

## “A Look Over the Mountain”: The Triumphs of Denver’s Five Points Neighborhood

Luke Ortiz-Grabe

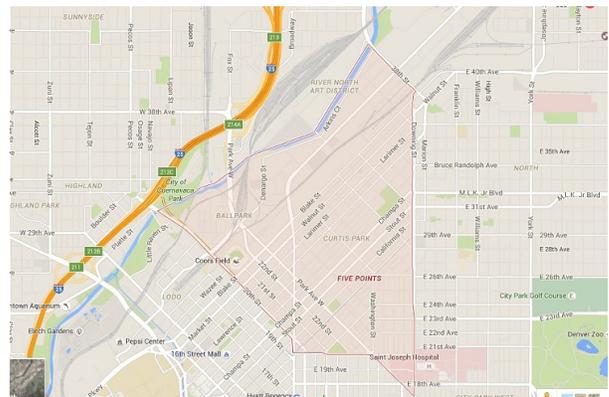
SkyView Academy  
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*For his second year competing in the National History Day competition, Luke selected a topic that tells the story of a neighborhood in the Denver area, along with recognizing the people who fought for equal rights in Five Points. Luke will be a junior at SkyView Academy this fall. He works on the Executive Committee of the Cherry Creek Diversity Conference, is head of his school’s Diversity Club, has an internship at the Interfaith Alliance of Colorado, and is a barista at Starbucks. He chose this topic to highlight the variegated history of the state of Colorado, and to make people aware of the rich African American history and culture that Five Points has. He also chose to outline the Chicano history of Five Points, connecting the era of Chicano activism to the Hispanic presence in the Denver-Metro area. His paper describes the complexity of the multicultural and multiethnic urban history of the Denver Five Points neighborhood.*

*“Let us look over the mountain determined that we shall work together to remove any obstacle on the Road to Freedom remembering the future in America must be founded firmly on the laws of God and dedicated wholly to the dignity of man.”*

-Malvin R. Goode  
“A Look Over the Mountain,” Speech  
July 2, 1965

The Five Points neighborhood was the epicenter of African-American culture in Denver, Colorado from the early to mid-twentieth century. Redlining policies,<sup>2</sup> *de facto* segregation,<sup>3</sup> and Ku Klux Klan political influence were some of the factors that contributed to isolating African Americans within Five Points. Racism, informal Jim Crow practices, and patterns of residential segregation limited, constrained, impeded, or prohibited Blacks from moving into many Denver neighborhoods, resulting in Five Points becoming their refuge.<sup>4</sup> African Americans actively supported Black-owned businesses within their neighborhood and created a “city within a city” where they could live hospitably. Five Points’ cultural developments, such as the Juneteenth celebration and an extensive jazz presence, became defining features of the neighborhood’s identity. African Americans



*A map of the current boundaries of Five Points that illustrates the reason for the neighborhood’s name.*

now contend with the gentrification of Five Points. Determined to “look over the mountain,” residents have preserved the vibrant history and character of the neighborhood. It is their triumph.

### **The Early History of Five Points**

Five Points, located just north of downtown Denver, was named for the boundary points of the vertices formed at the intersection of 26th Avenue, 27th Street, Washington Street, and Welton Street. The neighborhood grew out of economic necessity and increasing population pressures. The City and County of Denver designated Five

Points for a Stout Street Herdic Coach Line station by the same name despite the opposition the moniker provoked for having an appellation associated with a New York City neighborhood notorious for gang activity.<sup>5</sup> Denver's Five Points formed during a period of economic growth from the early 1870s to the early 1890s. The mixed residential and industrial neighborhood had working-class Americans as well as European immigrant residents, such as Germans, Jews, and Irish.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the late nineteenth century, thriving businesses in Five Points contributed to economic development as they became integral to Denver's manufacturing enterprises, such as the Niederhut Carriage Company in 1883.<sup>7</sup> In the late 1800s, the Niederhut Company reached its apex in the Denver area. The company specialized in pre-automobile transportation.<sup>8</sup>

