

**Unearthing Historical Memory: How Letitia Carson and Silvy Harbor
Challenge the Mythos of the Oregon Pioneer Past**

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Unearthing Historical Memory: How Letitia Carson and Silvy Harbor Challenge the Mythos of the Oregon Pioneer Past

Letitia Carson and Silvy Harbor, Black midwives and homesteaders in Oregon during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, made a lasting impact on the West through land stewardship, raising livestock, growing food and pastureland, delivering children, and caring for their communities in times of need. Despite their contributions, they are not recognized as significant facets of the evolving American West. Instead, collective memory paints the West as a white pioneer story, obscuring women of color. This thesis investigates the historical memory of the “pioneer” era and first explores the Oregon pioneer mythos promulgated by the Oregon Historical Society and their contemporaries. The stories of Letitia and Silvy challenge that mythos and offer case studies through which we can dismantle and reorient our understanding of the American West. Through birth, homesteading, and community engagement, they both contributed to early manifestations of Black resistance and community care in Oregon. After sharing the biographical narrative of each woman, this work turns to the future of Black Oregon history and explores how the Oregon Black Pioneers present a framework through which we can engage in meaningful decolonization and un-whitening of the West by amplifying Black stories.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Silvy and Letitia, the two Black midwives and homesteaders whose lives fill these pages. Because of their resilient service and tenacious presence, we gain precious insight into the lives of Black women settlers across Oregon.

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PREFACE

My journey to this project began with my undergraduate internship with the Oregon Black Pioneers. While working for them, I created the Letitia Carson Digital History Collection using the Omeka program. This involved transcribing, archiving, and uploading primary sources, writing exhibits and all the text for the website, which left me with an abundance of knowledge (and some questions) about Letitia. With that, I wrote my undergraduate thesis on Letitia and explored historical memory and pioneer women and mothers, specifically asking why they're primarily represented as white across museums, scholarship, and public monuments. After writing this, I kept coming back to a briefly mentioned, and unexplored aspect of Letitia's life: she was a midwife. I wondered if I could find out more about this part of her time in Oregon and also was curious if there were other Black midwives who lived in Oregon during that period. I also understood that the history of white men and women in Oregon was often all that the public considered when thinking of the early settler period. I wanted to change this and dismantle the historical myths of whiteness that are so prevalent in our conception of the pioneer. With that, I began researching and found Silvy, whose story contributed significantly to this project and made it what it is today.

There is a rich scholarly debate surrounding the terminology used to describe people who came west in the nineteenth century. It is important to acknowledge the criticisms and conveniences of the most common terms: pioneer, settler, colonizer, and colonist. Scholars such as Marc Carpenter have aptly argued that "pioneer" is both a "reference to a soldier of colonialism" and a "mechanism for erasure" of Indigenous people. Additionally, the term settler is also not without its problems. As Carpenter states, "To call the Euro-Americans who came to the Pacific Northwest in this period pioneers risks conflating colonialism with innovation and discovery. To label the Euro-Americans as settlers risks evoking stereotypes of Indigenous

people as unsettled wanderers, rather than people with well-established traditional homelands.” Colonist and colonizer are also common phrases but fail to convey the complex positions Letitia and Silvy engaged in as Oregonians. Of course, these intricacies are made even more complex when considering that Letitia and Silvy were not white and therefore maintained a much more complicated relationship with colonialism and pioneering as they were both victims and perpetrators of the ongoing colonial project. For the most part, I have used the term settler to describe both white and Black Overlanders and Oregonians but am careful to discern the complications of the term where appropriate.¹

It is important to note the etymology of Black Southern midwives. Most commonly, these women are referred to as “Granny” midwives or “Grannies,” but this terminology suggests the racist “mammy” stereotype that defines Black women along the lines of passivity and servility and as only older women. As sociologists Keisha Goode and Barbara Katz Rothman explain, “Neither the term granny nor mammy accurately portrays the immense wisdom these women possessed. That is, there is often a historical assumption that granny midwives relied solely on “divine intervention” because of “the call” to be a midwife. While the “calling” and a connection to the spiritual realm are central to midwifery, it does not follow that granny midwives practiced without knowledge of and skill in pregnancy and childbirth.” As a result, many scholars studying Black Southern midwives have transitioned to the term “Grand midwife” to move away from harmful terminology and emphasize respectful vocabulary.²

¹ See Marc James Carpenter, “Settler Colonial Sin-Eaters: Disavowal of Atrocity and Its Uses, in and beyond the Late 1800s American Pacific Northwest,” *Settler Colonial Studies*, December 2024, 1–14.

² Keisha Goode and Barbara Katz Rothman, “African-American Midwifery, a History and a Lament,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 76, no. 1 (2017): 72; Laurie A. Wilkie, “Expelling Frogs and Binding Babies: Conception, Gestation, and Birth in Nineteenth-Century African-American Midwifery,” *World Archaeology* 45, no. 2 (2013): 278.

Throughout this thesis, I will use the terms “midwife” and “healer” interchangeably in reference to the positions that Letitia and Silvy took up in their communities and the labor that they accomplished. While the term midwife is accurate for both women, the term healer encompasses the broad scope of physical and emotional labor they engaged such as nursing, caretaking, homesteading, companionship, and any other work they did. The term healer comes from both midwife Shafia Monroe and historian and physician Susan Brandt. Monroe states, “We say “healers” because in the African culture, it’s not just about birth. The reason why babies aren’t doing well is because there’s no healing for the entire community, and an entire family. Our perspective of midwifery is much brighter than just getting a baby out. It has to deal with nutrition, spirituality, psychology, the family, the partner— all those things play into why our babies are not making it.” Likewise, Brandt uses the term healer, explaining, “The expansive term ‘women healers’ construes healing in its broadest sense to encompass a spectrum of paid and unpaid healing work, including diagnostic, prescriptive, therapeutic, pharmaceutical, obstetric, and nursing services.”³

Throughout this thesis, I will refer to Letitia Carson and Silvy Harber by their first names, rather than their last names. Though it is often disrespectful to reduce historical female figures to their first names (as historians do not do this with male historical figures), there is clear reasoning in both cases to refer to both Silvy and Letitia by their forenames. In Letitia’s case, it restores agency to her successes. Stephanie Vallance, who wrote her dissertation on Letitia’s judicial journey refers to Letitia by her first name to distance her from David and the

³ Shafia M. Monroe, Zalayshia Jackson, Mariah A. Taylor, and Consuelo Vazquez, “Birth, Healing, and Women of Color: Symposium Keynote Lecture and Discussion,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 117, no. 2 (2016): 240; Susan Hanket Brandt, *Women Healers: Gender, Authority, and Medicine in Early Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 6, 7.

Carson surname, because we cannot know the true nature of their relationship. Her first name is her own, and “her right to self-determination was robbed from her, likely many times during her life,” Vallance argues. “I believe she is owed that respect now.”⁴ For Silvy, I made the decision to use her first name to simplify unknowns surrounding her last name and to keep continuity between the women throughout the paper. For much of this thesis, I did not have clarity on Silvy’s name. People referred to her as Sybl, Sybil, Silva, Silvy, Aunt Sib, Sib, and countless other names. Her last name was also complex, sometimes spelled Harber, Harbor, or Haber in primary and secondary sources. When I reviewed her homestead claim file, I found a source where she clearly stated and spelled her name as Silvy Harbor. To avoid any confusion, I am referring to her as Silvy.

I have coined the term “pioneerism” for this research, a concept that revolves around the idea of the pioneer as a triumphant conqueror of vast open Western lands, the act of seeing the pioneer as a hero, white savior, and all-around valiant settler. Since the creation of early history museums in the American West, there have been evolutionary changes in the invocation of the pioneer, but victorious and triumphant imagery is synonymous with pioneers, when the reality is much darker. “Pioneerism” is formed through the romanticization of the mythological West, one that was “conquered” by “pioneers” rather than violently taken by colonists. Pioneerism is persistent in scholarship, and vast societal and cultural understandings of the West. Museums have to work against a monolith in American thought that sneaks its way into educational spaces and continues to uplift the notions of manifest destiny and colonial success that are harmful to marginalized groups and their history.

⁴ Stephanie Marie Vallance, “Letitia Carson in Court: African American Women, Property, and Wages in the Pacific Northwest.” (MA thesis, Portland State University, Portland, OR, 2021), 16.

Note on author's positionality:

It is crucial to recognize my own positionality and privilege as a white woman writing this. I write from a state with a predominantly white population and have been educated at institutions rooted in white supremacy with overwhelmingly white faculty. The discipline of Western history that I write from is similarly rooted in and has been dominated by the writings of white authors. I cannot claim an understanding of Black women's experiences throughout the American West's history. I recognize that I do not know what Letitia and Silvy felt as enslaved children, Black overlanders, new homesteaders, or midwives and caretakers. Despite these unknowns, I am committed to telling their stories and employing their narratives to amplify Black women settlers. I rely on primary and secondary sources to share their stories and fill gaps in archival knowledge. I am indebted to Black scholars who have written prolific secondary material that informs my understanding of Black women's experiences in the American West. This thesis seeks to embody the anti-racist tradition of sharing Black history to further question the institutions that manufacture historical understanding and memory.

Chapter 1: Introduction

There is a troubling scholarly silence surrounding Black women homesteaders and healers in the American West. This research challenges this neglect by focusing on the critical community role that Black midwives and homesteaders played in the social spheres of rural settler societies. We know that Black people were present in settler communities. One out of every thirty-five Overland travelers was Black.¹ What needs to be further explored is their unique position within these societies and the authority they established. Centering on two Black women, Silvy Harber and Letitia Carson, this thesis asserts that they were fundamental agents of community care at the nexus of Western frontier development during the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

Letitia and Silvy offer case studies through which we can understand the social and medical impact of Black women settlers. As midwives, land stewards, and engaged community members with complex interpersonal relationships, they claimed authority in white spaces and sustained strengthened and healthful community care throughout the state. Their hybrid roles sat at the nexus of early white settler societies in Oregon and resulted in unlikely authority within medical, agricultural, and social spheres of influence during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Though their stories are often absent from collective historical consciousness, this work investigates museums and memory to deconstruct pioneer pasts and diversify the history of the American West.

¹ John W. Ravage, *Black Pioneers: Images of the Black Experiences on the North American Frontier* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997), xix.

Letitia and Silvy lived in different geographies and periods across Oregon, but each of their stories illuminates how Black women were at the center of early settler communities through health and homesteading. Letitia Carson, born between 1814 and 1818 in Kentucky, was a valued community midwife and caretaker who homesteaded in both Benton and Douglas counties in western Oregon until her death in 1888.² With the passing of the 1862 Homestead Act, she applied for acreage in South Myrtle Creek. She worked the land for five years, and neighbors testified to improvements; in 1868, she obtained the land and became the first Black woman in Oregon to own property. Silvy Harbor, born in Missouri in 1856, came to Oregon decades after Letitia and settled in the high desert town of Lakeview, on the southern border of the state.³ Like Letitia, Silvy was a midwife and homesteader. Unlike Letitia, she owned several other service-oriented businesses in Lakeview including a boarding house, bakery, and restaurant. A rich history of Black women in Oregon has gone understudied because of a paucity of primary sources and prevailing assumptions that Black women were not present. Even as historians have amplified Black women's stories, it is still assumed they were not engaged in agricultural or social aspects of community building.⁴ The reality is much more complex. Black women were not only present but were critical sources of care, healing, knowledge, and

² This research does not idealize notions of a universal sisterhood or sole experience among Black women pioneers or Black midwives. It is unlikely, and not argued in this paper, that Letitia and Silvy knew each other. Instead, they should be considered two separate histories. While they overlap, it is crucial we do not blend their stories together as that risks consolidating their individual lives into one unified experience.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, 1900 United States Federal Census, Lakeview, Lake, Oregon, https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7602/records/68511518?tid=85667830&pid=120011972899&ssrc=pt&show=ai_recordnarrative.

⁴ Historians of the American West have been actively researching and writing about Black women. However, despite this work, there is still a prevailing notion among the public that Black people were not present in the early "pioneer" West. This notion of whiteness in the West was solidified through centuries of narrative building and still exists at the center of Western understanding, even with rigorous efforts from historians to dismantle this belief.

community. Letitia and Silvy's lives offer insight into the experience of Black settler women and their integral place in the American West.

Letitia and Silvy in Historical and Theoretical Context

The white settler colonial project relied on reproduction, land ownership, and cultivation to maintain Western "conquest." Historian Joyce Chaplin states, "Colonists suggested that it was their bodies that guaranteed overseas possession, both by creating a population that demonstrated territorial dominion and by generating many hands to improve 'wilderness' through labor." She further claims, "If men were the warriors who fought for colonial territory, women were the breeders of new colonists and nurturers of English constitutions in their children, whatever the climate around them." While her characterization of women as simply "breeders" is problematic, her correlation between reproduction and colonialism is important in contextualizing midwifery and birth work among settlers in the West.⁵ Historian Linda Nash furthers this sentiment: "Manifest destiny hinged not only on conquest and migration, but above all on healthy reproduction."⁶ Letitia and Silvy, while challenging the complex racial and gendered terrain of settler communities, provided early settler towns with reproductive and agricultural assistance in the babies they delivered and the land they cleared and farmed. The "success" of the social and agricultural colonial process was not always guaranteed, and it was significantly helped along by Black women settlers.

Letitia and Silvy held unique positions within the changing Western landscape. As Black women, they faced overlapping oppressions while also achieving healing and social authority

⁵ Joyce Chaplin, *Subject Matter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022,) 117-119.

⁶ Linda Nash, "Finishing Nature: Harmonizing Bodies and Environments in Late-Nineteenth-Century California," *Environmental History* 8, no. 1 (2003): 29.

through their midwifery and caretaking work. It is unclear if they willingly traveled west or if they were brought there as enslaved people. Was their journey to midwifery and community care a free or forced choice?⁷ This ambiguity surrounding choice further complicates the position they embodied once they settled in Oregon. Despite this opacity, it is clear that they felt the impacts of the settler colonial project as Black women. As multifaceted and multidimensional settlers, they cannot be flattened by contemporary and continued stereotyped understandings of Black women. Instead, we must consider how competing perceptions of Blackness, Indigeneity, gender, labor, and authority impacted their experience as settlers, crafting a duality that redefines what we typically assume when considering Black settlers. As historian Anthony Wood reminds us, "To be black and to be a settler blur the lines of two identities that we often imagine as incommensurate: colonizer and colonized."⁸ By recognizing the complexity that Letitia and Silvy experienced, it is clear that they both suffered from anti-Blackness and benefited from their position as gifted healers and caretakers in a region that relied on health and safety.

While they struggled with the divisive racial violence of Black exclusion laws and the weight of systemic racism, their unique position as healers offered a chance at authority within the communities they cared for. Historian Jennifer Hill reminds us that mothers and midwives constructed the American West through their creation of families, farmsteads, and communities, sharing their intimate knowledge of reproduction to achieve complex manifestations of authority in settler spheres.⁹ Silvy and Letitia found their way into white settler communities in their most

⁷ Language surrounding free vs. forced choice comes from Keisha Goode and Barbara Katz Rothman, "African-American Midwifery, a History and a Lament," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 76, no. 1 (2017): 74.

⁸ Anthony W. Wood, *Black Montana: Settler Colonialism and the Erosion of the Racial Frontier, 1877-1930* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 7.

⁹ Jennifer J. Hill, *Birthing the West: Mothers and Midwives in the Rockies and Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 97.

vulnerable and intimate moments of birth, injury, and tragedy, stepping in to provide small towns with a sense of safety that was not guaranteed. Their physical and emotional labor as midwives, caretakers, healers, companions, and sometimes servants allowed them to navigate the complex racial landscape and carve out a niche that elevated their position above that of other Black settlers, at least in the eyes of white families. This work as midwives often elevated them to a position of authority not claimed by other minority groups. They built intimate, interpersonal relationships through midwifery and homesteading, which positioned them as critical assets to the settler colonial enterprise, ensuring they were valued members of society.

Additionally, it is crucial to recognize how their work, consciously and unconsciously, directly impacted Indigenous communities who had lived in the region since time immemorial. Maintaining this understanding of how oppressed settlers contributed to the violence enacted against Indigenous communities is imperative. This knowledge guides our decolonization of the American West, inviting us to problematize our current understanding of settler colonialism, the American frontier, and the interwoven relationship of Black and Indigenous identities. Even as Letitia and Silvy faced misogynoir, or misogynistic racism, they were also a complex part of the settler colonial process, an inherently violent system that disrupted Indigenous relationships with the land.¹⁰ As they built communities through land stewardship and birth work, they also participated in the disruption of Indigenous lives, contributing to systems of enduring “epistemic,

¹⁰ Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey first coined misogynoir in her 2010 work, “They aren't talking about me.” She defines it as “the co-constitutive, anti-Black, and misogynistic racism directed at Black women, particularly in visual and digital culture.” While her work focuses on contemporary Black women in visual media, this term has expanded beyond its original framework and is used in many disciplines as a way to name both racism and sexism under one term. Her initial use of the word can be found here: Moya Bailey, “They Aren’t Talking About Me,” *Crunk Feminist Collective* (March 14, 2010) <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2010/03/14/they-arent-talkingabout-me/>. For a more recent reflection on her coining this term and how it has impacted her life and views on misogynoir see: Moya Bailey, “On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 762–68; Kyle Whyte, “Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice,” *Environment and Society* 9, no. 1 (2018): 125.

ontological, cosmological violence.”¹¹ When Letitia and Silvy worked for white families (either coerced by social pressures or acting of their own volition), they strengthened white families who were actively using reproduction as a form of colonialism.

Yet another important complexity is the relationships they may have formed with Indigenous people, the knowledge passed between them, and the mutual understanding of oppressive and dispossessive structures introduced by white settlers. There is a long record of the interwoven relationships between Black and Indigenous people. When Letitia and Silvy labored for white families, they aided in reproduction that disrupted Indigenous communities. What is less visible are the interpersonal relationships between Black and Indigenous women. Did they have friendships, alliances, or shared knowledge? There are many examples of cross-cultural marriage and families that include Black and Indigenous Oregonians. Letitia’s daughter Martha married into the Lavadour family, Walla Walla members of the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Indian Reservation. Many of Letitia’s grandchildren and great grandchildren were descendants of the Walla Walla people. Further, many white settlers in Oregon recall learning medicinal practices from Indigenous people. Did Letitia and Silvy also absorb and utilize Indigenous healing practices? Here, there are unclear but probable connections between Black and Indigenous women that have not yet been uncovered but likely complicate the relationship between Letitia and Silvy and the people they encountered in Oregon.

