

# The “Black Metropolis”

The center of Black—and American—history on Chicago's South Side

BRONZE  
VILLE



The Victory Monument by Leonard Crunelle, and the Monument to the Great Northern Migration by Alison Saar

We are truly honored and fortunate to call Bronzeville home.

From Ida B. Wells to Gwendolyn Brooks and Dr. Daniel Hale Williams to the many thousands of individual African Americans who came to Chicago during the Great Migration and built our city into a true international metropolis, the historic and cultural legacy of Bronzeville is impossible to overstate. Indeed, to recognize this extraordinary impact, the United States Congress designated Bronzeville a National Heritage Area. Illinois Tech must fully embrace all of the opportunities and responsibilities that come with being a major university in this historic part of Chicago.

I hope you take the time to learn about and celebrate the legacy of our very special community.

This informative and fascinating glimpse into our home is an important reminder to always be grateful to be a part of Bronzeville, strive to be a collaborative partner, and to actively serve our community as we move forward and grow together.

Sincerely,

Raj Echambadi  
President, Illinois Institute of Technology



## Chicago's Original Diverse Communities

**Bronzeville** is the center of Black history on the South Side of Chicago, significant for its impact on Black culture and life. However, to better understand the neighborhood's history, it is important to take stock of the diverse communities that first called Chicago home.

### Indigenous Peoples (Through 1835)

Seated atop a continental divide, the Chicago area is located at the intersection of a multitude of waterways, a key reason why it became the homeland for many Indigenous tribes, including the Potawatomi, Odawa, Sauk, Ojibwe, Illinois, Kickapoo (Kiikaapoi), Miami (Myaamia), Mascouten, Wea, Delaware, Winnebago, Menominee, and Meskwaki.



the Chicago area was widely seen as an important economic crossroads.

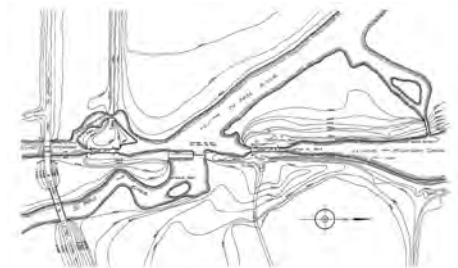
### Explorers, Fur Traders, and Farmers (1670s–1835)

Economic pursuits that intersected the needs and wants of these three groups promoted intercultural exchanges and influence between them, and with Indigenous peoples.



**Jean Baptiste Point du Sable**—along with his wife, Kitihawa, a

member of the Potawatomi tribe—established the first settlement in what is now Chicago, and is recognized by the city as its first non-Indigenous resident. A free Black man who was born in Haiti, du Sable, often referred to as Chicago's founder, was an adept intermediary between the different systems of commerce and the different groups of people who resided in the area.



### Industrial Chicago (1835–1890)

Incorporated as a city in 1837, Chicago saw an influx of capital and settlers beginning in 1835—following the removal of Indigenous peoples from northern Illinois. The Illinois and Michigan Canal—the creation of which drew unskilled labor (largely Irish and German) that diversified and grew early Chicago—opened in 1848 and briefly served as a conduit between Lake Michigan (and the East Coast) and the Mississippi River (and points south and west).



Free Black people were part of that inflow, ranging from wealthy businessman and anti-slavery activist John Jones to the unskilled laborers who worked in the stockyards and in other industries, which included the meatpacking industry at the Union Stockyards and companies such as McCormick Reaper that employed thousands of African-Americans—all of which set the table for Chicago becoming a key destination during the Great Migration to come.

## The Black Belt's Formation Through Migration

Motivated by the jobs awaiting them and by their weakening rights in the South, hundreds of thousands of Black people trekked north to Chicago during the **Great Migration**. Bronzeville quickly became these new Chicagoans' refuge as the "Black Belt" began to form around them.



