

# **Oak Park Black History Bike Tour: *People and Places that Matter***



*Jefferson family: Oak Park residents, c. 1905-1927  
Stop 5 on the bike tour*

***Self-guided tour offered free to the community in  
celebration of Juneteenth, the first annual Oak Park  
municipal holiday on June 19, 2021***

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OAK PARK  
RIVER FOREST  
MUSEUM

These sites are numbered sequentially beginning at Oak Park River Forest Museum at the corner of Lake Street and Lombard Avenue, but bikers can proceed in any order. The written description of each site is meant to be *a brief introduction* to the history of each and is not comprehensive. *Suburban Promised Land: The Emerging Black Community in Oak Park, Illinois, 1880-1980* tells more about these locations and other stories of African American residents in our community since the earliest days. This book is available at local libraries and also can be purchased at the OPRF Museum gift shop or [oprfmuseum.org](http://oprfmuseum.org).

Distance between Stops 1 and 7 is about 3.75 miles and the distance between Stops 8 and 16 is about 3.85 miles, for a route total of about 7.6 miles. Please obey the rules of the road including wearing helmets and use extra caution in congested areas in the business districts and on major streets.

Join us Wednesdays-Saturdays from 1 to 5 p.m. or by appointment other days and times inside OPRF Museum for the featured exhibit *Open House: The Legacy of Fair Housing*, which explores how race has impacted the creation of the Oak Park we know today. The exhibit will close at the end of 2021. Do you know of stories that might be added to this list? Please let us know at 708-848-6755 or [oprfmuseum.org](http://oprfmuseum.org).

1. **129 Lake** (southeast corner Lake and Lombard)

Built in 1898 as Cicero Fire Co. No. 2, this Oak Park Landmark predates the Village of Oak Park by four years and represents a time when Oak Park, Chicago's Austin neighborhood, Berwyn and Cicero were all governed by old Cicero Township. The building is a physical sign of the reality that our neighboring communities have a common history and intertwined destiny. As early as the 1880 U.S. Census, Black residents were listed in parts of Cicero Township, with oral tradition placing a small number of families here even earlier. The Oak Park Human Relations Commission, created in 1963 after a Black violinist was

briefly blocked from performing with the Oak Park Symphony Orchestra, met upstairs in the building when it had stopped being a firehouse and was used for municipal offices. In 1966, weekly Fair Housing marches left from this building and adjacent Stevenson Park to protest discrimination in local real estate practices. In 2017, it re-opened as Oak Park River Forest Museum after an extensive renovation by The Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest and aspires to tell *all* of the stories of *all* of the people of the villages over time.

## 2. **117 S. Lombard**

Home and Studio of Black artist Geraldine McCullough, where for three decades until her 2008 death, she created the large,



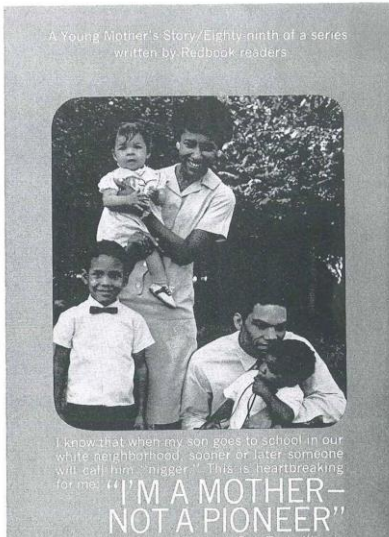
*Geraldine McCullough, 1969*

metal sculptures that were her specialty. Built in 1903 as an electrical generating station to power the nearby Lake Street Elevated (today's CTA Green Line), it was abandoned in the late 1960s and slated for demolition until McCullough saw its three-story-tall atrium which once housed equipment. It was perfect for her art studio and she and her husband Lester also created their home here. Born in Arkansas and raised in

Chicago where she earned a bachelor's and master's degrees from the Art Institute, in 1964 she was hired to be a professor at Rosary College in River Forest (now Dominican University) where she would continue for 25 years, later serving as Chair of the Art Department. That job brought her to Oak Park where she and her husband initially struggled to find housing in the days before the 1968 Fair Housing ordinance.