In 1893, economic growth halted when President Grover Cleveland called a special session of Congress to repeal the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890 in order to stop the drain on U.S. gold reserves. This led to a collapse in silver prices and silver mining, and an accompanying disaster in state-wide economic activity.<sup>9</sup> Silver mining fueled the economy in Colorado's early years. Thus the collapse of silver mining due to the termination of the government's authorization of silver bullion proved catastrophic to the state's economy. Eventually, the economy recovered. Meanwhile, modes of transportation developed allowing residents to live farther away from the industrial centers, which led to the establishment of neighborhoods such as Capitol Hill.<sup>10</sup> As more affluent residents could afford the transportation required to reside further away from industrial centers, this diminished the socio-economic status of Five Points. By the early twentieth century, Blacks, many of which were railroad workers, needed affordable housing options, leading to the transformation of Five Points into an epicenter for African-American residency and identity in Denver.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Golden Age of Five Points**

From the early 1920s to the late 1950s, Black culture flourished in Five Points. African Americans residents created a unique identity that made this era the "Golden Age" of Five Points. By the 1920s, more than ninety percent of African-American Denver residents lived in Five Points and the adjoining Whittier neighborhood.<sup>12</sup> Five Points became home to African-American

professionals, businesses, and communities that produced a vibrant cultural heritage. Neighbors heard locally established musicians in Five Points "jammin' the beat."<sup>13</sup> Whittier Elementary School and Manual High School opened in 1886 and 1894, respectively, providing Black youth access to education.<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Clarence Holmes, a Five Points resident and African-American professional, was a key local progressive figure. Dr. Holmes was the president of the Denver Cosmopolitan Club, an interracial and interfaith organization that worked to foster bonds between minority communities in Denver.<sup>15</sup> It had some success in the partial unification of Denver's social communities with people from varying backgrounds gathering to discuss urban problems and pursue progress in civil rights.<sup>16</sup> Holmes was one of the few licensed dentists to serve the Black community.<sup>17</sup> He connected African Americans to healthcare, helping patients access practices that did not discriminate based on skin color.<sup>18</sup>

Along with other African-American activists, Holmes worked to establish a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) branch in Colorado in 1914, bringing Five Points into the national progressive movement for civil rights.<sup>19</sup> In the early-twentieth century, Blacks made up almost a third of the population in the states of the "solid South" where organizations such as the NAACP were imperative for progress in civil rights.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, African-American Denver residents established an NAACP branch to aid in upholding their rights in Five Points.<sup>21</sup> The effort succeeded in providing them a platform to advance their civil rights locally and to connect and interact nationally.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the founders of the NAACP in 1909, called for a national conference to counter racial inequality and the disenfranchisement of African Americans, as well as to gain equal rights.<sup>23</sup> As African Americans experienced *de jure* or *de facto* segregation, and sometimes both, their struggle transcended Denver as it merged with the national Progressive movement for civil rights and civil liberties.

African-American activists in Five Points also endeavored to open a Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) branch on 2800 Glenarm Place.<sup>24</sup> The YMCA served as a "town hall" providing recreational, athletic, educational, and vocational training programs for Blacks in Denver.<sup>25</sup> With aid from the NAACP, the YMCA in

Five Points blended spirited African-American culture with ardent political activism. The Glenarm YMCA was a common meeting place for the Denver NAACP that helped blend culture, athletics, morals, and activism.<sup>26</sup> NAACP events included sundry aspects of Black identity. Church choirs, teas, picket signs, sidewalk gatherings, and jazz musicians were familiar to Five Points residents.<sup>27</sup> The triumph of the NAACP against restrictive informal Jim Crow practices eventually led to the spread of African-American events into other areas of Denver. On July 29, 1961, the NAACP held its first annual Freedom Fund Ball at a place where Blacks had been previously banned: The Denver Hilton Hotel.<sup>28</sup>

As Five Points assumed a prominent role in Denver, celebrations of Black culture sprouted up in the neighborhood. An example was Juneteenth. In 1953, Otha Rice, a jazz club owner and Five Points resident, pioneered the Juneteenth festival.<sup>29</sup> Originally started to commemorate the official end of *de jure* slavery in the United States, Juneteenth manifested African-American identity and brought Five Points residents together.<sup>30</sup> African Americans gathered, vendors sold goods, parades acclaimed local talent, jazz musicians forged the musical character of Five Points, and ceremonies commended those working to benefit the community.<sup>31</sup> These social gatherings celebrated black culture and defied discrimination in Five Points.



