

African Americans in Salem

African-American settlers in Salem faced many difficult obstacles. Although slavery was illegal in Oregon, it was not unheard of in the 1840s and 50s. Many more blacks worked in menial and poorly paid jobs, and struggled to get an education. Technically, these hard-working African-Americans were not supposed to be in the state at all. From 1844 to 1926, Oregon's laws prohibited blacks from living in the state. As Egbert Oliver wrote, "African-Americans were essentially illegal aliens in Oregon."

African American Exclusion

Blacks were present in Oregon in the early nineteenth century as explorers, trappers, and settlers, but they were far outnumbered by the white settlers who poured into the territory from the 1840s on. Many of these settlers were of the "Free Soil" persuasion. They opposed expansion of slavery to Oregon not because they believed slavery was wrong, but because they didn't want to compete with plantations fueled by slave labor. Many white settlers, like Salem newspaper editor Asahel Bush, wanted to avoid the "Negro Question" entirely by keeping Oregon whites-only. To discourage more blacks from settling, they passed restrictive laws. For example, the Oregon Donation Land Act of 1850 promised 640 acres of free land to every married couple who settled in the territory, but African-American settlers were barred from receiving free land.

In 1844 the Oregon Territorial Legislature passed a bill intended to prevent slavery, which stated that anyone who brought slaves into Oregon must remove them within three years, or else the slaves would be freed by the government. The bill also stipulated that any free blacks in the territory had to leave within two years (males) or three years (females). Any who remained in Oregon after that time would "receive upon his or her bare back not less than 20 nor more than 39 stripes." After complaints that it was too harsh, the whipping punishment was removed from the law. Instead, violators would be hired out at public auction (in other words, temporarily enslaved), and their employers would escort them out of the state at the end of their period of service.

The exclusion laws were primarily intended to prevent blacks from settling in Oregon, not to kick out those who were already here. The first and only African-American to be expelled from Oregon under



the exclusion act was Jacob Vanderpool, the owner of a saloon, restaurant, and boarding house in Salem (some sources say Oregon City). Vanderpool's neighbor reported him for the crime of being black in Oregon, and Judge Thomas Nelson gave him thirty days to leave the territory.

Despite the exclusion laws, African-Americans continued to settle in Oregon. The 1850 census lists nine blacks or mulattos (an archaic term referring to people of mixed African and European ancestry) living in Marion county, of whom only three were over 18 years old. One of the nine was identified as a "slave," despite the fact that slavery was illegal in Oregon. In 1860, Marion County had 18 blacks and mulattos, of whom six were adults. By 1870, the number had risen to 61, with 33 adults.

Slavery in the Willamette Valley

Most African-Americans who came to Oregon on the overland trail were free, coming to Oregon hoping to get away from the racial conflict of the east and move to a place where they would have greater opportunities—but some were enslaved, came to Oregon with their owners.

Daniel Delaney came from Tennessee with his family and at least one slave, Rachel Beldon. Rachel worked in the fields, garden, and house, and nursed the invalid Mrs. Delaney. Rachel was listed in the 1850 census as a "slave" of the Delaneys, and continued to live with them until the end of the Civil War. She had two sons, Noah and Jackson, and later married Nathan Brooks, another African-American. They later moved to Salem where they raised two other sons, Samuel and Mansfield.

Despite being a former slaveholder, Daniel Delaney had a reputation of being friendly with blacks. In 1865, after a dispute about some cattle, some of Delaney's neighbors took advantage of this; they blackened their faces and went to kill Delaney, hoping that the authorities would pin the crime on blacks. Rachel Beldon's son Jackson (also identified as Jack De Wolf) who worked for Delaney, witnessed the murder; his testimony helped convict the killers.



America & Richard Bogle

Another infamous incidence of slavery in Oregon took place in Rickreal, about 10 miles west of Salem. Robin and Polly Holmes, and their three-year-old daughter Mary Jane, came to Oregon from Missouri in 1844. They were the slaves of Nathaniel Ford, who settled in Rickreal. Robin and Polly believed that they would be freed in Oregon, and they eventually were--after several years of unpaid service, and after Robin went to California and mined gold for Holmes. Robin and Polly eventually gained their freedom, moved into their own house, and started a nursery business in Salem, but Ford retained custody of three of their four children. In 1852, after one of the children died in Ford's custody, Robin Holmes took Ford

to court to get custody of his children. In the first legal decision against slavery in Oregon, Oregon Supreme Court Justice George H. Williams granted custody to Holmes in 1853.

