

The Green Book

The forgotten story of one carrier's legacy helping others navigate Jim Crow's highways



This photo is believed to be Victor H. Green, as it was printed in the Spring 1956 edition of the Green Book opposite the editor's introduction. No other known photos exist.

The 1940s and '50s are remembered as the birth of the great American road trip. President Dwight Eisenhower championed the creation of a system of interstate highways that criss-crossed the nation, fueling the construction of service stations, road-side diners and motels. The growing middle class was getting out and seeing America.

But that was also still the time of Jim Crow laws in the South and racial discrimination in other parts of the country as well. The laws and practices were designed to keep African-Americans from voting or even patronizing businesses, including many restaurants and hotels. Some towns had what were known as sundown rules, meaning all African-Americans had to be out of town by sunset, or else.

For many, traveling wasn't simply an adventure to be filled with awe and pleasure, but also embarrassment and fear. Imagine not knowing where you could stop, where you could eat, where you could stay.

An entrepreneurial letter carrier from Harlem saw a need and created *The Negro Motorist Green Book*—commonly referred to as simply the “Green Book”—a travel guide for black- and white-owned hotels, inns and even private residences that would accept African-American travelers. He used his NALC and other postal contacts to find the listings all across the country. For example, in 1949 for Montgomery, AL, the guidebook recom-

mended the Douglas Hotel and Bonnie's Restaurant as safe places. In 1956, travelers to Hartford, CT, could stay at Mrs. Johnson's house at 2016 Main St.

The story of the Green Book had almost been lost completely until a stray remark a few years ago reminded the world of this remarkable tool and the letter carrier who made it his legacy.

The guide was the creation of **Victor H. Green**, a native of New York. In 1913, at the age of 21, Green was living in Hackensack, NJ, and went to work at the local post office as a letter carrier. With schooling that extended only through seventh grade, Green—as did many African-Americans—found a good, dependable, federal job with the Post Office Department, even if the pay was low (see NALC's history book *Carriers in a Common Cause* for more on letter carriers' experiences at the time). Green also joined NALC's Hackensack Branch 425, now known as Bergen County Merged. By 1933, he continued his route in New Jersey but had moved to Harlem, just over the George Washington Bridge.

There the Harlem Renaissance was still in swing, rich with culture, music and art, when important writers and social activists including W. E. B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes were attempting to redefine what it meant to be African-American, creating a new racial pride. Green must have been attracted to this energy, as by 1933 he was managing musician Robert Duke, his brother-in-law.

Green was described as a man of “tremendous drive and energy” by Novera Dashiell, an assistant editor, in the 1956

ROCHESTER
HOTELS
Avalon—305 North Broadway

ST. CLOUD
HOTELS
Grand Central—5th & St. Germaine
RESTAURANTS
Spaulding—6th Avenue, N.

ST. PAUL
TOURIST HOMES
Villa Wilson—697 St. Anthony Ave.
RESTAURANTS
G. & C. Bay—543-291 No. St. Albans
Jim's—St. Anthony and Kent
Carter's—286 West Central
Nifty's—Rondo and Kent
SERVICE STATIONS
Gardner—Western and Central
Otto's—Rondo and Central

GARAGES
Milligan's—1008 Rondo Ave.
TAILORS
Drew—1597 University Ave.

LIQUOR STORES
Bond—771 Wabasha
Firm—Robert at Fifth
Continental—14 East 4th St.
Seven Corners—158 West 7th St.
Seward—478 University Ave.
St. Paul's—200 East 7th St.
Rice—442 Wabasha
Jack's—517 Powers St.

MISSISSIPPI
BILOXI
TOURIST HOMES
Mrs. C. Bower—610 Main St.
Mrs. A. J. Alcains—443 Washington

SERVICE STATIONS
Dudes—Hwyway 49 So.

CANTON
RESTAURANTS
TOLLIVER'S CAFE
Was You Efer in Kanton?
THIRSTY THINK FIRST OF TOLLIVER'S
L. M. Tolliver, Prop. 115 N. Hickory
Canton, Miss.

NIGHT CLUBS
BLUE GARDEN NIGHT CLUB
51 Highway
Meals of All Kinds - Refreshments
Open Daily 7 P.M. - 2 A.M.
Sat. and Sun. All Day

5 Liberty St. Canton, Miss.

FUNERAL HOMES
PEOPLES FUNERAL HOME
116 N. HICKORY

CLEVELAND
SERVICE STATIONS
7-11—Highway 61 at 8

COLUMBUS
HOTELS
Queen City—15th St. & 7th Ave.
TOURIST HOMES
M. J. Harrison—215 N. 14th St.
H. Somerville—506 N. 14th St.
Mrs. E. Klansman—12th St.
Mrs. I. Roberts—12th & 5th Ave. N.
Mrs. Cleary—145 10th Ave. N.

