

Our History Built Richmond

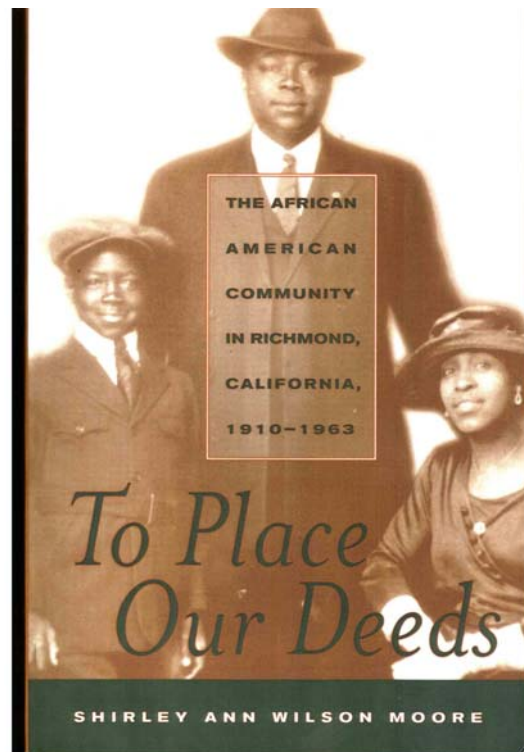
By Jovanka Beckles

To Place Our Deeds: The African American community in Richmond, CA 1910 – 1963 by Shirley Anne Wilson Moore, University of California Press; 2000

While African-Americans have always lived in Richmond, it was the demand for round-the-clock construction of ships in the Kaiser Shipyards that drew African-Americans here from all parts of the United States, but particularly from the rural South. The story of the Rosies who joined the work force is well known.

The contributions of African Americans is less well documented. Prof. Moore provides a parallel story for Black Americans. At the start, urban California African-Americans who had lived in Richmond were suspicious of the newcomers whose ways seemed “country” to them. However, during the war years and into the fifties, these newcomers contributed enormously to the war effort, helped support a flourishing economy and even started a musical renaissance in North Richmond. One fascinating chapter that delighted me, I might re-title, “Blues Club Women,” for many of the venues, like Tapper’s Inn, the Pink Kitchen, and Minnie Lou’s were founded or managed by Black women.

After the war, racial tensions flared as Black Americans began to assert their civil rights. Housing was one of the areas fought with strife and struggle. At the same time racial discrimination was rampant, many sincere white liberals and radicals saw injustice and challenged it. Elton Brombacher (who with Rev. Fred Busher of Easter Hill church formed a chapter of the National Council of Christians and Jews) found himself facing down a white racist crowd that had come to protest Black WWII veteran Wilbur Gary’s buying a home in the white enclave of Rollingwood. (see. my pamphlet, The Gary family). Some of Gary’s new neighbors joined other progressive community members and supported the rights of Blacks. For example, The Progressive Citizens of America boycotted Lucky’s on Cutting Blvd. for not hiring Blacks.



As a Black middle class of professionals began to emerge, the local Democratic party saw in the Black vote a way to overthrow the Republican control of Richmond. After a series of occurrences shifted the balance, George Livingston, an African American was elected to the City Council and was chosen to be mayor. By 1961, George Carroll became the first elected Black mayor. Blacks began to believe that they would and could be represented in city government. This is partially true. The Black community is at once stable and ever changing,

Using housing as an example once again, **when Parchester Village in North Richmond was originally built it was billed as a site for integration.** White Americans refused to buy homes in what would have been an integrated community. Many Blacks believed the village was only a ruse by white developers to gain Black dollars while defusing Black frustrations. Nonetheless, Blacks took advantage of this opportunity to create a Black community in which neighbors looked after one another. Today long time Parchester Village residents are accepting their multi-cultural new neighbors, recognizing the value of strong community, regardless of the color of one's skin.

As in the past, so today, there are individuals who insist that they speak for the “Black Community” and hope to win elections with this statement. The African-American community is by no means a homogeneous one. While we have common problems and must always be addressing racism of the larger society, we also have many diverse needs and concerns. Many of our needs are common with other communities. As in the past, so today, there are groups like the Richmond Progressive Alliance and others, where Latinos, Blacks and whites unite to improve the quality of life for all, recognizing that we have similar and different needs. **These groups have a larger vision of society that can be summed up in the motto, “One Richmond.”**



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