

ABSTRACT

Title of Final Project:

RHYTHMS OF THE BLUE RIDGE:
HISTORIC AFRICAN AMERICAN
ENTERTAINMENT VENUES OF
WESTERN MARYLAND

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Throughout the twentieth century, musical innovations such as the blues, jazz, and rock n' roll were being fostered on the edges of cities and towns in African American communities, separated from white society by racially restrictive housing and zoning policies. Within these communities, entertainment venues catering to a Black clientele were established by influential Black entrepreneurs. These spaces became the landscape of the Chitlin' Circuit— an unofficial network of establishments that were safe for traveling Black artists and patrons alike. Because Maryland is uniquely situated between major influences of the African American entertainment business in Washington, DC, and New York City, the state became a geographic and cultural crossroads for Black culture. Even as Jim Crow-era segregation took hold throughout the United States, Maryland became simultaneously a place of great racial strife and respite. This study identifies and contextualizes the African American entertainment venues of Western Maryland— a region that, despite having the lowest Black population in the state during the period of interest (1900-1960), still fostered vibrant Black communities and cultural traditions.

**RHYTHMS OF THE BLUE RIDGE: HISTORIC AFRICAN AMERICAN
ENTERTAINMENT VENUES OF WESTERN MARYLAND**

By

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Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, musical innovations such as the blues, jazz, and rock n' roll were being fostered on the edges of cities and towns in what would become colloquially known as *Bronzeville*s, defined by Chicagoan newspaper scribe James J. Gentry as “black towns [operating] within white cities” of the segregated North.¹ Walter Barnes, an influential journalist-musician of the 1920s and 1930s, extended this interpretation to the South- “Any place with a sizable black population grew a darktown, and each of these black districts centered on a main thoroughfare, a world unto itself.”² Within these communities, entertainment venues catering to a Black clientele were established by influential Black entrepreneurs. These spaces became the landscape of the Chitlin’ Circuit– an unofficial network of entertainment venues that were safe for traveling Black artists and patrons alike. These institutions became “critical sites in the production and dissemination of Black popular culture... where some of the most popular and influential musicians of the twentieth century honed their craft before Black audiences.”³

Maryland is, geographically and culturally, a crossroads for Black culture, especially music and dance. Maryland’s geopolitical nature as a border state between the South and North greatly influenced the trafficking *and* self-emancipation of enslaved peoples, as well as the movement of free Black individuals prior to and following Maryland’s Constitutional Convention of 1864, which abolished slavery throughout the state. As Jim Crow-era segregation and disenfranchisement took hold throughout the United States, Maryland became simultaneously a

¹ Preston Lauterbach, *The Chitlin’ Circuit: And the Road to Rock “n” Roll*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 15.

² Preston Lauterbach, *The Chitlin’ Circuit*, 51.

³ Kahrl, Cammeron, and Katen, “African American Outdoor Recreation: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study,” 8.

place of great racial strife and respite. In Baltimore alone, the Black population tripled between 1910 and 1970.⁴ While Maryland was often a stopover from Washington, D.C. to cities further north, close-knit communities throughout Maryland offered social and economic opportunities for Black travelers. Many tourists and migratory workers found reasons to stay, whether for such pursuits as business or love, and thus, microcosms of Black prosperity flourished throughout larger cities and small towns despite widespread racial discrimination and violence.

Although Maryland is uniquely situated between influences like Washington, D.C.'s Howard Theatre and Harlem's Apollo Theater, major theaters were not the only lifeblood of the Chitlin' Circuit or the African American entertainment business as a whole. In fact, for traveling and local performers alike, lesser-known establishments such as nightclubs, juke joints, and dance halls sustained both artists and communities. Often, these venues were how entertainers got their start— "the larger city venues and the smaller clubs... did not compete in this way; instead, they harmoniously spread and fostered the musical talents of America's black entertainers."⁵ While many of these spaces are unfortunately no longer extant or forgotten to time, this paper will highlight the historic African American communities and entertainment venues throughout one region with deep musical and cultural traditions— Western Maryland. This paper will interpret these spaces as cultural institutions locally and critically analyze their relationship to the broader constellation of African American entertainment venues throughout Maryland and beyond.

⁴ Ron Cassie, "The Great Migration," *Baltimore Magazine*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.baltimoremagazine.com/section/historypolitics/the-great-migration/>; WPA, *Maryland; A Guide to the Old Line State* (Oxford University Press, 1940), 59.

⁵ Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission, *African-American Historic and Cultural Resources in Prince George's County, Maryland*, 2012, <https://issuu.com/mncppc/docs/aapgc>, 164.

Background

The following section outlines the natural progression this research took in contextualizing sites of African American entertainment in Western Maryland. First, an exploration of Maryland's African American history blends into the geology, settlement, and industrial development of Western Maryland, including comparative census data. While the percentage of African Americans to the rest of Western Maryland's population decreases from 1850 to 1970, in many counties the actual number continues to increase as Black communities form and slowly grow over time (see Figure 1). Lastly, the history of Black American leisure, including entertainment, ties the concepts of labor, geography, music, and dance together.

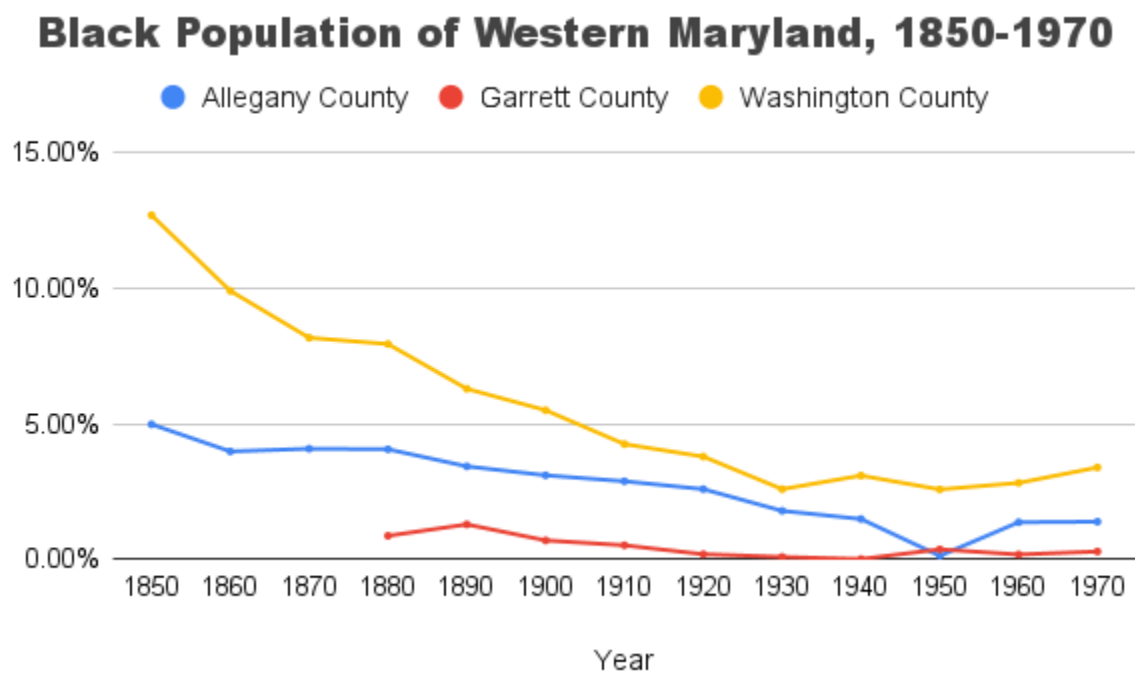


Figure 1. Black Population (by percentage) of Western Maryland Counties, 1850-1970.

Early Black History in Maryland

As a geographical and cultural crossroads for Black culture, Maryland's history has been greatly shaped by African Americans. From its time as a colony, Maryland's economy relied on the labor of enslaved individuals— they grew and harvested the crops, extracted the mineral resources, and helped build the infrastructure that defined Maryland's landscape and lifeways. Following a period of global political and economic strife, during which the English Royal African Company's slave trade monopoly was revoked and Bacon's Rebellion, which caused wealthy planters to grow distrustful of indentured servants, African slavery grew exponentially and largely replaced indentured servitude labor on plantations.⁶ This shift altered the nature of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, working and living conditions, and prospects of freedom for the worse. The Maryland colony, where fewer than 1,000 enslaved Africans had arrived in the early 17th century, trafficked almost 100,000 individuals for the exploitation of their labor in the 18th century before the American Revolution.⁷ Roughly one-third of Maryland's population had African origins by 1755, however, the proportion of free Black people diminished from one in four to one in twenty-five.⁸

Maryland's participation in the international slave trade officially ended in 1774, and 90% of the colony's enslaved population was born in colonial America by the start of the American Revolution.⁹ Five thousand enslaved people in the Chesapeake region escaped to the British

⁶ The University of Maryland College Park and The Maryland State Archives, "A Guide to the History of Slavery in Maryland," Brochure (Maryland, 2007). ; John Harold Jr.. Sprinkle, "Loyalists and Baconians: The Participants in Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, 1676-1677" (Dissertation, College of William & Mary, 1992), <https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-8smw-cm72>.

⁷ "A Guide to the History of Slavery in Maryland," Brochure (Maryland, 2007).

⁸ "A Guide to the History of Slavery in Maryland," Brochure (Maryland, 2007).

