

A Community on the Move, a 1750-square-foot exhibition, engages visitors of all ages and backgrounds with the courage and perseverance of Portland's black residents in the 1940s and early 1950s. Key messages trace the impacts of the WWII shipyards, migration of southern black workers and families to Portland, and the Vanport flood on the established black community of Albina. Urban renewal delivers a final blow, as construction of Memorial Coliseum and expansion of Emmanuel Hospital destroy a wide swath of (segregated) housing and black-owned businesses. Throughout the exhibit, visitors are prompted to connect the experiences of their parents and grandparents with present-day realities. The exhibit will be immersive and interactive, with engagement opportunities for all ages. Programs, community conversations, and educational tours will complement the exhibit. The projected budget is \$239,500.

Take home messages

Our aim is that all visitors will understand and retain a few big ideas:

- In the 1940s and 1950s, Portland had a vital, vibrant black community that was self-contained, and prosperous for that time.
- From the U.S. entry into World War II in December 1941 until the construction of Memorial Coliseum in the mid-1950s, a series of local and national events brought continuous, sweeping changes to Portland's black community.
- Legal segregation kept most of Portland's housing stock and job opportunities off-limits to blacks. Many black families moved multiple times in search of livable, permanent homes. Fair housing and equitable hiring practices were the focus for civil rights activists in this period.
- When fair housing and public accommodations laws ended legal segregation in the 1950s, illegal segregation continued, in the form of racism. It persists to this day.

Interpretive objectives

We expect that as a result of time spent in the exhibit, visitors will:

- learn eye-opening information that they want to share with others;
- get a sense of Portland as a legally segregated city in the 1940s and 1950s;
- become aware of connections among African American history at the national level, the history of blacks in Portland, and the history of Oregon as a whole;
- connect and compare past conditions with present-day realities.

Albina: Wherever Black Folks Live

As visitors enter the exhibit hall, the year is 1940. A collage of calendars, 78 rpm records and albums, movie posters, memorabilia, objects, and newspaper ads for black-owned businesses welcomes visitors to Albina, a small, close-knit black community within overwhelmingly white, legally segregated Portland. A typical barbershop and beauty salon is the interactive stage set where memories are shared and conversations begin. Sitting in barber and salon chairs or relaxing in the waiting area, visitors discover that the mirror doubles as a digital screen. Historic photos show families at their front doors, business owners in their establishments, and congregations in their pews; busy commercial districts with services of all kinds; and popular gathering places. As period music plays on a vintage radio, treasured photos document Albina's social groups, nightclubs, restaurants, and pool halls. A special exhibit focuses on Tom Johnson, the

underworld boss of Albina, who ran interference with the powers that be. All the captions are quotes—from those who remember how it was, and from those too young to remember, but aware of connections between then and now.

A browsing corner for barbershop/beauty salon “customers” invites visitors to peruse pages from black-owned newspapers and other publications of the period. On a bulletin board, a street map of historic Albina includes inset photos of buildings that are still standing. “Ghosted” lines on the street map show how Portlanders redefined the boundaries of “Albina” through the decades, to reflect white people’s definition of Albina as wherever black folks live.

Visitors are invited to add their own Albina memories: thumbnails of family photos, and reminiscences on post-its. In a related program, Portland-area students research family history, for a poster and video show to be held in the lobby of the Oregon Historical Society. Selected examples are showcased here.

From the South to the Shipyards

A movie marquee announces the latest newsreel: FDR declares war! As visitors enter, a sign directs “colored” moviegoers to the balcony—the only seats available. A brief media piece uses archival footage and sound, historic imagery, and newsreel-style titles and voiceovers to unfold an epic story. Newspaper headlines, historic images, and art work by Jacob Lawrence recreate the stunning news of Pearl Harbor and its tumultuous aftermath: mobilization of troops, internment of Japanese Americans, construction of the Kaiser shipyards—and recruitment of thousands of southern blacks to northern factories gearing up for war.

