Speaker 1:

... what do you see when you look at the Mims' property? Some people see two quaint old homes and a garden tucked back from a quiet street. Others see a safe haven, a site of resistance and a community center for Eugene's Black community. Like all of Oregon, Eugene started as an inhospitable place for early Black residents. Eric Richardson, past president of the Eugene Chapter of the NAACP, explains Oregon's history with exclusion.

Eric Richardson:

As many folks know, Oregon was one of the only states to be admitted into the union with exclusionary language in its constitution. And so we know that there was a movement to create what I guess some would call a white utopia in Oregon and in the Northwest, and that would entail excluding Blacks and others from coming as residents.

Speaker 1:

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

Eric Richardson:

There was a settlement across the Lamont River where many poor people, not only Blacks, but other folks who could not afford to live in the city or were not allowed, did set up residence or shacks, makeshift dwellings, and began to create community.

Speaker 1:

When the city decided to demolish the community in 1949 to build the Ferry Street Bridge, many Black families had a difficult time finding new places to live due to racial discrimination. The exceptions, such as the Mims family, were often able to buy or rent homes with the support of white employers.

Eric Richardson:

Some folks were able to by through employment with whites were able to live in the city, were able to live in proximity to their employers. The Mims themselves were able to purchase a property, but that is with the help of Joe Early Jr. who was the hotelier at the time in Eugene. So you had men of goodwill, women of goodwill in the white community who really did try to help, and so there were those instances.

Speaker 1:

C.B. and Annie Mims were the first Black family to own property within the city limits. Owning their home allowed them to not only provide stability for their family, but created opportunities for other Black people visiting and living in Eugene.

Eric Richardson:

My understanding is that the Mims' homes, which there are two houses on the Mims' property, one was the family home and one was a house that oftentimes was used as a boarding house, but at the same time, this property was known throughout the community as a safe space and a place that they could go and really have solace from the turmoils of racial discrimination.

The Mims are here in the '50s, and at that time, the University of Oregon itself began this idea of recruiting Black athletes, of getting people to come here for their own purposes. Yet they did not allow the Black athletes full rights. And so they weren't allowed live in the dorms like with the other white kids and other places. So many of these athletes did need to find lodging in the city. We know that at least the Mims played a role as a boarding house. And so this idea of Black philanthropy, that's what I like to call it, is like helping one another with what we have.

Speaker 1:

During the 1950s and '60s, the Mims also hosted visiting musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald because local hotels refused to serve Black patrons. Even after the civil rights era, the Mims home continued to play an important role in the community.

Eric Richardson:

I know myself as a young man, being able to go and visit Mrs. Mims on holidays, which we would do, gave me a sense of belonging, a sense of place, and a sense of history. And I think that is something that my generation has maybe have taken for granted, but it's something that was really meaningful in the '50s and '60s.

Speaker 1:

In 2016, the city installed a monument on the site honoring the Mims legacy. Explore the stone marker and informational signs to learn more about the history and future for the site and community.

Eric Richardson:

The fact that in 2016, this Black-owned property was still viable and still part of our community and something that the Mims family wanted to share with the community as a way of saying, "This is where we have been and we want to go forward as brothers and sisters, even though we know our difficult history." And so it was with great thankfulness that we dedicated that monument in 2016. And that also gave pride to the Black community who were seeing we recognize this place too, and having the city and the county recognize it gave them a sense of pride in place as we correct our course looking at environmental justice for all people.

This is a cautionary tale being the African American community in Eugene, how they were treated, how they were moved around, how they were put in harm's way and not afforded just dignity. As citizens of the United States, this is about reflection for our community, who are we, how can we be better, and to honor our past and go forward in a place where our children can really respect one another and build a community together. As the property stands today, it is a community treasure that the Mims family does want to share with the community, and we are in the process of doing that.

Speaker 1:

Learn more about Eugene's Black history and environmental justice projects ~~at the Mims House~~ by visiting the Eugene Chapter of the NAACP's website. This project was created by the Shelton McMurphey Johnson House Museum and was made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities.