Oberlin Monuments and Landmarks: Toni Morrison's "Bench by the Road"

Location: Northeast corner of Main and Lorain Streets (State Routes 58 & 511)
Built: 2009

Toni Morrison at the *Bench by the Road* placement in Oberlin, 2009.
(Courtesy of the Toni Morrison Society)

Oberlin's *Bench by the Road* near the corner of Main and Lorain Streets is a commemorative installation which seeks to remember the lives of enslaved Africans. The memorial bench, installed in 2009 by the Toni Morrison Society, was placed in Oberlin to honor the community's connections with abolition and the Underground Railroad.[1] The *Bench by the Road* program of the Toni Morrison Society earned its name from remarks the author made during an interview with *World Magazine* in 1989. In the interview, she laments the absence of historical markers remembering the lives of enslaved Africans, stating*: "There's no 300-foot tower, there's no small bench by the road."*[2] The project seeks to address the lack of remembrance sites by placing benches and plaques highlighting significant moments, individuals, and locations that honor and remember the

[1] Karen R Long, "Author Toni Morrison Helps Unveil Bench at Oberlin College Recognizing Underground Railroad," Cleveland.com (The Plain Dealer, April 24, 2009).
[2] "*Bench by the Road Project*" The Official Website of The Toni Morrison Society | *Bench by the Road Project* (The Toni Morrison Society).

African Diaspora. From 2008 through 2019, the Society had placed 25 Benches in different sites across the world.[3] Morrison promoted Oberlin as a location because, as she stated during the bench's unveiling, Lorain County is her home. The roots of abolitionism run deep in Oberlin, and Morrison's decision to honor them pays homage to the town's history.[4]

After Oberlin College began accepting students regardless of race in 1835 and the resulting migration of free and freedom-seeking black individuals and families, Oberlin became a hotbed of abolitionism. The town also provided refuge for those seeking freedom in Canada, which had abolished slavery in 1834, and acted as a haven from U.S. fugitive slave laws.[5] An overview of this important history is outlined on the historical marker near the *Bench by the Road* memorial on the Northeast corner of Oberlin's Main and Lorain streets.

Toni Morrison

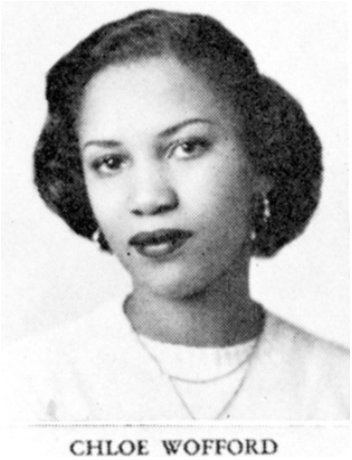
Toni Morrison was born Chloe Wofford in 1931, and was raised in Lorain, Ohio. At age twelve Morrison was baptized under the name Anthony, after Saint Anthony of Padua, which inspired the nickname "Toni." Although Lorain was a semi-integrated community, Toni and her family frequently faced racial discrimination.[6] In spite of this,

[3] "*Bench by the Road Project,*" (The Toni Morrison Society).
[4] Karen R Long, "Author Toni Morrison Helps Unveil Bench at Oberlin College Recognizing Underground Railroad," Cleveland.com (The Plain Dealer, April 24, 2009).
[5] For more information about Oberlin's abolitionist history, see *The Town that Started the Civil War* by Nat Brandt, *Constructing Black Education at Oberlin College* by Roland Baumann, *Elusive Utopia* by Gary Kornblith and Carol Lasser, and *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism* by J. Brent Morris.

[6] Kerri Lee Alexander, "Toni Morrison" (National Women's History Museum, 2019).

she was able to excel as a reader and in her studies, becoming active on her school's yearbook staff and debate team. Morrison also worked as a secretary for the head librarian at Lorain Public Library. [7]

Ohio Historical Marker outside the Lorain Historical Society.
(Courtesy of *The Morning Journal)*



Toni Morrison as a young woman from a Lorain High School yearbook.
(Courtesy of *Ohio History Connection)*

