

Phoenix civil rights activists highlighted in ASU professor's latest book

By Julia Taylor, ASU News

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As Phoenix began to grow following WWII, residents from other parts of the country moving to the area often brought with them Jim Crow practices.

Racism in the Valley abounded, and one family at the center of combating this was the Ragsdales, says [Calvin Schermerhorn](#), professor of history in the [School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies](#) at Arizona State University.

"Their effect in the Valley was to try to break barriers," he said.

A prominent figure in Phoenix history and an ASU alumnus, Lincoln Ragsdale and his wife, Eleanor, are one of seven families highlighted in Schermerhorn's new book "[The Plunder of Black America: How the Racial Wealth Gap was Made](#)."

Lincoln, an airman assigned to Luke Air Field near Phoenix during WWII, called the city "the Mississippi of the West." He remained in the area, though, seeing an opportunity to participate in desegregation during its startup phase.

Lincoln wanted to follow his family's footsteps and open a mortuary, though it was nearly impossible for Black borrowers to receive bank loans at the time. He faced rejection after rejection before finally securing a loan from a Dutch architect.

Schermerhorn said this was just one of the Ragsdales' remarkable accomplishments though, as they later expanded their ventures to include real estate and business, and became the first family to cross Phoenix's redline¹.

Lincoln Ragsdale Jr., a graduate of ASU's [W. P. Carey School of Business](#), recently donated some of his family's items for a new ASU Library collection opening later this year. His family photos, business records and other items outline the Ragsdales' activism and deep connection to their community, said [Jessica Salow](#), assistant archivist of [Black Collections](#) at [ASU Library](#).

We talked to Schermerhorn for more details about the Ragsdales and his recent publication.

Question: What was your inspiration to write this book on Black wealth in America?

Answer: I've written a couple of books on American slavery before, and there was always a question of, "What happened next?" There's freedom in 1865, there's this period called Reconstruction that lasted until the 1870s, and then what was the afterlife? So I went back to the beginning and took a look at the opportunities for African-descended people to earn money and build wealth, as well as what kind of obstacles they faced.

I noticed a pattern start to emerge: Each time a Black family or Black community got a little bit of money or started to get ahead, the structures of the economy moved to strip them of wealth and prevent them from reaching the new goal post — every time they overcame one set of obstacles, another set emerged. And so this was true in the 17th century. It's true in the 18th, 19th, 20th and 21st century.

Q: How did you go about gathering information for the book?

A: It was a lot of luck in finding these stories, some right in our backyard. Some were a challenge based on what evidence was available, but records enough existed to piece together what life might have been like at the time for these families. There was a lot of digging in digital archives, looking at census data, newspaper articles, government records, court cases and property deeds and transactions as well. I was even fortunate enough to talk to a descendant of the Georgetown 272² who contacted me and agreed to tell me her story.

It was also a joy and a treat to access transcripts of interviews from Lincoln Ragsdale and the Ragsdale children through ASU Library's [Distinctive Collections](#), which provided their voice to reflect on their achievements and obstacles. Ragsdale was also instrumental in inviting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to ASU, so it was interesting to go back and listen to the recording and look at the transcripts of that event.

Q: What was the Ragsdales' impact on the Phoenix area?

A: Eleanor and Lincoln Ragsdale were early civil rights pioneers. Lincoln Ragsdale integrated Lamson Business College and they tried to integrate the schools, supporting Phillips v. Phoenix Union High Schools and Junior College District. And so building on these little successes of

integrating education, they took on the establishment. Lincoln Ragsdale ran for city council, they protested discriminatory practices and helped push the Civil Rights Movement in Phoenix.

Q: What advice do you have for anyone wanting to write a book like this?

A: Tell a story. A lot of what we do as academics is try to analyze big processes and to utilize language that is inaccessible or jargon. So I would say try to tell a story in a way that connects with an audience and gives them the answer to the question, "So what? How does this affect me? What is the relevance?" Because when we think about things like housing discrimination, we think it's a battle that's been fought and won. But then, as we see in the Ragsdales and their legacy, this is a battle that keeps having to be fought over again.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

¹ Redlining is the practice of denying loans to people of color and low-income individuals based on the financial risk of the area where they chose to live. In Phoenix, areas south of Van Buren Street were historically redlined.

² In 1838, Maryland's Jesuit priests sold hundreds of men, women and children to Southern plantations to raise money for the construction of Georgetown University.

Main image



Phoenix civil rights activists Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale pose for a photo with their four children. They are one of seven families highlighted in ASU Professor Calvin Schermerhorn's new book. Photo courtesy of ASU Library

Text image(s)



Calvin Schermerhorn