GREENVILLE
TOURIST HOMES
Mrs. B. E. Clark—568 Ohio St.
SERVICE STATIONS
Peoples—Nelson & Eddie St.

GRENADEA
TOURIST HOMES
Mrs. K. D. Fisher—72 Adams St.
F. Williams—Hwyway 51 & Fairground Rd.
Henry's Lodge—Hwyway 51 & Fairground Rd.

HATTIESBURG
TOURIST HOMES
W. A. Godbold—409 E. 7th St.
Mrs. A. Crosby—113 E. 4th St.
Mrs. S. Vassar—634 Mobile St.

JACKSON
HOTELS
SUMMERS HOTEL
619 W. PEARL ST.
EDWARD LEE HOTEL
144 W. CHURCH ST.

TOURIST HOMES
WILSON HOUSE
151 W. OAKLEY STREET
STEVENS TOURIST HOME
HWYWAY 49 WEST

RESTAURANTS
TIP TOP CLUB
WHITFIELD MILL ROAD

JACKSON (Cont.)
SHEPHERDS KITCHENETTE
604 N. FARISH ST.
THE CHOP HOUSE
703 N. FARISH ST.
STEVENS BAR-B-QUE INN
HWYWAY 49 WEST

BEAUTY PARLORS
David Salon—703 N. Farish
BARBER SHOPS
Clyde—127 N. Farish

TAILORS
PARIS CLEANERS
809 N. FARISH ST.
DRUG STORES
PALACE DRUG STORE
549 N. FARISH ST.

SERVICE STATIONS
Johnson—536 N. Farish
FARISH ST.—748 1/2 N. Farish

TAXI CABS
VETERANS CAB CO.
116 W. AMITE ST.

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49 Highway N.

FOR EXERCISE AND PLEASURE—SKATE
Finest of Musical Entertainment
Refreshments
Willie Miller, Prop. Jackson, Miss.

LAUREL
HOTELS
Barr—8 Pine St.
TOURIST HOMES
Mrs. S. Lawrence—902 Meridian
Mrs. E. L. Bower—522 E. Kingston
Mrs. F. Garner—909 Joe Wheeler's Ave.
Mrs. S. G. Wilson—802 S. 7th

MACOMB
HOTELS
Townsend—514 Summit St.
TOURIST HOMES
D. Mason—218 Duval St.

MENDENHALL
SERVICE STATION
BOB'S SERVICE STATION
HWYWAY 49

MERIDIAN
HOTELS
Boles—2411 Fifth St.

TOURIST HOMES
C. W. Williams—1208-11st. St.
Mrs. M. Williams—15th St. Boro. 16 & 17 A.
Chatter Ledge—4th St. & 16th Ave.

MOUND BAYOU
TOURIST HOMES
Mrs. Sallie Price
Smith's
Mrs. Charlotte Strong
GARAGES
Liddle's

NEW ALBANY
HOTELS
Foss's—Railroad Ave.
TOURIST HOMES
S. Dwyer—Church St.
Patt Knorr—Cleveland St.
C. Morgenthaler—Cleveland St.

YAZOO CITY
HOTELS
Caldwell—Water & Broadway Sts.
TOURIST HOMES
Mrs. A. J. Walker—321 S. Monroe

MISSOURI
CAPE GIRADEAU
TOURIST HOMES
G. Williams—408 S. Frederick St.
W. Martin—18 N. Hanover St.
J. Randle—422 North St.

CARTHAGE
TOURIST HOMES
Mrs. M. Webb—S. Patton St.

COLUMBIA
HOTELS
Austin House—108 E. Walnut St.
TOURIST HOMES
Mrs. W. Harvey—417 N. 3rd St.

CHARLESTON
TAVERNS
Creole Cafe—311 Elm St.

EXCELSIOR SPRINGS
HOTELS
The Albany—408 South St.
Moore's—302 Main St.

HANNIBAL
TOURIST HOMES
Mrs. E. Jalin—1218 Grand St.

JEFFERSON CITY
HOTELS
Lusk's—600 Lafayette St.
Booker T.

TOURIST HOMES
Mrs. C. Woolf—118 Adams St.
R. Greave—118 E. Dunklin St.

guide: "Tall, well-built, always impeccably groomed, with an easy affable manner." People who knew him said that whenever he was out and about, he always dressed fashionably and would only change into his uniform once he got to work.

