



THE GREEN BOOK

SAFELY NAVIGATING JIM CROW AMERICA

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IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES, you will discover a re-publication of a mid-twentieth century travel guide titled *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, but commonly referred to as *The Green Book*. Published from 1936 through 1967, this travel guide catered exclusively to black motorists and vacationers.¹ During this period, due to the increased availability of automobiles, disposable income, and interstate highways, the United States as a whole experienced a surge in independent leisure travel and vacationing.² Suddenly, the quintessential American dream of adventure and the “open road” became a possibility for many Americans. However, in reality, for black motorists the “open road” was one monitored, regulated, and controlled by Jim Crow.³

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¹ For a digitized collection of *The Green Book*, see *The Green Book*, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY DIGITAL COLLECTIONS, digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/the-green-book?&keywords=&sort=sortString+asc#/?tab=about (last visited Oct. 24, 2016).

² See generally COTTEN SEILER, *REPUBLIC OF DRIVERS: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF AUTOMOBILITY IN AMERICA* (2008) (providing a history of American automobility).

³ See Cotten Seiler, “*So That We As a Race Might Have Something Authentic to Travel By*”: *African American Automobility and Cold War Liberalism*, 58 AM. Q. 4, 1092 (2006) [hereinafter Seiler, *Something Authentic*] (noting that during the mid-twentieth century the notion of an “open road” for black motorists was one of “bad faith”); see also Celia McGee, *The Open Road Wasn’t Quite Open to All*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 23, 2010, at C1 (“Historians of travel have recognized that the great American road trip – seen as the ultimate sign of freedom – was not that free for many Americans.”).

Under the reign of Jim Crow, the name associated with the de jure or legal segregation of blacks and whites following the Civil War through the 1960s, black Americans experienced a punishing restraint on their fundamental right to travel. For instance, the Supreme Court's 1896 proclamation in *Plessy v. Ferguson* of "separate but equal" led to the legalized form of discrimination known as "Jim Crow cars."⁴ Though black passengers paid the same train fare as similarly situated white passengers, Jim Crow relegated them to separate train cars. These Jim Crow cars were "invariably older and less well equipped, and frequently in such a condition as to defy cleaning."⁵ Consequently, many black Americans did not see travel as a leisurely vacation, but rather as a constant reminder of the injustice, oppression, and discrimination imposed upon them by Jim Crow America.

At the close of World War I, the mass production of automobiles appeared to change this state of affairs, seemingly providing black Americans access to the dignity, privacy, and autonomy so denied to them by Jim Crow cars.⁶ Unfortunately, because Jim Crow also controlled the "open road," black motorists could not explore the country without fear of prejudice and were thus, prevented from fully engaging in the "mobile citizenship" afforded to white motorists.⁷ Unlike their white counterparts, black Americans faced discrimination along America's highways as individual businesses, restaurants, gas stations, and hotels frequently refused service to black patrons.⁸ Some communities, known as "sundown towns," went so

⁴ See *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537, 544 (1896) (finding laws permitting or requiring separation based upon race "do not necessarily imply the inferiority of either race to the other, and have been generally, if not universally, recognized as within the competency of the state legislatures in the exercise of their police power").

⁵ CHARLES S. JOHNSON, *PATTERNS OF NEGRO SEGREGATION* 45 (1943).

⁶ See ARTHUR RAPER, *PREFACE TO PEASANTRY: A TALE OF TWO BLACK BELT COUNTIES* 175 (2005) (stating automobiles provided both white and black Americans "new mobility" based upon "personal standards rather than upon community mores").

⁷ SUSAN SESSIONS RUGH, *ARE WE THERE YET?: THE GOLDEN AGE OF AMERICAN FAMILY VACATIONS* 13, 70-72 (2008) ("Racial segregation and discrimination while traveling demonstrated the limits of citizenship and complicated the claims of African Americans to American identity.").

⁸ See, e.g., *id.* at 72 (recounting a complaint filed against Mobil Oil Company where the gas station attendant refused to allow a black family to use the public restrooms); ISABEL WILKERSON, *THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS: THE EPIC STORY OF AMERICA'S GREAT MIGRATION* (2010) (compiling accounts of racism and discrimination during the early twen-

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far as to strongly discourage these weary travelers from staying overnight.⁹ In order to encourage a black motorist's rapid departure from a sundown town, residents and local law enforcement would communicate subtle threats of violence.¹⁰ For instance, in Wyandotte, Michigan, law enforcement would stop black travelers just outside the city limits and "abruptly warn [them] that a welcome mat is not at the gates of the city."¹¹ According to the town's records, this warning typically encouraged the traveler to completely avoid Wyandotte.¹²

These forms of discrimination and threats of violence, however, did not stop black individuals and families from partaking in the "mobile citizenship" afforded by the automobile.¹³ Many black motorists converted their cars into mobile homes, stocked with food, sleeping bags, maps, spare automobile parts, and even portable toilets.¹⁴ Recognizing the realities of Jim Crow as well as black Americans' continued desire to travel, Victor H. Green, a New York postal worker, created *The Green Book*.¹⁵ Beginning with his own knowledge and the knowledge of other black postal workers, Green compiled a list of black-friendly establishments in and around New York City.¹⁶ With this guide in hand, black travelers could seek out safe and friendly businesses in and around New York City without fear of discrimination, humiliation, or harassment. Consequently, *The Green Book* permitted these travelers to temporarily circumvent Jim Crow's oppressive obstacles and barriers along the "open road."¹⁷ "[T]he response for copies was so

tieth century).