Morrison started college in 1949 at Howard University, a historically Black college, where she studied English. Morrison found community at Howard, connecting with writers, activists, and artists who would go on to influence her work. After finishing her degrees, Morrison worked as a professor for several years before moving to New York, where she worked as an editor.[8] At age 39, she published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, which challenged the conventions of American literature in the 1970's for its revolutionary discussions of the lives and experiences of young Black women.[9] She

[7] Dylan Reynolds, "New Historical Marker Honors Toni Morrison in Lorain," Chronicle Telegram, August 13, 2021.
[8] Kerri Lee Alexander, "Toni Morrison" (National Women's History Museum, 2019).
[9] Karen R Long, "Author Toni Morrison Helps Unveil Bench at Oberlin College Recognizing Underground Railroad," Cleveland.com (The Plain Dealer, April 24, 2009).

published two more novels before devoting herself to writing full time. *Beloved* was released in 1987 to immediate acclaim, quickly becoming a 25-week bestseller and winning many notable awards.[10] Morrison's works focus primarily on African American life, serving as commentary on race relations, and continue to influence writers and artists today.

The Toni Morrison Society

The Toni Morrison Society was founded on May 28, 1993, during the annual meeting of the American Literature Association (ALA) in Baltimore, Maryland. With the lead of Georgia State University professor Carolyn Denard, 26 scholars and admirers of Morrison's work convened to establish the Society.[11] It became an official member of the ALA, making it the 41st society dedicated to an author and the fourth dedicated to an African American author. Just four months after its founding, Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize for Literature resulting in the Society's growth from a small body to an international literary society with major outreach and members across the world.[12]

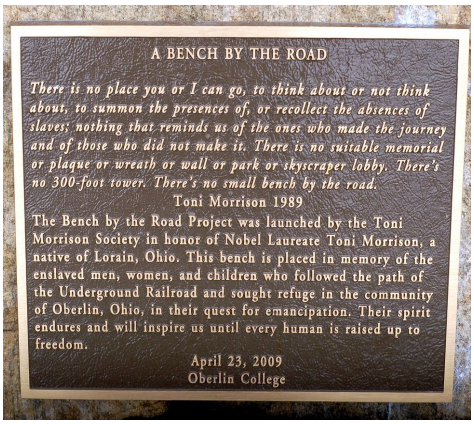
In 2012, the Toni Morrison Society relocated to Oberlin College's Mary Church Terrell Main Library. The Society then launched *Toni Morrison Society Lecture Series* at Oberlin, where they aimed to engage the college's community with educational and community outreach programs.[13]

[10] Kerri Lee Alexander, "Toni Morrison" (National Women's History Museum, 2019).
[11] "Society History," The Official Website of The Toni Morrison Society | Society History (The Toni Morrison Society).
[12] Ibid.
[13] "Society History," (The Toni Morrison Society).

Oberlin's *Bench by the Road*

Oberlin's *Bench by the Road* is a black steel memorial bench measuring 26 inches wide and 6 feet long.[14] A 6x9 inch naming plate is mounted in the center of the bench, containing the name of the site, the organization sponsoring it, and the date of placement.[15] The memorial also contains a 12x18 inch bronze description plate mounted on a small boulder near the bench. The plate includes a short description, the aim of the Project, and a detailed statement describing the significance of the Bench.[16]

The "Bench by the Road" in Oberlin. *(Courtesy of The Toni Morrison Society)*



Plaque installed with the bench in Oberlin. *(Courtesy of Oberlin College)*

Marker on the bench. *(Courtesy of Oberlin Heritage Center)*

Bench marker transcript:

Placed by Oberlin College
Oberlin, Ohio
April 23, 2009

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

Plaque transcript:

There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road.

Toni Morrison 1989

The Bench by the Road Project was launched by the Toni Morrison Society in honor of Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, a native of Lorain, Ohio. This bench is placed in memory of the enslaved men, women, and children who followed the path of the Underground Railroad and sought refuge in the community of Oberlin, Ohio, in their quest for emancipation. Their spirit endures and will inspire us until every human is raised up to freedom.

April 23, 2009
Oberlin College

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Written Summer 2022 by Junior Intern, Violet Haas, Wellington High School
Edited by Oberlin College Students Ellie Lane and Malena Glover
Oberlin Heritage Center, 73 ½ S. Professor St., Oberlin, OH 4404
440-774-1700
www.oberlinheritagecenter.org