As a union member and a civic leader, and perhaps because of his work managing Duke, Green heard many stories of humiliation and violence from members of his community. He looked to other travel guides for inspiration on creating a tool for helping African-Americans.

"The Jewish press has long published information about places that are restricted and there are numerous publications that give the gentile whites all kinds of information," he wrote in his introduction to the 1949 edition, recounting why he had created the guide.

The idea crystalized in his mind in 1932 and would see its first edition printed in 1936, covering just New York City. The demand was so great that the following year it became a national guide, and eventually expanded with international listings. To this day, people who used the guide speak about its importance for providing information and reassurance to African-Americans far from home.

"It didn't matter where you went, Jim Crow was everywhere then, and black travelers needed this badly," Julian Bond said in a 2010 interview while he was president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). "It was a guidebook that told you not where the best places were to eat, but where there was any place."

Bond spoke from personal experience. "My family had a Green Book when I was young, and used it to travel in the South to find out where we could stop to eat, where we could spend the night in a hotel or someone's home," he said. "I always thought it was called the Green Book because it was green."

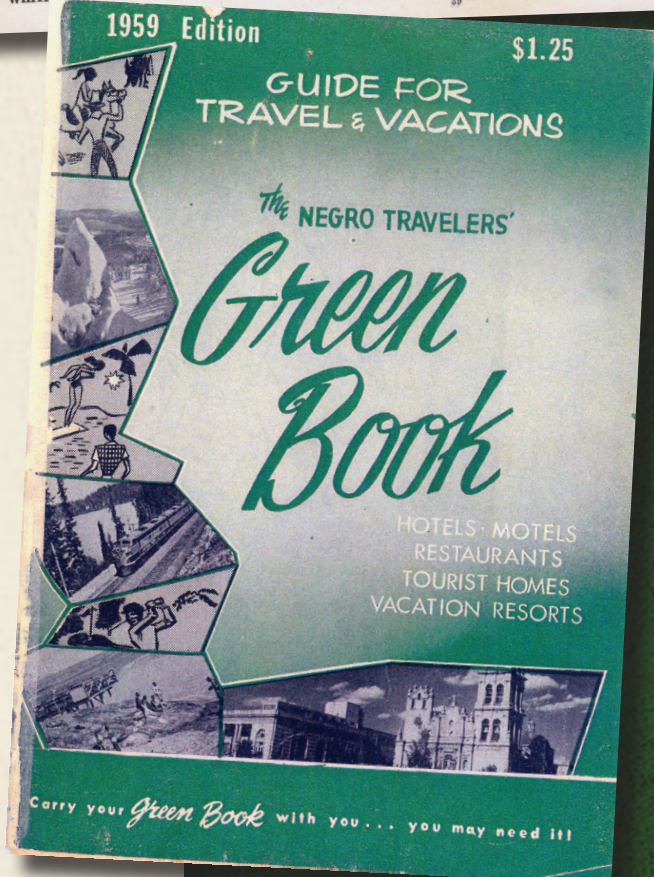
"The Green Book was, I think, an institution in black life," Ernest Green, no

relation, said in a 2011 interview. "It was one of those unknown survival tools for black people that had to move around the country."

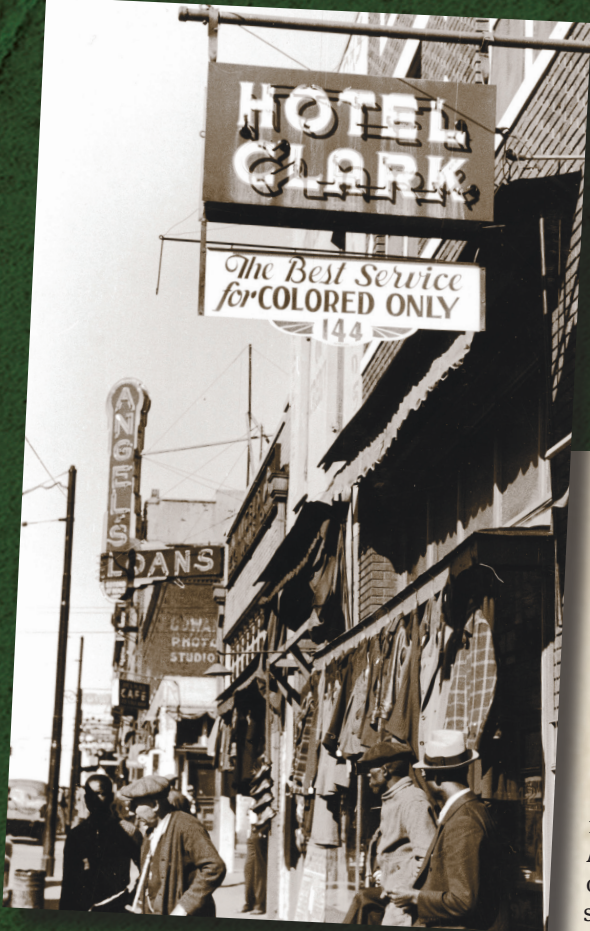
Ernest was one of the Little Rock Nine, a group who became the first African-American students at Central High School. He remembers his family using the book to travel from Arkansas to Virginia in the 1950s. "I knew the Green Book was a necessity for us to have a place to stay."

