

The Power of Place

in Civil Rights

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

In 2017, the Rhode Island Historical Society, in partnership with the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and the Rhode Island Historical 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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Sites of the African-American struggle for civil rights in 20th-century Rhode Island are identified in this exhibit as places where its most powerful players lived and worked, and where many of these issues were discussed and debated. Some were considered safe, while others were sites of conflict or intimidation. Although some of the people are gone, the places remain for those who remember, and help tell the stories of African Americans' ongoing efforts to secure civil rights in Rhode Island.

"As demonstration ends, civil rights marchers at the State House in Providence join hands and sing." Journal - Bulletin photo by Lawrence B. Millar (March 25, 1965)



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 unyielding 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, 65 Friendship Street, Newport / Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Lab, Inc.

Eleanor Walker Keys House (Keys family home from 1945–2012)

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 on significant black historical figures in Newport schools. A member of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and the Rhode Island Historical Society, Keys received numerous awards for civic work, including the City of Newport's Medal of Honor, a Community Service Award from the Newport Daily News, and the George T. Downing Award for 1978 (conferred by the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society).



"Convention of Colored Women's Club Meeting in Providence (1925) to Protest Characterization of Black Women as Prostitutes." Courtesy of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society

Bertha G. and Dr. William Higgins House, 50 Woodman Street, Providence
Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Lab, Inc.



Bertha G. and Dr. William Higgins House (Higgins family home from 1930–1940)

Bertha Higgins was highly active in social and political life from the 1910s until her death in 1944. She was involved in the RI Union of Colored Women's Clubs, the Colored Women's Civic and Political League of RI, as well as African American cultural organizations like the Twentieth Century Art and Literary Club. She led a committee for "colored women" within the RI Woman Suffrage Party, which led to her becoming a founding member of the RI League of Women Voters.

In the 1920s Higgins lobbied in support of the Dyer Anti-Lynching bill in Congress (first introduced in 1918), intended to make lynching a federal crime—which did not pass; in fact, no anti-lynching bill has been successful in the Senate until the Justice for Victims of Lynching Act of 2018; as of this writing it has still not passed the House or been signed by the President.

In the 1940s, Higgins joined the Providence Urban League and was appointed to the Commission on the Employment Problem of the Negro, which focused on racial discrimination in education and employment in Rhode Island. Higgins was the first black social worker in the Rhode Island Department of Public Welfare.

Places of PROMINENCE

People of PROMINENCE

Joseph G. LeCount Law Office
(Office in use 1950-1969)

Joseph G. LeCount moved to East Providence as a child and later lived in Providence's West Elmwood neighborhood. After earning a law degree at Howard University in Washington, D.C., he returned to Providence and became a civil rights activist, serving as president of the Providence NAACP from 1935-39, and chairing its Legal Redress Committee. He worked with Thurgood Marshall in a discrimination case against the Providence International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, which had forced blacks working at the Walsh-Kaiser Shipyard into an auxiliary union.

LeCount was a member of the Providence Urban League, served as president of the New England Regional Conference of the NAACP, and advised that body's Housing Committee on fair housing. In the 1980s he received special recognition by the Rhode Island Bar Association, and the University of Rhode Island awarded him an honorary doctorate.



