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Spaces of Fear: Race, Housing, and Travel in South Central PA

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Spaces of Fear: Race, Housing, and Travel in South Central PA

By Arion Dominique and David Michael

INTRODUCTION

Our poster explores the daily experiences of African Americans, and other minorities, in South Central PA, in the 20th century, with regard to housing and travel. It details the various difficulties that these groups encountered in the basic pursuit of equitable housing opportunities and safe travel/temporary lodging – a pursuit mired in socially enforced and legalized segregation and arising from long-standing white anxieties about people of color.

African Americans and other minorities had to learn how to navigate segregated landscapes in ways that their white counterparts were exempt from. Whites not only enjoyed a life free from racial restrictions but also actively worked to protect their privilege. The anxiety of harassment and harm while traveling, the financial disenfranchisement caused by housing restrictions such as racially restrictive covenants and redlining, and the denial of equal opportunities for housing and amenities for travel worked to create spaces of fear for immigrants and racially marginalized groups.

BACKGROUND



Levittown, PA. A suburb made explicitly, and exclusively for Caucasians.

The 1900s brought what is known as the “Great Migration.” Millions of African Americans poured into urban areas in the North. Harrisburg was one of these areas.

The growing population of African Americans and immigrants drove out urban whites who in turn fled to the suburban areas in a second migratory act known as “white flight.” Areas like Camp Hill, Mechanicsburg, Carlisle, and Dillsburg, among others, became enclaves for white investors and individuals, seeking escape from the changing demographics of the cities and the promise of new financial opportunities.

Racial tension in Central Pennsylvania has existed in the area since the 18th century. As tensions in the North rose in the 20th century due to the great migration, housing was not the only restrictive space for African Americans. The road ways of Central Pennsylvania and the hotels and the restaurants that populated them were also places where African Americans were not wanted.

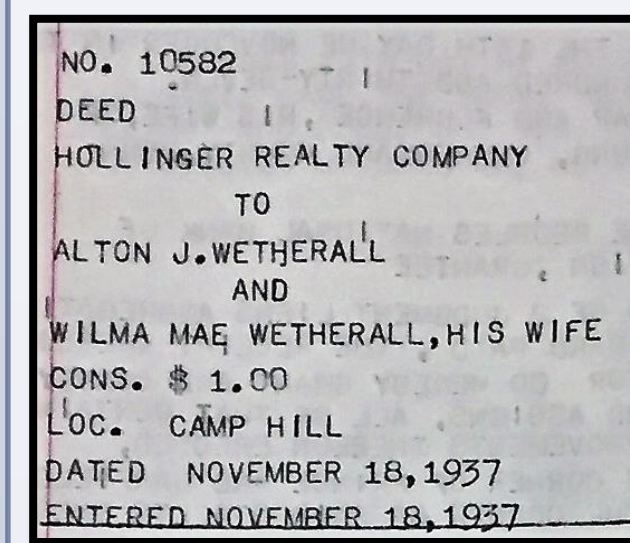


Harrisburg in the early 1900s

(Kiner, Deb. “Vintage Photos of Harrisburg from 1900 to 1919.” *PennLive.com*)

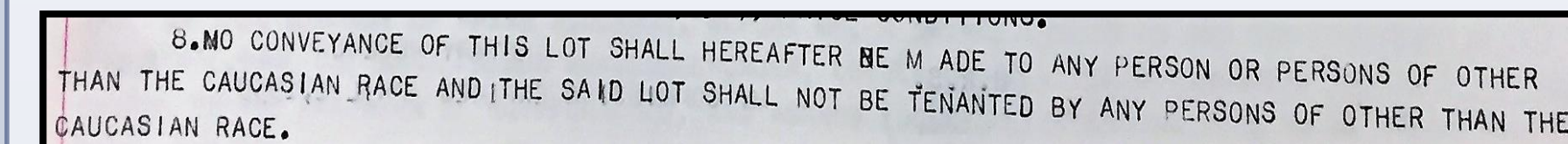
RACIALLY RESTRICTIVE COVENANTS

During the early 1900’s whites desired to protect their property, and neighborhoods, from “Inharmonious racial groups”



