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Little Tel Aviv

How Portland Got Progressive Through Ethnic
Cleansing

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How Portland Got Progressive Through Ethnic Cleansing

July 12, 2026

Retrieved on August 28, 2026, from an offline backup of censored

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Portland, Oregon, has long been America's whitest major city, yet its progressive activists, since the early 1990s, have embraced its branding as "Little Beirut" by the George H. W. Bush administration due to its boisterous protests. In reality, it's no coincidence that Portland is so white, and a brief (non-comprehensive) overview of its history of ethnic cleansing reveals the city as more akin to Tel Aviv than Beirut.

Unlike its less white fellow Pacific Northwest cities, Seattle, Washington, and Vancouver, British Columbia, where the original Native communities persist in some form within the newer settler metropolitan boundaries, Portland's colonizers long ago ethnically cleansed the area of its Indigenous peoples.

As detailed by David G. Lewis of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, in 1851, the Indigenous peoples of the Portland area (the Multnomah, Clackamas, Tualatin, etc.) and the rest of the Willamette Valley initially refused to move, negotiating treaties that would have established reservations within their homelands, but those treaties were never ratified when taken back to the federal government in the District of Columbia. In 1855, the Willamette Valley peoples signed a treaty which resulted, by the following year, in their tribes being removed to the Grand Ronde Indian Reservation, some 50 miles (now more than 60 miles) southwest from Portland.

Armed settlers claimed the entire Willamette Valley and would brook no compromise. In 1847 they had formed a militia in response to the killing of missionaries by Cayuse persons at Waiilatpu, more than 200 miles up the Columbia River from Portland. In Oregon City, now a suburb of Portland, five Cayuse individuals who'd offered themselves up in the name of peace were quickly tried and publicly hanged by the settler government in 1850.

The Oregon Donation Land Act of 1850 has been described by the state's online encyclopedia as "arguably the most generous federal land act in American history," since it allowed for claims as large as 640 acres (320 for a white male citizen and an equal portion

for his wife) for couples already living in Oregon, and 320 acres for newly arriving settlers and individual “half-breed” Natives willing to become citizens, so long as the land was resided upon and “improved” for four years. The law expired in 1855 and was replaced in 1862 with the less generous Homestead Act, allowing settlers to claim as much as 160 acres at \$1.25 per acre, with the option of expanding to contiguous adjacent land up to the same acreage.

The Grand Ronde reservation, originally some 60,000 acres in size, was allotted in the 1890s, allowing for allotments to eventually fall into settler hands. In 1901, US official James McLaughlin declared 25,791 acres of the reservation to be surplus and the government eventually sold it off for \$1.16 per acre.

Considering this level of intensity to Oregon’s settler colonial expansion, the state has something more in common with its overtly genocidal southern neighbor of California than it does with its northern neighbors of Washington and British Columbia, though the latter were certainly not innocent of genocidal displacement and repression either.

Portland’s historic and ongoing racism, furthermore, has never been limited to anti-Native sentiment. As Black scholar Walidah Imarisha explains, a series of exclusionary anti-Black laws were enacted in Oregon between 1844 and 1859, with the intention of building a “racist white utopia.”

The lives of several historic Black individuals illustrate the effect of these racist laws and of the white supremacist mindset they reflected. George Bush, a Black man who had been born in Pennsylvania and had been a farmer in Missouri, tried to move with his family to Oregon in 1844, but given its first exclusion law, he decided instead to move north across the Columbia River to present-day Tumwater, Washington, which was territory still shared with the British Hudson’s Bay Company at the time.

In 1851, a Black man named Jacob Vanderpool, who ran a hotel in Oregon City, was arrested due to a spurious complaint by a white hotel owner. Oregon’s laws weren’t actually written so as to

In a similar register, Aimé Césaire, in his 1950/1955 essay, *Discourse on Colonialism*, described colonialism (specifically) as having a “kickback” force, in the sense of the improper bracing and firing of a rifle, the butt of the rifle injuring the shooter at the same time its round injures the target, but with the shooter not realizing the harm they’ve done to themselves until later, in this case, until too late, when one day they wake up to the brutality they’d supported in the colonies now knocking at their door in the metropole.

Racism and settler colonialism ultimately harm Portland’s settlers as well, whether they ever come to realize it and actively confront it or not. It’s not a question of “if” Portland settlers will have to face up to their colonial history and present, but only of “how” and “when,” and the sooner they do, the better it will be for everyone.

Note

Portland’s closest Native reservation is now Cowlitz, located across the river and the state line in Washington, about 25 miles north. The reservation was not established until 2010, and consists, so far, only of businesses, not housing for its members.

and accentuated by the state's ultra-aggressive settler colonialism and anti-Native racism.

Until Portland's white population faces up to this reality, and actually does something about it, the city cannot be considered truly progressive for all people (or for all lifeforms, for that matter.)

One day Portland's smug white activists will be forced by circumstance to deal with the material interconnection between the global climate crisis and the racism of imperialism, including its settler colonial variant. Until then, they'll remain shocked, appalled and confused when other aspects of settler colonialism come home to them.

On May Day of this year, a menacing armored vehicle was spotted outside the downtown Portland field office of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. What Portland residents didn't know was that the vehicle in question was produced by a Canadian company owned by a former member of the Israel Defense Forces. That company, Roshel, has been profiting off sales to police forces worldwide, as well as to the government of Canada for aid to Ukraine, and then reinvesting their cash in production for immigration enforcement cops in Minneapolis, Portland, and the rest of the US.

