
DRIVING WHILE BLACK

African American Travel and
the Road to Civil Rights

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This family stopped their 1949 Oldsmobile 88 Deluxe Town Sedan by the side of the road to enjoy some refreshments. African Americans traveling by automobile often carried food and drink with them because they were not welcome at restaurants. (Courtesy Paul Ragghianti)

INTRODUCTION

Good roads beckon to you and me, daily we grow more motor-wise. The nomad in the poorest and the mightiest of us, sends us behind the wheel, north, south, east, and west, in answer to the call of the road. . . . [T]here is still a small cloud that stands between us and complete motor-travel freedom. On the trail, this cloud rarely troubles us in the mornings, but as the afternoon wears on it casts a shadow of apprehension on our hearts and sours us a little. "Where," it asks us, "will you stay tonight?"

—Alfred Edgar Smith,
"Through the Windshield," *Opportunity*, 1933

We obtained the most important book needed for Negroes who traveled anywhere in the United States. It was called the Green Book. The "Green Book" was the bible of every Negro highway traveler in the 1950s and early 1960s. You literally didn't dare leave home without it.

—Earl Hutchinson Sr.,
*A Colored Man's Journey Through
20th Century Segregated America*

SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, no feature of modern life has been more emblematic of, or deeply connected to, American identity and the American dream than the automobile. The automobile dramatically changed life in the United States, a subject documented extensively in both popular culture and scholarly works of social, economic, and cultural history. Cars altered

the physical landscape of the nation and transformed its culture. As large numbers of Americans moved from the cities to the suburbs, they used their cars to commute to work. Highways traversed and connected cities but bypassed many rural communities, often leaving them in difficult economic circumstances. The national economy flourished with the factory production of automobiles, car parts, and tires. Automobile workers were among those who joined the ranks of the middle class and purchased cars of their own. Anyone who could buy a car could usually also afford leisure travel, and cars took families on vacations, expanding tourism to become one of the nation's largest industries. As women became car buyers and drivers, their lives changed as well, giving them more independence. Cars even changed courtship patterns, as the backseat provided opportunities for teenage sexual encounters. Automobiles enabled people and goods to move through the country rapidly and increased interconnectedness across a vast nation, while at the same time creating a new pastime—driving.

Not everyone, however, celebrated the automobile. Over the decades, and even into the present, many commentators argued that it was an atomizing force—not to mention one causing widespread environmental harm and loss of life through traffic accidents. Still, the dominant view of the car was as a symbol of freedom, independence, and possibility. Yet those who celebrated the automobile and the ideal of the open road, in most cases, wittingly or not, limited their perspective to white Americans.

For African Americans, the automobile held distinct importance and promise. It made self-directed travel a possibility when travel by bus and train, controlled by others, could lead to humiliating or even life-threatening encounters. Owning a car demonstrated black American success in a nation where that success was often thwarted. With a growing black middle class, more and more black Americans could purchase automobiles, and they used their cars and their consumer dollars not merely to vacation—though they did do that—but also as weapons against segregation. Even many who were not in the middle class found ways to buy cars, seeking any alternative to public transportation, since

they were often barred, by law and custom, from securing mortgages and buying houses. Still, each car trip could be fraught with anxiety, and it required special preparations and careful planning to ensure success.

This is one of the first books to tell the story of the African American experience with the automobile, and my hope is that it shows how access to cars completely transformed black life in ways that were both far-reaching and totally unexpected. The automobile expanded the freedom of movement and the opportunity to travel throughout the country for all Americans, but this freedom meant something different—and often, simply more—to blacks than to whites. Automobiles provided a means of escape from the Jim Crow South. They were a tremendous source of pride for African Americans and they changed the etiquette of travel on the road. Most important, the automobile became a tool in the battle to end discrimination in public accommodations.

