

# 1850–1940

## SOWING SEEDS: THE BEGINNING OF BLACK PLACEMAKING IN WEST OAKLAND



Congregation in front of Beth Eden Baptist Church, Easter Sunday 1901, 1901. Reproduction. Courtesy of Oakland History Center, Oakland Public Library.

Narratives of Black life in West Oakland typically begin during World War II; however, the settlement of Black people in Oakland predates the Second Great Migration of the early 1940s. In fact, the creation of Black unions, societies, clubs, and churches in the 1850s laid the social groundwork for Black migrants to lay roots in the years to come.

**1859** | The African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church is one of Oakland's first Black social, cultural, and educational centers. It serves as a key touchpoint for distributing basic necessities and decades of political and community organizing. Services first take place in the homes of members, and by 1863, members purchase a building on 7th and Market Street. Activist and educator Elizabeth Scott Flood operates a private school within the building. In 1906, the California State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, Inc. is established within the church.

**1869** | The transcontinental railroad ends in West Oakland in 1869, leading to a fundamental shift in the city's demographics. Hotels and restaurants spring up to accommodate the new influx of travelers and workers, such as the Pullman Porters. The Pullman Palace Car Company hires exclusively Black staff to service the long-distance traveler. Soon, many Pullman Porters begin to purchase homes in West Oakland. Later, in 1925, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Union forms as the first major labor union opened to Black laborers.

**1874** | The Tubbs Hotel is the second largest employer to Black people in Oakland (the largest group was the Porters).

**1880s** | The Ladies Beneficial Society exists to aid sick members of the Black community. Later in 1914, the Phyllis Wheatley Club of the East Bay Records for young Black women focuses on fundraising for local organizations and community service.

**1898** | One of the three chapters of the Occidental Lodge emerges in 1884 for Black men.



California Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, Oakland, CA, July 27–29, 1915, July 1915. Reproduction. Courtesy of Oakland History Center, Oakland Public Library.

**1890** | The Beth Eden Baptist Church is the second Black church in Oakland on Filbert Street between 7th and 8th.

**1892** | The first Black newspaper in Oakland is the *Oakland Illustrated Guide* published from 1892–1896. Next came the *Oakland Sunshine* (1897–1923), and then the *Oakland California Voice* started in 1919.

**1924** | The Black YWCA at 828 Linden Street is organized by Hettie Tilghman, Delilah Beasley, Melba Stafford, and Willa Henry. This branch later functions as a job placement center and welfare agency during the Depression.

**1933** | Slim Jenkins is a popular nightclub along 7th Street that hosted Black musicians such as Nat King Cole, Aretha Franklin, B.B. King, the Ink Spots, Earl Hines, Louis Jordan, and Dinah Washington until it is demolished as part of urban renewal programs in 1962 for the Post Office.

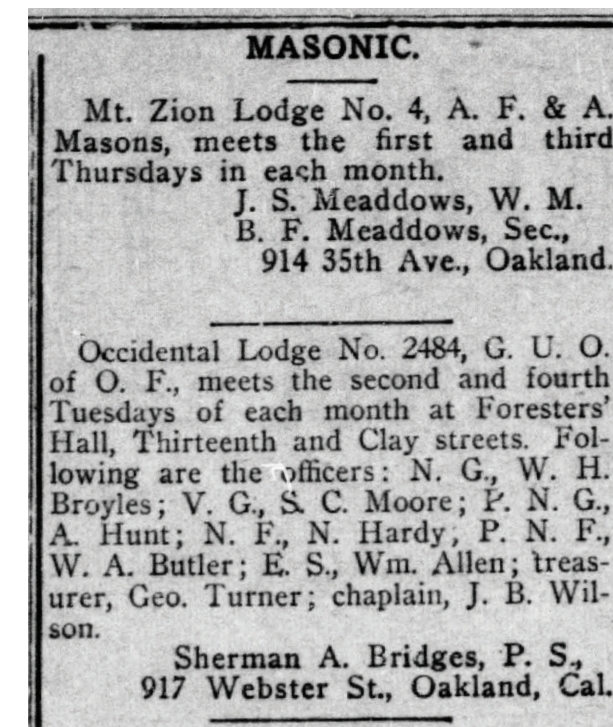


LEFT: 1906 Prince Hall Grand Lodge, 1906. Reproduction. Courtesy of Oakland History Center, Oakland Public Library.