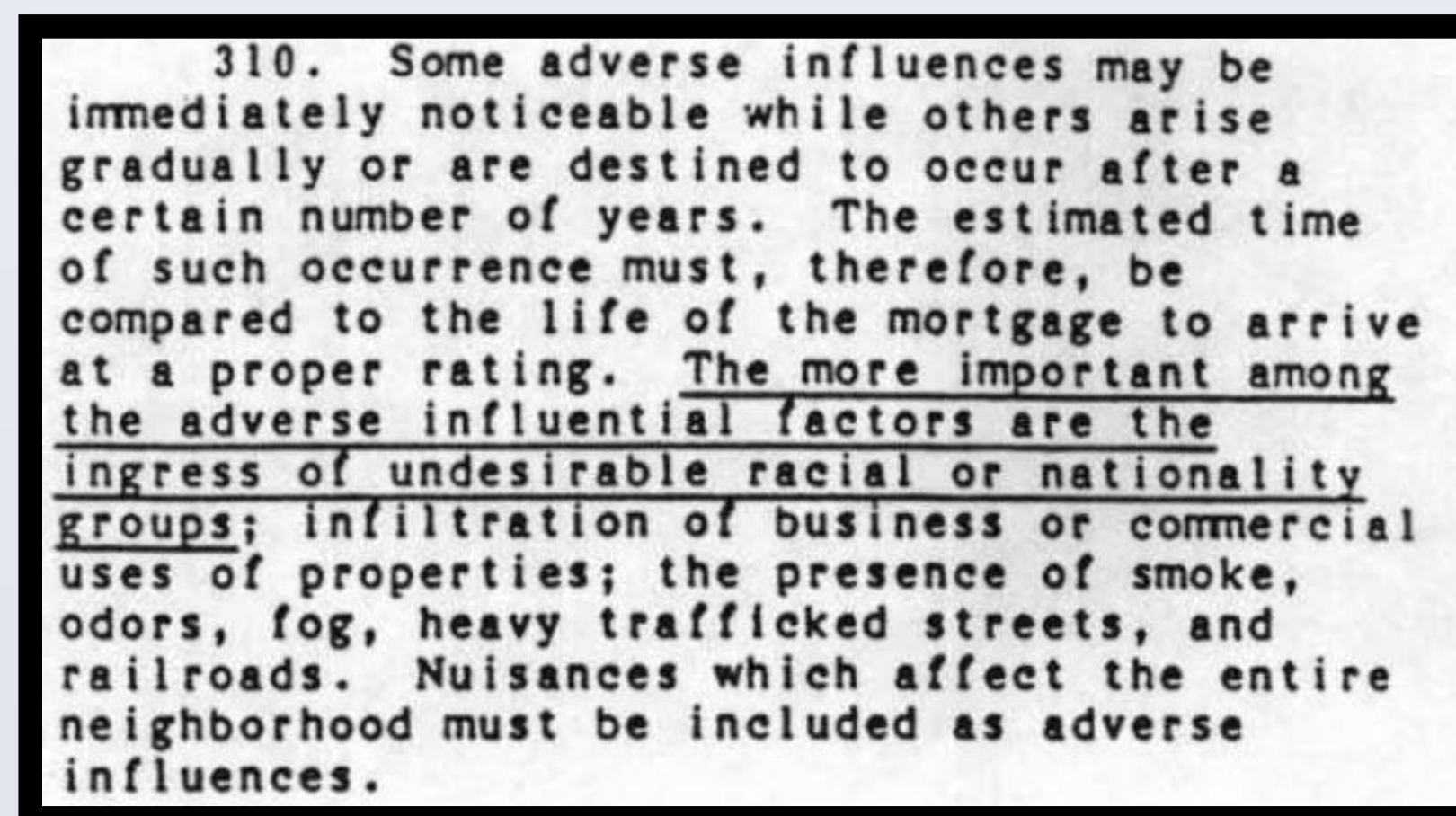
Racially restrictive covenants, restrictions placed in housing deeds, like this one, were made to protect Caucasian housing investments.

They were used to enact housing restrictions on non-Caucasians until 1948 when they became legally unenforceable.



Nevertheless, property deeds containing covenants continued to be created until the Fair Housing Act of 1968, wherein they became illegal.