From the founding of the republic, the right to move about without restrictions and at will was considered fundamental to basic civil rights and American democracy. In the twentieth century, in the 1920 case of *United States v. Wheeler*, the Supreme Court affirmed the entitlement of every person to move freely from place to place and state to state, a right denied to African Americans: . . . *and the people of each State shall have free ingress and egress to and from any other State, and shall enjoy therein all the privileges of trade and commerce, subject to the same.*

For black people, mobility was always most highly prized because it was often and had historically been an impossibility. Masters confined their enslaved persons to their property, and free black people found themselves regularly stopped, questioned to determine their status, and sometimes even kidnapped and sold into slavery. These restrictions on movement before emancipation carried on, in different forms, into the post-Civil War Reconstruction era and beyond, despite passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, designed to end slavery and protect the due-process and citizenship rights of African Americans.

For much of the twentieth century, many white Americans felt comfortable denying their black countrymen not only the right to travel freely but also the ability to use public accommodations—everything from swimming pools to restaurants, movie theaters, and hotels. Black Americans attempting to exercise their rights as citizens faced Jim Crow railroad cars and buses, segregated taxicabs and water fountains, even separate sections in public libraries. A tradition of deeply entrenched racism—including baseless fears about black men being dangerous, and the idea that all black people were naturally inferior—fed beliefs that African Americans should be literally kept in their places and restricted to segregated neighborhoods. The physical separation of black people from the white population excluded African Americans from quality education, housing, and employment, and also reinforced notions of white superiority. But the automobile made it more difficult, although not impossible, to enforce racial apartheid while cruising along the highways at forty-five miles per hour.

The growth of an automobile culture changed the physical environment as well and made reliable roads essential. Narrow carriage paths of mud or hard-packed dirt and meandering cowpaths needed to be replaced with macadamized highways and concrete streets. These old thoroughfares suited a culture that had moved slowly behind horse-drawn vehicles, but automobiles became stuck in these rutted roads, and the dust stirred up on unpaved surfaces clogged internal-combustion engines. Cars required smooth surfaces and at least two lanes wide, enough to accommodate vehicles traveling in opposite directions. And, to keep drivers from getting lost, planners needed to establish national and statewide systems of route numbers.

The intricate pattern of interstate highways was designed to make car travel safer and more efficient, to support national defense, to boost the economy, and later to provide a method for citizens to evacuate the cities in the event of a nuclear war. As early as 1916, the federal government passed legislation to finance the building of roads. Throughout the twentieth century, the US Army argued for

the building of a system of highways in the event that troops and supplies needed to be deployed quickly. President Dwight D. Eisenhower made passage of the 1956 Federal Aid Highway Act (also known as the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act) a signature piece of his administration. It soon led to a vast network of highways coursing through every state and connecting major cities and rural areas. Existing roads, the president argued, represented an “appalling problem of waste, danger, and death.” In his annual State of the Union address in January 1955, Eisenhower told the nation: “A modern highway system is essential to meet the needs of a growing population, our expanding economy and our national security.”

This national network of roads was used primarily by ordinary drivers, bringing Americans from different places and different backgrounds into contact with one another. Even when they stayed on the highways and away from town centers, drivers needed to stop for gasoline and sometimes for repairs. Each year, as African Americans who had migrated to the North, Midwest, and West during the Great Migration returned to the South to visit relatives, they dramatically increased the number of black people traveling on the nation’s highways. Turnpikes, highways, and parkways wound through areas of the country that had previously been entirely white and isolated from outsiders. Black people were traveling in these spaces for the first time, inadvertently challenging traditional customs. These drivers were not supposed to be in all-white neighborhoods without good reason, yet they pushed back against the laws and routines of segregated communities, crossing back and forth between “white spaces” and “black spaces.”

