



## Episode 5: The Nettles of Nashville

### Alvin Hall:

*The Negro Motorist Green Book* is actually a by-product of the Great Migration that occurred from 1910 to 1970. During that period in America's history, over six million African Americans left the South to move North and West for better opportunities in all areas of their lives—jobs, housing, fairer treatment, a better future for their children. With their new financial status, many found ways to avoid the commonplace indignities of Jim Crow, especially on public transportation and in places where they shopped.

For many African Americans who traveled back and forth to the same places to visit kinfolk and friends, the need for the Green Book diminished. As it did, fewer and fewer people talked about the publication. As a result, many children and grandchildren of those who participated in the Great Migration may have not been told anything about the actual Green Book, although they most certainly would have been told about the times that necessitated its creation.

I'm Alvin Hall, your host on *Driving the Green Book* by Macmillan Podcasts. As our producer, Janée Woods Weber, and I drove from Detroit to New Orleans we met fascinating people, some only recently familiar with the Green Book. In this episode, we're in Nashville where we met with young professionals, Ana Nettles and Crystal Churchwell, both in their early 30s. They told us about their first encounter with the Green Book and the extended family history that unspooled as a result.

### Hall:

When you first got one in your hand, Ana, what did you think when you opened it up and started to go through it?

### Ana Nettles:

I first thought the concept was just brilliant. I thought it was a tremendous resource. It makes total sense. It made everything else that I knew about how Black people traveled make sense. I just loved seeing it on the physical page and flipping [through

it]. Of course, I had to flip to my state first. And that's where you see where they say you should go.

I think it's tremendous. I think this is a history that people need to know more about. I was shocked that I didn't know it, but the ingenuity of Black people never surprises me.

**Janée Woods Weber:**

Very true.

**Crystal Churchwell:**

It makes sense.

**Hall:**

And when you, Crystal, started to actually dig down into it...

**Churchwell:**

It wasn't until I was older that I think I was actually able to put it all together and realize that [this guide meant] life or death. It truly allowed for Black people to navigate through society, through travels with some dignity. And I think that it's kind of amazing.

I want to see your copy. I didn't know you had a copy.

**Ana Nettles:**

Yeah, I brought the one that Evelyn gave to me. I asked my mom about it, I said, "Did you ever have a Green Book?"

And she's like, "No, we didn't have a Green Book." She said, "We always knew by word of mouth what the Black streets were in every town you were going to." A lot of the traveling my mom did was church-related. She said, "When you were in Chattanooga [you went to] Ninth Street and if you were in Nashville it was Jefferson Street.

I think that if you didn't have a physical Green Book that it was word of mouth that got around to a lot of people [to share which] were the safe shops that you could go to and the safe areas to be. People relied on that [word of mouth]. My mom said that my grandfather didn't even trust atlases.

**Hall:**

I was not remotely surprised that a young person of her age had not heard of the Green Book. The world that made the Green Book necessary changed as a result of the Civil Rights Movement. The legal restrictions, the overt mistreatment, and the commonplace indignities that necessitated the creation and distribution of the Green Book were legally prohibited, for the most part, but sometimes morphed into more subtle versions.

The network of shared information remained, even after the publication of the Green Book stopped. The practical knowledge and life-saving insights were shared within communities by action and by word-of-mouth, by daily acts of kindness and resistance.

**Churchwell:**

That reminds me of a story my dad told me when he was in college. He went to Vanderbilt and lived in East Nashville. He didn't have a car so he had to take the bus to Vanderbilt. The bus system picked him up in East Nashville and drove him all around town to take him through Belle Meade to go down west and to get to Vanderbilt, which is a very roundabout route. And I remember when I heard that, I was like, "Why?"

And he said, "Well, because they'd pick up the domestics in East Nashville and drive them all the way through to get to Belle Meade and drop them off for their jobs. Then you would go from Belle Meade to Vanderbilt. And it was an intentional bus route for that purpose.

He said that they'd pick up people along the way from East Nashville. And then by the time you get to Belle Meade, it's just him and all the ladies on the bus who are going to work in Belle Meade. [These were] little old ladies, women who were his mother's age, or women who were his grandmother's age. And they would say, "Oh baby, I hope you do well at Vanderbilt." And every day they'd give them little cookies.

