

“World-renowned actor, singer and civil rights campaigner, Paul Robeson (1898–1976), speaking at the Ferry Street Chapel, Across the Bridge.”

“Across the Bridge was called home by the African American community of Eugene, including four members of the Charlie and Bertha Mae Johnson family shown above: From left, William, Robert, Eloise and Charles”

“Founding members of the Ferry Street Chapel, 1948. Back row, L-R: Mrs. Bertha Frenchwell, Ms. Mary Williams, unknown, and Ms. Mattie Reynolds. Front row, L-R: Ms. Annie Mims, Ms. Bonnie Rucker, unknown, and Ms. Pearl Mae Joiner.”



“THIS WATER FOUNTAIN CELEBRATES THE STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE OF EUGENE’S AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY. THE WATER IS FOR ALL TO DRINK.”

“The Willamette River in Eugene, Oregon was once used to create places of exclusion. When Black Americans arrived here to work in either Pacific Northwest industries or for the expanding Southern Pacific Railway, they were forced to settle on the other side of the river. Local sentiment in Eugene, backed by real estate covenants, denied rental accommodation and home ownership to Black families within the city limits. This settlement on county land grew into a community that became known as *Across The Bridge*.”

“THE *ACROSS THE BRIDGE* COMMUNITY WAS WHERE BLACK FAMILIES AND THE WHITE WORKING POOR BUILT HOMES, ATTENDED CHURCH, AND SUSTAINED THEIR FAMILIES.

Often disparaged as a tent city, those who grew up in Across the Bridge recall a busy community that made the best of what they were allowed to have. “We could... just walk down the river and catch rainbow trout anytime,” said Willie C. Mims, a child of the community in 1948. Even though watchful elders restricted children from swimming in the river, Mims recalled taking his chances. “We’d camp out, learn to swim in the Willamette... Got caught there by Mrs. Reynolds once... You know, being young boys, we always did things that was forbidden.”

“Living in *Across the Bridge* brought Black residents relative sanctuary. Meanwhile, on this side of the river, the Ku Klux Klan regularly burned crosses on Skinner’s Butte, where the flames would announce themselves to people arriving by railroad. Among those travellers were Black university scholars, artists, and celebrities, including civil rights leader Paul Robeson. A room for the night in Eugene was denied to all of these people. They either found hotels further afield or stayed at a house owned by the Mims, an African American family who acquired their home through a fortunate circumventing of local barriers to Black home ownership.

In July of 1949, in order to make way for a new Ferry Street Bridge, Lane County ordered the *Across the Bridge* settlement bulldozed and its people removed. The Federally funded post-war building boom had made its way to Eugene, and as in other places across the country, the push to modernization disproportionately affected African American and other disenfranchised citizens.

Most people from *Across the Bridge* settled in the almost uninhabitable West 11th area—again, outside Eugene’s city limits. Beset by insects, mud, and frequent flooding, these over-priced properties were without sanitation or running water. The same year that saw one in three American households enjoying their first glimpse of television, residents of West 11th carried drinking water by hand for nearly a mile.

Through the act of naming these injustices, learning each other’s stories, and celebrating the resilience of all people working for change, we hope to bridge the divides that still linger with us today.

Let us today reclaim the Willamette as a river that shores up our community into a more perfect union.”



Across the Bridge Commemorative Fountain
Downtown Riverfront Park, Eugene