

REPRESENTATION & PRESERVATION



ISSUE STATEMENT

DESPITE THE documented historical impact of Black communities on the cultural, economic and broader community development of Flagstaff, there are few to no statements, placards, or other displays recognizing these contributions. We recognize the importance of representation and preservation of Black culture and Black communal wisdom in both recognizing the fully contextualized history of Flagstaff and pursuing an ongoing diversity in the development of the Flagstaff community at large.

BACKGROUND

Through these town halls, the Coalition wants to move the Flagstaff Community from actively listening to supporting its Black representation and preservation with moral conviction, personal involvement, and the investment of tangible and financial resources.

Flagstaff, Arizona, not unlike most American towns, reflects a complex story of America's tangled understanding of its racial history. Compounded to this is also the challenge of persuading City leadership to invest in measures that support the representation, resilience, and historical preservation of Flagstaff's past, present, and future Black culture and lives. Given the disparity of Black wealth and political influence, we as African-diaspora people must move beyond the pain and frustration while still seeking to be seated at the table of equality. As we take our seats, we are still finding our voice to ask that our intellectual and artistic contributions and blood, sweat, and tears be fully validated and acknowledged as America's history. Also, today, we are



REPRESENTATION & PRESERVATION QUICK FACTS:

- > **Historical** evidence reflects a Black/African-American presence in Flagstaff since its early history
- > **Little** recognition or representation of the Black Cultural Heritage of Flagstaff exists
- > **Most** communities have social clubs, bars, and restaurants representing the different ethnic cultures in that town
- > **Recent** community dialogues have sparked the question of how/why the representation of Black culture in Flagstaff have largely been "erased," and how to reinvigorate representation going forward

BACKGROUND (CONT)

asking this in the bitter memory of our African ancestors who were bought and sold here, and with whipped backs, toiled as free labor to build these United States of America.

Historically, a northern Arizona town's first census in 1860 counted twenty-one 'Freed Black Male[s] or Female[s].' African people have been in Flagstaff since the 1880s when men arrived here to work on the railroad. In the 1920s, a significant number of Black people would migrate to Flagstaff to work as lumberjacks. Black people came here to find better lives for their families. They found other work as miners, farmhands, housekeepers, cooks, shopkeepers, and ultimately, teachers, school administrators, and what was then referred to as secretaries.

The Black population has never been one of vast numbers. However, our presence in the Community was not what many of us describe today as being "invisible" in a population of seventy thousand residents.

The newly formed Lived Black Experience CommUnity Coalition are twelve members who currently reside or have resided in Flagstaff. Our mission to create discussions that educate, enlighten, and inform our acquaintances, friends, and neighbors of other ethnicities, but primarily of European -American descent, about our our-story and experiences while living black in Flagstaff.

Following are several key historical aspects of Flagstaff's Black/African-American community:

- African-Americans in Flagstaff have primarily lived the Southside and Pine Knoll areas.
- Many of the homes where Black people resided are still owned by the original family, but the owner no longer lives in Flagstaff.
- Black representation and preservation cannot be discussed without mention of the Black church, which has always been the community center. The Black church has historically served as both the school site and place for social functions. During the week, the Black church has been the daycare center and preschool, and provides meals to the clergy and its congregants, community, and people without homes. Some Black churches also have a prison ministry that assists newly released prisoners with finding housing, clothing for interviews, and securing job placement. Most importantly, the Black church provided childcare during the summer with Vacation Bible School and was historically the meeting place during the Civil Rights Movement.



On Sundays, the church becomes a place of fellowship, praise and worship, while also providing spiritual guidance and healing.

