

Sign on restaurant,
Lancaster, Ohio, 1938.

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Returning HOME

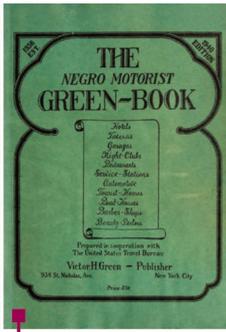
The historic *Green Book* and creating an honest narrative about our cities. | By Nick Bochenek

Dayton was the closest major city to where I grew up and served as a cultural and geographical landmark for the township where I lived. I recall driving to the city to accompany my parents on business, to go to shops and bakeries, or to watch a basketball game at UD Arena. Nearly all my memories there are fond ones, and have instilled in me a sentimental view of the city.

While I left the area in 2013, I frequently return to visit family and friends. In adulthood, I gained new memories of Dayton as I explored its clubs, bars, and breweries. These experiences too shaped the ideal contained within my head, still layered in nostalgia. As a city ravaged by the post-industrial

economy, it's interesting to imagine Dayton in its mid-twentieth century heyday, full of economic growth and social opportunity.

The post-war era brought a new industrial economy and a burgeoning middle class. Throughout the late 1940s through the 1960s, images of the American Dream contained picket fences, idyllic homes, and the family car. Emerging in the middle class was a distinct subset of African American car owners, who sought to fully participate in the "Republic of Drivers." This was not easily accomplished in this era of American history. Jim Crow still ruled the South, and racist attitudes and laws were scattered throughout American municipalities. While motorists of color may have had the same material freedom to travel as



The Negro Motorist Green-Book, 1940.

VICTOR H. GREEN & CO.;
COURTESY OF NEW YORK
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their white counterparts, their experiences of travel differed greatly. To alleviate this, numerous publications emerged for the African American traveler. The most famous of these was the *Negro Motorist Green Book*, published from 1936 to 1964 by Victor H. Green. The *Green Book* contained testimonials and business listings for hotels, restaurants, gas stations, and tourist locations

that were friendly to African American travelers. With the *Green Book*, travelers could tailor their experience to ensure safe and pleasant destinations.

Publications like the *Green Book* are part of the American story of the Civil Rights movement. The car allowed the conditions to travel with greater autonomy and anonymity than public transit. Public roads promised a democratic landscape where the rules were consistent for all drivers, granting equal access for anyone with the privilege of owning a car. To a certain extent, the car overtook the identity of the driver. But cars and public roads were not enough to ensure safe travel for people of color. An ardent eye could reveal the identity of a driver, opening them up to harassment by the police, fellow drivers, or citizens at a traffic stop.

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Reading the *Green Book* offers a window to the past and a record with which one can track the urban landscape. While reading it, I quickly focused my research on Dayton, the Gem City. I found myself utterly unfamiliar with the places named throughout the *Green Book*. Most of the businesses listed were located on the city's west side. This revelation forced some reflection. I am not very familiar with the west side, a neighborhood that is predominantly Black and has historically suffered from redlining. As a teenager, using my parents' car as a means of rebellion, I was told never to venture to the west side due to the high crime rate. As an adult, I realize that my lack of experience with one of my hometown's regions is intimately tied to Dayton's history of segregation.

Venturing there in search of the locations listed in the *Green Book* yielded new questions. Of the many Dayton entries listed in the publication, only one location remains. The 1954 *Green Book* lists the YMCA as a place of refuge. Located on West 5th Street, it is now owned by Miami Valley Housing Opportunities, a nonprofit that works to sustain affordable housing. Other listings now are only vacant lots, widened streets, or highway overpasses.

It is worth noting that the *Green Book* began to lose its relevance after the triumphs of the Civil Rights movement. A book that served to ameliorate discrimination had less usefulness in a society that outlawed such injustice. However, it's clear that the Civil Rights movement has entered a distinct new era, with emphasis on criminal justice and police brutality manifested in movements like Black Lives Matter. At the same time, we see white supremacists of the alt-right attempt to enter the mainstream of political and social discourse. In November, *The New York Times* interviewed a Neo-Nazi living in New Carlisle, a community adjacent to the townships where I grew up. This article, and the outrage that followed, brought home to many the chilling fact that members of extreme hate groups live—sometimes quite literally—right next door. The *Green Book* stands out as a historic example of self-determination in the face of adversity.

I'll always be proud of my hometown. I'm proud of its history of aviation and its tenacity in dealing with the post-industrial economy. At the same time, I am troubled by its history of racial and economic segregation. An honest narrative embraces the contradictions in human experience and then tries to parse through them. By being honest about our cities, we might one day create narratives that more wholly represent their collective history. ♥



YMCA, West 5th St, Dayton, Ohio.

PHOTO BY NICK BOCHENEK