

The Sundown Town News

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The Newsletter dedicated to the abolition of its subject

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All the News,
Fit to Print or Not



Eye-witnesses have supplied credible accounts of sundown signs in more than 150 communities in 31 states. This sign is from Connecticut. If you locate a sign or photograph thereof, please email jljoewen@uvm.edu.

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Sundown Towns Are Everywhere

When I started doing research on sundown towns, I knew that all-white towns came in three types: sundown towns that kept out African Americans (and/or other groups), sundown suburbs, and towns that just happened to be all white. I thought the vast majority of all-white communities would be of that third type. After all, I reasoned, who says black folks had to move everywhere? They started out mostly in the South, after all, and then moved North mostly to large industrial cities. Common sense and historical knowledge would tell a person not to expect many African Americans in Lemhi County, in northern Idaho, for example, and indeed Lemhi was all-white in 1930. Garrett County, in far western Maryland, had 24 African Americans in that year, not very many, but then it has no city of any size. Moreover, as a local historian told me, "It's too cold here."

Then I learned better.

Before 1890, African Americans moved everywhere in America, even to isolated places such as northern Idaho

and western Maryland. Isolation cannot explain the absence of African Americans, because places like Lemhi and Garrett counties were at least as isolated, socially and geographically, between 1865 and 1890, when African Americans were moving into them, as they were between 1890 and 1930, when African Americans were fleeing them. Something different went on after 1890.

A historian whose parents were born and raised in Lemhi County wrote that according to her relatives, "Black people were 'run off' in some distant past." Several sources, including Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., confirmed that Garrett was a sundown county.

This newsletter is designed to help you understand what constitutes a sundown town and what you can do to help eradicate them in our time. So, whether in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan or the distant exurbs of Los Angeles, when you find a community that was all-white, or almost all-white, for decade after decade, do investigate further. We'll show you how.

How Does a Town Become, and Stay, a Sundown Town?

Towns kept out minorities through a variety of methods. Some used restrictive covenants throughout the town, not just in one neighborhood. Some towns even required such covenants before approving a new development. Many suburbs used realtor steering, bank redlining, and other impediments to the home-buying process. Neighborhoods might require that a new household be approved by the neighborhood association. Towns might forbid "for sale" signs, meaning that all sales had to go through an approved realtor, all of whom knew that if they sold to a black family, they would be dropped from the realtor association. Many towns used violence or threats of violence or other

bad behavior by white individuals, such as refusing to sell food or fuel, harassment of children at school, and the like. Some towns have strong oral history that they passed an ordinance or put up a sign telling blacks they could not be within the city limits after dark.

While we are only interested in exclusion, such exclusion need not be total. The book, Sundown Towns, has a chapter telling how a town may have driven out its African Americans, even posted the traditional sundown town sign, yet allowed one family to remain. Larger cities have even allowed more than one, in a way. Cicero, IL, for example, when burning out a would-be black apartment renter,

had some 40 African Americans in town -- probably as servants in white households, in such institutions as jails, hospitals, colleges, etc., or as renters in large apartment houses not really located in residential neighborhoods and hence below the radar of whites. Since Cicero defined itself as all-white and took steps to keep out the next black would-be household, it certainly qualifies. Therefore, while doing census research, take care to notice non-household African Americans. Their existence does not take a town off the roll of suspected sundown communities.

What Can I do to Help?

Although in the past many sundown towns kept out other groups, including Jews, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans, today almost all have allowed them, still rejecting only African Americans. Finally, many towns have given up being sundown altogether, usually between 1970 and today. Yet we are still interested in them for their past practices.

Now that you know the history and methodology of sundown towns, you are ready to help, if you care to. Below we have provided an overview of the basic tools you can use in researching possible sundown towns. Please take the next step and help us discover these hidden, or not so hidden,

sundown towns in our midst.

Always we must recall that a community's overwhelming whiteness might be an accident, that perhaps no African Americans ever happened to go there. We cannot classify an "all-white town" as a "sundown town" unless we have evidence about its racial policies.

High school students who choose to do any of the tasks listed to the right may find that the work leads to a great term paper or entry for the National History Day competition. Undergraduates can construct a fine paper for a college course. Graduate students can build sundown town research into a thesis or dissertation. We are ready to help mentor you, in

conjunction with your local teacher or professor. Community residents can study and change their town or neighborhood. In all cases, please send **US** the results of your work. The "help wanted ads" on this page suggest some ways you can help study this important topic and end sundown towns in our time.

Help Wanted		
<p>Researchers Confirm or disconfirm towns as having excluded blacks (or others).</p>	<p>Analysts Compare a sundown and interracial town for economic development, politics, careers plans of youth, attitudes toward minorities, etc.</p>	<p>GIS Technicians Map states by ZIP code or finer units, showing distribution of African Americans.</p>
<p>WE NEED YOUR HELP!!</p>	<p>Records Examiners Search for sundown ordinances or newspaper stories that confirm exclusion in writing.</p>	<p>To volunteer your time, please contact us at jloewen@uvm.edu</p>
<p>Web Content Managers Insert accurate short paragraphs about the exclusive practices of sundown towns into their entries in Wikipedia.</p>	<p>Resolution Specialists Persuade sundown towns to admit their past practices, apologize for them, and move forward.</p>	<p>Reviewers Review books, movies, and museum exhibits that treat sundown towns, or that should treat sundown towns but fail to do so.</p>



