

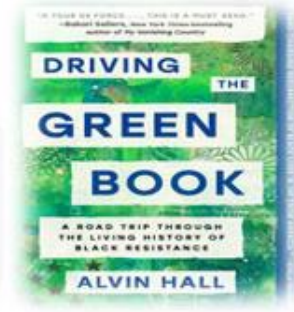
# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Book Notes #200

February 2025

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
Dr. Andrew Roth

### Why Black History Is Important – Part I



*From left: Victor Hugo Green, 1940 edition of “The Green Book,”  
Alvin Hal, and cover of “Driving the Green Book”*

Ever since American President Gerald R. Ford declared in the Bicentennial year 1976 that the public needed to “seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history,” February has been recognized as Black History Month. [1] It grew out of Black History Week, which began almost 100 years ago in 1926. It was created by Carter G. Woodson, one of the pioneer scholars of African American history. Woodson placed it in February to honor the birthdays of

Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, who were born on Feb. 12 and 14, respectively.

In conceiving Black History Week, Woodson wanted to encourage people “to extend their study of Black history,” so he “built Negro History Week around traditional days commemorating the Black past.” [3] In the African American community, Lincoln and Douglass’ birthdays were celebrated. Fifty years later, President Ford “extended” that celebration to a month. Now, almost another 50 years later, that extension is threatened by President Donald Trump and his aides Stephen Miller, Christopher Rufo, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, and others. [4]

Black history is important because it is integral to American history. One can no more understand American history without understanding Black history than one can without understanding the Pilgrims of New England, the Cavaliers of Virginia, the westward-bound Yankees who settled the Midwest, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century women who fought for women’s rights, the Mormons who settled the Great Valley of Utah, and the wave after wave of immigrants who made America great. In pursuit of understanding the entire tapestry of American history, just this month I read one excellent book and one brilliant book that “extended” and deepened my knowledge of the Black experience in America – Alvin Hall’s “Driving the Green Book: A Road Trip Through the Living History of Black Resistance” and Mark Whitaker’s brilliant “Smoketown: The Untold Story of the Other Great Black Renaissance.”

This week, we’ll look at Victor Hugo Green’s original “The Green Book” and Hall’s “Driving the Green Book”; next week, we’ll explore Whitaker’s immensely readable “Smoketown.”

I need to thank my former student Cheryl Rush Dix for suggesting Alvin Hall’s “Driving the Green Book: A Road Trip Through the Living History of the Black Resistance.” Hall’s book extended my understanding of the Black experience in America by vividly illustrating the challenges and perils of “DWB.”

I first heard the expression “DWB” from a young colleague at St. Bonaventure University. It was the Monday after Easter Break in 2017. I asked him what he had done the previous weekend. He told me he had hunkered down in his apartment reading and watching TV.

Since the weather had been beautiful, I asked why.

He said he didn’t want to be a victim of “DWB.”

Noting my blank expression, he proceeded to explain that he was from Ohio, and although he had been living in Olean, New York, for the past several months, his

car still had Ohio license plates, and, to state the obvious, he was a young Black man. That weekend, another Black man from Ohio had kidnapped his girlfriend, murdered an elderly man in Cleveland, fled to Erie, Pennsylvania, was accused of killing another woman there, and then was thought to have driven east along Interstate 86 into the Southern Tier of New York state.

My young colleague did not want to be the victim of someone stereotypically assuming that one Black male in a car with Ohio plates was as good as another and that he was the fleeing murderer.

He didn't want to be the victim of "DWB."

He didn't want to be a victim of "Driving While Black."

When I replied that he sounded a bit paranoid, he reminded me that Andy Grove, chief executive of computer chip manufacturer Intel, titled his autobiography "Only the Paranoid Survive." My young colleague told me his culture had schooled him not to be paranoid, for then the other guy wins, but always to be aware, always to be alert. As a young Black man in an overwhelmingly white region of New York state, he decided that on that beautiful spring weekend the risk-reward ratio said, "Stay indoors; don't be a victim of 'DWB.'"

For me, recalling that conversation transformed Hall's "Driving the Green Book" from an abstract, intellectual experience into a reality still alive in the third decade of the 21st century. Hall's "Driving the Green Book" resulted from his and two colleagues' decision to drive from Detroit to New Orleans using "The Green Book" as their guide. They wanted to understand the experience of their parents, grandparents, and earlier generations traveling by car in Jim Crow, segregated America.