Ultimately, Silvy and Letitia occupied a unique position within Oregon settlement. They faced multi-layered forms of violence and discrimination through misogynoir. The act of Black settlement in Oregon was legally and socially unwelcome. However, their emotional and physical labor as midwives, healers, and homesteaders offered a distinct and unusual role within

¹¹ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* (2012): 1; Whyte, “Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice,” 125.

settler society. They were present during the most challenging and dreadful times of rural childbirth, injury, and death, and their relationships with white settlers were special in this way. They claimed healing authority in spaces where they typically would have been excluded.¹² Amid this complexity, Silvy and Letitia labored as midwives, healers, companions, business owners, homesteaders, and neighbors engaging in care that directly impacted the social, agricultural, and medical landscapes of settler lives, creating unique claims to power and strengthened, cared-for communities.

The concept of care sits at the center of this research and manifests uniquely within the environments that Silvy and Letitia created.¹³ The Care Collective, a London-based academic group aiming to understand the crises of care, defines care in their 2020 book *The Care Manifesto: Politics of Interdependence*. They write, “Care is our individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow the vast majority of

¹² “Healing authority” is a term used by historian Susan Brandt in her book *Women Healers* when talking about both Black and white midwives and healers. I employ this term because it aptly encompasses not only the labor these women engaged in, but also the inherent power dynamics built into this work. To heal and care for someone was not always accessible work, they had to be trusted and maintain a certain aura of authority that allowed them to engage in midwifery and care work in predominantly white (and often exclusionary) spaces. Brandt, *Women Healers*, 171.

¹³ The Care Collective was formed in 2017 as “a London-based reading group aiming to understand and address the multiple and extreme crises of care.” The authors come from different disciplines and include: Andreas Chatzidakis (Professor of Marketing and Consumer Culture at Royal Holloway University of London), Jamie Hakim (Lecturer at King's College London), Jo Littler (Professor of Cultural, Media and Social Analysis, Goldsmiths, University of London), Catherine Rottenberg (Marie Skłodowska-Curie Visiting Professor in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London), and Lynne Segal (British-based socialist feminist academic and activist). In defining care, I want to be clear that my work is not sanctioning care/healing as women’s work, suggesting women have an innate ability for caring and healing, or reaffirming any stereotype of the “mammy” or Black midwife that has been popularized in American media and memory. Rather my thesis seeks to establish a historical precedent of women healers, specifically Black women healers, in the American West, and exemplify how their capacity for care contributed to settler ecosystems. Care is “neither assumed to be unproductive and primarily women’s work by nature, or, when paid, carried out mostly by women who are poor, immigrant, or of color.” The Care Collective (Andreas Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine Rottenberg, and Lynne Segal), *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (London: Verso, 2020), 19.

people and living creatures on this planet to thrive—along with the planet itself.”¹⁴ Both the human and natural world, though distinguishing between the two is often fraught, were crucial to defining the care work that Letitia and Silvy accomplished. Letitia’s and Silvy’s care was visible, outward, revolutionary, and resilient and encompassed not only their work as healers, caregivers, and midwives but also their labor in transforming homestead claim lands. The concept of community care envelops the vast spectrum of physical and emotional labor that both Letitia and Silvy performed within their settler communities. Care meant more than midwifery; it encompassed the land stewardship, nursing, cooking, caretaking, healing, companionship, and agricultural work they also engaged in.

Care work is profoundly complex, broad, and integral to the development of the American West, as seen through Silvy and Letitia’s histories. Historically, Black women have reimagined care work and motherhood, working within new models of kinship that developed among enslaved people across the South.¹⁵ This kinship, modeled from West African traditions, eased the burden of care by spreading it beyond the immediate family, spreading both the joys and challenges throughout the community.¹⁶ Letitia and Silvy, both likely coming from enslaved childhoods, would have been raised in this traditional of communal kinship, which often further

¹⁴ On the ambivalence, paradoxes, and etymology of care, “The very concept ‘care’ overflows with paradoxes and ambivalence. Indeed, the distinctions between caring for, caring about, and caring with - which feminist scholars such as Tronto have developed - are useful, but do not account for the conflicting emotions that are inevitably part of different forms of care. Compared with similar complex, emotive terms such as courage, love or anger, the notion of care is rarely given due respect or attention. Even its mythic and etymological routes are tangled. The word care in English comes from the Old English *caru*, meaning care, concern, anxiety, sorrow, grief, trouble - its double meanings clearly on display. This reflects a reality where attending fully to the needs and vulnerabilities of any living thing, and thus confronting frailty, can be both challenging and exhausting. For instance, hands-on caring, however rewarding, also put us in contact with what may be the most daunting, even at times the most seemingly repellent or shameful, aspects of people’s mortal, embodied selves.” The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, 5, 6.

¹⁵ The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, 34.

¹⁶ The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, 34.

extended to the land, water, and animals that enslaved people depended on for their livelihood.¹⁷ They created public spaces, shared resources, provided medical and agricultural labor when needed, and contributed significantly to Oregon's evolving landscape of settlement. Ultimately, Black women settlers like Letitia and Silvy employed care through many realms of physical and emotional labor, defying the confines of misogynoir that defined the American West.

Under the umbrella of care, Letitia and Silvy labored in three main ways: midwifery and healing work, land stewardship, and the interpersonal relationships they constructed. Black midwifery came from West Africa to the American South, where enslaved and later freedwomen labored as midwives and healers to white and Black mothers. As historian Wangui Muigai states, “Black midwives have long stood as pillars in their communities, providing vital health care from slavery through the twentieth century as government and organized medicine remained largely reluctant to address the health needs of poor, rural African Americans.”¹⁸ This practice continued as Black women migrated west. On the frontier, midwifery was a similarly social practice. As historian Jennifer Hill argues, “Childbirth and reproduction are initiated in the most private of acts and have far-reaching and public communal effects.”¹⁹ In most cases, midwives were more than birth attendants and acted as caretakers, nannies, cooks, cleaners, and farm workers, taking over any domestic responsibilities the mother had in the weeks after her birth.²⁰ Silvy and Letitia were not simply present at birth or delivery but were long-term companions who built intimate and familiar relationships with expecting mothers and their families, aiding in

¹⁷ The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, 40.

¹⁸ Wangui Muigai, “‘Something Wasn’t Clean’: Black Midwifery, Birth, and Postwar Medical Education in All My Babies,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 93, no. 1 (2019): 85.

¹⁹ Hill, *Birthing the West*, 198.

²⁰ Hill, *Birthing the West*, 46.

childcare, household chores, and the health and stability of the family. Through “social, economic, and nation-making transactions,” healers like Letitia and Silvy labored to bring white children into the world and built-up early settler communities across Oregon.²¹

Beyond midwifery, Letitia and Silvy also labored as homesteaders, connecting themselves to the environment in caring for and transforming Southern Oregon landscapes and livestock. Both women filed claims through the Homestead Act, Letitia in 1863 and Silvy thirty years later. The 1862 Homestead Act has been complexly related to race since its inception. While the vague language did not explicitly exclude Black people, it did deny them the right to claim land through the language of citizenship.²² After the passage of the 1866 Civil Rights Act and the ratification of the 14th Amendment, however, African Americans became citizens and could claim land under the act.²³ Letitia and Silvy's work to improve their homesteads, clear the land, build a home, cultivate crops, plant fruit trees, and manage livestock was determined by environmental conditions, much like midwifery. Thankfully, Black homesteaders had rich environmental knowledge as informed by their enslaved pasts in farming and agriculture. Further, their cultural tradition of cooperation and community could have allowed for communal sharing of resources that also contributed to land development.²⁴ Not every Homestead Act claim was certified; the success rate was around 50 percent over seventy-six years; there were three

²¹ Hill, *Birthing the West*, 73.

²² Roger D. Billings, “The Homestead Act, Pacific Railroad Act and Morrill Act,” *Northern Kentucky Law Review* 39, (2012): 699; Andrew Muhammad, Christopher Sichko, and Tore C. Olsson, “African Americans and Federal Land Policy: Exploring the Homestead Acts of 1862 and 1866,” *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* 46, no. 1 (2024): 95.

²³ The requirements surrounding Homestead Act “improvement” were notoriously vague. It was also objective in its approval process as it only required signatures and approval from neighbors who were also U.S. citizens. Muhammad, Sichko, and Olsson, “African Americans and Federal Land Policy,” 100.

²⁴ Muhammad, Sichko, and Olsson, “African Americans and Federal Land Policy,” 104.

million homestead applicants and 1.5 million titles given.²⁵ Despite intense threats of failure, Letitia and Silvy completed the improvements needed to certify their claims and maintained close enough relationships with neighbors to have signatures on their proof of improvement documents.

Additionally, Letitia and Silvy engaged in care by establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships with neighbors and townsfolk. As midwives, they developed close connections with expectant mothers and their children. As neighbors, both relied on nearby homesteaders for the certification of their homestead claims as well as employment, possible homesteading advice, and shared labor. Living in different geographies and times, Letitia and Silvy cultivated relationships differently. Silvy owned many community-centric businesses and ran a surgical hospital out of her home. Letitia homesteaded and engaged in legal action that established authority and revealed the strong bonds she formed with neighbors. Each of these roles culminated in greater social authority, establishing these specific yet flexible and evolving roles to keep themselves safe, self-sufficient, and reliable as community members.

Unconscious and conscious workings of taboo and misogynoir worked to obscure Letitia and Silvy's stories in archives, scholarship, museums, and collective memory, relegating them to the margins of Western American history.²⁶ Here, unintentional forgetting accompanies deliberate erasure, culminating in a lack of recognition for Black midwives and homesteaders. People didn't consider women to be integral parts of settler agriculture, and Black women even less so. Despite their significant role as farmers, mothers, caretakers, and more, their labor went unappreciated in the shadow of settler men. Similarly, midwifery work involved intimacy with

²⁵ Muhammad, Sichko, and Olsson, "African Americans and Federal Land Policy," 102.

²⁶ Bailey, "They aren't talking about me."

women's bodies that went unrecognized and unmentioned, even in settler women's diaries and personal remembrances. Social taboo surrounding gender and pregnancy made it so that pregnancy and childbirth were relegated to entirely private, more intimate sides of settler life, talked about only among midwives and a small group of female friends and relatives.²⁷ If it was mentioned, it was through oral communication and rarely documented in diaries and journals.²⁸ Often, when it was written or spoken about, it was done so through euphemism to conceal aspects of pregnancy and childbirth.²⁹ This was the culture of the time, infused with misogyny and misunderstanding of women's bodies. Settler memory often did not include Letitia and Silvy's vital actions. They survive through local memory to a limited extent but have not found a home in the collective memory of the Western past.

Early record keeping was skewed toward white male representation and was often faulty in emerging settler societies. Early pioneer societies, local historical societies, and museums have long focused on the white pioneer, casting them as heroes. In scholarship, archival erasure is accomplished through absence and omission, manifesting in greater silences in the telling and interpretation of Black western history. Oregon's territorial government was inconsistent, and community midwives, especially those of color, went unmentioned on birth records, if the birth was recorded at all. As Hill reminds us, the work of all midwives in the American West would long go unacknowledged, forgotten by history in a "reality that seems irreversible."³⁰ For Black

²⁷ Gertrude Jacinta Fraser, *African American Midwifery in the South: Dialogues of Birth, Race, and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 158.

²⁸ As historian and physician Susan Brandt argues, "Women's vernacular healing cultures were often transmitted through oral rather than written networks, leaving behind only shadowy traces in historical archives." Brandt, *Women Healers*, 4.

²⁹ Fraser, *African American Midwifery in the South*, 157.

³⁰ Hill, *Birthing the West*, 87.

midwives, this reality was complicated by race, and their labor, knowledge, and service were even further obscured in the historical record. And yet we know that these women worked as midwives and homesteaders across rural Oregon throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that settler communities were shaped and influenced by them.³¹ Erased from archives and collective understanding, they go largely unremembered. Memory and forgetting are complex, and we cannot dilute them to simple actions. Instead, we must acknowledge the duality of omission as both conscious and unconscious on multiple sides of historical practice: archival, scholarly, and public.

Medicalization and medical racism expelled Black midwives from mainstream medicine during the twentieth century.³² At the turn of the twentieth century, white male doctors pushed all midwives, but especially Black women, out of the birth room as pregnancy was medicalized. As medical racism expelled midwives from mainstream medicine, the labor they had contributed for decades went unrecognized and faded into obscurity.

Amid this change, birthing women increasingly sought out hospital births attended by physicians. White male doctors questioned the safety and cleanliness of midwife-led births and often forcefully led birthing women to the “side of science.”³³ Again, the position of Black midwives was paradoxical and complex. They had enough power to have an intense impact on their community and to be perceived as a threat to physicians. But just as this power was recognized, it was challenged and subsequently dismantled by the medical authority, leaving

³¹ Hill, *Birthing the West*, 88.

³² Christa Craven and Mara Glatzel, “Downplaying Difference: Historical Accounts of African American Midwives and Contemporary Struggles for Midwifery,” *Feminist Studies* 36, no. 2 (2010): 330.

³³ Fraser, *African American Midwifery in the South*, 87.

midwives and their history gradually silenced and removed from reproductive practice.³⁴ With their authority, competence, and cleanliness in question, white male doctors were able to dismiss Black midwives as superstitious, backward, dirty, and even dangerous. In reality, midwives were their direct competition. Racial and cultural stereotypes worked in tandem with doctors' active restructuring of the medical landscape, and the elimination of midwifery was ultimately "part of an overall movement to gain control of the reproductive sphere."³⁵ As a result, the traditions of midwifery among enslaved Black women that influenced Letitia and Silvy's work were slowly but significantly pushed from the center of public health, clouding the history of Black midwifery.³⁶

Remembering and Forgetting

To understand the impact of taboo, misogyny, and medicalization, we must explore key locations of forgetting, primarily archives and collective memory. In both, the duality of deliberated erasure and the unconscious side-lining of these women is present. Forgetting was not always nefarious, but it was always at hand. As many historians and archivists have increasingly recognized, the archives are not passive but active sites of power and visibility.³⁷ As historian Joan M. Schwartz and archivist Terry Cook remind us, "Archives, since their very origins in the ancient world, have systemically excluded records about or by women from their

³⁴ Fraser on the power of midwives: "As long as African American midwives delivered children and delivered them safely, they challenged the dominance of the medical profession. Fear of the midwife's real power—her ability to do the work of obstetrics—translated into a public portrayal of such women as primarily responsible for long labors and puerperal deaths." Fraser, *African American Midwifery in the South*, 83.

³⁵ Fraser, *African American Midwifery in the South*, 129.

³⁶ Lara Foley, "Midwives, Marginality, and Public Identity Work," *Symbolic interaction* 28, no. 2 (2005): 190.

³⁷ Joan M. Schwartz, and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 2.

holdings and, as institutions, have been willing agents in the creation of patriarchy by supporting those in power against the marginalized.”³⁸ For Black women midwives and homesteaders specifically, the overlapping influences of misogynoir and time have worked to obscure records that may have once illuminated much of their story.³⁹ Though it is a difficult venture to search for these women, historian Tiya Miles reminds us, “To abandon these individuals, the ‘archivally unknown’ who fell through the cracks of class, race, and position, would consign them to a ‘second death’ by permitting their erasure from history.”⁴⁰ To avoid the second death, we, as historians, have an obligation to read against the grain with the hope of resurrecting and reviving these women’s stories despite the dim and diminished nature of the archives.

This leaves us with the question: How can we find these women when their archival traces are elusive? While other settlers have trail diaries, journals, correspondences and other written sources, Letitia and Silvy left nothing of the sort. If they did, those records were not preserved as other documents have been. Thankfully, each woman still has a paper trail to follow: Letitia through census and court records and land deeds, and Silvy through newspaper articles, land deeds, and a few photographs. Left with fewer sources than usual, one must read the archives against the grain and, as historian Jill Lepore says, “let the absences speak.”⁴¹ What does it mean that they were missing from census records? Where else can we look for answers? Here we turn to reminiscences, journals, and diaries of nearby neighbors, and primary sources

³⁸ Schwartz and Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power,” 2.

³⁹ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Duke University Press, 2021), 5.

⁴⁰ Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* (New York: Random House, 2021), 29.

⁴¹ Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), 20.

from other midwives and homesteaders, both white Western and Black Southern accounts, and triangulate those records to craft our understanding of Silvy and Letitia. In this way, we can deliberately manipulate the archives to our advantage. They are a tool of hegemony, but they can also become a tool of resistance.⁴²

Considering these archival lacunas, a collective forgetting has obscured Letitia and Silvy from public historical memory. As archives shape and shift scholarship, collective historical memory was influenced, and the understanding of Black women in the West was diminished. There is debate throughout the historical discipline as to whether collective memory exists.⁴³ However, the question “Is there or isn't there?” is less central to the issue. Instead, it is crucial to establish the complexity of collective memory, where it exists, and how it functions in society. As historian Joan Tumblety reminds us, “Historians tend to fall back either on a notion of ‘collected memory’ ... or use the term ‘collective memory’ to suggest a rather loose notion of popular knowledge about the past that exists ‘out there.’”⁴⁴ In contrast, the collective memory of the American West exists everywhere: in pageants, statues, movies, books, advertisements, television, and numerous romanticized depictions of the frontier. In all these, the white pioneer's

⁴² This language is from Schwartz and Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power.” The full quote reads, “Archives have the power to privilege and to marginalize. They can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance. They both reflect and constitute power relations. They are a product of society's need for information, and the abundance and circulation of documents reflects the importance placed on information in society. They are the basis for and validation of the stories we tell ourselves, the story-telling narratives that give cohesion and meaning to individuals, groups, and societies.” Schwartz and Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power,” 13.

⁴³ On the debate on collective memory, historian Joan Tumblety states, “Although many sociologists and historians have deployed working distinctions between social memory, collective memory and historical memory, there is no strict consensus on what distinguishes them. What is more widely agreed is that memory is always socially framed in one way or another. Here one must point to the impact of early twentieth-century French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs whose posthumously published work *On Collective Memory* has informed much recent scholarly thinking in this area.” Joan Tumblety, *Memory and History: Understanding Memory as a Source and Subject* (London: Routledge, 2013), 9.

⁴⁴ Tumblety, *Memory and History*, 10.

heroic mythos stands at the forefront, triumphing over any people of color through famed “conquest.”⁴⁵ Collective memory shapes and is shaped by larger cultural scripts, in this case, “manifest destiny,” pioneer heroism, white right to land, power, and ownership. Each time the media communicates this vision of the West, it is reshaped and reconstructed in collective memory.⁴⁶ An undeniable and often invisible hand fortifies collective historical memory as a monolithic entity, upholding a white male visage of the American West in collective historical memory. We can confront this by telling their stories and reinserting the labor of Black midwives into our understanding of the evolving West.

Recognition of Letitia and Silvy disrupts the collective appreciation of pioneer heroism. We must learn their stories and incorporate them into our understanding of the American West. In 1936, W. E. B. Du Bois alerted readers to “the American Blindspot for the Negro and his problems,” which had obscured Black influence in countless historical events.⁴⁷ As historian Thomas Sabatini writes, “This blind spot leaves the drama of history to whites and reduces the fully human tragedy of a nation divided by race to a simple, exonerating tale of American exceptionalism.”⁴⁸ Black women have been continually pushed out of their place at the center of colonial landscapes as healers, agriculturalists, and midwives and denied their contribution to

⁴⁵ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (Norton: New York, 1987), 19.