### 3. **214 S. Elmwood**

In 1965, Harriette and McLouis Robinet purchased this house through a “straw buyer”—white Fair Housing advocates and activists Joyce and Rev. Donald Beisswenger. The Beisswengers, whom the Robinets did not know, helped establish the Housing Committee of the Oak Park River Forest Citizens Committee for Human Rights in 1964; after they re-sold this house to the Robinets, their landlord evicted them from their own rented home on Home Avenue in retaliation. “Straw buyers” were commonly used to circumvent discriminatory housing practices in the USA in this era. The Robinets had made offers on a number of Oak Park homes but the deals fell through once their race became known. Prior to the 1968 Fair Housing ordinance,



**Redbook magazine, February 1968**

the Oak Park Board of Realtors offered forms that allowed home sellers to opt out of showing or selling property to minorities—dubbed “M listings.” The Robinets, leaders of the 1966 Fair Housing protest marches, still live here and remain active in community life in their retirement. Harriette is a noted author of historical fiction for children, and McLouis or Mac worked as a physicist at Argonne National Laboratory.

### 4. **123 Madison** (southeast corner Madison and Lombard)

In 1982, Geraldine McCullough’s *Pathfinder* was installed in the Oak Park Village Hall courtyard as an artistic focal point of the new Village Hall, opened in 1975 to replace the 1903 structure at Lake and Euclid. In 2020, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police, students from OPRF High School and other young people used chalk to write on the sculpture to

peaceably give voice to their anger and frustration in a public display of civil disobedience. The original municipal building was considered inadequate in size and amenities, but the new structure was also conceived by village leaders as a new anchor and prominent public investment in southeast Oak Park, seen as under pressure for so-called “White Flight” and possible re-segregation. Oak Park’s Black population as measured in the U.S. Census would grow from 132 (.2 percent) in 1970 to 5,942 (11 percent) in 1980. The village board, staff, and citizens meeting in this facility developed a wide range of strategies, some of them experimental and controversial like banning For Sale signs or an Equity Assurance Program, as tools to build a more diverse and welcoming community. McCullough’s work is in museums and public spaces around the USA including her statue of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. near the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield and her *Our King* in front of the Austin Wellness Center at Cicero and Chicago avenues in Chicago, which reimagines Dr. King as a leader of Africa’s Benin people.

5. **622 S. Cuyler** (next to Longfellow Park)

Gertrude and Frederick Jefferson bought this home sometime after 1910, living here until 1927.



**Faith Jefferson OPRF  
graduation photo, 1923**

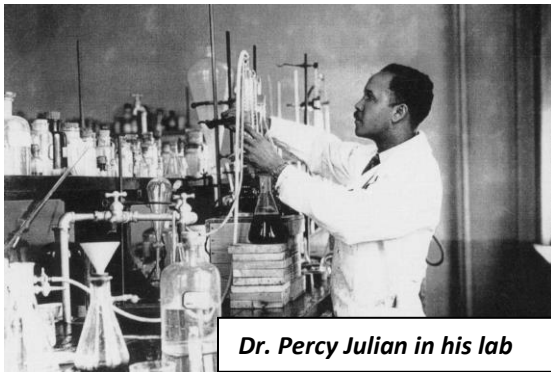
Frederick came north from Metropolis, Illinois to study at the Art Institute of Chicago. But the Jeffersons supported themselves by other means: he was a chauffeur for prominent Oak Parker Henry Hamilton, a paint company executive and village president from 1907-1909, and later Jefferson had a 30-car garage and auto sales room at Lyman and Roosevelt; Gertrude operated a catering business and

worked as a cook for the Beye family, for whom Beye School is named. While the Black population of Oak Park was growing in this era and peaked at 170 in 1920, the African American

population was centered around what is today Downtown Oak Park near Lake and Harlem. Because of discriminatory real estate practices, it was unusual for Black residents to own their own homes. In 1914 and again in 1916, suspicious fires were set at the Jefferson's home. While these violent incidents were downplayed in the Oak Park newspaper, the Black press took notice with a front page article in the *Chicago Defender* calling it an "attack of colorphobia," but also claiming the arsonists were "fiends incarnate" who did not represent the majority of Oak Parkers who were outraged at the attack on the respected Jefferson family. No one was ever arrested or charged with arson, and Frederick Jefferson made it known he was armed and willing to defend his home if other attacks occurred. Along with classmate Archie Webster, daughter Faith Jefferson graduated from OPRF High School in 1923; the two are believed to be its first Black graduates. In 1985, Faith was inducted posthumously into the OPRF High School Tradition of Excellence.