\*\*\*

**Aside.** There are three "Green Books" in play here. To avoid any confusion, let's first note that this is not about the 2019 Academy Award-winning film "Green Book," in which Black concert pianist Don Shirley hires an Italian American bouncer, Frank "Tony Lip" Vallelonga, to drive him around the country on a concert tour in 1962.

The film's true story uses "The Green Book" as the hook holding the story together; hence, the title. It truthfully depicts the discrimination and dangers they encounter because Shirley is Black. In the process, however, it transforms the story into a black-white "buddy" film as Shirley and Vallelonga overcome their differences and become friends through their shared experience. The film's use of "The Green Book" as a plot device gives the film more than a hint of authenticity.

Second, there is Victor Hugo Green's original "The Green Book," the Black motorist's guide to navigating American culture in the mid-20th century. Lastly, there is Hall's "Driving the Green Book," which seeks to place original "The Green Book" in its proper historical context and to use it as a lens into 21st-century American society.

\*\*\*

Published from 1936 to 1967 during the segregation and Jim Crow era in American history that began after the Civil War in 1865, Victor Hugo Green created "The Green Book" as a travel guide for Black motorists. Hall points out that the automobile became not only an avatar of freedom for Black Americans just as for white Americans in the early 20th century, but literally a vehicle that "opened up" the country. Although racial discrimination and certain economic realities limited Black car ownership, seeking that freedom of the open road that is such a mythic part of the American ethos, Black Americans, like white Americans, bought cars as soon as they could. But, unlike most white Americans, Black Americans encountered inconveniences (inadequate or no restrooms open to them and being denied service in restaurants, diners, and hotel/motels) to actual danger posed from people hostile to their presence, and even arbitrary arrest.

In early and mid-20th century America, "DWB" was not for the faint of heart. Apparently, as I am learning, it still isn't.

A native New Yorker and a postman in Harlem, Green married a woman from Richmond, Virginia. Upset and angry after his experience driving from New York to visit her family in Richmond and after hearing numerous complaints from others about their objectionable and sometimes dangerous experiences while traveling by car, Green conceived of a guide that would make traveling by car safer and more enjoyable for Black Americans. He modeled it after similar guides published for Jewish motorists. He published the first version in 1936; it was primarily focused on New York City. Demand was so great that within a year, its 1937 edition was distributed nationally. As noted at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, "in its heyday, the Green Book sold 15,000 copies per year." [5] To see the entire collection of "The Green Book," visit the [New York Public Library Digital Collections](#).

Demand for "The Green Book" increased over the 1940s, '50s, and early '60s as Black Americans who had migrated north and west during The Great Migration out of the South during and after World War I sought to travel south to visit family and friends. For those traveling south but also for all Black American travelers, "The Green Book" pointed them toward Black and white businesses willing to

serve Black customers. Additionally, it outlined routes around towns where Blacks were unwelcome and guided them towards towns and neighborhoods where they would find a safe welcome and suitable accommodations.

Having spent the bulk of my life along the shores of Lake Erie, I thought I'd check to see what "safe" places were listed for Erie, Pennsylvania, and Cleveland and Canton/Massillon, Ohio. For Erie, the only listing I could find was the Pope Hotel at 1318 French St. in the 1950 edition. [6] Partially because of size but also because of its vibrant Black community, Cleveland has numerous entries. They included the Log Cabin bar on East 55th Street; the Majestic Hotel, which was one of the largest Black-owned hotels in the country; Williams Bar-B-Q; and the Ward Apartment Hotel, advertised as "the nation's best race-owned and operated hostelry." [7]

In the Canton/Massillon area, there are numerous listings, including several private homes that offered travelers lodging, including one at 1104 Sixth St. SW that is still standing and the Phillis Wheatley Association House at 612 Market Ave. S., which "in the 1930s was a welcome sight for single young Black women in need of a place to stay." [8] Other locations included the Clearview Golf Club, which in 1946, "was the first golf course in America designed and built by a Black man, the late William J. Powell." In Massillon, there was Oak Knoll Park and Catherine's Beauty Shop. [9] Unfortunately, when I examined the 1962 edition, there were no locations for either Canton or Massillon. On the other hand, Erie had three: Kentucky Bar-B-Que on Parade Street, the venerable Pope Hotel on French, and Wilson's Sinclair Service Station at East 17th and French streets. [10]

While "The Green Book" guided Black travelers to safe places where they would be welcomed and could find decent service, it also guided them away from less welcoming, potentially violent if not lethal locales that became known as "sundown towns." As Hall points out in "Driving the Green Book," sundown towns were "towns in which, by local law or practice, African Americans were prohibited from being within the town limits after sunset. Black people might be able to work in such a community, but they had to be out of town by the time the sun went down." [11] Such towns were never mentioned in "The Green Book" itself. As Hall says, "Travelers and locals knew about them by word of mouth, usually from a story about a Black person who made the mistake of being within the town's limits after sunset." [12]

As they drove south seeking to understand the experience of Black Americans during segregation, Hall and his companions interviewed survivors of that era in the communities they visited. Regarding sundown towns, Hall interviewed Jerome Gray. In his 80s, Gray, who was a voting rights activist in the 1960s, told Hall:

There were two [sundown towns] in Monroe County [Alabama] about twenty miles from my hometown. One was called Excel and the other was called Frisco City. Then the saying was: Negroes – they used the N-word back then – were not supposed to be caught in those towns after sundown. And we didn't go to those places. In fact, I can't recall having gone to Excel or Frisco City during my growing-up years, even though they were just twenty miles from where I lived. [13]

Of course, the great danger – and danger is the right word – to a Black traveler was to have a car break down or run out of gas. This was a general problem, because only some service stations would serve Black Americans. It's an angst that white travelers almost never experience, but as Isabel Wilkinson eloquently illustrated in her classic "The Warmth of Other Suns," it was the everyday experience of Black Americans. But it could also become an extraordinary if not existential experience if a Black traveler inadvertently stopped or had to stop in a sundown town. Although the example Hall uses is in Alabama, sundown towns were all across the country. In the North and West, they were reactions to the influx of Black people during The Great Migration.

This got me to wondering what, if any, sundown towns existed in the areas I know, or thought I knew so well, in western Pennsylvania and northeastern Ohio. It turns out that the groundbreaking research of scholar James W. Loewen, author of the 1995 "Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong," resulted in an interactive map of sundown towns at the historically Black university (HBCU) Tougaloo University's History and Social Justice Center. You can [find it here](#).

It is a work-in-progress. It admits to two potential deficiencies. First, it is incomplete as researchers continue to identify sundown towns. Second, it hedges its findings, saying in the case of some towns, the final determination has not yet been decided. It ranks towns on a scale from "Don't Know" to "Surely." It also identifies towns that are "Unlikely/Always Biracial" (e.g. Euclid, Ohio) and "Black Town or Township." It lists five towns in northwestern Pennsylvania ranked from "Don't Know" to "Probable." It lists only one in Stark County, Ohio (of which Canton is the County Seat) as "Probable," but about 38 (!) in northeast Ohio, which includes Greater Cleveland and Akron. [14]

More heartening are Hall's accounts of stores, hotels, diners, and restaurants, some owned by white proprietors who welcomed Black travelers. In the process of covering both the travails and the triumphs of Black people sojourning across America, Hall's "Driving the Green Book" provides a valuable, I almost said "glimpse," but it is far more than a glimpse. It provides a detailed and illuminating look into an important and not well-understood aspect outside of the Black community regarding the Black American experience.

Proving the value of Black history, it certainly helped me better understand my young colleague's anxiety about "DWB" all those years ago.

Alvin Hall is also an accomplished podcaster, whose podcast "Driving the Green Book" can be [found here](#).

Next week, we'll explore Mark Whitaker's "Smoketown: The Untold Story of the Other Great Black Renaissance." If I was marginally clueless about "DWB" and sundown towns, I confess to near total ignorance about the incredible cultural richness of Pittsburgh's Black community in the arts, music, theater, and journalism during the mid-20th century. I knew August Wilson was from Pittsburgh, but I did not know that Lena Horne, Billy Eckstine, Billy Strayhorn, Earl "Fatha" Hines, Errol Garner, and many others lit up the Hill District long before it was largely leveled in a misguided attempt at urban renewal. That's next week in Part II of the "Importance of Black History."