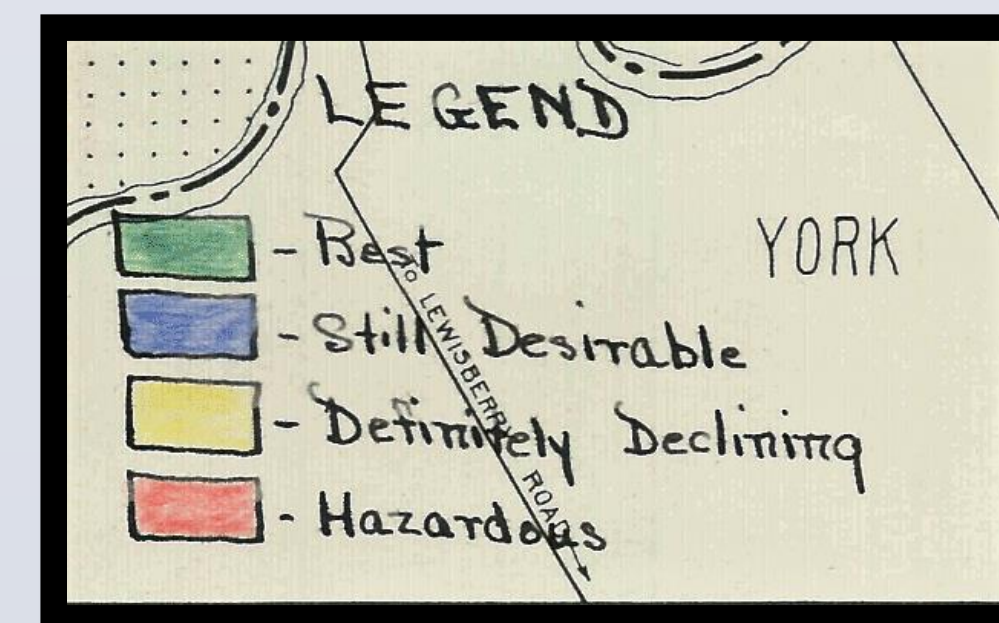
With Whites moving out of cities, and other minority-prevalent areas, to the highly-valued suburban areas and establishing racially restrictive neighborhoods, African Americans, and