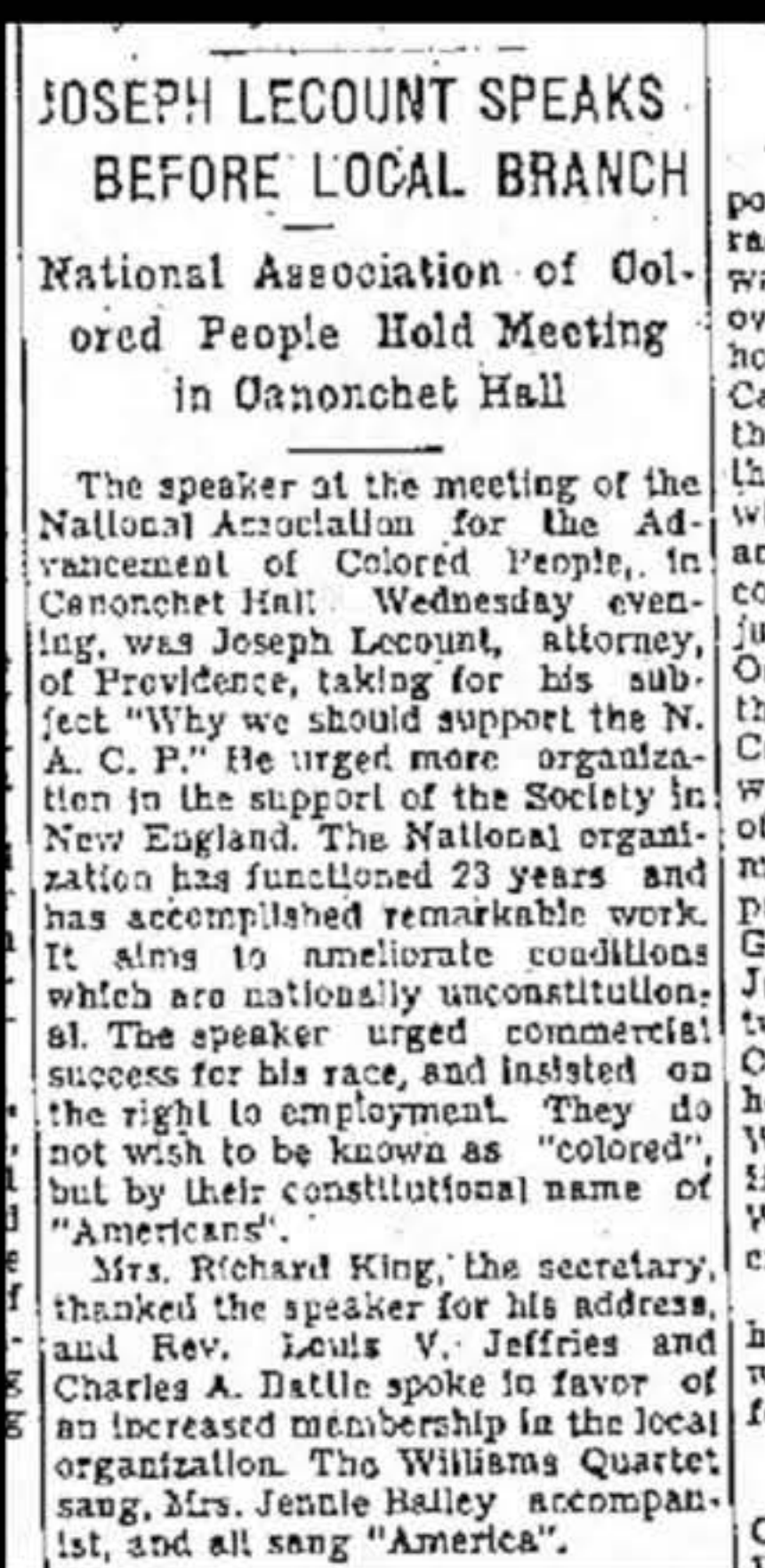
Courtesy of the Stokes Family



Case-Mead Building / Joseph G. LeCount Law Office, 68-76 Dorrance Street, Providence
Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.



Courtesy of the Stokes Family



Newport Mercury, 15 July 1932

Irving J. Fain House, 400 Laurel Ave, Providence
Courtesy of the Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.



Irving J. Fain House
(Fain home from 1955-1970)

In 1958, Irving J. Fain organized Citizens United for a Fair Housing Law to campaign for comprehensive legislation that would prohibit discrimination in private and public housing. After two previous bills were blocked, the Rhode Island Fair Housing Practices Act passed on April 12, 1965. Fain sought solutions for the complex issues related to desegregation of the city's neighborhoods. He was actively involved in the redevelopment of the Lippitt Hill area of Providence and developed University Heights, completed in 1968, as a place "that people of many backgrounds can live together." Fain also provided seed money to found CURE (Citizens United Renewal Enterprises) in 1968 and participated in the creation of Providence's Opportunities Industrialization Center in 1967.

George S. and Selma Lima House
(Lima home from 1960-1990s)

George S. Lima served with the Tuskegee Airmen in WWII and joined 60 black officers in a 1945 protest against segregation at a white officers' club on an Indiana air base. After the war, he earned a degree in sociology from Brown University, where he helped found the first chapter of the national African American fraternity Omega Psi Phi. Lima later became the first full-time black officer in the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, and served as that union's regional director in 1962.

As president of the Providence branch of the NAACP, Lima supported the need for a black legislator to be elected in order for fair housing legislation to be passed. He participated in many civil rights marches, including the 1963 March on Washington, and organized sit-ins for fair housing at the Rhode Island State House. He was elected to the Rhode Island state legislature in 1985 and served two terms as the representative for District 83, helping to pass a law requiring that a percentage of state contracts be awarded to minority-owned businesses.



George Lima
Courtesy of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society

George S. and Selma Lima House, 64 Charles St, East Providence.
Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.



Places of WORSHIP



Congdon Street Baptist Church, 17 Congdon Street, Providence
Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.

Congdon Street Baptist Church (1874–present)

Descended from the Free African Union Society, Congdon Street Baptist Church became the first independent African church in Rhode Island in 1819 and remains the oldest black congregation in Rhode Island. The original structure on Meeting Street was torn down by white neighbors in the 1860s because of its proximity, and rebuilt in its present location in 1874. In the 1950s and 1960s, church members participated in civil rights marches in Providence and with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the South. In 1966, the church began an outreach program to African American students at Brown University, and in 1968 (and 2018), Congdon Street provided a haven for students protesting a lack of African-American representation in staffing, curriculum, and student body at the university.



