



# LOUISVILLE DOWNTOWN

## *Civil Rights Trail*



*Designed by Ed Hamilton, nationally recognized sculptor and artist*



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### III. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

*The Civil Rights Era in Louisville (Two Centuries of Black Louisville, 2011)  
pp.185-193, by Dr. J. Blaine Hudson, (1949 -2013)*

From the end of World War II through the early 1950s, Louisville African Americans had been unusually effective in desegregating some sectors of the local workforce and selected public spaces. As many of these spaces—for example, golf courses, libraries and parks—were used only by a minority of local whites, and often a middle- to upper-middle class minority, there was comparatively weak public resistance to change and a fair likelihood of attracting white liberal allies. Even the token desegregation plan for the public schools, when coupled with “tracking” and other in-school grouping practices, enabled most whites to avoid contact with African Americans even in a technically desegregated school system. However, as the 1960s approached, the struggle for desegregation and equality moved into domains that whites could not avoid: public accommodations, employment, and housing. White resistance grew stronger exponentially, the risks in advocating change grew more daunting—and the efforts of local African Americans and their allies became increasingly determined. . .

Through the 1950s, most Louisville restaurants, department stores and other white-owned establishments outside African American communities either excluded African Americans altogether or treated them differently as customers—for example, denying them the opportunity to try on clothes, to sit at lunch counters and to enter movie theaters. As late as 1950, White Castle, a popular fast food restaurant, served black patrons only through an outside takeout window.



*Fourth Street, between Liberty and Jefferson Streets, March 1961.  
The Courier-Journal Archives*

Although segregation seemed “softer” in Louisville, appearances were deceiving and the city was still deeply and structurally segregated. Early successes in breaching the walls of segregation soon led to more ambitious efforts to level those walls altogether. For example, Lyman Johnson led the NAACP Youth Council in sit-ins in downtown Louisville as early as 1956, and members of the Youth Council protested segregation at the Brown Theater in 1959. However, the battle lines of the first major struggle were drawn in January 1960, when a delegation of thirty-five community leaders, black and white, met with Louisville Mayor Bruce Hoblitzell to press for a public accommodations ordinance. Both the mayor and the Board of Aldermen were unresponsive. Eighth Ward Alderman William W. Beckett, the lone African American member of the Board, twice introduced an ordinance to end segregation in restaurants, theaters, and other businesses. Twice, the ordinance was rejected by a vote of 11 to 1.

In response, on February 9, 1961, Louisville African Americans launched the “Nothing New for Easter” protests and a boycott of downtown businesses. These large scale demonstrations brought numerous arrests. African American student and adult demonstrators often used Quinn Chapel A.M.E. Church at 912 W. Chestnut Street as a staging area—and the old “Abolition Church” became, quite fittingly, the “Civil Rights Church” of a new era. Other churches and civic groups helped raise money for bail.



*Stewart's Department Store, March 11, 1961.*

Unlike most other cities that witnessed demonstrations during this period, the shock-troops in the Louisville marches and sit-ins were students from local junior and high schools. There were few college students, comparatively few adults and only a few sympathetic whites who occasionally joined the protests. The number of young people arrested was sometimes so large that the young protesters were held in the police gymnasium before being charged, usually with delinquency and breach of the peace, and then released. In many cases, African American police officers, under the watchful eyes of white commanders, were assigned deliberately to “police” the demonstrations—which often placed them in the obviously uncomfortable position of arresting relatives or the children of friends. Some of the adults attracted considerable attention; Chief William Binder himself arrested Frank Stanley, Jr., son of the publisher of the Louisville Defender, at a demonstration on March 13, 1961, in front of the United Artists Theater on 4th Street.

Although most demonstrations targeted downtown businesses, there were a few enterprises outside the business district that received special attention. For example, one of the most visible symbols of segregation in Louisville was Fontaine Ferry, an amusement park in western Louisville that offered over fifty rides and other attractions, a swimming pool, skating rink, theater, and roller coasters. Not surprisingly, Fontaine Ferry was the target of numerous protest marches. [A time-line for these demonstrations is included in Appendix 2.]

Clearly, African Americans were on the “front-lines” of the demonstrations. However, growing out of the interracial coalitions of the “movement before the movement” period, a number of prominent local whites were staunch allies in support of civil rights both in public and behind the scenes. Some, such as Mrs. Dann C. Byck and Anne and Carl Braden, had long been active. Some, such as Suzy Post, Galen Marin, Reverend Charles Tachau, Henry Wallace, Lucretia (Lukey) Ward and others became prominent supporters during the 1960s. At the same time, The Courier-Journal, through the editorial stance of Barry Bingham, Sr., gained national recognition as a southern newspaper that advocated for civil rights and desegregation. In this respect, African Americans were never entirely alone in their struggle and had a reservoir, however shallow at times, of sympathy in the larger community.



*April, 1961, Kupie Restaurant  
The Courier-Journal Archives*

Because the demonstrations brought no immediate response from city leaders, African Americans, with white support, used a weapon unavailable to blacks farther south until after the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965—and organized an extensive voter registration campaign to oust the mayor and the aldermen. Woodford R. Porter, Jr., elected in 1958 as the first black member of the city school board, was chairman of the Non-Partisan Voter Registration Committee campaign, the high point of which was a rally in August 1960 at which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke to more than 9,000 people. In the November elections, African Americans voted in record numbers for Republican candidates and contributed decisively to the removal of Hoblitzell and the aldermen, even including Beckett, from office.

The new mayor, Republican William O. Cowger, and the new Board of Aldermen established the Louisville Human Relations Commission in 1962, but an enforceable public accommodations ordinance was not passed until May 14, 1963—after more than a year of further negotiations and occasional demonstrations. Still, the passage of the public accommodations ordinance was a “first” for a southern city and Louisville received—and, for a time, basked in the public glow of—national recognition for peaceful desegregation precisely at the time that racial violence had exploded in Birmingham and elsewhere. . .