⁹ See JAMES W. LOEWEN, *SUNDOWN TOWNS: A HIDDEN DIMENSION OF AMERICAN RACISM* 269-71 (2005).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 269.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ RUGH, *supra* note 7, at 13.

¹⁴ Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, "Keep Going": *African Americans on the Road in the Era of Jim Crow* 55-57 (2009) (unpublished PhD dissertation, The University at Albany) (on file with The University at Albany library) ("The car became an extension of the safe home environment and the safe black neighborhood – a home on wheels.").

¹⁵ See VICTOR H. GREEN, *THE NEGRO MOTORIST TRAVEL GUIDE 1* (1949) [hereinafter GREEN, TRAVEL GUIDE].

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ See RUGH, *supra* note 7, at 70 ("To resist Jim Crow, by the 1930s blacks had created an

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great” that by the following year, Green decided to transform his local guide into a national handbook.¹⁸ In 1947, Green formally established Victor H. Green & Company, where he and his wife not only published *The Green Book* but also booked advance reservations for black vacationers at resorts and hotels.¹⁹

The Green Book soon became the official national travel guide for black motorists. As one traveler exclaimed in the 1939 edition of *The Green Book*, “*The Negro Motorist Green Book* will mean as much if not more to us than the A.A.A. means to the white race.”²⁰ Similarly, another traveler noted in his personal memoir, “*The Green Book* was the bible of every Negro traveler in the 1950s and early 1960s. You literally didn’t dare leave home without it.”²¹ As word spread about *The Green Book*, the guide received national attention and increased sponsorships. For instance, Esso Standard Oil Company – today, known as Exxon Mobil – agreed to promote, sell, and distribute copies of *The Green Book* in its gas stations throughout the country.²² By 1962, *The Green Book*’s annual circulation reached 2,000,000 copies.²³ Eventually, the travel guide expanded to include destination listings in Canada, Mexico, and Bermuda, transforming into an international travel guide.²⁴ At the time of its final publication in 1966, *The Green Book* was not only the official travel guide for black travelers, but also an invaluable resource for the black community.

Besides its practical purpose as a travel guide helping black Americans avoid discrimination and harassment, *The Green Book* also served as a testi-

entirely separate tourist infrastructure, including their own travel guides and travel agencies that directed travelers to places where they would be welcome without fear of humiliation.”).

¹⁸ GREEN, TRAVEL GUIDE, *supra* note 15, at 1.

¹⁹ Novera C. Dashiell, *Many Happy Returns*, THE NEGRO TRAVELERS’ GREEN BOOK 5-7 (1956).

²⁰ Seiler, *Something Authentic*, *supra* note 3, at 1102.

²¹ EARL HUTCHINSON & EARL OFARI HUTCHINSON, A COLORED MAN’S JOURNEY THROUGH 20TH CENTURY SEGREGATED AMERICA 87 (2000).

²² Dashiell, *supra* note 19, at 5 (“One of [*The Green Book*’s] greatest enthusiasts has been James A. Jackson, Special Representative of the Esso Standard Oil [Company], who has used these guides [and who] has helped it prosper . . .”).

²³ Sorin, *supra* note 14, at 181.

²⁴ See VICTOR H. GREEN, TRAVELERS’ GREEN BOOK: INTERNATIONAL EDITION (1961-64).

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monial to the accomplishments of black entrepreneurs and leaders throughout the country. Within *The Green Book's* pages, readers would discover articles concerning the history of monuments dedicated to black soldiers,²⁵ photographs of successful black-owned businesses,²⁶ and towns “owned and operated” by black Americans.²⁷ In a similar vein, *The Green Book's* editors promoted black-owned businesses, commerce, and travel as the means of desegregating the country.²⁸ Specifically, by using their purchasing power to support businesses listed in *The Green Book*, black travelers created financial pressure on racist establishments to open their doors to black customers or otherwise face economic failure.²⁹ Underscoring the influence of the guide and its purpose, the editors remarked in the 1949 edition that one of their goals was to eliminate need for *The Green Book*:

There will be a day sometime in the near future when this guide will not have to be published. That is when we as a race will have equal opportunities and privileges in the United States. It will be a great day for us to suspend this publication for then we can go wherever we please, and without embarrassment.³⁰

As its editors predicted, *The Green Book* ultimately did render itself obsolete.³¹ During the Senate Commerce Committee Hearings for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, *The Green Book* provided “dramatic testimony to the difficulties” that black citizens encountered while traveling and the nega-

²⁵ GREEN, TRAVEL GUIDE, *supra* note 15, at 22 (describing a monument dedicated to the Old 8th National Guard, an integrated Illinois regiment).