In spite of the court's decision, Ford apparently remained convinced that he held some power over the Holmes children. In 1857, when the eldest daughter Mary Jane Holmes got married, Ford made her husband, Reuben Shipley, pay \$700 for her. Mary Jane and Reuben Shipley lived in Salem and Corvallis for many years. After Reuben died, Mary Jane was remarried to R. G. Drake. She died in 1925, the year before Oregon's last exclusion law overturned. Technically, Mary Jane Holmes Shipley Drake had lived illegally in Oregon for 81 years.

In 1857, the year of Mary Jane's wedding, the new Oregon Constitution came to a vote. Oregonians had the opportunity to voice their opinion on two pressing questions: Should Oregon have slavery, and should free blacks be permitted in Oregon. Statewide, 2645 people voted to legalize slavery, and 7727 voted to ban it. While Oregon was decidedly anti-slavery, the opposition to free blacks was even stronger. 8640 voted to exclude free blacks; only 1081 voted to allow them. Voters in Marion County followed the same pattern: 1044 voted against slavery, versus 214 for slavery, while 1115 voted against free blacks, versus only 76 for free blacks.

Struggles in Salem

Not all whites in Salem embraced the racist attitudes that were so prevalent at the time. Reverend Obed Dickinson of the First Congregational Church and his wife Charlotte were fervent abolitionists and advocates of black equality. Rev. Dickinson welcomed African-Americans into his church; former slaves Robin and Polly Holmes were among several who became members. Because most former slaves were illiterate, Charlotte Dickinson taught four black women in her home for two hours every evening, "with a fifth as often as her mistress will allow." One was a grown woman with a family, and at least two were servant girls.



North Salem School in 1904

In his writings, Obed Dickinson lamented that Salem had "closed the doors of all our schools against the children of these black families dooming them to ignorance for life." He described a William P. Johnson, who worked as a painter for \$5 a day and looked "nearly white." His daughter-in-law had grown up in slavery and never been to school, so Johnson offered to give \$500 to one of the Salem schools so that she could learn to read and write. His offer was refused. Dickinson also described a boy "so ignorant he hardly knew his right hand from his left" who was accused of theft, captured by a "gang of men," whipped and hanged nearly to death until he confessed. He was jailed two months before his trial, and was finally acquitted.

On January 1, 1863, Rev. Dickinson officiated the wedding of America Waldo and Richard Bogle and hosted the wedding reception. A black wedding taking place in a white church and a party attended by both blacks and whites was apparently too much for some people to handle. The event provoked nasty comments from Asahel Bush, first in his private letters and then in the Oregon Statesman; eventually, the incident made the newspapers as far away as the Portland Oregonian and the San Francisco Bulletin.

In 1867, the African-American community in Salem raised \$427.50, which allowed them to operate a school for six months. They placed an announcement in the newspaper, saying that "Notice is hereby given that the colored people of Salem expect to pay all the expenses of the Evening School now being held by them, without aid from other citizens - no person is authorized to collect funds in our name." The following year, the city of Salem continued what they had begun, and opened Little Central School. This segregated school was located near Central School on High Street between Center and Marion. Its fifteen minority students were taught by Marie Smith and Mrs. R. Mallory. Tuition at Little Central was \$4 a term, the same that white children paid to attend "big" Central School.

In January 1868, African-Americans from Salem and Albany gathered to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. In a rare display of racial harmony, the celebration was attended by whites of both political parties. The Salem Daily Record reported that six of the blacks at the celebration had been freed by the Emancipation Proclamation.

In 1870, Oregon was one of many states that refused to ratify the fifteenth amendment, which granted equal voting rights to African-American men. The amendment was not ratified in Oregon until 1959. But, amendment or no amendment, the Oregon Supreme Court upheld the right of black men to vote in 1870.

The 20th Century

The 1920s were a time of heightened racial tension throughout the United States, and Oregon was no exception. The Ku Klux Klan organized in Oregon in 1921 and began terrorizing blacks and other minorities throughout the state, including Salem. Charles Maxwell, the owner of a shoeshine shop in Salem, received a threatening letter which read "We have stood you as long as we intend to stand you, and you must unload, if you don't we will come to see you." It was signed KKK over a skull and crossbones. Maxwell refused to be bullied; he remained in Salem and in 1928 opened the Fat Boy Barbecue restaurant in the Hollywood section. The business was successful until a bank foreclosure during the Depression. Maxwell's daughter Maxine was also the victim of racism; in 1929 she was denied a room in the women's dormitory at Oregon State University because she was black. In the 1930s, the Maxwell family moved to California, as did many blacks from Oregon.

