The Power of Place in Civil Rights

African Americans Struggle for Civil Rights in Rhode Island during the 20th Century

In 2007, the Rhode Island Historical Society, in collaboration with the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and the Rhode Island Preservation and Heritage Commission, was awarded a grant from the National Park Service for a multi-phase project on African Americans’ Struggle for Civil Rights in Rhode Island during the 20th Century. Partners conducted archival research, collected oral histories, and contracted with the Public Archaeology Lab, Inc. (PAL) to document places of significance to civil rights in Rhode Island.

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In Memoriam
Michael Van Leesten
July 29, 1939 – August 23, 2019

Rhode Island born Michael Van Leesten was a lifelong champion for civil rights and economic justice. He maintained an unwavering belief in African American equality throughout his extraordinary career. He was a tireless civil rights worker who helped poor African Americans in rural Alabama register to vote during the height of the 1960s civil rights era. He is best known locally as one of the founders and chief executive officer of the Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC) of Rhode Island, which became a premier training, education and employment organization that assisted thousands of Rhode Island families in need.
Places of PROMINENCE

People of PROMINENCE

While it is impossible to tell all of the stories of those who fought for civil rights in Rhode Island, these sites and the people associated with them can help us recall and honor the struggle.

Eleanor Walker Keys House
(Rose Keys House from 1936–2012)

Eleanor Walker Keys was active in leading roles in the NAACP and the Women’s League in Newport, and promoted the understanding of African American heritage through lectures at significant local historic figures in connection with the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and the Rhode Island Historical Society. She received numerous awards for her work, including the City of Newport’s 1986 Women’s Community Service Award from the Newport Daily News, and the George G. Edwardson Award for 1979 (presented to the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society).

Bartha S. and Dr. Williams Higgins House
(Higgins Black House from 1930–1940)

Bartha Higgins was highly active in social and political life from the 1930s until her death in 1940. She was involved in the RI League of Colored Women’s Clubs, the Colored Women’s Civic Club of Newport, and the African American fraternal organizations like the Twenty-Third Infantry and Liberty Club. She held a committee for "awarded women" within the Ri League Suffrage Party, which led her in becoming a founding member of the Ri League of Women Voters.

In the 1930s Higgins lobbied in support of the Fair Play (lynching) bill in Congress. She first approached in 1930, intended to make lynching a federal crime— which did not pass; in fact, the aspiring bill has been reestablished in the House and the Justice for Victims of Lying Act of 2018. One of her writing in the paper in 1938, his predecessor the House bill was signed by the President.

In the 1940s, Higgins joined the旋星 Residency and was责编 in the Committees on Employment. Prominent of the Chamber of Commerce and an enthusiastic advocate in education and employment in Rhode Island. Higgins was the first black woman elected to the Rhode Island Department of Public Welfare.
Places of PROMINENCE

People of PROMINENCE

Joseph G. LaCour Law Office
(office in 1959-1981)

Joseph G. LaCour moved to East Providence as a child and grew up in Providence's lower Newberry neighborhood. After earning a law degree at Harvard University in Cambridge, MA, he returned to Providence and became a civil rights attorney, serving as an advocate at the Providence NAACP. In 1939-40, he became the Legal Defense Committee's leader, fighting against discriminatory laws against the Providence Board of Education. He also founded the American University of Rhode Island's legal center.

LaCour was a member of the Providence Chapter of the NAACP, serving as president of the New England Regional Conference of the NAACP and advising Harvard's Housing Committee on civil problems. In the 1950s, he received special recognition by the Rhode Island State Senate for his work in civil rights. His work was recognized by the University of Rhode Island, where he was awarded the Honorary Doctorate.

In 1965, William J. Fink organized Citizens United of Providence for a Fair Housing Law to campaign for comprehensive anti-discrimination laws. The Fair Housing Act was passed in April 12, 1968. Fink fought against the fears that were linked to desegregation of the city's neighborhoods. He was actively involved in the redevelopment of the Union Hill area and developed the Union Hill Flats project in 1969, improving the city's neighborhoods significantly. He also provided seed money to found CURF (Citizens United Renewed Enterprises) in 1990 and participated in the creation of Providence's Opportunities Industrialization Center in 1967.

George S. and Lena Lourie House
(Last owned by: 1945-1990)

George S. Lourie served with the Tuskegee Airmen in WWII and joined the NAACP in 1951, becoming a director in 1957. During his tenure, he was responsible for the hiring of black police officers in Providence. He also served on the board of directors of the NAACP and was a key figure in the civil rights movement in Rhode Island. In 1945, he purchased a property in East Providence, which became the Lourie House.