⁹ "A Guide to the History of Slavery in Maryland," Brochure (Maryland, 2007).

during the American Revolution, ultimately undermining the slaveholders' authority and altering the dynamic of slavery permanently.¹⁰ An independent “slave economy” flourished as enslaved individuals took part in artisan trades and learned skills to improve their quality of life, and tight-knit networks of kin formed that would assist in the growth of a free Black population through various means.¹¹ Barbara Jeanne Fields argued that because slavery defined freedom before emancipation, the rise of a free Black population in Maryland before 1864 “lodged a conspicuous anomaly in the heart of the slave order.”¹² Eventually, the Maryland legislature strengthened slavery and limited the civil and political rights of free Black individuals through a variety of means, including the passage of vagrancy laws that legalized the sale of unemployed freedmen into servitude.¹³

Thousands of Black Marylanders had settled north before the Civil War, especially as the decline in the tobacco economy coincided with the demand for cotton. Maryland’s slaveholders are estimated to have sold 20,000 slaves south between 1830 and 1860.¹⁴ Baltimore became a haven for fugitive slaves, and at the very least offered a safe place to stop before continuing on through the mountains or up to northern cities. Maryland’s shared border with Northern states may have contributed to the steady decline in the slave population of Northern Maryland. Locations throughout Western Maryland, such as The Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Cumberland, are believed to have played a part in the Underground Railroad.¹⁵ From the start of the Civil War,

¹⁰ “A Guide to the History of Slavery in Maryland,” Brochure (Maryland, 2007).

¹¹ “A Guide to the History of Slavery in Maryland,” Brochure (Maryland, 2007).

¹² Fields, Barbara Jeanne. *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century*. Yale University Press, 1987.

¹³ “A Guide to the History of Slavery in Maryland,” Brochure (Maryland, 2007).

¹⁴ “A Guide to the History of Slavery in Maryland,” Brochure (Maryland, 2007).

¹⁵ Teresa McMinn, “Local Ties to the Underground Railroad,” Western Maryland’s Historical Library, December 28, 2019, <https://www.whilbr.org/AlleganyAfricanAmericans/Local-ties-Underground-Railroad>.

federal recruitment of Maryland's Black population, including the enslaved, protected white men from the draft and offered the hope of freedom and expanded civil liberties to Black men.¹⁶

Post emancipation, Black communities settled in cities and towns throughout Maryland despite discriminatory laws and attitudes continuing to affect the movement of Black individuals.¹⁷

Despite maintaining some of the lowest Black populations in Maryland throughout the history of the United States Census, Western Maryland saw the establishment of vibrant Black neighborhoods within larger towns and cities. Although unfortunately necessary in the face of intentional housing segregation policies, these communities often formed to provide for themselves what they would be denied or disrespected over elsewhere.¹⁸ Enclaves formed around schools, churches, and Black-owned business establishments that would serve as the lifeblood of communities and entice traveling African Americans to visit and, in some cases, stay.

Western Maryland History

Western Maryland is a region of Maryland that encompasses Garrett, Allegany, and Washington counties. This region of Maryland is geographically within the Appalachian Mountains, a mountain range stretching roughly from Georgia to Maine (see Figure 2).¹⁹ The Appalachian Mountains are considered some of the oldest in the world— much of the mountain range is

¹⁶ "A Guide to the History of Slavery in Maryland," Brochure (Maryland, 2007).

¹⁷ C. Fraser Smith, *Here Lies Jim Crow : Civil Rights in Maryland* (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), <http://archive.org/details/hereliesjimcrowc0000smit>.

¹⁸ Kevin Fox Gotham, "Urban Space, Restrictive Covenants and the Origins of Racial Residential Segregation in a US City, 1900–50," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24, no. 3 (June 28, 2008): 616–33, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.00268>.

¹⁹ "About the Appalachian Region," *Appalachian Regional Commission* (blog), accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.arc.gov/about-the-appalachian-region/>.

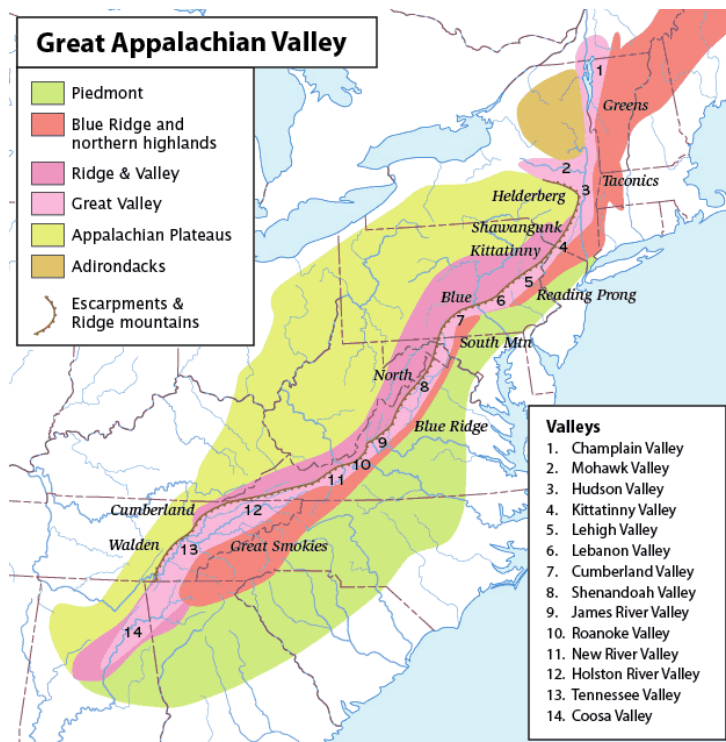


Figure 2. Map of the Appalachian Mountain physiographic regions, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

thought to have formed from continental collisions during the Paleozoic era.²⁰ The Blue Ridge Mountains, a mountain range within Appalachia, have rocks dating back about 1.2 billion years. Like all mountain ranges, the Appalachian Mountains have experienced various cycles of formation and erosion, however, their current topography is something of a geological mystery.

Geologists understand that the

formation of the most recent supercontinent, Pangea, resulted in “the big Alleghenian mountain building episode,” but that those mountains eroded away roughly 150 million years ago.²¹

The Central Pangean Mountains also included what are now known as the Scottish Highlands and the Atlas Mountains of northern Africa. Like the unique cultural identity and influence that Appalachia is known for, the Atlas Mountains and Scottish Highlands contain multitudes of similarities in their development of “distinctive attire, music, dance, dialect, and folklore.”²²

European immigrants from areas of political upheaval, such as Northern Ireland, Scotland, and

²⁰ Glynis Board, “Appalachian Mountains: A Story Of Their Own,” *West Virginia Public Broadcasting* (blog), June 24, 2019, <https://wvpublic.org/appalachian-mountains-a-story-of-their-own/>.

²¹ (Board 2019)

²² Clyde H. Ray, “Traditional Appalachian Culture and Traditional Scottish Highland Culture Compared: A Personal Perspective,” *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* 1 (1989): 141–44.

Germany, had begun settling in Appalachia in the mid-18th century.²³ Indigenous settlement of Appalachia is believed to have begun over 10,000 years ago, but those native to the area of Western Maryland during the time of European contact include the Algonquin-speaking Powatan, Delaware or Leni Lenape, and Shawnee.²⁴

Western Maryland is separated from Pennsylvania to the north by the Mason-Dixon Line, which represents both the surveyed resolution of border disputes between former British colonies, as well as a cultural boundary between the North and South.²⁵ Resistance in the form of self-emancipation occurred throughout the United States, often through terrain that white slaveowners were unwilling, or unable, to navigate safely.²⁶ Maroon communities formed in places like the Great Dismal Swamp,²⁷ and routes for the Underground Railroad are thought to have maneuvered through places like the Appalachian Mountains.²⁸ Although the labor of enslaved individuals contributed substantially to industries throughout Western Maryland, it's possible that the surrounding environment not only offered freedom to those who sought it, but also acted as spaces of respite for enslaved individuals searching for connection, worship, and even entertainment out of sight from their enslavers.²⁹ Almost 10% of the Appalachian

²³ Madison Whipple, "The History of Appalachia & Its People," The Collector, August 6, 2024, <https://www.thecollector.com/history-of-appalachia-and-its-people/>.

²⁴ Sarah Gripshover and Kelli Carmean, "Native American Cultures of Appalachia," Accessible Appalachia, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://manifold.open.umn.edu/read/complete-text/section/e33db79f-5a34-489e-a550-a0e034564e29>.

²⁵ "History of the Mason-Dixon Line," Town of Rising Sun, Maryland, accessed May 19, 2025, <http://www.risingsunmd.org/departments/division.php?structureid=51>.

²⁶ Cassandra Newby-Alexander, "Underground Railroad in Virginia," Encyclopedia Virginia, December 7, 2020, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/underground-railroad-in-virginia/>.

²⁷ William H. Funk, "The Dismal Swamp: One Road Out of Slavery Took You Straight into the Boggiest Place You've Ever Been," *National Endowment for the Humanities*, Spring 2017. ; Richard Price, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, 2nd ed., A Johns Hopkins Paperback (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

²⁸ (Newby-Alexander 2020)

²⁹ Camp, "The Pleasure of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861."

population was Black by 1860, but many were still enslaved.³⁰ In Western Maryland, a little over 7% of the population was listed as “Colored,” with a slightly higher population of “Free Colored” at 3.6% compared to an enslaved population of 3.5%.³¹

Despite border conflicts, Western Maryland’s history and development are a very similar tale to industrial and coal mining regions of neighboring West Virginia and Pennsylvania. Because the mountains of Western Maryland limited industries like agriculture, abundant deposits of coal, iron, and clay defined settlement patterns of the 19th and 20th centuries.³² Many laborers found work in grist mills, mines, brickyards, and iron furnaces. The National Road, now known as U.S. Route 40, was authorized by Congress in 1806 as the nation's first federally funded roadway.³³ Construction started in Cumberland and opened up Western Maryland for trade and travel. As demand for the region's natural resources grew throughout Maryland and beyond, alternative transportation methods became necessary. The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was completed in 1850, shifting the transport of raw materials and goods from the National Road.³⁴ Once the canal’s competing railway, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, reached the Ohio River in 1852, the National Road experienced significantly less commercial and passenger travel.³⁵ Other local railroads, like the Cumberland & Pennsylvania Railroad (C&P) and the Western Maryland

³⁰ (Whipple 2024)

³¹ Joseph C.G. Kennedy, “Population of the United States in 1860” (Washington, DC, 1864), <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1864/dec/1860a.html>.

