efforts led in part by Alderwoman Milele Coggs and Maures Development Group to redevelop an area near and north of old Bronzeville into the Bronzeville Cultural and Entertainment District. The new district, in today's Halyard Park and Harambee neighborhoods, has attracted a number of art and commercial enterprises. One of the latest is the Garfield project, a $17.4 million catalytic development designed to transform a nearly vacant city block into a mixed-use campus. Included among the features will be 30 apartment units, and 8,000 of square feet of commercial space called the Griot (with 41 more residential units). The Griot and Historic Garfield project has been spearheaded by Maures Development Group in collaboration with J. Jeffers & Co. Included among the project's features is the future reopening of America's Black Holocaust Museum.

America's Black Holocaust Museum


Reggie Jackson, Dr. Fran Kaplan and Brad Pruitt

The Return of the ABHM

America's Black Holocaust Museum was founded in 1984 in a Milwaukee storefront by Dr. James Cameron, the only known survivor of a lynching. In 1988 Cameron acquired a spacious free-standing building, where he expanded ABHM's exhibits and employed staff.

Cameron's passing in 2006 combined with the country's economic downturn forced the museum to give up its building in 2008. The museum went online (abhmuseum.org), providing myriads of links to useful information on African American history and contributions.

But today, thanks to the efforts of volunteers such as Reggie Jackson, Brad Pruitt, and Dr. Fran Kaplan, the efforts of Maures Development, a tax credit equity, foundation support, and an ongoing capital campaign, the museum is on track to reopen in the near future.

"I am so glad they are trying to restore old Bronzeville. But will a manufactured community work the way the real one did back in the day?"

"My great-grandparents were slaves. You have to wonder how America would have fared without us. . . . African slavery must have accounted for a very high percentage of all the goods produced in the Americas. I wonder if the Americans would have even considered revolting against England if it had not been for the advances they'd seen under slavery. I just don't hear much about this contribution. I don't see any of my family members being thanked."

"What they've done—especially with the Black Holocaust Museum and Dr. Cameron and now. It is black creativity at its height—turning utter tragedy into a positive resource for the community."

Quotes of African American informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

And a culture of contribution

Despite the history of constraints and discrimination at the national and local levels, only some African Americans have despaired. Through seemingly insurmountable barriers, the majority of Black Americans have developed a dynamic and creative culture of contribution. The "culture of contribution" was a major finding in the African American study conducted by anthropologists at Urban Anthropology Inc. during the early years of the 21st century. Among the findings was the following.

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> **1**. Voluntary service to others (A commitment to helping that can be seen in family and community relationships, as well as in the enterprises founded by African Americans).
>
> **2**. A continuing reinvention of self (A creative way of redeveloping popular cul- ture that transforms personal and group identities).
>
> **3**. The will to struggle (A determined practice of holding one's own ground and resisting discrimination and exploitation).

For more on the results of this study, see the free online documentary, *African Americans and the Culture of Contribution*, by Urban Anthropology Inc. at:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNo9fHzX8XY&feature=youtu.be.

"You see this among family and friends. If someone has trouble they will take in their kids—sometimes even raise them. The Latinos do this too, but I see less of this among whites."

"I know some blacks that have gone to Africa. But it's hard. You don't really know where you came from. You visit here. Was this my ancestor's home? Was this my ancestors' tribe? You come away with more questions than answers. I know people that have come back mad. They say, "Other people go to their home countries and search for their roots. We have nothing to search for."

"I think we [African Americans] have more day care centers than anyone else. My family was involved in this since we came up from the South. It used to be we'd be hired to live in white people's houses to be nannies. Today all the women work and they need this. It's like you can't have enough child-care. You see a new one opening every day."

Quotes of African American informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Meet one of your current African American neighbors

Niki Renee Espy

Niki Espy is an excellent representative of the African American "culture of contribution." Her entire life has been dedicated to service to others and service to the earth's environment. With a bachelor's degree in biological sciences, she chose a career as an informal educator with an environmental focus. This has included her work at the Milwaukee Public Museum and her current work with youth at Milwaukee's Neighborhood House. She also serves on several boards of other community-focused organizations.

Niki likes to call herself an American of African descent. She works today with primarily African American young people where she successfully motivates them to grow and consume fresh vegetables and learn more about their culture as well as other Milwaukee ethnicities.

Much of her interest in helping others came from her early black church experiences. Later she honed her passions participating in social networks such as African American Interpreters Committee, Outdoor Afro, and her places of employment.

However, Niki is quick to point out that while she loves black music, food, and communications, she constantly reaches out to others. “I would like to say that I also have many friends and other interests that are outside my ethnic group.”