6. **416 S. Ridgeland** and **325 S. Kenilworth**

Percy Julian and Gwendolyn Brooks Middle Schools. Originally named for writers Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson, both middle schools were renamed to honor



*Dr. Percy Julian in his lab*

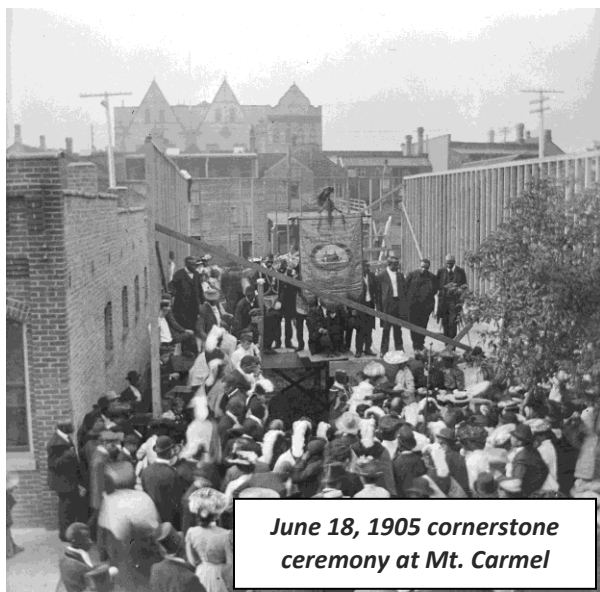
accomplished African Americans: scientist Percy Julian and poet Gwendolyn Brooks. The 1985 renaming of Hawthorne to Julian marked the first Oak Park public facility named for an African-American

person. Emerson became Brooks in 2002, becoming the first school named for a woman, honoring the Pulitzer Prize winner and Poet Laureate of Illinois. Both schools feature tile mosaics that interpret the lives of the two creative giants, installed in



2017 and 2018 by lead artist Tracy Van Duinen as part of an Oak Park Education Foundation project. School District 97 board members, administrators, and parents have worked together to serve the increasingly diverse students attending Oak Park schools. Increasing equity in education for all students is a major ongoing focus of the local elementary schools.

- 7. **1130 Westgate** (Entrance of Emerson Apartment building, east of Target) Mt. Carmel Baptist Church was the spiritual and community center for the local African American community



from 1905-30. After first meeting in the original one-room schoolhouse at Lake and Forest as early as 1887 and then in a rented storefront on Lake Street, the congregation bought a \$600 lot on Chicago Avenue, west of

Cuyler and decided to build a church there in 1904. That was opposed by neighbors, which Deacon Harry Weatherspoon declared “a small tinge of race prejudice which ought to be stamped out now.” The congregation sold that lot at a profit and built its church here on Westgate, then called William Street. This fine, well-appointed brick edifice was soon called “the spiritual and social center of the colored population of Oak Park and vicinity.” A number of Black residents lived and worked in the adjacent area which includes garages, a milk depot and other commercial structures, as well as private homes. The

first few blocks west of Harlem between Lake Street and the train tracks in River Forest also was considered part of this community. In the late 1920s, merchants and property owners devised a plan to attract branches of the major Chicago Loop department stores to Lake Street, creating a west suburban shopping hub. That plan would include new and renovated commercial structures in a Tudor or Art Deco architectural style, which is still evident today. The church members sold the structure and it was soon demolished, with some of its members moving to Maywood and other towns.

## 8. 848 Lake Street (northeast corner Lake and Kenilworth)

Now called First United Church, this structure and an earlier

### March 6, 1931, Oak Leaves

#### CONGREGATIONAL FORUM

James Weldon Johnson, Negro Poet and Author of Novels, to Lecture at 7:30 on Sunday Evening

James Weldon Johnson, negro poet and author, is to speak at the First Congregational church at 7:30 o'clock on Sunday evening, on the theme, "Negro Poets and Their Poetry." A sketch of the speaker follows:

James Weldon Johnson was born in Jacksonville, Florida. He graduated from Atlanta University, taking the work for both his A.B. and A.M. in that institution. He spent three years in graduate work at Columbia university. The honorary degree Litt.D. was conferred upon him by Talladega college, Talladega, Alabama, in 1917, and by Howard university in 1923.

