



Do you know if your community was ever a sundown town? Sundown towns were those that prohibited African Americans, and sometimes other groups such as Jews, Asian Americans, Native Americans, or Mexican Americans from settling in their communities, or even spending the night. Sundown towns became common throughout the Midwest and many parts of the United States during the period following Reconstruction, from roughly 1890 to 1940. During the period immediately after the Civil War, African Americans settled in many parts of the country, especially in small rural communities in the North, including Wisconsin. These newcomers were generally welcomed. But by 1890 things had begun to change, due in part to “the decay of Civil War idealism, and the evolution of ideas such as imperialism and eugenics”. * A shift in the priorities of the Republican Party which had until then championed the rights of African Americans., was also an important factor. As people of color were pushed out of small towns and cities in Wisconsin, they usually moved to larger cities such as Milwaukee and Chicago which already had a sizeable concentration of Black residents.

Over 250 confirmed or probable sundown towns were created in Wisconsin, beginning in the 1890’s, up until the start of World War II. * These ranged from tiny villages to mid-sized cities. They were often characterized by a sign at the village or city limits announcing that no Negroes were allowed in the town after sundown. Sundown towns forbid Blacks (and sometimes Jews or other groups) to settle in their community by creating an ordinance, by threats of violence, or with a whistle blown at 6 PM every evening announcing that it was time to be gone. Fond du Lac, Appleton, Green Bay, La Crosse, Sheboygan, and Janesville are some of the larger Wisconsin communities confirmed as sundown towns. Several towns in Dane County share this history as well, including but probably not limited to Sun Prairie, Cottage Grove, Oregon, Maple Bluff, Middleton, Monona, Cross Plains, and Mt. Horeb.

Most residents of past sundown communities are unaware of this part of their local history—it has been lost to the community memory, as local historians have preferred to focus on more positive aspects of the past. People wanting to research their community’s racial history can consult census data, interview elderly residents, and check at the local library for newspaper articles and other local history items that might provide clues. An interactive map of known sundown towns can be found at <https://justice.tougaloo.edu/sundown-towns/using-the-sundown-towns-database/state-map/> * If a community does in fact have such a history, residents can advocate with community leaders to publicly acknowledge and apologize for the past, and to renounce racially and ethnically exclusionary tactics for the present and future.

* Data drawn from [Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism](#), by James W. Loewen