RIGHT: Oakland Sunshine, Detail of the March 27, 1915 publication, March 27, 1915. Reproduction. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

“The Transcontinental trains ended in West Oakland and the porters and all those personnel, the train riders were also living in West Oakland. So all of this population sought entertainment, and because you didn’t go downtown, you didn’t go to anywhere in Grand Lake. The only place you could go for entertainment was West Oakland and of course, there were many joints for partying for entertainment.”

—Harold Adams Jr,  
West Oakland Resident during WWII  
(Oral Interview 2020)





# 1940–1969

## NO ROOM TO GROW: STRUCTURES OF PHYSICAL CONTAINMENT AND WORKPLACE

Oakland’s strategic location as a railroad and shipping hub made it a central location for World War II wartime mobilization. Black migrants from the South were recruited in droves and by the end of the decade, the population in Oakland doubled from 21,770 in 1944 to 47,562 residents by 1950. However, for Black migrants employment and housing wasn’t guaranteed. Segregation was still in practice in the form of racial covenants drawn by homeowners associations and developers; redlining supported by the federal government, banks and realtors; and racial zoning, introduced by local governments. These factors contained Oakland’s Black community in specific areas, making the population vulnerable to exploitation, racial violence, and mass eviction.

“They offered me \$7,000, but for something comfortable like now it will cost \$14,000 or up. With \$7,000 if I’m not replaced, I’ll have to rent. We worked for nothing.”

—Mrs. Stenyard,  
West Oakland Resident



Dorothea Lange, *End of Shift*, circa 1943. Reproduction. Gift of Paul S. Taylor. A67.137.42081.8

**1942** | Wartime shipbuilding industries, such as the Kaiser Shipbuilding Company, actively recruit Black southerners to work on the shipyards in the Bay Area promising higher wages and employment opportunities. Black service workers and wartime laborers form unions and organizations such as the Boilermakers Union Black auxiliary unit and the Black United Servicemen’s Organization. Many Black servicemen frequent the De Fremery Hospitality House, a 15,000 square foot building with a canteen, lounge, library, dorm and ballroom located in DeFremery Park.

**1941–1943** | Black Laborers experience poor housing conditions in West Oakland. Beginning in 1880, the introduction of racially restrictive covenants forced Black migrants to live in a few locations in the Bay Area. Additionally, in 1937, area reports by Home Owner’s Loan Corporation designates the entirety of West Oakland as “hazardous” and disqualifies the residents of West Oakland from securing loans for mortgages or improvements to their homes. West Oakland, as legally one of the few places Black migrants could live, quickly became overcrowded and strategically under resourced.

Temporary wartime housing projects are quickly, and cheaply built in West Oakland to house the Black laborers. Cypress Village, Willow Manor, Magnolia Manor, Peralta Villa and Chestnut Court are a few of the all Black temporary war housing in West Oakland. City administrators neglected the predominantly Black neighborhood. Municipal services such as sanitation, water, garage, sewage, and road maintenance, are not adequately provided to the residents.

**1949** | West Oakland is declared “blighted.” “Blight” is a derogatory and racialized term city officials and financiers deployed to blame the physical deterioration of homes on the residents; the term is used to imply a contagion that would spread and threaten the city as a whole. By 1950, the Black population in Oakland hit 47,562 and 85% of this population lived in the West Oakland district. In 1949, the Oakland City Planning Commission designates all of West Oakland as “blighted.” This designation granted the city of Oakland access to federal funding and the authority to begin demolishing homes and displacing residents through a process known as “urban renewal.”

**1957** | Oakland Citizens Committee for Urban Renewal (OCCUR), a group of real estate, business, and construction stakeholders, pass the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan that calls for five urban renewal projects in West Oakland totalling to 225 acres. The group did not include any representation from the West Oakland community.

**1958** | Just as the City of Oakland used housing demolition as a tool to clear the West Oakland residents, freeways are also a targeted tool used to displace and control the Black population. The Nimitz Freeway (Interstate 880) slices through West Oakland, and isolates the Prescott Neighborhood, for the benefit of suburban commuters.

The subsequent Grover-Shafter Freeway (Interstate 980) creates a barrier that separates West Oakland from the downtown area. Homes of West Oakland residents are taken by eminent domain.



**1959** | Esther’s Orbit Room, a blues and jazz club, opens in West Oakland. Famous musicians such as Tina Turner, Lou Rawls, Etta James, B.B. King and Al Green perform at the club.