²⁶ *Id.* at 23 (depicting images of Metropolitan Funeral Homes and Mutual Assurance Company, which the editors described as “monuments to Negro business”).

²⁷ *Id.* at 26-27 (describing Robbins, Illinois, a primarily black community founded in 1917).

²⁸ See, e.g., VICTOR H. GREEN, THE NEGRO TRAVELERS' GREEN BOOK: 1955 INTERNATIONAL EDITION 1 (1955) (“Thousands and thousands of dollars are spent each year in the various modes of transportation. Money spent like this brings added revenue to trades people throughout the country.”).

²⁹ See generally Meagen K. Monahan, “The Green Book:” A Representation of the Black Middle Class and Its Resistance to Jim Crow Through Entrepreneurship and Respectability (Dec. 12, 2012) (unpublished B.A. honors thesis, College of William & Mary) (on file with Swem Library, College of William & Mary) (discussing how *The Green Book* utilized black middle class purchasing power to effectuate social change during the Civil Rights Movement).

³⁰ GREEN, TRAVEL GUIDE, *supra* note 15, at 1.

³¹ Seiler, *Something Authentic*, *supra* note 3, at 1108.

tive effects racial discrimination had on interstate travel and commerce.³² Even after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the opening of public accommodations to all races, *The Green Book* continued to provide evidence for the need to dismantle Jim Crow cultural norms and prejudices. In *Heart of Atlanta Motel v. United States*, a case involving a challenge to Title II of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Supreme Court noted that *The Green Book's* mere existence demonstrated the severity of racial discrimination along the road, which “had become so acute as to require the listing of available lodging . . . in a special guidebook.”³³ The Supreme Court therefore held that Title II of the Act, which forbade public accommodations from discriminating on account of race, was a permissible exercise of Congress’s power under the Commerce Clause. The Heart of Atlanta Motel and similar public accommodations were thus required to serve all travelers, regardless of race.³⁴ *The Green Book* served not only as a practical day-to-day guide but also as a conduit for the black community to secure “equal opportunities and privileges” through federal legislation and Supreme Court decisions.

Following its final publication in 1967, *The Green Book* faded from the American consciousness. Fortunately, in recent years, several individuals, plucking *The Green Book* from near obscurity, have published works examining this travel guide.³⁵ Calvin Alexander Ramsey, at the forefront of this effort, published a children’s book titled *Ruth and the Green Book*, which encourages children to grapple with the intricacies of race relations through an accessible narrative of a young black girl who, in 1952, uses *The Green Book* while on a trip to see her grandmother.³⁶ Such efforts to recover *The*

³² See *Heart of Atlanta Motel v. United States*, 379 U.S. 241, 253 (1964) (quoting *Hearing on S. 1732 Before the S. Comm. on Commerce*, 88th Cong. 692-94 (1963)).

³³ 379 U.S. 241, 253 (1964).

³⁴ See *id.* at 247-48, 261-62.

³⁵ See, e.g., TONI MORRISON, *HOME* (2012) (referencing the travel guide); CALVIN ALEXANDER RAMSEY, *RUTH AND THE GREEN BOOK* (2010) (writing a children’s book based upon a young girl’s road trip while using *The Green Book*); RUGH, *supra* note 7, at 70-91 (dedicating a chapter to *The Green Book* and “vacation without humiliation”); Seiler, *Something Authentic*, *supra* note 3 (analyzing the rhetoric of *The Green Book* and positioning it within the era of Cold War liberalism); Sorin, *supra* note 14 (producing a PhD dissertation on automobility during the Jim Crow era).

³⁶ See generally RAMSEY, *supra* note 35.

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Green Book and its history provide an opportunity for modern readers to reflect upon our society's progress – or perhaps the lack thereof. Though *The Green Book* has not been published in fifty years, readers should ask themselves whether it would still be useful today. In the wake of Ferguson and similar tragedies, the Black Lives Matter movement, the disproportionately high rate of incarceration of young black males,³⁷ and the day-to-day humiliations of Driving While Black³⁸ and Stop & Frisk,³⁹ it is worth asking whether American society has reached *The Green Book* editors' image of a "great day" – a day where black Americans "can go wherever [they] please, and without embarrassment."



³⁷ See Bruce Drake, *Incarceration Gap Widens Between Whites and Blacks*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (2013), www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/06/incarceration-gap-between-whites-and-blacks-widens/ (noting Pew Research Center figures recorded "[b]lack men were more than six times as likely as white men to be incarcerated in federal and state prisons, and local jails in 2010").

³⁸ See Sharon LaFraniere & Andrew W. Lehren, *The Disproportionate Risks of Driving While Black*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 25, 2015, at A1 (examining the realities of racial profiling through the measure of racial differences in traffic stops and arrests in Greensboro, North Carolina).

³⁹ See Joseph Goldstein, *Judge Rejects New York's Stop-and-Frisk Policy*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 13, 2013, at A1 (reporting that a New York federal judge ruled New York Police Department's stop-and-frisk policy resorted to indirect racial profiling and violated the constitutional rights of minorities in the city).