Some Stories of Black History are Still Rarely Discussed

By Edna Kane-Williams, AARP Vice President, Multicultural Markets and Engagement

Sharon Conn was visiting her mother in a Maryland nursing home about nine years ago when her 94-year-old roommate from Georgia chimed into the conversation. She began talking about something called the “Green Book” that was used by “Negroes” to find safe accommodations and services during racial segregation.

Dr. Conn recalls asking the woman, “What book are you talking about?...She thought it was the greatest thing since bread and butter. She said it saved many lives.”

Being a voracious researcher with a doctorate, Conn found the rarely discussed Green Book, a relic once used in all 50 states as well as a few countries by Blacks and other ethnic minorities who needed to find establishments that would welcome them while traveling. The actual name of the book was *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. A description on the cover reads, “Carry your Green Book with you – You may need it.”

It was first published in 1936 and for nearly 30 years thereafter, according to the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), which featured the book in a Sept. 15, 2010 interview with civil rights icon Julian Bond.

In the audio recorded interview, Bond, former NAACP chairman and a founder of the Student Non-violence Coordinating Committee (SNCC), recalls that his parents owned one.

“My family had a ‘Green Book’ when I was young, and used it to travel in the South to find out where we could stop to eat, where we could spend the night in a hotel or somebody's home,” Bond said.

He said the document is not called the “Green Book” because of its color, but because of its author, Victor H. Green, a postal worker, "who used his contacts in the postal workers union to find out where Black people could stay."

The use of the Green Book is just one of those little known or little discussed facts about Black history. There are others that reveal how African-Americans strategically and courageously furthered the causes of freedom during legal segregation, the civil rights movement and slavery.

Another is the “Double V” campaign. During World War II, this campaign, led by the Black Press, quickly spread across the nation, the two V’s meaning “Victory” against fascism abroad and “Victory” against racism at home.

“That was one of the greatest, most courageous things the Black press ever did,” says Black press historian A. Peter Bailey, former Black press professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. “We just don’t talk enough about these courageous acts.”

The Double V campaign, started by the Pittsburgh Courier in early 1942, was so intense that it caught the attention of several federal agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which probed for charges of “sedition” in the spring of 1942; mainly because the campaign started during war time.

One book, *A Question of Sedition* by journalist Patrick S. Washburn, documents “the federal government’s investigation of the Black Press during World War II”.

The book quotes the Courier from a Feb. 14, 1942 column: ‘“We, as colored Americans, are determined to protect our country, our form of government, and the freedoms which we cherish for ourselves and for the rest of the world, therefore we adopted the Double ‘V’ War Cry…WE HAVE A STAKE IN THIS FIGHT….WE ARE AMERICANS, TOO!’”

Following the Black press lead, historians say people flashed V signs with their fingers, designed Double V posters and formed Double V Clubs. Women even wore hair styles in the shape of a double V.

Despite threats, the papers avidly defending their First Amendment rights. Ultimately, mainly due to the lack of evidence of sedition, no charges were ever filed.

Many little known protests, campaigns and activities made life more hopeful for African-Americans as they sought freedom. While the “Underground Railroad”, which led thousands of slaves to freedom, is among the best known, there are still facts about even that historic pathway that are not widely discussed.

The Eastern Illinois University (EIU) has documented some of these “fascinating and lesser known details” of the Underground Railroad in a booklet based on sources in the Library of Congress.

Among those facts:

- Harriet Tubman, herself a fugitive slave and the most famous conductor of the Underground Railroad, who led hundreds of slaves to freedom, never lost one along the way.
- Fugitive slaves not only feared starvation, recapture and punishment, but wild animals, treacherous terrain, and severe temperatures.
- Risks by conductors were equally dangerous as risks for slaves. If caught, conductors would be charged with theft of a slave owners’ personal property and “fined, imprisoned, branded or even hanged.
- ”Still, some courageous former slaves who had escaped "voluntarily returned to the lands of slavery, as conductors, to help free those still enslaved.”

The Green Book, the Double V Campaign and the Underground Railroad all illustrate one of the most dominant characteristics of those who navigated the paths to freedom. That characteristic is courage.