³² Gerry Kuncio et al., *Maryland Railroads Statewide Historic Context* (Pittsburgh, PA: Maryland Department of Transportation, State Highway Administration, 2024).

³³ “City History,” City of Frostburg, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.frostburgcity.org/community/page/city-history>.

³⁴ “City History,” City of Frostburg.

³⁵ “City History,” City of Frostburg.

Railway (WMRY) expanded travel and trade throughout the region alongside the development of the B&O.³⁶

Black American Leisure

The ability of enslaved persons to pursue entertainment and socialization varied by plantation; however, according to historian D. Wiggins, most enslavers “found it to their advantage to grant a few periods of leisure time to their slaves.”³⁷ Some gatherings were strategically organized and overseen by enslavers to maximize profitability and minimize the “spirit of insurrection.”³⁸ However, the surrounding environments rarely utilized by enslavers offered an opportunity for enslaved people to participate in forms of amusement. In these spaces, music and dance played a central role. Nancy Williams, who was formerly enslaved in Virginia, frequently “slip[ed] away” to an “ole cabin” in the woods where enslaved people danced, performed music, drank alcohol, and courted “away from slaveholding eyes.”³⁹ In New Orleans, “Congo Square” became a symbol of African cultural resilience through the gathering of enslaved people to perform songs and dances for nearly half a century.⁴⁰

Post-emancipation, many formerly enslaved people sought land ownership and outdoor space as a means to gain “distance and autonomy from whites.”⁴¹ African Americans took part in

³⁶ (Kuncio et al. 2024)

³⁷ (Kahrl, Cammeron, and Katen 2022)

³⁸ Kahrl, Cammeron, and Katen, “African American Outdoor Recreation: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study,” 17-18 ; Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845, 50.

³⁹ Camp, “The Pleasure of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861.”

⁴⁰ Kubik, Gerhard. *Jazz Transatlantic, Volume I: The African Undercurrent in Twentieth-Century Jazz Culture*. American Made Music Series. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017, 43.

⁴¹ Kahrl, Cammeron, and Katen, “African American Outdoor Recreation: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study,” 14.

outdoor leisure activities such as hunting and fishing, religious ceremonies, and social events in the period following emancipation, despite the growing use of outdoor spaces by white people to threaten, injure, and kill Black people.⁴² Continued threats and attempted domination of Black life during this time emphasized the significance of Black land ownership, gathering spaces, and community organizations like churches, fraternal orders, and benevolent societies.⁴³ Formal exclusion of Black people from beaches, national and local parks, playgrounds, campgrounds, and outdoor entertainment venues occurred throughout the United States under Jim Crow. Historians Andrew W. Kahrl and Malcolm Cammeron posit that spaces of Black leisure became “more than a respite from the strictures of Jim Crow” but rather a landscape of resistance to “white notions of a racially hierarchical society,” in which the materials of Black labor allow whites to enjoy recreation.⁴⁴ The places where Black music, dance, and leisure were fostered post-emancipation and throughout Jim Crow-era segregation epitomize the resilience and resourcefulness of Black entertainers, entrepreneurs, and patrons alike. Despite the enslavement, violence, segregation, and persecution perpetrated against Black Americans, the music and dance they created and performed have influenced the broader American sound and culture since time immemorial.

While much of the music of the Chitlin’ Circuit may have been genre-bending, the most popular genres would have been the blues, jazz, and rhythm and blues. The blues originated on

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Kahrl, Cammeron, and Katen, “African American Outdoor Recreation: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study,” 19 ; Nancy O’Malley. “The Pursuit of Freedom: The Evolution of Kinkeadtown, an African American Post-Civil War Neighborhood in Lexington, Kentucky.” *Winterthur Portfolio* Vol. 37, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 187-218. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/381641>.

⁴⁴ Kahrl, Cammeron, and Katen, “African American Outdoor Recreation: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study,” 15.

plantations worked by sharecroppers during Reconstruction, the period following the American Civil War, when the United States was determining how to integrate newly freed African Americans into society.⁴⁵ The blues is broadly defined by call and response lyrics of an emotional subject, a style popularly used by sharecroppers to set the pace of work, and which spread through their movement between plantations.⁴⁶ In Appalachia, distinct blues sounds such as the Piedmont Blues, a folk guitar style of intricate fingerpicking, blossomed.⁴⁷ Traveling entertainment acts such as those on the vaudeville circuit and in minstrel shows adopted these early blues sounds.⁴⁸ The influence of the blues is seen in jazz, rhythm and blues, rock n' roll, go-go, rap, and more.

Music ethnologist Gerhard Kubik posits that, rather than being a new type of music, jazz was a new expressive form of other established styles, such as the blues and ragtime, with a basis in the tonality of rural blues.⁴⁹ Like the blues, jazz is often characterized by the *blues note*. The blues note is popularly defined as an accentuation on the “weak parts” of a 4/4 meter, but Kubik believes this style is actually “the hidden legacy of another, non-Western tonal system.”⁵⁰ Jazz was catapulted into national consciousness during the Prohibition era of the 1920s, a time when musicians and composers like Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton were contributing to the

⁴⁵ Southern, Eileen. *Readings in Black American Music*. [1st ed.]. New York: W. W. Norton, 1972. pp. 202-216.

⁴⁶ Southern, Eileen. *Readings in Black American Music*. [1st ed.]. New York: W. W. Norton, 1972. pp. 202-216.

⁴⁷ Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation. “Piedmont Blues,” 2019. <https://www.acousticblues.com/piedmont-blues>.

⁴⁸ Kubik, Gerhard. *Jazz Transatlantic, Volume I: The African Undercurrent in Twentieth-Century Jazz Culture*. American Made Music Series. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017. P. 187.

⁴⁹ Kubik. *Jazz Transatlantic, Volume I*. p. 193

⁵⁰ Kubik. *Jazz Transatlantic, Volume I*. pp. xiii-xiv

genre in both recording and live performance.⁵¹ Throughout the rest of the 20th century, jazz would develop into new forms such as swing, bebop, cool jazz, and hard bop.⁵²

Rhythm and blues, much like earlier categories of “race music,” was first labeled as such in the 1940s as a catch-all marketing category for secular African American music, including the blues, jazz, and modern blends of both.⁵³ Northern cities of the Great Migration became a hotbed for the blending of regional African American music styles, as well as new markets for these sounds.⁵⁴ Rhythm and blues is widely understood to have developed after World War II, in a style that combined elements of genres like pop, gospel, blues, and jazz.⁵⁵ While music critics and academics differentiate rhythm and blues and soul music, musicians and producers like Jerry Wexler understood the formation of soul music as “a semantic fabrication... It was rhythm and blues.”⁵⁶ While rhythm and blues was regularly disparaged as “low-class... wild... ‘dirty’ music,” like its precursors, it nevertheless continues to inspire generations of singers, musicians, and listeners.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Hasse, John Edward, and Bob Blumenthal. “Jazz.” *Smithsonian Folkways Magazine*, March 2016. <https://folkways.si.edu/magazine-winter-2011-jazz-cover-story/ragtime/music/article/smithsonian>.

⁵² Kubik. *Jazz Transatlantic, Volume I*. p. 289-290 ; Hasse, John Edward, and Bob Blumenthal. “Jazz.”

⁵³ Library of Congress. “Rhythm and Blues.” Web page. Accessed December 14, 2024. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/musical-styles/popular-songs-of-the-day/rhythm-and-blues/>.

⁵⁴ Lauterbach, Preston. *The Chitlin’ Circuit: And the Road to Rock “n” Roll*. 1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011. ; “Rhythm and Blues,” Webpage, Library of Congress, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/musical-styles/popular-songs-of-the-day/rhythm-and-blues/>.

⁵⁵ Library of Congress. “Rhythm and Blues.” Web page.

⁵⁶ Guralnick, Peter. *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1986. p. 4.

⁵⁷ Guralnick, Peter. *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1986. p. 5.

Methods

The methods used to conduct this study included a combination of archival research, oral history, and a close review of established literature. Due to the widespread invalidation of African American history and historic resources in the twentieth century, research of these communities required a combination of sources to contextualize, identify, and analyze their history and architecture. I started with literature on the Chitlin' Circuit. Preston Lauterbach's *The Chitlin' Circuit: And the Road to Rock 'n' Roll* details the firsthand accounts of Sax Kari, a musician who played the historic Chitlin' Circuit, alongside a historical narrative that provided a broader picture of the type of resources I might be looking for. From there, I looked into the history of African American music, including music ethnologist Gerhard Kubik's *Jazz Transatlantic, Volume I: The African Undercurrent in Twentieth-Century Jazz Culture* and American musicologist Eileen Southern's *Readings in Black American Music*, both of which offered oral history alongside the contextualization of music development, both sonically and culturally. To ground these perspectives in space, I looked to the National Park Service's *African American Outdoor Recreation Theme Study* and Jearold Winston Holland's *Black Recreation: A Historical Perspective*.

The uncertainty in pinpointing Chitlin' Circuit sites outside of the well-established and documented venues makes it difficult to truly understand the musical reach and influence of this cultural institution, especially in rural areas or communities now disfigured by urban renewal and gentrification. So, while my overarching research purpose has been geared toward places that may have been considered along the Chitlin' Circuit, I adjusted my search to a broader look at historic African American entertainment venues. The type of evidence I looked for included:

1. Common types of venues, including dance halls, nightclubs, juke joints, beer gardens, church social halls, and lodges, have all come up as venues along the Chitlin' Circuit.
2. Years of operation between 1900-1960, although I was willing to consider venues established earlier if historical evidence could demonstrate that they continued operating.
3. A documented history of live music or dance at the venue.
4. Whether Black patrons were able to freely enjoy the entertainment.
5. Ownership or management by Black entrepreneurs. Some Chitlin' Circuit venues were white-owned, but many were owned or managed by Black entrepreneurs, including women.