## The Great Migration

In the years immediately following the Civil War, Southern Black people made civil and economic advances under federal military and governmental protection during the Reconstruction Era that lasted until 1877. In the period of repression that followed, especially during its legal phase

**150%**

From 1910 to 1920, the population of Bronzeville grew **150 percent** because of the Great Migration, reaching 110,000 by 1920

from the 1890s onward, Jim Crow laws codified racial separation and segregation. These oppressive laws led many Black people to relocate to the North, which was accelerated by other factors,

including the United States' rapid industrialization in the North where Black people could easily earn three to five times more working in factories than they did as sharecroppers in the South. Chicago's status as the rail capital of the U.S. also facilitated the migration northward, with the Illinois Central Railway serving as a major and direct conduit.

## ASK THE EXPERT

**Q:** What other factors drove the Great Migration?

**A:** The era saw an information revolution, as quicker communication and the explosive growth of newspapers spread information down to the poorest people. The *Chicago Defender*, for example, worked with Black porters on southbound trains to load as many copies on board as possible. The paper's founder and publisher, Robert Abbott, wrote strong editorials and stories that urged Black Southerners to come to his city and help develop a strong, progressive, and vibrant "Black Belt" that could then turn the tide against national Jim Crow laws.

—University Archivist Mindy Pugh



## Politics in the Black Belt and Bronzeville

In Bronzeville, **politics** served as both a platform to help give a voice to the Black people who lived there and as another avenue for the City of Chicago—and the country at large—to ensure that they weren't treated the same as their white counterparts.



### People to Know

**Oscar DePriest:** Served in the United States House of Representatives from 1929–35 as a Republican, the first Black person elected to Congress in the twentieth century and the first Black representative from the North; served two terms on the Cook County Board of Commissioners (1904–08) and served as the first Black alderman in Chicago (1915–17)

**Ida B. Wells:** The journalist, educator, and anti-lynching crusader founded the Alpha Suffrage Club in 1913 to educate Black and working-class women on civic matters and on the importance of voting rights as a path to the election of Black candidates; those efforts helped Oscar DePriest become Chicago's first Black alderman in 1915, with women, according to Wells, accounting for a third of DePriest's votes



# 1929

Since Oscar DePriest took office in 1929, the **First Congressional District** that includes Bronzeville has only been represented by a Black person—the longest ongoing stretch of Black representation for any seat in the United States House of Representatives

## KEY DEVELOPMENTS

### Political Machine on the South Side



Following Oscar DePriest's lead in the early 1900s, many Black voters backed Republicans, as DePriest helped the party recognize that the rapidly growing Black population could be a key voting bloc. That began to change in the 1930s. DePriest lost his House seat to Arthur Mitchell, a Black Democrat, in 1934. With the help of William L. Dawson, a Black Second Ward committeeman, Chicago Mayor Edward J. Kelly built a powerful Democratic machine by enlisting the support of Black voters on the South Side. Dawson would eventually take Mitchell's seat in the House and serve 14 consecutive terms.

### The Use of Housing as an Impediment

Despite some initial benefits, machine politics did little to help the residents of Bronzeville as more and more Black people migrated to Chicago. In particular, housing was a powerful tool to hold Black residents back.

Contract buying—a process in which a buyer put down a large payment for a home and then paid on the home monthly at high interest rates, but the buyer did not gain ownership of the home until the contract was paid in full—exploited Black residents on Chicago's South and West sides. The contract seller held the deed for the home throughout, and could evict the buyer. According to research by Duke University's Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity and University of Illinois Chicago's Nathalie P. Voorhees Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement, between 75 percent and 95 percent of homes sold to Black families in the 1950s and 1960s were sold on contract.

Meanwhile, redlining ensured that it would be nearly impossible for residents in areas such as Bronzeville to buy a home. Local real estate professionals around the country provided data and evaluations that the Home Owners' Loan Corporation used to "grade" residential neighborhoods for their "mortgage security." Bronzeville was in an area given the lowest grade, D, which was labeled in red and considered "hazardous" investments for mortgages. The report called it a "negro-blighted district" where a "very fine park," Washington Park, had been "monopolized by the colored race," among many other overtly racist takeaways.