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According to the Rhode Island Historical Society, the Lourie House was purchased by the Lourie family in 1945 and served as a residence for many years. It was later converted into a private residence, with the current owners using it as a family home.

The Lourie House was designated as a Rhode Island Historical Landmark in 1986, recognizing its significance in the history of civil rights and social justice in Rhode Island.

In 2007, the Lourie House was renovated and restored, preserving its historical significance and serving as a reminder of the contributions of individuals like Joseph LaCour, George Lourie, and others who worked tirelessly to advance civil rights and social justice in Providence and beyond.
Places of WORSHIP

Many of Rhode Island’s historic African American churches evolved from 18th century African Union Societies and churches, such as the Mother Bethel A.M.E. and the African Episcopal churches of colonial Philadelphia. Many of these have long served as places for religious, civic and political gatherings where African Americans, enslaved and free, could assemble without white intimidation and interference. Black churches continue to welcome civic and political meetings in service to their communities.

Olive Street Baptist Church (1862–present)

In 1866, the Olive Street Baptist Church hosted non-violent resistance classes, sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and in 1969, Reverend Paul B. Thompson (1935–2004), pastor of the Olive Street Baptist Church and a member of the Providence Human Rights Commission (PHRC), protested the treatment of blacks by police during a riot outside the Rhode Island Auditors on High Street (now called Washington Street), after the 1969 and the Rhode Island riot. He noted that while some white teens were also beaten, they were not arrested, and that the police acted with excessive force.

Congregational Street Baptist Church (1871–present)

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Places of PREJUDICE

Acknowledging specific sites where civil rights were challenged helps us to recall why the determined pursuit of legislation or legal action was, and is, crucial to protecting those rights.

Foster Old Home Day Grounds KKK Rally (1924)

On June 25, 1924, 3,500 Ku Klux Klan members from across New England met on the Old Home Day Grounds in Foster, Rhode Island for a rally that included a clam chowder supper, games for children, running races, and baseball. Speakers representing Connecticut and Pennsylvania were present, along with Alabama Senator Tom Heflin. After dinner, several hundred new members of the KKK were initiated by the light of a burning cross. On July 26, a second field day and initiation ceremony was held with 8,000 reported participants.

Other KKK rallies were held at the Benefit Street Arsenal in Providence, Rhode Island on the Pawtucket in Cranston, and at the Broad Street Cemetery on the Providence/Cranston line. The Rhode Island Klan committed arson, cross burnings, racist leafleting, and other activities. In 1924 and 1925, suspicious fires at the Watchman Institute, a technical and trade school for black children in neighboring Scituate, were believed to have been the work of the Klan, but no one was ever charged.

Rhodes on the Pawtucket (1925, 1943)

In January 1925, nearly 1,000 gathered at Rhodes on the Pawtucket for the Rhode Island KKK’s first public dinner dance, sponsored by the Providence County Klan and its women’s auxiliary.

In October 1943, a concert by the renowned black bandleader Count Basie was cancelled, purportedly due to concerns about race riots, but specifically in response to southern white sailors stationed in Narrangansett Bay who objected to the possibility of African American and white people dancing together.

Ambassador Inn Night Club (1949)

Samuel and Betty Jackson, a black couple, filed a lawsuit in Providence Superior Court in November 1949 claiming that the Ambassador Inn Night Club refused to serve them due to their race. The Jacksons argued that, in denying entry, the club was in violation of state laws for livestock establishments which guaranteed “full and equal enjoyment” of the facility.
Places of SAFETY

In a society in which people of African heritage constantly had to navigate where to live, work, and play, safe places for families were essential. Black Rhode Islanders formed social clubs and created community organizations that provided places of sanctuary for celebrations, gatherings, and fellowship.

Crescent Park Emancipation Day Celebrations (1898–1937)

Individual states and territories variously celebrate Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, depending on when the news reached them. It is not clear where the earliest Emancipation Day celebrations were held in Rhode Island, but beginning in 1862 they took place at Rhode Park in Woonsocket. In the 1920s, avid collectors noted that park management was closing the skating pond during the celebrations to prevent the black mothers from using it. The park refused to change the policy and the celebrations were moved to Crescent Park in East Providence, which continued through the 1940s. Recent celebrations have taken place at Roger Williams Park and Waterplace Park in Providence.

Rhode Island civil rights leader Paul Benjamin recalls that Emancipation Day provided an opportunity for older folks to gather and reminisce about the old slave-wheelchildren played hide-and-seek. Everyone packed a picnic lunch for the site at the Snake Dining Hall, and the Saint John Baptists hosted a service which often continued past midnight.