Exiting the newsreel theater, visitors encounter a wall plastered with retro-style handbills (actually interpretive panels). *Backstory* traces the effects on established Albina of the big changes brought to Portland by World War II. In a few years, shipyard workers and their families, along with blacks serving in the military, quintupled Portland’s black population. Strung on a clothesline, images and quotes depict life in the mushrooming housing projects at Vanport and Guild’s Lake—segregated residentially, but with integrated schools and recreation centers. A chunk of riveted steel displays snapshots of workers on and off the job; first-person quotes and memorabilia convey tension and conflict over union representation, as the whites-only Boilermakers Union fought black membership every step of the way. Uniforms, images, and reminiscences honor black veterans whose military careers brought them to nearby camps and bases, showing the importance of Albina as a refuge where black soldiers could enjoy some night life and patronize black-friendly businesses. *Backstory* also puts shipyard recruitment efforts in historic context. This was the latest in a series of importations of black workers to Oregon to meet a short-term need, benefiting larger white society and leaving blacks high and dry when they were no longer needed. Through a series of poignant quotes, *Backstory* also reveals friction between long-time black Portlanders and the new arrivals.

Flight from the Flood

A mural-size historic image captures people fleeing for safety from the destruction of their homes in Vanport. As ambient sound recreates the rising floodwaters, visitors must choose what few things they will pack, given five minutes' warning to evacuate. Nearby, battered suitcases open to reveal precious heirlooms, saved from Vanport on that terrible Memorial Day in 1948. Quotes and photographs testify to acts of heroism, lucky breaks, and tragic deaths.

We Have to Move—Where To?

Visitors join the refugees, becoming part of a community constantly on the move, in search of housing first of all. A hands-on obstacle course puts visitors in the shoes of families who need shelter. Photos of available houses, with descriptions by real estate agents, read two ways using a Pepper's ghost illusion, or by studying the "fine print" with a magnifying glass. One after another, each house is found to be unavailable to black buyers. Visitors discover such barriers as restrictive covenants, real estate "ethics" policies, and neighborhood redlining by banks. A *Tribute* display honors black pioneers who bought homes in white neighborhoods, enduring racist harassment and worse. *It's the Law* focuses on Oregon's Fair Housing Act, enacted in 1957, one of the nation's first.

We Need Jobs—What's Available?

When the shipyards closed toward the end of WWII, thousands of workers lost their jobs. A *Firsts* timeline begins in 1945, when employment opportunities for blacks were no different than in 1940: the railroad, hotels, domestic service. Photos, objects, and hands-on interactives honor Portland's firsts: first black public school teacher, first black police officer, first black store clerk, first elected official, etc. A desk with the nameplate "Bill Berry" stands before a photomural of Urban League officials signing a jobs agreement. Visitors view documents on the desktop, open drawers, and study framed (and captioned) photographs to find out the inside story of how the League worked successfully for change. A bulletin board features current news stories and publicity about black professionals and other working people in Portland today, from a variety of public and private sectors.

Urban Renewal = Negro Removal

Period news clippings, reports, maps, and documents proclaim the ascendancy of a national "urban renewal" strategy aimed at replacing "blighted" city neighborhoods with massive construction projects. Visitors step through the jagged walls of a demolition site to view a graveyard of "dead" street signs. Then and now photos create a time-lapse feel, as a Pepper's ghost illusion shows how construction of Memorial Coliseum, expansion of Emmanuel Hospital, and the new "Minnesota Freeway" gutted Albina's homes and business districts. Schematic maps provide stark evidence of the extent of the losses. Produced by middle school students, video clips share eyewitness testimony by urban renewal survivors whose families had to move multiple times before they found a safe landing place; and by business owners who found relocation costs too expensive, and had to fold.

From Legal to Illegal Segregation

In spite of Oregon's new public accommodation and fair housing laws and *Brown v. Board of Education* at the national level, in the mid-1950s Portland legal segregation morphed into illegal segregation, aka racism.

The daily experience of blacks in Portland is symbolized by a mural-size image of the façade of the Coon Chicken Inn on Sandy Boulevard. Viewing a "menu" from that once-popular establishment, visitors take a true/false quiz about choices and opportunities open to blacks and whites in Portland in the mid-1950s. Their conclusion is clear: things have *got* to change.

A collection of ads from mainstream magazines and local/regional newspapers, along with memorabilia, movie posters, etc., highlights the casual racism that pervaded white culture in the 1950s. Changeable questions prompt visitors to add comments about their own experiences in Portland, now and in the past, using post-it notes. A bulletin board offers information about programs, classes, and associations working to educate Portland about African American history, and to promote dialogue and exchange.