Speaker 1:

As you walk through the neighborhood east of Skinner Butte, what do you notice? You might see the Parkview Terrace Apartments or cross the Ferry Street bridge. What you won't see are the homes of black and indigenous families that used to live in this area before racist development policies displaced them. Dr. David Lewis explains how the settlers excluded the Kalapuya and other native nations as they built Eugene.

Dr. David Lewis:

So there are other stories of where native people were living when Eugene was forming as a city. In Oregon at the time, early 1850s, native people were not allowed to live inside of what was called the white towns, or white settlements. And so when Eugene was formed as a city, they literally set the border or boundary of the city at the river. Across the river in what's now Alton Baker Park, native people would set up encampments, sometimes basically called Indian camps or encampments, and then they would live there because they were allowed to live close to the city, but not inside the city limit. And that went on likely into the 20th century, where native people would come into the area sometimes from reservations in the summer times and set up camps alongside the riverside.

Speaker 1:

Zachary Stocks, executive director of Oregon Black Pioneers, explains how early black settlers were not only excluded from living in Eugene, but the whole state of Oregon.

Zachary Stocks:

Between the 1840s and 1850s, there were three laws that were passed by the provisional territorial and then state governments of Oregon, which today we collectively refer to as the Black exclusion laws. The goals of all three of these laws were largely the same. It was to prevent the creation of a black population within Oregon. And they did that by discouraging black people from coming to Oregon, and by heavily restricting the rights and opportunities of black people already in Oregon. They could not bring a lawsuit against a white defendant, they could not start a business, they could not own property, essentially making it so that there were no civil rights whatsoever for black people in what would become the state of Oregon when it was federally ratified in 1859.

Speaker 1:

Despite these racially biased restrictions, indigenous and black people did live near Eugene and contribute to the community's early history.

Zachary Stocks:

In Eugene, black people had very few places where they were actually able to find housing. That became an early challenge for black people who came here for jobs in timber, and then later in railroads. Many black families had no other options for housing, but to create a makeshift neighborhood essentially along the banks of the river in what is today, Alton Baker Park.

Speaker 1:

Eric Richardson, past president of the Eugene NAACP, explains how the Ferry Street community across the river from Skinner Butte became a target for urban renewal.

Eric Richardson:

In 1949, we know that, I think it's August 24th, the county moved in and demolished that makeshift settlement in an effort to clear it out for the building of the new Ferry Street bridge, which still exists today. And this is something that with modern engineering, modern building of the interstates, we see that throughout the United States that many black communities were the first to be dispersed when it came to new building construction, new infrastructure that was going to be needed as we built up our nation.

Speaker 1:

But not all of the white residents of Eugene wanted to displace their neighbors. A report from the League of Women Voters in 1952 outlines how the organization worked to relocate black families who had lost their homes.

Eric Richardson:

I think this is a record that should be more readily available, and it shows that there were white citizens of goodwill who saw the illegality and the unmoral treatment of their fellow citizens. This is a good document to really expose some of these truths, and to have these conversations going forward about who we are as a community and the things that we have done together to make progress.

Speaker 1:

Lisa Arkin of Beyond Toxics has researched the displacement of black families during this time. A few families relocated to the basis Skinner Butte along High Street, and formed a tight-knit community.

Lisa Arkin:

As I interviewed Lyllye Reynolds-Parker about growing up on the corner of High Street and second, she talked about the nature of the community and a safe and loving space, especially to raise children. And she talked about how she knew as a child that she could simply run across the unfenced yard over to the Washington's house, let's say. And she knew there'd be an adult there and some cookies or something to drink, that it was really this loving community and that people planted gardens and shared produce from the gardens. And that there were many cookouts where even the families living in Glenwood or other parts of the city would know.

Speaker 1:

But this pocket of black community was short-lived. The city chose this section of High Street to build a low-income housing project now called Parkview Terrace.

Lisa Arkin:

So the idea that the city picked this one spot to do urban renewal is highly suspicious. And when I went back through city documents, they talk about choosing an area of blight that they're going to correct through basically ripping those houses down and putting up building for low-income housing. And they take great care to say they interviewed everyone there and tried to find a new place for them to live. But according to their records, there was only one black family living in the area. And we know that's not the case. There was also a boarding house there, primarily for black men. The city didn't take the time to gather enough evidence of who was living there, why they were living there, and what would happen if their housing was demolished. Eugene was not so big in the early sixties, there were plenty of places to build affordable home, but to pick that one block and to move fast to bulldoze those homes and displace those families, and most importantly, whether they put it in writing or not, to break up this loving community and to spread the families to the wind.

Speaker 1:

Knowing this history helps us understand how places and people in our community go together. They tell important stories about our past, our present, and what we choose for the future.

Eric Richardson:

Well, we know that the idea of environmental justice from the African-American perspective is really about place. Many times we have been placed in harm's way, and this story of the African-American community in Eugene really speaks to that.

Speaker 1:

To learn more about race and community development in Oregon, look for resources from Oregon Black Pioneers, the Eugene Chapter of the NAACP and Dr. David Lewis. This project was created by the Shelton McMurphey Johnson House Museum and was made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities.