

# How Did Blacks Travel During Segregation?

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By: Nsenga K. Burton, Ph.D.

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*The Negro Motorist Green Book* was helpful for navigating Jim Crow America.

**(*The Root*)** -- In 1936 a Harlem postal worker and activist named Victor H. Green <sup>[1]</sup> decided to develop a guide that would help African Americans travel throughout the country in a safe and comfortable manner. *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (also called *The Negro Travelers' Green Book*), often simply known as *The Green Book*, identified places that welcomed black people during an era when Jim Crow laws and de facto segregation made it difficult for them to travel domestically without fear of racial backlash.

*The Green Book* listed businesses and places of interest such as nightclubs, beauty salons, barbershops, gas stations and garages that catered to black road-trippers. For almost three decades, travelers could request (for just 10 cents' postage) and receive a guide from Green. Eventually the guide expanded to encompass information about Canada and Mexico.

Like users of today's popular recommendation sites such as TripAdvisor <sup>[2]</sup>, travelers collected information during their journeys, which they shared with Green and his team of editors. The data were then incorporated into future editions. "Historically, *The Green Book* falls in line with the underreported activism of black postal workers and the heightened awareness of driving while

black in certain regions of the country," says Robert Smith, associate professor of African-American and civil rights history at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "Although many think of this book in historical terms, the challenges facing black travelers then resonate with black travelers now, particularly as it relates to racial profiling <sup>[3]</sup> and stop-and-frisk laws <sup>[4]</sup>."

*The Green Book* has recently been rediscovered in popular culture. Atlanta playwright <sup>[5]</sup> Calvin Alexander Ramsey wrote a play <sup>[6]</sup> entitled *The Green Book*, in which a black military officer and his wife stay in a "tourist home" (private homes identified as safe places for travel) with a Holocaust survivor on the eve of a speech being given by W.E.B. Du Bois in Jefferson City, Mo. Ramsey also published a children's book, *Ruth and the Green Book*, illustrated by legendary artist Floyd Cooper <sup>[7]</sup> that follows a young girl's journey with her family in an expensive car from Chicago to Alabama.

In a New York Times article <sup>[8]</sup>, Ramsey recalled having to pack a big lunch when his family traveled from Baltimore to Roxboro, N.C., so they wouldn't have to stop along the way. Food historian Jessica Harris <sup>[9]</sup> recently discussed *The Green Book* in Byron Hurt <sup>[10]</sup>'s award-winning documentary <sup>[11]</sup> *Soul Food Junkies*. Harris shared that the guide highlighted not only safe places but also the best places to eat and to find soul food while traveling. A traveling exhibition, "The Dresser Trunk Project," <sup>[12]</sup> also pays homage to the places of refuge, comfort and familiarity found in the guide.

Some of the locations mentioned in the books are still standing today. But not surprisingly, many, if not most, of the businesses that ***The Root*** contacted or attempted to locate on foot or by car in Washington, D.C., and Baltimore no longer exist.

Some of the *names* of the places, like the Casbah restaurant found in the 1956 guide for Washington, D.C., still exist. But this Casbah Café <sup>[13]</sup> has a different address and has been in existence only for about eight years, so we know it isn't the Casbah of *The Green Book*.

We did get a kick out of seeing Republic Gardens <sup>[14]</sup> listed as a nightclub in the 1956 edition, knowing that most college-educated blacks who have spent any time in D.C. -- certainly in the last 25 years -- have frequented the hot spot. The venue opened its doors in 1920 on the historic U Street corridor. But we were surprised to find that the Excelsior Club <sup>[15]</sup>, located in Charlotte, N.C., and the oldest supper club founded by blacks in the Southeast, was not listed in the 1949 or 1956 version of the guide.

Through a search that *The Root* conducted, we also found that many of the historical places of interest in cities like Chicago -- including Navy Pier, the Water Tower and the Merchandise Mart -- were open to blacks. Meanwhile, Robbins, Ill., located 17 miles outside of Chicago, was listed in the 1949 edition <sup>[16]</sup> as a city "owned and operated by Negroes" that proclaimed "no prejudice or restrictions." Robbins had more than 60 businesses, two physicians and nightclubs that would "do justice to Chicago and New York's brightest."

The New York City area, including all five boroughs and New Jersey, had pages and pages of businesses that were safe. Buffalo, N.Y., also had scores of businesses listed in the guide, while Lackawanna, N.Y. had only two, one of which was the Little Harlem Tavern, which was demolished <sup>[17]</sup> in 1999.

As expected, in many cities the YWCA and YMCA allowed blacks to stay there during travel, business and college matriculation, but what was unexpected was the drop in the number of businesses identified as safe in some cities from the 1949 version to the 1956 version. For example, Columbia, S.C., had 35 businesses listed in the 1949 version of the guide but only 12 in the 1956 version.

For the 1956 edition, Green and his editorial staff may have decided to be more discerning in the places that they identified as "safe," paying closer attention to the quality of the accommodations available. A number of other factors could also explain the lower number, including post-World War II industrialization, increased costs associated with retail merchants associations, the Great Migration <sup>[18]</sup> and fallout over the continued struggle over civil rights in the U.S.

Most of the businesses in *The Green Book* don't include captions, so in 2012 the book raises many more questions than it answers -- making tracing the locales a worthwhile pursuit, particularly along famous routes (i.e., Route 66, the Pacific Coast Highway and the Blue Ridge Parkway) but also on some lesser-known ones (such as the Lincoln Highway and the Blue and Gray Trail).

If tourists and history buffs are willing to re-create Civil War battles or trace the Trail of Tears <sup>[19]</sup>, then it would also seem worthwhile to spend some time finding out which locales in *The Green Book* are still standing or which establishments have taken their place. With the help of augmented-reality apps <sup>[20]</sup> and the forthcoming Google Goggles <sup>[21]</sup>, a lot of passion and a strong interest in black history, plotting a *Green Book* path during your summer travels is now much easier than Victor Green could probably ever have imagined.

*Nsenga K. Burton, Ph.D., is editor-at-large for **The Root**. Follow her on Twitter <sup>[22]</sup>.*

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