Congdon Street Baptist Church, 1934, Rhode Island Historical Society Collections RHI39258

Pictured left to right: 1st row: Reverend BR. Lawson, Deacon O.B. Joffe, Mrs. Ella Mass, Mrs. Lelia Patton, Mrs. Elizabeth Becket, Mrs. Anna Blackmon, Mrs. Hattie Dudley, William Smith, Mrs. Mary Younger 2nd row: Dr. Spicer, Deacon Charles Harris, Deacon Fleming, Deacon Joseph Williams, Mr. Tom Jackson, Mr. William A. Younger, Mr. Tabscott, Mr. Isaiah Russel, Mr. Richard Russel, and Mr. Henry Johnson, onlookers in left hand corner: Beatrice Harris, Nora Williams, and unknown child; onlookers in right hand corner: Joseph Brown, William Blackmon, and Walter Smith.

Union Congregational Church, 49 Division Street, Newport
Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.



NAACP to Scan Police Incident

10 Who Saw Aug. 2 Roundup of Negroes Write Statements

Statements charging an unexplained police roundup of a large group of Negro cafe patrons on Aug. 2 have been turned over to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. John E. Maddox, a candidate for the state House of Representatives from Providence's 23rd district reported last night.

Mr. Maddox, who has been legislative agent for the NAACP in its efforts to promote a Rhode Island fair housing bill, said he has given the Providence branch of the NAACP statements of 10 witnesses to the incident, eight of whom claim they were among the 57 herded into police vehicles and detained up to two hours at the police station.

"NAACP to Scan Police Incident: Providence Journal (August 20, 1962) Copyright 2015 The Providence Journal Reproduced by Permission

Olney Street Baptist Church (1962–present)

Constructed in 1962-63, the current Olney Street Baptist Church is the second church built by this congregation, which was incorporated in 1901. It would become a major meeting place for religious and civic meetings within the Lippitt Hill community. In 1962, the church's pastor, Reverend Percy A. Carter, Jr. (b. 1929) wrote an article calling attention to race relations in Providence, challenging the assumption that things were better here than in the South. Carter described how 57 blacks were recently "rounded up in a raid-like fashion" in the Blackstone Cafe on Plain Street in Providence (no longer standing).



Olney Street Baptist Church, 100 Olney Street, Providence
Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.

In 1964, the Olney Street Baptist Church hosted non-violent resistance classes, sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). In 1969, Reverend Paul F. Thompson (1933–2008), pastor of the Olney Street Baptist Church and a member of the Providence Human Relations Commission (PHRC), protested the treatment of blacks by police during a riot outside the Rhode Island Auditorium on North Main Street (no longer standing) after a Sly and the Family Stone concert. He noted that while some white teens were also beaten, they were not arrested, and that the police acted with excessive force.



Reverend Mahlon Van Horne
Courtesy of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society

Places of PREJUDICE

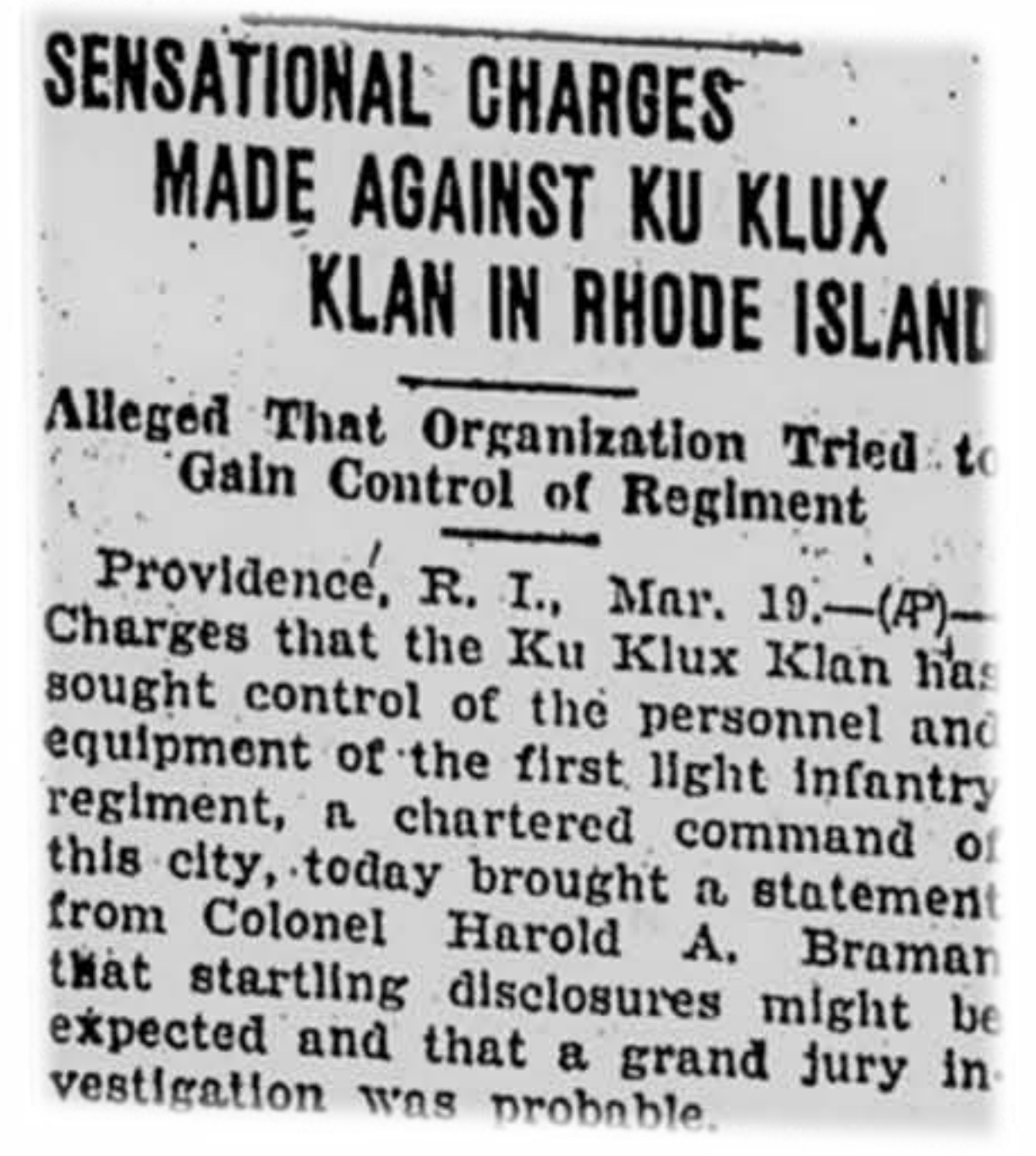
Acknowledging specific sites where civil rights were challenged helps us to recall why the determined pursuit of legislation or legal action was, and is, crucial to protecting those rights.