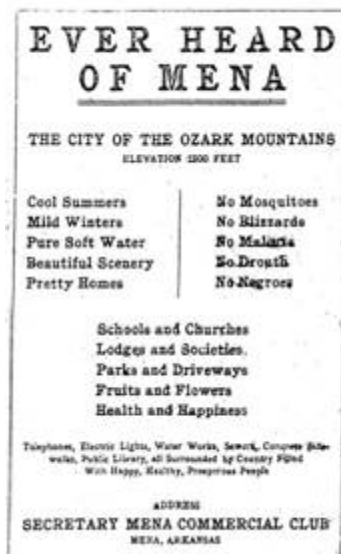
Step One: Census Research

A first step is to look up the census information on racial composition in various years. The [census](#) provides the racial proportions of every town in the country with more than a few hundred inhabitants for 2000. Included is information as to age and sex in the black population and number of households with black adult householders. This information is particularly useful because it allows us to avoid misattributing residential status to African Americans living in institutions such as colleges or prisons or within white households as servants. Because many sundown towns gave up their prohibitions in the 1990s, even more useful are the [1990 census figures](#).

For 1860-1980, the racial composition of your town will be in the printed census in the bound volumes of the census at your local library or nearest university library. Most figures are also available [online](#). Get the actual census figures, decade

after decade. For small towns in many years, especially before 1940, the census does not list population by race, but you can amass it yourself from the "manuscript census" for any decade between 1860 and 1930 inclusive (except 1890, most of which was destroyed by fire). This is the raw data of the census. Much of it is on the web at various sites, usually by state. Large libraries and genealogical collections also have it on microfilm. A website at the [University of Virginia](#) provides the racial proportions of every county from 1790 through 1960.

If you find a sharp drop in the black population, that is of course suspicious. If you only find low numbers of African Americans, decade after decade, that too is suspicious, especially if blacks are hardly absent from nearby towns and counties or if the town's total population is increasing.



Step Two: Local Histories and Newspapers

Once you have basic information on the town, go to the local libraries (in person) and read (skim) any local history books, such as centennial histories and county histories. Usually the local library has a local history room (or local history shelf, in small libraries). Probably you will find nothing about African Americans, but sometimes there are surprises. If there are notes on file for the county from the WPA Federal Writers Project (c.1935-40), skim those. Also, see if there are vertical files (newspaper clippings) on "blacks," "Negroes," "segregation," "Ku Klux Klan," and other related topics.

Then you can scan local newspapers for the decade between two adjacent censuses that show a sharp decline in black population, to see if it describes any actions whites took to cause the decline. Sometimes the nearest newspaper outside the town in question will be more forthcoming.

Step Three: Collect Oral Histories

The next step is to conduct interviews, again in person is best. Ask the librarian in charge of the local history collection if s/he knows anything about the absence of blacks. Has s/he ever heard it might have been on purpose? Does s/he know of any stories (oral history) about anything bad that happened to a black family that tried to move into the town in the 1920s, 1970s, or any other decade?

Follow up by asking the librarian, "Who knows the most about the history of the town?" Every town has an expert. Then interview that person or persons. Ask, "who else should I talk with?" Is there a genealogical society? If so, attend its next meeting, after talking with its leader. Begin softly, maybe by asking what the town's major employers used to be. Eventually ask, "Have you ever heard that [name of town] used to keep out blacks?" Maybe mention that some nearby towns (by name) used to keep out blacks, and follow by asking if this community had the same policy. If folks say yes, then ask how they heard it, from whom,

about when (year), etc.

Oral history is fine, so long as it is solid. Thus, if a person says "Blacks were not allowed..." follow up by asking, "How do you know that?" Seek details: "Did you ever hear of any family that moved in, then left?" etc. Also seek written sources, such as some ordinance about keeping out African Americans (or another group). The "ordinance," however, may be nothing more than a motion voted on in a city council meeting on a Tuesday evening in 1911, perhaps not even noted in the minutes of that meeting, and next to impossible to find now.

Repeat this process with the City Clerk and the head of the local historical society. Bear in mind, however, particularly with a local history society, that this usually does not work UNLESS you are there in person. Usually these folks just don't want to say anything bad about their town if they can help it. In person, however, they don't want to lie. And of course, you flatter them by telling

them (correctly) that they are the expert on the town's history.

Another good idea: go to the local nursing home, or to places where seniors live or hang out (community center, SRO hotel). Interview elderly people. Take good notes, including "quote notes" (with "") when you actually capture the phrase verbatim. Old folks love to hold forth on the long-ago past. Also talk with long-time realtors, minority group members in nearby towns, and other likely sources. The more people you can reach, the more likely you are to discover, and be able to corroborate, something.

Step Four: Triangulate

After you have some information, perhaps from oral history, then you may be able to triangulate with additional confirmations from others. For example, if you hear that your town once had a black or interracial neighborhood and its location, then check the plat book and deeds of sale: did many homes change hands at about the same time? If you learn the approximate date of a racial incident, check the newspaper and also the paper in the county seat or nearest larger town.

You can also ask African American senior citizens in the nearest biracial town; they may know something about your town, at least by

reputation. Sometimes they know telling details. The manuscript census may even allow you to trace family names from your town to the nearest biracial community, if they left prior to 1930 (the last year it is available). You'll know best how to proceed at this point once you have a working base of information.

Next Issue:
How to use
research on
sundown towns to
cause social
change.