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.  
*Scholar-in-Residence*  
The Jefferson Educational Society  
[roth@jeserie.org](mailto:roth@jeserie.org)

*This content is copyrighted by the Jefferson 2022.*

### Photo Credits

"Victor Hugo Green (1892-1960) in 1956.png" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Victor Hugo Green \(1892-1960\) in 1956.png - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed Feb. 22, 2025.

"The Negro Motorist Green Book.jpg" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:The Negro Motorist Green Book.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed Feb. 19, 2025.

"Cover of 'Driving the Green Book' and photo of Alvin Hall" at Alvin Hall.com available at [Alvin Hall - Official Website](#) accessed Feb. 23, 2025.

### End Notes

1. Ford, Gerald R. "President Gerald R. Ford's Message on the Observance of Black History Month (February 10, 1976)" at **Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library** available at [President Gerald R. Ford's Message on the Observance of Black History Month. February 10, 1976](#) accessed Feb. 22, 2025.

2. Scott, Daryl Mitchell, “*The Origins of Black History Month*” at **Association for the Study of African American Life and History** available at [ASALH - The Founders of Black History Month | About Black History Month](#) accessed Feb. 22, 2025
3. Ibid.
4. Streeter, Leslie Gray, “*Black History Month is under attack. We have to teach it harder,*” at **Baltimore Banner** (2/6/2025) available at [Black History Month is under attack. We have to teach it harder. - The Baltimore Banner](#) accessed Feb. 22, 2025.
5. “*Green Book Sites: A Historic Travel Guide to Jim Crow America*” at **National Trust for Historic Preservation** available at [Green Book Sites | National Trust for Historic Preservation](#) accessed Feb. 23, 2025.
6. Diehl, Emma, “*Offbeat Outing: The Green Book in Philadelphia*” at **Pennsylvania Historic Preservation** available at [Offbeat Outing: The Green Book in Philadelphia - Pennsylvania Historic Preservation](#) accessed Feb. 23, 2025.
7. Cain, Brenda, “*Green Book Cleveland rewriting city’s Black history, finding lost sites*” at **Cleveland.com** available at [Offbeat Outing: The Green Book in Philadelphia - Pennsylvania Historic Preservation](#) accessed Feb. 23, 2025.
8. Goshay, Charita M. and Amanda Garrett, “*Where did Black travelers stop in Stark years ago? New Cleveland Green Book revisits spots*” at **CantonRep.com/The Repository** available at [Cleveland State revisits Green Book sites in Northeast Ohio](#) accessed Feb. 23, 2025.
9. Ibid.
10. “*The Green Book, 1962 edition*” at **The New York Public Library Digital Editions** available at [Green Book: 1962](#) accessed Feb. 23, 2025, pp. 76 & 80
11. Hall, Alvin. “*Driving the Green Book: A Road Trip Through the Living History of Black Resistance.*” (New York: Harper Collins, 2023), p. 52.
12. Ibid., p. 53.
13. Ibid., p. 54.
14. “*Sundown Town Interactive Map*” at **Tougaloo University Center for History and Social Justice** available at [Sundown Town Map | History and Social Justice | Inspired by James W. Loewen](#) accessed Feb. 23, 2025.

Subscribe to JES Publications  
Mailing List!

Support JES | Donate

## In Case You Missed It

[Building Community and Social Infrastructure](#) written by Lavea Brachman, JC, MCP, and Meriem Hamioui



[JCLA Report | 'It's Broken, so Let's Fix It'](#) written by 2024 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy Cohort

[Truth in Love | Margaret's Story and the Price of Redemption](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris Baker, Antonio Howard, and Diane Chido**

[The Wider World | Foreign Aid - Where Has it Gone?](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Diane Chido**

[Classic Be Well | Power Down After Day at Work](#) written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

[On the Waterfront | Hunting Grounds: Bay Rat Big Game](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

[Russia-Ukraine War Series | What Does Trump Presidency Mean for Ukraine?](#) written by **Lena Surzhko-Harned**

[Book Notes #198 | "This, That, & the Other X": The Art of Power ... or Maybe Not](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

*JES Mission: The Jefferson was founded to stimulate community progress through education, research, and publications. Its mission also includes a commitment to operate in a nonpartisan, nondenominational manner without a political or philosophical bias. As such, the Jefferson intends to follow the examined truth wherever it leads and is neither liberal nor conservative, Democratic nor Republican in philosophy or action. Our writers' work reflects their own views.*