other minorities, lost a valuable asset of wealth accumulation through housing.



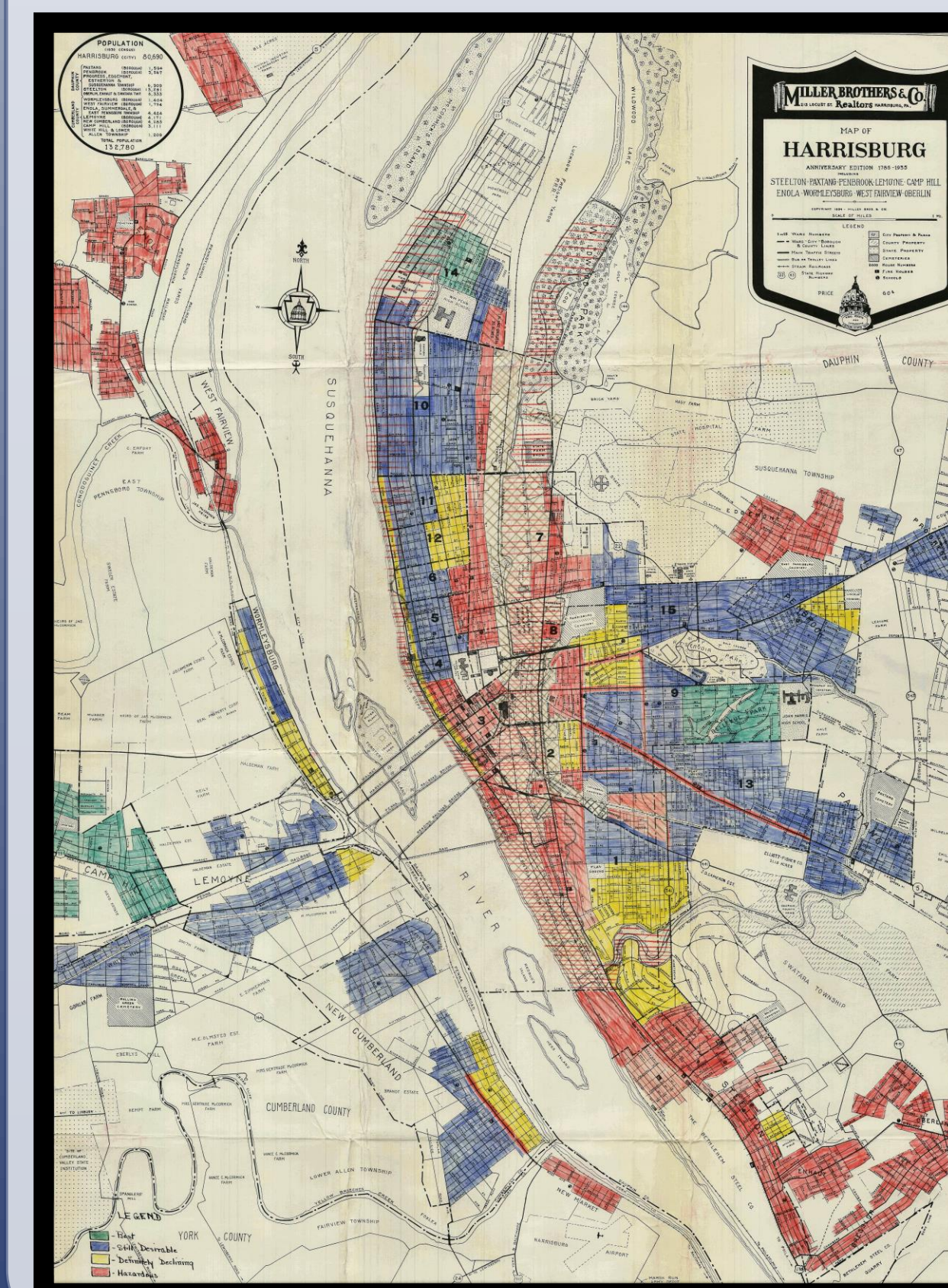
Restrictions on houses would include animals, noxious fumes, and “undesirable racial groups.”