To identify these resources, a lot of the work was already done, but difficult to find unless you were looking for it. I scanned local Facebook groups, blogs dedicated to the theaters of Maryland, census records, and anywhere that had preserved a historic African American church or school (indicating a community may have cropped up around it and fostered music). Historian and former professor of English, Lynn Bowman, wrote about the historic communities of Brownsville and Jonathan Street through oral history and genealogical research in her works *Ten Weeks on Jonathan Street: The Legacy of 19th Century African American Hagerstown, Maryland*, and *Being Black in Brownsville: Echoes of a "forgotten" Frostburg*. These works provided me with a starting point from which I could incorporate newspaper ads and articles, Sanborn maps, and a consideration of a venue's architectural elements.

Findings

Garrett County

Garrett County was the last Maryland county formed in 1872, named after the B&O Railroad president John Work Garrett.⁵⁸ Development of the region is similarly informed by industry—grist milling, iron production, lumbering, coal mining, and railroad construction all contribute to the settlement and economy of Garrett County.⁵⁹ However, unlike the other counties of Western



Figure 3. Buckwheat field in Garrett County, Library of Congress.

Maryland, Garrett County's economy has continued to rely on agricultural production since its incorporation (see Figure 3).

Companies like the Allegheny Iron Company employed and housed their workers, but because the industrial workforce largely consisted of seasonal laborers,

there were no company towns in the county.⁶⁰ The county seat of Oakland was incorporated in 1862, after the arrival of the B&O in 1851.⁶¹ John Work Garrett saw the recreational potential of the region in 1860 and built two hotels after the conclusion of the Civil War that would

⁵⁸ "John W. Garrett," U.S. National Park Service, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/people/john-w-garrett.htm>.

⁵⁹ Robert C. Chidester, "A Historic Context for the Archaeology of Industrial Labor in the State of Maryland" (College Park, MD, University of Maryland College Park, 2004), <http://www.heritage.umd.edu/chrsweb/AssociatedProjects/chidesterreport/Chapter%20VIII.htm>.

⁶⁰ (Chidester 2004)

⁶¹ (Chidester 2004)

eventually host four Presidents.⁶² With the eventual decline in railroad usage, mining, and timber production, Garrett's enterprises would seem like a premonition, as tourism has since become essential to the county's economy.⁶³

Since its incorporation, Garrett County has maintained a significantly smaller population than Allegany or Washington County. Between 1880 and 1970, the population maintained fewer than 200 African American residents, with an all-time low of just 5 Black individuals in 1940.⁶⁴ Lifelong resident Tifani Fisher, president of the Allegany County branch of the NAACP and a member of the Allegany County Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Committee (ACLTRC), recalls that her family originates from Garrett County when it was still part of Allegany County, and that the Black community they had built was pushed out when Garrett County was formed and became a "sundown county."⁶⁵ The earliest census records of Garrett County substantiate the possibility of early Black settlement. From 1880-1910, there were only a little over 100 African American residents still in the county. Another theory of these early census figures puts forth that, opposed to permanent residency, the Black population is largely residents of Civilian Conservation Corps, logging, and mining camps.

Garrett County's history as a sundown county, which means that any Black person "caught" after sundown faced the possibility of being lynched in the cover of night, is corroborated by other residents of Western Maryland. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. recalls that "We all knew that blacks were

⁶² (Chidester 2004)

⁶³ "History," Visit Garrett County, April 30, 2014, <https://visitgarrettcountrymd.com/history/>.

⁶⁴ "Black Marylanders 1880," Legacy of Slavery in Maryland, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdslavery/html/research/census1880.html>.

⁶⁵ Sean Yoes, "The Ghosts of Racial Violence in Maryland," International Center for Transitional Justice, June 14, 2022, <https://www.ictj.org/latest-news/ghosts-racial-violence-maryland>.

not wanted in Garrett County, especially in Oakland, where they tried to lynch Mr. Les Clifford – the saxophone player – when I was a boy.” Another anonymous, former Black resident of the county recalls that his father claimed a sign was put up near Oakland reading “NIGGERS READ AND RUN. AND IF YOU CAN’T READ, RUN ANYWAY.”⁶⁶

Another contentious piece of Garrett County African American history is Negro Mountain, an Allegheny Mountain ridge stretching roughly 30 miles from Somerset County, Pennsylvania to Deep Creek Lake in Maryland. Many believe that the mountain was named for a Black man traveling with Thomas Cresap, a white frontiersman of Western Maryland, most well-known for his role in armed border disputes between Maryland and Pennsylvania. Nemesis is said to have been a free Black man working for Cresap when he gave his life protecting Cresap in an armed conflict with Native Americans of the area.⁶⁷ Given that multiple variations of the story exist, many are skeptical of this tale as folklore. Lynn Bowman, a historian of Western Maryland who specializes in African American history, believes that an area on the west side of the mountain, said to be a site of lynching, could be another origin of the name, and hopes to see it renamed. However, members of the Pittsburgh-based Edna B. McKenzie branch of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) regularly visit and clean-up areas of Negro Mountain, believing that Nemesis’s legacy is important to preserve and oppose renaming it.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ “Oakland,” *History and Social Justice* (blog), accessed May 19, 2025, <https://justice.tougaloo.edu/sundowntown/oakland-md/>.

⁶⁷ J. Thomas (John Thomas) Scharf, *History of Western Maryland : Being a History of Frederick, Montgomery, Carroll, Washington, Allegany, and Garrett Counties from the Earliest Period to the Present Day ; Including Biographical Sketches of Their Representative Men*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia : L. H. Everts, 1882), <http://archive.org/details/historyofwestern02scha/1325>

⁶⁸ Alonna J. Carter, “Preserving the Historic ‘Negro Mountain,’” *New Pittsburgh Courier* (blog), June 3, 2019, <https://newpittsburghcourier.com/2019/06/03/preserving-the-historic-negro-mountain/>.

Given this legacy of racial discrimination and violence, little evidence exists on the potential settlement of African Americans in Garrett County. Thus, no sites related to African American entertainment or recreation were identified as a result of this study.

Allegany County

Allegany County was formed from the westernmost section of Washington County in 1789.⁶⁹

Agriculture was most limited in this county due to its mountainous terrain; however, natural resources like coal, iron, and clay became the cornerstone of the county's economy.⁷⁰ Miners, mill workers, and other laborers in the county were often European immigrants, but over 600 enslaved individuals were recorded in the last United States Census before emancipation.⁷¹

during the Cumberland was incorporated as the county seat in 1815, by which time swaths of settlers were coming to the region looking for economic opportunities and demanding transportation routes that would connect them to the Ohio River Valley.⁷² Nineteenth-century railroad developments opened the area's coal and iron industry to major markets, including local railways constructed by coal and iron companies like the Mount Savage Railroad, the Georges Creek Railroad, and the Eckart Branch Railroad.⁷³ The Cumberland & Pennsylvania Railroad (C&P), which would eventually acquire these local railways in the latter half of the nineteenth century, became essential to transporting coal during the Civil War after the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad was damaged.⁷⁴

Despite the presence of the Ku Klux Klan, a violent white supremacist group, and threats of racial violence, African Americans continued to live and form communities throughout Allegany County in substantial numbers after the end of the Civil War. By 1910, Cumberland had a Black

⁶⁹ (Chidester 2004)

⁷⁰ (Chidester 2004)

⁷¹ Howard G. Brunsman, *1960 Census: Characteristics of the Population*, vol. 1, n.d.

⁷² (Kuncio et al. 2024)

⁷³ (Chidester 2004) ; (Kuncio et al. 2024)

⁷⁴ (Kuncio et al. 2024)

population of over 1,000, and Frostburg had a growing African American community known as Brownsville with a population of over 200.⁷⁵ While it is likely that African American communities formed in other areas of Allegany County, this research has only been able to identify African American entertainment venues in these two municipalities, detailed in the following sections.

Cumberland

While this research could not identify a single, unified historic African American community within Cumberland as found in other areas of Western Maryland, African Americans lived and sought entertainment there. It is possible that racially restrictive housing covenants were less common in Cumberland than in other places, and thus most businesses were segregated rather than racially restricted. As no Black-owned entertainment venues were identified during this period of interest, it may have been instead more difficult for Black entrepreneurs to establish themselves without a local “Bronzeville.” African Americans in Cumberland appear to have sought entertainment at many of the same establishments as white residents, albeit in less than equal, segregated areas. Cumberland’s prominent theaters, many of which hosted films and live performances, were segregated, often requiring African American patrons to buy tickets at a separate entrance and view the shows from less-than-optimal seating, out of view from white patrons. The historic theaters of Cumberland that hosted live performances and allowed Black patrons are detailed below, including their contributions to the city's legacy of racial segregation.

⁷⁵ WM. C. Hunt, “Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910 Bulletin,” Bulletin (Maryland, n.d.).