In 1936 an NAACP officer reported that "Salem has no Negro population, except a few inmates in the Penal Institution and Insane Hospital. All the colored people who did live here, have all moved to Los Angeles. I know of no Negro living in Salem at the present time." A sign at Salem's Greyhound bus station boasted that the city was "99.9 percent white."

However, a former Salem resident, David Martinez, remembers Gordy T. "Jitterbug" Levy, a black man who worked for the railway on Extra-Gang 23. Jitterbug was a familiar and beloved figure at the depot in the late 1930s and for a decade later. In David's graduating class at high school was another

African-American, Barbara Smith, who was probably the daughter of Calvin and "Miss Hattie" Smith, the owners of a Salem shoeshine shop.

After World War II there was an awakening of the public consciousness toward minorities in America. After serving in the military, working in defense plants, laboring even more intensely in agriculture, African-Americans expected to be treated with more equality. Accommodation laws, allowing blacks to use public facilities, were put in place in Oregon in the 1950s. But discrimination still took place. One of the best known incidences of this discrimination was when Mark Hatfield had to drive Paul Robeson, a nationally-known black actor, singer, and political activist, to Portland after a Salem performance in order to find him a place to sleep overnight. Many Salem African-Americans still remember the difficulties of travel when motels and dining places were closed to them.

Many African-American families, like that of Jackie Winters, came to Oregon during WWII to work in war industries. In the 1960s, other job opportunities attracted blacks to the area. Rheola Sampson, who was interviewed in 2001 at age 92, grew up in the South and moved to Michigan before coming to Oregon as an agricultural worker, picking berries and cherries. Although she was trained as a teacher, Sampson worked in the fields because she wanted to work alongside her family. She worked as a picker until at least age 70. Sampson's daughter, Claudia Thomson, recalled the contributions of the Valley Migrant League, which provided vital services such as medical care, preschool, day care, and free lunches for the children of field workers.

Kathy Bailey grew up on a farm in South Salem in the 1960s, when hers was the only African-American family in the area. She remembers both positive and negative aspects of her childhood here. At Rosedale School she was always "treated as family," but she heard stories about other blacks being called names, run off the road, or finding burning crosses outside their homes.

African Americans in Salem Today

In 1995, six local citizens were interviewed for the CCTV program, Legacy: Pioneers in Black Salem. The panel included Kathy Bailey, David Burgess, Willie Richardson, AJ Talley, Claudia Thompson, and Jackie Winters. They expressed a variety of feelings about their experiences in Salem, ranging from pride that African-Americans are now spread throughout all areas of town and all different professions, to frustration that, as Dave Burgess put it, "Salem has not accepted minority populations, period." He pointed out that blacks and Latinos face the same problem of gaining recognition and respect in a city that is still about 80 percent white.

Today, the African-American community in Salem remains small. In the 2000 census 1750 people (1.28 percent of the total population) identified themselves as black or African-American. In this small group, there are many respected community leaders. Among these are:

- Raymond Byrd, a police officer honored as Keizer officer of the year in 1998
- Geraldine Hammond, a former public school administrator for whom a new elementary school was named recently
- Jim Hill, Jr., state treasurer for two terms



Jackie Winters

- Lonnie Jackson, author and director of the Oregon Youth Authority Office of Minority Affairs
- Johnny Lake, a member of the Oregon Commission for Black Affairs
- M. Lee Pelton, president of Willamette University
- Willie Richardson, a former Salem-Keizer School Board member and owner of "Willie's Fashion Hats & More"
- AJ Talley, executive director of Unity & Support Services, Inc. and president of local NAACP
- Nellie N. and Odell Thompson, the founders of the Pauline Memorial Church
- S. Frank Thompson, the assistant director of the Oregon Department of Corrections
- And Jackie Winters, a two-term representative to the Oregon Legislature and owner of Jackie's Ribs.

Many others, less well-known to the public, serve this community in the professions and as business entrepreneurs.

Although Salem's black community remains small, its influence is growing. In recent years, local historians have begun researching the experiences of African-Americans in Salem. We are only beginning to rediscover the important role that minorities played in the development of our community, but we can be certain that they will play an equally important role in its future.

Written by Virginia Green and Katherine Wallig

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