



River Street Review

BOISE, IDAHO, PRESERVATIONISTS SPOTLIGHT A LOCAL NEIGHBORHOOD'S MULTICULTURAL PAST

by Meghan Drueding

In 1956, Boise, Idaho, resident Earline Browning wrote Martin Luther King Jr. a letter. Along with her encouraging words, she included two pairs of shoes (“some of my better ones,” she noted) for any women involved in his Civil Rights work who might need them. It was her way of showing support, though she lived thousands of miles away from the epicenter of the movement and did not have extra money to send. “I’m with you even if I’m so far off,” she wrote. She signed her letter, “From one of the race, Mrs. Earline Browning.”

Browning’s modest cottage is part of a new, self-guided audio tour created by the nonprofit Preservation Idaho. Located in Boise’s River Street neighborhood, the free tour highlights places of historical importance in the city’s Black, AAPI, and Basque communities, among others. Made possible by a \$25,000 grant from the National Trust’s Telling the Full History Preservation Fund (which was created with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities), the 10-stop tour also includes places such as the Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, a nexus of the

small but significant Civil Rights movement in Boise; and the Imai Family House, whose owners were incarcerated during World War II at the Minidoka War Relocation Center in southern Idaho.

Preservation Idaho board member Paula Benson says her team hasn’t found evidence of official redlining policies in Boise, but she adds that more subtle forms of discrimination pushed members of multiple historically underrepresented groups toward River Street during the 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s. The area lies just south of Boise’s former rail yard, and its houses—mostly built earlier in the 20th century—tend to be sturdy and relatively small. “It was the area that was by default where [many] people of color could go and live and purchase a home,” says Benson.

A couple of those homeowners were the parents of former state Sen. Cherie

Top: Earline and Gus Browning lived in this 1895 house in Boise during the 1950s. It is now a stop on Preservation Idaho’s self-guided audio tour of the River Street neighborhood.



Buckner-Webb, Idaho’s first elected Black state legislator. Buckner-Webb grew up in the neighborhood, and she narrates several of the stops on the tour. “We were thrilled when Sen. Buckner-Webb agreed to narrate part of the tour, because obviously she’s very busy,” says Benson. “That told us that she liked the tour and that she was excited about what we were doing in the neighborhood.” Co-narrator Emily Fritchman-Mahaney, a public historian and Boise State University lecturer, researched and wrote the script with Dan Everhart, an outreach historian at the

➊ Preservation Idaho received a \$25,000 Telling the Full History grant from the National Trust for its work to protect and highlight Boise’s River Street neighborhood. Funding for the Telling the Full History Preservation Fund has been provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) as part of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and the NEH Sustaining the Humanities through the American Rescue Plan (#SHARP) initiative.

Idaho State Historic Preservation Office and a longtime Preservation Idaho volunteer. Both had previously devoted time to researching the neighborhood, combing through old photos, newspaper stories, and other resources. By joining forces they were able to come up with a comprehensive list of places to include.

Many River Street-area buildings, such as a former community center, have been demolished over the past couple of decades. Developers have constructed condominium and apartment buildings on these sites, and as of press time there is no legal safeguard in place against more of the same. Helped by money from the Telling the Full History grant, Preservation Idaho is pressing for the River Street neighborhood to become a local historic district, which would give it a measure of protection. “Much has been lost,” Benson says. “But you have a real mixture of things that are still there that are really important—personal family stories, social change stories, and, of course, architecture and buildings that are beautiful in and of themselves. So we feel that River Street is still at

From left: The former Zurcher Bros. grocery store once housed Friendship Missionary Baptist Church; The Imai Family House. *Opposite:* The city of Boise owns and operates the neighborhood’s Erma Hayman House as a historic and cultural site.

a perfect point to be preserved.”

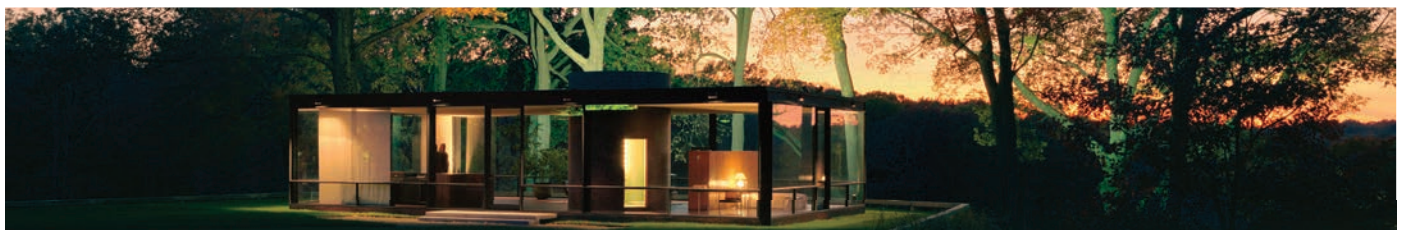
The more people who know about the neighborhood’s history, the likelier it is that the push for historic designation will succeed. Using the same Telling the Full History grant funding, the Preservation Idaho team commissioned a graphic designer and worked within city and county regulations to create a series of nine street signs. Installed atop street and stop signs and on lampposts, the brightly hued pieces are meant to catch the eye of passersby and drivers and let them know they’re in the River Street neighborhood. “We were also able to budget in a couple of yard signs, nice metal signs, that have a QR code for the tour,” Benson says. “So that’s another way we’re hoping to draw people in to learn about the neighborhood.”

The audio tour has been available since March 2023, and Preservation Idaho plans



to celebrate and publicize it this spring—along with the new signage, which was completed in June. The mostly-volunteer group also would like to secure funding to add more signs and collect oral histories about the River Street communities in the future.

The best way to take the tour is in person, using a smartphone or other mobile device and following the audio prompts and map. But those who aren't in Boise or who have mobility limitations can still enjoy it online, where the engaging audio narration is paired with helpful photos. The idea of making the tour available virtually appealed to the Preservation Idaho team partly because they know that many Americans don't necessarily think of Idaho as a place with rich multicultural histories. "Our launch in the spring will really be for local people," says Benson. "But we want everybody across the United States, especially people outside of Boise, to really become aware of this amazing history, and to get to do it through the tour is awesome." **P**



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THE GLASS HOUSE PHOTO BY HARF ZIMMERMAN

