

# BLACK, WHITE & BEYOND

*An Interactive History*

AKRON'S  
MULTICULTURAL  
HISTORY

CLINTON  
THE PRESIDENT'S  
INITIATIVE ON RACE

COMING  
TOGETHER  
PROJECT

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## AFRICAN AMERICANS IN WWII & CIVIL RIGHTS

Ohio African-Americans gained economic independence during WWII because of the job openings throughout the industrial northeastern portion of the state. African-Americans migrated into Ohio from the rural South, and many migrants from West Virginia poured into northeast Ohio to take part in the booming wartime economy. Akron was home to huge rubber corporations at this point, and the city was teeming with new faces and many job openings. While the economic benefits of Akron's rubber industry were welcomed by African-Americans and Appalachian migrants, a patriotic spirit infused many in Akron; companies switched over the making planes and other wartime materials. One of the key developments in Akron was synthetic rubber, considered almost as important to winning the war as the atomic bomb.

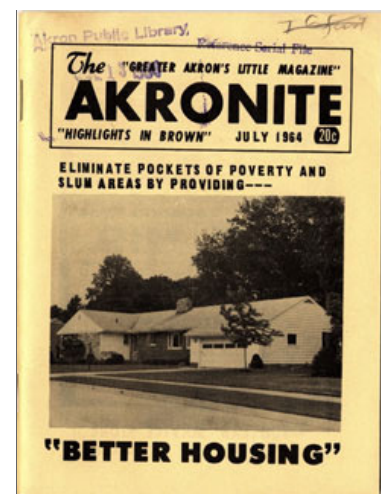
Akron's black population increased and while there was intense demand for employees in Akron and other northeastern Ohio industrial cities, racism and discrimination ruled in many companies for as long as possible. Housing discrimination also continued. African-Americans were still not given semiskilled or skilled jobs, and these often went to white men disqualified from military service or white migrants from Appalachia; African-Americans were relegated to the most menial jobs. This eventually changed in many industries as the war effort increased, and it became more obvious that every person was needed to perform skilled work for the war effort. By the end of the war 8% of Ohio's skilled workforce population was African-American; Ohio's African American population was 6.5% by 1950. Appalachian migrants also stayed in Ohio after the war, and Ohio's population included 7.2% from the Southern highlands in 1950.

### African-American Soldiers in WWII

African-American soldiers were welcomed into certain branches of the armed forces in this war, but, like other wars, there was discrimination and segregation. Soldiers still fought in segregated units throughout the war, but there were advances in the number of commissioned officers. Other forms of racism included barring African-Americans from the Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Army Air Corps, and the Navy only allowed African-Americans as mess men. These conditions were not promising, and these policies have been called "Jim Crow military". Some changes were made with the 1940 Selective Service Training Act which stated that all men between 18 and 36, regardless of race, were eligible to volunteer in naval and ground forces without fear of discrimination. It also prohibited racial and/or color discrimination in selection and training of military personnel. This act attempted to change the makeup of the military, but it did not address the underlying issues present such as stereotypes and racism.

African-American soldiers noted the irony and hypocrisy of fighting for freedom and democracy in Europe when they could not enjoy those same privileges in their own country. This sentiment led to the Double V campaign which worked to end discrimination at home and ensure democracy abroad. At home this movement was maintained by discrimination in the defense industries and labor unions; racist housing practices were also noted and

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attempts to change these were part of the Double V campaign. African-American rights were directly tied to European emancipation.

## **African-Americans after WWII**

The end of the war brought back hundreds of thousands of American soldiers to Ohio, and in most industries in northeast Ohio African-Americans, southern migrants, and women were pressured by society, soldiers, unions, and company executives to relinquish their wartime positions in favor of the white veterans. This was a step backwards for many African-Americans on the home front, and these individuals combined with African-Americans who served in the war worked to end the hypocrisy and discrimination prevalent in American jobs, housing, and society. These African-Americans created the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and used the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) to press for legal redress against Jim Crow laws, especially in the South. CORE had a predominately white membership in the late 40s and 50s, and in the North they focused on equality of opportunity such as desegregation of institutions and facilities, fair housing, equal pay, and job opportunities instead of freedom to vote like in the South.

Southern African-Americans lost many share-cropping and mining jobs with increased government funding for better equipment, and, consequently, African-Americans migrated to large northern cities looking for industrial jobs. Between 1940 and 1970 African-Americans in urban environments increased from 50% to more than 80%. Akron and other northeastern Ohio cities received many of these migrants. However, mechanization eliminated many jobs in general in industry, and migrating African-Americans missed out on many job opportunities. Unfortunately, the decline in industrial output combined with racist segregation of many jobs left African-Americans without job seniority out of work.

Akron and other northeastern Ohio cities faced industrial job crunches while the South and major northern cities faced problems from the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 established the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, and charged it with investigating violations of civil rights and seeking remedies; Ohio responded to this law with the 1959 creation of the Ohio Civil Rights Commission. This commission monitored and enforced a new law against discrimination by race, color, religion, national origin, and ancestry in employment; the commission initially found discriminatory practices at Ohio hotels, restaurants, and stores, but many of these facilities sidestepped the law and converted to private, members only clubs. Cold War politics also greatly affected African-Americans in industrial cities because these people would have continued the push for equality from WWII momentum, but unionization efforts and questioning labor policies was seen as un-American and communist by many laborers and Americans in general. These policies and aura of conformity gave African-Americans little room to maneuver for equal opportunities.

Starting in the 1960s, blacks in Akron began to push for an end to discrimination using various tactics, such as political action, workshops, and employment drives. Opie Evans edited the *Akronite* and began pushing for changes in his magazine. Protests widened to include sit-ins and other demonstrations. In 1968, in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., riots erupted in Akron for six days, the city went into curfew and National Guard Troops had to be called in to restore order. Cleveland also witnessed violence in 1966 in Hough and again in 1968. The NAACP became active in focusing on housing and employment issues. The city participated in national programs such as Model Cities and blacks began to gain more ground in various professional positions within government, education and elsewhere.

## **Sources**

### **Websites**

Akron Black History Timeline: <http://www.ci.akron.oh.us/blackhist/timeline/index.cfm>

### **Books**

Knepper, George W. *Ohio and Its People*. Kent: Kent State University Press,  
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