**1962** | The Acorn Redevelopment Project is the first urban renewal project in the OCCUR plan. As per the plan, the designated area of demolition is 200 acres bounded by 8th and 10th streets and Union and Filbert Streets. As a result, approximately 9,000 West Oakland residents are forced to leave. Even though the destruction of the homes is quick, the land sits fallow for 10 years until anything is built. Even then, only 1,000 new units are created with the intent for the country’s first attempt at “reverse integration.”

**1966** | By 1966, the unemployment in West Oakland had reached five times the national average. During this year, Merritt College students, Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton create the Black Panther Party to bolster Black self-determination and community self-defense. Local West Oakland neighborhood groups and civil rights organizations join to create a civilian review board that eventually joins the West Oakland Planning Council in 1967 and fights for poor Black folks to take control of the city’s Economic Development Council.



Dorothea Lange, *Shipyards Workers*, circa 1944. Reproduction. Gift of Paul S. Taylor. A67.137.97127

“There were banks, cleaning, and pressing shops. You name it, and it was there. Whatever you needed, you didn’t have to leave West Oakland to get it, see. So, consequently as a result of that, West Oakland was a city within a city. And it was a beautiful place.”

—Tom Nash  
(Oral Interview, 1994)

**LEFT:** Joanne Leonard, *Untitled* (Street scene), undated. Reproduction. Gift of the artist in honor of Therese Thau Heyman. 2003.139.20

**RIGHT:** Joanne Leonard, *Untitled* (Outdoor cleanup), undated. Reproduction. Gift of the artist in honor of Therese Thau Heyman. 2003.139.54



# 1969–1994

## WILTING ON THE VINE: DEINDUSTRIALIZATION IN BLACK OAKLAND

In the late 1960s, industrial plants in Oakland began to move out of the city, relocating jobs and a significant amount of city tax revenue to the racially-exclusive suburbs over the Oakland Hills. Constrained by a significantly smaller budget, the city was forced to slash funding for municipal services like schools, hospitals, and parks. These budget cuts led to a decline in quality of life and destabilized the working-class Black community that remained in the city.



Ken Papaleo, *Howard Jarvis and Paul Gann after Prop 13 Win*, June 6, 1978. Reproduction. Courtesy of the Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

Howard Jarvis and Paul Gann celebrate after Proposition 13 wins on June 6, 1978. Celebrated by suburban homeowners, Proposition 13 slashed property tax revenue to local governments by roughly 60%, disproportionately impacting cities and counties that have more residents in need of welfare and other social services.



Reginald A. Pearman, *Shelter the Homeless*, circa 1983–1990. Reproduction. Courtesy of African American Museum & Library at Oakland, Oakland Public Library.

Oakland residents respond to the loss of employment and subsequent increase in homelessness throughout the city.

**1970** | The Acorn Supermarket at 12th and Market Streets is the first Black owned and operated supermarket in Oakland.

**1972** | Bay Area Regional Transit (BART) finishes construction. Black business districts on the south side of 7th street are removed for the BART station and tracks.

**1977** | Lionel Wilson is elected Mayor and the majority of city council seats are held by Black Oaklanders.

“Our community has lost more than 20,000 jobs in the last few years because of plant closures and lay-offs in all sectors of our economy.... Then there is the ‘ripple effect’ that unemployed workers can no longer buy groceries or pay rent thereby hurting small businesses. And our local tax base also decreases just when unemployed workers and our families need more services and assistance. There are some new jobs being created, but most of them are part-time, temporary and pay minimum wage with no health care or other benefits.”

—Worker at East Oakland’s Engine and Compressor Division  
of TransAmerica Delaval Inc.

**1978** | California voters pass Proposition 13. The ballot measure caps property taxes and limits property reassessments, exacerbating pre-existing racial inequalities related to property-ownership and slashing property tax revenue for local governments by roughly 60%. These changes disproportionately impact cities like Oakland that have more residents in need of welfare and other social services.

**1980** | U.S. Congress passes the Motor Carrier Act, which deregulates the trucking industry and drastically increases the number of trucks moving through Oakland. Given the large number of highways slicing through Black neighborhoods, this has a significant impact on air quality and asthma rates.

**1980** | Federal regulators deregulate the savings and loan industry causing the first subprime mortgage crisis and a wave of foreclosures in working-class communities and communities of color. These foreclosures lead to a rapid increase in vacant properties in Oakland, which becomes closely associated with gangs who deal crack cocaine.

**1993** | The Alameda Naval Air Station and Naval Aviation Depot close, eliminating several thousand stable working-class jobs held disproportionately by Black Oaklanders.

