

SANKOFA

@Home

*Plymouth
Avenue*



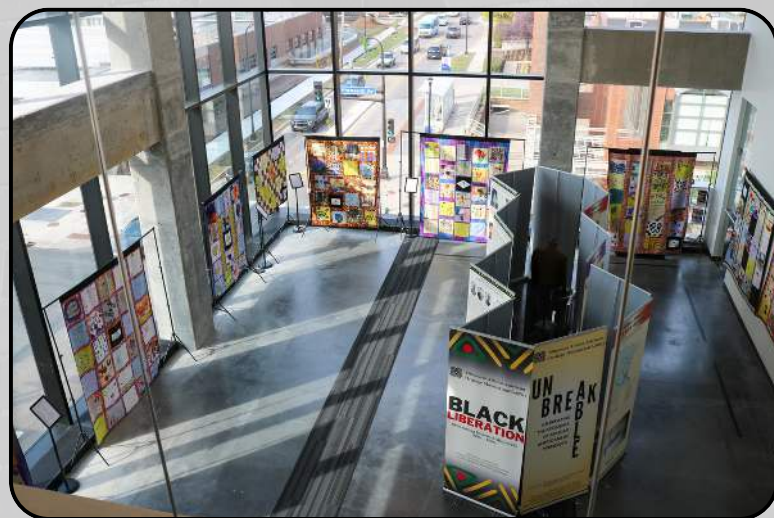
Transform Minnesota

PLYMOUTH AVENUE

This month's Sankofa at Home brings us to Plymouth Avenue in Minneapolis.

Plymouth Avenue runs through the heart of North Minneapolis, spanning east-to-west from the Mississippi River to the Theodore Wirth Parkway through the North Loop, Near North, and Willard-Hay neighborhoods of Minneapolis.

The Northside community around the avenue first started to take shape in the late 1800s as Jewish immigrants settled in the area. Black residents slowly moved into the area as housing covenants in other parts of the city limited options for minority racial and ethnic groups.



The MAAHMG overlooks the intersection of Plymouth and Penn Avenues



Plymouth Ave
Minneapolis, MN 55411

Plymouth Avenue developed as a primary commercial corridor for the neighborhood during the first half of the 20th century, with grocery stores, restaurants, and entertainment venues largely owned by Jewish merchants spread down the avenue.

The racial and ethnic makeup of the neighborhood slowly began to shift following World War II. As the Jewish community became more integrated and accepted into white society, Jewish families from the Northside began moving into suburban neighborhoods. The Black population made up only 1-2% of Minneapolis during the 1950s and 60s but was slowly growing as individuals and families moved from the South or other urban areas and settled in existing Black neighborhoods in Minneapolis.



The Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, now attached to Bethune Arts Elementary, has served the Northside for 100 years

Changing demographics contributed to growing tensions on the Northside, especially between Jewish shop owners and Black patrons. This tension boiled over in 1966 after an incident between the owner of Silver's Food Mart and several Black youth led to instances of vandalism and arson on Plymouth Avenue. Sensing the possibility of increased violence, community leaders called for a meeting with city officials where community members expressed the need for more jobs and a desire for a place in the community that was theirs.

Minneapolis Mayor Arthur Naftalin promised that jobs would be created for young people on the Northside, and a new community center known as The Way opened on Plymouth Avenue, joining the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center in serving Northside residents.

CIVIL UNREST ON PLYMOUTH AVENUE

“The direct neglect of the Black population here is what led to the riots.”

- Dr. Brittany Lewis,
University of Minnesota

By the summer of 1967, community members felt that there was an insufficient commitment to ongoing change in the city. The Black population was twice as likely to be unemployed as white, and jobs that had been created following the 1966 community meeting turned out to be largely temporary. As Dr. Brittany Lewis of the University of Minnesota summarized, "That's why '67 happened, because now you have paid lip service to a request the community have made, and they see through you."

On July 19, 1967, reports spread throughout the community about police misconduct at the Aquatennial parade in downtown Minneapolis. Witness reports ranged from severe mistreatment by police of a young Black woman to multiple police beatings of Black individuals, including members of the Sabathanites Drum Corps.

A period of unrest that was referred to at the time as the Plymouth Avenue Riots began late that night as residents returned to the Northside from the parade. The first instances of vandalism and arson occurred just before midnight, and riot police with helmets and shotguns arrived on Plymouth Avenue shortly thereafter.

The following night, Mayor Naftalin requested that the Governor mobilize the National Guard, and 600 guardsmen were mobilized. On July 21, The Way organized a community dance on the avenue in a successful attempt to dissipate the unrest. 150-250 guardsmen remained stationed at Plymouth Avenue during the following week.

Departures from the neighborhood increased in the late 1960s, especially as Jewish families and businesses moved from the Northside to the suburbs. The Way continued to serve as a community gathering space until its closure in 1984, providing educational opportunities and serving as a musical “training ground” that contributed to the creation of the Minneapolis Sound.



