

The Roots of Route 66

By Candacy Taylor, www.theatlantic.com

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America's favorite highway usually evokes kitschy nostalgia. But for black Americans, the Mother Road's lonely expanses were rife with danger.

No other road has captured the imagination and the essence of the American Dream quite like Route 66. The idea behind the "Mother Road" was to connect urban and rural America from Chicago all the way to Los Angeles, crossing eight states and three time zones. With more hope than resources, Dust Bowl migrants and others escaping poverty caused by the Great Depression could motor west on Route 66 in search of a better life. This 2,440-mile "Road of

Dreams” speckled with romantic and unconventional attractions symbolized a pathway to easier times. It was one of the few U.S. highways laid out diagonally, and it cut across the country like a shortcut to freedom.

But though that message went out to all Americans, it was really only meant for white Americans. Just one year before construction on Route 66 began, the *Chicago Tribune* suggested in an editorial on August 29, 1925, that black people avoid recreational sites altogether:

We should be doing no service to the Negroes if we did not point out that to a very large section of the white population the presence of a Negro, however well behaved, among white bathers is an irritation. This may be a regrettable fact to the Negroes, but it is nevertheless a fact, and must be reckoned with ... [T]he Negroes could make a definite contribution to good race relationship by remaining away from beaches where their presence is resented.

Not only were they shut out of pools and beaches, blacks couldn't eat, sleep, or even get gas at most white-owned businesses. To avoid the humiliation of being turned away, they often traveled with portable toilets, bedding, gas cans, and ice coolers. Even Coca-Cola machines had “White Customers Only” printed on them. In 1930, 44 out of the 89 counties that lined Route 66 were all-white communities known as “Sundown Towns”—places that banned blacks from entering city limits after dark. Some posted signs that read, “Nigger, Don't Let the Sun Set on You Here.”

Route 66 started out in Illinois, a state that itself had nearly 150 sundown towns. The road certainly did not mean freedom for everyone, and it bore witness to some of the nation's worst acts of racial terrorism. Today, politicians and television anchors speak of "terrorism" as though it is a new phenomenon to the United States. Terrorism is not new and to think so is a grievous slight to the nation's native peoples, to its multitudes of immigrants, and to its legions of black Americans—all of whom have long been terrorized for calling America home. In fact, even before Route 66 was officially connected and enshrined, the roads that would come to form it linked one atrocity to the next.

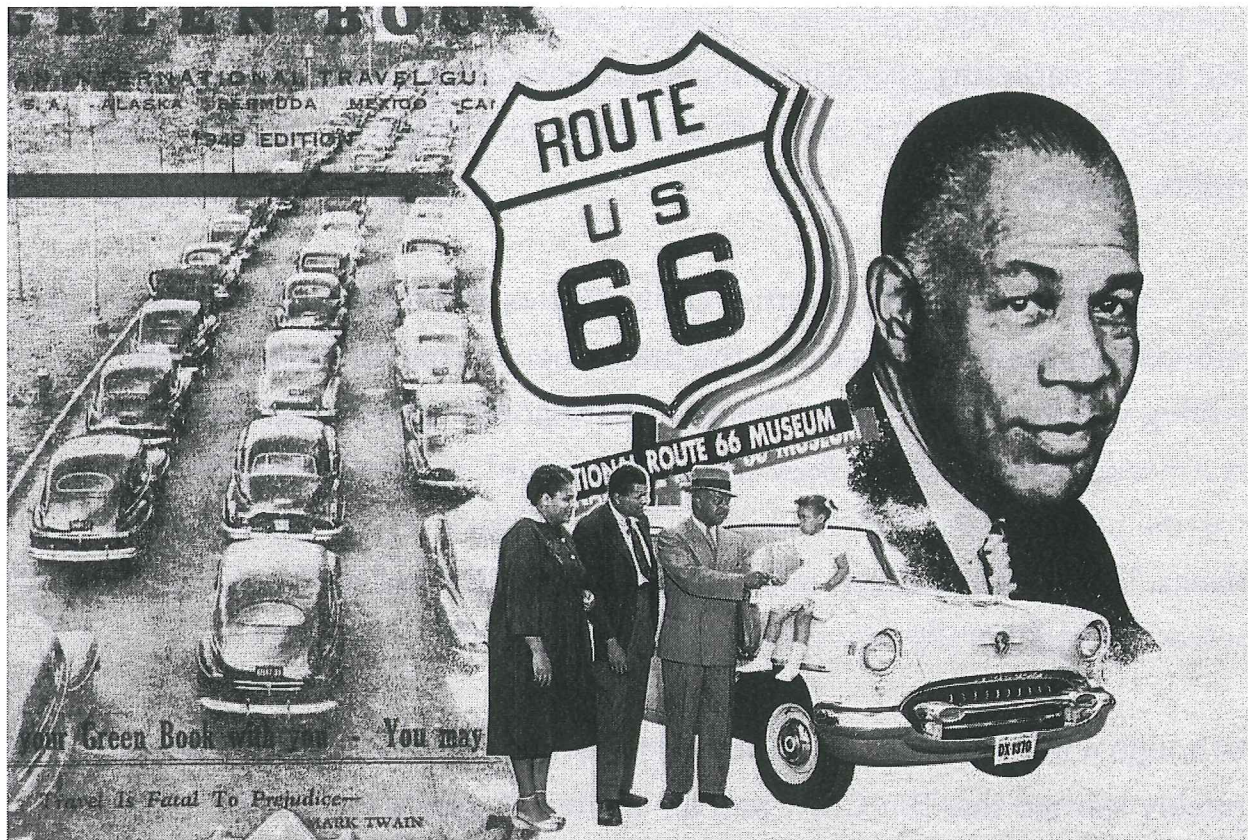
Take, for example, one violent night in 1906 in Springfield, Missouri, which would soon become the birthplace of Route 66; though the road starts out in Chicago, the route was officially designated as "66" in Springfield. During a grisly lynching on Easter weekend, a vigilante white mob dragged Horace Duncan and Fred Coker to the town square, hanged them, burned their bodies while thousands watched, and then distributed their body parts among the crowd as keepsakes.