Foster Old Home Day Grounds KKK Rally (1924)

On June 21, 1924, 8,000 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 there with 8,000 reported participants.

Other KKK rallies were held at the Benefit Street Arsenal in Providence, Rhodes on the Pawtuxet in Cranston, and at the Broad Street Cemetery on the Providence/Cranston line. The Rhode Island Klan committed arsons, cross burnings, racist leafleting, and other activities. In 1924 and 1926, 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.



Freeport Journal-Standard (Freeport, Illinois), 19 March 1928



RIHS collection, RHIX173909

Rhodes on the Pawtuxet (1925, 1943)

In January 1925, nearly 1,000 gathered at Rhodes on the Pawtuxet for the Rhode Island KKK's first public dinner dance, sponsored by the Providence County Klanton 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 Narragansett Bay who objected to the possibility of African American and white people dancing together.

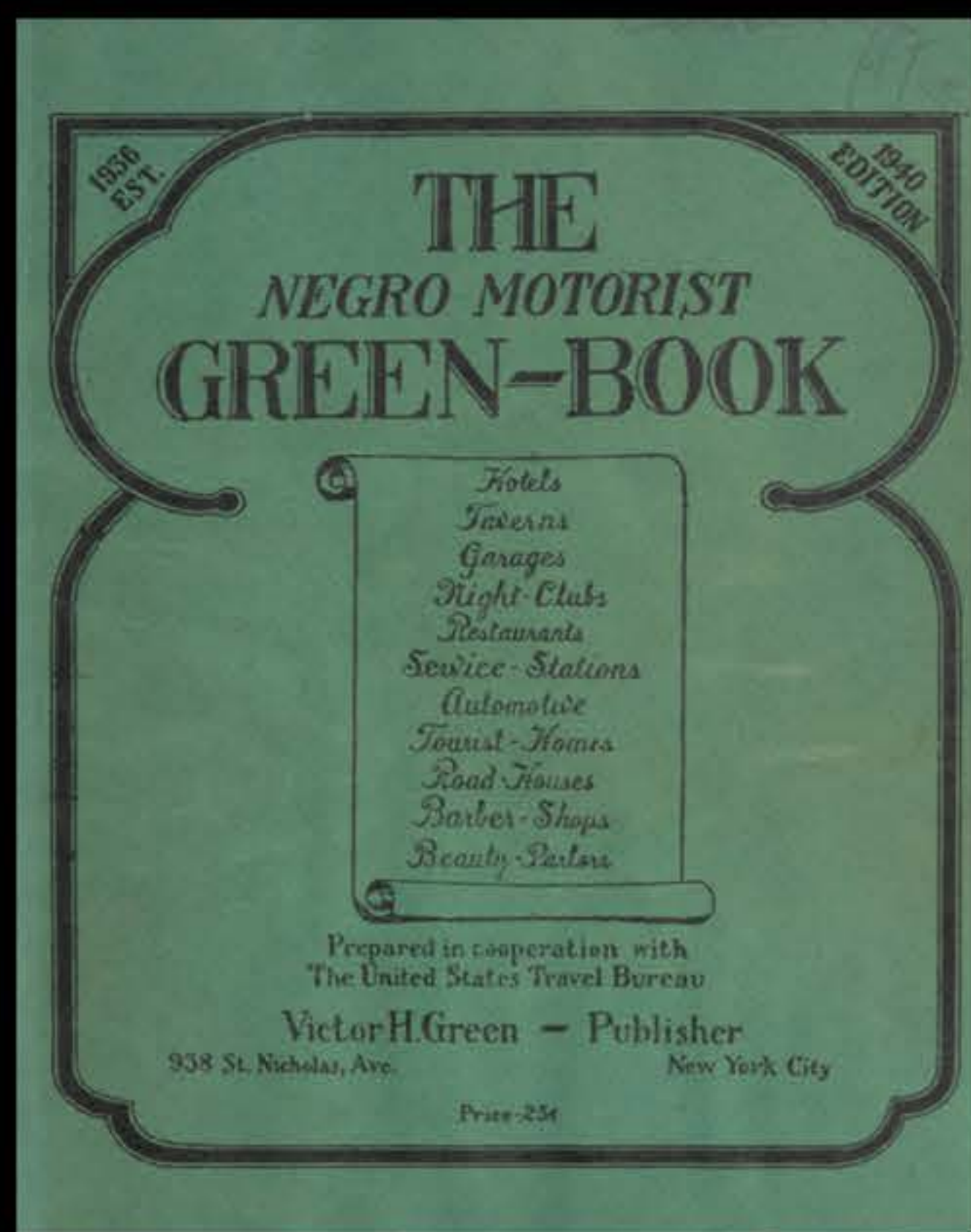
Ambassador Inn Night Club (1949)

