

# A History of Discriminatory Housing Practices in Oregon

Can we understand the impact of housing discrimination on Oregon today without looking at its historical context? Race, hatred, prejudice, segregation, ethnic conflict, discrimination, and our national legacy of slavery all shaped the history of our state. Most of us prefer a history which focuses on the positive--the courage of early European settlers, the bounty of Oregon's natural resources, or the development of Oregon's progressive political system. It is natural for us to share this common affection for the history of our state, a history written by those who prospered in their new home.

But who can tell us the history of those who struggled? How can we learn about those who were denied a home? Can we use this information to gain a new appreciation of how historical racial and ethnic separation are reflected in the discriminatory housing practices of today? In any attempt to educate ourselves about civil rights in housing--fair housing--it is important that we remind ourselves about the pain suffered by those who were individually or collectively denied those rights. Courageous people faced the forces of prejudice, persevered, and built an important place in Oregon's history.

- **Native Americans have lived in the Pacific Northwest for ten thousand years.** Estimates of the population of the indigenous people in Oregon before European settlement of the 1800's may have been over 120,000. Disease, war, and forcible displacement had a severe impact on Native American communities. By 1900, the native population of Oregon was approximately 5,000 persons. Forced to live on reservations by the United States government, most native people were systematically denied the basic freedom of a choice about where to live.
- **Chinese immigrants moved to the Oregon Territory to work in mining communities, fish canneries and on the railroads.** When statehood was declared in 1859, Oregon's constitution prohibited anyone of Chinese ancestry from owning land or holding a mining claim. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act banned Chinese immigration to the United

States. Restrictive covenants in deeds for residential property were commonplace and resident Chinese-Americans were excluded from living in certain neighborhoods.

- **The immigration of Japanese people to Oregon increased with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act.** Early in the twentieth century, Japanese immigrants settled in Portland to work in the traditional service industries. As they settled into their new home, many Japanese-Americans moved from Portland to begin farming in east Multnomah County and the Hood River Valley. Competition with European-American farmers provided the impetus for bills in the Oregon Legislature in 1917, 1919, 1921, and 1923 prohibiting Japanese land ownership. Japanese-Americans also faced racist restrictive covenants that excluded home seekers from purchasing in certain areas.
- **African-Americans were deterred from living in the Oregon Territory by racial exclusion laws passed between 1849 and 1854.** These laws stated it was “unlawful for any Negro or mulatto to come in or reside” in Oregon. Although slavery was banned in Oregon, the state’s first constitution, passed in 1857, denied African-Americans the opportunity to live in the new state. This language was not removed until 1927.

**This legacy of race hatred and separation continued into the twentieth century.** The institution of restrictive zoning laws prohibited African-Americans from living in certain residential areas. The Portland Realty Board revised its Code of Ethics in 1919 to include a section forbidding members from selling homes to African-Americans or Asians. Racial segregation was reinforced in Portland by federal housing policies during the 1930’s, which placed restrictions on minority borrowers.

- **World War II shipyard industries attracted a growing African-American population to Oregon.** The Housing Authority of Portland’s Vanport housing complex was home to an estimated 5,000 African-Americans. When Vanport was flooded in 1948, African-American families began to relocate in the Albina area. By 1962, 80 percent of Portland’s African-American population was living in the Albina area and for decades the community was systematically denied loans for home improvements by local banks.

- **Many of Oregon's Latino immigrants came to the state as migrant farmworkers and settled in rural, agricultural areas.** In 1951, the federal Bracero Program allowed Mexican nationals into the country as guest workers. These laborers were often steered into overcrowded and squalid mobile labor camps rather than local communities. Despite the struggles they faced, many Latinos made Oregon their permanent home, left the rural areas and began to live in Oregon's larger cities. Latinos are now the largest minority population in Oregon.

**Civil rights protections in housing are still evolving.** Oregon's first fair housing law, passed in 1959, began an era of civil rights protections for minority populations. The federal Fair Housing Act of 1968 provided even stronger protections and provided more opportunities for equal access to mortgage financing and rental housing.

The federal Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 amended the Fair Housing Act to include protections for persons with mental and physical disabilities as well as families with children. The State of Oregon passed similar civil rights protections in 1988 and also protects for marital status, source of income, and sexual orientation. Many cities and counties in Eugene, Ashland, Portland, Salem, and Corvallis have added protections for categories such as type of occupation.

**If you are interest in learning more about the history of housing discrimination in Oregon, be sure to check the FHCO website : [http://www.fhco.org/books\\_movies\\_plays.htm](http://www.fhco.org/books_movies_plays.htm) or <http://fhco.org/history.html>.**