Homewood Studios is housed in one of the few remaining original commercial buildings on Plymouth Ave

Most of the commercial buildings from Plymouth Avenue’s past are gone today, but the community call for justice and equity remains. Minneapolis’ Fourth Police Precinct building, located on the former site of The Way, played host to community protests following the death of Jamar Clark in 2015. Other locations on Plymouth Avenue, including the University of Minnesota’s Urban Resource and Outreach



The former site of The Way is now home to Minneapolis’ Fourth Police Precinct building

Engagement Center (UROC), the Minnesota African American Heritage Museum and Gallery (MAAHMG), and the Urban League also help the community gather, remember their history, and call for equity, justice, and change in the community.

THE KERNER COMMISSION REPORT

"When we look at Kerner and its relevance, the most obvious point of it is in establishing that the incident that happens is not the sole genesis of the problem."

- Jelani Cobb, discussing *The Essential Kerner Commission Report*

The racial unrest seen on Plymouth Avenue came during a period of unrest across the United States dubbed the "Long, hot summer of 1967." During this time, more than 150 uprisings fueled by racial discrimination occurred in cities across the country.

On July 28, 1967, in the midst of ongoing unrest in Detroit and one week after the uprising in Minneapolis, President Lyndon Johnson appointed the **National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders**, which came to be known commonly as the **Kerner Commission**. President Johnson directed the commission to answer three questions related to the rioting seen in the previous 3 years: "What happened?"; "Why did it happen?"; and "What can be done to prevent it from happening again and again?"

After months of hearings and in-depth field research in affected cities, the commission released its findings February 29, 1968. The commission concluded that the source of the unrest and rioting was decades of "pervasive discrimination and segregation." This finding ran counter to a prominent narrative that the riots were the work of radicals or a foreign conspiracy.



*Members of the Kerner Commission
at the White House*

The report was unwavering in its findings that racism was at the heart of the issue, stating that “...white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.” The commission released sweeping recommendations in response to the report, including directing funds from policing to other social services, the need for greater diversity in the media, and better access to employment, education, and housing.

The report became a bestseller just over a month after its release following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. As millions of Americans sought answers for the state of the country, the Johnson administration largely ignored the commission’s findings and did not implement many changes as Johnson chose not to run for re-election.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

As you visit Plymouth Ave:

- What do you feel? What’s new to you?
- How was the community shaped by race and ethnicity? How was yours?
- Set aside time to visit the MAAHMG, Homewood Studios, or another site on Plymouth Avenue. How are these places preserving the history of the neighborhood? How are they contributing to the neighborhood today?
- Numerous media outlets compared the unrest in 1967 to the unrest in 2020. What are the similarities between the two periods? What are the differences?
- A mayoral aide said of the 1967 unrest, “We said it could not be classified as a riot - that was a mis-description. But it was a disturbance, and it was serious for us in Minnesota.”
 - How does the language we use influence the way we think about events?
- Read more about the Kerner Report
 - How are the issues the report identified still present today?
 - Have any of their suggestions been implemented? How?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Cornerstones: A History of North Minneapolis

Twin Cities PBS

“This hour-long journey explores the history of Minnesota's least understood neighborhood. These place-based stories reveal common-ground experiences for various cultures over the last century.”

A video containing the portion of this documentary dedicated to Plymouth Avenue can be found [here](#).

A Firey Unrest: Why Plymouth Avenue Burned MPR

This audio documentary from MPR details the causes and consequences of major violence and fires that broke out in north Minneapolis in July 1967.

Housing Rehabilitation and Neighborhood Self- Determination: The Willard-Homewood Experience, 1969-1977

Douglas Ellingson

A short history of the creation and operation of the **Willard-Homewood Organization**.

The Essential Kerner Commission Report

Ed. Jelani Cobb and Matthew Guariglia

Professor **Jelani Cobb** offers an introduction to a distilled version of **The Kerner Commission Report**, a reported which examined more than a dozen urban uprisings between 1964 and 1967 and offered recommendations for changes to address racial injustice across society.

The Riot Report: A Presidential Commission Defied Expectations by Telling a Hard Truth American Experience | PBS

The **Riot Report** explores the findings of the **Kerner Commission** and “the fraught social dynamics that simultaneously spurred the commission’s investigation and doomed its findings to political oblivion.”

**Photos: Documenting 1967's
'Fiery Unrest' in Minneapolis**
MPR

**Civil Unrest on Plymouth
Avenue, Minneapolis, 1967**
MNOpedia

**When flames of racial strife
engulfed a Minneapolis street**
MPR

**Near North African American
Community, Minneapolis**
MNOpedia

**Phyllis Wheatley House,
Minneapolis**
MNOpedia

Sabathanites Drum Corps
MNOpedia

**A People's History of the
Homewood Neighborhood**
NRRC

**Unrest in Minneapolis
echoes Summer of 1967**
Star Tribune

**Minneapolis' 'long, hot
summer' of '67 - and the
parallels to today's protests
over police brutality.**
MinnPost

**The Essential Kerner
Commission Report**
Into America Podcast

**The 1967 Riots: When
Outrage Over Racial Injustice
Boiled Over**
History



Transform Minnesota

COMPLEX ISSUES. BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE.

This resource list is part of Transform
Minnesota's Sankofa @ Home series

Inclusion of a resource on the list does
not represent a full endorsement of
stated beliefs