In 1921, the Tulsa Race Riot erupted in the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma. It was one of the nation's most devastating acts of terrorism against African Americans. Greenwood was an unusually vibrant community of successful black entrepreneurs, doctors, and lawyers. Booker T. Washington called it "Black Wall Street," and it was arguably the wealthiest black neighborhood in the South. But, after a young black man was wrongfully accused of assaulting a white woman, an angry lynch mob broke out. Long-held jealousies over black prosperity and Greenwood's wealth ignited a riot. A white mob set the neighborhood on fire. After 16 hours, at least 300 people had died, 35 blocks of the Greenwood District had burned to the ground, and more than 10,000 black residents had been left homeless.

On Route 66, every mile was a minefield. Businesses with three “K”s in the title, such as the Kozy Kottage Kamp or the Klean Kountry Kottages, were code for the Ku Klux Klan and only served whites. Black motorists of course also had to avoid sundown towns like Edmond, Oklahoma. In the 1940s, the Royce Café, located right on Route 66, proudly announced on its postcards that Edmond was “‘A Good Place to Live.’ 6,000 Live Citizens. No Negroes.” The humiliation of being shut out of not only public spaces but out of entire towns was bad enough, but for blacks, there were always plenty of even bleaker fears—every stop was a potential existential danger. The threat of lynching was of particular concern when blacks traveled through the Ozarks on Route 66. For instance, the Ku Klux Klan ran Fantastic Caverns, a popular tourist site near Springfield. They held their cross burnings inside.

For many, the vulnerability of the road meant always having a plan, a cover story, or even a disguise. One popular safety precaution? A chauffeur’s hat. Black motorists who drove nice cars were especially susceptible to regular harassment by law enforcement. In 1930, the black columnist George Schuyler wrote, “Blacks who drove expensive cars offended white sensibilities,” and some blacks “kept to older models so as not to give the dangerous impression of being above themselves.”

In the 1950s, my stepfather, Ron, experienced this firsthand as a child. His father had a good job with the railroad and owned a nice car. After being stopped by a sheriff while on vacation with his family, the sheriff asked Ron’s dad where he got the car. Knowing better than to say it was his, Ron’s father pretended to be a chauffeur. When the sheriff asked about the other people in the car, Ron’s dad pretended they weren’t his family. He said the woman sitting next to him (his wife) was his employer’s maid, and he was taking her and her son (Ron) home. The sheriff asked, “Where’s your chauffeur hat?” Ron’s dad was ready; he had one in the car: “Hanging right up in the back, Officer.”



