

The Alcan Highway- Paving the way for integration in the U.S. Military

In both of his non-fiction books, Jesse Holland, my husband, underscores the irony of the position of the black person in America, the fact that at every pivotal point in America's history, African-Americans, in the form of the enslaved, and the oppressed- proved the lie of the ideals which the founder's claimed, if not believed. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal". At the moment of the writing of those words, Thomas Jefferson was enslaving about 130 persons, some of whom, his kin.

The irony of the American ideal in tension with its reality is told in its founding documents.

"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

And as Nicole Hanna Jones the New York Times reporter and creative genius behind the 1619 project indicates,

"Black Americans have also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom. More than any other group in this country's history, we have served, generation after generation, in an overlooked but vital role: It is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy."

She is referring to the resolution of this tension between our ideals and our realities, the 13th and 14th amendments and eventually the 19th amendment that made the phrase "all men are created equal" true- The struggle for equal rights, continues to do more for the country than just free the oppressed, it allows us to live out the true meaning of our creed.

But what does this mean for us, in our industry in the charge to plan, design, build, operate maintain and sustain the built environment? How do telling these stories and understanding these truths help us be better human beings, better citizens, better engineers, better planners, ? I suggest to you that there is a critical role that our built environment has had in the formation of our current culture. Our predecessors in this role have contributed for the better and for the worse of our civilization, and we now have the opportunity to learn from the bad, capitalize and improve on the good, and move our nation forward with our new found knowledge. It is in our hands.

ALCAN HIGHWAY

The Alcan Highway is a story of an impossible task, undertaken by ingenious patriots who went on to disprove the theory of black inferiority, and segregation. Admiral Korka reminded me that I told this story the last time I stood before you, almost 20 years ago, as a story of road builders in a time of urgency, drivers of diversity in a time of mistrust and pavers of the way in a time when trailblazers are required.

This story begins in earnest following the attack on Pearl Harbor, that spurred American and Canada to dust off old plans for a land route connecting the United States to its Alaskan Territory through Canada, as a means of supply and defense against Japanese advancements.

A daunting endeavor, it's no wonder the road was considered for over twenty years before being abandoned as too long, too expensive- just too hard. But existential threats have a way of making the difficult a task we figure out.

Alas, NAVFAC cannot take credit for this mammoth project- It was the Army Corps of Engineers who developed a workable scenario and sent some 7,000 troops to begin the work following Army approval and congressional authorization on February 11, 1942. After many scenarios were studied, the Corps' preferred route traversing from Dawson Creek, BC, through the Yukon, and onto Delta Junction, Alaska was selected because it linked a series of airfields just built by the Canadian army between Edmonton and Whitehorse.



However, after two months only 95 miles had been completed. (95 miles in two months would be fantastic, now a days, right?) But they had over 1600 miles to cover and we were a nation at war. Reluctantly, the General in charge, General William Morris Hoge, was forced to accept negro troops from the newly formed 93rd, 95th and 97th Engineering General Service Regiments and 388th Engineering Battalion. The hesitancy on the part of the general included assumptions about the men's hardiness for the wintry conditions, owing to their point of origin as the American south. But it also included unscientific and racist assumptions about the soldier's ability, intelligence and will to complete the work.

In June 1942, the Japanese attacked Alaska's Aleutian Islands, adding increased pressure to the fast pace of road building.

The black soldiers were sent, with inadequate equipment, and sometimes hand tools, and slept in tent camps rather than the wooden buildings for the white troops.

Col. Heath Twichell Sr., was assigned to the roadwork and was "heartsick" upon learning he was to command one of the black units. He was able to witness firsthand the valiant, creative, perseverance of his unit in the completion of the bridge over the Sikanni Chief, a fast flowing river through a 300 foot wide gorge in British Columbia. His mind was changed by the completion of that bridge in record time and after 72 straight hours of construction to write in a letter home, "We hear less and less about the supposed deficiencies of Negro troops."

In the end, the Alcan Supply Road crossed over 1600 miles of rough terrain, took more than 10,000 men, cost 138 million dollars and was completed in 8 months and 12 days. The final link connecting all the crews was between a white and black unit in November 1942.