Samuel and Betty Jackson, a black couple, filed a lawsuit in Providence Superior Court in November 1949 claiming they were denied entry to the Ambassador Inn Nightclub due to their race. The Jacksons argued that, in denying entry, the club was in violation of state laws for licensed establishments which guaranteed "full and equal enjoyment" of the facility.



Ambassador Inn Night Club, Mineral Spring Avenue, North Providence
Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.

Places of SAFETY



The Negro Motorist Green-Book (1940)
Courtesy of the New York Public Library

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

Frederick Williamson
Courtesy of the Rhode Island
Black Heritage Society



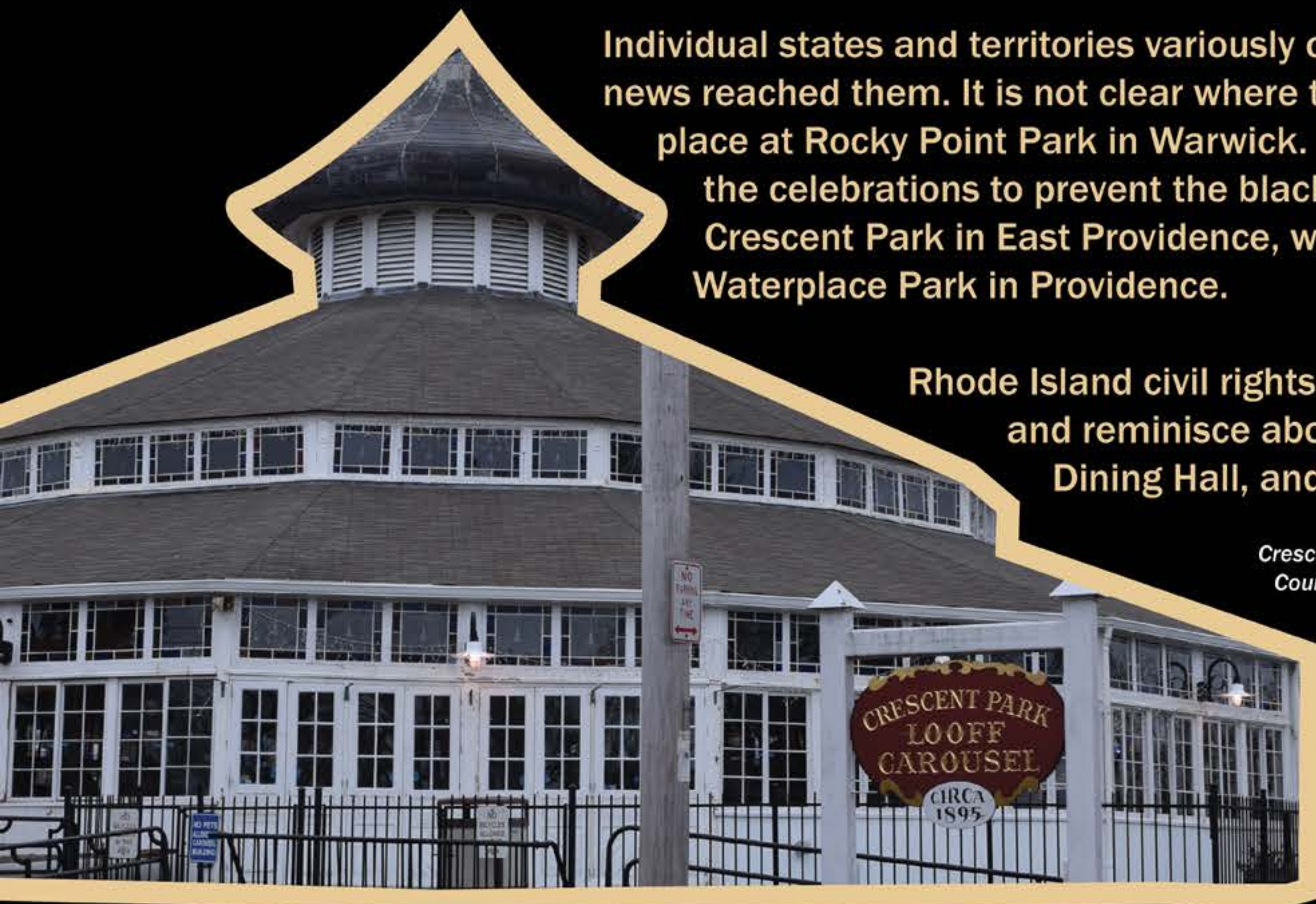
Emancipation Day broadside.
Courtesy of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society

Crescent Park Emancipation Day Celebrations (1930s-1977)

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 1882 they took place at Rocky Point Park in Warwick. In the 1930s, event organizers discovered that park management was closing the swimming pool during the celebrations to prevent the black visitors 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 1960s. Recent celebrations have taken place at Roger Williams Park and Waterplace Park in Providence.

