

Black History Month: Almost Heaven, West Virginia.

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*"Almost Heaven, West Virginia
Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River
Life is old there, older than the trees
Younger than the mountains, growing like a breeze."*

Take Me Home, Country Roads
John Denver



Pictures taken on location in West Virginia and courtesy of Tracy Pechulis

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Experience History; Traveling Through Time

Throughout my 25 years of traveling, I always immersed myself in the rich history of the area. In the early 2000s, I spent a month traveling through the state of West Virginia. This was my first trip where I opted to stay at bed and breakfast inns versus traditional hotels. My expectation was simply a cozy room and a home-cooked meal versus McDonald's and the usual Crown Plaza or Holiday Inn. I planned to travel the areas during the day including museums, historic places, and other points of interest and writing about my travels at night. What I experienced, changed my traveling habits forever. It was like relinquishing the well-appointed yet sterile environment of a hotel, history brochures, hotel maps, and jumping into the colorful and warm pool of actual history. History that you do not often find in history books. The history lesson learned was a personal and moving experience beyond measure for me. It shaped who I am today. I was able to visualize history through the eyes of those who experienced it and through the stories passed down through generations. This was the oral history told by many of the bed and breakfast inn owners, included their small museums, guests, and the historic places the owners would point me towards that weren't always on a map. I took many pictures to document my travels.

Flying into Charlotte, West Virginia, I would find myself flying out of Cincinnati, Ohio a month later with the perfect ending to my trip. I was so amazed by the history I found in College Hills, Ohio; I would wind up staying the entire week. A fitting bookend to an on the ground education in African American history and the amazing people who propel it forward.

Black History of West Virginia

Elkhorn Inn and Theater

My first stop was Elkhorn Inn and Theater in Elkhorn, West Virginia. The Elkhorn Inn was originally built by Empire Coal & Coke Company as their "Miner's Clubhouse" in 1922. On the way into the bed and breakfast, I was greeted by a woman guest gently rocking in a rocking chair on the porch with a warm smile, a nod, and a soft "Hey." After checking in the owner started telling me about the history of the Elkhorn Inn. I was very inquisitive of the history of the bed and breakfast and the area and asked several questions diving in deeper and immersing myself. The owner decided to show me their own onsite museum dedicated to the history of the area.

The first item I noticed was a coin. Although, I could clearly see it wasn't a U.S. government minted coin. "That's scrip. It is what the owners of the mines paid their workers with. The workers would use it to make purchases with it in their company-owned stores." Hanging on the wall were pictures of miners toiling away in the coal mines. Whites, Europeans, and African Americans working side by side. "Miners didn't care about the color of your skin. They cared about your work ethics, family, and who you were as a person." While the owners of the coal mines were not sympathetic to those of other ethnicities, the community including other miners made up for their lack of compassion. The miners worked closely together and participated in events outside of work together. The ideology of segregation was not of the community, but rather thrust upon them by the coal mine owners. Many of the stories of West Virginia African American history articulated during my stay at the Elkhorn Inn and travels in West Virginia are reflected in this article. It was an unexpected historical feast that was rich in diversity.

Unlike its Appalachian neighbors, West Virginia did not disfranchise African Americans, and they continued to enjoy full political equality. In fact, one of the major reasons African Americans moved into the state's mining towns in such large numbers was the near absence of Jim Crow laws. They preferred West Virginia to Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee because they wanted to vote, to educate their children, and to live in a African American community which was not suppressed by racist politics or hedged in at every turn by the constraints of caste etiquette.

Pictured is the Elkhorn Inn in Elkhorn, West Virginia. The Elkhorn Inn has been featured in a variety of media, including HGTV, CNN Travel, Speed Channel, Traveling the Mountain State, Good Morning WV, "Hollow", The Great Country Inns of America Cookbook, The NY Daily News, WV Off The Beaten Path, and Historic Inns of Southern WV.^[1]

One of The First African American Schools

One of the first schools for African American children was in Parkersburg West Virginia, a self-help effort, opened in 1862. After 1865, education for West Virginia's African American citizens was undertaken wherever there were enough students. Schools were underway in 18 communities by 1868, including Parkersburg, Wheeling, Clarksburg, Charleston, Lewisburg, Martinsburg, Charles Town, and Malden. These early schools were held wherever space could be found, sometimes in homes and churches. In some instances, the schools were private and served both adults and children.^[2]

History of the Term Rednecks: West Virginia

White hill folk, European immigrants, and African Americans were fed up with life-threatening working conditions, terrible wages, crushing debt, and corrupt mine operators. They were the original rednecks, and their *interracial* coalition was ahead of its time.