The Maryland Theatre, 37 North Mechanic Street (1907-1964)

The Maryland Theatre was constructed in 1907 as a “first-class, modern and up-to-date playhouse,” prompted by complaints that Cumberland’s other theaters were an inadequate match for the city’s size and importance.⁷⁶ Construction on the theatre began on February 28, 1907, and included materials and labor from local industries such as Queen City Brick and Tile Company and the Cumberland Hydraulic Cement Company. The architect for this project, John D. Allen, had spent the majority of his 25-year career designing hotels and theaters, including Baltimore’s own Maryland Theatre. The structure was built out more than the front entrance on North Mechanic Street let on, with a three-story wing for twelve dressing rooms “equipped most modernly,” and 77 feet by 12 feet stage separated from the audience by a fireproof, asbestos curtain. The main floor of the auditorium was capable of seating 1600 people, and contained a ladies’ parlor, gentlemen’s smoking rooms, and “adequate toilet facilities.”⁷⁷

While no direct archival evidence of the Maryland Theatre’s early segregation was uncovered, oral history and architectural features suggest this structure was built to provide separate, unequal access to Black patrons. In a Cumberland Evening Times article detailing the building’s design elements before its opening, something referred to as a “gallery entrance” details the

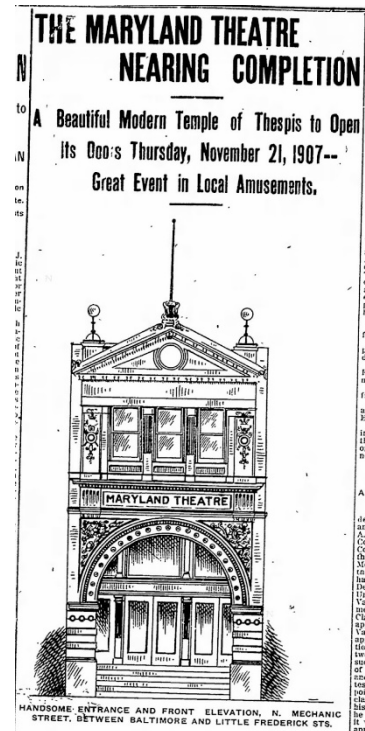


Figure 4. Architectural drawing of the Maryland Theatre, Cumberland Evening Times, Nov. 15, 1907.

⁷⁶ “The Maryland Theatre Nearing Completion,” *Cumberland Evening Times*, November 15, 1907.

⁷⁷ (Cumberland Evening Times 1907)

entrance and ticket office on the backside of the theater.⁷⁸ This section, said to be accessible from Liberty Street, is remembered to be the only area of the theater where Black patrons could watch a show.⁷⁹ William D. Fossett, who worked at the theater in the late 1940s, recalls that this rear ticket booth and a set of stairs up to the top balcony—likely meaning what is referred to as the gallery in the Cumberland Evening Times article (see Figure 5).⁸⁰ This article also claims

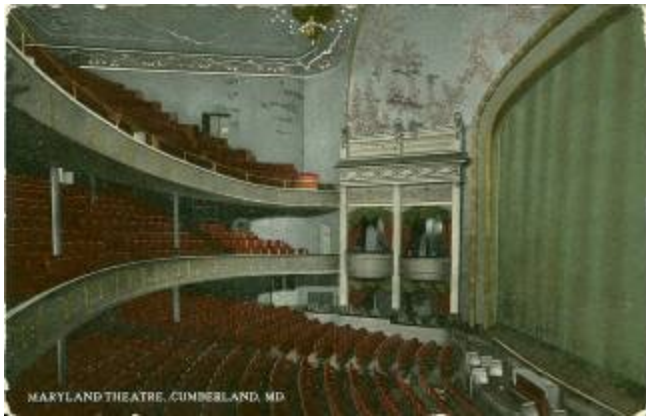


Figure 5. Inside the Maryland Theatre. Courtesy of Western Maryland Historical Library.

that “more than ordinary care” had been given to this section for its anticipated patrons and offered “a plain view of the stage from the remotest corner.”⁸¹ Thus, it seems that this theater was built with the means of intentional segregation rather than completely barring Black patrons like other theaters in Cumberland.

The theater’s stage may have been the largest in the state at the time it was built, hosting live performances and showing movies. Like other theaters of the region and time, minstrel shows were a popular attraction. In its opening weekend, the Maryland Theatre hosted Lew Dockstader “and his own great minstrels,” with the Cumberland & Pennsylvania Railroad Company even running “theatre trains” to see the show.⁸² Herman J. Miller, lifelong Cumberland resident born in 1903, recalls The True American Minstrel Show performing at the theater in 1918 to a

⁷⁸ (Cumberland Evening Times 1907)

⁷⁹ (Cumberland Evening Times 1907)

⁸⁰ Albert Feldstein, “The Maryland and Other Cumberland Theaters,” Western Maryland’s Historical Library, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.whilbr.org/AlleganyAfricanAmericans/Maryland-Other-Cumberland-Theaters>.

⁸¹ (Cumberland Evening Times 1907)

⁸² (Cumberland Evening Times 1907)

“crowded house of whites and blacks, who enjoyed the fun immensely.”⁸³ Al Jolson, who regularly performed in blackface, was featured at the Maryland, Embassy, and Liberty theaters. The Maryland Theatre showed one last movie in 1963 and was demolished the next year.⁸⁴

The Strand Theatre, 25 (101-110) South Liberty Street (1920-1972)



Figure 6. *The Strand Theatre in 1972. Image by Brenda Kline.*

Other Cumberland theaters, like the Embassy, Liberty, and Strand theaters, were segregated in a similar manner. Crandall’s Strand Theatre was the other popular venue, besides Maryland Theatre, for both motion pictures and live performances in the early twentieth century. This theater is said to have opened in 1920, with a capacity for seating 1,400

between the main floor and balcony seating. Like the Maryland, this theatre was a three-floor brick construction with a stage and asbestos curtain. Unlike the Maryland, the Strand Theatre put less emphasis on its lobby and facilities, opting instead for a modern glass awning. Crandall’s theater also hosted a detached dance hall in its early years, with a brick first floor, a frame second-story, and a composition roof.⁸⁵ Despite hosting Black performers and musicians like “the trumpet king of swing” Louis Armstrong, “the Petite Song Stylist” Midge Williams, and

⁸³ (Feldstein, n.d.)

⁸⁴ “Parking Lot Planned on Theater Site,” *Cumberland Evening Times*, October 26, 1964, newspapers.com.

⁸⁵ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Cumberland, Allegany County, Maryland.*, 1921, 1921, http://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn03592_006/, Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Washington, D.C. 20540-4650 USA, https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3844cm.g3844cm_g035921921/.

“romantic tenor” Sonny Woods, it is unclear whether Black people were welcome at the Strand.⁸⁶ Given that other venues (see the Garden Theatre) would advertise for “white patronage only,” it is likely that Black people were able to attend shows at the Strand, albeit under segregated conditions similar to the Maryland Theatre.⁸⁷ The Strand Theatre showed one last movie in 1972 before its closure and eventual demolition.⁸⁸

The Howard Theatre and Dancing Academy, 127 North Mechanic Street. (1927) / The Garden Theatre, (1927-1954)

The Howard Theatre and Dancing Academy was opened on July 11, 1927, as a theatre and dance hall for Black patrons. The summer 1927 Motion Picture News reported the construction of a two-story theater and store for exclusively “colored patronage.”⁸⁹ This new theater was said to have a seating capacity of 500, but unlike other newly constructed theaters in this section, there is no listed cost. The mayor of Cumberland, Thomas W. Koons, attended the opening performance of the venue, addressing its patrons along with local Reverend Nathaniel Minor.⁹⁰ Despite this large inaugural crowd, the theater was closed to Black patrons just three months later as the venue was changed to the “Garden Theatre.” No available newspaper coverage appears to address either the opening or closing of the Howard Theatre, but multiple

⁸⁶ “Strand Theatre in Cumberland, MD,” Cinema Treasures, April 16, 2018, <https://beekman.herokuapp.com/theaters/35703/photos/240236>.

⁸⁷ David Zornig, “Garden Theatre,” Cinema Treasures, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://cinematreasures.org/theaters/59008>.

⁸⁸ Joe Vogel, “Strand Theatre,” Cinema Treasures, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://cinematreasures.org/theaters/35703>.

⁸⁹ Motion Picture News, *Motion Picture News (Jul - Sep 1927)* (New York, Motion Picture News, 1927), <http://archive.org/details/motion36moti>, 696.

⁹⁰ (Motion Picture News 1927), 465.

advertisements announce the opening of the Garden Theatre and its strict “white patronage only” mandate (see Figure 7).⁹¹

In a 1921 Sanborn map of Cumberland before the construction of the Howard, 127 North Mechanic Street was one of three brick dwellings on the lot, located near the Market Street bridge.

The building had a frame cornice, slate or metal roof, a slim frame porch, and a one-story frame structure with a shingle roof in the backyard— based on Cumberland modern city’s layout, it would have been located along North Mechanic Street between

Market Street and Queen City Drive. While African Americans were not relegated to live in one specific area of Cumberland during these years like many cities accomplished through racial housing covenants, this location is only a street over from the “colored” Mechanic Street School (between 69 and 77 N. Mechanic Street) and the McKindree M.E. Church (colored) (between 151 and 157 N. Centre Street).⁹²

The Garden Theatre was open from 1927 until 1954 and was heavily advertised to host a variety of performances and movies throughout its lifespan. Based on recollections of the theater from residents who grew up in the area (Harry Robert Porter), the theater began primarily showing movies and shorts after World War II. This is despite the efforts of the new 1949 management team, Fred Perry and Richard Young, to audition and hire live entertainment for nearly an entire year. Based on newspaper archives, it appears this search had ended by 1951, and the Garden

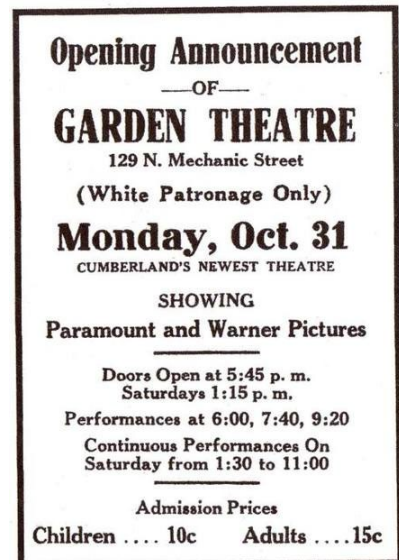


Figure 7. 1927 advertisement for the “whites only” Garden Theatre. Images courtesy of newspapers.com.