For several years Mr. Johnson was principal of the colored high school at Jacksonville. He was admitted to the Florida bar in 1897 and practiced law in Jacksonville until 1901, when he removed to New York to collaborate with his brother, J. Rosmond Johnson, in writing for the light opera stage.

In 1906 he was appointed United States Consul at Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, being transferred as Consul to Corinto, Nicaragua, in 1909. While in Corinto he looked after the interests of his country during the stormy days of revolution which resulted in the downfall of Zelaya, and the revolution against Diaz.

His knowledge of Spanish has been put to use in the translation of a number of Spanish plays. He was the translator for the English libretto of "Goyecaca," the Spanish grand opera produced by the Metropolitan Opera company in 1915. Mr. Johnson was for ten years the contributing editor of the New York "Age." He added to his distinction as a newspaper writer by winning in an editorial contest one of three prizes offered by the Philadelphia "Public Ledger" in 1916. His poems have appeared in the "Century," "The Independent," "The Crisis" and other publications.

Mr. Johnson is secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and a trustee of Atlanta university. He is the author of "The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man," "The Book of American Negro Poetry," "The Book of American Negro Spirituals," "God's Trombones," and several others. He is also a very popular and able lecturer.

All who are interested are invited to attend this service. There is no admission charge.

building constructed in the 1870s on the same site, was the home of the First Congregational Church of Oak Park. The congregation has a long tradition of being supportive of what is today called "social justice," and in his tenure from 1899-1924, legendary minister and Abraham Lincoln scholar Rev. William Barton was supportive of the Mt. Carmel Church, including bringing Booker T. Washington to First Congregational in 1908 as a benefit for Mt. Carmel. Rev. Albert Buckner Coe, pastor from 1930 to 1949, created the Sunday Evening Forum which brought speakers such as James Weldon Johnson and Zora Neale Hurston to talk about their lives and careers. Rev. Coe

welcomed Percy and Anna Julian to the congregation in the 1940s while they still lived in Maywood. In 1972, the church hosted and helped fund a new community institution aimed at fostering racial integration: the Oak Park Housing Center. Although racism has always existed in the community, First



Congregational was not alone among its peers in aiming to educate the community about racial disparities and in active work toward civil rights for all, especially in the 1960s push for Fair Housing. Jewish and Roman Catholic leaders also spoke up and marched in favor of racial integration, joining with Protestant leaders in this 1960s activism. Other Black luminaries invited to Oak Park by religious leaders include Ida B. Wells speaking at the First Baptist Church and W.E.B. Du Bois speaking at the First Methodist Church.

9. **Scoville Park** (northwest corner Lake and Oak Park)

This bust of Dr. Percy Julian outside the library main entrance was conceived of in 1999 during the community celebration of Julian's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday commemoration. It was funded by private donations spearheaded by the Institute for Science Education and Technology and was dedicated in 2003. Sculptor Erik Blome was commissioned to create a larger than life bust of Julian, with a second casting commissioned in 2005 by DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, Julian's undergraduate alma mater. The chemist earned his Ph.D. at the University of Vienna in Austria, where his brilliance was recognized and he experienced less discrimination than in his native Alabama or his later homes in Indiana and Illinois. The granite plinth of the bust is engraved with an image of a soybean plant. His specialty was developing useful chemical compounds synthesized from the inexpensive, plentiful soybean. This resulted in less expensive and mass-produced drugs to treat glaucoma and rheumatoid arthritis. His research also led to the development of aerofoam, a flame retardant crucial in WWII and in chemicals used in birth control pills. Dr. Julian was granted more than 100 patents and authored more than 150 articles in scientific journals. Scoville Park is considered the "public square" for Oak Park and it remains an important gathering spot for demonstrations, rallies, and public commemoration. That has included many gatherings focused on

racial justice and equality, some organized and led by Black students and residents.