REDLINING

During the Great Depression the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC) were tasked with stimulating the housing market and increasing homeownership levels.



These institutions created maps that designated areas which should receive refinancing, loans, and mortgages.

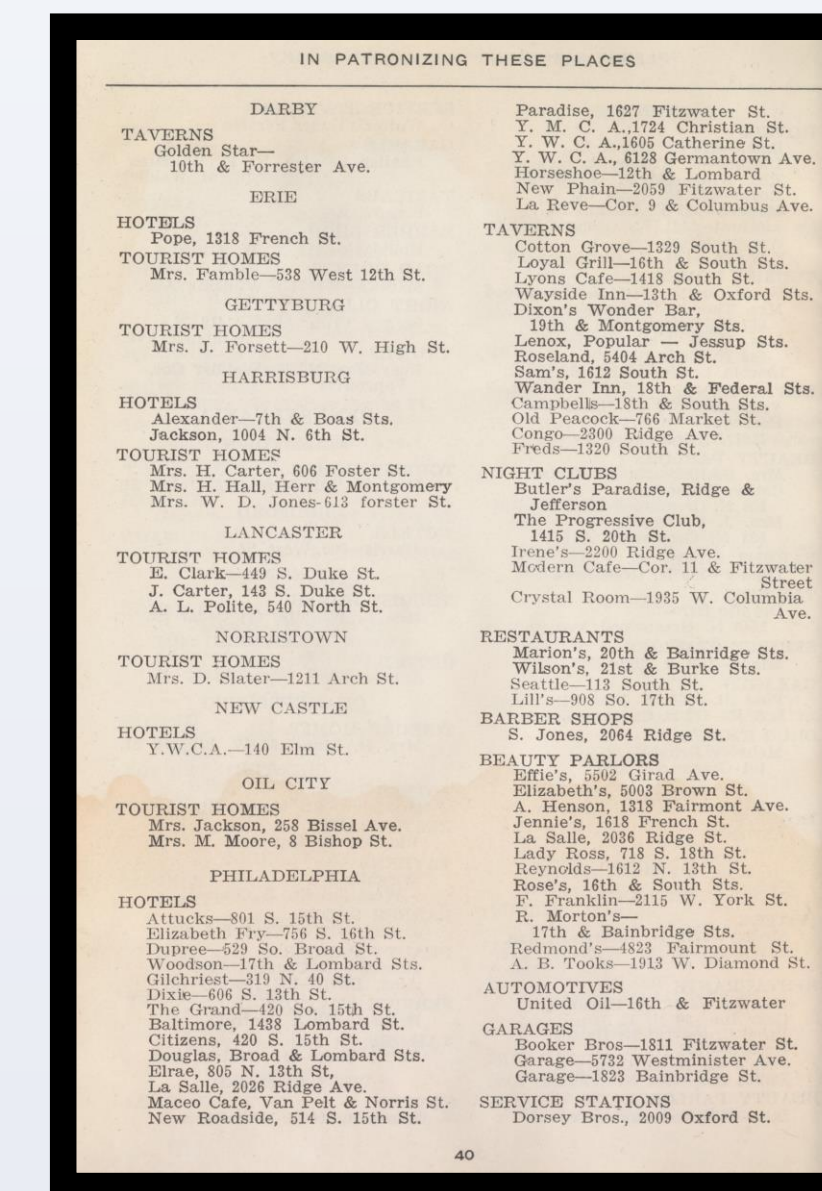


An example of a redlining map from Harrisburg.

The color-coded maps, almost always highlighted sections with populations of minorities and/or immigrants in red.