⁹¹ Albert Feldstein, “The Howard and the Garden, Cumberland,” Western Maryland’s Historical Library, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.whilbr.org/AlleganyAfricanAmericans/Howard-and-Garden-Cumberland>.

⁹² (“Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Cumberland, Allegany County, Maryland.” 1921), 3.

Theatre continued to focus on movie sales. The 1956 Sanborn map of Cumberland shows the building still standing, but not in operation. Since then, it has been torn down and a high-rise apartment complex has replaced it.

Frostburg

Frostburg was founded in 1812 by Meshach and Catherine Majers Frost, descendants of early western Maryland settlers, the same year the National Road reached the area.⁹³ Coal was discovered in the area in the late 18th century, leading Frostburg to become a hub for coal mining and brick making following the expansion of railroads into the town. It is estimated that “95% of the city’s surface area was situated over deep mining tunnels” by the early 20th century.⁹⁴ Given Frostburg’s ability to service and profit from its surrounding mining communities, the town experienced a unique level of prosperity in the early 20th century. While the town was uniquely situated to host traveling laborers, Frostburg’s relative affluence inspired the establishment of Maryland's second Normal School for teacher training in 1900.⁹⁵ After the demand for coal declined, what is now Frostburg State University quickly became the center of Frostburg’s economy. What began as Maryland’s second Normal School for teachers in 1900 (with one building and 57 students) would eventually become Frostburg State College in 1963.⁹⁶ Maryland's 1987 addition of Frostburg State College to the State University system drove expansion of the school that would see the destruction of much of Brownsville to make room for more academic and administrative buildings.

⁹³ (“City History,” n.d.)

⁹⁴ “History,” *Downtown Frostburg* (blog), accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.downtownfrostburg.com/history/>.

⁹⁵ (“City History,” n.d.)

⁹⁶ (“History,” n.d.)

Brownsville is a historically African American community, settled after the Civil War by Tamar Brown, a formerly enslaved woman freed before the Civil War. Tamar first appeared in public records in 1860, living near Frostburg's earlier Black community surrounding the Mechanic Street Hall Chapel.⁹⁷ In 1866, she purchased Lot 1 in Beall's First Addition for \$150.00, and by the 1870 census owned \$1500.00 in real estate.⁹⁸ The house she built on this lot, where Frostburg State's Simpson Hall now stands, was a two-story frame house with a substantial porch.⁹⁹ The 1870 census shows that ten people lived on the property, including herself and her two children, another laundress and her four children, and two male laborers.¹⁰⁰

In 1868, six men in the African American community purchased land across the alley from Tamar's home with the intent of building a school. Local legend suggests this idea came from Tamar Brown, especially as the deed suggests it may have been a community-wide effort, "the colored people of Frostburg being desirous to erect a School House for their especial use and benefit."¹⁰¹ However, the official sale of the lot was to William Jackson, David B. Taylor, George Johnson, Dennis McKinney, William Rederick, and William Johnson.¹⁰² This schoolhouse would come to be known as the Lincoln School, opened in 1868 and attended by children from both the Mechanic Street community and Brownsville.¹⁰³ By 1870, Lincoln School had twenty students, aged seven to nineteen, many of whom also had jobs.¹⁰⁴ The establishment

⁹⁷ Lynn Bowman, *Being Black in Brownsville: Echoes of a "Forgotten" Frostburg*, 4th ed., 2011. 22

⁹⁸ (Bowman 2011), 22

⁹⁹ (Bowman 2011), 23

¹⁰⁰ (Bowman 2011), 23

¹⁰¹ (Bowman 2011), 23

¹⁰² (Bowman 2011), 23

¹⁰³ (Bowman 2011), 24-25

¹⁰⁴ (Bowman 2011), 25

of the school prompted further settlement and led Brownsville to become a popular community for African American families.

Music was a popular pastime in Brownsville– Lynn Bowman asserts that a “tradition of people getting together to play and sing was well-established” by the 1950s.¹⁰⁵ Three non-extant entertainment venues were identified within the Brownsville community, ranging from 1928 to 1973. While no associated structures remain today, their history is still important to both Brownsville and the history of African American music and culture as a whole.

¹⁰⁵ (Bowman 2011), 76

The surname Jackson became popular among African Americans following the Civil War, with two different families forming in Frostburg between Brownsville and Mechanic Street. The second woman to purchase land in Brownsville was Betsy Elizabeth Jackson, who settled on the lot next door to Tamar Brown.¹⁰⁶ Betsy's descendant Earl Jackson and his wife Eleanor continued to live in Brownsville during the twentieth century, opening an after-hours club known as the "Progressive Music Club" in the bottom floor of their home at 58 Park Avenue.¹⁰⁷ While no documentary information has been able to establish a timeline of the restaurant, it is first mentioned on page seven of the April 21st, 1928 issue of the Afro-American– "Mrs. Elleanor Jackson entertained the Progressive Club. Music and games were the features of the evening."¹⁰⁸ Mrs. Josie Harper shared with Lynn Bowman the fond memories of her father, Eugene Bush, Jr., playing banjo on their porch with Earl Jackson.¹⁰⁹ Later, the Jacksons were likely pushed out of their home due to university expansion and established a new club known as the "Cotton Club." This venue is said to have been integrated and host to famous African American entertainers like Dizzy Gillespie and Lena Horne after they'd play white-only clubs in Cumberland.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ (Bowman 2011), 70

¹⁰⁷ (Bowman 2011), 70

¹⁰⁸ "Frostburg, Maryland," *Baltimore Afro American*, April 21, 1928, sec. Maryland, <https://newspaperarchive.com/baltimore-afro-american-apr-21-1928-p-7/>.

¹⁰⁹ (Bowman 2011), 76

¹¹⁰ (Bowman 2011), 70

Harper's Parklane Restaurant, 85 Beall Street Extended (1956-1973)

Harper's Parklane was a restaurant and entertainment establishment owned and operated by Lucius Carlton "Pete" Harper and his wife, Mary Priscilla (Washington) Harper. Lucius was likely born in Frostburg to parents Loucious and Hattie Harper in 1916.¹¹¹ According to the 1910 census, Loucious was 33 years old, born in Georgia, and worked as a coachman, while Hattie was 28 and born in Virginia.¹¹² The couple, their five children, and one boarder lived in a rental 4 Water Street.¹¹³ They had been married for 15 years and may have previously lived in West Virginia for a time given that their oldest children, William and Madge, were born there.¹¹⁴ In 1920, the family was renting 12 Fairview Street with three more kids, including four-year-old Carlton, and two boarders.¹¹⁵

In the 1930 census, only Hattie was living with the kids in the same home, now owners.

Fourteen-year-old Carlton was working in a brick factory, and while he could read and write, he was not in school. Mary Priscilla Washington was 13 in 1930 and lived at 115 Park Avenue with her parents and four sisters.¹¹⁶ According to the census, she was in school and likely attended the Lincoln School, given that she lived in Brownsville proper. By 1950, Carlton (now going by Lucius) and Priscilla (now known as Mary P.) were married with five sons and one daughter,

¹¹¹ "1910 United States Federal Census: Frostburg, Allegany County," Census (National Archives and Records Administration), Ancestry.com, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7884/records/10172429>.

¹¹² ("1910 United States Federal Census: Frostburg, Allegany County")

¹¹³ ("1910 United States Federal Census: Frostburg, Allegany County")

¹¹⁴ ("1910 United States Federal Census: Frostburg, Allegany County")

¹¹⁵ "1920 United States Federal Census: Frostburg, Allegany County," Census (National Archives and Records Administration, 1920), Ancestry.com, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/6061/records/107015687>.

¹¹⁶ "1930 United States Federal Census," Census (National Archives and Records Administration, 1930), Ancestry.com, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/6224/records/104354366>.

living at 28 Pine Street.¹¹⁷ Lucius Carlton was unemployed at this time, looking for work as a laborer in road construction.¹¹⁸

In 1952, Lucius would buy an empty lot in Brownsville, the address of which would change over the years, likely due to encroaching university development.¹¹⁹ The earliest advertisement found for the restaurant was in December of 1956, and listed their address as 85 Beall Street.¹²⁰ Later, their address was listed as 83 Beall Street, on the intersection at Broadway and Park Avenue, 85 Beall Street Extended, and finally at 85 1/2 Beall Street Extended. The 1956 advertisement offered a food delivery service



Figure 8. 1957 Advertisement for Harper's Parklane, Cumberland Evening Times. Courtesy of newspapers.com.

for fried chicken, French fries, or coleslaw at any hour, but by 1957 the Harper's opened a Dining Room in late June that offered weeknight entertainment from Lucius (see Figure 8).¹²¹ Lucius is said to have had a slew of careers while trying to establish himself as a musician, which he accomplished on at least a local level, including through the integration of "The

¹¹⁷ "1950 United States Federal Census: Frostburg, Allegany County" (National Archives and Records Administration, Seventeenth Census of the United States 1950), Ancestry.com, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/62308/records/61024094>.

¹¹⁸ ("1950 United States Federal Census: Frostburg, Allegany County" 1950)

¹¹⁹ (Bowman 2011), 76

¹²⁰ "Harper's Parklane Advertisement," *The Cumberland News*, December 3, 1956.

¹²¹ "Opening Next Week: Beautiful New Parklane Dining Room," *The Cumberland News*, June 22, 1957.