Despite all the dangers, millions of black vacationers, like Ron's family, did explore the country—many relying on a unique travel guide, *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. Victor H. Green, a black postal worker from Harlem, New York, published his guide from 1936 until 1966. His *Green Book* featured barbershops, beauty salons, tailors, department stores, taverns, gas stations, garages, and even real-estate offices that were willing to serve blacks. A page inside boasted, “Just What You Have Been Looking For!! NOW WE CAN TRAVEL WITHOUT EMBARRASSMENT.”

Green modeled his book after Jewish travel guides created for the Borsht Belt in the 1930s. Other black travelers' guides existed—*Hackley and Harrison's Hotel and Apartment Guide for Colored Travelers* (1930-1931), *Travel Guide* (1947-1963), and *Grayson's Guide: The Go Guide to Pleasant Motoring* (1953-1959)—but the *Green Book* was published for the longest period of time and had the widest readership. It was promoted by word of mouth, and a national network of postal workers led by Green sought out advertisers. Esso Gas Stations

(Standard Oil, which operates as Exxon today) sold the *Green Book* and hired two black marketing executives, James A. Jackson and Wendell P. Allston, to promote and distribute it. By 1962, the *Green Book* reached a circulation of 2 million people.

The *Green Book* covered the entire United States, but during the time it was in publication, Route 66 was easily the most popular road in America. And driving was the most popular pastime. Automobile travel symbolized freedom in America, and the *Green Book* was a resourceful, innovative solution to a horrific problem. People called it the “Bible of black travel” and “AAA for blacks,” but it was so much more. It was a powerful tool for blacks to persevere and literally move forward in the face of racism.

Although 6 million blacks hit the road to escape the Jim Crow South, they quickly learned that Jim Crow had no borders. Segregation was in full force throughout the country. Out of the eight states that ran through Route 66 (Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California), six had official segregation laws as far west as Arizona—and all had unofficial rules about race.

It was assumed the West was more liberated than the South, but thanks to the enormity of the American West’s expanses, it in some ways was even more dangerous. The farther west *anyone* traveled, the fewer services were available—for whites and especially for blacks. Food and lodging were scattered over long distances, and there were also just fewer people living out West in general, and fewer black people in particular, which reduced the chances that black travelers could find trustworthy help in case they had car trouble or needed directions. In the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*, the writer Isabel Wilkerson recounts Dr. Robert Foster’s harrowing journey in the West, where he would fall asleep at the wheel from exhaustion simply because he had been turned away from every motel he stopped at for being black.

Even once black travelers reached a multiracial city, such as Albuquerque, New Mexico, only 6 percent of the more than 100 motels along Albuquerque's slice of Route 66 admitted them. And although there were no formal segregation laws on the books in California, both Glendale and Culver City were sundown towns and the sun-kissed beaches of Santa Monica were segregated. Route 66 epitomized Americana—for whites. For black folks, it meant encountering fresh violence and the ghosts of racial terrorism already haunting the Mother Road.

This is why the cover of the *Green Book* warned, "Always Carry Your Green Book With You—You May Need It." In Chicago, for example, there were no *Green Book* businesses on Route 66 at all for nearly three decades. (There were *Green Book* businesses in other parts of Chicago—but not on the Road of Dreams.) After leaving Chicago on Route 66, the next *Green Book* sites were more than 180 miles away in Springfield, Illinois. But Springfield at least was helpful, with 26 listings: 13 tourist homes, four taverns, three beauty parlors, two service stations, and one restaurant, barbershop, drugstore, and hotel. If you were black and didn't have this information, how would you know where to go? You could easily wind up in the wrong town after dark.

Of course Route 66 wasn't any more racist than any other road in America at the time. What makes Route 66 different is that the open-road branding associated with it celebrated a time when blacks had to navigate racial violence and the Jim Crow policies that shut them out of businesses and recreational sites. Plus, the desolation of Route 66's stretches left black motorists particularly exposed. The American ideals associated with Route 66, then and now, have usurped the narrative, erasing the more harrowing aspects of the nation's past. So when the United States promotes freedom and democracy, fights for those values abroad, and then fails to abide by them at home, the hypocrisy feels cruel.