*The triangular design and Beaux-Arts molding of the Rossonian Hotel and Lounge in 1945.*

A feature of the Golden Age of Five Points was jazz with its treasure trove of talent. Residents often described Five Points as the “Jazz Mecca” or the “Harlem of the West,” a sobriquet coined by Beat author Jack Kerouac, for its connection to

jazz in a Black enclave similar to that of Harlem in New York City.<sup>32</sup> Jazz musicians found places to play such as Rice’s Tap Room and Oven, a two-story taproom with an attached jazz and blues club, that had weekly jazz nights.<sup>33</sup> The Rossonian represented the pinnacle of jazz in Five Points. In 1912, Robert Baxter hired architect George Bettcher to design the Baxter Hotel on 2642 Welton Street.<sup>34</sup> The triangular design and Beaux-Arts molding immediately made the hotel a neighborhood landmark.<sup>35</sup> With Baxter’s death, the hotel shifted hands to Alfred Ross and became the Rossonian in 1929, with the hotel emerging as the prime spot for Black social gatherings.<sup>36</sup> From nationally-recognized musicians and entertainers such as Miles Davis, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Nat King Cole, and Billie Holiday opening in jazz clubs, to the inspiring stories of up-and-coming teen jazz bands, the Rossonian represented Five Points’ affection for jazz and fondness for its prevalence.<sup>37</sup>

Jazz also engendered a sense of commonality between Blacks and Whites in Denver. During the height of the Golden Age, Whites came to Five Points’ jazz clubs when famous musicians played.<sup>38</sup> Jazz music in Denver had a way of bringing everyone together. When Whites visited, they found that African Americans were tolerant and shared their common affinity for jazz. The realization that African Americans were cordial helped to promote cultural pluralism and erode segregation.

### **Chicano Five Points**

Though Black culture defines much of Five Points, it is not exclusive to the diverse neighborhood. Five Points has been and remains a place for social progress where minorities live, including a sizeable Chicano-Latino population. Mexican Americans grew up in Five Points, such as the illustrious Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, who was born at Denver General Hospital in 1928.<sup>39</sup> Working as a farm hand while attending school, he graduated from Manual High School in 1944.<sup>40</sup> Afterward, he began a boxing career where he competed for years before turning to politics in 1963.<sup>41</sup> Most of his formal political bids were unsuccessful. Fortunately, Gonzales became an activist advocating for Chicanos, who comprised forty percent of the Five Points’ population during the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> He

founded the Crusade for Justice, a grassroots cultural center, located at 1567 Downing Street.<sup>43</sup>

The Crusade for Justice was also a civil rights organization and a social movement to empower Denver's Chicanos.<sup>44</sup> *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, a manifesto promoting Chicano nationalism and activism, was adopted at the First National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference hosted by Gonzales in 1969 at the Crusade for Justice. Through sustained activism and struggle for Chicano rights, Gonzales inspired Chicanos to demand local and national recognition, pursue inclusivity, achieve educational mobility, resist Anglo discrimination, oppose injustice, protest denials of their civil rights, and assert ethnic and cultural identity. Though the Chicano community in Denver faced challenges and tragedies, such as the bombing of a Crusade apartment and subsequent police shooting in 1973, Chicanos engaged in self-expression, resistance, and political activism in order to triumph over discrimination.<sup>45</sup>

### Discrimination in Five Points

Though Five Points' culture reflected Black and Chicano pride, the underlying issue of racism seeped into the neighborhood. Throughout the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was influential in Denver, with some politicians, such as Denver Mayor Benjamin Stapleton, aligning with KKK identity.<sup>46</sup> The KKK openly advertised in newspapers calling for new members to sign up.<sup>47</sup> In 1924, the Imperial Wizard, Hiram Wesley Evans, visited Denver while the Klan hosted an initiation of five-thousand members.<sup>48</sup> Public displays of intimidation were an indication of KKK presence in Denver as well as in Colorado. Dr.