These areas thereafter were less likely to receive financing and credit, stifling home ownership and equity.

THE GREEN BOOK



A page out of the 1940's Green Book, pinpointing safe places for African Americans to stop in Central PA

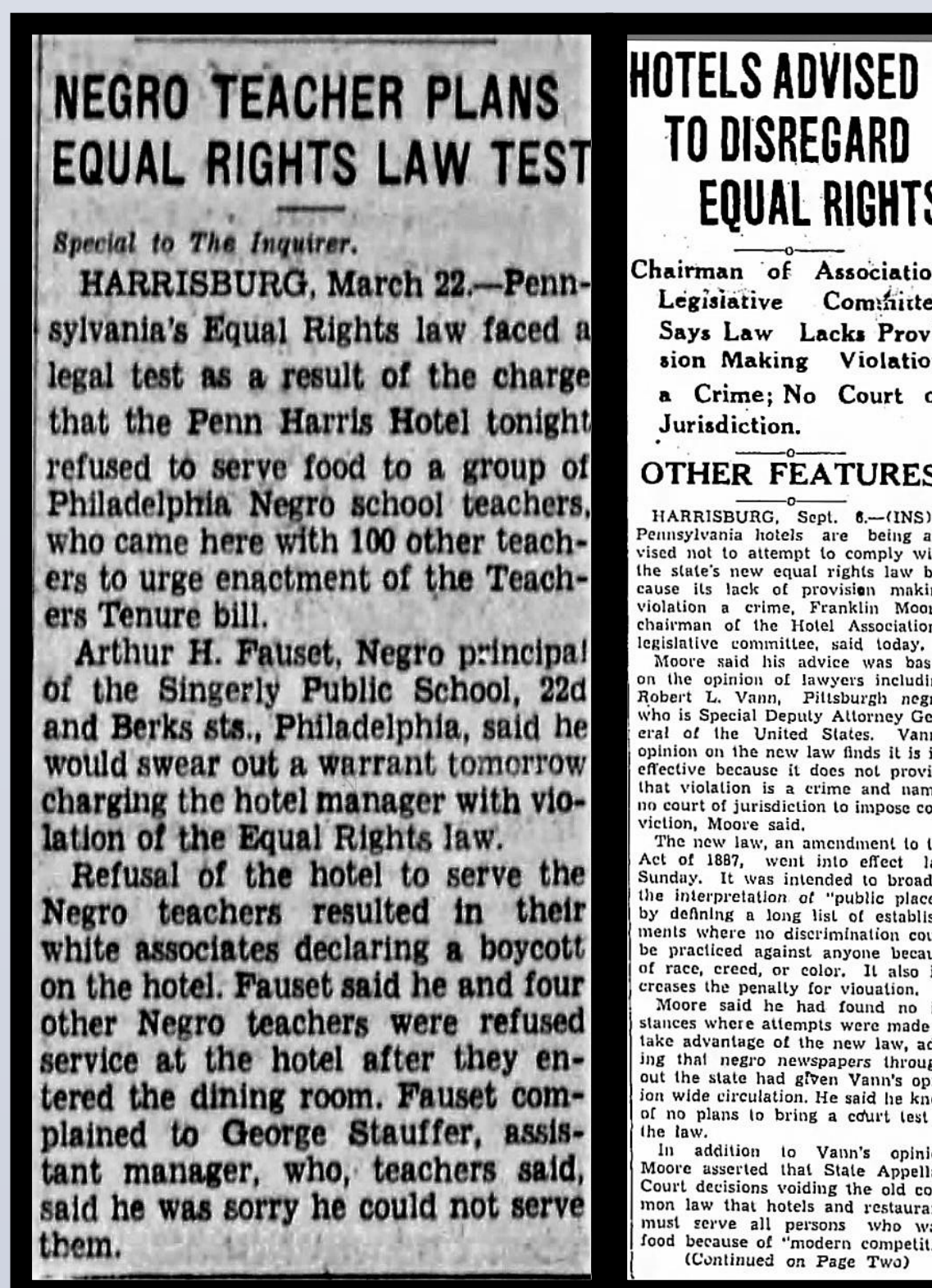
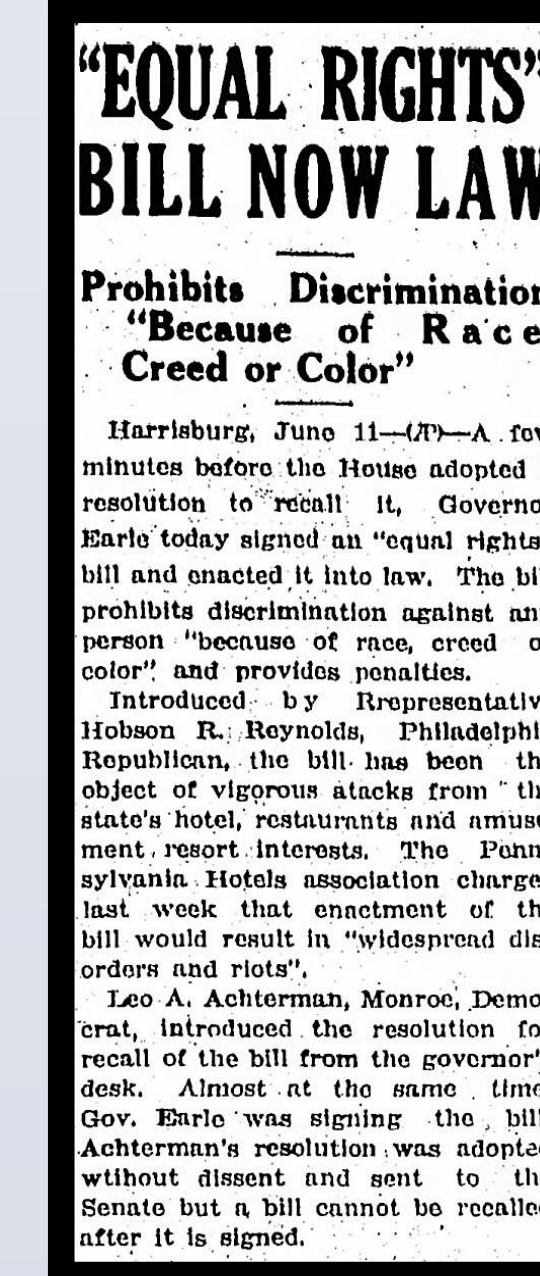
Tension followed African Americans in the early 20th century into the lodging establishments that populated the roadways. Many white hotel owners did not allow African Americans to stay in their institutions.