⁴⁶ Tumblety, *Memory and History*, 7.

⁴⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1935), 365; Thomas Sabatini, “Whitewashing the Past: The Racial Blindspot in “White Ethnic” Memories of the Youngstown Steel District,” in *Public Memory, Race, and Ethnicity*, ed. Mitchell G. Reyes (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 53.

⁴⁸ Sabatini, “Whitewashing the Past,” 53.

social, agricultural, and medical realms.⁴⁹ By confronting the flawed historical memory that rests in archives and collective consciousness, we can subvert the overwhelmingly white understanding of the American West.

During the nineteenth century, the simple act of existing as a Black woman in Oregon was resistance. Silvy and Letitia's choice to become midwives and caretakers is one of resilience.⁵⁰ It says something about them that they chose this path; even after enslavement and mistreatment in Oregon they chose to help their communities. As Wood argues in his history on Black Montanans, "The racial regime of the settler state did not subdue the Black community into passive colonial subjects on a path to an eventual exodus. Rather, what emerges from the archive is an adapted, hybrid, Black settler ideology that helped Black Montanans make sense of their lives and imagine new futures."⁵¹ Silvy and Letitia were also architects of an adapted, hybrid, Black settler ideology. Their knowledge of medicine, bodies, and health shaped and supported white settler communities in a fight against multilayered oppressions.

Black women homesteaders and midwives have been overlooked and excluded in secondary scholarship on the American West. As bell hooks reminds us, "As far back as slavery, white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first,

⁴⁹ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 196.

⁵⁰ I do not want to contribute to the common stereotype of Black women as one-dimensionally "strong." This characterization obscures the difficulty and prevalence of the oppression they faced when eliciting this strength. As bell hooks states, "When feminists acknowledge in one breath that black women are victimized and in the same breath emphasize their strength, they imply that though black women are oppressed they manage to circumvent the damaging impact of oppression by being strong—and that is simply not the case. Usually, when people talk about the "strength" of black women they are referring to the way in which they perceive black women coping with oppression. They ignore the reality that to be strong in the face of oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression, that endurance is not to be confused with transformation." bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 6.

⁵¹ Wood, *Black Montana*, 22.

white women second, though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third, and black women last.”⁵² This reverberates through historical scholarship, and Black women’s stories are routinely neglected in literature as a result of misogynoir and a continual lack of primary material. Secondary scholarship on women’s and Black history in Western states has evolved through waves and increasingly incorporates more stories of women of color. Yet, there are many specific instances of Black healers, caretakers, and homesteaders that have been neglected, despite their presence and significant contributions across agriculture, health, community building, and other facets of settler lives. What historians Richard White and Lawrence de Graaf called the “contribution school” is still the most common framework for addressing Black women in the West.⁵³ Building on the work of previous historians, this research asserts that Black women were not only present but negotiated authority through complex interplays of intimacy, agriculture, and healing work in their communities. A 2015 Oregon Historical Society Symposium titled “Regulating Birth” produced a rich discussion on Black midwifery in Oregon and Western history that even mentioned Silvy Haber. This scholarship identifies this silence and challenges it, but further research on individual women’s stories is still urgently necessary.⁵⁴ Here, the lives of Letitia and Silvy become pertinent examples of western Black midwifery, illuminating that Black midwives not only lived and worked in the West, but also were pillars of their communities and crucial cultivators of care.

⁵² hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*, 52, 53.

⁵³ Anthony W. Wood, “Colonial Erosion: Unearthing African American History in the Settler Colonial West,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 9, no. 3 (2019): 400.

⁵⁴ Monroe, Jackson, Taylor, Vazquez, “Birth, Healing, and Women of Color,” 232–51; Christin Hancock, “Regulating Birth: Locating Power at the Intersection of Private and Public in Oregon History,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 117, no. 2 (2016): 122–33.

Historiography

Women's history of the American West exploded in popularity in the 1980s following second-wave feminism and the reinvigoration of a "New Western history" that departed from the tired rhetoric of the "frontier." Historians Joan M. Jensen's and Darlis A. Miller's "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," offered a framework that recognized white frontier women's contributions, lives, and legacies, planting the seeds for the future recognition of Black women in the West.⁵⁵ Later, Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage edited *The Women's West* (1987), a series of essays that built upon the ideas presented by Miller and Jensen to expand the racial binary and turn the tides of previous Western consciousness into something more accurate to pioneer women's lived experiences.⁵⁶ That same year, historian Patricia Limerick published *Legacy of Conquest*, which aimed to deconstruct a shared understanding of the West.⁵⁷ Her work opened up an initial confrontation of Western mythologies, primarily the concept of racial binaries. In the early years of women's Western history, scholars argued two things: that women's history was overlooked in previous patricentric publications on the American West and that white women should not be the only focus.

By 1991, historians of the American West had made significant strides to write not only women's Western history but a consciously "multicultural" vision of this history that illustrated the histories of women of color. In the early 1990s, Black women's presence was finally being

⁵⁵ Joan M. Jensen, and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 49, no. 2 (1980): 173–213.

⁵⁶ Susan H. Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, *The Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

⁵⁷ Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*.

gradually welcomed into the narrative of the American West. However, their individual stories were still neglected during decades of famed white women pioneers. In the late 1990s, Armitage and Jameson teamed up once again to edit *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West*.⁵⁸ Alongside this generation of well-known women's historians like Armitage and Limerick, this book provided a platform for lesser-appreciated authors such as Vicki L. Ruiz and Sucheng Chan, who wrote about the experiences of Mexican and Korean women in the American West.⁵⁹ This work capped off the scholarship of the twentieth century, providing a visible middle ground between the glaring whiteness of early Western feminist works and the later publications that would accomplish the voiced goals of multiculturalism and later decolonization.

By the 1990s, Black women were slowly welcomed into the narrative of the Western frontier as a somewhat monolithic group. Individual stories and layered complexity had yet to be addressed. In the 2000s, growing calls for decolonization of Western history once again reshaped the landscape of this literature. Historians such as Lawrence B. de Graaf, Quintard Taylor, Darrell Millner, Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, and Quin'Nita Cobbins-Modica led this new wave of western women's history that brought Black women into contemporary understandings of the West.⁶⁰ Historian Richard Keith's "Unwelcome Settlers: Black and Mulatto Oregon Pioneers"

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Jameson, Susan H. Armitage, *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press).

⁵⁹ Jameson and Armitage, *Writing the Range*, table of contents.

⁶⁰ Lawrence B. de Graaf, "Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850-1920," *Pacific Historical Review* 49, no. 2 (1980): 285-313; Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528-1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, "'Your Life is Really Not Just Your Own': African American Women in Twentieth Century California," in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California, 1769-1997*, ed. Lawrence De Graaf, Kevin Mulroy & Quintard Taylor (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008); Demetrius L. Eudell, "Black Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in *A Companion to American Cultural History*, ed Karen Halttunen

built upon this concept of inclusion and wrote of Black pioneer men and women within Oregon Territory.⁶¹ Historian Lawrence B. de Graaf went one step further by focusing entirely on Black women in *Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850-1920*.⁶²

Unfortunately, many of the works from this subgenre provided only generalized discussions of Black women in the West without telling the stories of individual women. Black women remained nebulous.

Many historians have continued telling the stories of Black women in the West. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore's work *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000* examined the stories of Black women traversing the Overland Trail and settling in the American West.⁶³ Other works like Demetrius L. Eudell's chapter "Black Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries" in *A Companion to American Cultural History* and Sheridan McCarthy's and Stanton Nelson's *Perseverance: A History of African Americans in Oregon's Marion and Polk Counties*, published by Oregon Black Pioneers, provide more in-depth stories of Black identity in the West.⁶⁴ They both document the lives of Black women pioneers as midwives, farmers, mothers, and entire people – not just companions or concepts. Historians have been trying for decades to recognize the importance of Black women settlers in

(Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008); Sheridan McCarthy and Nelson Stanton, *Perseverance: A History of African Americans in Oregon's Marion and Polk Counties* (Salem: Oregon Northwest Black Pioneers, 2011); Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *Sweet Freedom's Plains: African Americans on the Overland Trails, 1841-1869*, vol. 12 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016).

⁶¹ K. Keith Richard, "Unwelcome Settlers: Black and Mulatto Oregon Pioneers," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (1983): 29–55; K. Keith Richard, "Unwelcome Settlers: Black and Mulatto Oregon Pioneers, Part II," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (1983): 173–205.

⁶² Graaf, "Race, Sex, and Region."

⁶³ Taylor and Moore, *African American Women Confront the West*.

⁶⁴ Eudell, "Black Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries"; McCarthy, Stanton, *Perseverance*.

the West. But they are up against a monolithic white-centric Western history. As Taylor and Moore noted in 2008, “black women were 'significant forces in local economies and community building.'”⁶⁵ Still, the stories of individual women often go unrecognized. Taylor elaborated on this, writing, “Unlike Asian American, Chicano, or much of Native American history, which are automatically perceived as “western” in orientation, black history in this region continues to be viewed by western regional historians and historians of African America as an interesting footnote to a story focused elsewhere.”⁶⁶ Even with evolving attempts to include Black women’s stories, there are more Black women’s stories to be told.

Outside of the American West, secondary historical sources have explored Black midwives and homesteaders as they lived and worked in the American South and Great Plains regions. Historians of slavery, medicine, and women have thoroughly explored the vast history of Black Southern midwives. In 1961, Beatrice Mongeau, Harvey L. Smith, and Ann C. Maney recognized the often overlooked role of Black “Granny” midwives in the American South.⁶⁷ Gaining traction in the 1980s, in the wake of growing Black feminism, scholarship on Black midwifery emerged as a way to examine the connections between Black midwifery, folk medicine, and contemporary midwifery.⁶⁸ Authors such as Linda Janet Holmes, Gertrude Jacinta Fraser, and Valerie Lee shared the stories of Black midwives in the American South, arguing that Black women birth workers acted as pillars of community, economy, and continued wellbeing

⁶⁵ Taylor and Moore, *African American Women Confront the West*, 126.

⁶⁶ Quintard Taylor, “Facing the Urban Frontier, African American History in the Reshaping of the Twentieth Century American West,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, 43 (Spring 2012): 5.

⁶⁷ Beatrice Mongeau, Harvey L. Smith, Ann C. Maney, “The “Granny” Midwife: Changing Roles and Functions of a Folk Practitioner,” *American Journal of Sociology* 66, no. 5 (March 1961): 497-505.

⁶⁸ Goode and Rothman, “African-American Midwifery, a History and a Lament,” 72; Wilkie, “Expelling Frogs and Binding Babies,” 278.

during slavery.⁶⁹ Recently, authors Mikal Brotnov Eckstrom, Richard Edwards, and Jacob K. Friefeld have collaborated on several articles on Black homesteading colonies on the Great Plains. In 2023, Edwards and Friefeld co-authored *The First Migrants: How Black Homesteaders' Quest for Land and Freedom Heralded America's Great Migration*, a culmination of years of research on Black Great Plains homesteaders.⁷⁰ Other historians and anthropologists have also recently highlighted the history of Black homesteaders in Oklahoma.⁷¹ Still, many of these more general overviews neglect the narratives of individual women.

Academics have only briefly mentioned Black midwives and homesteaders in Western states. Historian Lillian Schlissel's *Black Frontiers: A History of African American Heroes in the Old West* mentions Black women homesteaders in Western states, bringing them into the discussion of the American West. This work was published thirty years ago, and a more detailed discussion is urgently necessary. Even recent scholarship that includes a fascinating analysis of settler colonial theory and Black communities in the West, such as Wood's *Black Montana*:

⁶⁹ Some examples of this scholarship include: Linda Janet Holmes, "African American Midwives in the South," in *The American Way of Birth*, ed. Pamela S. Eakins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Susan Lynn Smith, *Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women's Health Activism in America, 1890–1950* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Gertrude Jacinta Fraser, "Modern Bodies, Modern Minds: Midwifery and Reproductive Change in an African American Community," in *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*, ed. Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Valerie Lee, *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double-Dutched Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Fraser, *African American Midwifery in the South*; Foley, "Midwives, Marginality, and Public Identity Work"; Craven and Glatzel, "Downplaying Difference"; Wilkie, "Expelling Frogs and Binding Babies"; Keisha La'Nesha Goode, "Birthing, Blackness, and the Body: Black Midwives and Experiential Continuities of Institutional Racism" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2014); Goode and Rothman, "African-American Midwifery, a History and a Lament"; Muigai, "'Something Wasn't Clean': Black Midwifery, Birth, and Postwar Medical Education in All My Babies"; Jennifer C. Nash, "Birthing Black Mothers: Birth Work and the Making of Black Maternal Political Subjects," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 3/4 (2019): 29–50.

⁷⁰ Richard Edwards and Jacob K Friefeld, *The First Migrants: How Black Homesteaders' Quest for Land and Freedom Heralded America's Great Migration* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023).

⁷¹ Muhammad, Sichko, and Olsson, "African Americans and Federal Land Policy"; Heidi Dodson, and Kalenda Eaton, "'We Are Now the Owners of the Land': Black Homesteading and the Rise of Political Participation in Kingfisher County, Oklahoma, 1889–1907," *Great Plains Research* 33, no. 1 (2023): 7–19.

Settler Colonialism and the Erosion of the Racial Frontier and Richard Adkisson's, "Black Homesteading in Southern New Mexico: An Undertold Story," lack an analysis of gender.⁷²

A Decolonial Approach

This thesis is decolonial. In 2010, Margaret Jacobs stated that "Western women historians must 'decolonize' our narrative and our field through seriously considering the West as a colonial site."⁷³ This research builds upon Jacobs' call by complicating not only the position of white colonists but the hybrid and tangled experience of Black women within the colonial project. Further, it challenges us to continue to dig our way out of this rut by implementing a more diverse, decolonized vision of the West in historical societies and museums. To echo the work of Patrick Wolfe and Anthony Wood, we must consider the West (and the whitening of it) as a continual structure or process in which colonialism, white supremacy, and violent dispossession are ongoing actions shaping our present reality. By directly engaging with the public side of history, public historical memory better matches the historical truth and resolves some of the dissonance between historical reality, academic history, and public knowledge. As we expand public understanding of Black women in the West, we effectively escape from the rut of unobserved colonialisms.

This research builds upon an evolving notion of decolonial feminist history that refuses the tired rhetoric of white patriarchal colonial narratives in the American West.⁷⁴ While these

⁷² Wood, *Black Montana*; Richard V. Adkisson, "Black Homesteading in Southern New Mexico: An Undertold Story," *Great Plains Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2023): 385–403.

⁷³ Margaret D. Jacobs, "Getting Out of a Rut: Decolonizing Western Women's History," *Pacific Historical Review* 79, no. 4 (2010): 585.

⁷⁴ Nash, "Finishing Nature"; Dianne D. Glave, *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010); Margaret D. Jacobs, "Reproducing White Settlers and Eliminating Natives Settler Colonialism, Gender, and Family History in the American West," *Journal of the*

concepts and terms were not available to Black women settler midwives and homesteaders, their active resilience from the bottom and interwoven connection with land mirrors contemporary depictions of eco-womanism. Black Ecofeminism, or eco-womanism, stems from womanist scholarship by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Audre Lorde and puts them in conversation with the environmental justice movement and eco-feminist ideologies.⁷⁵ Eco-womanism contributes to our growing understanding of Letitia and Silvy as midwives and environmental knowledge holders.⁷⁶ It considers the intersecting histories of Black women being enslaved, commodified, consumed, and deemed less than human and how these have subjugated Black women to the “bottom.”⁷⁷ As Jennifer James argues, “The bottom can be a productive, unifying space where like beings are no longer alone and are instead conjoined in struggle.”⁷⁸ By reimagining the bottom, Black eco-womanism ultimately produces a “gendered and racialized intersectional environmentalism” that does not but perpetuate the history of conflagration between women and earth. Instead, it moves beyond this trope and “operates on a principle of inextricably in which the terms “Black women” and “the earth” are inseparable.”⁷⁹ We can uncover a deep-rooted story of eco-womanism through Letitia and Silvy’s homesteading history.

West 56, no. 4 (2017): 13–24; Mark Carey, M. Jackson, Alessandro Antonello, and Jaclyn Rushing, “Glaciers, Gender, and Science: A Feminist Glaciology Framework for Global Environmental Change Research,” *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no. 6 (2016): 770–793.

⁷⁵ Melanie L. Harris, “Ecowomanism: Black Women, Religion, and the Environment,” *The Black Scholar* 46 no. 3 (2016): 27–39; Jennifer C. James, “A Theory of the Bottom: Black Ecofeminism as Politics,” *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 10, no. 1 (2022): 46–52.

⁷⁶ Melanie Harris defines ecowomanism as, “Ecowomanism centers the religious, theological, and spiritual perspectives of black women and women of color as they confront multilayered oppressions such as racism, classism, sexism, and environmental injustice.” Harris, “Ecowomanism,” 27–39.

⁷⁷ James, “A Theory of the Bottom,” 46.

⁷⁸ James, “A Theory of the Bottom,” 48.

⁷⁹ James, “A Theory of the Bottom,” 49.

Through feminist decolonization and eco-womanism, this research works to counteract a narrative of white pioneerism that often saturates our understanding of Oregon history.

Chronologically detailing their lives, the following chapters explore Silvy and Letitia's individual histories and explicate how their work as midwives and homesteaders was founded in community connections, intimate patient relationships and a vast capacity of care. Chapter two explores Oregon statehood in the context of race and centers on a case study of early pioneer museums and memory. Chapters three and four tell the stories of Letitia and Silvy, focusing on how they cultivated early settler community by birthing white babies, homesteading, and building complex interpersonal relationships with their neighbors. Chapter five brings us back to the concept of shared collective memory and historical understanding, charting the emergence of local and public memory and the rise of Black History in Oregon. The conclusion takes readers back to the twenty-first century and the complexity of Black maternal mortality and environmental racism in its connection to the medicalization of midwifery and subsequent erasure of Black midwives and homesteaders.

Silvy and Letitia's success was not accidental, nor was it provided to them by white settlers. They strategically utilized their physical and emotional labor to build purposeful community spaces despite Black Exclusion Laws and lingering echoes of systemic racism throughout Oregon's history. The further complexity of their role as laborers with varying claims to power and intimacy only intensified their intricate place in early settler societies. Black ecologies and notions of health built and upheld white settler spaces through the labor of Black healers. Despite archival silences fueled by misogynoir and social taboos, primary and secondary sources from Southern Black midwives and white Western midwives illuminate the daily practices that Letitia and Silvy likely used to care for the communities they called home. By

understanding how and what Silvy and Letitia contributed to their communities, we can better understand the significance of their impact, which has gone long overlooked under the monolithic white pioneer conceptualization of the American West. We must investigate this crucial intersection of reproductive care and community to reshape our understanding of power and its complexity in frontier history.