He said that they were so proud of him and he said that he felt that on his shoulders when he got off the bus at Vanderbilt because he knew that all of it is so intertwined in the fact that they saw pride in him and he wasn't even their blood. [That's] the nature of how interconnected we are as a Black community and the fact that your space is ever-moving in terms of being in that dual kind of headspace.

**Weber:**

That's exactly why they say: We are our ancestors' wildest dreams.

**Churchwell:**

Right.

**Hall:**

But what does this all mean? It means that the next generation has freedom—a freedom of thought, of imagination, of relationships. They don't have all of the psychological burdens that their forebears carried and that I carried.

I look at the two young women in front of me and I see such possibilities. I'm sitting in the presence of confident, smart, beautiful, poised young Black women who just a few generations ago would have had to mask or suppress parts of themselves in order to survive. Even someone like Ana Nettles's grandfather, Willy Nettles, might not have thought his grandchildren could have some of the freedoms they enjoy today.

**[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]**

**Hall:**

While in Nashville, we interviewed someone whose personal and family stories proved to be a microcosm of the broader experience of three generations of African Americans: the Jim Crow generation, the post-Jim Crow generation, and the contemporary generation. We came to Nashville thinking we would learn about the lives of African Americans during and after the period when the Green Book was published. We learned so much more!

We met Dr. Evelyn E. Nettles at her office at Tennessee State University, one of the legendary historically Black colleges and universities (otherwise known as an HBCU). Dr. Nettles is the Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs.

From the moment she walked in the room, I knew as a person also born and raised in the South, that Dr. Nettles and her brother Michael came from a family of diligent and generous people. It was her smile when she shook our hands as she greeted us; it was her tone of voice and the way she made eye contact; it was the comfort level she instantly created by the natural warmth of her personality.

Janée and I were surprised to learn that, like her niece Ana, Dr. Nettles had never heard of the Green Book.

**Dr. Evelyn E. Nettles:**

I didn't know [about it] until I went to the movie.

**Hall:**

Really?

**Dr. Evelyn E. Nettles:**

That's right.

**Hall:**

You didn't know about the Green Book?

**Dr. Evelyn E. Nettles:**

I didn't know about the Green Book.

**Hall:**

And you're a Black woman in America.

**Dr. Evelyn E. Nettles:**

And I'm a Black woman and I'm an educated Black woman in America, and I did not know [about it]. And I said, "Michael, do you remember daddy having a Green Book?"

And he said, "No, I don't remember that."

It was an eight-to-ten hour drive between here and Mississippi, and we drove it the whole way. We did not make many stops.

**Weber:**

So you did not know about the Green Book until you were an adult. What do you think this says about the way Black folks in America learn about our history and pass down our stories?

**Dr. Evelyn E. Nettles:**

I think people like my dad told us stories and that's how we learned about some things. But I think in my generation, we lived it. We lived it. Even though you didn't let it paralyze you, because I think the statement that you probably heard as you were growing up as well is "You've got to be twice as good and you've gotta be the best. You cannot be lazy. You need to work and you need to work hard."

**Hall:**

This ethos is deep in the Nettles family, going all the way back to her grandmother, Essie Nettles, who owned a restaurant in Moss Point, a Gulf town in Mississippi, from which the family migrated.

**Dr. Evelyn E. Nettles:**

When I was a little girl we lived in Moss Point, Mississippi and I had a grandmother who was an entrepreneur. She owned a restaurant and my grandfather ran a barbershop and he also worked for Ingalls Shipyard. The men who worked at the shipyard counted on her to make their lunches for the day and then they would come back and eat dinner in her place. She was a marvelous cook.

My grandmother and my grandfather did not have more than a high school education, but if she just had had the opportunities, she would have been very, very wealthy. She was wealthy, but not as [wealthy as] she could be. Her growth was probably stifled because of her race. Her place was called Essie's Place.

[My grandmother and grandfather] believed in education, so when my father was growing up he didn't go to public school in Mississippi. His grandfather made sure he went to Miss Jones's School, and evidently Miss Jones had been fired from the local public school system because she had insisted on the white superintendent not calling them n\*\*\*\*r. So she was fired. So she opened up her own school and some people from the community, my dad being one of those people, went to school at Miss Jones's School. And then as he grew older they sent him to Beatrice, Alabama. There was a school there that was supposed to be one of the best schools in the country for negroes. [My grandparents] really wanted him to have an education. He was their oldest son.

