

Black History Month is a good time to reflect on the ways food co-ops, particularly African American food co-ops, relate to food justice.

The history of cooperation in African American society dates back to the early 17th century, when Africans were first transported, against their will, to the Atlantic shores. Eventually, mutual aid societies blossomed, followed by endeavors including cooperative farming by communities of women on abandoned farms during the Civil War. Later, Black farmers' collectives sprung up and many flourished. These types of efforts laid a foundation for the modern food cooperative movement. Many stories have been passed down to us that relate how oppressed Black people created their own options for access to food and other necessities in a racist and unjust environment.

Our own Ypsilanti Food Co-Op, which was established in 1975 with roots back to the 1930s, seems young compared to some of the earliest African American food co-ops, which date back to the early 20th century. One such organization was the Harlem Pioneer Cooperative Society in New York, which opened a small grocery store in 1919. That same year, the Citizens' Co-operative Stores in Memphis opened its first cooperative meat market, eventually growing to five stores serving about 75,000 people.

W.E.B. Du Bois was promoting African American cooperatives as early as 1898. His efforts inspired later influential black leaders like Ella Baker, who founded the Young Negro Cooperative League in 1930. Baker, a seminal figure in the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-20th century, credited her time with the Cooperative League as crucial to developing her skills in "grassroots leadership, education, democratic decision making, and a step-by-step, transformative process of working toward long term goals."

Although many of these early ventures were obstructed by white supremacist interventions and violence, the African American cooperative movement persists today. Co-ops are founded on the idea of social responsibility – "Food for People, Not Profit". Early co-ops practiced food justice by selling produce grown by local farmers. Cooperative farming groups followed the guidelines of environmental responsibility and sustainability outlined in practices developed by leaders in agricultural innovation like George Washington Carver, who perfected and taught his techniques at the Tuskegee Institute beginning in the late 19th century.

African American cooperative successes allowed our Black brothers and sisters to rise above the economic struggles caused by segregation. The movement continues today, as evidenced by groups like The Detroit People's Food Co-op, an emerging African American led, community-owned grocery cooperative.

For further reading, please have a look at

<https://www.foodcoop.coop/blog/2020/6/19/a-short-history-of-black-cooperatives-in-america>

<https://www.shareable.net/the-deep-roots-of-african-american-cooperative-economics/>

*Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*, by Jessica Gordon Nembhard.

*Grocery Story*, by John Steinman, details the history of grocery chains and the growth of the food co-op movement to create a more just world.

*Freedom Farmers*, by Monica White, provides historical perspective and reveals agriculture as a site of resistance.

These books, and many more titles relating to food justice, are available at the Ypsilanti District Library as well as via Hoopla (the digital media service offered through YDL).