#### 10. **838 Belleforte**

The Stewart-Shannon-Hurst-Peerman House was the home of four generations of this extended family, whose roots in Oak Park, River Forest and Maywood extend back into the late nineteenth century; some family members remain in the west



*Louise Stewart Shannon and  
J.W. Shannon in front of 838  
Belleforte, 1937*

suburban area today. Mary and Fleming Stewart may have built the first section of this house as early as the 1880s, when empty fields stretched north of Division Street. Fleming was a Black stonemason from Virginia who was part Choctaw. Their daughter Louise married John W. Shannon, a talented musician who performed throughout the Chicago region; his parents had been enslaved in Kentucky before his father William gained his

freedom and served in the 119th Regiment U.S. Colored Troops in the Civil War. Louise and John's daughter Virgie Shannon married Mitchell Peerman and lived in this house until her death in 1996; Mitchell worked 30 years for the Village of Oak Park. Together the Peermans raised seven adopted children here and served as foster parents to more than 70 children of all races. Virgie's older sisters Grace Shannon and Ethel Shannon Hurst are seen in the front row, dressed in their Sunday best, in the photo of Mt. Carmel Baptist Church shown at top of opposite page.



## 11. 738 Forest

Louisa and Nathan Brown moved to Oak Park about 1903 and raised three children here: LeRoy, Margaret and Dorothy. Louisa was a native of Minnesota and Nathan was born in Canada. Louisa worked for the F.E. Hoover family, from whom they purchased this home, and Nathan was a coachman for E.H. Pitkin, owner of a Chicago china and glassware wholesaler. Nathan was a regular ribbon winner at the Oak Park Horse Show, a charity fundraiser of the era, but his opportunities dwindled with the rise of the automobile and after they separated, he moved to Chicago and died in 1920. Louisa continued to live here until her death in 1942; her daughter Dorothy and niece Bernice Thornton, lived here until the late 1950s. After graduating from Holmes School, Dorothy was the only Black student when she attended OPRF High School in the late 1910s, but was stymied by a Latin requirement and finished her degree at Englewood High School in Chicago. Many students

in this era, white and Black alike, went to work without completing their high school education.

12. **515 N. East** (northwest corner Chicago and East)

Percy and Anna Julian bought this home and its adjacent lot in 1950 and embarked on a renovation. Percy was a world-famous chemist with a Ph.D., numerous patents, was director of soya



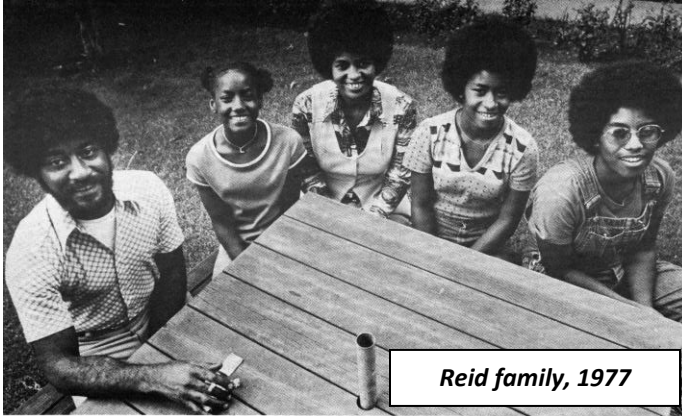
**Anna Julian**

research at Glidden Paint Co. and the reigning "Chicagoan of the Year" as selected by the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Anna had earned a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Pennsylvania early in their marriage and was raising a young son and daughter. They were the sort of well-educated and civic-minded citizens Oak Park prided itself on. Yet before they could move in, someone sprinkled gasoline in their home and attempted to set it on fire. While that attempt was

unsuccessful, it spurred Dr. Julian to hire guards and arm himself. Many people of goodwill and some neighbors rallied around the Julians, petitioning the village board for better police protection and attention to improved race relations. The attack received national headlines and embarrassed many in Oak Park. But in 1951, a stick of dynamite was thrown at the house when the Julians were at his father's funeral and their small children were being watched by a babysitter. No one was injured in either attack, but no one was ever brought to justice. Anonymous threats continued for several years. But the Julians stayed and the home has remained in the family for 70 years. As the years passed, the Julian family's courage and their many accomplishments and community volunteerism became a point of pride for the community.