During World War II, Route 66 played a major role in military efforts, becoming a primary route for shuttling military supplies across the country. It was used so heavily that a 200-mile stretch of asphalt was thickened so that it could better handle military convoys. At that time, American soldiers fought for human rights overseas, but the troops were still segregated at home. As a result, black soldiers made good use of the Mother Road. For black soldiers stationed at Fort Leonard Wood near Rolla, Missouri, for example, their best option for a little R&R was a full 80 miles away: Graham's Rib Station in Springfield, Missouri, an integrated local landmark that opened in 1932 and was owned by an African American couple, James and Zelma Graham. The onsite motel court was built during the war specifically to offer lodgings to black soldiers—but Pearl Bailey and Little Richard stayed there as well. (Today, nothing remains of Graham's, except a tourist cabin that an area law firm uses as its storage shed.)

The vast American landscape meant long, lonely stretches of perilously empty roads, and places like Graham's and other *Green Book* properties were vital sources of refuge. Today, they still play a critical role in U.S. history, revealing the untold story of black travel. Many of the buildings along Route 66 are physical evidence of racial discrimination, providing a rich opportunity to reexamine America's story of segregation, black migration, and the rise of the black leisure class. But the current passion for gentrification and suburban sprawl is expunging the past: Most *Green Book* properties have been razed and many more are slated for demolition. That's why the National Park Service's Route 66 Preservation Program approached me in 2014 to document *Green Book* sites on Route 66 and to produce a short video. I've estimated that nearly 75 percent of *Green Book* sites have been demolished or radically modified, and the majority that remain have fallen into disrepair, so it's crucial to preserve whatever sites are left.

That means places like the Threatt Filling Station, a one-story sandstone bungalow with a slightly pitched and gabled roof, wide eaves, and a wooden door. Alan Threatt Sr., a black man, owned the gas station and served black motorists from 1915 to the 1950s in Luther, Oklahoma. His family quarried the native sandstone on their homestead land to build the filling station, which bordered their property at the intersection of Route 66 and Pottawatomie Road. And, although it's no longer open to the public, the building still stands. The National Park Service included the Threatt Filling Station on its National Register of Historic Places in 1995.

The De Anza Motor Lodge on Route 66 in Albuquerque was built in 1939 and run by a prominent Zuni Indian trader; the motor lodge served blacks on a stretch of road where there were few options available to them. The Spanish-Pueblo Revival style of the building features a conference room with seven 20-foot murals painted by a Zuni artist. The motor lodge was slated for demolition when the city purchased it in 2003. Still, the property sat empty for more than a decade after that purchase. (Although, the motor lodge did have a brief gig as the setting for a scene in *Breaking Bad*.) Now, the city has an \$8.2 million plan to convert the property into a condo-hotel hybrid with shops and restaurants.

One *Green Book* business that did survive over the decades is Clifton's, a quirky Depression-era cafeteria in downtown Los Angeles at the corner of 7th Street and S. Broadway—the original terminus of Route 66. Clifton's closed for a few years starting in 2011 to undergo a \$10 million renovation before reopening last year. It's now possibly the largest and most unusual cafeteria in the world—with five floors of history and taxidermy and a giant fake redwood tree rising up through the center. In the evenings, classic concoctions like absinthe are served at the bar, which features a 250-pound meteorite sitting on it. The original owner—a white man, a Christian, and the son of missionaries—Clifford Clinton had traveled with his parents to China, where he witnessed that country's brutal and abject poverty firsthand. He couldn't understand how

America, a country with so much wealth, could allow its citizens to go hungry. So he never turned away any customers—even those who couldn't afford to pay. Clinton followed what he called the "Cafeteria Golden Rule." His menu read, "Pay What You Wish" and "Dine Free Unless Delighted."

One of the *Green Book's* most unusual Route 66 sites was Murray's Dude Ranch. This lost gem was billed as "The Only Negro Dude Ranch in the World"—which it very likely was. The 40-acre ranch was situated on the edge of the Mojave Desert, with Joshua, yucca, and mesquite trees dotting the landscape. A black couple, Nolie and Lela Murray, owned the property and offered blacks traveling on Route 66 much-needed lodging and some good old-fashioned Western recreation. All manner of black and white celebrities visited, from Lena Horne and Joe Louis to Hedda Hopper and Clara Bow. Pearl Bailey ultimately bought the property in 1955 but sold it in the mid-1960s. Sadly, today there's no physical evidence that Murray's Dude Ranch ever existed.