Rhode Island civil rights leader Fred Williamson recalls that Emancipation Day provided an opportunity for older folks to gather and reminisce about the old days while children played together. Families packed a picnic lunch or ate at the Shore Dining Hall, and the Alhambra Ballroom hosted a dance which often continued past midnight.

Crescent Park and Carousel, 700 Bullocks Point Ave. East Providence
Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.



Philip Rider Boarding House (1938-1940)

From 1938 to 1940, The Negro Motorist Green Book listed the Glover Hotel, owned by Thomas Glover, at 26 Brinley Street in Newport as a safe place for black travelers to seek lodging. The Green Book, published yearly from 1936 to 1964, 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 motorists. A later owner of the property, Ethel Ames, hosted meetings of the Newport Women's League here. The building has since been converted into condominiums.

Philip Rider Boarding House, Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Lab, Inc.



Nellie Brown's Golden Age Rest Home, 21-23 Brinley Street,
Newport. Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.

Nellie Brown's Golden Age Rest Home (1957-1981)

In November 1957, Nellie Brown opened the Golden Age Rest Home at 21 Brinley Street in Newport to address the lack of nursing home facilities for the city's black community. It remained in operation for decades, closing in the early 1980s. The building was recently converted into a boutique hotel.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Center / West Broadway USO-YMCA (1944-present)

The West Broadway USO-YMCA was constructed in 1944 by the Federal Works Administration as a USO Club, or recreation 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 Army-Navy YMCA/USO Club at 50 Washington Square. Despite the end of formal military segregation in 1948, both YMCAs remained in Newport.

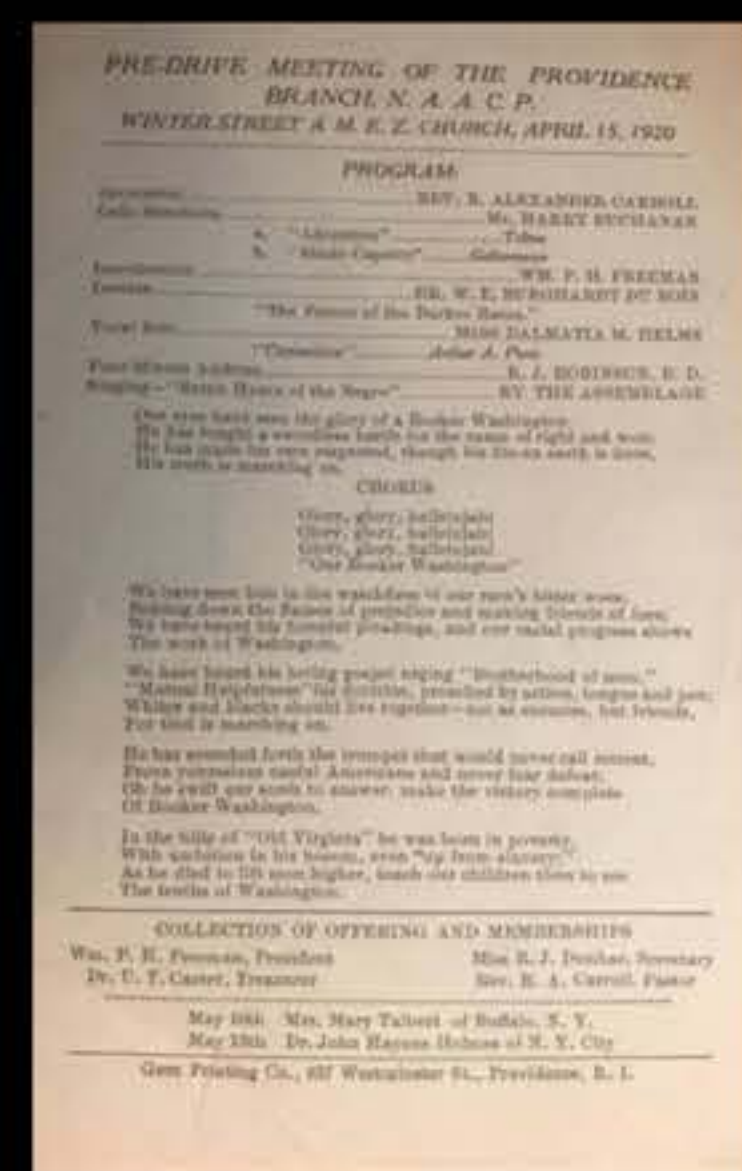
The Newport Community Center was founded in 1922 by trustees of the Newport Historical Society who had recently received the Old Friends Meeting House. In 1968 it was moved to the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Center which also housed the Newport Urban League, dedicated to "improving the working and living conditions of non-white citizens." The MLK Center continues to provide urgent food services, educational programming for young children, and adult programming for the community.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Center, 20 Dr. Marcus Wheatland Boulevard, Newport
Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.