African Americans faced a wide variety of difficulties and potential dangers on and off the interstate highways and whenever they traveled—whether for vacation, to visit family, or for business. They encountered racist law-enforcement officers and gas-station attendants, bigoted auto repairmen, threatening road signs, restaurants and hotels that denied them service. They faced the possibility of mob violence. Even though the fear of such unpleasant or

even violent encounters left many black drivers continuously on edge, they embraced the automobile as their preferred method of travel. To navigate safely, they devised many strategies, both individually and through group action. They carried detailed maps and itineraries and carefully watched the faces of the people they encountered, looking for any indication of hostility. They bypassed specific communities reputed to be “sundown towns” and places that had reputations for being particularly hostile to black people. The automobile supported travel for blacks in private, comfortable circumstances, but it also required new thinking and habits.

A network of black businesses that catered to and supported black travelers grew organically across the country. Women operated many overnight lodging spaces—home businesses that gave them extra income and helped them support their families. From coast to coast, mom-and-pop guesthouses and tourist homes, beauty parlors, and even large hotels (including New York’s Hotel Theresa, the Hampton House Motel in Miami, and the Dunbar Hotel in Los Angeles), as well as nightclubs and restaurants (such as New Orleans’ Dooky Chase’s or Atlanta’s Paschal’s), and a growing number of black-owned service stations kept automobiles on the road, people fed, and provided places to stay the night. Many of these businesses, most of which have not survived, were known only to the black citizens who frequented them—they existed in a parallel, segregated world. Nonetheless, these establishments also reflected a vibrant entrepreneurial spirit within the black community that helped them “make a way out of no way.”

This parallel world of black travelers generated a number of guidebooks, none more famous than *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (later *The Negro Travelers’ Green Book*), founded by Victor and Alma Green in 1936. This and other travel guides listed black businesses, promoted them, and made them accessible to the traveling public, thus helping travelers navigate the ever-changing landscape. Not only did the guides aid travelers, but they opened

small black family businesses to a national market—exposure that most could never have afforded otherwise.

THIS BOOK opens in the antebellum period, as any history of black freedom and mobility must. In the twentieth century, it charts the growth of the automobile as the preferred method of travel for African Americans and recounts the experiences of black travelers in cars as well as on public conveyances that made their race an issue of central concern whenever they left their neighborhoods. The poignant stories of these travelers explain the necessity for the wide variety of specialized black travel guides that grew with the popularity of the automobile. World War II led African American soldiers and industrial workers to demand an end to segregation—a moral stain on a nation that fought Nazism and an obstacle on the path to middle-class life. After the war, family, business, and pleasure travelers purchased automobiles in even larger numbers. The opportunity to own a car brought new freedom to black people, and many embraced it with delight. But as they looked out through their windshields, with their children safely ensconced in the backseats, African Americans saw a landscape of demeaning and frightening imagery—signs, billboards, souvenirs, even menus at roadside restaurants. Most drivers' mishaps on the road resulted in travel delays, but encounters with the police, traffic accidents, angry mobs, or simple car trouble could turn deadly for African Americans.

As this history reveals, black drivers took many precautions to protect themselves and their families from these dangers. They had specific criteria for the selection of the makes and models of their cars and they carried a variety of supplies to ensure the success of every trip. Beginning in the 1930s, the guidebooks began appearing. *The Green Book* was distinctive not only because of its success but because of its ambitious and high-minded goal. Its writers saw travel as transformative—something that would elevate not only the traveler but also those whom the traveler encountered along the way.

The guide hoped to encourage black Americans to use their vacations and business trips as a means of defeating racism. "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts," wrote Mark Twain in his 1869 travel book *The Innocents Abroad*.¹ Victor Green adopted these words and made them his mantra. Many white people only knew African Americans through stereotyped images in everything from magazines and postcards to cookie jars and films. If white Americans could only meet and talk with African Americans, Green reasoned, they would change their attitudes. *The Green Book* promoted travel by rail, bus, and eventually plane, but the focus was on the automobile, coveted by almost every American family.

Victor and Alma Green did not produce the first African American travel guide, and *The Negro Motorist Green Book* would not be the last. But theirs had the largest readership and the greatest impact, and it provides a crucial perspective on gender, discrimination, automobile culture, black entrepreneurship, and national identity in Jim Crow America. As we will see, Victor Green's mantra would be, to some extent, borne out by history: This book advances the claim that travel contributed to changes in American behavior.

