



# *ACROSS THE COLOR LINE*

*Reporting 25 Years in Black Cincinnati*

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# PROLOGUE

## A Race through Time

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Notable events in Cincinnati's history that have helped shape present-day racial attitudes:

1787: The Northwest Ordinance prohibits slavery in the region that will become Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin.

1788: Whites settle Cincinnati.

1794: First blacks arrive.

1800: Black population is confined to segregated Bucktown, an area bordered by present-day Main, Broadway, Sixth, and Seventh streets. Northwest Territory Gov. Arthur St. Clair decides that the anti-slavery passage does not apply to slaves brought into the territory before 1787. Blacks can neither vote nor sit on a jury.

1804: A year after its founding, Ohio enacts an "anti-immigration law" to regulate the population of "black or mulatto persons" in the state. A later ruling requires blacks to pay \$500 for residency and to carry citizenship papers at all times.

1829: Ohio passes "An Act to Provide for the Support and Better Regulation of Common Schools." The law bars black children from attending public schools, although Cincinnati's black property owners pay taxes that support them.

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- 1829: Fearing that blacks will threaten their job security, a group of whites living near the river marches on Bucktown, pelting homes and businesses with rocks. Blacks defend their property, killing one white. Seven whites and ten blacks are arrested. City officials fine each white \$700 and rule that blacks acted in self-defense.
- 1830: Cincinnati becomes a prominent stop on the Underground Railroad. But local businessmen, because of their strong economic, cultural, and social ties to the South, oppose any cause that might offend their neighbors on the other side of the Ohio River.
- 1836: Pro-slavery whites storm the office of publisher James G. Birney, whose weekly *Philanthropist* advocates black equality, throwing parts of his press into the river.
- 1840: James P. Ball along with brother Tom opened one of the largest photo galleries/studios in the heart of Cincinnati, "Ball's Great Daguerrean Gallery of the West," quite a feat for a black man in the 1840s.
- 1842: A street brawl between blacks and Irish immigrants causes city officials to declare martial law and vow to uphold Black Laws designed to "control the Negro."
- 1842: The Ohio Supreme Court rules that it is illegal for public funds to be used to educate black children.
- 1844: Six blacks-only schools operate in Cincinnati with private funds.
- 1850: Legislation passed by the Ohio General Assembly improves opportunities for blacks, who establish successful barrel-making, tailoring, pickling, grocery, and construction businesses in Cincinnati.
- 1851: Although a state law establishes black public schools to be funded by taxes collected from black property owners, Cincinnati refuses to release any of the tax money because black school trustees were not elected officials and therefore could not drain funds from the city treasury.
- 1853: The Ohio Legislature creates a segregated black school system to be funded by both white and black taxes but still governed by a white school board.
- 1856: The white school board returns control of Cincinnati's public schools to a board of six black trustees to be elected annually by black male voters.
- 1861: Having acted to prevent persons of mixed white and "African" blood from voting, the Ohio Legislature then declares that "it shall be unlawful for persons of pure white blood to intermarry with or have illicit carnal intercourse with any negro (sic), or person having a distinct and visible admixture of African blood."

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1862: Blacks previously ignored as Civil War recruits are enlisted as the “Black Brigade” to build Ft. Mitchell in Kentucky.

1869: When Congress submits the Fifteenth Amendment (black suffrage) to the states for ratification, Ohio quickly refuses. The state later ratifies the amendment only when the legislature realizes it will pass nationally regardless of its objection.

1870: Poor Irish and German immigrants settle in and around Bucktown, but most eventually move out, leaving only the poorest whites to live in an uneasy peace with economically trapped blacks. About 500 blacks live in Walnut Hills, recently annexed by Cincinnati, and work as domestics in the nearby hillside homes of affluent whites.

1871: The Ohio Supreme Court challenges the federal bill of rights given to blacks by ruling that “Equality of rights does not involve the necessity of educating white and colored persons in the same school.” The ruling also eliminates Cincinnati’s black school board and returns control of black schools to the white board.