## Black-Owned Businesses

As Bronzeville's population grew, so, too, did the "city-within-a-city." Enterprising Black residents saw an opportunity to open businesses and provide other services in the neighborhood, which were needed in a city where Black residents had few other options.



## One-Stop Shopping

Serving a needed role—one precipitated by restrictive covenants in Chicago that limited where Black residents could live, do business, and enjoy entertainment—Black-owned businesses in Bronzeville allowed residents to conduct personal business such as banking and insurance, as well as to shop for necessities and other goods. In some cases, residents could go to one location and take care of all of their business and shopping needs, such as at:

- **Binga Block:** One of several enterprises created by Jesse Binga, Chicago's first Black banker who, in 1908, opened Binga Bank, the largest Black financial institution in the country with assets of more than \$1 million before its collapse during the Great Depression. Binga Block, located on State Street between 47th and 48th streets, hosted a variety of businesses, including a pharmacy and barber shop. Binga also opened and operated the Binga Bank and Arcade, located at the corner of 35th and State streets, that was home to the bank, offices, shops, and a dance floor.
- **The Forum:** Built in 1897, the Forum, located on East 43rd Street, was a business and culture hub that featured a ground floor of storefronts and a second-floor auditorium that was a gathering place for the community, be it for concerts or civil rights events.



## Notable Entrepreneurs

- **Anthony Overton:** Brought his bustling business, Overton Hygienic Company, to Bronzeville in 1911. Hundreds of Bronzeville residents worked at Overton, which manufactured and sold 52 cosmetics products. He later founded the *Chicago Bee*, a Black newspaper.
- **Annie Malone:** Sold Black-focused hair products, beginning with door-to-door sales of Poro Products. She eventually founded Poro College in 1917 in St. Louis, and later moved its operations to Chicago in 1930.







A Bronzeville Saturday by Gregg Spears, courtesy of the Chicago Public Library (Chicago Bee Branch)

## The Impact of Jazz and "The Stroll"

A multiple-block stretch of State Street, beginning at 31st Street and heading south, known as "The Stroll" was the vibrant cultural center of Black nightlife in Chicago that once reigned as America's jazz capital and was home to world-class musicians, celebrities, and much more.



# PEKIN RAG

## INTERMEZZO



Composed by  
**JOE. JORDAN.**

Author of Nappy Lee &c.  
Published by  
PEKIN PUBLISHING CO.  
CHICAGO  
2309 STATE ST.

### The Beginning

The musical entertainment component of the “Black Belt” traces its lineage to 1904 when the Pekin Inn, located at State and 27th streets, was revamped as a cabaret that featured ragtime and other pre-jazz music. Pekin Inn served as a forebear of what was to come for venues further south on State Street: Beyond world-class music and entertainment, these establishments were also a center for gambling and political dealmaking.

Louis Armstrong



### A Stroll to Remember

- **Café de Champion:** A cabaret and formal dining establishment opened in 1912 by Jack Johnson, the heavyweight boxing champ and the most famous Black man in the United States
- **Grand Theater:** A home to blues singers such as Alberta Hunter, Ethel Waters, and Bessie Smith
- **Royal Gardens** (later Lincoln Gardens): Trumpeter Joe “King” Oliver led an ensemble of musicians who followed him from New Orleans at Royal Gardens; in 1922 the group was joined by trumpeter and singer Louis Armstrong
- **Vendome Theater:** The former home of the German-American athletic association, the theater was opened in 1919 and seated 1,500 people; it quickly became the hottest jazz spot in Chicago (and, potentially, the United States) in the 1920s. Its resident band was Erskine Tate’s Venome Orchestra, which Armstrong joined in 1925 and was where he developed his mature style of scat singing
- **Venues up and down the “The Stroll”** hosted talented Black musicians who made a name for themselves while in Bronzeville, including pianist and band leader Jelly Roll Morton, pianist Earl “Fatha” Hines, and clarinetist Jimmie Noone, among many others

