



# REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

## Race Relations in Portland

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Chris Bodenner

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### **Gentrification in Portland: Residents and Readers Debate**



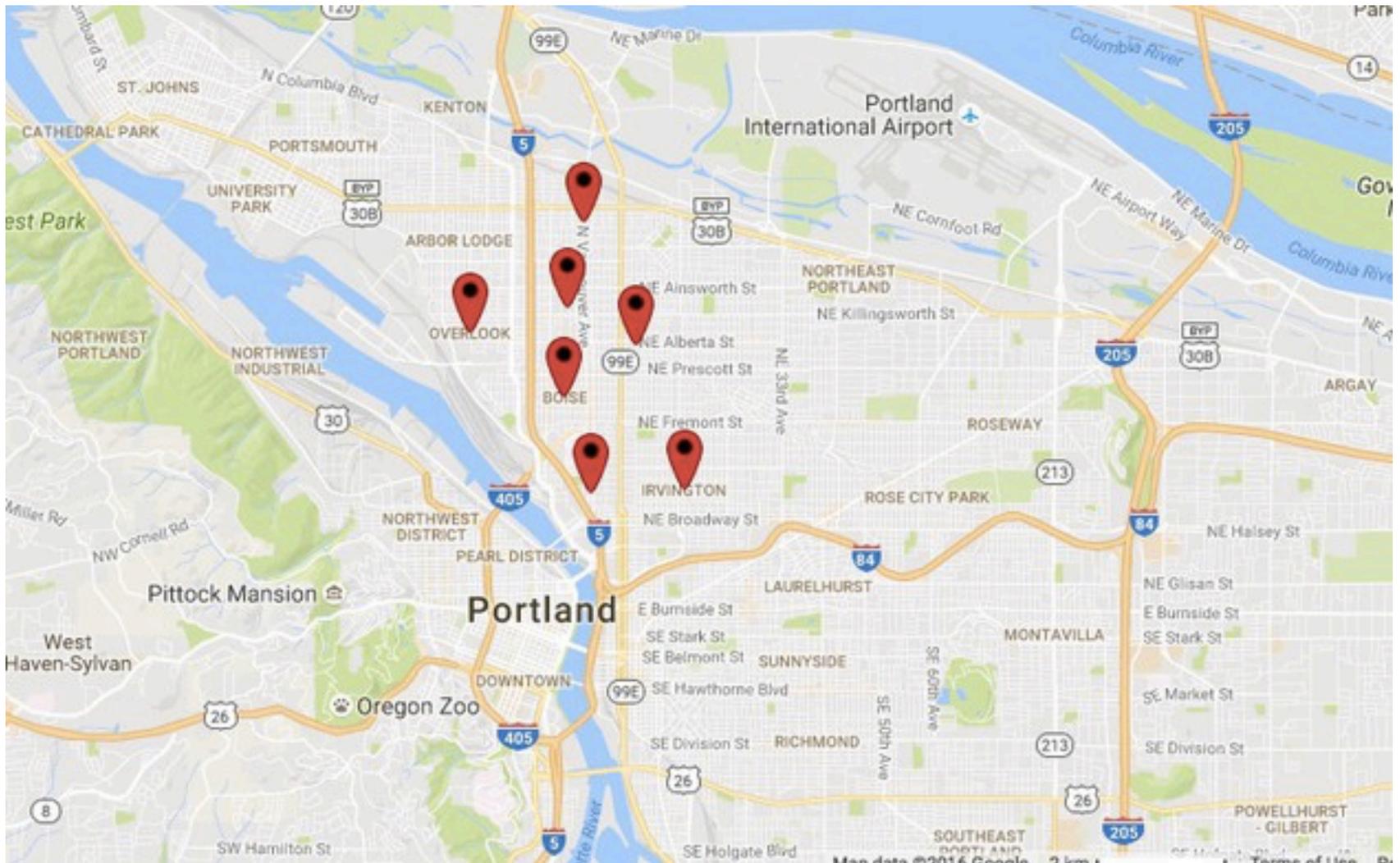
The historic Frederick Torgler Building was built in 1894 in the city of Albina and is now listed on the US National Register of Historic Places. The lower level is currently occupied by an American bistro/bar called Mint. ([Wikimedia](#))

Alana Semuels wrote a popular piece last month called “The Racist History of Portland, the Whitest City in America.” Towards the end of it, she writes:

Yet as the city became more progressive and “weird,” full of artists and techies and bikers, it did not have a conversation about its racist past. It still tends not to, even as gentrification and displacement continue in Albina and other neighborhoods. “If you were living here and you decided you wanted to have a conversation about race, you’d get the shock of your life,” Ed Washington, the longtime Portland resident, told me. “Because people in Oregon just don’t like to talk about it.”