1887: The Arnett bill repeals the last of Ohio’s Black Laws, including ones calling for segregated schools, but it prescribes no means for enforcement. Blacks begin attending the city’s three main high schools – Walnut Hills, Hughes, and Woodward – but as more blacks enroll, black schools close and black teachers are fired. Not until 1948 would the Cincinnati Board of Education allow blacks to teach white students.

1910: Forty-four percent of the city’s black population lives in the West End, in “tenements and apartments of different, though generally lesser, degrees of quality,” David A. Gerber writes in *Black Ohio and the Color Line 1860-1915*. In Walnut Hills, home to a fifth of the city’s blacks, “there were an ample number of affluent black homeowners.” Small clusters of blacks were developing in the central hilltop communities of Clifton and Avondale, near where blacks worked as domestics.

1914: Blacks fill manufacturing jobs vacated by white Cincinnatians fighting in World War I. Blacks are displaced, however, when whites return at war’s end.

1925: A period of dramatic growth in Cincinnati’s black population ends with an “acceleration of trends already underway: huddled together in increasingly large concentrations in decaying, congested neighborhoods, suffering from disease, low wages, periodic or chronic unemployment, discrimination, and the dislocations of resettlement. At the same time, the growing presence of the southern migrants severely strained the limits of an already weakened white tolerance,” Gerber writes in *Black Ohio*. The “Official City Plan for Cincinnati, Ohio” cites the shortage of adequate housing as the city’s primary problem, which would unavoidably continue because of the “unusual influx of colored people.”

1931: Frank A. B. Hall is the first black elected to Cincinnati City Council.



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1933: Ohio is the first state to enact federal housing legislation, and the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA) is created and enters into a contract with the Ohio Board of Housing to provide low-income housing in Cincinnati, Columbia, Springfield, and Sycamore townships.

1935: Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority decides its top three priorities will be a slum clearance project for whites in the West End, a vacant land project for whites on Este Avenue and a vacant land project for blacks on land north of Lockland (Lincoln Heights). The black project would provide housing for blacks displaced in the West End and would, according to CMHA, "help prevent the scattering by negroes in the various residential areas of the city."

1937: The February flood, worst in the city's history, exacerbates the need for low-income housing. CMHA writes President Roosevelt and asks for additional federal funds for an additional black housing project because "it has been the desire of the community to see the proposed Laurel Homes project in its present location be occupied by white tenants." CMHA formalizes its decision to exclude blacks from Laurel Homes because they "could not pay the rent."

1938: The Suburban Division of the United States Resettlement Administration completes planning for the white suburb of Greenhills that includes golf courses, parks, and woods. A planned black suburb, Lincoln Heights, however, calls for no paved streets, gutters or sidewalks, and no connections are secured for utility lines.

1939: Pressure from the federal government requires that blacks be allowed to live in 1,039-unit Laurel Homes. Although 700 black families were displaced by Laurel Homes construction, only 302 units are allowed for blacks, 737 for whites.

1950: Laurel Homes is converted to "Negro occupancy," and 85 percent of the city's black population now lives in the Basin, almost all of them in the 2,318 units of public housing constructed by CMHA or in apartments rented by white landlords who had been encouraged to concentrate the black population there. CMHA promises to find "suitable" housing for whites displaced by the development of the black ghetto. The Cincinnati Board of Education cooperates in the "ghettoization" by building a "new Negro" elementary-high school in the area.

1951: Black students in Cincinnati Public Schools are allowed to swim in pools with white students. Previously, blacks were not allowed to swim or were allowed to swim only on Friday afternoons, after which time policy stated the pool must be drained and cleaned.

1953: Porter-Hays school opens. Its student body is 95 percent black.

1954: The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kan.*, rules unanimously that racial segregation in schools is unconstitutional. Black teachers are assigned to only eight of the 86 Cincinnati Public Schools, each one with a black student population in excess of more than 70 percent. These schools are located in the West End, which is 85 percent black.

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1963: Nine years after the *Brown* decision made school segregation illegal, the Cincinnati chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) lawsuit alleges that the Cincinnati Board of Education practiced racially segregated intact busing between schools. Also, the first blacks are elected to the Cincinnati Board of Education and City Council since the repeal of proportional representation, a method of ranking choices for council.

1965: Cincinnati Human Relations Commission is formed.

1966: Cincinnati approves new regulations to assure equal opportunities in city construction. Meanwhile, more than 1,000 blacks and whites participate in Home Visit Sunday, when families invite people of another race into their home for the afternoon.

1967: Four days of rioting in Avondale result in 107 arrests, 40 fires, 12 serious injuries and \$3 million in property damage. Blacks had met to protest the arrest of a black protester and the unequal enforcement of the city's anti-loitering ordinance.

1968: Four days after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., a memorial service spills into rioting in Avondale. One the evening of April 8, two die, 220 are arrested, and \$3 million worth of property is damaged.

1968: The University of Cincinnati agrees to an eight-point plan that will broaden the involvement of blacks in campus courses, employment, and policies. The leader of the United Black Association of students is Dwight Tillery, who 23 years later will be the first black mayor of Cincinnati elected by popular vote.

1969: Blacks boycott the city's major department stores over the lack of black Santas. Shillito's promises to have black Santas for Christmas 1970.

1970: Race-related fights and violence close several Greater Cincinnati high schools – including Withrow and North College Hill – for several days at a time.

1973: Black students become the majority in Cincinnati Public Schools.

1974: NAACP lawyers file the *Bronson vs. The Cincinnati Board of Education* suit that seeks complete desegregation of the city's schools.

1979: The practice of prohibiting the sale of homes to blacks is stopped. More than 1,000 deeds in Hamilton County still carry such covenants.

1981: A sales manager at the Westin Hotel distributes an internal memo to hotel executives saying that employees can expect loud guests, drug dealing, and poor tipping during the 20th annual Kool Jazz Festival, which attracts a predominantly black audience of 60,000 to



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Riverfront Stadium over two nights. A banquet honoring former Cincinnati Mayor Theodore Berry scheduled for the Westin is moved to the Netherland Plaza.

1982: A white fraternity at the University of Cincinnati, Sigma Alpha Epsilon, holds a "Martin Luther King Trash Day" party, which promotes negative stereotypes of blacks. The SAEs are placed on probation by UC President Henry Winkler.

1984: After weeks of intense negotiations, Cincinnati Public Schools and the plaintiffs in the *Bronson* case reach a consent decree that calls for a federal court to oversee nine areas within the system.

1987: A neo-Nazi group of white youths called White American Skin Heads (WASH) begins recruiting in Corryville and places an ad with Warner Cable. Black business owners call for the ad to be removed.

1988: A judge orders Covington's Glass Menagerie to stop discriminating against blacks who have been prevented from entering the lounge and dance club.

1989: Twelve arts organizations – including the Cincinnati Symphony, Cincinnati Art Museum, and Taft Museum – receive a more than 300-percent increase in funding from the city but are told to begin opening their boards, staffs, and committees to "people of diverse backgrounds" and to create programs that reflect the "rich, multifaceted culture here."

1991: The Buenger Commission, a critical private-industry assessment of the Cincinnati Public Schools, calls for a major overhaul to the system by reducing administration costs and wasteful business practices. Its release is met with criticism from black leaders who say its all-white membership from the business establishment made no effort to include blacks or other minorities.

1991: Cincinnati Public Schools are released from seven of nine areas of supervision under the *Bronson* agreement. Only discipline and performance in low-achieving schools will remain under watch.

1991: A study by the Federal Reserve Board finds that Greater Cincinnati banks are two times more likely to deny black applicants mortgage loans than white applicants.

1992: Former Cincinnati Reds controller Tim Sabo files a wrongful-firing suit against Reds President and CEO Marge Schott in Hamilton County Common Pleas Court. Sabo claims Schott called former Reds outfielders Eric Davis and Dave Parker her "million-dollar niggers."

1995: A coalition led by the Cincinnati NAACP demands the firing of three Cincinnati Police officers involved in the arrest of a black teenager, Pharon Crosby, that was captured on video by a local television station. The year also marks the beginning of a seven-year period during

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which 14 African-Americans, 13 men and one male child, are killed in conflicts with Cincinnati officers. At least two of the suspects had fired first at officers.

2000: Protesters picket eight downtown restaurants that closed for the weekend in late July during two high-profile events that draw tens of thousands of African-Americans to Cincinnati, the Coors Light Jazz Festival and Ujima Cinci-Bration.

2001: In March, the American Civil Liberties Union joined the Cincinnati Black United Front in filing a lawsuit accusing the Cincinnati Police Department of 30 years of illegally targeting and harassing blacks based on race.

2001: Three weeks later, in early April, an unarmed black man, Timothy Thomas, 19, who had a record of minor offenses, mostly traffic-related, tries to run from police. He is shot and killed in an alley in Over-the-Rhine by a white police officer. His death touches off weeks of rioting and social unrest and a declaration of martial law.

2002: The Collaborative Agreement is signed and changes the way the Cincinnati Police Department does its job. Changes in use of force, accountability, data collection, bias-free policing, and community-oriented policing become policies. The goal is to increase trust between the department and the city's black community.

2003: The Cincinnati Bengals hire their first African-American head coach, Marvin Lewis, amid an NFL-wide effort to increase minorities in top coaching and front office ranks.

2008: The Cincinnati Reds hire their first African-American manager, Dusty Baker. The team had previously hired a popular Cuban-American manager, popular former Reds player Tony Perez, who was fired just 44 games into the 1993 season.

2011: For the first time, a majority of African-Americans is elected to the nine seats on Cincinnati City Council.

2012: After an election recount, Tracie Hunter wins a contested race and becomes the first African-American Juvenile Court judge in Hamilton County. Two years later, she is convicted by a jury of one felony charge for giving confidential records to her brother, a juvenile court employee. The case divides the city and county racially.

2014: The Urban League National Meeting is held in Cincinnati. The century-old civil rights organization had pulled its convention from Cincinnati in 2002, honoring a boycott established by African-American leaders in the wake of the 2001 Timothy Thomas shooting.

2015: A white University of Cincinnati police officer, Ray Tensing, shoots and kills unarmed black motorist Sam DuBose during a traffic stop in Mount Auburn. Tensing faces two murder



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trials, which end in hung juries, in 2016 and 2017. The case further polarizes a polarized community along racial lines.

2015: The Urban League of Greater Southwestern Ohio publishes a 164-page book titled *State of Black Cincinnati 2015: Two Cities*. Its findings reveal pervasive racial division in inequality:

- Seventy-six percent of the 14,000 families who lived in poverty in the city of Cincinnati from 2005 through 2009 were African-American.
- Life expectancy of black men in Cincinnati, 63.8 years, was exactly 10 years less than life expectancy for white men.
- The rate of home ownership in 15-county Greater Cincinnati was 33.1 percent for African-Americans but 74.5 percent for whites.
- Three of every four black children in Cincinnati lived in poverty.
- Ohio's prison population was 45 percent African-American, though African-Americans made up just 12.5 percent of the state's overall population.

2017: The Sentinel Police Association, an advocacy group of black Cincinnati Police officers, unanimously votes that it has no confidence in Sgt. Dan Hils, the white president of the police union.

2018: Two racial incidents occur within weeks in Warren County. A white female Mason Middle School teacher tells a 13-year-old African-American student that he will be lynched by classmates if he does not get back on task. White players on a youth basketball team take the court in jerseys bearing the names "Knee-Grow" and "Coon" across the back.