Spaces of Fear: Race, Housing, and Travel in South Central PA

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Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
INTRODUCTION

Our poster explores the daily experiences of African Americans, and other minorities, in South Central PA, in the 20th century, with regard to housing and travel. It details the various difficulties that these groups encountered in the basic pursuit of equitable housing opportunities and safe travel/temporary lodging - a pursuit mired in socially enforced and legalized segregation and arising from long-standing white anxieties about people of color.

African Americans and other minorities had to learn how to navigate segregated landscapes in ways that their white counterparts were exempt from. Whites not only enjoyed a life free from racial restrictions but also actively worked to protect their privilege. The anxiety of harassment and harm while traveling, the financial disfranchisement caused by housing restrictions such as racially restrictive covenants and redlining, and the denial of equal opportunities for housing and amenities for travel worked to create spaces of fear for immigrants and racially marginalized groups.

BACKGROUND

ITHA Four Americas brought what is known as the “Great Migration.” Millions of African Americans poured into urban areas in the North. Harrisburg was one of these areas.

The growing population of African Americans and immigrants drove out urban whites who in turn fled to the suburban areas in a second migratory act known as “white flight.” Areas like Camp Hill, Mechanicsburg, Carlisle, and Dillsburg, among others, became enclaves for white investors and individuals, seeking escape from the changing demographics of the cities and the promise of new financial opportunities.

Racial tension in Central Pennsylvania has existed in the area since the 18th century. As tensions in the North rose in the 20th century due to the great migration, housing was not the only restrictive space for African Americans. The road ways of Central Pennsylvania and the hotels and the restaurants that populated them were also places where African Americans were not wanted.

SUNDAWN TOWNS

Sundown towns were communities that tried to ensure that no African American would stay in the town past dark. The goal was simple; keep the town or village white. These were found all over the country.

In central PA, sundown towns would manifest themselves in the neighborhoods outside of Harrisburg such as Camp Hill, Mechanicsburg and Chambersburg. These were not locations that African Americans would want to travel to, or sometimes even stay.

CONCLUSION

Travel and housing were limited to African Americans in 20th Century central Pennsylvania, limiting options for temporary and permanent housing.

The evidence of this is demonstrable in the various racially restrictive practices present in the area. Some of these were officially documented in the form of restrictive covenants and HOLC redlining maps.

However, some were less documented or fully customary such as the Green Book, used for African American motorist travel and Sundown Towns, used to enforce segregation at night.

Perhaps viewing these practices holistically reveals insights into the daily life of the minority in the United States; their daily difficulties and stresses in finding the basic desiers of property, rest from traveling, lodging, entertainment, and financial services.

REFERENCES


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