The colorful historic sites of Route 66 have been mostly lost to time and neglect. But when a site is nurtured, like Clifton's, or commemorated, like the Threatt Filling Station, it can be an important connection to the past. In Tulsa, for example, travelers can now visit the Greenwood Cultural Center to learn about the Tulsa Race Riot. The Greenwood District—"Black Wall Street"—was eventually rebuilt; now the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park offers a space for healing, with a 25-foot memorial and three 16-foot granite sculptures honoring the dead.



In 1978, at the age of 7, I was riding in the car with my mother in Houston, Texas, when I saw a prison chain gang; shackled men were working in a sugarcane field. I said, “Mom, isn’t slavery over?”

“Yes, honey,” she replied.

I said, “Why are all of these black men in chains working in a field?”

“Well, they’re prisoners.”

“Why are they all *black*?”

She had no answer, or maybe she just didn’t know how to explain institutional racism to a 7-year-old. Either way, it was painfully obvious to me that there was a problem. I’ve been questioning the existence of racial equality ever since.

When I talk to people about the full history of Route 66 and the *Green Book*, they say, “Thank God we don’t need that anymore.” But while blacks may not have to worry about KKK cross burnings at tourist sites, they still have to worry about being shot by the police. The spot where Michel Brown bled out in the street for four hours in Ferguson, Missouri, is just a couple of miles from the original Route 66.

In a country that desperately, fitfully, tries to be color-blind, even the first black president has not been able to stop the bleeding, let alone heal the old and deep wounds of white supremacy and systemic racism. Black veterans were once blocked from taking advantage of the GI Bill, missing out on valuable educational resources. The Federal Housing Association redlined neighborhoods and denied loans to blacks, preventing them from accessing wealth-building opportunities freely given to whites. Since the 1970s, the black male prison population has skyrocketed by 700 percent, and Justice Department data now predicts that one in three black male babies born in America will be incarcerated in their lifetimes.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the *Green Book* ceased publication right around the time the Civil Rights Act passed. Of course, the Civil Rights Act did not fix racism, and discrimination persisted. As the Equal Justice Initiative’s Bryan Stevenson points out: Civil rights in America is too often seen as a “three-day carnival: On day one, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus. On day two, Martin Luther King led a march on Washington. And on day three, we passed the Civil Rights Act and changed all the laws.” Problem solved.

Given this mass denial, it’s not surprising that Route 66 is weighted down with nostalgia, suffocating from an idealized past that never was. But Americans should not be so quick to pat themselves on the backs just because, nowadays, black people can drive U.S. highways mostly without incident. Not when a struggle for social mobility continues to take a debilitating toll on black

Americans. And it is too early to celebrate the nation's racial tolerance when ongoing racism and xenophobia is camouflaged under the banner of patriotism.

Today, Route 66 has surrendered to a series of bypasses, causeways, and highways, but the path it traced is still troubled: "American Owned" signs line the old Route 66; they are code for "Not Owned by Immigrants." In Noel, Missouri, Somali immigrants say they are not welcome at Kathy's Kountry Kitchen, where even now servers wear t-shirts reading, "I got caught eating at the KKK." Stories like these are why the rosy hue of Route 66 nostalgia leaves a bitter chill in the souls of black people.

I only learned about the *Green Book* after being commissioned to write a Moon Series travel guide on Route 66. As I paged through all the kitschy advertising of postwar suburban white families in Airstream Trailers and chrome-finned Chevys getting their "kicks" at campy Americana landmarks, I wondered: *Where are the black people?* I discovered that more than 90 percent of those who have written about the Mother Road are white—and male. I may be the only black woman to have written a travel guide about Route 66. And after discovering the *Green Book*, I was never able to look at America's favorite highway the same way again—the way those other tour guides seem to.

I wanted to share the real story of Route 66—its promise of freedom and its failure to live up to that promise. For black Americans who hit the road with a copy of the *Green Book*, a guide expressly created to keep them safe in a wildly perilous landscape, they surely already understood that the hopeful Mark Twain quote gracing almost every *Green Book* cover—"Travel is fatal to prejudice"—was purely aspirational.