The guide was especially popular with African-Americans who traveled frequently for work, such as jazz musicians and ballplayers in the Negro leagues. The Negro Leagues Baseball Museum has a copy of a Green Book that belonged to the legendary Buck O'Neil—a player, scout and manager of the Kansas City Monarchs and a member of the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Victor Green set up extensive contacts to get his information, including



Listings from the 1949 edition of the Green Book and the cover from the 1959 edition.



The Hotel Clark in Memphis, TN, in 1939 specialized in lodging for “Colored only.”



Calvin A. Ramsey’s book, “Ruth and the Green Book” was written to help teach the importance of Victor Green’s work.



using his NALC connections. “There are postal workers everywhere,” Bond explained. “And he used them as guides to tell him: ‘Well, here’s a good place here, a good place there.’”

Green’s most important partnership was with the Esso (now Exxon) gasoline station chain. Esso, a subsidiary of Standard Oil, was progressive for its time, selling franchises to and employing African-Americans in its corporate offices. Esso sold the guides in its service stations and advertised in the guide’s pages, along with helping Green finance the publication.

People in Harlem and the broader African-American community knew the importance of what Green had created, and some supported it financially. Author Langston Hughes took out an ad in the 1947 edition proclaiming, “To live in a country where we’re not hardly welcomed anywhere and where our money is no good and our dignity is trampled on daily says a lot about us as a people and not giving up our right for full citizenship.”

While the book’s main goal was to offer protection and reassurance, overtly it looked like and offered the services of a travel guide. (In St. Georges, Bermuda, for example, the 1949 guide suggested renting bicycles from Dowling’s Cycle Livery on York Street.)

In 1947, Green expanded the book to include a vacation reservation service, to help travelers make advance plans. And by 1952, as the book had broadened its scope from mainly hotel and restaurant listings to include barbers, beauty salons, bars and nightclubs, it was renamed *The Negro Travelers’ Green Book*.

“White barbers would not cut black people’s hair. White beauty parlors would not take black women as customers,”

Bond explained of the need for expanded listings. “You needed the Green Book to tell you where you can go without having doors slammed in your face.”

Victor Green believed that the entrepreneurial spirit that propelled his guide could be a driving force for advancing the African-American community, especially through the expanding use of advertising that marked the late 1950s and early 1960s.

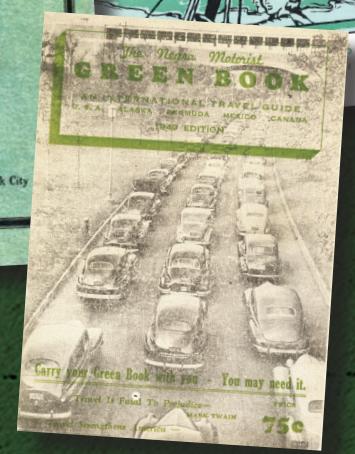
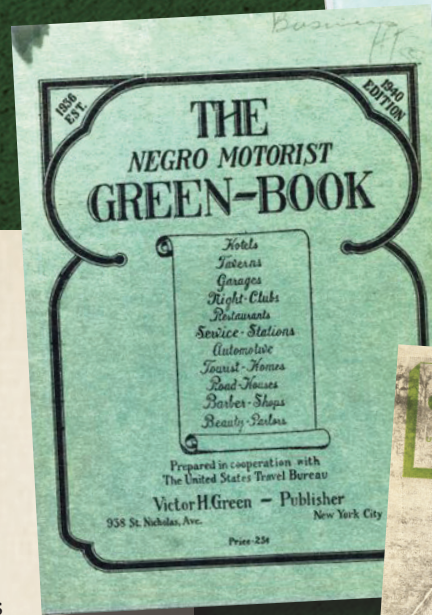
“If Negro-owned business is good, it can be better with advertising,” Assistant Editor Dashiell quoted him in the 1956 edition. She explained, “His philosophy is that we can create our OWN ‘name brands.’” He encouraged youngsters to enter the advertising field and noted to his readers that white-owned businesses had seen the power of advertising in the guide and “have come to value and desire your patronage.”