Chapter 2: Pioneer Myth and Memory: Tracing Institutional Archives, Whiteness, and Collective Consciousness in Early Oregon

“We live in a society of an imposed forgetfulness, a society that depends on public amnesia.”

Angela Davis

Waves of white settlers flooded Oregon between 1840 and 1870, staking claims to the West based on perceived sentiments of manifest destiny and the open frontier.¹ Concepts of whiteness and white supremacy were not inherent beliefs. Instead, they were crafted from colonial expectations, experiences, and desires of ownership over land and people. As historian Carmen P. Thompson states, the concept of whiteness is “an expectation (sometimes an unconscious expectation) that the government will maintain laws and policies generally benefiting White people.”² This expectation, in turn, fosters white supremacy: “the hierarchical ordering of human beings based on phenotypic, or physical, attributes that we call ‘race.’”³ White supremacy cannot be flattened into a timeless concept nor frozen as a moment in time, non-relative to its past and future. It is a system of oppression that has evolved to fit each

¹ While my research focuses on Oregon history from 1845 through 1918, an earlier Oregon history of inter-racial mixing existed during the fur trade in Oregon Territory from 1790 through 1840. During this time (and long before it), whiteness was not seamlessly adopted nor automatically associated with settler colonial enterprise. Ideas of race were evolving, and many inter-racial relationships grew between white fur traders and Indigenous people in Oregon Country, all complicating our understandings of whiteness, much as the stories of Black pioneer women do. For this reason, it is crucial to acknowledge that whiteness, while upheld as a goal and triumph of settler colonists, was never truly an accomplished reality, as inter-racial relationships, defiance toward settler colonial rule, and people of color have always existed within Oregon Territory. Barton Barbour, “Fur Trade in Oregon Country,” *Oregon Encyclopedia*, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/fur_trade_in_oregon_country/; Katrine Barber, “‘We Were at Our Journey’s End’: Settler Sovereignty Formation in Oregon,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 120, no. 4 (2019): 384.

² Carmen P. Thompson, “Expectation and Exclusion: An Introduction to Whiteness, White Supremacy, and Resistance in Oregon History,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 120, no. 4 (2019): 358.

³ Thompson, “Expectation and Exclusion,” 358.

historical era, suppressing Black women's voices through centuries of American history. As white settlers claimed Indigenous land, they built Oregon Territory on a foundation of whiteness, using pioneer societies and early museums to spread unconscious and conscious ideas of white superiority through settler narratives of conquest.⁴ Settler colonists fortified whiteness and white supremacy using dispossession, race, misogyny, and the myth of conquest to shape collective memory. Positioned at this intersection, Silvy and Letitia engaged in community care and blazed a trail for Black settler success despite overlapping waves of racial misogyny. By exploring memory, myth, and museums, we can better understand Oregon's complex relationship with race and the dualistic erasure and forgetting of Black women settlers.

Land claim legislation created a restrictive legal landscape that dispossessed Native communities, inhibited Black migration, and founded Oregon on the basis of enduring whiteness. The 1850 Oregon Donation Land Claim Act legitimized the 1843 Oregon Territory land claims staked under the provisional government.⁵ Oregon's provisional government limited land claims to only white men and their wives, who could take 640 acres of Indigenous land and continued cultivating an increasingly white landscape.⁶ The Homestead Act (of 1862), by contrast, did not discriminate by race; it actually allowed Silvy and Letitia to steward their own land, even as it paved the way for white colonial communities that were legally and socially opposed to Black Americans. As historian Kenneth Coleman argues, "By using real estate as a tool of racial exclusion, Oregon's early political leaders initiated a pattern that continued well into the

⁴ Frances Lee Ansley, "Stirring the Ashes: Race, Class and the Future of Civil Rights Scholarship," *Cornell Law Review* 74, no. 6 (September 1989): 1024; Barber, "'We Were at Our Journey's End,'" 386.

⁵ William G. Robbins, "Oregon Donation Land Act," *Oregon Encyclopedia* https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/oregon_donation_land_act/.

⁶ Robbins, "Oregon Donation Land Act."

twentieth century.”⁷ Land ownership, coupled with prevailing notions of white superiority and heroism, dispossessed Indigenous people and contributed to hostile anti-Blackness.

This enduring impact is evidenced in the Black Exclusion Laws introduced by white settlers in the 1840s. Peter Burnett, who journeyed overland in 1843 and became a member of the Oregon Provisional Government’s seven-member legislative council, wrote and enacted Black exclusion as an amendment to an 1844 law that prohibited slavery and forced settlers to remove their enslaved people from Oregon Territory.⁸ Burnett defended his stance against Black people, saying, “The object is to keep clear of that most troublesome class of population. We are in a new world...we wish to avoid most of those evils that have so much afflicted the United States and other countries.”⁹ Exclusion continued manifesting in state legislation and was further legitimized in an 1849 exclusion act that barred Black people from entering or residing in the state.¹⁰ A general housekeeping act repealed this law in 1854, but in 1857, the legislature incorporated exclusion into the Bill of Rights, which prohibited Black people from being in the state, owning property, or drawing any contracts.¹¹ Eventually, the 14th Amendment superseded the clause, making Blacks citizens and thus eligible to live in whatever state they chose.¹² Nonetheless, Oregon’s Black population remained small. In the 1860 census, only 128 Black

⁷ Kenneth R. Coleman, “‘We’ll All Start Even’: White Egalitarianism and the Oregon Donation Land Claim Act,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 120, no. 4 (2019): 429.

⁸ Greg Nokes, “Black Exclusion Laws in Oregon,” *Oregon Encyclopedia*, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/exclusion_laws/#.

⁹ Nokes, “Black Exclusion Laws in Oregon.”

¹⁰ Nokes, “Black Exclusion Laws in Oregon.”

¹¹ Nokes, “Black Exclusion Laws in Oregon.”; Elizabeth McLagan, “The Black Laws of Oregon, 1844-1857,” *BlackPast*, March 30, 2009, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/black-laws-oregon-1844-1857>.

¹² Still, the language was not repealed by voters until 1926, and the Oregon state constitution included racist language until 2002. Nokes, “Black Exclusion Laws in Oregon.”

people were living in Oregon.¹³ By 1920, the number was still only a fraction of the population at 2,144.¹⁴ Today, Black people are still only about 2 percent of Oregon's total population.¹⁵ White settlers legislatively and socially built Oregon atop a foundation of anti-Blackness.

Despite exclusion laws and systemic discrimination against Black women, Silvy and Letitia resiliently devoted themselves to caring for their neighbors. While it is unclear how they were specifically each able to reside in the state during Black exclusion, it was likely a combination of the unenforceable nature of the laws, the crucial care that each woman provided, and the relationships they cultivated with neighbors. In turn, they became pillars of the community, historical actors who shaped social ecosystems through close relationships, their intimate birth work, and the capacity of their care. Instances of Black success were limited as Black settlement was discouraged, and prosperity was sparsely recorded in popular media or memory. There is great irony in this landscape of whiteness. Although Black women like Silvy and Letitia aren't often recognized for their contributions, they provided essential services that significantly aided white families via reproductive care, health care, and the cultivation of community spaces. The colonial "success" of white families was partially reliant on the concentrated community care provided by Black women's physical and emotional labor as caretakers, midwives, and companions. White colonists who conceptualized health as an

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, "Population, by Race, Sex, and Nativity," Oregon, 1860.

¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, "Oregon Composition and Characteristics of the Population," Oregon, 1920.

¹⁵ Darrell Millner, "Black People in Oregon," *Oregon Encyclopedia*, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/blacks_in_oregon/.

environmental and racial factor demonized Black and brown bodies as weak and unable to thrive.¹⁶ As a result, white settlers pushed Black pioneers to the edge of settler societies.¹⁷

Myth of the Frontier

As Letitia and Silvy tilled their land, the myth of the pioneer hero and the “conquered” West began its evolution. It started with the words of settlers themselves at pioneer society gatherings across the Pacific Northwest, more akin to echo chambers of mutual congratulations.¹⁸ Elwood Evans, who presented the keynote address at the Washington Pioneer Association in 1885, lovingly declared, “Pioneers of the Pacific Northwest... [were] soldiers dedicated to the Americanization of the wilderness.”¹⁹ From here, pioneer appreciation continued as these associations evolved into museums and journals with a public and academic presence. Before and after Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis declared that self-reliance and individualism were forged through the mastering of the frontier, the myth of the pioneer hero prevailed.²⁰ Settlers further circulated a growing understanding of the frontier myth through literature and media, both fictional and non-fictional. This research focuses on the foundation of the myth in

¹⁶ Nash, “Finishing Nature,” 29.

¹⁷ Medical authority, as well as other types of authority, were kept from people of color, and the majority of healing and doctoring was left in the hands of white settlers. While Indigenous and Black people in Oregon contributed to health and wellness, they are often not credited or associated with the history of medicine in Oregon. O. Larsell, “The Development of Medical Education in the Pacific Northwest,” *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 27, no. 1 (1926): 65–112.

¹⁸ Marc James Carpenter, “Pioneer Problems: “Wanton Murder,” Indian War Veterans, and Oregon's Violent History,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 121, no. 2 (2020): 156.

¹⁹ Carpenter, “Pioneer Problems,” 156.

²⁰ For more on Turner’s thesis see William Cronon, “Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1987): 157-76; Lacy K. Ford Jr., “Frontier Democracy: The Turner Thesis Revisited,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 13, no. 2 (1993): 144-63; Jackson K. Putnam, “The Turner Thesis and the Westward Movement: A Reappraisal,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1976): 377-404; Gene M. Gressley, “The Turner Thesis: A Problem in Historiography,” *Agricultural History* 32, no. 4 (1958): 227-49.

early museums and prototypical pioneer associations to explore memory and mythmaking within collective historical consciousness.

There is still a prevailing notion among the public that Black people were not present in the early “pioneer” West. In the West, “a distinctly western structure of racism . . . worked in tandem with settler colonialism,” according to historian Anthony Wood.²¹ Settlers viewed the West as the “locus of whiteness” despite building their landscape on violent Native dispossession and land appropriation. Centuries of narrative building solidified this notion of whiteness in the West, and it still exists at the center of Western understanding, even with rigorous efforts from historians to dismantle this belief. The popular image of the West was founded on white heroism, pioneer power, and triumphalist colonial narratives. These selective portrayals spread nationwide, settling in a shared national consciousness that idealized a narrow characterization of Western pioneers. The ubiquity of pioneer imagery, fomented through the efforts of white pioneer organizations, left no room for the transgressive example that Black women homesteaders and midwives presented.

Black women were significant agents of change and community cultivation within early Oregon towns.²² This legacy, however, is buried beneath the myth of the white pioneer hero. By tracing the nuanced omission of Black women's pioneer history throughout memory institutions, we can better understand why these stories have been overlooked.²³ The process of forgetting, as seen in the annual addresses of historical societies and newspaper articles, evolved throughout

²¹ Wood, “Colonial Erosion,” 397.

²² Taylor and Moore, *African American Women Confront the West*, 126.

²³ The term “memory institutions” is quoted from Kristen Wright and Nicola Laurent, “Safety, Collaboration, and Empowerment,” *Archivaria* 91 (Spring/Summer 2021): 38-73 and refers to museums, historical societies, pioneer societies, and all other institutions that were cultivating historical memory during this period.

the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from personal manifestations of pioneer history to museums and eventually academic institutions that perpetuated a shared notion of white settler history. Ultimately, I seek to decolonize the history of the American West and uplift stories of marginalized historical actors, like Black women midwives in nineteenth and twentieth-century Oregon.

Memory

Forgetting and memory have a blurry relationship. Anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin reminds us that “the point is not to separate them, but to realize the surprising point that forgetting is also sometimes a technique of the dominated, used to enable memory.”²⁴ In the instance of Black women settlers, unconscious and conscious workings of misogynoir and taboo are coupled together, fueling archival absences that silence them.²⁵ The archive is not static, either.²⁶ Here, it is critical to incorporate agnotology, or the study of ignorance. Agnotology investigates the circulation of knowledge and specifically explores barriers to transmitting knowledge, complicating our understanding of forgetting or ignorance throughout history. Reframing forgetting as ignorance introduces a cultural and political weight that reminds us of the conscious undercurrents of crafting memory and, subsequently, crafting forgetting.²⁷ All of these mechanisms have shrouded Black women settlers from collective memory, which remains firmly rooted in white, heroic tales of pioneer conquerors.

²⁴ Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 4; Tony Kushner “Alienated Memories: Migrants and the Silences of the Archive,” in *Memory and History: Understanding Memory as Source and Subject*, ed. Joan Tumblety (Routledge, 2013) 184.

²⁵ Bailey, “They aren’t talking about me.”

²⁶ Kushner “Alienated Memories,” in *Memory and History*, 180.

²⁷ Londa L. Schiebinger, *Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 158.

Collective memory also requires deeper consideration and examination of its complexity and inner workings. Collective memory shapes and is shaped by larger cultural scripts and events, in this case the westward migration of settlers and the “conquering” of the frontier. Historian Hannah Ewence notes that when memories are married to climactic national moments, they are more significant and meaningful and culminate in a shared national consciousness.²⁸ As defined by Pierre Nora, “Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.”²⁹ The dialectic of remembering and forgetting is especially important when investigating the pitfalls of public historical memory. It is crucial to recognize that the fragility of memory is inherent: “Memory has to be selective,” notes historian Tony Kushner, “or else it would be overwhelmed by the sheer size of its potential raw material. The process of selection is not arbitrary, however, and what is forgotten often has an ethical dimension.”³⁰ Considering these barriers, one must ask what separates Black experiences from a shared understanding of pioneer pasts. How are the non-traditional narratives of Black women homesteaders and midwives kept from collective memory and museums? Moreover, how was the conquering white pioneer narrative established? How did this forgetting change and evolve to become the impenetrable force of pioneer memory that stands today?

To answer this query, we must turn to the earliest producers of Oregon history, the Oregon Historical Society (OHS) and its many predecessors and contemporaries such as the

²⁸ Hannah Ewence, “Memories of Suburbia: Autobiographical Fiction and Minority Narratives,” in *Memory and History: Understanding Memory as Source and Subject*, ed. Joan Tumblety (Routledge, 2013), 161.

²⁹ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26, no. 26 (1989): 8.

³⁰ Kushner “Alienated Memories,” in *Memory and History*, 190.

Oregon Pioneer Association, Portland Historical Society, and Oregon Pioneer and Historical Society. Each year, OHS held annual addresses before the historical society members to reflect on the previous months and the year ahead. I chose to analyze the addresses from the beginning years of the organization, 1899-1905, to gain insight into their shared qualities and messaging, the experiences and ideas that “old pioneers” spread among a growing membership, which offered a very narrow perspective of settler colonial experiences in Oregon.

As knowledge is shared, knowledge is also lost. Forgetting ebbed and flowed, reaching different peaks and conclusions as different pioneers and institutions crafted it. Forgetting may have come in the form of omitted stories, lost relics, or purposefully curated cabinets of pioneer curiosities. The omission of Black women’s stories was not an immediate or instant event, nor did it have a single cause. Instead, it was crafted through decades of individual and institutionalized pioneer narratives that shifted and evolved. Overlapping concepts of racism, sexism, classism, and ignorance fomented the neglect of Black women from the white pioneers’ narrative of the West. Forgetting was not always nefarious but could have also come from a general lack of knowledge of Black settlers, accompanied by a desire to immortalize settler narratives. A careful examination of the institutional archives of OHS, nonetheless, reveals the institutionalization of an ongoing fascination with and focus on white pioneer history. From early private and local collections of pioneer relics to later historical societies, museums, and academic institutions, pioneer memory was fortified in many ways. Throughout all the varied realms of forgetting, the central effect remained constant: Black women healers were not present in the memorialization of Oregon’s history.

Early Pioneer Collections

The gathering of pioneer relics began long before the institutionalization of settler colonial history. Local, private, and personal rooms of collected pioneer and “Indian” curios had become a popular pastime in the American West as pioneers and those enthralled by their history sought to memorialize the settler era. Traces of these local stockpiles are visible in early Oregon newspapers. In November 1888, following a destructive house fire, the *Albany Morning Daily Herald* reported that “The fine library and collection of pioneer and Indian war relics, which were Father Parrish’s especial pride, were mostly saved, although badly damaged by fire and water...the loss is estimated at about \$6000.”³¹ Notably, Father Parish had just presented part of his archive to Willamette University. In the aftermath of this disastrous fire, it was the “valuable collection of pioneer relics saved” that made the headlines that morning. Its value equates to nearly \$200,000 in 2025. The value and importance of Father Parrish’s assemblage as a community treasure illustrate the critical reverence for such collections at this time before the founding of the state’s historical society. Other personal pioneer relics traveled across the state, and small exhibitions took place regularly at local pioneer society meetings, public schools, the Oregon House of Representatives, club meetings, and reunions.³²

Additionally, there were several storefronts dedicated to exhibiting and selling Oregon relics. The *Morning Oregonian* advertised the curio store of D.M. Averill & Co. as “One of the places well known in Portland and visited by all tourists.” Visitors could view “the largest

³¹ “State News,” *Morning Daily Herald* (Albany, OR), November 15, 1888.

³² J.T. Ford, “The Annual Meeting of Polk County Pioneers,” *The Enterprise* (Independence, OR), May 30, 1895; J.T. Ford, “A Unique Exhibit,” *The Enterprise* (Independence, OR), December 19, 1895; “Items in Brief,” *The Dalles Times Mountaineer* (The Dalles, OR), October 15, 1898; “State News,” *Daily Capital Journal* (Salem, OR), June 16, 1897; “Delegates Meet at the Dalles,” *The Oregon Daily Journal* (Portland, OR), May 17, 1904.

collection of Indian relics and curios ever shown on the Pacific Coast...Constant inquiries and orders come from all the principal Eastern cities for articles which cannot be obtained elsewhere.”³³ In 1903, a similar establishment, the B.B. Rich Curio Store, bought an entire private grouping of Indian relics and advertised them in the *Morning Oregonian*, saying, “Right now is your opportunity to get Indian relics at prices that will enable you to add to your curio corner at a nominal figure.”³⁴ The buying and exhibiting of Oregon relics was a popular endeavor that began in personal homes and private reserves but expanded beyond these limits to nationally known stores and later internationally known museums.

The 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition also centered pioneer collections in their preparation for Portland’s first and only World’s Fair. In 1890, *The Enterprise* wrote of plans for an additional exhibit building to “show the relics and pioneer collections.”³⁵ A 1905 *East Oregonian* article described the exhibit at the exposition as an entire room dedicated to pioneer relics, reporting, “The walls of the interior are covered also with pioneer relics, some of them owned by Mr. Meeker and some the property of other pioneers or their descendants.”³⁶ At this moment, local personal and private sets coalesced and formed a unified representation of pioneer history that was presented on a national stage and exhibited for more than five months to an audience of 1.5 million people.³⁷ Across Oregon, pioneers filled their homes with treasures from

³³ “Indian Relics and Curios,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), January 01, 1901.

