

# The Half-Truth of America's Past Greatness

Sept. 10, 2023



Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, circa 1940. Archive Photos/Getty Images

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**By Esau McCaulley**  
Contributing Opinion Writer

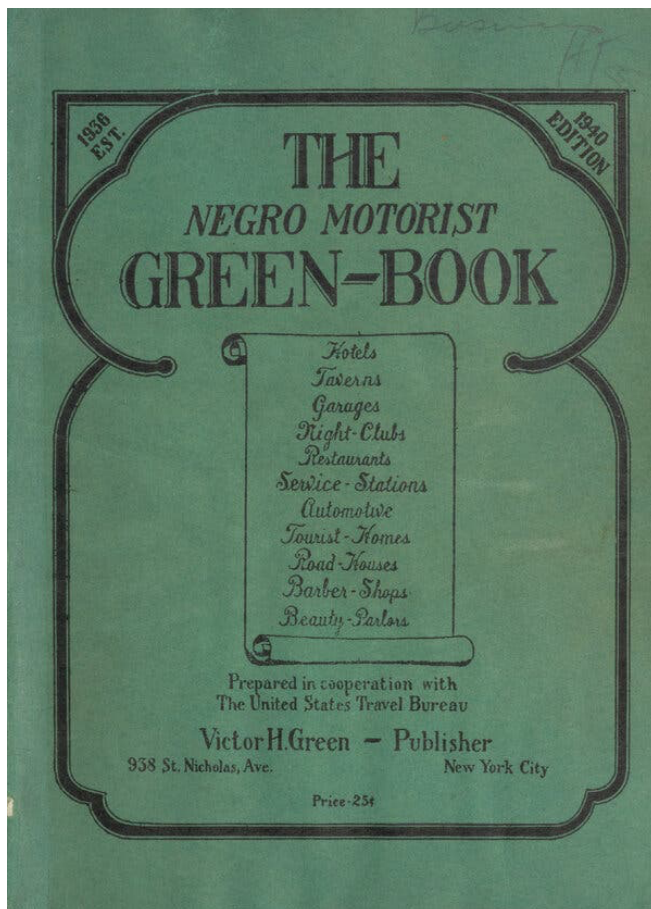
Many of us are familiar with “the talk.” I have in mind the African American version in which we outline for our kids how to engage with law enforcement. This is not an instruction on the nuances of legal rights. Instead, Black children receive tools to survive the moment.

But there is another talk that exists largely in the states of the former Confederacy. It’s a lesson in Southern geography.

I knew two maps as a teenager. One revealed the quickest way from, say, Huntsville, Ala., where I lived, to Jackson, Miss., where I sometimes visited family and friends for the weekend. But overlaying that map was a racial one depicting the detours we had to make as we journeyed through the land of Dixie in Black bodies.

My mother informed me of this second map the first time I planned a trip outside the confines of our hometown. She explained that I needed to fill up my gas tank before leaving and was not to stop in any small towns. “Under no circumstances are you ever to go to Cullman, Arab or Boaz,” she said.

Her advice transcended this particular journey, transforming it into a lesson on the nature of Black life in the South. During those years, I never heard of any official [Green Book](#) directing Black travelers to safe stops in the South. This was just local knowledge passed down from mother to son. I vowed to obey her on all my journeys, to make sure that I never crossed into those forbidden hamlets.



“The Negro Motorist Green-Book” steered Black travelers in the South to stops that were safe for them. Credit...Victor Hugo Green, via the New York Public Library

I was an adult when I finally did some research into the places she outlawed. I learned that [Cullman, Ala.](#), was said to be a [sundown town](#) even in the 1980s, a place where Black people were not allowed to live or be found after dark. Cullman schools remained [segregated](#) into the 1970s, the years of my mother's childhood.

The racism that plagued those places is not merely a remnant of a [long-forgotten past](#). [Their history](#) still haunts them. In 2021, [a video of two Cullman High School students spewing](#) white power slogans and threats of violence against African Americans was posted online.