### A Place to be Yourself



Beyond its impact on the entertainment world, the jazz clubs and other venues that populated “The Stroll” also served as a safe haven of sorts for members of the LGBTQ community in Chicago, specifically Black members of that community. From its

beginnings in the 1920s through the 1950s and 1960s, Bronzeville openly welcomed LGBTQ singers and entertainers such as Alberta Hunter, Ethel Waters, Bessie Smith, Antony Jackson, Gladys Bentley, Tony Jackson, and Rudy Richardson, among others, for performances and to enjoy the nightlife. These same venues were also welcoming to LGBTQ community members to visit, and some held drag shows, particularly on Halloween and New Year’s Eve. As the LGBTQ community grew in Chicago, establishments began to open on the North Side to serve them, though most excluded Blacks. Bronzeville stayed a welcoming place for Black members of the LGBTQ community through the ‘50s and ‘60s when cultural attitudes began to shift.



## Community Activism

Whether it was spreading the word about the opportunities available in the North during the Great Migration or to lend a hand to its residents, organizations from churches to newspapers played an outsized role in advocating for those who called Bronzeville home.

### Spreading the Word



In 1905 Robert S. Abbott (LAW 1898) founded the *Chicago Defender*, a newspaper for the Black community. Abbott strongly encouraged Black people living in the South to migrate to Chicago, where he wrote of the opportunities awaiting them—just one way

that Abbott highlighted the good that the Black community in Chicago was doing to the more than 1 million readers of the *Defender*. Its rival, the *Chicago Bee*, was first printed in the mid 1920s by Anthony Overton. Among its accomplishments, the *Bee* is credited with coining the term Bronzeville as part of a local contest.



The First Church of Deliverance

## Providing a Helping Hand

Social clubs and churches often met a vital need for newly arriving Bronzeville residents. Social clubs provided acculturation, while houses of worship served as gathering places where Blacks could unite and fight against the prejudices that they regularly faced. Some of the notable churches and organizations included:

- **The Negro Fellowship League** was an idea developed by Ida B. Wells through conversations with her church group. The Negro Fellowship League served as a resource center for young Black men who had recently arrived in Chicago during the Great Migration. The league was created in response to race riots and to help alleviate the difficulties that many faced in moving from the rural South to the urban North. The group’s building, located on “The Stroll” and paid for by Wells’ wages as a probation officer, included a small library, a job center, and, eventually, a dormitory.
- **The South Side Settlement House** was founded by Ada S. McKinley, a schoolteacher and social reformer, in 1919 amid the Spanish Flu pandemic and the Chicago Race Riot. It was started to assist Black World War I veterans and other families migrating from the South. Now called Ada S. McKinley Community Services, Inc., the organization continues to serve communities on the South Side of Chicago and beyond.
- **The Wabash Avenue YMCA** served as a major social and education center in Bronzeville upon its opening in 1913, a place where Blacks could obtain an education, receive job training, find a variety of other resources, and build communities.
- **Pilgrim Baptist Church**, formed in 1922, became a center for gospel music with musical director Thomas A. Dorsey and, in later decades, a pulpit for civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr.
- **The First Church of Deliverance**, founded in 1929, offered less-formal services for comparatively rural residents. Walter T. Bailey, the first licensed architect in the state of Illinois, designed the church’s second building that was finished in 1939.
- **Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ** opened its doors in 1916 and quickly grew a large congregation. The institution gained worldwide recognition during Emmett Till’s open-casket wake and funeral. Till, the 14-year-old Chicago native who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955, posthumously became an icon of the civil rights movement.



## Life in Bronzeville

Living, creating, and working in Bronzeville was its own unique experience, for good and bad. In some ways, the "city-within-a-city" provided Black Chicagoans a place to call their own, with all they could want and need. It also served as an example of the inequality they regularly faced.