³⁴ “Private Collection, Indian Relics Bought by the B.B. Rich Curio Store,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), September 24, 1903.

³⁵ Carl Abbott, “Lewis and Clark Exposition,” *Oregon Encyclopedia*, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/lewis_clark_exposition/; “Mr. Morgan’s Plans, Proposed Arrangement for the Oregon’s World’s Fair Exhibit,” *The Enterprise* (Independence, OR), November 6, 1890.

³⁶ Abbott, “Lewis and Clark Exposition.”; “Old Oregon Relics, Ezra Miller Shows Pioneer Collection,” *East Oregonian* (Pendleton, OR), August 19, 1905.

³⁷ Abbott, “Lewis and Clark Exposition.”

their Overland journey, establishing memories of a white West “won” by pioneer men and women. These rooms and exhibits became antecedents to formal historical societies, like OHS, but also continued alongside official state institutions, perpetuating a statewide acceptance of white settler narratives. Though they are not the central focus of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge the widespread power they held in shaping collective memory and ignorance.

Beyond private and personal local collections, as historian Marc Carpenter has observed, Western pioneer societies formed mainly “for the purpose of exchanging mutual congratulations.”³⁸ Existing as glorified good ol’ boys clubs, pioneer organizations met to tell stories of overland travels and build community among Oregon Territory newcomers. Additionally, pioneer societies fomented the continued violence of colonizers as they expanded forcefully across Oregon territory and celebrated pioneer weapons and stolen Indigenous belongings. Through regular meetings and publications, pioneer societies commenced a decades-long tradition of memorializing themselves as heroes— and thereby skewing historical memory. In these early years of pioneer community building, settlers also legally protected whiteness throughout Oregon territory. Coleman reminds us that the settlers used the government to confirm their own land claims and to exclude Black people from residing in the state.³⁹ Small in numbers and socially shunned, “Black women would long remain an invisible segment of Western society whose lives and accomplishments would remain known only within the confines of their race.”⁴⁰ Throughout this pioneer praise, Black women fell at the intersection of overlapping oppressions.

³⁸ Carpenter, “Pioneer Problems,” 156.

³⁹ Coleman, ““We’ll All Start Even,”” 415.

⁴⁰ Graaf, “Race, Sex, and Region,” 313.

Oregon Historical Society

Pioneer men and women founded the Oregon Historical Society on Saturday, December 17, 1898, when they met under the guidance of Lewis Berkeley Cox in the lecture room of the Portland Library Building.⁴¹ It was a culmination of a decades-long statewide effort to commemorate and preserve pioneer memory. An 1867 lecture from Reverend H.H. Spaulding published in the *States Rights Democrat* stated, “An Oregon Historical Society is about forming, and I deem it due to the memory of the meritorious that the herculean labors of Dr. [Marcus] Whitman should be laid before the public at this time.”⁴² Considered one of the great “martyrs” of the settler colonial cause, Whitman serves as a stand-in for all gritty and heroic pioneer stories that Oregonians like Spaulding believed should be memorialized in a permanent public setting. An 1892 article from the *Newberg Graphic* stated, “The outlook is favorable to the formation of an Oregon Historical Society. This, we think is a move in the right direction. This state is rich in relics and reminiscences of early days, and a historical society is sadly needed to facilitate their collection and provide for their preservation.”⁴³ These pleas for the permanent preservation of pioneer memories made their point by linking the story of Oregon to a greater cultivation of national American identity.

By 1899, the cries for participation in and appreciation of this society had spread, and founding secretary George H. Himes’s travels cropped up in newspapers across the state, often followed by pleading remarks. As one pioneer, Thos. Otchin, observed, “A state pride ought to

⁴¹ W.D. Fenton, “The Oregon Historical Society, Its Past, Present, and Future,” in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899-1905* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1905), 26.

⁴² “Lectures by Reverend H.H. Spaulding,” *State Rights Democrat* (Albany, OR), January 19, 1867.

⁴³ *Newberg Graphic* (Newberg, OR), January 1, 1892.

urge the preservation of the story of our founding and settlement.”⁴⁴ George Himes’s storied past provides insight into the white pioneer construction of historical and cultural memory. His work prematurely and inaccurately memorialized Indigenous history while excluding Black settlers. Himes was the founding secretary and first curator at OHS, a position he acquired as a long-time Oregon pioneer and certified member of earlier organizations such as the Indian War Veterans of the North Pacific Coast,⁴⁵ which he joined based on “his service as an armed guard in the Rogue River War through 1855 when Himes was around eleven years old.”⁴⁶ Traveling across the state, Himes gathered donations from private and personal pioneer relic collections.. As Himes pulled donations together from all over Oregon, he uncritically collected both pioneer and Indian relics, sometimes directly from grave robbers.⁴⁷ His travels connected the widespread practice of relic collecting to the centralized institutional collection cultivated at OHS in Portland.

Oregon settlers placed immense value on the stories and relics of the pioneer era, which they viewed as a way to assert Oregon’s historical importance as a state and establish a national narrative of pioneer heroism centered around the white male settler. The *Morning Oregonian* explained, “That which was commonplace fifty years –forty-five years – forty years ago has become heroic now; later it will become marvelous, and later still it will challenge belief in vain, unless the era in these recitals gives place while yet there is time to the written. There is a certain

⁴⁴ “Some Oregon History,” *Hillsboro Independent* (Hillsboro, OR), October 6, 1899.

⁴⁵ Himes’s involvement in the Rogue River Wars at age eleven speaks to the invasive nature of violent, white supremacist pioneer ideologies that infiltrated even the youngest Oregon pioneer boys in their efforts to “tame” the wild American West.

⁴⁶ Carpenter, “Pioneer Problems,” 172.

⁴⁷ In 1903, an *Oregon Daily Journal* article announced that “Henry R. Nichols of Benton County has sent George H. Himes of the State Historical Society, a number of Indian relics which he has collected from graves of the aboriginals in and about his home.” “Indian Relics Donated,” *The Oregon Daily Journal* (Portland, OR), January 10, 1903; Sarah Keyes, “From Stories to Salt Cairns: Uncovering Indigenous Influence in the Formative Years of the Oregon Historical Society, 1898-1905,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 121, no. 2 (2020): 90.

charm about folklore, but it becomes babble, so far as duly accredited fact goes, in a few generations at farthest. Measures should be taken to make these matters history.”⁴⁸ And measures were. By 1900, OHS had founded the *Oregon Historical Quarterly (OHQ)*, and the writing of pioneer reminiscences fueled the publication. *The Hood River Glacier* praised the second issue of the journal, saying “A file kept of the Quarterly will some day furnish an interesting story of Oregon, told as it happened by the men and women who braved the hardships of pioneer life to reclaim Oregon for civilization.”⁴⁹ The journal became yet another facet in forming the collective memory of the pioneer past.

As the white pioneer heroism was on the rise, newly formed Oregon pioneer museums continued to craft history by and for white Oregonians, illustrating a takeover of Western imagery by white pioneer men and women. From this stemmed the ubiquity of white pioneer narratives, most notably through the annual addresses delivered by OHS presidents, religious leaders, or well-known pioneers. OHS held these speeches publicly while also recording them in print to preserve the activities of the early societies. Though the topics ranged widely, all of the speeches centered on the success of the early Oregon pioneer and how the bravery of this journey not only established the superiority of white Western colonists but also should be shared and preserved. Many of these addresses directly discuss Indigenous people while entirely omitting any mention of Black pioneers. Reading between the lines with the understanding of the deeply entwined nature of the treatment of people of color in the American West, it becomes clear how these addresses illuminate the shared underpinnings of their society, their goals of a white-centric

⁴⁸ “Valuable Data,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), April 3, 1900.

⁴⁹ “Hood River Glacier Friday August 3, 1900,” *The Hood River Glacier* (Hood River, OR), August 3, 1900.

historical memory, and the cultivation of ignorance and forgetting that characterized pioneer legacies.

A 1905 book recounts OHS's annual addresses from 1899 through 1905, exhibiting how the first seven annual addresses given to the society membership shaped the trajectory of collective memory in support of the pioneer cause. Looking closely at these speeches, it becomes clear how early pioneer orators combined heroic pioneer imagery, vilification of Indigenous people, and the omission of Black pioneers to craft a world in which white Oregon pioneer men become the conquerors of the frontier and heroes of a white West. Some speakers came as religious leaders, championing a story of pioneer determination as sent by God, others came as pioneers themselves, telling their own personal story of trial and triumph. These subtle differences reveal the nuances of forgetting and remind us that this landscape of ignorance and cultivated memory was not linear or neat but varied and built by a diverse community of pioneers. These addresses exist as a direct reflection of the museum's early beliefs, shared on a public stage. They celebrated the museum's accomplishments, commemorating specific pioneer experiences and perceived heroism. At the same time, they provide a mirror of the settler colonial violence and the exclusion of Black people that characterized Oregon's rise to statehood.

What becomes increasingly clear throughout these early documents is that the preservation of early Oregon pioneer history is inextricably linked to an overwhelmingly white perspective of "civilizing" and colonizing the West. Some documents state this more explicitly than others. In the fourteenth annual meeting of the Oregon Pioneer and Historical Society, a predecessor of OHS, Reverend J.O. Roberts, delivered an annual address that illuminated the direct and interwoven ties between pioneers' stories and attitudes of white superiority. When

discussing the forced religious conversion of Indigenous peoples, he stated, “For reasons already named, the work was limited among these heathen people, as it always must be when a superior race comes in contact with an inferior one. The heathens take on the lives of the civilized race much more readily than their virtues.”⁵⁰ His perspective, elevating the “civilized” white pioneer to the top of the Western hierarchy, was all too common and illuminates how these old pioneers saw themselves, as the superior race among people of color, often referred to as savage or heathens. This narrative of white superiority is found again and again among early OHS documentation; on the institutional side, it is visible in the annual addresses of early OHS meetings, as well as newspaper clippings advertising the exhibit rooms to the public. These documents engage with whiteness in implicit and explicit ways, making the early pioneer society's mission clear in its vocal praise of white pioneer men, repeated vilification of Indigenous actors, and the omission of Black pioneer women.

Early Oregon pioneers and historical societies formed as men like Himes desired to compete with the museological successes of Eastern states. This competition fueled their focus on the “‘golden age’ of the ‘pioneer period’” and furthered the traumatic treatment of Indigenous artifacts.⁵¹ As historian Sarah Keyes notes, “the White pioneers from whom Himes collected appear to have been just as likely to have ‘Indian’ relics to donate as they were to have pioneer relics associated with their personal and family histories.”⁵² Further, excerpts from Himes’s diary revealed a stark lack of critical thinking regarding the origins of donated objects. In an entry

⁵⁰ Oregon Pioneer and Historical Society Records, 1884-1892, Folder 1, Mss 41, OHS Research Library, Portland.

⁵¹ Keyes, “From Stories to Salt Cairns,” 90.

⁵² Keyes, “From Stories to Salt Cairns,” 199.

dated November 9, 1900, he described a donation of “some Indian beads.”⁵³ Keyes argues, “the banality of the entry belies the egregious violence of grave-robbing that had resulted in” the donation of said beads.⁵⁴ Display rooms that he curated blurred the lines between white pioneer donations and Indigenous objects; he uncritically included Native stories, not recognizing the harmful pioneer history as he mixed it with Indigenous objects. Ultimately, racial exclusion did not stop within the economic or political circles and continued into memory and museums, culminating in the cultural forgetting of Black pioneer women’s stories in favor of white heroism and the curated mythology of Indigenous actors.

Silas B. Smith, a prominent early Oregonian with Clatsop roots and a sustained interest in the history of the Clatsop people, delivered the first annual address of OHS on December 16, 1899.⁵⁵ As he spoke, he provided moments of credit and empathy to Indigenous people, saying that he wished to pay tribute to them. In the end, however, he concluded with an all-too-common sentiment that reflected his true beliefs, principally the heightened civilized manner of white settlers in contrast to the “primitive state” of the Northwest. “In my brief span of life,” he intoned, “I have seen the passing of one race from this territory and the oncoming of another. I have witnessed the advent of the pale-faced race into this land of the Northwest, from a few hundred until they number more than a million. I have seen its transition from its primitive state unto its now civilized conditions.”⁵⁶ In the end, Smith accepted the narrative of great white

⁵³ Keyes, “From Stories to Salt Cairns,” 199.

⁵⁴ Keyes, “From Stories to Salt Cairns,” 199.

⁵⁵ Cameron La Follette and Douglas Duer, “Silas B. Smith,” *Oregon Encyclopedia*, <https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/smith-silas-b/>.

⁵⁶ Silas B. Smith, “Beginnings in Oregon,” in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899-1905*, 97.

civilizers and the ever-turning wheel of progress that affirms the extinction theory placed on Indigenous communities in favor of the new race of the West.

The third annual address, delivered by newspaperman D.W. Craig, closely followed Smith's, this time exhibiting extreme derogation toward Indigenous people.⁵⁷ He began by telling tales of past historic and religious migrations of people, at one point stating that "the little bark that carried Caesar and his fortune is renowned in classic story," but it was nothing compared to the "succession of trains which started from the banks of the Missouri at that early date and struck out over the plains toward the Pacific Coast."⁵⁸ He continued, "As the slow-moving procession made its way from day to day over immense plains, where bloodthirsty savages and tramping buffaloes alone held sway, the most lively vigilance was required for the security of all. Besides, the train carried infinitely more than Caesar and his fortune."⁵⁹ Considering the entire history of mankind, Craig viewed the westward march of pioneers as the pinnacle of human achievement, placing it in direct contrast to the "savage beasts and more savage men," that inhabited the land prior to colonial settlement.⁶⁰ The pioneer, he argued on behalf of OHS and its vast membership, was "the vanguard in the march of civilization, who smoothed the way for the generations following after them."⁶¹

Colonel B.F. Shaw presented the annual address delivered in 1903 at the fifth annual meeting. Shaw was a celebrated heroic pioneer, famed for his leadership during a violent

⁵⁷ D.W. Craig, "The Oregon Pioneer; Address of D.W. Craig before the Historical Society," Dec. 21, 1901, in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899-1905*, 164.

⁵⁸ Craig, "The Oregon Pioneer," in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899-1905*, 164, 165.

⁵⁹ Craig, "The Oregon Pioneer," in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899-1905*, 165.

⁶⁰ Craig, "The Oregon Pioneer," in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899-1905*, 163.

⁶¹ Craig, "The Oregon Pioneer," in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899-1905*, 163.

massacre of Walla Walla, Cayuse, and Umatilla people in July 1856. This brutal attack resulted in the death of “sixty men, women, and children, destroying their homes and foodstuffs, and capturing some two hundred horses.”⁶² His annual speech continued in the same tradition as past orations, elevating the white American pioneer while admonishing the character of Indigenous actors. He justified his savagery, saying, “Now the American settlers who came in early times were as different from the Indians as it was possible for them to be. They were men of great energy and push. They had traveled 2000 miles over the dusty plains and were aggressive and persevering and did not know what the word fail meant.”⁶³ He offered this pioneer praise with a room full of proud Oregon settlers who shared his celebration of the pioneer's grit and admired the great men who did not know what the word fail meant. When discussing his wartime involvement, he further explained, “This war was a natural result of the aggressive policy of the white man coming in contact with the idle habits of the Indians.”⁶⁴ In presenting the unfolding of violent massacres as a natural consequence of clashing perspectives, he confirmed the pioneers' elevated vision of themselves and their deeply harmful view of those who came before them.

To understand the erasure of Black women, we must discuss the intertwined treatments of Indigenous women and Black women within museums like OHS. While both histories have been harmed by the controlling hand of white, colonial, and patriarchal American historians, they have felt this impact differently. Sensationalized stories of caricatured Native persons replaced factual histories. By contrast, museums silenced and forgot the histories of Black pioneers; their presence went untold until very recently. Whereas Native women became cultural intermediaries

⁶² William L. Lang, “Benjamin F. Shaw,” *Oregon Encyclopedia*, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/shaw_benjamin_f/.

⁶³ B.F. Shaw, “Medicine Creek Treaty” in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899*, 26.

⁶⁴ Shaw, “Medicine Creek Treaty” in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899-1905*, 27.

and national symbols, Black women were not given the same treatment. This dissonance is caused by racial perceptions and stereotypes that cast Indigenous figures as either savage or particularly sage and often ignore Black women completely. Whether through tokenism or disregard, the stories of Black and Indigenous people have been altered to uphold a white vision of the frontier.

The omission of Black pioneers accompanied the prevalent mistreatment of Natives. In 1877, Overlander Stephen Staats addressed the Oregon Pioneer Association, a predecessor of the Oregon Historical Society, and directly omitted the story of Black pioneer woman Letitia Carson, who traveled alongside him. Staats spoke of David Carson, the man with whom Letitia traveled and the father of her children, fondly as “Uncle Davy,” and remembered him kindly as a tough pioneer. Staats would likely have then interacted with Letitia as well, but he did not speak of her.⁶⁵ In fact, he rarely spoke of women individually in this address and instead generalized them as “the fond mother, the truehearted wife preparing the frugal meal.”⁶⁶ His erasure of Letitia and other pioneer women speaks to the continued intersection of racism and misogyny that characterize pioneer narratives. Moreover, he marked a clear difference between the pure pioneers of his band and the “wiley ‘savages’” they encountered on the trail; his preservation of

⁶⁵ At the time of Staats's address, the Oregon Pioneer Association, formed from earlier manifestations of white pioneer communities, had been around only for five years. On June 13, 1901, the Oregon Pioneer Association renamed itself the Sons and Daughters of Oregon Pioneers. Today, they have 1,100 members worldwide. Merle Miller, “Sons and Daughters of Oregon Pioneers,” *Oregon Encyclopedia*, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/sons_and_daughters_of_oregon_pioneers/#.ZF0pKezM LFo.

⁶⁶ Stephen Staats, “The Occasional Address,” 1877, *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/326>, 2. Many of the primary sources I have used for Letitia's story come from the Letitia Carson Digital History Collection. I created this digital resource as an intern with the Oregon Black Pioneers so that there could be one accessible location for all of the primary sources associated with her life, thus my reliance on this online archive.

heroic whiteness was far-reaching.⁶⁷ Staats, speaking to his white pioneer audience, began his address saying, “I am one of *those* old pioneers,” thereby acknowledging a developing persona that defined his generation: white and knowledgeable of a pioneer past. He praised David Carson for his “true grit and unabated energy” and the “nobleness of his actions.”⁶⁸ He left Letitia entirely out of the picture. While he provided a disclaimer on the possible imperfection of his memory at the start of his speech, it is hard to believe he forgot the presence of the only Black woman in their trail community. It is likely that he viewed her as a slave or servant to David and that racism and misogyny directly affected his recollection.