In November 1857, the Rhode Island Board of Directors of the American Crusade Against the Slave Trade established the agency’s Rhode Island office in a house at 221 Broad Street in Newport to address the issue of escaping female convicts for the city’s black community. As a result, the building operated as a safe house for the convicts until the early 1860s. The building was usually converted into a hotel but was eventually turned into a hospital.

The Newport-River Side Boarding House (1855–1865)

From 1838 to 1845, the Negro Monitor Green Book listed the Glover Hotel, owned by Thomas Street, at 20 Brown Street, as a safe place for black travelers to seek lodging. The Glover House, published yearly from 1838 to 1845, was a travel guide published by Victor Green which identified hotels, restaurants, service stations, and other establishments across the United States, Canada, and Mexico that were friendly to black travelers. A major owner of Rhode Island’s Newport Women’s League, the building has since been converted into condominiums.

The West Broadway 190th–191st (1934–1942)

The West Broadway 190th–191st (1934–1942) was constructed in 1944 by the Federal Works Administration as a CWA Club, or community center, for black soldiers and sailors stationed in Newport during World War II. At the time, service members of color were not permitted to use the West Avenue 190th–191st Club at 30 Washington Square. Despite the end of formal military segregation in 1948, both WPA clubs remained in Newport.

The Newport Community Center was founded in 1952 by trustees of the Newport Historical Society who had recently received the Old Friends Meeting House. In 1946 it was renamed to the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Center which also housed the Newport Urban League, dedicated to improving the living and working conditions of Newport’s citizens. The Multi-Center continues to provide vibrant food services, educational programming for young children, and adult programming for the community.
Places of CIVIC ACTION

African Americans in Rhode Island formed organizations with their supporters to advocate for civil rights in all aspects of society, including fair housing, equal employment, education, and voting rights. Brave men and women fought discrimination through voice and law, inspired or even forced to choose the courts. New organizations and subsequent generations of activists have joined the effort for social and economic equity and equality.

Rhode Island ACLU Office (1977-1979)
The Rhode Island ACLU Office was established in 1959 after James H. Bissell, an African American lawyer for the Providence branch, wrote about the difficulties blacks faced in securing decent housing and employment. Local ACLU branches, including Providence Urban League director James H. Wakefield, and the state legislators Irving J. Fain, met to organize the卓著. The ACLU hosted the campaign for comprehensive fair housing legislation in the General Assembly that passed in 1995. The early 1990s and early 2000s, we supported efforts to desegregate Providence’s public schools. In 1995, the Rhode Island affiliate of the ACLU set up a project to address the need for affordable housing in Downtown Providence, and today it is located at 329 Broad Street.

The building housed the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Citizens United Renewal Enterprise (CURE), two of Rhode Island’s most well-known organizations in the 20th-century struggle for civil rights.

Rhode Island’s chapter of CORE was established in the early 1960s to assist in the campaign for the fair housing legislation that was filed in 1963. The organization had a headquarters in Providence that was used for name-and-shame campaigns and legal battles against housing discrimination. CORE and CURE advocated for fair housing laws and worked to end housing discrimination.

CRI was a tenant’s housing rights organization founded in 1968 by local activist Doris Mathis. The organization focused on housing discrimination problems in Providence and cooperation with local community groups.

Bennison Baptist Church / Providence NAACP (1913)
Under the leadership of Reverend Jacob H. Wilcox, Bennison Baptist Church played a key role in the early days of the Providence chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In recent years, on August 6, 1973, a meeting was held here to protest an attempt to restrict and reduce the role of Reverend Martin Luther King in the city. The meeting was called "a united movement to fight any discrimination or petty racial grudges against citizens in public places of amusement, entertainment, lodges, theaters, and by public officials." Reverend Wilcox served as a committed leader in efforts to end racial discrimination.

South Providence Neighborhood Center / Urban League of Rhode Island (1970s-present)
On March 13, 1969, the Rhode Island Congress of Racial Equality held a rally in the parking lot of the Wilbert Avenue Shopping Center to build support for a fair housing law. On September 5, 1941, the center of the city sent a delegation to the State House to present a petition for fair housing. The center’s headquarters was at 1900 Broad Street, and today it is home to the Urban League of Rhode Island, a police station, and a homeless shelter.

Daily Mark / Providence Civil Rights

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Sites of SIGNIFICANCE

Over a hundred sites throughout Rhode Island were identified as significant to the African American struggle for civil rights by the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society during the course of this project. Seventy-six of those properties were recorded by the Public Archaeology Laboratory. We have shared some of their stories in this exhibit. The list below amplifies the magnitude of the importance of these places in our history.