The Supreme Life Insurance Company Building

### NOTABLE BRONZEVILLE INNOVATORS

#### Daniel Hale Williams

A surgeon, Williams performed the first successful open heart surgery in 1893 after helping to establish Provident Hospital in Bronzeville

#### Bessie Coleman

Despite prejudice against women and Black pilots that kept her out of flight schools in the United States, Coleman—with help from *Chicago Defender* founder Robert S. Abbott—became the first Black woman to earn an aviator's license by training in France

#### Gwendolyn Brooks

Brooks used her roots in Bronzeville to become one of the most highly regarded, influential poets of the twentieth century. She was the first Black author to win the Pulitzer Prize, and served as poet laureate of the State of Illinois. Her work displayed her civil rights activism, spanning from her time working at the Mecca Flats in the 1940s

#### Frank Gillespie

The Arkansas native founded what would become Supreme Life Insurance Company in Bronzeville in 1919, becoming the first Black-owned insurance company in the North. Before starting Supreme Life, Gillespie had risen to become the first Black superintendent employed by a White-owned insurance company in the North



# LOST *and* FOUND

MECCA FLATS

IN 2018, when work was being done on the steam piping near S. R. Crown Hall on Illinois Institute of Technology's Mies Campus, artifacts from the Mecca Flats apartment building basement were found by workers. Built in 1891 in preparation for guests of the World's Columbia Exposition, the Mecca was, at the time, the largest apartment building in the United States. Eventually bought by Illinois Tech in 1939, it was razed in 1952, with Crown Hall sitting where the Mecca once did. The Mecca holds a special place in the history of Bronzeville, at one time home to the Black middle class and later home to the Black musicians and artists who made the neighborhood a special place. It is also one of the first examples of how urban renewal impacted many of the historical structures and communities in Bronzeville. "You still have architecture historians writing articles about the Mecca Flats. You still have cultural historians talking about the jazz and blues that was performed in the Mecca Flats or near the Mecca Flats. For the African-American community, it's one of the important buildings of early Bronzeville. Even though it's gone, it has never left anyone's memory," University Archivist Mindy Pugh says.







## Winds of Change Come to Bronzeville

World War II marked the beginning of an exodus. Bronzeville's thriving economy, culture, and community eventually peaked in the 1940s, as high-rise buildings and public housing projects razed blocks of former homes and businesses, despite residents' fight against forced relocation.

# 75%

According to a Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning analysis of the United States census data, Bronzeville lost more than **75 percent** of its population from 1950 to 2010

## What Changed?

Starting with Oscar DePriest's election to the United States Congress in 1928, Black representation in local and federal politics grew, but, because of institutional policies and prejudices, victories were elusive. Policies built on segregation and racism impacted Bronzeville's growth and, ultimately, led to its decline.

- Beginning in the 1940s, the Chicago Housing Authority began erecting “residential towers” in primarily Black neighborhoods throughout Chicago, a public-policy extension of racially restrictive covenants, which were in place from 1927 to 1948, and continued to limit Black residents from moving into other neighborhoods
- The U.S. Supreme Court's decision to lift rules restricting the sale of housing to people of color in certain areas in 1948—thanks, in part, to an argument by Bronzeville politician Earl B. Dickerson—allowed middle-class Black residents to leave the city to find less-restrictive housing in the suburbs
- Upon election, Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley began construction on the Dan Ryan Expressway, which cut Bronzeville off from the rest of the city when it opened in 1962
- By the 1970s, dozens of residential towers for low-income Black residents were built, but middle-class families that did not fit income requirements either paid increased rent or were forced to leave the neighborhood.



## Contemporary Bronzeville

Much has changed in Bronzeville since the days when "The Stroll" was bustling, serving as the center of life for Black Chicagoans. Political and racial motivations depleted the neighborhood, but now a new generation is working to reignite the fire of Chicago's "Black Metropolis."

35th Street Bicycle and Pedestrian Bridge over DuSable Lake Shore Drive



### Trend-Setting Entrepreneurs

The **Boxville marketplace** forgoes brick-and-mortar buildings in favor of shipping containers, and entrepreneurs who couldn't afford a traditional storefront can support the community.