Of course, not every small town in the South is racist. Small and Southern does not mean evil. The wealthy often show equal disdain toward white small-town poverty and Black urban poverty. There is a kinship and possible cooperation born of shared suffering that is yet to be actualized. When [Wendell Berry](#) speaks of small-town life, I can lament with him about what has been lost. When John Denver sings of [country roads](#), I can envision a land we can share.

People unfamiliar with the idea of a racial map may have been surprised by Black responses to Jason Aldean's country song "[Try That in a Small Town](#)," which became a hit this summer. The song describes stomping on the flag, disrespecting the police and armed robbery. If you try those things in a small town, the song goes, "See how far you make it down the road / Around here, we take care of our own." Later in the song Mr. Aldean warns that he's got a gun and that small towns are "full of good ol' boys, raised up right / If you're looking [for a fight](#)."

The suggestion that this song could be deeply problematic received the expected condemnation from certain quarters as another example of woke cancel culture. But the song's story of "good ol' boys" taking the law into their own hands stirs up a particular history for me and many Black listeners. I wonder how often vigilante groups were formed to protect Black Southerners from harm rather than inflict it upon them.

Aldean strongly disagreed that there were any racial undertones to his song. After all, the song doesn't mention African Americans or race at all. [According to Mr. Aldean](#), it is simply about the traditional values of small-town America. Some people think this set of values is drifting away in a rapidly changing country.

Where can African Americans find this lost golden age? Do we discover it during the first centuries of the Republic when slavery was the law of the land? Do we fast forward to the [Red Summer](#), Jim Crow laws and “[strange fruit](#)” hanging from poplar trees?

The small-town song, in the end, is about a return to a glorious past that existed only for some. It is a fresh creation cobbled together from a mishmash of half-truths and long-cherished myths. It is a 1950s with a booming economy and picket fences but no whites-only water fountains. It leaves out the rampant racism, tosses aside rural and urban poverty and focuses on manners without examining the threat of violence lingering underneath the surface.

It is the same kind of false remembering that makes a plantation wedding sound picturesque when in reality it's marriage at a site of horrors. Small Southern towns, in this mythic America, are all sweet tea and thank you, ma'ams.

[Black history](#) and the [legacy of slavery](#) remain contested, not because we lack information about what occurred in America, but because it's all too real. And it has the power to destroy false nostalgia.

A path remains open for this country, but it is rarely trod. We can fully own our national sins, a pursuit of a genuine reconciliation rooted in truth and the righting of wrongs. Following such a course might allow for a genuine miracle: a truly multicultural society marked by understanding and forgiveness. To create that America, we are going to have to learn to sing better songs.

One summer in the late 1990s when I was on my way home from college in Mississippi, I stopped in a small town to buy gas. My mother's instructions had slipped my mind. The gas station had a hamburger spot attached to it. After I stepped inside, I noted that everyone was white and that all their faces turned toward me with expressions of surprise and hostility.

Black Southerners know the meaning of certain looks and the best way to survive when we have wandered into places bubbling with danger. Rather than fill up, I said to the guy behind the counter, “Can I have \$15 on number four, please?” I handed him a \$20 bill and told him to keep the change. Fifteen dollars would buy enough fuel to take me to a major town and a safer exit.

I returned to my car calmly but quickly and began pumping the gas. As I was finishing, a few people came out of the gas station and got in their pickups.

They turned on their engines but did not move until I got into my car. As I pulled out, they followed close behind until I returned to the highway. My heart raced until I reached the safety of being among other travelers on the interstate.

There will undoubtedly be some who question my interpretation of this interaction, if I was really at risk. No one at the gas station mentioned race, and the Confederate flag on the license plates could have simply been a matter of Southern pride rather than outright racism.

But that instinctive feeling of doubt that arises in the hearts of so many Americans is a fear that recognizes that some forms of nostalgia must finally be put to rest.

*Esau McCaulley (@esaumccaulley) is a contributing Opinion writer, the author of the forthcoming book ["How Far to the Promised Land: One Black Family's Story of Hope and Survival in the American South"](#) and an associate professor of New Testament at Wheaton College.*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/10/opinion/small-town-racism.html>