### 13. 323 N. Ridgeland

In 1968, Henry and Sherlynn Reid bought this home with a conventional mortgage soon after the Fair Housing ordinance was approved. It is believed to be the first conventional



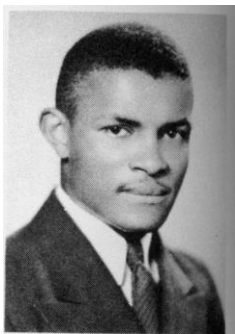
mortgage issued to an African American family in the village, at a time when the banking industry often "redlined" Oak Park and other communities that were undergoing racial change or that were categorized as "in decline" because of racial or demographic changes. This often meant that banks would not underwrite private mortgage loans or only do so after a more stringent review and added requirements. As was common practice at the time, when the Reids and their three young daughters moved in, village officials sent a memo to neighbors describing their family, education, and occupations; they also stepped up police patrols. In short order, the Reids were guiding the village's experiment in integration. By 1971, Henry was a member of the Oak Park Community Relations Commission and later a social worker in the Oak Park schools and a booster of school theater, helping spearhead what is now the CAST program at Julian Middle School. Sherlynn was a force of nature who threw herself into village life, including school PTO, Girl Scouts, and the local League of Women Voters, becoming its first Black president. In 1973, she took a job in the Oak Park Community Relations office, rising up to become its legendary

and long-time director. Middle daughter, Dorothy, also is a community leader who is a former board member of the District 97 school board and a former Trustee on the Oak Park Township board.

#### 14. **201 N. Scoville**

Like the elementary schools, Oak Park River Forest High School enrolled and educated the small number of Black students who lived in the community, never more than a fraction of 1 percent of the total population until the 1970s. The first documented African American graduates were Archie Webster and Faith Jefferson in the Class of 1923. A number of other students attended through the decades, apparently never more than a handful at any one point in time, often not graduating in favor of working to support their families. At OPRF High School in 1970, there were only 9 Black students out of the total of 4,269. By 1980, African American students made up nearly 11 percent of the total and that number continued to grow, even as the alumni numbers swelled from hundreds to many thousands, and Black graduates went out in the world to achieve as scientists, doctors, entrepreneurs, attorneys, and artists. A Miss America, pro athlete, and CEOs are counted among the African American graduates of OPRF High School. Today, there are numerous initiatives aimed at building equity into OPRF's curriculum and programs and there has been an ongoing public discussion about how to overcome racial disparities that remain.

#### 15. **OPRF Stadium** (Northwest corner Lake Street and East Avenue)



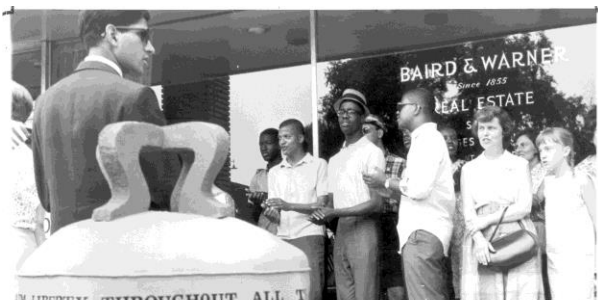
Lewis Pope

Until Faith and Percy Julian Jr. attended in the 1950s, the Black student most in the public eye was Lewis Pope, a 1938 graduate who was a star football player on an undefeated, OPRFHS champion team. Some said it was the best prep football team in the nation in fall 1937, and that claim brought a challenge from the Miami, Florida Senior

High School for the Huskies to come to the Orange Bowl and play for a “national championship game.” Once the Miami boosters found out one of the OPRF players was Black, he was asked not to come to comply with the rules of the Jim Crow South. Pope was asked by the OPRFHS administration if he minded if the team went without him, putting him in a terrible situation. He agreed to stay home and debate raged in the local press and the streets of the villages: why didn’t Oak Park stand up for one of their own? The game ended in a 7-7 tie.