The original settler colonial brutality of Oregon (and other American states) was a prototype and normalization of the carnage that America and its ally Israel would go on to unleash on other parts of the world (not to mention what both had already learned from the brutality of their parent empire, Great Britain.) Now, American imperialist methods are increasingly being used against non-Natives in a way they've always been used against Indigenous peoples, both at home and abroad.

As Nguyen Nam had already pointed out in a 1933 article in a French anarcho-syndicalist newspaper, European fascism enacted in the African colonies was "a prelude to the fascist movement that our bourgeoisie will unleash against all workers, metropolitans included."

expel Black people already living in the region, only to discourage them from moving there, but a racist judge decided to arbitrarily apply them anyway. Vanderpool would never return, and the Oregon Statesman newspaper praised the ruling as a "reaffirmation of a well-settled doctrine."

Another Black man, George Washington, arrived in Oregon City in 1852, but soon moved his family north as well, managing to establish title to land in 1853, once Washington territory split off from Oregon, and founding the town of Centralia in 1875.

Portland, like the rest of the West Coast, also played its part in a wave of anti-Asian racism and pogroms beginning in the 1870s and continuing sporadically into the 1910s. The Los Angeles pogrom of 1871, the Rock Springs massacre of 1885, the Tacoma pogrom of later that same year, and the Hells Canyon massacre of 1887 were among the worst of these attacks on Chinese people in the West. The Tacoma rioters in fact expelled the entire Chinese population of the town, causing many to move along to Portland. However, Portland's own history of anti-Asian pogroms has mostly been forgotten or covered-up.

In February of 1886, about 1,000 settlers took part in a racist torch-lit march through downtown Portland. That same night armed white men attacked Chinese workers in Oregon City and Portland's Albina neighborhood, which was its own town at the time. In March of 1886, a newspaper report read, "Another Chinese Outrage: Fifty Masked Men Drive 125 Chinamen into Portland from Mt. Tabor."

In 1910, a white mob rampaged through the Portland neighborhood of St. John's, this time attacking South Asian people, who fought back, being aware of previous anti-Asian pogroms. South Asian community members protested to the British consulate, leading the American District Attorney to issue nearly 200 arrest warrants, but ultimately only two people were convicted and both had their sentences suspended and were released on parole without bond.

In the '20s, the Ku Klux Klan exploded in popularity in Oregon, with some of its members winning local, county, and even state legislature elections, along with helping their preferred governor get elected. In 1921, KKK members and Portland city officials held an open and publicized meeting to discuss their collaboration in "moral and political clean-up." In 1923, governor W. M. Pierce even joined Portland Mayor George L. Baker in honoring the KKK's Grand Dragon at a "patriotic dinner."

In 1948, a flood destroyed the neighborhood of Vanport, the population of which was about a third Black people. Although flooding had occurred elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest earlier that year, and dikes around the neighborhood were already leaking, the Housing Authority of Portland didn't evacuate Vanport, in an example of the kind of racist neglect that would be more widely recognized decades later in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Discrimination on the part of landlords in other Portland neighborhoods also made it difficult for former Vanport residents to secure new housing.

In 1954, the federal government passed the Indian Relocation Act, as part of its wider termination policy, and Portland was made one of several destination cities where Native persons would be transplanted and assimilated. Two of the individuals relocated to Portland in the following years happened to be Leonard Peltier and his mother, who was from the Spirit Lake reservation (referred to as Fort Totten at the time) in North Dakota. Peltier, in his autobiography, explains that he left Portland and eventually landed in Seattle, where he became involved in the burgeoning Red Power movement that was coming out of the Puget Sound Fish Wars.

Mainstream journalist Alana Semuels has written in recent years that in the '60s, "whites only" signs could still be seen in Portland stores. In the '70s and '80, she explains, there were a series of shootings of Black men by police, with the department at one point being investigated for leaving dead possums at the doors of Black-owned restaurants.

Portland, in this era, not only saw victimization but also resistance to racism, as riots broke out in the Albina neighborhood in '67 and '69. The Oregon Journal reported one (unnamed?) Black resident's response to the '67 riot with a quote in which he said, among other things, "tell them Portland stinks behind its roses," a reference to the city's other nickname.

The Black Panther Party formed a Portland chapter in 1969, providing food and medical services to the community, and in 1975, about 100 Native persons occupied the local offices of the Bonneville Power Administration, in reaction to state repression of the Red Power movement in South Dakota.

Portland took a bleak turn for the worse in 1988, when MuLugeta Seraw, an Ethiopian student studying in Portland was murdered by white supremacists. One of the attackers was convicted of murder but the other two were only convicted of manslaughter and assault. One of these latter two killers, Kyle Brewster, was released in 2002, violated parole and then was released again in 2010, only to go on to join recent years' violent and fascist Proud Boy protests in Oregon, including in Portland.

Today, less than 0.8% of Portland's population self-identifies as Native, according to the official census (disputed as too low an estimate by the city's Native American Youth and Family Center.) This is a statistic that the Israeli city of Tel Aviv would envy, given that an estimated 20,000 Palestinians still live there, mostly in the original town of Jaffa, the population of which is still about a third Palestinian.

The progressive white activist in Portland doesn't even need to worry about doing a land acknowledgment at all (the purpose of which is to recognize current, not past Native communities), let alone worry about getting it right, because the original Native communities have been completely removed, some losing their distinct identities within confederated tribes. Furthermore, anti-Black and anti-Asian racism in Oregon have always been intertwined with