

# LEST WE FORGET

#teachthetruthWisconsin



**Lest we forget**  
**The great migration**  
**Building Beloit's labor force**



## Former Site of Chicago and Northwestern Railroad, Where Black Migrants Arrived, on Race St.

- Between 1910-1930, more than 1 million African Americans moved from the South to the North.
- Many arriving in Beloit were from just a few counties in northeastern Mississippi; one study in 1955 found 72% of Black Beloit citizens came from that state.
- Many arrived by rail: train trip from New Albany, MS to Memphis TN, to Chicago to Beloit.
- Factors affecting migration:

Promise of less oppression and segregation: *Chicago Defender*, Black newspaper widely distributed in the South wrote that the North offered better life

Boll Weevil infestation/falling prices for cotton led to lack of employment in the South

Low wages: \$2-3/ day for men and \$2-3/week for women

Promise of better education for children, desire to live near family already in North



## **Dairy Queen on Riverside: Site of Company Temporary Housing**

- Initially Black workers lived in company campground near the factory or in shacks.
- Just to the north of this (directly across from Lagoon) in the large green space is considered the place where people gathered to worship. Bethel AME which is on Athletic Ave is the oldest church in Beloit. Organized in 1881, it was the only church until 1917.
- Later this became the site of several Black churches. By 1933, there were 6 Black churches.
- Opportunities for housing were limited by Whites' demand for segregated neighborhoods.
- Realty practices discriminated against Black buyers: in loan applications for Whites, the wife's earnings were counted as 50% of income. For Black buyers, wife's income not included at all.
- Realtors and banks would not support sale to Black buyer unless another Black family lived on the block.
- Housing for workers was most prevalent issue for company once workforce established.
- The company built 138 single family homes for White employees at Eclipse Home Addition.
- City Council fought company housing for Black workers but housing was needed. A solution had to be found.



## **Fairbanks-Morse Company, 701 White Avenue est. 1823**

- Company produced gasoline and diesel engines used for agriculture and military purposes. Demand increased during WWI with orders from US and Europe.
- Draft in WWI of young men workers and marked restriction in immigration led to significant decrease in available workforce. Fairbanks-Morse had large labor shortage.
- John McCord, trusted 19-yr-old Black janitor at company was going to visit family in 1914 and offered to recruit workers from MS. He returned with 18 men who were promised 22 ½ cents/hour, high wage compared to South. Company was offering them 5-6 cents less than White-worker pay.
- Walter Ingram, another young man from the company, had been a semi-pro baseball player and knew many people in MS from his playing time. He served as a recruiter from 1916-1917.
- Recruiting trip was dangerous due to law in South of fine, jail time or worse for any person, Black or White, taking southern workers to cross the Ohio River north.
- To avoid dangerous trips, recruiters wrote to Black churches in NE Mississippi to advertise jobs at the company. Word of mouth to family, friends and neighbors help spread the message. After 1917, no more trips were needed to recruit.
- Tuskegee Institute connection: JD Stevenson, assistant to B.T. Washington, approached the company for funds for the college. Company recruited him and provided jobs for students in summers. Some stayed on permanently.
- Black workers were assigned to low skill jobs or the foundry, dangerous task due to fumes. Many working there died in their 40s-50s. Unions were not present until federal contracts during WWII required equal opportunity and wages.



## **Edgewater Flats 200 block of Carpenter and Birch**

- By 1917, resistance to housing for Blacks receded in face of the important war effort so the company built apartment housing for Black employees and families. This became known as the only housing built by a company exclusively for Black workers in Wisconsin. Flats attracted national attention and commendation from industry and welfare organizations.
- Edgewater Flats were 4 buildings of 6 two story units, with kitchen, living room, bedrooms and bath, electricity and running water.
- Playing fields for basketball and baseball nearby supported recreation for families and workers.
- Close social networks were formed.
- The company hired JD Stevenson as the superintendent/manager of the Flats. The company was concerned about community resistance to the project. Stevenson was supposed to provide supervision to keep young men out of trouble and avoid negative publicity.
- The site was listed on the State and National Register of Historic Places in 1983, after an attempt to demolish them met with community resistance. The Register refers to it as “the nucleus of the Beloit’s 20<sup>th</sup> century Black community”.



## YMCA Near Edgewater Flats

- The company built the Black YMCA near the Flats with housing for single men. The other Beloit YMCA was segregated till 1945; the YWCA was not segregated.
- The Y by the Flats had a dining hall, library, game room and meeting rooms. JB Stevenson, manager of the Y, led Bible Study classes for children and adults. There were also Christmas and Easter programs for the children.
- Black Boy Scout Troop was started by Stevenson and Earl Rice in 1924. The Troop competed at jamborees, attended UW football games together and camped out. Y also had a Hi-Y club for youth. The Quest Club, a men's group focused on educating and meeting the needs of the community, was located near the Y.
- Though Stevenson had a good reputation with the Black community, some people were concerned that he was too tied to Fairbanks-Morse to advocate strongly for them.



## Vernon Park, Corner of Vernon and Hackett

- Vernon Park came about as a result of the city not wanting Blacks to live west of the river in this area.
- A local assemblyman wrote a bill that said if land is condemned, it can be developed into a park.
- This is what happened. The bill passed, the land was condemned and a park was developed.
- Mayor Adams, Beloit's last mayor, was against housing for Blacks. Two councilmen who were Fairbanks employees were in favor. In this case, the Mayor got his wish.



## Resources

- African American Historical Society of Beloit (<https://www.aahsb.com/>)
- Beloit College, Coming Up North: A History Harvest about Black Migration to Beloit Wisconsin, May 2019
- Fair, Linda, Beloit's African American History, University Place, WisCONTEXT, June 25, 2019
- Knowles, Lucas, Beloit Wisconsin and the Great Migration: The Role of Industry, Individuals and Family in the Founding of Beloit's Black Community, Bachelor of Arts Thesis, UW-Eau Claire, 2010
- Jim and Cheryl Caldwell Foundation, Through Their Eyes: The History of African Americans in Beloit, Wisconsin from 1836-1970
- Polaski, Tom, The Impact of the Black Migration to Fairbanks-Morse and Company 1915-1920, Master of Arts Thesis, Northern Illinois University, 1984

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