

White Supremacy: We Must Own It Before We Can Disown It

In the wake of the public display of white supremacy now known as “Charlottesville,” white people are starting to face the unchangeable story of our collective past, and beginning to accept responsibility for our part in where that story goes from here. We are joining those who are speaking up, even if it is uncomfortable to do so. That is the price of the unearned advantages that white people have. To dismantle white supremacy, we must know white history—both collective and personal. We own this shameful history; it belongs to us even though we wish it did not. Only then can we *disown* white supremacy completely and actively try to undo its damage.

With these beliefs in mind, I present here a brief, incomplete history of white supremacy in Denver: The Denver Ku Klux Klan era is signified by Mayor Ben Stapleton’s tenure, 1923–1931 and 1935–1947, because, especially in the 1920s, it was a reign of terror for minorities. Hooded men marched in the streets. West of Denver, the KKK held regular meetings on South Table Mountain, with burning crosses visible for miles. South of Denver, there were weekly rallies near “Kastle” Rock. Shorter AME Church was destroyed by a fire that many believe was caused by the KKK. With impunity, white supremacists burned crosses on front lawns of black activists, white supporters, and blacks who moved to white areas.

The effects of Denver’s KKK era lingered in systemic practices and racist attitudes, especially those related to housing and schools. Neighborhood associations also played a role. Housing and neighborhood segregation was the result of “racial steering” in real estate sales and rentals, and in redlining certain neighborhoods. By the 1920s many nineteenth century houses were deteriorating in Five Points where African Americans were surrounded by railroads, industry and a growing downtown. Many wanted to move eastward, a sign of moving up in the world, but to do so was extremely risky because moving east also meant crossing traditional racial boundaries —first, Race Street, then Colorado Boulevard, then

Park Hill, then Monaco. When a black fireman bought a home on Gaylord St., members of the Clayton Improvement Association threatened his life. The same year, a white mob threatened a black woman who moved to Gaylord Street. The next year a black post office clerk's rental home on Gilpin St. was bombed twice. In 1932 blacks tried to integrate Washington Park's swimming beach, and were beaten up by locals. Before 1948, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down restrictive racial covenants in deeds, the Capitol Hill Improvement Association urged owners to restrict sales of their home to whites only.

One result of these systemic housing practices was the "de facto" racial segregation of children in Denver public schools, a practice that took Denver activists, a big lawsuit, and an order of the U. S. Supreme Court in 1973 to stop. In 1995, a federal court ended busing and court supervision of school desegregation, "In Denver, income and housing disparity fall along racial lines. In 2017, Denver's "neighborhood schools" may be even more segregated than they were before court-ordered desegregation.

Today Denver's easternmost community retains the name of the mayor who embodied and enabled white supremacy in our city. Is it any wonder many feel the slight, the insult, the disregard, the old burn, when they see or hear that name-- Stapleton? White supremacy has always been a part of U.S. history. The ideas go underground and wait, sensing when they might survive in the light of day. This is one of those times. Willful avoidance of this history makes us complicit in allowing this toxic dynamic to survive today. Stapleton is part of that history. Change the name. Stapleton--it must be hard to feel good about living in a place with a name like that.

*Jacqueline St. Joan is a white woman who has lived in Denver for 46 years. She chairs the Legal Team for Rename St*pleton for All. <http://renameforall.com>*