Green worked on the annual guides while continuing to deliver the mail, though records suggest he didn’t profit much from the guides. In 1940, he reported his income as \$2,100, which was the average pay for a letter carrier at the time.

By 1942, he had a route in Leonia, NJ, where he worked until 1952, when after 39 years of carrying the mail, he retired at age 60. With help, he continued publishing some 15,000 guides annually until his death in 1960. The guide remained in publication by others, with the 1959 guide listing his wife, Alma, as the editor and publisher, and the 1966 edition lists two publishers who weren’t related to Green. A printer, who printed the Green Book, said that a daughter of Victor’s brought him the master pages of the last several guides, until about 1966, after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act had made discrimination by businesses illegal.

In the almost 50 years since the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the Green Book has largely been forgotten except by older generations whose families may have used the guides. Author and playwright Calvin A. Ramsey had never

The 1940, Spring 1956 and 1949 editions



heard of the guides until he attended a funeral in Atlanta sometime around 2004. The deceased's grandfather, who was from New York and had never been down South before, asked Ramsey where he could get a Green Book, as he thought he still needed one. Fascinated, Ramsey researched the history of the Green Book and got hooked, which inspired him to write a play, "The Green Book," and a children's book, "Ruth and The Green Book," to help preserve its legacy.

"Ruth and the Green Book" is the emotional story of a young African-American girl who traveled to the South with her parents. They're turned away from a gasoline station and a hotel before buying a copy of the Green Book at an Esso station. The joy at finding friends on the road comes as a welcome and heartwarming relief.

"[Children today] know about anti-slavery, the period of the Underground Railroad, and about Reconstruction, but even after that, travel was really difficult," Ramsey said. "It just fell on me, really, to tell the story."

The play was staged in Atlanta for a limited run and was put on as a special reading with the cooperation of Bond of the NAACP and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2010. Victor Green makes an appearance in the play on the telephone with Langston Hughes before the narrative focuses on characters at a tourist house. Ramsey also brought the story of the Green Book to the attention of NALC Region 15 Regional Administrative Assistant Orlando Gonzalez, who did his own research and forwarded it to *The Postal Record*.

"Ramsey said he wanted to come in and show me his book and talk about the letter carrier who helped all these people," Gonzalez said. "When he mentioned Green, I was like, there's no way that's possible that I don't know about it. This guy was completely lost to history."

Not much is known about Green, the man, other than what was written about

him in his guides and the historical facts NALC was able to track down. We were not able to locate any of Green's relatives—and have yet to find any documentation on the daughter mentioned by the printer. Not many copies of the Green Book can be found, with only a few known editions residing in academic and museum collections, where they are being used to help research this era.

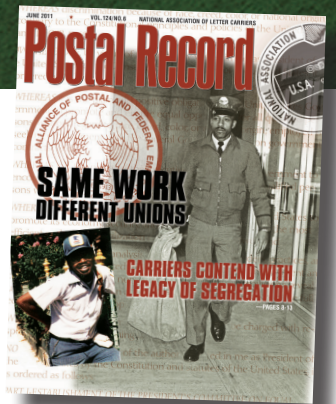
For example, early editions of the Green Book reveal that most of the listings where African-Americans were welcomed in New York City were in Harlem. Over the course of the guidebook's run, hotels in Manhattan started to be listed as well, documenting the spread of the rejection of segregation.

But for the tens of thousands of travelers who used the guides during the three decades they were in circulation, their importance was known firsthand. They were truly a roadmap for friendly faces in hostile territory.

It's likely that Green would not be too upset about his guide being relegated to history books. He often said that he looked forward to the time when the Green Book would no longer be necessary.

"There will be a day sometime in the near future when this guide will not have to be published," he wrote in 1949. "That is when we as a race will have equal opportunities and privileges in the United States. It will be a great day for us to suspend this publication for then we can go wherever we please." PR

Special thanks to Orlando Gonzalez, Jeff Fox, Bruce Didriksen, Sonny Guadalupe, and Charlie and Emy Peasha for their help in researching Victor H. Green's life and NALC membership.



Attention: NALC is looking for African-American carriers who joined the National Alliance of Postal Employees because of racial inequality within the NALC. The 2012 NALC Convention passed a resolution that any carrier who was affected by this racial inequality could use membership in the Alliance for purposes of Article 2, Section 5 of the NALC Constitution.