

THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE:

MILWAUKEE

1923

DETECTIVES ARREST 39 BLACK MEN FOR VAGRANCY

Those who could not prove they had jobs were brought before the Milwaukee District Court, where Judge Michael Bienski tells them that Milwaukee has no use for their kind.

1925

HALYARDS START COLUMBIA SAVINGS AND LOAN

After receiving no support from the City of Milwaukee to build housing, Ardie and Wilbur Halyard started Columbia Savings & Loan to help African Americans purchase their own homes. The Halyards also worked to strengthen the Milwaukee NAACP.

1928

KELLEY LEADS THE MILWAUKEE URBAN LEAGUE

William Kelley becomes director of the Milwaukee Urban League. He and colleagues assess public education and note that there are no Black teachers in the public school system. In the 1930s, he begins his fight for hiring Black teachers.

1940

HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT, LOW HOMEOWNERSHIP

The census reports that 51% of the Black labor force in Milwaukee is unemployed, contrasted with 17% of the White labor force; only 6% of Milwaukee's Black families are homeowners, while 32.6% of White families are homeowners.

1946

SUBDIVISIONS PROHIBIT SALE OF PROPERTY TO BLACK PEOPLE

Attorney George Brawley completes a survey of restrictive covenants filed with the Milwaukee County Register of Deeds and estimates that 90% of the subdivisions in Milwaukee, dating back to 1910, contain a covenant prohibiting the sale of property to Black people.

1957

MPS BEGINS THE PRACTICE OF "INTACT BUSING"

Intact busing moves entire Black classrooms to a host school daily, but preventing Black students from mixing with White students at the host school.

1958

DANIEL BELL IS SHOT BY POLICE

Daniel Bell, age 22, is pulled over by Milwaukee police for a busted taillight and shot moments later. The policeman stated that Bell had lunged at him with a knife, which was later found to be untrue.

1960

DISCRIMINATION CONTINUES IN MILWAUKEE

Newly elected Milwaukee Mayor Henry Maier announces a civil rights policy of "go slow" as he opposes the municipal fair-housing law. Calvin Sherard organizes a series of marches against police brutality and pickets grocery stores in Black neighborhoods that do not hire Black workers. Of the 191 Black teachers employed by MPS, only 10 work at schools with largely White students.

1961

LLOYD BARBEE FIGHTS FOR FAIR HOUSING BILL

Attorney Lloyd Barbee leads a 13-day sit-in at the State Capitol to pressure the legislature to pass a fair-housing bill.

1962

VEL PHILLIPS PROPOSES A MUNICIPAL FAIR-HOUSING LAW

Under pressure from Mayor Maier, the Common Council defeats the fair-housing law by a vote of 18-1. Alderwoman Phillips continues to propose it throughout the mid-1960s.

1963

CORE FIGHTS NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES ABOUT BLACK PEOPLE

Milwaukee Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) organizes an ongoing protest against Fred Lins of the Community Social Development Commission after reports of his comments that Black persons all look alike, are crime-prone, and have low IQs.

1964

MILWAUKEE UNITED SCHOOL INTEGRATION COMMITTEE STARTED

Lloyd Barbee organizes the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC) with a goal of eliminating school segregation. MUSIC's first school walkout takes place in May with 11,500 students; the second is in November. Both commemorate Brown vs. Board of Education, with which Milwaukee was not in compliance.

1965

MUSIC & CORE PROTEST CONTINUED SEGREGATION IN SCHOOLS

MUSIC and CORE begin protests in response to Milwaukee School Board's refusal to address de facto segregation in Milwaukee. Lloyd Barbee files a lawsuit charging the Board with intentionally maintaining racial segregation. After 11 years of litigation, the lawsuit is successful.

1966

NAACP PICKETS, KKK RETALIATES WITH BOMBINGS

The Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council pickets the Fraternal Order of the Eagles Club, which is exclusively White with prominent officials like the mayor. The KKK bombs the NAACP headquarters and Calvary Baptist Church in Milwaukee.

1967

FATHER GROPPI IS A LEADER IN FAIR HOUSING

Father James Groppi, NAACP Youth Council, and other civil rights organizations march into predominantly White, Southside, and Wauwatosa neighborhoods to advocate for fair housing. President Lyndon Johnson invites Father Groppi with Dwight Benning to Washington, DC to testify before Congress to get federal housing legislation passed.

1968

DISCRIMINATION IS OUTLAWED IN MOST OF THE U.S.

The Federal Open Housing Law is passed on April 11, outlawing discrimination in 80% of the nation. On April 30, the Milwaukee Common Council passes a fair-housing bill, allowing Black people to move to suburbs and creating subdivisions for White people to move into the city proper.

1981

LACY DIES AS A RESULT OF POLICE BRUTALITY

Ernest Lacy, age 22, dies in police custody after officers confront him about being a rape suspect and one holds a knee on his back. A different suspect is later convicted of that rape.

1992

SCHOOLS REMAIN LARGELY SEGREGATED

A report from the Wisconsin Advisory Committee to the United States Civil Rights Commission indicates that Milwaukee-area schools remain very segregated.

2001

LOW GRADUATION RATES

MPS has a Black student graduation rate of only 34%.

1846-1919

Wisconsin has a rich history of civil rights activism that began even prior to statehood. The draft of the 1846 Wisconsin Constitution called for Black men to have the right to vote. Events like the George Marshall Clark lynching of 1861 showed a need for legislation to defeat ongoing discrimination. It was Milwaukeean Ezekiel Gillespie who challenged the State to give Blacks the right to vote in 1865, and won. Even after Wisconsin's Civil Rights law of 1895 was passed, it was necessary to establish chapters of the NAACP and Milwaukee Urban League in 1915 and 1919.

1925



The Columbia Savings and Loan Association. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Black Historical Society.

1960s

The City of Milwaukee uses federal redevelopment funds to tear down the blighted homes around Walnut Street, now known as Bronzeville. Citizens are led to believe that it's torn down to make way for the expressway. Later, the portion of I-43 from Port Washington Road to the Marquette Interchange effectively destroys the Black neighborhood and business district of the Fond du Lac corridor.



Destruction of Walnut Street housing. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Black Historical Society.

MARCHES



Civil rights march. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Black Historical Society.

RESILIENCE

As history demonstrates, the results of the fight for racial justice are significant but often hard fought. Milwaukee's fair-housing legislation passed in 1968, but Milwaukee remains one of the most racially segregated cities in America. Still too few Black students graduate from high school, and the disparity between Black and White students is great. Housing, unemployment, and health issues continue to plague the Black population. Police issues disproportionately impact Black citizens. The Black community's resilience frequently emerges with the determination to continue the fight to become equal citizens in the U.S.

SOURCES:
Clayborn Benson and the Wisconsin Black Historical Society
Wisconsin Historical Society
"Reflections on Wisconsin's Brown Experience" by Phoebe Weaver Williams, Marquette Law Review
More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee by Jack Dougherty
Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee by Patrick D. Jones
Educating Milwaukee: How One City's History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped Its Schools by James K. Nelsen
Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat 1915-45 by Joe William Trotter, Jr.
Encyclopedia of Milwaukee: <https://emke.uwm.edu/>
March on Milwaukee: <https://uwm.edu/marchonmilwaukee/>