

FACT SHEET: AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY IN GREENBELT



- Several African American families (about 14 people total) lived on farms on the land that would become Greenbelt. (Joseph Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs: A History of the Greenbelt Town Program*, 1971, p.143)
- June 1936, early plans for the land that would become Greenbelt included a “separate development area” set aside for use by African American families, to be called the Rossville Rural Development. Planners jettisoned this idea, however, in the face of strong opposition from local communities and lawmakers. (Arnold, p. 143)
- Although the workers who built Greenbelt were both African American and white, the community would be segregated and open only to white families.
- November 16, 1939, Donald Cooper, editor of *The Cooperator*, wrote a short notice on the front page of the paper, entitled, “Race Prejudice In Greenbelt.” (on right) This was in reference to “colored people being served in the town drugstore.” (Mary Lou Williamson, editor, *Greenbelt: History of a New Town*, 1987, p. 79)
- A Citizens for Fair Housing group was active in Greenbelt in 1963 and was advertising in the *News Review*.
- In 1967, “City Council directed owners of apartments in Greenbelt to voluntarily adopt nonsegregated rental practices.” (Williamson, p. 196)
- To the best of our knowledge, African American families began moving into Greenbelt in late ‘60’s, early 1970’s.
- Controversy over bussing in Prince George’s County around 1972 sparked more debate about race.
- In 1979, Jeannette Gordy was the first African American to run for office in Greenbelt. She was not elected.
- February 2008, The Maryland American Civil Liberties Union and Prince George’s County NAACP sent a letter to the Greenbelt City Council questioning Greenbelt’s election system. The City of Greenbelt, along with the ACLU, NAACP, and FairVote held three community meetings to discuss the issues raised.
- November 2008, Greenbelt elected its first African American councilmember, Emmett Jordan, who, based on the number of votes received, also became Mayor Pro Tem.
- 2009, Greenbelt implements election reforms aimed at increasing diversity. The number of city councilmembers increases from 5 to 7 members, an additional precinct is added in Greenbelt East, and early voting is instituted.
- 2012, in conjunction with the opening of the timeline exhibit, the Museum establishes the Archive of the African American Experience in Greenbelt in order to formalize the collection of this significant history. The Museum is actively collecting photographs, personal recollections, press articles, census data, and oral history interviews.
- 2013, Greenbelt elects its first African American mayor, Emmett Jordan.

Greenbelt Answers Race Prejudice

On two recent occasions race prejudice has shown its ugly head in Greenbelt. During the Town Council election campaign and again last Monday night in the Citizens Association meeting one or two individuals have tried to make an issue of the occasional Negro visitors to Greenbelt. On both occasions public opinion demonstrated itself vociferously and the instigators were literally shouted down.

Encouraging prejudice and narrowness of thinking by attempting to curb the liberties of any minority race or group is deplorable in America. In Greenbelt to raise such an issue is utterly ridiculous inasmuch as the only Negroes who come to our community are occasional visitors. In both instances where the racial question was posed Greenbelt citizens have thrown it out. This is Greenbelt's answer to un-American tendencies. — The Editor