Modernaires.” While no physical evidence of this exists, the restaurant was also known to host famous African American artists who would visit, eat, and jam with Pete after gigs at whites-only clubs in Cumberland.¹²²

1957 advertisements of the restaurant included the promise to “hear Lucius sing while you dine.” It’s likely around this time that Lucius started going by Pete— the restaurant’s name switched between *Pete Harper’s Parklane*, *the Parklane*, and eventually back to *Harpers Parklane* throughout the years. Various bands and musicians lost to memory were advertised at the Parklane between 1966 and 1971, including The 3 Jets, Bill Bittner and Trio, The Jack Hull Trio, The Wave, Expression Wagons, Joe Derrico, Robinson-Cruiso, The Fabulous Lizards, and Gobblers Knobs. Based on these advertisements, it also seemed common for Pete to join the bands, play in his own bands (the Parklaners and the Pete Harper Combo), as well as sing with his daughter, Linda.¹²³ In an act that may have helped bridge the gap between Brownsville and Frostburg State students, Pete occasionally offered a college student special.¹²⁴ Given this information, the later years of these entertainment offerings, and the odd names that accompany them, it’s possible that Pete may have been hiring college student bands to play the restaurant. The last advertisement promising entertainment by Pete was in 1971, and in 1973 the restaurant was reopened under the management of Wayne Harper.¹²⁵ Wayne may have been his son Lucius W., as recorded in the 1950 census, who would have been about 23 by then. No further advertisements appeared in *The Cumberland News* after this point.

¹²² (Bowman 2011), 77

¹²³ “Harpers Parklane Advertisement,” *The Cumberland News*, December 14, 1968.

¹²⁴ “College Student Special Price,” *Cumberland Evening Times*, March 3, 1967.

¹²⁵ “Fri. & Sat. The New Parklaners,” *The Cumberland News*, July 10, 1971.; “Re-Opening Under Management of Wayne Harper,” *The Cumberland News*, November 24, 1973.

At the time that Lynn Bowman published *Being Black in Brownsville* in 2011, only four buildings of the Brownsville community remained, including the Harper's Parklane Restaurant. By 2018, two more buildings had been demolished and replaced by student apartments and a parking lot, unfortunately also including the Harper's restaurant.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ (Bowman 2011), 115-116

Tommy Taylor's "Blue Room"

While research for this study uncovered no documentary evidence of the “Blue Room” outside one sentence in Lynn Bowman’s *Being Black in Brownsville*, what she wrote felt noteworthy enough to include and hopefully spur further interest in uncovering its history. The Taylors of Brownsville have been around since at least its earliest years in the 1860s, and Bowman describes the family as being “crucial to the development of the African American communities of Frostburg.”¹²⁷ David B. Taylor was one of the six men who helped purchase property for the Lincoln School in 1868, and three Taylors are recorded as free in the 1860 census- Ellen, Rob, and Kitty.¹²⁸ In a discussion of Brownsville’s entertainment business, Bowman asserts that Tommy Taylor’s “Blue Room,” along with the Jackson’s “Cotton Club,” had established “the area’s reputation for 'after-hours' entertainment of the highest order.”¹²⁹ No variation of the name Tommy Taylor exists in available census data besides a ten-year-old Charles T. Taylor living with his parents at 107 Park Avenue in 1930, which would make him a fair bit younger than Lucius Carlton “Pete” Harper.¹³⁰ Given that Bowman insinuates the Blues Room was established prior to Harper’s Parklane Restaurant, Charles would’ve had to establish the Blues Room around the age of 20, which is unlikely but not entirely impossible.

¹²⁷ (Bowman 2011), 11

¹²⁸ (Bowman 2011), 124

¹²⁹ (Bowman 2011), 76

¹³⁰ (“1930 United States Federal Census” 1930)

Washington County

In 1732, Lord Baltimore “opened” the lands of Western Maryland for colonial settlement, after which Frederick County was formed in 1748 to encompass the region.¹³¹ This area of Maryland was delayed in settlement largely due to its mountainous terrain, lack of adequate transportation, and indigenous occupation. As settlers began establishing farms throughout the region, Washington County was formed in 1776 and encompassed the entire Western arm of Maryland.¹³² Grain crops were a popular agricultural pursuit of the county, but a lack of major transportation routes in the region led to a proliferation of gristmills to ensure that local farmers were able to process their crops. Like nearly all agricultural and industrial pursuits of the time, the mills, iron forges, and furnaces were commonly serviced by indentured servants and enslaved individuals. As Maryland transitioned into having an industrial-based economy, Hagerstown became a hub for manufacturing, producing silk garments, paper, engines, and more.¹³³ Hagerstown’s Black population nearly doubled from 1850 to 1910, likely in pursuit of work and community in the historic African American community of the Jonathan Street Neighborhood.¹³⁴

Hagerstown

Hagerstown’s Jonathan Street Neighborhood is a historic African American community. Although the community likely existed prior to 1865, the Civil War and emancipation are largely attributed with bringing more residents to the area.¹³⁵ African American businesses, fraternal

¹³¹ (Chidester 2004)

¹³² (Chidester 2004)

¹³³ (Chidester 2004)

¹³⁴ Census records

¹³⁵ Brett Peters, “Spotlight on Jonathan Street,” Washington County Historical Society, March 30, 2021, <https://washcohistory.org/spotlight-on-jonathan-street/>.

organizations, and churches thrived along Jonathan Street. Jacob Wheaton, the first Black man to vote in the state of Maryland, lived in the neighborhood, as did members of Moxley's Band.¹³⁶ Moxley's Band was formed by brothers Robert, Joseph, and Perry in 1854 as a cornet and drum band, and in 1863, the entire band joined the U.S. Colored Troops in exchange for their freedom.¹³⁷ Three venues associated with African American entertainment were identified along Jonathan Street. However, given how Washington County's African American population grew over the period of interest, it is likely that other venues throughout the county existed but have yet to be recorded.

¹³⁶ (Peters 2021)

¹³⁷ (Peters 2021)

The Harmon Hotel/Dance Hall, 226 N. Jonathan Street (c. 1900-1977)

In the early 1900s, Walter Harmon was Hagerstown's wealthiest African American entrepreneur. The 1900 census shows Walter, aged 27, as the head of household at 226 North Jonathan Street. This census details that he owned the house outright and worked as a saloon keeper. His wife, Florence Key, and their two children, Louisa and Walter, are also listed in the census, as well as one lodger and one boarder, who both appear to be working for Walter as bartenders.¹³⁸ Among some of Walter's various property holdings, a dance hall is said to have been operated by the Harmons. While I have not been able to locate where the Harmon's dance hall might have stood, it is common for dance halls to be close by or even share the same lot as travelers' lodges and hotels.¹³⁹

Walter's impact on Hagerstown is clear in the newspaper coverage of his illness and eventual death. On the front page of the January 27, 1915, edition of *The Morning Herald*, Walter is reported to have "taken suddenly ill last night with



Figure 9. Recreation of the Harmon Hotel on a historical marker. Courtesy of Allen C. Browne.

heart trouble and indigestion"¹⁴⁰ In early February, *The Morning Herald* reports that Walter died

¹³⁸ ("1900 United States Federal Census: Hagerstown, Washington County" 1900)

¹³⁹ I have found this to be a common occurrence throughout my research of music and dance venues in African Americans communities, such as the dance pavilion said to have occupied the former William Sidney Pittman property in Fairmount Heights, Maryland during its time as a boardinghouse.

¹⁴⁰ "Walter Harmon Ill," *Hagerstown Morning Herald*, January 27, 1915.

in his home, leaving behind his wife and nine children.¹⁴¹ According to this obituary, Walter operated the hotel, a pool room, and bowling alleys, had an excavating and hauling business, and owned 37 houses, altogether making him worth an estimated \$50,000-\$75,000 (which, adjusted for today's inflation, would make him a millionaire).¹⁴² This obituary also interestingly details that he rented some of his property to white people.

Following Walter's death, Florence took over the business and ran the hotel alongside her son Frank until she passed away in 1953. Under her management, the hotel was originally run as an apartment building, and then as a hotel when Frank joined the business in the 1930s. Although the hotel was reported to be "gutted by fire" in January of 1950,¹⁴³ the family seems to have been able to rebuild quickly, as Willie Mays stayed in the hotel later that year during his debut in the minor leagues with the Trenton Giants.¹⁴⁴ While only four listings of Victor and Alma Green's *The Negro Motorist Green Book* included sites in Western Maryland, the Harmon Hotel was listed from 1938 to 1964.¹⁴⁵ *The Negro Motorist Green Book* was a travel guide published annually to assist Black travelers in finding safe accommodations, dining, and entertainment.¹⁴⁶

As the hotel was eventually torn down, the only surviving depiction of it exists on the historical marker and on Sanborn maps. Based on its depiction in the 1904 Sanborn map of Hagerstown, the hotel was a two-story, U-shaped brick building with a frame cornice and mainly shingle

¹⁴¹ "Walter Harmon Dead," *Hagerstown Morning Herald*, February 19, 1915.

¹⁴² (*Hagerstown Morning Herald* 1915)

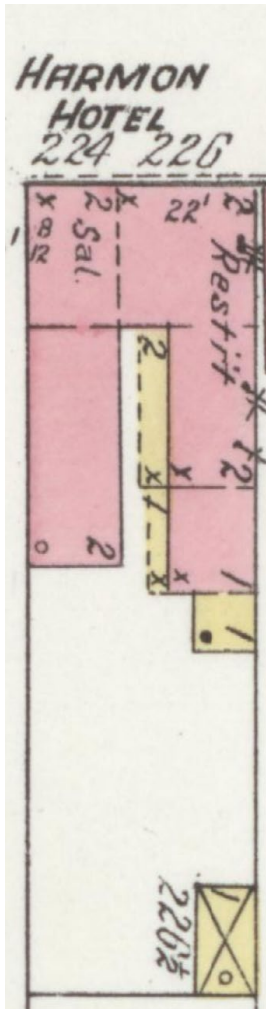
¹⁴³ "30 Years Ago Today," *The Morning Herald*, January 20, 1950.

¹⁴⁴ Christopher Busta-Peck, "The Harmon Hotel Historical Marker," The Historical Marker Database, November 22, 2019, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=5675>.