The latter chapters tell that story, moving from Kittery Point, Maine, to Birmingham, Alabama, and New Orleans, Louisiana, looking at the role of black-owned businesses that assisted travelers. When seen from this angle, the civil rights movement becomes a broad struggle—not only of marches and demonstrations but also of many thousands working quietly behind the scenes. The epilogue briefly explores the legacy of this history in the present day, when driving a car remains for African Americans a potentially dangerous activity, especially when it comes to police traffic stops. We should see these dismal events not simply as a legacy of slavery and racism but also as the continuation of restrictions on mobility that have been placed on African Americans from the start.

Current restrictions on African American mobility contribute to ongoing deep divisions between black people and white people about

their views of law enforcement. Seventy-three percent of African Americans today believe that black people are treated unfairly by the justice system, while 53 percent of white Americans view the justice system as fair and equal. Similarly, a 2016 Pew Research Center study revealed a huge disparity between black and white Americans in their beliefs about the treatment of black citizens by law-enforcement officers, with black Americans far more mistrustful of police officers, and far more convinced that police officers are inclined to use excessive force, and rarely are held accountable, when dealing with people of color.² The shooting of Philando Castile in his car in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, on July 6, 2016, and fifteen-year-old Jordan Edwards, a passenger in a car leaving a party in Dallas on April 29, 2017, are frightening reminders that black lives remain captives to history.

There are some reasons for hope. There have been those moments in American history when white allies joined with African Americans to push the nation to live up to its founding principles through lawful and peaceful protest. The abolition movement resulted from such a moment. The black freedom struggle in the 1950s and 1960s benefited from the involvement of white allies willing to join the movement and legislators who supported the civil rights bills. More recently, cell phone videos have made some of the horrific events that began as traffic stops and ended as murders visible to a broad American public. Just as the attacks on lawful, nonviolent demonstrators by police and dogs broadcast on the nightly news in the 1960s helped to end segregation, these cell phone videos and the focused attention brought on by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic mobilized black and white allies to take to the streets in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Perhaps these Americans are the ones that Congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis referred to when he said that “ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. Voting and participating in the democratic process are key.”

As Americans, we share certain values: the freedom to travel, the joy of driving, the sense of wonder and adventure in a national

park, the fear of seeing police lights in the rearview mirror. But there are also experiences that divide us and point to a deeply troubling, but at the same time often inspiring, history of struggle, perseverance, and transformation.

THE RESEARCH and writing of *Driving While Black* was for me intensely personal and a journey in itself. Unexpectedly, I came to a much greater understanding of my parents, and the courage and determination of everyone who, like them, grew up amid the humiliation, violence, and discrimination of the Jim Crow era. The experiences they never divulged to my brother and me—the segregated schools and Jim Crow signs, a stay in a segregated hospital, living in the volatile community of Fayetteville, North Carolina, during World War II—must have been debilitating, even as they silently endured them. They were strivers who always kept moving forward. The intransigent nature of racial discrimination in the United States, sanctioned by law, and the determination of many Americans to keep African Americans from being successful, makes their accomplishments all the more remarkable. Going out on the road was for them, as it was for so many black Americans, an act of quiet rebellion. “Driving while black” is a phrase first used sarcastically in the 1990s, but it refers to a problem that predates its coinage—encountering danger, harassment, and even violence while operating a car on the road in the United States. My parents knew the feeling, even if they would not have used these words. I realized it would have been impossible for me to write this book without reflecting on their journeys, literal and metaphorical. This is a reality that they lived with all of their lives and that every African American family still lives with each and every day. But this is a story that is not simply about African Americans, although it is told through that lens. I hope it is a story that broadens and deepens our understanding of the automobile’s role in American life and history and encourages us to consider the context within which today’s race relations developed. Looking back often provides a way to move forward.