Later, OHS annual addresses would continue in this same tradition of both attacks on Indigenous people and neglect of Black settlers, mirroring the action of colonial settlement in annual orations. The sixth annual address, delivered in 1904 by Judge Reuben P. Boise, derived from a similar speech he had given to the Oregon Bar Association, sketching “some of the characteristics of our early judges and members of the bar.”⁶⁹ He elaborated on a list of early lawyers and judges of Oregon, occasionally mentioning the “exciting question of the extension of slavery.”⁷⁰ We know how this question was answered by early Oregon men: waves of Black exclusion laws that simultaneously outlawed slavery and kept Black people from living in the state. This was not addressed directly in his address; he talked around it and instead offered a congratulatory and heroic account of each man. In the end, he peddled a familiar narrative of pioneer grit and heroism, stating, “They came with heroic courage, through privations and

⁶⁷ Staats, “The Occasional Address,” 4.

⁶⁸ Staats, “The Occasional Address,” 7.

⁶⁹ Judge Reuben P. Boise, “The Bench and Bar of Early Oregon,” in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899-1905*, 17.

⁷⁰ Boise, “The Bench and Bar,” in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899-1905*, 18.

dangers, and to look back upon their perilous journey-ings, it looks as though many of them must have perished before arriving at their destination, had not some protecting angel guarded their footsteps.”⁷¹ In the last minutes of his speech, he took the time to emblemize these men further, intoning,

These pioneer missionaries were not only brave, energetic men – they were able men of business, capable of planning and putting in operation great enterprises...They were plain, intelligent, earnest, honest men, who cared little for the gilded tinsel and vain display of wealth or station. They were men of giant soul; Men of faith and deeds sublime; Men whose acts shall reach their goal in the mighty depths of time.⁷²

The “exciting question of the extension of slavery” was mentioned only briefly, while the accomplishments and moral character of these early pioneer men were celebrated again and again, establishing a clear pattern of white pioneer superiority in the growing circle of OHS.⁷³

OHS’s president, W.D. Fenton, delivered the seventh annual speech, departing from their tradition of inviting well-known pioneer figures. This address provides especially significant insight into the beliefs and motivations of the society as they were espoused by the president and not simply a member of the organization. Fenton provided a brief overview of the society but really emphasized the future of OHS and the direction it should advance, stating,

The soil we claim was the prize for which all of the great powers planned and failed. The kinship of Englishmen endears two nations and one race to the Oregon Country, and it is to be the seal of the most alert civilization of modern times...Here let us record the great events that have become history, here let us make imperishable the names of the men and women that make biography. In so doing the Oregon Historical Society will be a mute

⁷¹ Boise, “The Bench and Bar,” in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899-1905*, 27.

⁷² Boise, “The Bench and Bar,” in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899-1905*, 28.

⁷³ Boise, “The Bench and Bar,” in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899-1905*, 18.

instrument in the hands of Divine Providence to serve mankind by keeping a faithful record of all that may survive, – to enlighten, to honor, and to ennoble the race.⁷⁴

Fenton affirmed a racial message: the pioneers represent the one race that conquered the West, and the goals of OHS were to honor and ennoble the white race. Throughout his address, a shared vision of the Oregon pioneer as a white, heroic savior of uncivilized lands became clear. Speakers cultivated this perspective alongside the repeated vilification and dismissal of Indigenous people and the continued omission of Black stories, even when mentioning the issue of slavery. Despite variances in pioneer experience and narrative, speeches directly reflected the founding views and beliefs of OHS, summed up and neatly presented to members each year, repeatedly affirming that the organization was to celebrate the contributions of whites only.

In addition to these annual addresses, early newspaper mentions of the exhibit rooms at OHS exemplified the use of the museum space to cultivate a shared historical understanding of white pioneer heroism. Though they do not provide many specific details on exhibits or materials, they illustrate the bridge between the museum collections, the curation of these materials, and the public as active visitors within the early museum space. People desired historical knowledge of the shared pioneer past, one that instilled a sense of national identity and Oregonian pride. And the rooms delivered. Only a year after opening, Himes wrote that the rooms had attracted 10,000 visitors, with “persons from every state in the Union and from many foreign countries.”⁷⁵ The collections had also grown considerably, doubling by November 1899.

⁷⁴ Fenton, “The Oregon Historical Society” in *Oregon Historical Society Annual Reports 1899-1905*, 35.

⁷⁵ “Oregon Historical Society,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), January 2, 1901.

As visitors and objects multiplied, so did membership, which counted 653 people by 1901, including people from over twenty-three Oregon counties.⁷⁶

Early 1900s Oregon newspaper articles urged readers to visit the rooms of OHS by including vivid details of the objects, convincing Oregonians to flock to the rooms for educational and experiential purposes.⁷⁷ A piece of wood from a pioneer apple tree and “a bayonet belonging to a U.S. musket, one of a number sent to settlers in Clatsop County, for use in repelling an expected attack by the Indians” were all considered incredibly valuable artifacts.⁷⁸ These objects indicated what the museum curators thought the public wanted to see, thereby creating and confirming a longstanding historical consciousness shaped around the mighty white pioneer. The *Morning Oregonian* advertised the rooms to everyone who could visit: businessmen, residents of the city, strangers in the city, and especially teachers and students.⁷⁹ According to the *Morning Oregonian*, the society was “rapidly becoming one of the most important institutions of the city and state.”⁸⁰ Further, pioneers routinely appreciated these rooms for “the efforts of the Oregon Historical Society in endeavoring to gather a place of safe-keeping the relics of the journey across the plains and those relating to the primitive conditions of early

⁷⁶ Oregon Historical Society,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), January 2, 1901.

⁷⁷ “Historic Pioneer Dance,” *The Sunday Oregonian* (Portland, OR), March 25, 1900; “At the Historical Society,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), June 23, 1900.

⁷⁸ “At the Historical Society,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), June 23, 1900.

⁷⁹ “City News in Brief,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), February 10, 1900; “City News in Brief,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), March 3, 1900.

⁸⁰ “City News in Brief,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), May 11, 1900.

life in Oregon.”⁸¹ Ultimately, the relationship between the museum and the public found its roots in white pioneer heroism.

OHS provided a foundation for pioneer history, but it was also simultaneously absorbed into academic institutions across the state. Several OHS founding members and employees also served as professors and leaders of Oregon universities. OHQ founder Frederick G. Young, who edited the journal until 1929, taught sociology and economics at the University of Oregon.⁸² Joseph Shafer, a popular author for OHQ, was the first academically trained professional historian to teach at the University of Oregon and wrote a classic textbook, *A History of the Pacific Northwest*.⁸³ W.D. Fenton, the OHS president who delivered the seventh annual address, helped fund the University of Oregon, which named a building in his honor.⁸⁴ The increasingly academic quality of pioneer history relates to the conceptualization of settler conquest as the pinnacle of human achievement.

During the turn of the century, classicism and progressivism fueled the evolution of personal pioneer collections into museological and academic settings, cementing the white pioneer as “the vanguard in the march of civilization.”⁸⁵ All of these instances reveal the process of forgetting, evolving from personal manifestations of pioneer history to museums, and

⁸¹ “City News in Brief,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), June 13, 1900, “City News in Brief,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), May 11, 1900.

⁸² Richard Engeman, “Oregon Historical Society,” *Oregon Encyclopedia*, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/oregon_historical_society/.

⁸³ Jeff LaLande, “Joseph Schafer,” *Oregon Encyclopedia*, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/schafer_joseph_1867_1941/.

⁸⁴ University of Oregon, “Then and now: Fenton Hall in 1906, and today,” Facebook, November 19, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/universityoforegon/photos/a.144244069841/10153414279444842/?type=3&paipv=0&ea_v=AfapetDwMqKJ7bGZt2_3csgN4PrpimgnoRsV-ZqZPW6cUR00JJ9X48-3kntl_FTSg1E&_rdr.

⁸⁵ University of Oregon, “Then and now: Fenton Hall in 1906, and today,” November 19, 2015.

eventually academic institutions that perpetuated a shared notion of white settler history. This process crafted a complex landscape of pioneer whiteness and calculated forgetting that was even more difficult to overcome and challenge as later decades of Western scholarship attempted to reclaim and revitalize pioneer narratives.

Through waves of overlapping reminiscences (personal, museological, and academic), the story of white triumph over land and Indigenous people was perpetuated in Oregon's history, further cementing the idea of "civilized" whiteness and the overwhelming white character of the Oregon pioneer. Institutions broadcast white pioneerism and built on one another. These selective narratives spread nationwide, establishing a shared national consciousness that idealized a narrow characterization of Western pioneers. The ubiquity of pioneer imagery, fomented through the efforts of white pioneer organizations, left no room for Black women pioneers. Not until the Black Power movement of the 1960s and the rise of social history in the 1970s did Black history come to the fore. It took decades for stories of resilient Black pioneers to be told in academic and mainstream narratives. Even then, Black women's stories often remained untold. This silence, coupled with a repeated emphasis on white stories in early Oregon history institutions, culminated in erasure and the conditioned public memory of Western history.⁸⁶ The harmful forgetting of Black women's pioneer stories offers us an inroad for the exploration of the complex and fraught relationship between Black history and museums. By

⁸⁶ My language surrounding public memory, cultural memory, and conditioned memory is largely inspired by Cynthia Culver Prescott, who argues that public pioneer mother monuments shaped public knowledge of history. Essentially, through nation-building and commemorating the pioneer woman of the West, a narrow popular memory formed that convinced the American public of a prevailing pioneer imagery. Cynthia Culver Prescott, *Pioneer Mother Monuments: Constructing Cultural Memory* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), 8, 11.

exploring the stories of individual Black women, we can better understand how to repair a relationship that should have been there from the beginning.

Chapter 3: Between Mountains and Mothers: Letitia Carson's Life as a Black Overlander, Homesteader, and Midwife in Western Oregon (1818-1888)

The Oregon Trail was not a forgiving landscape for childbirth. But it was an inevitable reality for expectant Black pioneer woman Letitia Carson. There are no surviving accounts of Letitia giving birth near the crossing of the South Platte River, where the Oregon Trail begins to follow the North Fork.¹ We are saddled with many more unknowns than certainties in this case. What we do know is that Letitia Carson was a Black woman traveling alongside a white man named David Carson, and she was pregnant with their first child, Martha.² We also know what they packed and with whom they traveled. Aside from this, we must critically imagine this scene, giving space to a history obscured from our shared understanding of the past. In this, we are tasked with restoration work, pulling from overwhelmingly white archives to weave together stories of enslaved and later freed women and their experiences.³

Letitia would have known childbirth was coming soon. Maybe there was a conversation with David, a rush to find a place to deliver Martha in a safe, slightly secluded area. Back home in Missouri, laboring women were treated by doctors and midwives in the safety of their own houses. Letitia had to face the climate of the plains. Water ran nearby, cloven hoofs marched in

¹ Bob Zybach, "The Search for Letitia Carson in Douglas County: Who Is Letitia Carson?" *The Umpqua Trapper* 50, no. 4 (2014), <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/347>; Donna M. Wojcik, *The Brazen Overlanders of 1845* (Portland, OR: Self-pub, 1976).

² U.S. Census Bureau, 1850 United States Federal Census, Benton County, Oregon, <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/8925728:8054>; Death Certificate for Martha Carpenter, 17 July 1911, Registered Number: 2061, Adams, Oregon; Fidelia March Bowers, *The Organizational Journal of an Emigrant Train of 1845* (Eugene, OR: Lane County Pioneer-Historical Society, 1960), n.p.

³ Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 11,12.

the distance, birds and insects flew overhead, and the smell of dust and dirt caked her clothes. From the start of their journey, Letitia was immersed in nature, and Martha's birth was no different. However, it likely marked the first birth Letitia experienced in the rural West, where she would come to assist countless other deliveries.⁴ It is here at this river junction that we can begin to understand what called her to midwifery and caretaking. It was a culmination of the intimacy between people that characterized her journey and the sense of urgency and necessity that transformed her life into one of caring for others in the uncertain times of the early settler West.

Letitia was a homesteader, midwife, and active community member, occupying a complex hybrid position within early settler societies in Benton and Douglas County, Oregon. Although evidence regarding the specifics of her midwifery work is sparse, those who knew Letitia always noted first that she was a midwife. Her labors in medical, agricultural, and social capacities provide insight into the multi-layered impact of Black women settlers during the nineteenth century. Through this work, she established both social and healing authority and contributed to communities of care amid tumultuous iterations of white settlement.

Early Life

Letitia was born into slavery between 1814 and 1818 in Kentucky.⁵ The first thirty years of her life have been lost to time and archival uncertainties.⁶ Using tools of critical analysis, we

⁴ Due to the obscured nature of Letitia's early life, before she enters the historical record in 1845, it is unclear if she was a practicing midwife when she lived in Missouri. Considering the common practice of young pregnancies among enslaved women, Letitia also likely had children she left behind in Kentucky or Missouri before she traveled west.

⁵ Zybach, "The Search for Letitia Carson in Douglas County," 4; U.S. Census Bureau, 1850 United States Federal Census, Benton County, Oregon, *Ancestry*. It is unclear exactly where she was born or by whom she was enslaved.

⁶ Because Letitia took David's last name, Carson, we do not know her last name prior to their relationship. This would give us critical insight into her early life, possibly leading us to find the family she was born into or enslaved

can consider the common experience of young, enslaved women in Kentucky and Missouri to better understand what her early life would have looked like. According to her biographer Bob Zybach, Letitia was likely involved in agricultural work in the tobacco or hemp farming industries and may have worked as a house servant or field hand, or possibly both.⁷ When she traveled west, she brought a cow alongside her and kept it safe for the entire journey, indicating that she would have had some prior experience with livestock and agricultural work.⁸ In her first lawsuit, she described herself as a domestic servant for David, arguing that she was due back wages after his death. Had she been a domestic servant in her past as a young, enslaved woman? What other early life experiences contributed to her success with agricultural and community care in Oregon Territory? Though there are many unknowns, this first part of Letitia's life in Kentucky and Missouri, and later on the Oregon Trail, contributed to her later career as a community midwife and homesteader.

Letitia lived in Kentucky and Missouri before her overland journey. Both western border states relied less on large-scale plantations, where enslaved people labored under the watchful eyes of overseers, and slave holders profited off of a system of small farms cultivating hemp or tobacco.⁹ In these frontier states, enslaved laborers cleared forested land, helped build

by as a child. However, without this crucial piece of information, we are left only with what census records show: her age and the state she was born in, Kentucky.

⁷ Zybach's postulation is based on the most common industries in which enslaved people worked in Kentucky and Missouri. Zybach, "The Search for Letitia Carson in Douglas County," 4.

⁸ Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Walker Deposition," October 8, 1856, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives.

⁹ As historian Marion Brunson Lucas writes, "Most Kentucky bondsmen labored in a land of small, self sufficient farms, a circumstance very different from the South as a whole where 25 percent lived on large plantations with at least fifty bondsmen." Marion Brunson Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 2003): 2; John David Smith, "'To Hue the Line and Let the Chips Fall Where They May': J. Winston Coleman's 'Slavery Times in Kentucky' Reconsidered," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 103, no. 4 (2005): 696.

homesteads, and were tasked with the role of protector against Indigenous communities.¹⁰

Though we cannot say for certain whether Letitia lived in a rural or more populous area, the majority of enslaved people in Kentucky worked on small-scale farms.¹¹ As historian Marion Brunson Lucas explains, most Kentucky farmers moved to the Bluegrass region beyond the eastern mountains in search of tillable land.¹² Within this landscape, Letitia would have likely worked as an enslaved domestic servant or field hand, possibly doing both jobs as needed.¹³ According to historian Diane Glave, the environment was always closely tethered to enslaved childhoods. As children, they would watch their adult family members labor in the fields over tobacco or hemp. As they grew older, they would begin to help in the fields, fighting humidity, heat, and hunger as they labored over the crops.¹⁴

Though the period between her birth and her departure on the Overland Trail in 1845 falls into a void of uncertainties, secondary and primary sources provide some idea of what Letitia's early life would have looked like. At some point before 1845, Letitia and David met. David likely leased or bought Letitia, and the two would have lived together at his house in town.¹⁵ David also owned a farm in Platte County, Missouri, opening up other possibilities for

¹⁰ Smith, "'To Hue the Line and Let the Chips Fall Where They May,'" 694.

¹¹ Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 2.

¹² Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, xvi, xvii.

¹³ Ellen Eslinger, "Farming on the Kentucky Frontier," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 107, no. 1 (2009): 28.

¹⁴ Glave, *Rooted in the Earth*, 94, 95.

¹⁵ "Annals of Platte County Missouri," June 1839, Letitia Carson Digital History Collection, *Missouri Documents*, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/223>; Platte County Historical Society, "Platte County Missouri Records 1839-1849," 1993, Letitia Carson Digital History Collection, *Missouri Documents*, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/242>; "David Carson Naturalization," March 1840, Letitia Carson Digital History Collection, *Missouri Documents*, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/231>; "David Carson Land Deed Platte County Missouri," Dec 16, 1841, Letitia Carson Digital History Collection, *Missouri Documents*, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/1>.

Letitia's agricultural labor history.¹⁶ These details provide a small window into her pre-1845 world.

In April 1845, Letitia re-enters the archive. Hundreds of hopeful settlers met as the "Savannah Oregon Emigrating Society" along the banks of the Wolf River in Missouri a month before their departure on the Oregon Trail.¹⁷ Irish immigrant David Carson was part of the executive council and one of many men elected to draft resolutions for the group.¹⁸ The organizational journal listed 293 total travelers divided into sixty-six wagons, each acting as their own party.¹⁹ Carson's wagon consisted of 600 pounds each of flour and bacon, 100 pounds of meat, eight oxen, three armed men, four guns, two horses, one wagon, a cow, and a woman.²⁰ The woman in question was Letitia Carson. She is not mentioned elsewhere in the organizational documents and was likely viewed by others as an enslaved woman. Throughout their journey, and later in Oregon Territory, Letitia saw herself as a domestic servant working for David.²¹ Despite the unknowns surrounding the relationship between David and Letitia, we do know Letitia was beginning her third trimester with David's child when the two started their journey West.²²

¹⁶ Zybach, "The Search for Letitia Carson in Douglas County," 4; Platte County Historical Society, "Platte County Missouri Records 1839-1849," 1993, Letitia Carson Digital History Collection, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/242>.

¹⁷ Bowers, *The Organizational Journal of an Emigrant Train of 1845*.

¹⁸ Bowers, *The Organizational Journal of an Emigrant Train of 1845*.

¹⁹ Bowers, *The Organizational Journal of an Emigrant Train of 1845*.

²⁰ Bowers, *The Organizational Journal of an Emigrant Train of 1845*.

²¹ Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Letitia Carson bill to David Carson for unpaid labor," July 17, 1854, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/29>.