¹⁴⁵ Christopher Busta-Peck, "The Harmon Hotel Historical Marker," The Historical Marker Database, November 22, 2019, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=5675>.

¹⁴⁶ "Route 66 and the Historic Negro Motorist Green Book," U.S. National Park Service, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/route-66-and-the-historic-negro-motorist-green-book.htm>.

While the image on the historical marker shows that the hotel had a mansard roof, the Sanborn map does not corroborate nor completely rule this out. The first floor of the hotel fronting Jonathan Street had both a saloon and a restaurant, which might explain why there were three entrances along the front facade. According to a 1971 article in *The Morning Herald*, the Harmon Hotel was slated to close soon despite residents of 25 and 50 years still living inside.¹⁴⁸ In the fall of 1977, advertisements for the public sale of the hotel's contents went out in both *The Daily Mail* and *The Morning Herald*, and the hotel was likely demolished not long after.¹⁴⁹



¹⁴⁹ "Public Sale," *The Morning Herald*, November 1, 1977.

The Elite Rendezvous was a popular restaurant and lounge in the Jonathan Street neighborhood, in operation from 1945 to 1975. Early newspaper coverage of the establishment mainly details petitions to transfer a Class B Beer License from Walter Mason to R.A. Mosley in September of 1945, and then a subsequent transfer from R.A. Mosley to Leonard W. Curlin in December of the same year.¹⁵⁰ Curlin likely took over the Elite Rendezvous in 1946, at which time a car unfortunately crashed into the building and is said to have almost reduced it to shambles (see Figure 11).¹⁵¹ No one was injured as a result, and the article offers a glimpse into the only architectural element this research has determined of the Rendezvous; the vehicle is described as crashing through a big plate glass window. Leonard W. Curlin moved to Hagerstown from Jamaica in 1945 and operated the Elite Rendezvous until 1975, at which time he sold the property for redevelopment of the block into affordable housing.

During its years of operation, both the Elite Rendezvous and Curlin faced many challenges. The tavern was broken into and stolen from in 1955, 1957, and 1964, and Leonard was assaulted and robbed on his way home from the lounge in 1967.¹⁵² While no concrete evidence exists on



Figure 11. The Morning Herald, Jan 10, 1946. Courtesy of newspapers.com.

¹⁵⁰ "Announcements," *The Morning Herald*, September 24, 1945.; "Announcements," *The Daily Mail*, December 28, 1945.

¹⁵¹ "Building Wrecked; Patrons Uninjured," *The Morning Herald*, January 10, 1946.

¹⁵² "Negro Community Leader Assaulted, Robbed Here," *The Morning Herald*, January 9, 1967.

whether Curlin's lounge offered live entertainment, he was a prominent member of not only the Hagerstown Black community but also the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order Elks of the World (IBPOEW). The IBPOEW, also known as the Black Elks, is an organization that was formed in 1898 after exclusion by the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks (BPOE), or the white Elks.¹⁵³ Curlin became the Exalted Ruler of the Pride of Hagerstown Elks Lodge #278 in the early 1940s, and later became president of the Tri-State Association of Elks, which petitioned the national organization to buy and develop the Kennedy Farm into the Chitlin' Circuit stop it became.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ "History of the IBPOEW," Improved Benevolent and Protective Order Elks of the World, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.ibpoew.org/history>.

¹⁵⁴ Ed Maliskas, *John Brown to James Brown*, First Edition (Hamilton Run Press, 2016), 80-83

While this property is technically situated in Sharpsburg, its relationship with the Hagerstown Black Elks has prompted its inclusion as one of Hagerstown's venues. Kennedy Farm is most popularly associated with the raid that abolitionist John Brown launched against the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in 1859.¹⁵⁵ A little under 100 years later, the Black Elks would purchase the property in 1950 with the intent of memorializing John Brown's legacy.¹⁵⁶ Over the next fifteen years, it would turn into a meeting place for members and families of the Black Elks, as well as multi-state black youth on the weekends who remember seeing iconic black musicians and singers such as James Brown, Tina Turner, B.B. King, Ray Charles, Etta James, Otis Redding, and many more.¹⁵⁷ The Elks built an auditorium and three cottages, renovated a barn, and erected an impressive arched entryway to the property before financial issues forced the group to move in 1966.¹⁵⁸

Upon the grand opening of the farm under the Black Elk's ownership in the fall of 1951, they had updated the farmhouse, renovated a barn with a veranda able to accommodate hundreds of guests, and completed construction of the auditorium and facilities, a cottage, and a 14-foot

John Brown Farm Dedicated By Negro Elks

Two thousand Negro Elks dedicated over the weekend the first of a series of projected buildings at the old John Brown Farm near Samples Manor.

Sponsored by the Grand Lodge, the Elks event drew busloads of members from points as far distant as Indiana.

Figure 12. The 1951 Hagerstown Daily Mail article detailing the IBPOEW dedication of Kennedy Farm.

¹⁵⁵ Benjamin Levy, "Kennedy Farm / John Brown's Headquarters," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1973), Section 8.

¹⁵⁶ (Maliskas 2016)

¹⁵⁷ (Maliskas 2016)

¹⁵⁸ (Maliskas 2016)

archway.¹⁵⁹ A September 24, 1951, article in the Morning Herald describes the dance hall as “a concrete block building... about 250 [actually 124] feet long, this structure contains a dance hall, refreshment facilities, and other recreational equipment.”¹⁶⁰ During this event, each Elks’ State association pledged to build a cabin on the property; however, in 1954, Pennsylvania became the first and only state to do so.¹⁶¹ The Daughters of the Elks ran a successful national campaign for the construction of a cottage during that same year.¹⁶² Later dedication ceremonies would be held for structures in which no records or physical remnants exist- this includes: a “freedom tower,” said to be “a tall structure which will bear on its top a light which will keep burning at all times” as a symbol for “the light that John Brown helped to bring to the slaves nearly a century ago”; as well as a 1957 groundbreaking for a proposed chapel.¹⁶³

The Black Elks significantly developed the property and had bigger plans than they were financially able to pursue.



Figure 12. The IBPOEW Auditorium in 2023, photo by author.

The memorialization of

John Brown's legacy was one of the strongest lobbying points employed by local members, namely Leonard Curlin, to the national organization. Thus, from their purchase, it was always their intention to properly enshrine the farm. A 1956 Grand Lodge meeting reminded delegates

¹⁵⁹ (Maliskas 2016)

¹⁶⁰ “John Brown Farm Dedication by Negro Elks,” *The Daily Mail*, September 24, 1951.

¹⁶¹ (Maliskas 2016), 95-96.

¹⁶² (Maliskas 2016)

¹⁶³ (Maliskas 2016), 93, 99.

that the intent in purchasing the property was to establish “a museum to tell the story of the heroes who died in John Brown’s raid, to all the world, for generations to come.”¹⁶⁴ The following year, Grand Lodge minutes record a suggestion of establishing an on-site museum dedicated to the Elks.¹⁶⁵ Many leaders in the organization were hopeful that it could become a place for educating and inspiring the youth- the possibility of a summer camp for underprivileged youth was tossed around in a 1950 Grand Lodge meeting, and the vision “to enlarge, beautify and extend the usefulness of this National Shrine for ourselves and our children,” was expressed by Grand Secretary Hueston in a 1954 report.¹⁶⁶

Despite these plans, the Black Elks' ownership of the farm over the following years is marked largely by their auditorium's use as a music venue under the management of John Bishop, an advantageous entrepreneur who solidified the property’s place along the Chitlin Circuit.¹⁶⁷ The area of the farm containing the dance hall was eventually sold to Steve Belschner and James Sickafus, who operated an “all-gay campground and dance venue” from 1972 to 1979.¹⁶⁸

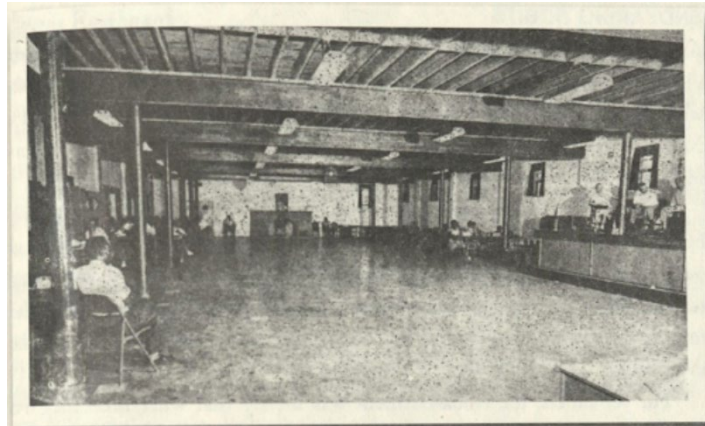


Figure 14. Earliest known photo of the interior of the IBPOEW Auditorium. Image courtesy of Ed Maliskas.

¹⁶⁴ (Maliskas 2016), 99.

¹⁶⁵ (Maliskas 2016), 99.

¹⁶⁶ (Maliskas 2016), 89, 97.

¹⁶⁷ (Maliskas 2016), 149-157

¹⁶⁸ Ferentinos and Egerman, “Maryland LGBTQ Historic Context Study.”

Conclusion

The African American entertainment venues and communities of Western Maryland offer an alternative narrative of the region as a place of Black joy and recreation. Trends that we see throughout the historic Chitlin' Circuit, such as dance halls, lounges, and after-hours jam sessions in restaurants, are present throughout Brownsville and the Jonathan Street Neighborhood. While urban renewal and encroaching university construction have physically altered these landscapes, their legacy of resilience and community has persisted. Although the music may have been a guest in these spaces for just a short time, these establishments deeply impacted the daily life of their communities. This history is testimony to the importance of considering narratives beyond what a structure is or looks like, and diving into how and by whom it was used.

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