Miners often wore red bandanas to protect themselves from coal dust, earning them the nickname "rednecks." By late 1921, they had organized for years through unions including the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). They'd led strikes, protests, and smaller armed clashes against their employers, building up to what would become known as the largest labor uprising in U.S. history.

In the early 1900s, coal miners were fighting for the right to organize and to stop the practice of using mine guards. They also wanted an alternative to shopping at coal company stores and being paid in scrip, instead of money. In the early 1900s, miners led a series of strikes in southern West Virginia, leading up to the climatic march on Blair Mountain in 1921. Of the estimated 15,000-armed miners were 2,000 black miners, predominantly from the Kanawha-New River Field.^[3]

Kimball, West Virginia

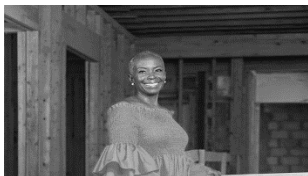
Pictured is the first African American museum dedicated to the African American soldiers of World War I. A memorial dedicated specifically to the African American soldiers of the First World War (the first memorial of its kind) was designed and built by architect and West Virginia native Hassell Hicks, opening in 1928 in Kimball, McDowell County.

African Americans represented as much as thirty-five percent of the workforce in McDowell County coal mines, with 1500 volunteering for service in World War I. After a county-funded war memorial was built in Welch, African American veterans petitioned the county commission for funding, resulting in an appropriation of \$25,000 for the building's construction. The completed building housed a hundred-seat meeting room, trophy room, kitchen, recreation center, and a library, and was used by local citizens of all races. It was also home to the Kimball American Legion post, which was itself the first African American Legion post.^[4]

Six Acres, College Hill, Ohio: Underground Railroad

I had selected a bed and breakfast at random with a plan to catch a flight out the next day. It was late on a crisp fall evening when I arrived at Six Acres. Kirstin, a woman of color, began to give me a complete tour of Six Acres that began in the foyer. With excitement in her words, Kirstin decided to purchase the property that held her high school graduation, although that wasn't the main reason. Sure, there was a sentimental aspect, but as she continued an even greater story unfolding before me. Although late in the evening, Kirstin continued to give me a complete tour of Six Acres including the history the house played during the days of the underground railroad and her vision for the future. I had found more than a breathtaking bed and breakfast, I found history. Before heading to my suite for the night, Kirstin asked me what time I would like breakfast served in the dining room. I asked her what time others were having breakfast? I normally sleep in, although if the guests were having breakfast at 7 am, I would make a point to be on-time and present. Kirstin informed me that I was the only guest for the night. Not wanting her to have to go through the trouble of making breakfast for just me, I declined.

In the morning, I headed out to do some sightseeing in the area and returned at 10 am to checkout. Kirstin and I continued our conversation around the history of Six Acres, her vision of the future, and her passion as I began to checkout. I became immersed in the history as it was laid out before me. Abruptly, I decided to finish out the week there. Kirstin once again asked me what time I would like breakfast served. I again, said I would have breakfast at the same time as the other guests. Kristin informed me that other than a guest on Thursday night, I was her only guest. I declined as I did before for the same reason. What came next was unexpected. Kirsten asked if I would be interested if she made an authentic dinner from that era. Knowing the history of the house, her knowledge of the history of the surrounding area, I took up her offer. Kirstin and I would have several authentic era dinners together that week. Each one overflowing with history, knowledge, passions for the future, and authentic cuisine.



Today, Kristin Kitchen owns Sojourn Heritage Accommodations. As Kirstin puts it, her "why?" is simple, to share the rich history of African Americans across the country through art, jazz, wine, and food in a uniquely diverse hospitality setting. Six Acres Bed and Breakfast in College Hill, OH was her start. In 2018, businesses owned by women of color grew faster than other female-owned businesses, which led Choice Hotels International, Inc. to award six franchise agreements for hotel developments in the U.S. and the Caribbean to organizations led by African American women.

Pictured is the Six Acres Bed and Breakfast. Built between 1850 and 1860 by noted abolitionist Zebulon Strong, this beautiful home has a unique connection to the Underground Railroad (now Six Acres). Zebulon was a Quaker and a farmer. Documents in the Ohio Historical Library speak of him having a “false bottom” in his farming wagon where he would pick up his “passengers” along the Mill Creek which runs along the side of the property. He would hide the runaways in the bottom of his wagon and put his crops on the top and take them up to the house for a safe respite before moving them further up Hamilton Pike to the next safe house along the route.^[5]

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