Places of CIVIC ACTION

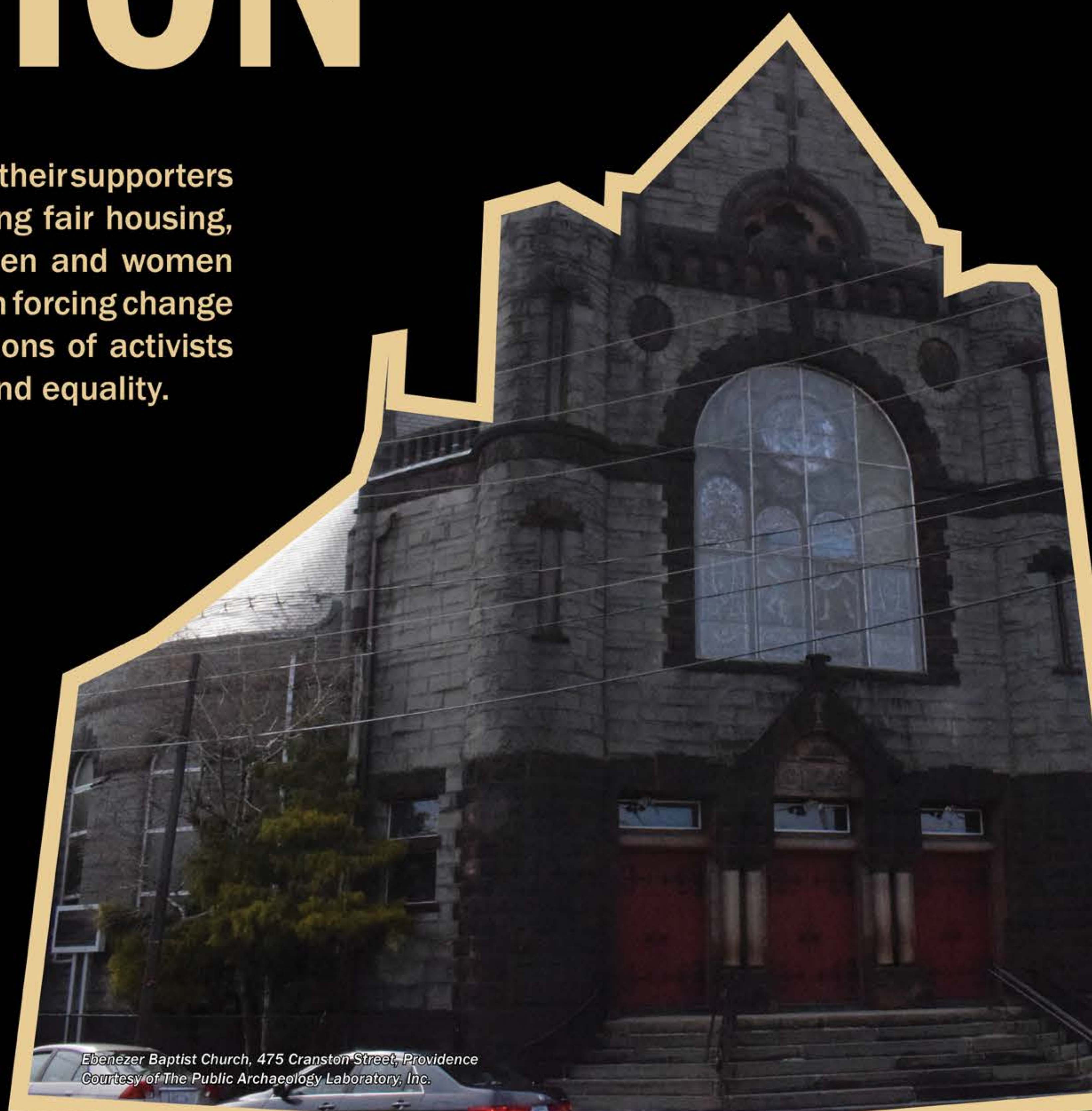
African Americans in Rhode Island formed organizations with their supporters to advocate for civil rights in all aspects of society, including fair housing, equal employment, education, and voting rights. Brave men and women fought discrimination through voice and law, inspiring or even forcing change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



Meeting flyer of the NAACP Providence Branch at the A.M. E.Z. Church. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society.

Ebenezer Baptist Church / Providence NAACP (1913)

Under the leadership of Reverend Jacob H. Wiley, Ebenezer Baptist's A Street church (no longer standing) was the place for the organizers of the Providence chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to meet. On August 6, 1913, a meeting was held in response to an attempted lynching and subsequent riot in Newport earlier in the summer. Attendees agreed to "start a statewide movement to fight any discrimination on purely racial grounds against citizens in public places of amusement, entertainment, restaurants, theatres, and by public utilities." Reverend Wiley joined a committee to investigate ways to fight discrimination. Ebenezer Baptist Church relocated to a new home on Cranston Street in 1969, and remains one of the largest black congregations in Providence.