For this reason, many middle-class African Americans used the Green Book. The Green Book is an African American travel guide started by Hugo Victor Green which documented safe hotels and rests stops for African Americans throughout the country.

TRAVEL AND THE PENNSYLVANIA CIVIL RIGHTS LAW

In 1935, the state government passed the Pennsylvania Equal Rights Bill making discrimination based on race illegal in all businesses and institutions. This included hotels and restaurants.

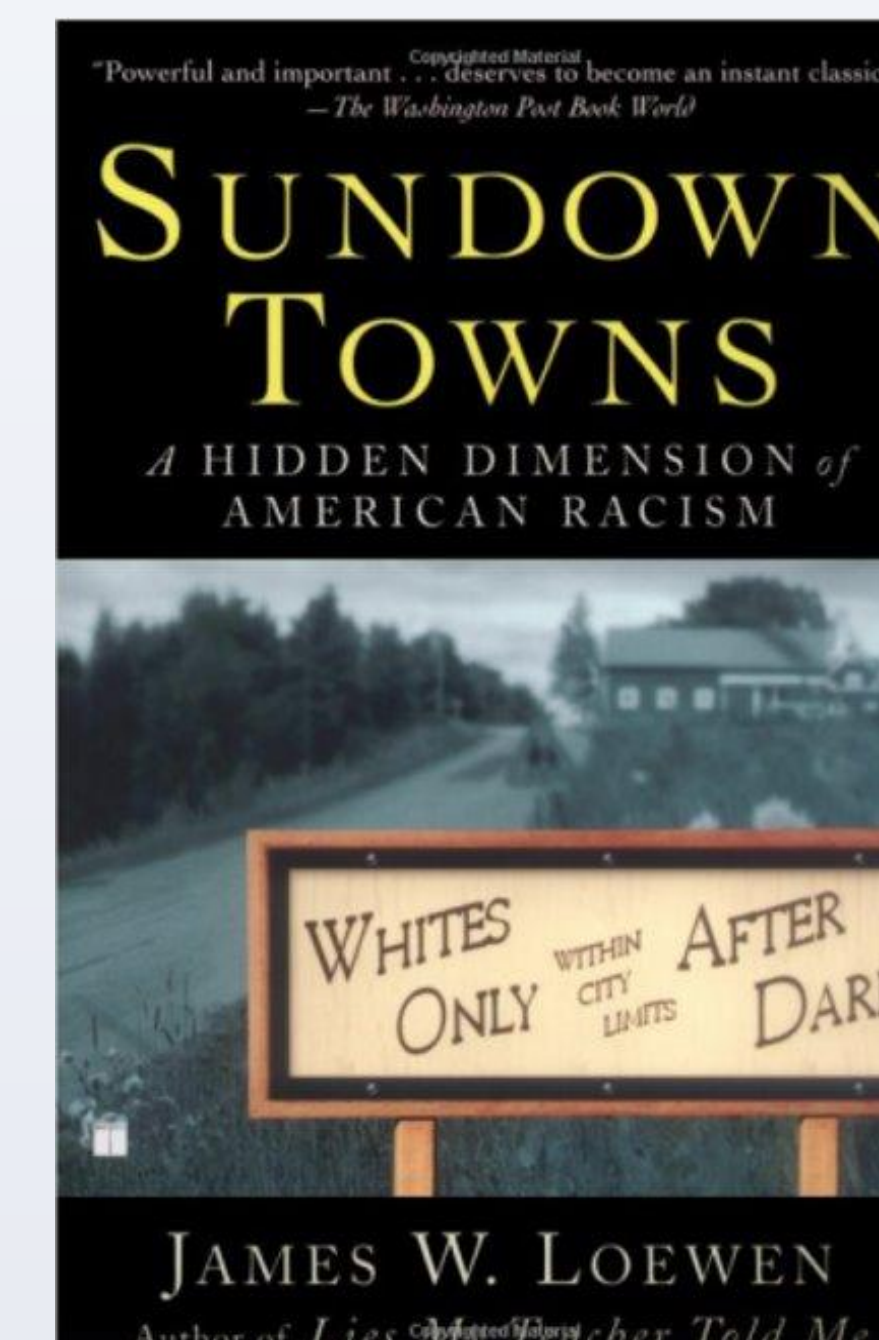
Unfortunately, the law, inconsistently reinforced, exposed tension between white business owners and black travelers. The law failed to end that national made roads accessible.



In 1937, two African American teachers sued the Penn Harris Hotel in Harrisburg for barring them from staying the night, while their 98 other white colleagues could.

While these teachers won the case and the hotel paid a small fine, this law was often ignored or failed to give African Americans justice in courts across the state.

SUNDOWN TOWNS



Sundown towns were communities that tried to ensure that no African American would stay in the town past dark. The goal was simple; keep the town or village white. These were found all over the country.

In central PA, sundown towns would manifest themselves in the neighborhoods outside of Harrisburg such as Camp Hill, Mechanicsburg and Chambersburg. These were not locations that African Americans would want to travel to, or sometimes even stay.

CONCLUSION

Travel and housing were limited to African Americans in 20th Century central Pennsylvania, limiting options for temporary and permanent housing.

The evidence of this is demonstrable in the various racially restrictive practices present in the area. Some of these were officially documented in the form of restrictive covenants and HOLC redlining maps.

However, some were less documented or fully customary such as the Green Book, used for African American motorist travel and Sundown Towns, used to enforce segregation at night.

Perhaps viewing these practices holistically reveals insights into the daily life of the minority in the United States; their daily difficulties and stresses in finding the basic desires of property, rest from traveling, lodging, entertainment, and financial services.

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