²² Bob Zybach, "Pioneer Woman Confronts Discrimination," *Gazette-Times*, February 28, 1991, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/342>; Death Certificate for Martha Carpenter, 17 July 1911, Registered Number: 2061, Adams, Oregon.

As harrowing as the trail was for white pioneer women, it was made even more difficult for Letitia due to the overlapping intersections of racism and misogyny that surrounded her experience.²³ Although Letitia kept no diary, other instances of Black women traveling the Oregon Trail provide insight into the conditions she may have faced. Rose Jackson, who came West in 1849, was rumored to have been kept in a box for the entirety of her journey, coming out only at night.²⁴ While it is family lore, the fact that the story is told at all is an indication of the extreme treatment Black women received on the trail. That same year, a company abandoned a Black mother and daughter while traveling west. The mother had “talked sassy” to the man leading the group, and she was immediately expelled.²⁵ Their belongings “were all thrown out in a heap on the campground, and the Army train went on, leaving her & daughter, without provision, to the mercy of their Californians or the savages.”²⁶ While there is not one single experience that represents Black women overlanders, there is a visible pattern of converging misogyny and racism resulting in exclusion and ostracization. White overlander Margaret Frink wrote of a Black woman she saw walking alone in the Nevada desert. Frink observed her, “Tramping along through the heat and dust carrying a cast iron bake stove on her head, with her provisions and a blanket piled on top—all she possessed in the world—bravely pushing on for

²³ Sylvia D. Hoffert, “Childbearing on the Trans-Mississippi Frontier, 1830-1900,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1991): 276, 77; Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 156, 7.

²⁴ Fears of Black Exclusion Laws contributed to this decision. For more on the story of Rose Jackson see *Black in Oregon - Rose and John Jackson*, and *Black Americans in Early Oregon City (1841 - 1864) — Clackamas County Historical Society*.

²⁵ Moore, *Sweet Freedom's Plains*, 126.

²⁶ Robert Eccleston, *Overland to California on the Southwestern Trail, 1849: The Diary of Robert Eccleston*, ed. George P. Hammond and Edward H. Howe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 95, 96.

California.”²⁷ As white women wrote of isolation, Letitia would have likely faced similar but compounding experiences, considering racial and gender barriers.

Tracing the movement of the company alongside the birth date on Martha’s death certificate places David and Letitia near the California Crossing of the South Platte River when Martha was born.²⁸ Fording rivers was one of the most treacherous parts of the Overland Trail, made only more complex by Letitia’s late-term pregnancy. Whether they had safely crossed the Platte or were planning to in the coming days, Letitia’s birth experience was likely marked by danger and chaos. They had been traveling only a month before Letitia’s water broke, and she gave birth to Martha on June 9th. That same day, a hailstorm thundered along the Platte, interrupting several trains.²⁹ The undulating hills offered little respite for travelers and an almost unimaginable landscape for childbirth. It is likely that the only shelter was the canvas canopy over their small, tightly packed wagon. The pace of travel and the deadline of the looming winter months made stops brief and rest infrequent. Settlers’ perceived threats of Indigenous violence also kept them moving through the landscape quickly to avoid conflict with the communities they invaded. Letitia may have had the luxury of a layover for a day or two, but long periods of rest were uncommon and impractical.³⁰ There were few comforts in this constantly changing environment.

²⁷ Margaret Frink, quoted in Moore, *Sweet Freedom’s Plains*, 81.

²⁸ Wojcik, *The Brazen Overlanders of 1845*; Death Certificate for Martha Carpenter, 17 July 1911, Registered Number: 2061, Adams, Oregon.

²⁹ Wojcik, *The Brazen Overlanders of 1845*, 80.

³⁰ Myres, *Westering Women*, 130.

After Martha's birth, Letitia and David still had five months of travel ahead of them.³¹ At the crossing of the South Platte River, they would have been on their way out of Nebraska, with 1,300 miles to go. Their continued movement along the trail and her duties as a company member complicated the postpartum period. Her fellow party members were all men, most likely white. It is unknown if they held any medical knowledge or insight into child-rearing. Letitia's relationship to these men, as a pregnant Black woman traveling to a free territory, must have been difficult to explain to other company members. The introduction of her baby further complicated this relationship and the way it was perceived by others. Did the men she traveled alongside help her with newborn Martha? As a woman, she was expected to cook, wash clothes, darn damaged garments, clean, collect supplies, and help with the wagon.³² The presence of Martha amplified the trials of the journey. Every river fording, hot desert landscape, mountainous terrain, and frigid cold day they experienced became more complicated. Confined within both gender and racial expectations, Letitia likely carried out most of the parental care. Children were a particularly at-risk population along the Oregon Trail; the rough wagon rides, exposure to harsh elements, danger of fording rivers, and unruly livestock posed countless threats to infants. The vigilant care required in the postpartum period would have truly stretched the limits of Letitia's capacity as a settler, mother, and caretaker in these months.

The unforgiving landscape was accompanied by equally unsettling physical ailments, all too common along the trail. While some trains had midwives and doctors, most companies rarely had access to doctors, medicine, and medical advice. The trail was characterized by communal responsibility and mutual care, and many travelers assumed healing roles even if they had no

³¹ Map of their travels taken from Wojcik, *The Brazen Overlanders of 1845*.

³² Myres, *Westering Women*, 103-5.

medical knowledge.³³ The nearest available hands nursed, fed, and cared for sick and injured travelers.³⁴ Travelers were exposed to quick-moving illnesses such as the usual diseases: measles, chickenpox, whooping cough, and scarlet fever, but also the more deadly conditions such as cholera, smallpox, and dysentery that marked the trail.³⁵ Stories from historian Lillian Schlissel's *Women's Diaries* exemplify what women brought with them. Overlander Catherine Haun's diary listed quinine, hartshorn, citric acid, opium, and whiskey as recommended trail cures.³⁶ Elizabeth Geer's trail diary confirmed this, writing, "no one should travel this road without medicine." She urged each family to bring physicking pills, castor oil, rum, and peppermint essence.³⁷ Letitia's wagon likely carried a medicine chest that would have included similar remedies. Often, other nearby mothers offered to help. It is unclear if Letitia, as a Black woman, would have been granted this kindness. Some Oregon wagon trains banned Black settlers completely. The articles of incorporation for an 1843 Oregon-bound company stated, "No Black or Mulatto person shall, in any case or any circumstances whatever, be admitted into this society, or permitted to emigrate with it."³⁸ With such racist attitudes increasing as even Northern states like Illinois and Indiana banned Black people from entering, it is uncertain

³³ Carter, "Sometimes When I Hear the Winds Sigh," 156.

³⁴ Carter, "Sometimes When I Hear the Winds Sigh," 155.

³⁵ Myres, *Westering Women*, 130.

³⁶ Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 61.

³⁷ Schlissel, *Women's Diaries*, 61.

³⁸ Myres, *Westering Women*, 85.

whether Letitia would have received the same community-minded medical care as other mothers on the trail.³⁹

Thankfully, Letitia would have been prepared. Black midwifery was prevalent among enslaved women in the South during this time. As historians Keisha Goode and Barbara Katz Rothman observe, the majority of Southern births during the antebellum period, regardless of race, were attended by Black midwives.⁴⁰ The tradition of Black midwifery was intergenerational; many Black midwives learned the trade through apprenticeships with experienced and established midwives as the practice was passed from generation to generation.⁴¹ It is likely that Letitia assisted community midwives. Further, it is likely that at thirty-one years old, Martha was not Letitia's first child.⁴² Enslaved women were expected to have children as soon as they were able, especially after the 1807 act to prohibit the importation of slaves.⁴³ Enslaved women often gave birth to their first child in their early teens.⁴⁴ This would

³⁹ In 1851, Indiana prohibited all Black people from entering the state. Illinois did the same in 1853. Myres, *Westering Women*, 85.

⁴⁰ Goode and Rothman, "African-American Midwifery," 75.

⁴¹ Katrina Donald-Hazzard, *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 137-8.

⁴² There is a significant history of reproductive resistance among enslaved women during this time and many women induced their own abortions, birth control, and other methods to cease reproduction and stop the cycle of enslavement and oppression. Due to archival absences, we do not know for certain whether Letitia had children before she met David. Jennifer Morgan's works, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* and *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, and Alexandra J. Finley's *An Intimate Economy: Enslaved Women, Work, and America's Domestic Slave Trade* explore this in more detail.

⁴³ Melissa De Witte, "Stanford Scholar Reveals the Inner Lives of Enslaved Women by Studying Religious, Sacred Practices," *Stanford Report*, Stanford University, February 18, 2022, <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2022/02/studying-inner-lives-enslaved-women-religion-sacred#:~:text=Enslaved%20women%20of%20prime%20childbearing,slaves%20into%20the%20United%20States.>

⁴⁴ Emily West, "Hidden Voices: Enslaved Women in the Lowcountry and U.S. South: Motherhood and Children," Lowcountry Digital History Initiative, College of Charleston, <https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/hidden-voices/enslaved-women-their-families/motherhood-and-children.>

have been crucial in the moments of her own birthing experience, as race likely isolated her from the surrounding overlanders. As she lay on the uneven ground of the plains or the wooden panels of her wagon, preparing to give birth to Martha, she would have thought back to her past experiences with childbirth.

In addition to Martha, we also know that Letitia cared for a cow that she brought across the plains.⁴⁵ Later legal documents identify Letitia as the primary caretaker of the livestock.⁴⁶ Throughout the entire journey, while pregnant and later as a new mother, Letitia kept her cow safe and protected from the dangers of the trail. From this cow came the thriving herd of twenty seven that Letitia raised in Benton County.⁴⁷ Here, we can begin to comprehend her connection to the land, from early enslavement on small farms in Kentucky, across the Oregon Trail with her precious cow companion, to the Willamette Valley, and later to Douglas County after buying back her belongings and claiming her own homestead land. Near the end of their journey, David and Letitia were separated, and Letitia was sent forward with other mothers and children; her cow was left behind with David and other men. Letitia and six-month-old Martha were on their own for the last leg of the journey. Letitia was alone in caring for Martha, the wagon, and their belongings.

The Overland travelers of 1845 remember David in reminiscences, but Letitia goes unmentioned. In 1877, fellow immigrant Stephen Staats delivered the Occasional Address at the Oregon Pioneer Association, recounting his Overland Trail journey and paying tribute to the late,

⁴⁵ Carson vs. Smith, “Walker Deposition,” October 8, 1856.

⁴⁶ Carson vs. Smith, “Walker Deposition,” October 8, 1856.

⁴⁷ Carson vs. Smith, “Walker Deposition,” October 8, 1856.

“courageous” Uncle Davy Carson.⁴⁸ From Staat’s story, we know that David stayed with those driving the livestock over the mountains and into the Willamette Valley while women and children made rafts to travel the river to Vancouver. As David and the men traveled up the mountain, the cattle were lost in a snowstorm. David had a favorite cow, likely the one Letitia had brought with her, and couldn’t bear to lose it to the Cascades, so he set off searching for the missing heifer. Along with “a few trusty and dauntless spirits,” David successfully located not only his cow but the rest of the cattle near Mt. Hood under the cover of perpetual snow.⁴⁹ In this recovery act, Carson also saved the overlanders, who were close to perishing in the storm, lost without livestock or the rest of the train. David’s bravery is immortalized in Staat’s legacy-building text, but Letitia’s story of childbirth and her other experiences on the trail are never recounted.

Soap Creek Valley

In December of 1845, David journeyed south to the mid-Willamette Valley, where he claimed 640 acres of land, the amount entitled to white married couples.⁵⁰ They settled along the Soap Creek Valley in Benton County, Oregon. Letitia made her home in this new environment, working carefully with the terrain to cultivate farmland and negotiate the survival of her family and livestock. She quickly established herself as a steward of this land, while David was the legal owner. Letitia likely employed skills and knowledge she had absorbed while enslaved. Now, she

⁴⁸ Staats, “The Occasional Address,” 6.

⁴⁹ Staats, “The Occasional Address,” 6.

⁵⁰ “David Carson Polk County Donation Land Claim,” October 19, 1847, Oregon Territory Government, Oregon State Archives, Letitia Carson Digital History Collection, *Oregon Documents*, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/210>. The 1857 map of Carson’s Donation Land Claim shows the coordinates and location and a drawing of the shape and size of the land. Also see the following maps: <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/257>, and <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/354>.

labored over land that was her own and over cattle she, and David, had kept safe and secure across the treacherous journey west. She would come to understand her surrounding landscape intimately, aware of even slight changes to animal behavior, climate patterns, and the growth of their shared crops.⁵¹ Letitia entered this increasingly white landscape and quickly fell into the role of homesteader and domestic servant.

All of this did not exist in a vacuum. The land that Letitia was transforming, appreciating, and caring for was the home of Indigenous people. Her Benton County homestead was constructed upon the land of the Kalapuyan people.⁵² The name “Willamette” itself is a colonized adaptation of the Clackamas Chinook village, *Walamt*, which sat on the other side of the Clackamas River estuary near Oregon City.⁵³ As white settlers entered the valley, the Kalapuya were met with decades of devastating brutality through waves of epidemic disease, violence, and forceful colonization of their lands. Provisional settler governments certified Donation Land Claims established upon Kalapuya land, leaving the Indigenous communities dispossessed and decimated by disease. Their land, taken from them by white colonists, would continually change and no longer be meticulously cared for through cultural burning practices.

⁵¹ Glave, *Rooted in the Earth*, 35.

⁵² “Homepage,” *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/>.

⁵³ As a group, the Kalapuya are the largest Native American community in Western Oregon, with a population estimated at twenty-five thousand distributed across nineteen bands before the arrival of Euro-American settler colonists. While each band shared certain resources, land, and parts of languages, they were autonomous groups, who spoke different dialects and resided in separate villages. See David G. Lewis, “Kalapuyans: Seasonal Lifeways, TEK, Anthropocene,” NDN History Research, *The Quartux Journal*, November 8, 2016, <https://ndnhistoryresearch.com/2016/11/08/kalapuyans-seasonal-lifeways-tek-anthropocene/>. Other origin stories state that the word Willamette is derived from the Kalapuya word *Walama* which means “to spill or pour water.” The suffixes “et” and “ette” are most likely French and the name of the river was recorded as “Wallamette” in a Gibbs-Starling map of 1851; David Lewis (Takelma, Chinook, Molalla, Santiam Kalapuya), “Willamette Falls,” *Oregon Encyclopedia*, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/willamette_falls/; Henry Zenk, “Notes on Native American Place-names of the Willamette Valley Region,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 109: 1 (Spring 2008), 25-26.

When the Carsons arrived, there were fewer than one thousand Kalapuya remaining, with some bands numbering a dozen or fewer.⁵⁴ Historians estimate 97 percent mortality among the Kalapuya people.⁵⁵ By 1851, there remained no unclaimed land in the Willamette Valley, and Euro-American settlers issued a call for genocidal violence and removal.⁵⁶

Although we have a limited understanding of Letitia and David's time and lifestyle in the Soap Creek Valley from 1845 until David's death in 1852, we can surmise that Letitia and David likely built their homestead in the spring of 1846 after staying in a preliminary cabin through the winter months. When the Donation Land Claim Act was passed in 1850, David had to refile his Soap Creek Valley claim. In the process, his claim was halved to 340 acres, indicating that county officials did not recognize David and Letitia's union as legitimate, either because interracial marriages weren't lawful or because authorities believed Letitia was enslaved. While the cabin was the only documented building on their Soap Creek land, an outhouse, a smokehouse, a root cellar, and a barn or stable were likely outbuildings.⁵⁷ We know from Letitia's second lawsuit that she was the primary cattle raiser, but the 1852 appraisal document

⁵⁴ Lewis, "Kalapuyans: Seasonal Lifeways, TEK, Anthropocene." David G. Lewis, *Tribal Histories of the Willamette Valley*, (Portland, Oregon: Ooligan Press, 2023), 9.

⁵⁵ David G. Lewis, "Agent of Rebirth, Kalapuyan Culture in Linn County," NDN History Research, *The Quartux Journal*], April 23, 2020, <https://ndnhistoryresearch.com/2020/04/23/agent-of-rebirth-kalapuyan-culture-in-linn-county/>; Lewis, *Tribal Histories of the Willamette Valley*, 10.

⁵⁶ David G. Lewis, "Kalapuyan Tribal History."

⁵⁷ These additional buildings are likely for several reasons. Zybach posits that David had likely farmed and processed hogs back in Missouri, explaining the enormous 600 lbs. of bacon he was able to bring on the trail. Additionally, when Letitia later homesteaded in Douglas County, she built several other buildings on her property including a barn, a granary, and a smokehouse, and planted an orchard of approximately one hundred fruit trees. Bowers, *The Organizational Journal of an Emigrant Train of 1845*. See Letitia Carson, Homestead File No. 103, June 19, 1868, Douglas County, Oregon, Land Office: Records of the Bureau of Land Management, National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

shows that the couple also raised oxen, horses, and pigs.⁵⁸ Cattle grazed on native grasses, and Letitia grew apples and potatoes and likely harvested wild berries and filberts seasonally. In 1947, Oregon State University student Robert Wilson photographed an apple tree that Letitia and David likely planted on their Benton County homestead. According to Zybach, the tree was named in honor of Letitia, who may have planted it when she lived there in the 1840s and 50s. In 1849, Letitia gave birth to their second child, Andrew C. "Adam or Jack" Carson.⁵⁹ While the circumstances of his birth remain unknown, we do know that this was yet another rural birth for Letitia, likely accomplished without a doctor present.⁶⁰

After seven years of homesteading in Benton County, David Carson passed away in the fall of 1852, and wealthy, pro-slavery neighbor Greenberry Smith became administrator of Carson's estate.⁶¹ Smith lived just a few properties away from the Carsons on a 642-acre claim stretched across the valley.⁶² In 1850, he received a large fortune in the wake of his brother's death and quickly became notorious among poor farmers for his land-grabbing efforts as he

⁵⁸ Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Estate sale of late David Carson's property," Jan 4, 1853, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/7>.

⁵⁹ Andrew also went by Adam and Jack throughout his life, though it is unclear why. Death Certificate for Andrew Carson, September 14, 1922, State Index Number 164, Canyonville, Oregon.

⁶⁰ See Appendix, Figure 1 for photograph of the Letitia Carson Apple Tree.

⁶¹ "Taken Up," *Weekly Oregon Statesman* (Salem, OR), August 13, 1852; Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Bill for 50 from Doctor SA Smith," Jan 10, 1853, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/10>; Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Greenberry Smith confirmed as administrator of David Carson estate paid 1000," Nov 25, 1852, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/2>. Carson vs. Smith, "Greenberry Smith confirmed as administrator of David Carson estate paid 1000," Nov 25, 1852; "Administrator's Notice for David Carson estate," *Weekly Oregon Statesman* (Salem, OR), December 4, 1852.

