

Oregon's First African Americans

How the Institutional Racism of Yesterday Still Reverberates Today

By: Joe Streckert



OREGON'S AFRICAN AMERICAN history isn't a sidebar; it's not something that can be easily compartmentalized away from the rest of the state's narrative. Oregon has had African American history as long as, well, Oregon has existed. This isn't to say the state has been a sterling example of integration throughout its history; it hasn't at all. Instead, it's worth noting that Oregon grappled with issues like race and

slavery just like the rest of the US did in the mid-1800s. This remote frontier area that would eventually attract dysentery-prone wagon trains wasn't immune or exempt from America's obsession with race.

THE UNKNOWN CREWMEN

According to Darrell Millner, a Portland State University professor and an expert on African American history during Western expansion, various Spanish and English voyages to Oregon almost certainly had black crewmen. "We'll probably never know their names," says Millner, who contends that the vessels of world-spanning empires like Britain and Spain almost certainly included sailors of African descent.

The first American voyage to what would be called Oregon also brought the first black to the region. In 1788 Robert Gray's ship, *Columbia Rediviva*, explored the area that would eventually be known as Oregon, and his vessel lent the Columbia River its name. Markus Lopus was a black crew member on Gray's ship, and while several blacks on various European vessels probably preceded him, he's the first documented black person to visit Oregon.

YORK

The most well-known American expedition to Oregon also brought along probably the single most visible of Oregon's historical black people. William Clark (of Lewis and...) hailed from a prominent Virginia family, and when it came time to explore an uncharted section of continent, he took his slave, York, with him.

Most of what we know about York comes from Lewis and Clark's journals, and historical scholarship on him has tended to follow the racial attitudes of the time. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, depictions of the expedition portrayed York in a stereotypical fashion, ignoring the historical record in favor of prevailing prejudices. Later on, revisionist historians fashioned him into something of a larger-than-life figure, as scholars looked for paragons of African American achievement. What we know for sure is that he was good at communicating with the Native Americans.

"York became a very important diplomatic person," says Millner. "At a number of points he was probably responsible for the survival of the expedition because he engaged in trading activities [between] the expedition and the Indians when they were otherwise in great danger."

Unfortunately for York, though, he was not compensated for his efforts. Every member of the Corps of Discovery was paid except him, and Clark would keep him as a slave for another decade.

Today York is portrayed in all manner of monuments and memorials. Most notably, his image looms over pedestrians as they pass the Oregon Historical Society. However, York's participation in the Corps of Discovery existed in a broader context of exploration, migration, and eventual settlement. His participation in the expedition was certainly significant, but it wasn't singular. Others followed.

THE FUR TRADE

After the Corps of Discovery returned back East, American and British settlers alit on Oregon in search of fur. Oregon was jointly occupied by both Britain and the US, and Fort Vancouver was the economic center of the territory. Nearly all of Oregon's economy at that time centered on the acquisition of beaver and otter pelts: a massive global infrastructure all about turning small animals into hats.

"Fur trading was a very dangerous business," says Millner. "In the fur-trading generation many blacks participated, sometimes as free men and sometimes as slaves. That was the foundation on which the pioneer generation was founded."

Most of the workingmen, hunters, and laborers who trapped beavers and otters toiled in obscurity. Like the crews of so many ships that came to Oregon, their names and origins are lost to us. One prominent black resident of Fort Vancouver, though, was far from obscure. "[James Douglas] was of mixed racial ancestry, which meant that as far as his generation was concerned he was a black person," says Millner. After John McLoughlin (the white-haired guy known as the "Father of Oregon" and all that) retired his position as the chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company, Douglas took the job. He'd later become the governor of Vancouver Island and then British Columbia.

That was on the British side of things, though. Up in Canada, a man with African ancestry successfully became governor of a future Canadian province. This is not to say that race relations in British territory were ideal, but things were certainly worse in America.

OREGON'S SLAVES, AND THE CASE OF ROBIN HOLMES

America was swelling west in the years before the Civil War. Most of the early pioneers were poor, working white laborers, but a very small population of those pioneers did, in fact, own slaves. And they took them along into the expanse that would become Oregon.

"Most of [the slaves] were brought to the Willamette Valley, virtually all of them from Missouri in a very early period of immigration beginning in 1843 and ending in 1850," says R. Gregory Nokes, who outlined the experience of Oregon's slaves in his book *Breaking Chains*.

Slavery was not technically legal in the Oregon Territory, and neither was the presence of free African Americans. As of 1844, the territory excluded blacks—slave or not. According to Nokes, slaveholders in Oregon reported holding slaves all the way up until the 1860 census, one year after Oregon became a state.

"To me that shows how little concern there was that anybody was going to enforce this antislavery law. There were so few slaves [by then], maybe 50 at the most, that even if most people were against slavery, it didn't trouble them that maybe the neighbor down the road had a couple of slaves," Nokes says.

The most dramatic and personal episode in the Oregon Territory's history of slavery was the case of *Holmes v. Ford*—the only slavery case to be tried in Oregon. Like several other slaves, Robin Holmes had been transported by his owner from Missouri to Oregon. For six years he

worked (illegally) as a slave in Oregon before finally being freed by his owner, Nathaniel Ford. However, Ford hung onto Holmes' children.

"Ford held the children for an additional three years," says Nokes. "There was a law against slavery, but it wasn't enforced, and really not enforceable. But it was on the book."

In an unprecedented move, Holmes took legal action against his former master. With the help of Ruben Boise, an abolitionist lawyer, Holmes sued the man who once held him as property. George Williams, a circuit judge who had just recently arrived in the Oregon Territory, ruled in Holmes' favor. The children, Williams ruled, were being kept as slaves, and Ford was in clear violation of territorial law. The Holmes children, after living in Oregon as slaves for nearly a decade, were finally free.

The case had fallout, though. Holmes won his battle, but it was not without reprisals in Oregon's larger legal world. After the Holmes case—in which a former slave successfully sued his master—Oregon law was changed to disallow testimony by blacks, making it so African Americans would not be allowed to testify against whites in state courts.

THE FREE-STATE LETTER AND STATEHOOD

When Oregon voters ratified the state constitution in 1857, they did so in a piecemeal fashion. The basic body of the state's founding document (things like the structure of the legislature, the powers of the governor, etc.) was voted on with a simple up and down vote. However, two issues had not been settled during the constitution's drafting, and those would be voted on separately from the main body of the document.

The first issue was whether or not Oregon would have slavery at all. The second was whether or not Oregon would allow free blacks to settle in the new state.

Despite the comparatively small population of African Americans in Oregon at the time, race and slavery dominated the political conversation regarding Oregon's identity. George Williams (the same judge who ruled in the Holmes case) published a vociferous editorial on the front page of the *Oregon Statesman* just prior to the vote. Called "The Free-State Letter," Williams' editorial was indeed a denunciation of slavery—but it's also a jarring and disorienting document for the modern reader.

In the letter, Williams made it perfectly clear that he was fine with slavery in the South, but that Oregon was another matter. Williams, like many other abolitionists, was against slavery because he saw it as competition with white labor. If anything, Williams' dislike of African Americans contributed to his rejection of slavery. His "Free-State Letter" didn't advocate a free Oregon so much as it advocated a white one.

In an integrated society he wrote that "the white men will go down and the negroes will go up, till they come to resemble each other in the habits, tastes, and actions of their lives." For the race-obsessed, fearful white audience that Williams was writing for in 1857, that was a nightmare.

Williams' opinions and attitudes carried the day. Oregon voters said yes to the constitution, no to slavery, and no to any future settlement by free blacks. Millner estimates that in 1857 there were probably fewer than 100 African Americans living in Oregon. New black settlers would be barred from joining them. Oregon was not so much free as it was isolated.

LEGACY

There's no way of knowing how many people Oregon's exclusion clauses kept out of the territory, and later the state. Trying to imagine a different, more welcome, more diverse

Northwest is merely an exercise in academic speculation. But both Nokes and Millner agree that Oregon very probably missed out on a more diverse population.

"The law on the books, enforced or not, prohibited free blacks from living in Oregon," says Nokes. "That is a statement of local attitudes that say 'you are not welcome.'"

Millner agrees: "Oregon was visualized as a white homeland. That's been a racial vision that's part of Oregon's from the pioneer period until [now]. We're still grappling with the consequences of that. The real effect of the exclusion laws is not how many blacks were kicked out of the state, but how many chose not to come to Oregon in the first place."

Millner later adds, "I see a pretty direct connection between our founding racial policies and the kind of racial realities that we see in Oregon today."

Oregon would not get any kind of major African American settlement until much later. The transcontinental railroad brought in small, discrete pockets of black workers, but it wasn't until 1943 that a black community of any real size cropped up in Oregon. Vanport, a town on the site of present-day Delta Park, was the largest housing development in the US during WWII, and home to the first substantial black population in Oregon.

Vanport's construction was of the cheap and temporary kind (the locals called the prefabricated dwellings "cracker-box houses"), and for much of the 1940s, Portland's first sizable black population was separated from the town proper by economics, administration, and the river. The town was destroyed by a flood in 1948, and many refugees from the disaster settled in the Albina neighborhood. More than 100 years after initial settlement, Portland finally had an African American population of appreciable size. The influx of that population didn't come about, though, because Portland had liberalized or become more open. Portland's first large black neighborhood materialized because a force of nature destroyed an industrial ghetto.

Oregon's (and Portland's) current demographics were not shaped purely by accidents of migration or economics. Portland did not simply happen to become an anomalously white city. It was made that way. As far away as this place is (culturally or geographically), it's still apparent that retrograde attitudes about slavery and race left their mark here and that Oregon did not escape the peculiar institution. It's not absolved of America's original sin.

Questions for Analysis:

- 1) Who were the earliest black settlers in the Pacific Northwest?
- 2) What was York's impact in the Core of Discovery expedition? How is he remembered?
- 3) Why is James Douglas significant in Oregon's history?
- 4) Why is the case of *Holmes v. Ford* significant? What does it tell us about race and slavery?
- 5) What was the main argument by George Williams in his editorial "The Free Speech Letter?"
- 6) What does the article of the article mean when we states, "Oregon was not so much free as it was isolated?"
- 7) When did African Americans start coming to Oregon in greater numbers
- 8) Do Oregon's laws still have an impact today in the Pacific Northwest? Explain.