### Bringing the Swing

Music is intertwined in Bronzeville's past, and it remains the same today. Musicians flock to the **Bronzeville Jazz and Music Festival**, Norman's Bistro, and Room 43.



### Celebrating History

The neighborhood's storied past lives on in its people and landmarks, and the 92 bronze plaques of the **Bronzeville Walk of Fame** honor influential Black Chicagoans. Monuments honoring the Great Migration and the second-oldest Black church in the city, Olivet Baptist Church, are constant reminder of the history made in Bronzeville.

### Outdoor Adventure

Bronzeville is home to **Margaret T. Burroughs Beach**, also known as 31st Street Beach, and the Burnham Wildlife Corridor, a 100-acre ribbon of wildlife that stretches from McCormick Place south to 47th Street.





The Armour Institute Building



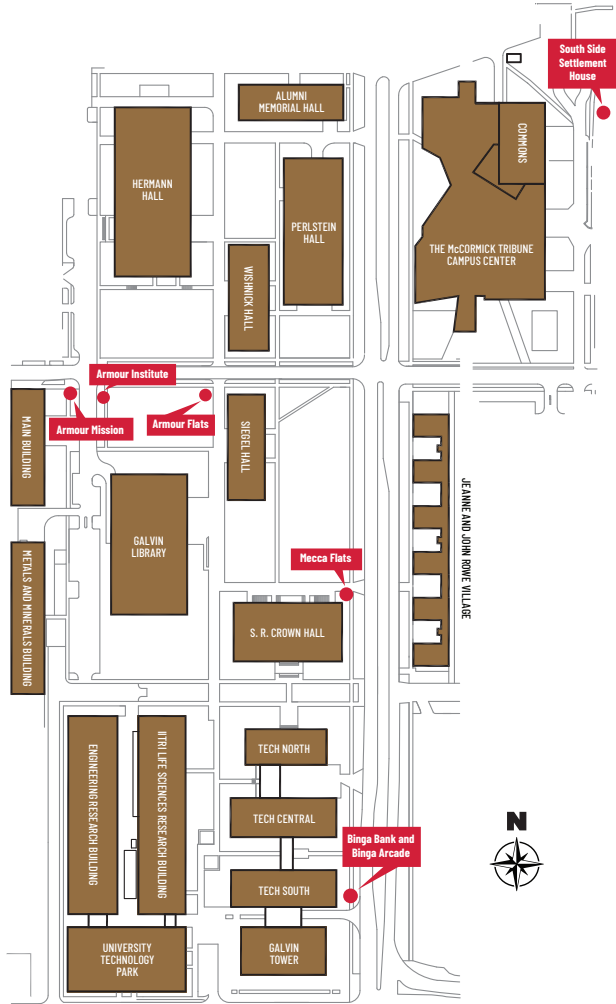
Courtesy University Archives and Special Collections

## Historical Campus Markers

There are seven cultural markers on the Illinois Tech campus that highlight where historically relevant structures once stood. Four of the markers—Binga Bank and Arcade, Mecca Flats, South Side Settlement House, and the Alpha Suffrage Club—had key roles in the lives of the Black community in Bronzeville. When visiting Mies Campus, look out for—and take a minute to read—these markers, as well as those highlighting Illinois Tech’s forebearer, Armour Institute.



Near the intersection of 31st Street and State Street, the Alpha Suffrage Club, the first organization established to promote the right for Black women to vote in Illinois, was founded by Ida B. Wells on January 30, 1913. The group met every Wednesday evening at the Negro Fellowship League, located at 3005 South State Street. The group aimed to educate Black and working-class women on civic matters and the importance of voting rights as a path to the election of Black candidates to political office, despite largely being excluded from the existing local and national suffrage organizations.





Office of Community Affairs and Outreach Programs: [www.iit.edu/community-affairs](http://www.iit.edu/community-affairs)  
Black Metropolis National Heritage Area Commission: [blackmetropolis.org/](http://blackmetropolis.org/)

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