Part Two

Original Collection of
Historical Retrospectives

WASHINGTON AND DAVIS

In the wake of the events of Charlottesville, calls were made for the removal of confederate monuments where they stood. Donald Trump weighed in, inferring that these removals would open Pandora's box; leading to the possible removals of monuments celebrating George Washington or Thomas Jefferson. Historians rushed to draw distinctions between Confederate "traitors" like Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis and American "patriots" like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. The argument is made that Davis and his ilk were traitors while Washington and Jefferson were essential to the creation of the United States. It is true that these men owned slaves, however one historian offered the opinion that one cannot look at them through a lens only seeing slavery associations because one would be hard-pressed to find any 18th- and 19th-century leader of great consequence to American life who never owned slaves. In essence, the argument of (some) historians is that owning slaves is no barrier to being celebrated as an American patriot. This rationale is subjective at best.

When reflecting on history, it is not the job of those looking back do so forgivingly. When looking back on history we are to weigh both the goodness and guilt of time and men. We are to wrestle with how the goodness and the guilt intertwine with each other to remind us of the mortality of righteousness. The Revolutionary War and Civil War are distinctive largely in name. White "revolutionaries" fought to control their economic destinies; control of the logistics and practice of slavery. Both were wars to control the existence of slavery; essential to the existence of the United States. Just as the colonists believed the British were mistreating them economically, so too did the southerners believe that of the north.

The Triangular Trade made the colonies, New England specifically, an economic powerhouse. Rum was shipped to the African continent to trade for Black bodies. Those Black bodies were traded in the West Indies for profits and molasses to return to New England to make more rum and continue the cycle. Great Britain, angered by American colonists for enriching rival nations while

themselves being cut off from profits, instituted the Molasses Act of 1733. Poorly enforced, the law was revised as the Sugar Act of 1764 to help ease British debts. These acts struck directly at the pockets of slave merchants; free trade, specifically free slave trade, more so than a tax on stamps and tea, was cause for revolution. President John Adams noted at the time that the Molasses Act was an essential ingredient in American independence.

The invention of cotton expanded American economic growth. According to J.A. Rogers, the Jamaican born journalist and historian, the United States went from producing 2 million pounds of cotton in 1793 to 62 million pounds in 1811. The value of cotton in 1861 is estimated to be \$200 million; \$2.5 billion in 2011 dollars. In the hearts of many southern leaders was a cocktail of discontent and independence. Southern planters shared much of their profits with northern bankers, investors and middle-men. Northern investment fuel industry steeped in the business of slavery; insuring slaves, insuring slave production and shipping cargo (both human and non-human). This, along with the Union's negotiation of slavery expansion, angered southern leaders. These, combined with visions of expanding territory (and slavery) into Latin America, and reviving the African slave trade, fueled calls for independence in the form of secession. No last ditch attempt to prevent war would work.

The individual slave holding associations of Washington, Jefferson, Davis and Lee are documented, disgusting and inhumane. What these men also have in common is that it was their desire of self-determination of economic prosperity which led to their high minded justifications for independence—and slavery. It is important when reflecting on American history to acknowledge the use of racism to benefit and bolster the United States economically and politically. These men understood the economic engine slavery was and saw the need to maintain control of (and even expand) slavery.

It is true that Confederate statues honoring “traitors” have a different purpose than statutes in tribute to the American “patriots.” It is also true that there is no difference of intention between the United States and Confederate States in their initiations of liberty. Maybe the monuments of Washington and

Jefferson remain in place. However consider the ways that capitalism makes monsters of men at the expense of Black bodies. Historians call some revolutionaries and others secessionists. I call them what they were: capitalists and White supremacists.

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Resources

- National Museum of African American History and Culture—<https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/educators>
- Smithsonian Education—http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/educators/resource_library/african_american_resources.html
- National Education Association—<http://www.nea.org/tools/lessons/black-history-month.htm>
- National Archives—<https://www.archives.gov/research/aic/reference/black-history.html>
- PBS.com—<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/2015/01/black-history-month-resources-for-the-classroom/>
- WHYY—<http://www.pbs.org/black-culture/explore/black-history-month-facts-and-films/#.WnDa8KinE2w>
- Zinn Education Project—<https://zinnedproject.org/?s=black+history>
- Atlanta Black Star—<http://atlantablackstar.com/category/global-black-history/>
- Library of Congress—<https://www.loc.gov/law/help/commemorative-observations/african-american.php>
- Anti-Defamation League—<https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/black-history-month>

Thank You

To the Ancestors,

For your relentless pursuit of freedom and for your righteous struggle for justice. The African Diaspora in the Americas is in debt to you for our strength, courage and resolve

To My Ancestors,

Thank you for enduring the whip, acres in Attapulgus, escape to the North and for South Jersey.

Thank you for America



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