**1994** | California voters pass Proposition 184, also known as the “Three Strikes Law.” Mandating a minimum of 25-years to life, Proposition 184 dramatically increases California’s prison inmate population. By the end of 2004, a decade after TSL’s enactment, second and third strikers make up over 25% of the prison population in California.



# 1995–PRESENT

## RECLAIMING THE SOIL: GENTRIFICATION AND THE FIGHT FOR HOUSING JUSTICE

During the 1990s, the rapid growth of the Bay Area tech industry reversed two decades of economic decline. The benefits, however, were unevenly distributed throughout the region. While investment flowed into San Francisco and Silicon Valley, Oakland only saw rising housing prices that put pressure on the Black community in the city. The result was a wave of gentrification that displaced many longtime Black residents. In response, a radical new housing justice movement arose to meet the moment.



David Solnit, *Everyone Deserves a Home*, January 13, 2020. Reproduction. Courtesy of David Solnit and Moms 4 Housing.

Community supporters outside the house at 2928 Magnolia Street. Moms 4 Housing occupied the vacant home in 2019–2020. Responding to the wave of foreclosures that left many Oakland residents homeless, they fought to make housing a human right.



Gary Reyes, *[Redevelopment in Downtown Oakland]*, September 18, 1991. Reproduction. The Oakland Tribune Collection, the Oakland Museum of California. Gift of ANG Newspapers. 2000.1.1399

Between 1998 and 2006, Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown steered the Oakland Redevelopment Agency toward “downtown revitalization.”

**1995** | California voters pass the Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act, prohibiting cities from establishing rent control over single-family dwellings, condos, and new apartments.

**1998** | Jerry Brown is elected Mayor of Oakland and steers the Oakland Redevelopment Agency away from “slum clearance” and toward “downtown revitalization.” He envisions downtown as a mid-sized place that could reap the Bay Area overflow of people and business unable to afford San Francisco.

**2000** | During the late 1990s, low interest rates led to a massive increase in venture capital investments into Bay Area tech companies, intensifying the already uneven development of the Bay Area. In 2000, the stock value of the tech industry crashed, causing 434,000 Bay Area residents to lose their jobs and homelessness to surge throughout the region.

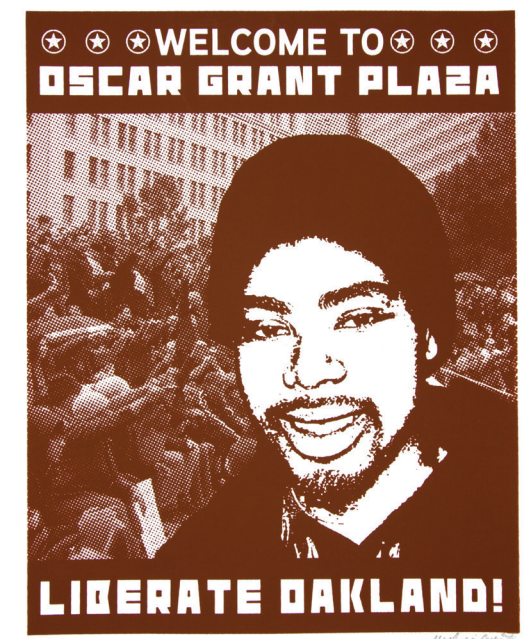
**2007–2008** | After experiencing some of the fastest rising home prices in the nation leading up to 2007, the Bay Area had a foreclosure rate nearly twice the national average. 1 in every 14 Oakland homeowners lose their home through foreclosure, with the majority of foreclosures located in West and East Oakland.

**2010** | In February 2010, Oakland city attorney John Russo files for the city’s first gang injunction, proposing a “safety zone” of 100 blocks. These zones effectively deny individuals listed in the gang member database the right to roam freely in city space rendering them illegitimate in their own neighborhood.

**2019** | Moms 4 Housing occupies a vacant home on 2928 Magnolia Street to demand the city, county, and state make “Housing is a Human Right.”

“I already have affordable housing in Oakland. I want unaffordable housing.”

—Mayor Jerry Brown  
(1999)



Melanie Cervantes, *Welcome to Oscar Grant Plaza*, 2011. Reproduction. Gift of the artist and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, from “Occupy Bay Area, 2012.” 2013.29.2

Gang injunction zones in North and East Oakland effectively denied the right to roam freely in city space—many Black and Latinx Oakland residents became illegitimate in their own neighborhood.