Ebenezer Baptist Church, 475 Cranston Street, Providence. Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.



South Providence Neighborhood Center, 245 Prairie Avenue, Providence. Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.

South Providence Neighborhood Center / Urban League of Rhode Island (1976-present)

On March 11, 1965, the Rhode Island Congress of Racial Equality held a rally in the parking lot of the Willard Avenue Shopping Center to build support for a fair housing law. On Emancipation Day (August 1, 1966), a crowd of at least 500 attended a freedom rally here. A year later, increasing racial tensions in Providence erupted outside the shopping center following the Emancipation Day celebrations.

Shots Mark S. Providence Disturbances

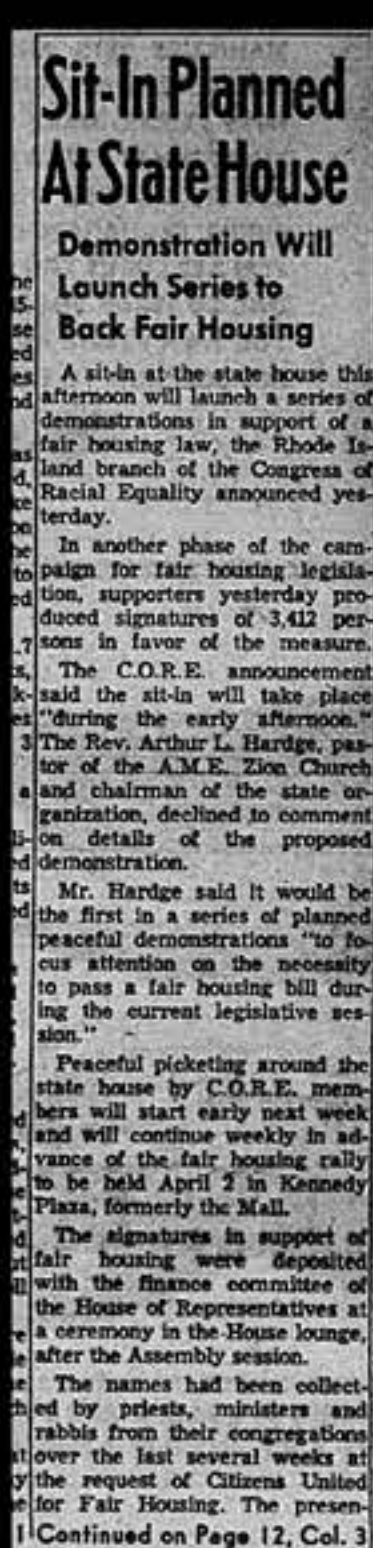


The Willard Shopping Center was razed in 1976, and the South Providence Neighborhood Center was built on the site. One of its first tenants was the Providence Urban League, established in August 1939 as a "black-oriented social agency." Today it houses the Urban League of Rhode Island, a police substation, and a homeless shelter.

"Shots Mark S. Providence Disturbances" Providence Journal August 2, 1967

Rhode Island ACLU Office (1973-1979)

The Rhode Island chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union was organized in 1959 after James N. Rhea, an African American reporter for the Providence Journal, wrote about the difficulties blacks faced in securing decent housing and employment. Local ACLU members, including Providence Urban League director James N. Williams and fair housing advocate Irving J. Fain, met to organize this chapter. The RI-ACLU backed the campaign for comprehensive fair housing legislation in the General Assembly that passed in 1965. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, it supported efforts to desegregate Providence's public schools. In 1973, the Rhode Island affiliate of the ACLU set up its first permanent office on Eddy Street in Downtown Providence, and today it is located at 128 Dorrance Street.



Clifford Monteiro. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society.

Rev. Arthur L. Hardge. RIHS 1969.81.7513

Sit-In Planned at State House: Providence Journal 13 March 1964. Copyright © 2019 The Providence Journal. Reproduced by Permission.



CURE/CORE Office, 33 Chestnut Street, Providence. Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.

Citizens United Renewal Enterprise (CURE) / Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Office (1969-1970s)

This building housed the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Citizens United Renewal Enterprise (CURE), two of Rhode Island's most active 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 fair housing legislation at the state level. It was chaired by Reverend Arthur L. Hardge, pastor of the Hood-Shaw Memorial AME Zion Church in Providence, and then by Clifford Monteiro (a co-founder of CURE). CORE volunteers documented housing-related racial discrimination and violations, staged sit-ins at the State House during legislative sessions, held rallies to build support for a Fair Housing law, and also lobbied for school desegregation.

CURE was a nonprofit housing renewal corporation founded in May 1968 by local activists Clifford Monteiro, Andrew Bell, Jr., and others, to address housing discrimination problems in Providence in cooperation with neighborhood groups.

RI ACLU Office, 51-55 Eddy Street, Providence. Courtesy of The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.