The cooperation and collaboration of the team that was formed out of exigency is the story of the hope of America, the ideals written in our founding documents, proved out in the muddy chasm-- that expanse that opportunity and hard word closed. It is a lesson for us- Opportunity and Hard Work. And while we gather here today, celebrating Black history month and telling one another stories about an immense construction project that can show the very best in us, our built environment has also been an instrument of our division, wielded by narrow minded people in power, whose prejudices alone made true their predictions.

FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION

But, you may be saying- We build roads, we build infrastructure, peers, drydocks, barracks, runways, these are concrete things that require hard science and engineering, they are immune to bias, they are indifferent to difference, they are agnostic on the topic of cultural significance, place or purpose. Right?

Let's take a moment to understand the significance of the decisions made by people like you and me. Engineers, planners, architects, budgeteers, decision makers. And when those decision makers don't look like me- aren't Hispanic, aren't women, disabled, aren't veterans returning home from war, then those perspectives and needs can be overlooked. If those decision makers are dedicated to old stereotypes of who people can and cannot be, the results are disastrous.

America is living with the consequences of the unfortunate history of some of our practices. Like the Federal Housing Administration, that legislated the practice of redlining, penning minority communities in undesirable sides of cities, denying upwardly mobile minorities the ability to qualify for government sponsored programs of home ownership post world war II that were offered to white Americans. And leading to those same communities degrading under lack of resources and overcrowding. Then in came the planners, who lured with the Federal Highway Act's promise to cities of 90 cents on every dollar for construction, determined the best way to solve the problems of the inner-city, was to bulldoze right through them with highways. Highways were built through Birmingham and Syracuse, through Boston and Miami. All over the country, highways were directed through communities, erecting concrete barriers as a physical manifestation of policy that preceded and predicted the decline of those communities.

And some may say- that the damage was done and it was unfortunate, but it only affected those communities, it hasn't affected me, personally? No? Well the housing and transit policy in the cities of America led to the suburban development in and around our cities. It led to unsustainable housing costs, increasing transit costs and affordability issues for everyone. Our fate as nation is bound together and connected in ways we may not comprehend. Our infrastructure policy must therefore consider the impacts to all concerned, Our plans must represent all of those who utilize the infrastructure we build, our sailors, Seabees and marines in those barracks, but also consider the generations yet unborn who will benefit from our sustainable selections today.

America is at a crossroads, I believe. And we in the Architect, Engineering Construction space have an opportunity to live out the true meaning of our nation's creed- "that All men and women are created equal". As tough as a time this is, I truly believe that we are moving sincerely in that direction, because the room where it is happening is not closed off to all of us. Oh, we are not represented as we should be, but the door is not closed. Opened by the work of the 93rd, 95th, 97th and the 388th, opened by the likes of Dr. Lilia Abron, the door is not closed. And all of us lucky enough to be in the room- we have an obligation, and I will leave you with these lessons.

Our best work as designers, as builders, and as operators, our best work happens when we include all stakeholders. When we consider the significance and contribution and culture of those for whom we build. Walkable routes, affordable housing, ADA compliance are all inclusive approaches and bring all of our community into positive connection with the infrastructure we worked so hard to get funded and designed and constructed.

As the deputy project manager for the renovation of the HQ1 building of the International Monetary Fund, we installed hands free soap dispensers. But they didn't work on consistently. Our sensors may have had the same problem as some you may have seen on the internet. The manufacturers built those machines without testing them on darker skin.

So our obligation is to get that input. Welcome those in the room who might represent a completely different point of view from yours. Welcome the tension of new ideas at the design stage of this thing you are going to launch into the world that will be there for 3 generations or more. Your charge is to check your bias, understand that you invite that point of view, not to give them a break, not to fill a quota, not to check a box, but to improve your design- to have a better chance of completing that project on time, and on schedule, built for the intended purpose.

In this way- our profession can help create a more perfect union. We can continue to uphold the our highest values of our Nation, we can continue to perfect our democracy.