Flagstaff has four historically African-American churches:

- First Missionary Baptist where Evangelist Shirley Sims is the Assistant Minister (219 South Elden Street)
 - Springhill Baptist Church led by second-generation church Pastor Cemie Clayton (624 South O'Leary Street)
 - Riverside Church of God in Christ (419 South Verde Street)
 - Harbert AME Church (424 South San Francisco Street)
- The Black community has always had businesses that provide services unique to the culture. For example, there were black barbershops and hair salons, hat shops, butcher shops that sold meats like chicken gizzards, chitlins', fatback, oxtails, and turkey wings. Black people have always owned restaurants specializing in soul food cuisine, which traditionally includes collard greens, lima beans, okra, and black-eyed peas complemented with white rice and gravy, macaroni and cheese, buttermilk biscuits, or cornbread.
 - While most of Flagstaff's Black men were lumberjacks, railroad men, and miners, the women, like most in the African-American culture, were laundresses, shopkeepers, cooks, seamstresses, nurses, and maids. Those fortunate enough to complete specialized studies or four-year colleges became then called secretaries and schoolteachers.

BACKGROUND (CONT)

- Some Black men found a decent living becoming personal drivers and lawn care workers to the wealthy or maintenance workers at schools and businesses— Very few Negroes were able to attend college after graduating high school. Most Black men completed college degrees after returning home from WWII.
- Flagstaff had an Elks Lodge and Black Masonic Hall. It should be noted that European-American Masons and Shriners met in a separate hall. The Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks of the World is an African-American fraternal order that was established in 1897 in the United States. The Elks Order is said to have descended from the Free African Society, the first formal Black society in America. When traveling or moving to a new city or state, Negro people would seek to find an Elks Lodge for dining, lodging assistance, and trusted guidance and advice while traveling.

These lodges were listed in the Negro Motorist Green Book, an annual guidebook used by Black travelers to navigate Arizona during Jim Crow. The guidebook featured Black-owned businesses and hotels, gas stations, restaurants, barbershops and beauty parlors, and dance-halls where Negro people were welcomed. Flagstaff had listings for rooming houses that also provided meals.

The Sims, one of the few remaining longtime black Flagstaff families, now owns the historic Elks Club location on San Francisco Street.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

Despite the rich historical tapestry of Black/African-American culture in Flagstaff, there remain few physical representations of this culture to date. As part of this ongoing conversation, we seek to examine how this “erasure” has happened, recognize the significance of this history, and move forward in ways that recognize, honor, and preserve the legacy of Black culture in Flagstaff’s ever evolving story. To provide a contextual framework for this discussion, we will look at the lingering representations of Black culture in Flagstaff, and question the limitations thereof:

There are only two brick and mortar representations of African-American/Black businesses in Flagstaff – a barbershop and a co-op market that assists in launching retail and food businesses. Flagstaff’s other Black businesses are operated from the proprietor’s home. While there may be others, the following are the only known businesses to longtime Black Flagstaff residents:

1. **Dirty Bird Spices** is owned by **Brandon Billings-Reber** (2703 North 1st Street)
2. **Destiney’s Creations**, offering homemade bath and body products and handmade greeting cards, was created and is owned by **Coral and Destiney Evans**; products are available at the Market of Dreams located at 2532 East 7th Avenue, and other local retailers
3. **Elijah Smith** provides DJ services for private parties and special events
4. **Gallyvant/Jewelry, Women’s Clothing, and Accessories** is owned by **Kim Robinson**; this business transitioned from a downtown Flagstaff brick and mortar business to an online and mobile business
5. **Jerry Nickels** is a local musician (**DuB and Down with the Blues**), personal designer clothing line, and food caterer
6. **Kutz Barber Shop and College** is owned by **Jabar Nickels** (2219 East 7th Avenue)
7. Black communities have always had its celebrated soul food chefs who do catering for church fundraisers and special events (i.e., baby showers, wedding receptions, and the family dinners served after a funeral service). **Ms. Sissy Hickman’s** culinary skills are well known throughout the Flagstaff African-American community.



Next to Black spirituality and religion, Black culture uses the Arts to tell “our-story,” through drawing and painting, literature, poetry, music, and theatre. The only artistic evidence of African-American cultural preservation in Flagstaff is a mural on the Murdoch Community Center wall, originally the Dunbar School site, a formerly segregated elementary school named after African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. The mural depicts Black community leaders and influencers from the Segregation era. If one did not drive or walk down East Brennen Avenue, they may never know that people of African descent are somehow connected to Flagstaff.

We are grateful to then community activist, Mayor Coral Evans, for organizing community

CONTEXTUALIZATION (CONT)

members to save the Murdoch Center, and our Community Chieftess, Ms. Deborah Harris, for being the Preservationist of the Murdoch and the scattered history of Black Flagstaff.

Our community is incredibly grateful to Dr. Ricardo Guthrie, whose artistic vision brought together the combined talents of other local artists, students, and community members to complete the mural in 2011.

It is not uncommon for communities to recognize and celebrate their artists with a gathering space to protect these sacred objects for many years to come. Today we ask if you know the following Black artists, and have you seen their art somewhere in Flagstaff?

- Debra Edgerton, NAU Assistant Professor, School of Art
- Dr. Ricardo Guthrie, Associate Professor, Department of Ethnic Studies (currently on Sabbatical)
- Professor Franklin Willis, NAU Professor, School of Art¹

The Murdoch Community Center is where we gather to celebrate King Day, Black History Month, Juneteenth, and Kwanzaa. We gather there to celebrate our achievements. We meet there to plan our strategies for obtaining equality and our plans to become visible in a City that does not have at least one street named after a well-known African-American (see note below). However, there is a downtown street and local beer brewery named after celebrated scientist and public racist, Louis Agassiz.

Meanwhile, the NAACP also holds their monthly meetings at the Murdoch. Those walls contain class lectures, Southside Community Association discussions, and memories of birthday, graduation, and wedding celebrations. It is a space that taught young community leaders how to respond to, "but all lives matter." The Murdoch has been a preschool from Monday to Friday, a blues hall featuring Winslow's Tommy Dukes on Saturday evening, and a church on Sunday. The Murdoch is whatever we need it to be at the time we need it.

Most communities have social clubs, bars, and restaurants representing the different ethnic cultures in that town.

In conclusion, we leave you with questions raised by the African-American community of Flagstaff: Where is Flagstaff's jazz, rhythm and blues club, soul food restaurant, retailers that showcase the fashion and products that our culture heavily influences in the media and on the runways. Where is the Flagstaff Black Cultural Center? When will Aida, Porgy and Bess, The Wiz, Ladysmith Black Mombasa, and the Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre perform in Flagstaff? Can we plan to have Flagstaff's first annual African Arts and Food Festival in downtown Heritage Square?

If Black lives matter in Flagstaff, its leadership must establish tangible evidence of this in its schools, businesses, food and beverage establishments, social and recreational activities, and the tourist industry. There needs to be an ongoing project to record and preserve the City and all of northern Arizona's Black history in one place. Most importantly, the City's Economic Development needs to encourage, support, and nurture Black businesses in prime areas that include downtown, Route 66, and Fourth Street. Cultural and artistic activities should also be included on the City's calendar.

This discussion is meant to spark a commitment to support the representation, resilience, and historical preservation of the past, present, and future Black culture and lives. Again, through these town halls, the Coalition wants to move the Flagstaff Community from actively listening to supporting its Black/African-American representation and preservation with moral conviction, personal involvement, and the investment of tangible and financial resources.

KEY QUESTIONS

- WHAT representations of the Arts, culture, and the unique development of community have you seen, if any, that are specific to the Black community in Flagstaff?
- WHAT historical, artistic, or other significant moments or representations are you aware of that are lacking within the portrayal and/or recognition of the Black community of Flagstaff?
- HOW can we, together, create a visible Black presence in Flagstaff?
- WHAT do you feel needs to change in order to ensure continued positive development of the Flagstaff community in this area?
- WHAT does change look like to you when it comes to Representation and Preservation for Flagstaff's Black community?

¹ Note: There is another Black painter (name unknown) recently brought to the author's attention in Flagstaff's La Plaza Vieja.