

# BAPTISTTOWN WALKING TOUR

In the years following the Civil War, African Americans settled along Evansville's riverfront and into downtown, as well as areas such as Blankenburg, Independence, and Oakdale. Many also resided in Evansville's 7th Ward, generally surrounding Governor Street, Canal Street, and Lincoln Avenue. Into the 1880s, this area became known as "Baptisttown," a racially-infused term that stereotyped African American residents and cultural lifeways in this area.

Over time, however, residents of the area took ownership of the name Baptisttown and reconceived it as part of the growing community's identity. By 1900, about 54 percent of Evansville's African American population lived in the general vicinity of Baptisttown, which served as the backdrop for much of the African American experience in Evansville during the 20th century, both good and bad.

Over time, Baptisttown developed as a thriving community with its own sense of place, supported by important institutions such as local churches and schools and a growing number of civic leaders. *The Evansville Argus*, a local newspaper dedicated to covering all aspects of Evansville's black community, was also critical to the growth and identity of Baptisttown, particularly during a period when discrimination limited opportunities elsewhere in the city. Lincoln Avenue, the primary east-west corridor, boomed into the 20th century as the hub of commercial and social activity. Over 200 businesses, civic organizations, churches, and social clubs located in Baptisttown during its heyday between 1930 and 1960.

Today, the area historically known as Baptisttown is much changed, many of the places once associated with the community no longer remaining. Yet, the rich and varied story of Baptisttown persists as an integral piece of Evansville's past, anchored by the Evansville African American Museum and long-standing institutions such as Lincoln School and Liberty Baptist Church.

A component of the Evansville African American Heritage Trail, the Baptisttown Walking Tour explores this story through some of the individuals, businesses, churches, schools, and events that have shaped Baptisttown's identity and helps us to better understand the fabric of our community.

## EVANSVILLE AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE TRAIL

# Baptisttown

NEIGHBORHOOD WALKING TOUR

A partnership of the City of Evansville and the Evansville African American Museum, the Evansville African American Heritage Trail is intended to raise awareness of Evansville's cultural diversity and share the story of our community for the benefit of future generations.

Historical photographs courtesy of David L. Rice Library University Archives & Special Collections at the University of Southern Indiana and Willard Library.



[evvafricanamericanmuseum.org](http://evvafricanamericanmuseum.org)





## 1 LINCOLN GARDENS

579 S GARVIN ST

Completed in 1938, Lincoln Gardens was a federal housing project built under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program. It replaced 174 substandard dwellings with 16 modern buildings that provided 182 low-cost housing units. Lincoln Gardens served as a center for the black community in Baptisttown, offering recreational and educational programs.

## 2 AFRICAN AMERICAN LEADERSHIP

CORNER OF S GARVIN ST AND LINCOLN AVE

The 600 block of Lincoln Avenue was home to many of Evansville's black community leaders. Residents such as Alfred Porter, Thomas Cheeks, Boyd Henderson, and W.E. Best were either educators or employees of nearby Lincoln School.

## 3 GUARDIAN HOME

CORNER OF S MORTON AVE AND LINCOLN AVE

Built c. 1850s as a home for children who were wards of the county, the Guardian Home was originally located at this site. The building was later used as the Lincoln USO Center for black servicemen from Camp Breckenridge. After World War II, it became home to the Carver Community Center.

## 4 LIBERTY BAPTIST CHURCH

CORNER OF S MORTON AVE AND LINCOLN AVE

Founded in 1865 by a group of former slaves, Liberty Baptist Church is the oldest black congregation in Evansville. The present church was constructed about seven blocks to the west on Oak Street in 1886-87. Liberty was among the most influential and affluent of black churches in Evansville and has historically provided numerous social and cultural programs.

## 5 LINCOLN SCHOOL

635 LINCOLN AVE

Completed in 1928 at a cost of more than \$275,000, Lincoln School consolidated the African American student population from Governor Street, Clark, and Oakdale schools. As the only African American high school in the area, students were also bussed in from Newburgh, Rockport, and Mt. Vernon. The school remained segregated until 1972.

## 6 EVANSVILLE ARGUS

CORNER OF S GARVIN ST AND LINCOLN AVE

Published in Evansville from 1938 to 1945, *The Evansville Argus* was an African American newspaper covering local, regional, and national news. It provided an important outlet for black business owners to advertise their goods and services and served as a strong advocate for social change in Evansville.



The mission of the Evansville African American Museum (EAAM) is to continually develop a resource and cultural center to collect, preserve, and educate the public on the history and traditions of African American families, organizations, and communities.

## 7 BAPTISTTOWN BUSINESS DISTRICT

CORNER OF S GARVIN ST AND LINCOLN AVE

Intense segregation during the early-to-mid 1900s fostered the growth of the Baptisttown business district, which provided the local black community with essential services and goods. By the 1950s, Lincoln Avenue had developed into the heart of the community. Only one structure remains from the district's heyday -- the Paradise Dance Hall at 253 Lincoln Avenue.

## 8 GOVERNOR STREET SCHOOL

CORNER OF GOVERNOR ST AND MULBERRY ST

Governor Street School operated from 1874 to 1928. Faculty member Charles Henry Turner, who taught at the school in 1888 and 1889, later became a noted biologist and one of the first African Americans in the country to earn a doctorate in the biological sciences.

## 9 GRACE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN

420 E GUM ST

Established in 1934 by the Lutheran Mission Society of Greater Evansville, Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church was unique among the churches in Baptisttown in that it was established by a black congregation and had a white pastor. The congregation later merged with Peace Lutheran Church.

## 10 DAYS ROW / ERIE HOMES

CORNER OF GOVERNOR ST AND CANAL ST

Once known as "Days Row," this area was historically occupied by many dwellings owned by absentee landlords, who allowed properties to fall into disrepair. Conditions in this area led to initiatives to promote community change. Erie Homes, a government housing project, was later constructed on the site.

## 11 WILLIS GREEN

420 E GUM ST

Known as the "Baptisttown Surgeon," Willis Green was one of Evansville's first black physicians. Tradition suggests that his introduction to medicine came while serving as a chauffeur for the Wellborn family. Green would sit in the back of classrooms at Evansville Medical College while his employer attended class.

## 12 ERNEST TIDRINGTON

CORNER OF GOVERNOR ST AND LINCOLN AVE

A savvy strategist and one of Evansville's most prominent African American citizens, Ernest Tidrington became known as the "Boss of Baptisttown" in the 1920s. Much of his influence lay in his ability to control the black vote in Baptisttown to influence local elections. Such power also led to discord with others. In January 1930, Tidrington was killed by a political rival at the corner of Lincoln and Governor.