[My father] would tell his mother, "I don't know why you have me down here, but I am hungry. They don't have enough food." So he learned this sometime later, from a woman who was doing a book about Piney Woods, that his mother had bought cows for the school. He knew they started having meat, but he didn't know where it came from. And his mother was buying the cows for the school.

**Hall:**

Essie is an example of how Black women have always been business leaders and entrepreneurs. They have historically excelled at finding needs and filling them. Most impressively, Essie Nettles turned her economic power in Moss Point into political clout when it was most needed.

**Weber:**

Did your father ever share stories with you about what it was like to grow up and be a young man and then an adult during Jim Crow?

**Dr. Evelyn E. Nettles:**

He did. One story that we found amusing was about a sheriff named August Campbell in Moss Point. His son had ordered a sheriff's uniform. Even though he wasn't a sheriff, he would antagonize the Black people on the weekend on Sunday. What he would do was go and pick up his girlfriend in a car and he would have Black people, Black men dancing for her—tap dancing for her—and he would be in his sheriff's uniform.

**Weber:**

Like a minstrel show?

**Dr. Evelyn E. Nettles:**

Yeah, like a minstrel show. And he said that one Sunday he got the wrong fellow and that fellow beat him good and made him take his uniform off. And, of course, that fellow had to get out of town and the Black people were really scared. People came to my grandmother and said, "Miss Essie, we're really concerned because of what has happened here. They may start lynching people." And she went to the mayor and he said, "No." She had worked for the mayor, she had worked in his kitchen. He said, "No, it'll be okay, Essie, so you don't have to worry about anything."

**Hall:**

As we spoke to Dr. Nettles, I could see in the way she engaged with us, that her "people"—her family, friends, close relatives, and those with whom she surrounded herself—were full of thoughtfulness, generosity, humor, and genuine love for each other.

These values were widespread throughout communities where families like the Nettles lived. These people with drive, vision, and wherewithal of all types created businesses to serve American travelers when white-owned businesses largely refused. These enterprises included hotels, beauty shops, restaurants, savings and loans, tourist houses, taxi companies, night clubs, drug stores, and more.

After the break, we'll hear about how Nashville has changed over the decades and how urban renewal has impacted the Black businesses and residents on Jefferson Street.

**[AD BREAK]**

**Hall:**

While in Nashville, we also met Tennessee State University Professor Learotha Williams, who is in his early 50s. He teaches African American history and has a special interest in Nashville.

He suggested we meet on the campus of Fisk University because, as a historian, he wanted to start our tour near the heart of the Black business area. As you get closer to the campus, the area slowly starts to change from one block to the next.

**Prof. Learotha Williams:**

The curious thing about Nashville is this is where the center begins to shift because it was a couple of blocks this way on Charlotte and then it begins to move here. So that might be the point where you start to see some stuff fall between the cracks.

**Hall:**

Yes.

**Williams:**

But there are some listings [in the Green Book that] as I went through I was like, “Wow, that’s all?” Because I know that as the entertainment spot in Nashville, the place where Black performers could come and stay and not have to worry about being Jim Crow’d was right here on this street, on Jefferson.

**Hall:**

What was the street like in those days? Was it full of activity at night? Was it busy on the weekends?

**Williams:**

This was the place to be seen. If you had an outfit you wanted to show out, you’d come to Jefferson Street. The nightclubs were there. You could go right down the street and see Little Richard perform, and while you’re listening to Little Richard, you look around and you might see Jackie Robinson or Joe Louis in the spot. This street serviced these three universities and in doing so it created a really intimate relationship between these universities and the community.

**Hall:**

The three universities Professor Williams is referring to are Meharry Medical College, which is blocks away from both Fisk and Tennessee State.

In any Black community in the U.S., if you said you went to Fisk, Tennessee State, or Meharry, it was an indicator of Black excellence. Even with their collective accomplishments, professional Black people were excluded by the city from public services and from political processes that deeply impacted them.

If Jefferson Street was populated with a thriving business district and prestigious colleges, why did the area have to undergo urban renewal? Why were new roads built through the community that cut off and starved those Black businesses? To stop Black dollars from staying in Black communities.

**Williams:**

It displaced more than a thousand homes, eight hundred businesses are removed and you'd hear them talk about urban renewal. So I was like, "Let's see if they're removing poor folks." All of the folks along 12th Avenue North, and I encourage y'all to drive down 12th Avenue North. On one side of the street, you still got houses, but on the other side, you have the interstate. So what I and my students did is we said, "Let's look at homeownership along that strip." And the vast majority of those folks, at least along the first couple of blocks of it, were homeowners. Same thing down there at 28th.

**Hall:**

In the face of this discrimination, people needed to understand their economic power. Parents, like Dr. Nettles's father, modeled for their children what it looked like to exercise that power. How people could rally or organize to fight back against discrimination.

**Dr. Evelyn E. Nettles:**

When I was little, Black people boycotted all the downtown stores. We used to go to Harveys, Caster Knotts, and Cain-Sloan when I was [downtown]. Those were the big department stores.

But even during the Christmas season when you knew you wanted something from one of those stores, my daddy wouldn't let us shop in the stores downtown if we were boycotting the stores. We could not go there. So I understand walking with your purse and not participating in or giving my money to people who don't have my best interests at heart.

**Hall:**

Dr. Nettles's father knew how to use his family's economic power to benefit his community. He was the same person who would make sure his family's hard-earned money would not be spent in white businesses that treated Black people badly. He also used this money to support Civil Rights marches in his city.

**Dr. Evelyn E. Nettles:**

I can remember when we were little, that's when the Civil Rights marchers came through—the marchers came through Nashville. They were based in Centennial Park

and we had to look at all of that on television. Daddy wouldn't let us go out. But he went out and they would bring food to the marchers over in Centennial Park so that they would have food as they marched on.

**Hall:**

At the end of our conversation, we asked Dr. Nettles for restaurant suggestions.

**Weber:**

We want to keep our dollars circulating in the Black community.

**Dr. Evelyn E. Nettles:**

That's a very good idea. Thank you. That's good. There's one restaurant on Jefferson Street....

**Hall:**

She recommended Kingdom Cafe & Grill on Jefferson Street. They employ people who have recently been released from prison and are teaching them cooking and the business of running a restaurant.

As we walked into what looked and felt like a jazz club, on one side was a long line of steam tables holding an array of delicious soul food.

Janée and I decided to honor our foregone travelers by recreating one of the signature road trip meals mothers would pack for their journey: fried chicken and cornbread. The whole experience to me felt like Sunday dinner at a Baptist church, where the love and spirit of generosity feed the soul.

Both Janée and I got chills during our conversations in Nashville because one of the things we kept realizing is the entrepreneurship among Black women during this time. That's something that's largely unreported and unrecognized. You have Miss Essie, you have Miss Jones, people who in the face of adversity cooked and created schools to help Black people—their own people—reach higher and achieve more.

So I want to end this episode by honoring some of the other women whose businesses were included in the Green Book—businesses like tourist homes, restaurants, beauty salons, and more. Most importantly, these and many other women were prime creators of the network of safety and home comforts for Black travelers like us.

Mrs. Rose Allen

Mrs. India Herndon

Faustina Wilson

Mrs. Mattie Herron  
Mrs. Louise Pitts  
Mrs. Clara Oliver  
Mrs. Gustava Anderson  
Ida Thurman  
Mrs. Margaret Wright  
Mrs. Allie O. King  
Ida Miller  
Mrs. Edith Wilkins  
Mrs. Lessie Bennett  
Mrs. Clara Eubanks  
Mrs. Melanie B. Wilson

That's all for this episode of Driving the Green Book. When we come back next week we learn from our elders about how they safely navigated tense, frightening, and humiliating situations, and what we can learn from them to move forward to a more just future.

## **CREDITS**

Driving the Green Book is a production of Macmillan Podcasts. It is created, narrated, and produced by Alvin Hall and edited by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. Sound design and original theme song by Cedric Wilson at Lantigua Williams & Co. Field production by Oluwakemi Aladesuyi. Janée Woods Weber is the associate producer with additional production support by Jasmine Faustino, Michelle Margulis, Morgan Ratner, Emily Miller, and Becky Celestina. Kathy Doyle is the Macmillan Podcasts Vice President.

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Safe travels.