*Ku Klux Klan members during a cross burning in Denver, 1921.*

Holmes experienced burned crosses in his yard.<sup>49</sup> The KKK even held a "Klan Day" where spectators watched Klan members participate in events.<sup>50</sup> Colorado

society in the 1920s was where the KKK could visibly express virulent racist and pernicious anti-Catholic views. In general, discrimination restricted Blacks to a few ambient neighborhoods, such as Skyland, Clayton, and Whittier.<sup>51</sup> The residents of these neighborhoods created a concentration of African-American culture that was missing in most of Denver. Though the obstacles of segregation and KKK prejudice persisted close to Five Points, residents there nonetheless triumphed over discrimination by affirming cultural solidarity in a place where minorities lived amicably.

### Culture Effaced Countered by Cultural Revival

Though the Golden Age of Five Points was robust with its jazz clubs, community centers, and doughty African-American culture, it ironically abated with and following civil rights victories such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.<sup>52</sup> African Americans were no longer victims of redlining practices, and residents who could afford to move out of Five Points into other neighborhoods, such as Northeast Park Hill and Cole, and the suburb of Aurora, did so.<sup>53</sup> Over time, Five Points succumbed to economic decline, urban deterioration, crime, and illicit drug trafficking.<sup>54</sup> The population decreased drastically, going from 25,000 in 1950 to 8,000 in 1990.<sup>55</sup> Developers tore down whole blocks of historic housing to make room for complexes such as Curtis Park Homes and parking lots.<sup>56</sup> Five Points culture nonetheless endured during years of hardship with the Juneteenth festival occurring annually and the Zion Baptist Church remaining to serve the community.<sup>57</sup>

From the late 1980s onwards, residents have begun making strides toward the revival of Five Points. In 1988, Paul W. Stewart opened the Black American West Museum in the home of Justina Ford, a prominent doctor in Five Points in the early twentieth century.<sup>58</sup> The Black American West Museum dedicates itself to preserving African-American history in Colorado throughout all periods, thereby demonstrating the sentiment of conservation and revival in the neighborhood.<sup>59</sup> In 1990, Thomas J. Yates, a member of the American Woodmen, now known as Woodmen of the World, bought the Rossonian hotel with support from the Denver City Government.<sup>60</sup> Yates hoped to bring the hotel back to its former glory; however, he ran out of money.<sup>61</sup> Fortunately, Carl Bourgeois bought the Rossonian with a similar goal of revival.<sup>62</sup> In 2002, construction on the Blair-

Caldwell African-American Research Library began.<sup>63</sup> It officially opened in 2003. The Blair-Caldwell library pays tribute to the African-American heritage of Five Points and is a resource of Black history with thousands of documents displaying the story of the neighborhood. Moreover, the Five Points Juneteenth continues to celebrate African-American heritage with a festival that has grown to 20,000 attendees annually.<sup>64</sup> Though Five Points has waxed and waned, sustained efforts have revived its heritage. It is an African-American urban triumph.



*Vendors selling merchandise on Welton Street during the 2016 Juneteenth Festival.*

### **Looking “Over the Mountain”**

Five Points has triumphed over obstacles throughout its history. It began as an industrial neighborhood as enterprises took root there in the late nineteenth century. In time, Five Points

became the epicenter of African-American culture in Denver. The NAACP, jazz clubs, the Glenarm YMCA, the Rossonian, and a thriving African-American presence made it an oasis. Afro-Caribbeans, such as Bahamians established themselves in the northeast Denver neighborhood as well. Five Points became the home of Chicanos, Mexican Americans, Hispanics, and Latinos, where they engaged in self-expression, resistance, and political activism, and asserted their cultural identity. The era of jazz clubs faded, but their legacy in Five Points remains. Residents triumphed over hardship again with the revitalization of the neighborhood following its dissipation. Five Points is a progressive, multiethnic, and inclusionary neighborhood for its many residents. Whites presently comprise the largest population there.<sup>65</sup> Now, in the early twenty-first century, Five Points is back. It has arrived again.

When Five Points residents “look over the mountain,” they see that obstacles were part of a dynamic cultural history. By acknowledging this reality, they demonstrate commitment to revitalizing its positive features. They embody Goode’s speech “A Look Over the Mountain” by taking on contemporary challenges. A dynamic blend of national and local scales of history have interacted in the story of Five Points. Residents bear witness to the legacy of the past’s heritage in the present and in its cultural identity for the future. Their energetic spirit drives the neighborhood forward towards the renewal of African-American urban character combined with other multicultural, multiethnic identities.