**16. 100 block of North Scoville**

Oak Park artists and volunteers created this colorful Black Lives Matter mural in summer 2020 in the immediate aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis by a police officer. The 130-foot long by 12-foot wide mural was the brainchild of resident Cullen Benson and funded by the Oak Park Area Arts Council. “We thought this was something that Oak Park needs to have – something that children in the community can see for



**Activism in the Streets:** *In 1966, Fair Housing marches went west down Lake St. from Lombard Ave., ending up at Marion St. and North Blvd.*

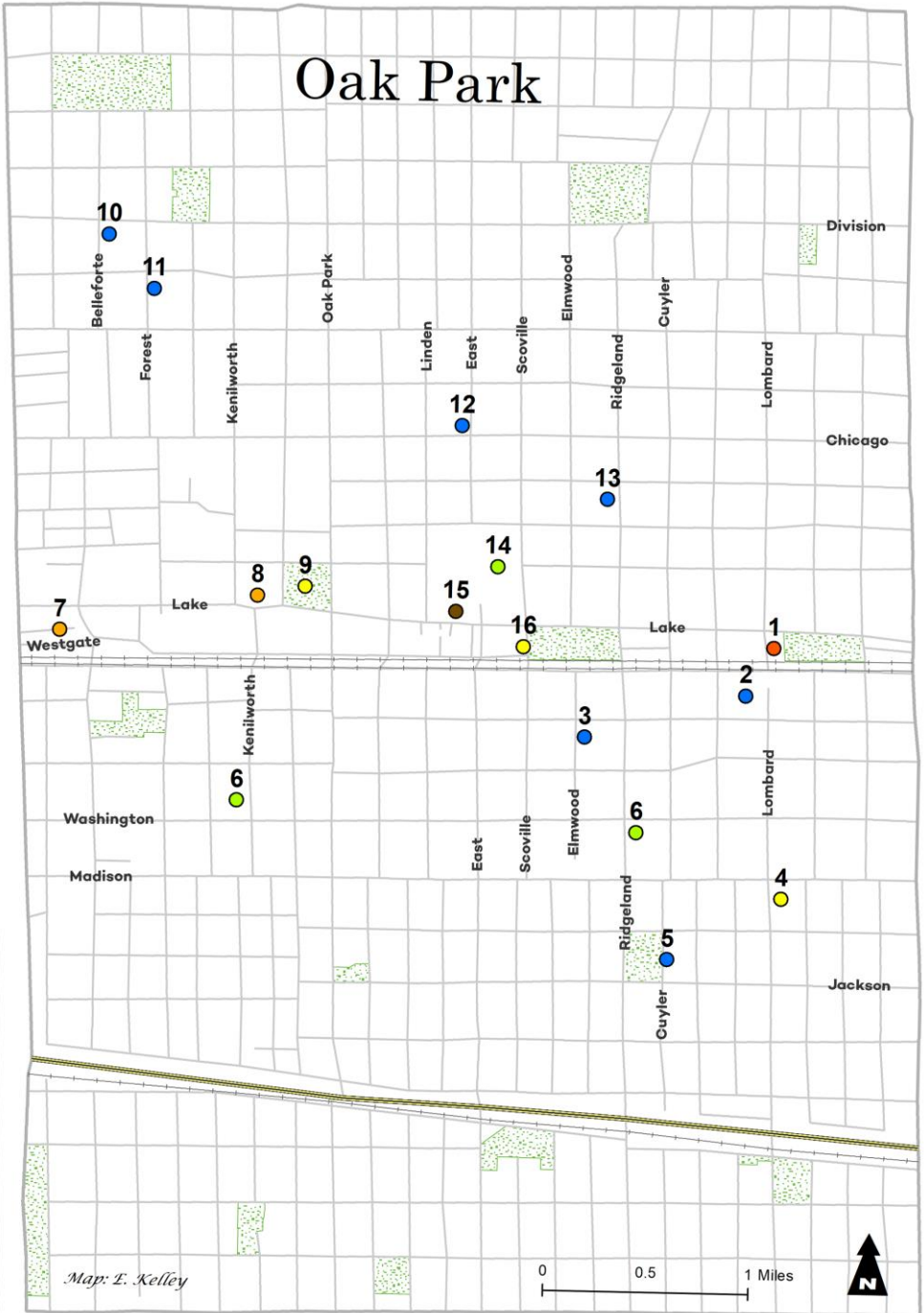
hopefully years to come and know this is where we stand as a community,” said Benson, who used social media to spread the word of the project. Multimedia artist Franka Del Santo

was lead designer and developed the mural’s concept, and artist and community organizer Cortlyn Kelly managed the project’s execution and coordinated work teams. Benson is a native of Oak Park. “I’m half Black and half white, so I have both sides of the equation to deal with...It means a lot to me.”

**Written by Frank Lipo**



# Oak Park



Map: E. Kelley

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