Scores of *Atlantic* readers in Portland have been talking about Alana’s piece and emailing their views, so we’ve decided to convene a conversation about race in

the city (via [hello@theatlantic.com](mailto:hello@theatlantic.com)). To start things off, we're focusing on Albina, the northeast area of Portland that historically housed the vast majority of the city's African American residents. Albina now comprises the neighborhoods of Eliot, Boise, Humboldt, Irvington, King, Overlook, and Piedmont, plotted on this map:



Here's how Alana introduces Albina in her piece:

As the city becomes more popular and real-estate prices rise, it is Portland's tiny African American population [6.3 percent] that is being displaced to the far-off fringes of the city, leading to even less diversity in the city's center. There are around 38,000 African Americans in the city in Portland, according to Lisa K. Bates of Portland State University; in recent years, 10,000 of those 38,000 have had to move from the center city to its fringes because of rising prices. The gentrification of the historically black neighborhood in central Portland, Albina, has led to conflicts between white Portlanders and long-time black residents over things like widening bicycle lanes and the construction of a new Trader Joe's.

Rosa Inocencio Smith, our new assistant editor for Notes (and writer of our *Daily newsletter*) will be posting a note soon about that Trader Joe's controversy. Her hometown is Portland, so she will have a lot of great insight to share during our ongoing reader discussion. For my part, Portland has become an adopted hometown since my family moved there more than a decade ago, next to Albina, so I'm especially interested in this topic as well.

But for a much closer firsthand perspective, here's one of many readers who grew up in Albina:

I lived in this neighborhood in the late '80s. I still do. The first thing this article (and Kamau Bell's CNN show [*United Shades of America* —relevant clip here]) gets wrong is that this was a “black” neighborhood. Even when it was the center of black culture in Portland, it was still 40 percent white.

Here's a breakdown of that demographic over the decades:

From a paper by Karen J. Gibson, a Portland State scholar cited in Alana's piece

Back to our reader:

The second thing is that blacks some how have a “historical claim” to Albina because they as a majority occupied it from roughly 1947-

1990. Hell, you could make the claim that neighboring Overlook is a “Polish” neighborhood if you want to go back far enough, and that the city should implement policies to promote Polish ownership, but nobody ever does.

The third thing is over just how much safer (though in some respects less fun) this neighborhood is now. I too have had suspects pursued through my backyard, blocks cordoned off, gun fights in front of the house, I had to dive behind a car because of a drive-by [reported examples [here](#) and [here](#)], been witness to and a victim of arson, and I can attest to this sad fact: More white people = less crime of all varieties, from littering to murder. As a homeowner here, amen to that.

That “sad fact” seems dubious. Gun crimes, for one, are dispersed throughout Portland, not just the Albina area, where most of the black population is concentrated:

Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute, Portland State University

Residential burglary is similarly dispersed, while street robbery and non-domestic assaults are mostly concentrated downtown, across the river from Albina. (**Update:** Here's a fuller picture of crime trends in Portland among difference racial groups.)

Overall, according to an April 2015 news report that featured the crime statistics cited above, crime in Portland has “plummeted since the 1990s,” much like the rest of the country:

Portland State Professor Kris Henning said many residents don't realize that crime has declined considerably over the past 20 years. Henning said they devour so much crime news they think the city is more dangerous than it is. “Of the 13 crimes we looked at, the only one that increased significantly was bike theft,” [PSU student Kelsey] Baleilevuka said.

Overall, gun-related crimes in Portland have dropped 84%. Residential burglaries are down 61%, motor vehicle thefts dropped 70%, home robberies are down 76% and street robberies are down 70%. ... Excluding homicides, crimes involving guns have moved from inner Northeast Portland toward Gresham.

Another reader who lived in Albina makes a distinction between renters and homeowners in the neighborhood:

Per the claim that 10,000 African Americans were “forced out” of inner N/NE, I lived in the neighborhood starting in the late '80s. Yes, it was crime-ridden, dangerous, and full of abandoned houses. Yes, I witnessed quite a few drive-bys. But many of my neighbors who were black and owned their homes were ready and willing, as prices increased throughout the '90s, to sell out and move without being forced out.

If you are a renter who can't afford the rising rents, then you are forced to move. And this has happened to quite a few of my renting friends who have lived in the neighborhood for over 20 years, and yes, they are white.

This next reader also attests to the crime in Albina in the '80s, and the exodus of both black and white neighbors as development and higher prices arrived:

It's weird to read an *Atlantic* article about something I personally experienced. It's a bit of a trip down memory lane. I'm white, and my parents moved to the Albina area in the late '80s. They purchased and refurbished a 1920s bungalow as part of an urban



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