⁶² U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management General Land Office Records, Mineral Survey Township No. 10, South Range No. 5 West Willamette Meridian (March 1860), https://glorerecords.blm.gov/details/survey/default.aspx?dm_id=331964&sid=3o0ys1ez.r20#surveyDetailsTabIndex=2.

offered high-interest loans to struggling Benton County residents.⁶³ Eventually, Smith acquired twenty thousand acres of land, half a million dollars, and a reputation for tax evasion.⁶⁴ Once Smith was assigned administrator, he quickly seized the property from Letitia and her children, taking everything, including their clothes, housewares, livestock, and personal belongings.⁶⁵ Letitia was left homeless with her two children. In early January 1853, Smith held a public auction of David's land and all of the family's possessions.⁶⁶ Letitia spent \$104.87 to buy back what she could of her family's belongings: "one tub, one large iron pot, one skillet + lid, a half dozen plates, one bed & bedding, one roan cow, and one brindle cow & calf."⁶⁷ She spent nearly \$4,355 in 2025 dollars, illuminating how costly this action was and just how essential these items were to her. Amid this uprooting turmoil, she hired Corvallis lawyer, Andrew Thayer to sue Smith twice: for the value of her cattle and for back wages owed for labor she had done for Carson.⁶⁸ She won both suits.

Letitia's legal action illustrates the complexity of her labor as a Black woman in Oregon, the strength of her relationships with her neighbors, her homesteading successes as seen through her treasured livestock, and her ability to establish authority within white spaces. In the aftermath

⁶³ "Greenberry Smith's Start," *The Oregonian* (Portland, OR), March 27, 1888; "Greenberry Smith's Fortune," *The Oregonian* (Portland, OR), April 23, 1888; "Cowardly Attacks Against Accessor for Doing His Duty," *Corvallis Gazette-Times* (Corvallis, OR), May 30, 1884.

⁶⁴ "Cowardly Attacks," *Corvallis Gazette-Times* (Corvallis, OR), May 30, 1884; "Sued for an Accounting, A Large to be Brought up in Court, Greenberry Smith Estate," *Corvallis Gazette-Times* (Corvallis, OR), March 30, 1888.

⁶⁵ Carson vs. Smith, "Estate sale of late David Carson's property," Jan 4, 1853.

⁶⁶ Carson vs. Smith, "Estate sale of late David Carson's property," Jan 4, 1853.

⁶⁷ Carson vs. Smith, "Estate sale of late David Carson's property," Jan 4, 1853.

⁶⁸ "Who Was Letitia Carson?" *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/who-was-letitia-carson>.

of David's death, she was forcefully moved from her Benton County home, leaving with only a few belongings, her children, and a couple of cattle. The 1852 estate sale of the late David Carson's property provides insight into Letitia's experience. She did not purchase the family bible, weapons, or farming tools. Was this a conscious choice, or did she have only enough money for dire necessities? The fact that she purchased one roan cow and one brindle cow and calf, accounting for the majority of her total expenses, \$89.50 of the total \$104.87 spent, once again demonstrates the deep ties she had with her animals, both emotional and economic. Additionally, the act of purchasing back her belongings indicates that she herself had money that was separate from David's, prompting questions about how she made income if she was not given anything after David's death, and had the ability to spend more to sue Smith for back wages. Where did that money come from, and how much did she have? Further, the estate sale documentation reveals what Letitia already knew: the livestock Smith sold was the sale's most valuable and expensive. Smith himself bought a velvet vest, coat, two steers, one cow, one sow and her three pigs, a yoke of oxen, and a heifer calf, totaling \$254.65, or \$10,576.21 in 2025.⁶⁹ Through the sale, Smith directly profited off Letitia's belongings and her labor; after all, it was Letitia who had turned one cow into twenty-seven head.

With this in mind, Letitia sued Smith for damages: seven years, five months of labor, twenty-nine head of Cattle at \$50.00 per head (though this later changed to twenty-seven throughout court documents), and the use of ten cows for seven years.⁷⁰ She claimed David had "stipulated & agreed to & with me that in consideration that I would live with & work for the

⁶⁹ Carson vs. Smith, "Estate sale of late David Carson's property," Jan 4, 1853.

⁷⁰ Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Letitia Carson formal complaint to Greenberry Smith," February 27, 1854, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/16>.

said David Carson for and during the term of his natural life that at his decease he would make me his sole heir or that he would give me his entire property which should own or be possessed of at the time of his said decease.”⁷¹ After this, she argued that she “continued to live with & work for the said David until the time of his decease.”⁷² As we know, David failed to draw up a written contract, resulting in Letitia sustaining “great damage to wit five thousand dollars,” which she demanded in court.⁷³ Ultimately, there are many unknowns in David and Letitia’s relationship. It is quite possible that he had enslaved her in Missouri, and they entered into this “service contract” negotiation once they were headed to free territory. It is also plausible that David and Letitia publicly presented a more believable association, that of enslaved woman and slave holder, while their interpersonal relationship was much more complex. David’s role as a father to Martha and Adam is never elaborated upon, as he died when they were both under seven years old. Why did Letitia view herself as a servant and later as his widow? Her claims to these myriad and sometimes competing identities suggest that she was well aware of the unusual position she was in and used it to her advantage strategically in these lawsuits and, later, when applying under the Homestead Act before she was granted citizenship.

Here, we can use her lawsuits to gain insight into the homesteading operation and her hand in it. According to the estate sale document, Letitia and David together owned twenty hogs, eleven cows, ten heifers, at least ten steers, four oxen, three pigs, one bull, a horse, and a sow. William Henry Walker, who knew Letitia, David, and Greenberry Smith, testified on behalf of Letitia’s cattle ownership and confirmed that she owned twenty-seven head in total, all of which

⁷¹ Carson vs. Smith, “Letitia Carson formal complaint to Greenberry Smith,” February 27, 1854.

⁷² Carson vs. Smith, “Letitia Carson formal complaint to Greenberry Smith,” February 27, 1854.

⁷³ Carson vs. Smith, “Letitia Carson formal complaint to Greenberry Smith,” February 27, 1854.

came from the one cow she brought overland to Oregon.⁷⁴ Henry W. Knighton wrote a letter to the court stating that he sold a cow to David Carson in 1845, prior to his journey west.⁷⁵ While their relationship is undocumented beyond this single transaction, Knighton included that David had purchased the cow for Letitia with her money.⁷⁶ Again, we are confronted with the fact that Letitia had her own money and could purchase livestock with her own funds, even prior to her first year in Oregon. Further, Walker and Knighton's claims tell us that Letitia was the primary caretaker of the cattle and had turned one cow into a thriving herd of twenty-seven.⁷⁷

While raising cattle, Letitia engaged in farm labor dictated by the seasons. In the fall, she would dig potatoes and pick apples, possibly turning the apples into cider or dried, preserved products.⁷⁸ During this time, male farmers butchered hogs while women preserved the meat in brine and rendered the fat for tallow, lard, candles, or soap.⁷⁹ Cattle typically gave birth in the spring, after several months of pregnancy. In raising and breeding her cows, Letitia had to consider factors such as land management, water access, and nutrition, expending significant time and labor to achieve her twenty-seven head of cattle. Additionally in the spring months, Letitia would have planted the garden and tended to the daily chores of milking, tending cattle, and making cheese and butter, which she possibly sold to neighbors, townsfolk, or travelers on the nearby Applegate Trail.

⁷⁴ Carson vs. Smith, "Walker Deposition," October 8, 1856.

⁷⁵ Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Andrew Thayer Statement on behalf of Letitia Carson," March 13, 1854, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/27>.

⁷⁶ Carson vs. Smith, "Andrew Thayer Statement on behalf of Letitia Carson," March 13, 1854.

⁷⁷ For further writing on gendered labor in agriculture and livestock raising, see Joan Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

⁷⁸ Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds*, 37; Carson vs. Smith, "Estate sale of late David Carson's property," Jan 4, 1853.

⁷⁹ Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds*, 37.

Neighbors played a crucial role in these court cases, as community testimony upheld Letitia's claims, but neighborly relationships were also strained and complex, as in the case of Smith. Letitia was clearly a valued and essential part of her Benton County community. At this time, Black settlers were actively excluded from the territory, but Letitia was valued enough to find support from her white male neighbors. Yet another testimony, this one submitted by her attorney, Thayer, stated that many individuals had also crossed the plains in 1845 and witnessed Letitia "at work for said Carson & have known of her working for said Carson until the time of his death."⁸⁰ While Thayer never brought these informants to testify, the mention of witnesses alone is compelling. Smith, for his part, argued that Letitia had been enslaved by David in Missouri and remained as such until his death, when the "relation of master & slave was changed by the removal of the deceased."⁸¹ He, too, claimed to have witnesses who could prove Letitia's status as a slave, but he also never brought them to testify. Smith's testimony stated that Letitia hadn't completed all the labor she claimed because she was "sick" for a period of time in 1849, when giving birth to Adam, and later in 1851 and 1852.⁸² He also claimed to have seen a bill of sale regarding her status as a slave, but curiously never produced said document.⁸³ Smith had insight as a fellow 1845 Overlander and neighbor, but his perception of Letitia and David's relationship was colored by his assumptions of Black women as slaves and by his notorious bad faith in mortgaging and grabbing land, which suggests a more corrupt motive.

⁸⁰ Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Testimony of Andrew Thayer," September 22, 1854, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/31>.

⁸¹ Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Greenberry Smith Answers," October 10, 1854, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/34>.

⁸² Carson vs. Smith, "Greenberry Smith Answers," October 10, 1854.

⁸³ Carson vs. Smith, "Greenberry Smith Answers," October 10, 1854.

Over one hundred years later, it is unclear what documentation supported Smith's claim. Nevertheless, Smith built his case on this platform, continually claiming that Letitia's work boarding and clothing the children was reasonable for her position as a slave. He also argued that Letitia's emancipation and journey west was reasonable compensation for any labor she had done for David, rendering her claims for back wages null and void in Smith's mind.⁸⁴ Letitia responded via a sworn written statement, never testifying in the courtroom, likely because she had moved south to Douglas County. This statement, likely transcribed by Thayer while Letitia spoke, has several lines crossed out, indicating that she made corrections to her statement after it was written. Initially, she denied that she had remained enslaved by Carson until his death and that emancipation was "any consideration" in moving west with David Carson, but both of these statements are crossed out, inferring that she did not swear to them.⁸⁵ In the intact sections of the statement, Letitia swore that her services were worth one thousand dollars, and she denied that she lived and resided as a member of the family.⁸⁶ Instead, she explained that she resided as a servant and performed "meneal [sic] service."⁸⁷ She also denied any sickness or inability to work, restating that her labor was worth one thousand dollars.⁸⁸ While her social position remained blurry in the wake of this case, her central argument was clear: she had worked as a servant for David, clothing and caring for her children. In return, she expected the wages and inheritance that David verbally agreed to before their journey west.

⁸⁴ Carson vs. Smith, "Greenberry Smith Answers," October 10, 1854.

⁸⁵ Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Andrew Thayer Response," October 11, 1854, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/38>.

⁸⁶ Carson vs. Smith, "Andrew Thayer Response," October 11, 1854.

⁸⁷ Carson vs. Smith, "Andrew Thayer Response," October 11, 1854.

⁸⁸ Carson vs. Smith, "Andrew Thayer Response," October 11, 1854.

The only newspaper record of Letitia's lawsuits against Smith was published amid her first case, but it misspells her name and misstates her case: "This was an action by a black woman to recover the value of her service rendered in this territory to the defendant, from the year 1845 to 1852. Luteshia was a slave in Missouri but came to Oregon and served her master faithfully until his death. In the absence of circumstances that would imply an agreement to pay, Jury disagreed – 9 for and 3 against – jury discharged. Cause continued."⁸⁹ If we left this as we found it, taking it at face value, we could entirely miss the true nature of her legal action against Smith. As historian Jennifer Morgan argues, enslaved Black women overwhelmingly appear through the objectified, disposable, and silenced lenses through which they were treated in life. The violence of this treatment, Morgan observes, moves from "the enslaved bodies to the documents that count, condemn, assess, and evoke them, and we receive them in this condition."⁹⁰ It continued after enslavement and as Black women migrated into the American West. Although Morgan works on early enslaved women in the American South, her acknowledgment of archival gaps rings true: "The archives do not allow women enslaved in early American colonies to speak. The absence of their literal voice in the documents does a violence that flows into current historical studies with almost unbearable ease."⁹¹ But what we do know is this: In May 1855, the jury of all white men ruled in Letitia's favor, deciding she was David's rightful heir and employee, although she was awarded only \$300 plus court fees, not the back wages she demanded.⁹²

⁸⁹ "District Court, Benton County," *Weekly Oregon Statesman* (Salem, OR), October 17, 1854.

⁹⁰ Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 9.

⁹¹ Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 198.

⁹² Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Judgment by George Williams, Judgment True Copy," May 12, 1855, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/41>.

Letitia remained unhappy with this outcome, especially the lack of compensation for her cattle. With the first case proving she was a free laborer, she could now return and confront the issue of her stolen cattle, yet another nod to her deliberate and strategic legal plan in action. In August 1855, Letitia filed a second suit against Smith for \$2,500, this time for the unlawful sale of her cattle in the wake of David's death.⁹³ This suit was significant, as it is assumed that cattle were Letitia's main income source before David's death. Importantly, it was with this second case that Letitia established she was not David's property and, in fact, owned her own property. Smith, confident in his assessment of Letitia as an enslaved woman in David's household, had assumed that the cattle were David's and included them in his appraisal and later sale of David's estate. Not only had he seized the cattle, but he quickly sold them to several buyers. According to the estate sale documents, Smith sold Letitia's herd for \$1,200, divided among twelve men, including himself.⁹⁴ On October 8, 1856, acquaintance William Henry Walker outlined a conversation with David when he came to care for the cattle when Letitia and David were sick. Walker's deposition became the primary evidence that Letitia owned twenty-seven head of cattle. Walker was impressed with the large band of cattle that they owned, and David replied that "those cattle there were not his except seven head which consisted of two yoke of oxen one cow one yearling & one sucking calf, and he further said that Twenty seven head of the cattle belonged to Lutishia Carson."⁹⁵ Walker clarified that Letitia owned twenty-seven head in all, nine cows, and eight calves; the remaining ten head were young cattle of various kinds. Walker

⁹³ Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Complaint by Andrew Thayer on behalf of Letitia Carson," August 2, 1855, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/45>.

⁹⁴ Carson vs. Smith, "Estate sale of late David Carson's property," Jan 4, 1853; Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Letitia Carson Testimony by Thayer," September 21, 1855, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/48>.

⁹⁵ Carson vs. Smith, "Walker Deposition," October 8, 1856.

then asked where Letitia had obtained these cattle, and David explained that Letitia bought the cows over the plains in 1845, and the offspring were all her property.⁹⁶ Again, the influence of neighbors aided her case. In October 1856, Judge George Williams issued a judgment in Letitia's favor, awarding her \$1,200 plus nearly \$200 in costs.⁹⁷

Though it is unclear exactly what conditions led to Letitia's success in court, several factors contributed to her victory, in addition to her strong-willed tenacity. Historian Stephanie Vallance credited her focus on land, labor, and slavery and her "shrewd legal strategy."⁹⁸ Letitia's unwavering dedication and strategic decision to position herself as a laborer allowed her to define herself along lines that ultimately led to her victory twice.⁹⁹ The jurors in her cases were white men, but members of her community in Benton County. They, too, had traveled west on the Overland Trail and settled into the arduous task of homesteading. As Vallance notes, Letitia was, importantly, not asking for her land back. "To do so might have been a bridge too far, asking too much from the settlers to see her as David's wife and heir. Plus, if she had chosen to sue Smith as a widow, she would have lost her ability to sue for compensation as a laborer."¹⁰⁰ Ultimately, while Letitia's victories were unexpected, given the racial makeup of early Oregon courtrooms and a hostile legal system, it was her strategic decisions and reliance on neighbors' testimony that led to her success.

⁹⁶ Carson vs. Smith, "Walker Deposition," October 8, 1856.

⁹⁷ Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Judgment of 1200 dollars for Letitia Carson," October 20, 1856, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/61>.

⁹⁸ Vallance, "Letitia Carson in Court," ii.

⁹⁹ Vallance, "Letitia Carson in Court," ii.

¹⁰⁰ Vallance, "Letitia Carson in Court," 74.

Together, these cases illuminate the complexity of Black women's labor. Letitia's relationship with labor was intricate even before she began her practice as a community midwife, exercising authority and power through intimate patient relationships. For those years in Benton County, her work as a homesteader and servant established a close connection with her neighbors. Further, these lawsuits illustrated that she was able to assert a measure of autonomy in spaces where Black women were expected to be absent or submissive. According to the 1857 Oregon Constitution, "No free Negro, or Mulatto, shall come, reside, or be within this state, or hold any real estate, or make any contracts, or maintain any suit therein," effectively banning Black people from taking action in Oregon courts.¹⁰¹ Although laws were often hard to enforce, this speaks to the general sentiment toward people of color and their judicial authority at the time. Letitia was not expected to speak up on her behalf, let alone win twice. Before these cases, her caretaking labor for David went unpaid, and she was viewed within the confines of her race and gender. The institution of slavery was powerful and all-consuming at this time in American history, and it promoted a very specific sentiment toward Black bodies, labor, and authority. Despite this, she used Oregon courts and strategically positioned herself to gain the sympathy of her white community, using their testimony to establish that she was a free woman who had labored for David, raised a thriving flock of cattle, and maintained a healthful homestead for which she was owed compensation. Through these cases, Letitia constructed an identity as a homesteader with agricultural prowess and a laborer with strong community ties that would later continue as she moved south and established herself as a community midwife and homesteader.

¹⁰¹ *The Oregon Constitution and Proceedings and Debates of the Constitutional Convention of 1857*, art. XVIII, sec. 4, <https://records.sos.state.or.us/ORSOSWebDrawer/Record/9479966>.

Cow Creek Valley

Before and after David's death, Letitia's life was laborious. The first recorded instance of her midwifery work occurred when she moved south to Douglas County after Smith took her home and belongings.¹⁰² It is unclear how and when she traveled, but we know that she arrived sometime before the fall of 1854, as she was recorded helping in the birth of Melvina Elliff's first child, Alice.¹⁰³ While it is unknown how Letitia met the Elliffs, she lived with them for at least a year and likely worked as a domestic servant. Patriarch Hardy Crier Elliff came west in the fall of 1849 and arrived in Douglas County, settling in present-day Azalea at the heart of Cow Creek in June 1852.¹⁰⁴ Within the next two years, Letitia moved and settled into her new life amid her lawsuits against Smith.¹⁰⁵ While in Douglas County, she worked as a community midwife, aiding local families through rural births and the 1855-56 Rogue River War. Throughout these years, Letitia leveraged her knowledge in small white settler communities, navigating a complex terrain of white supremacist ideals and Indigenous death and dispossession. By practicing midwifery, she was able to establish healing authority and challenge systemic power dynamics that typically sidelined women of color.

By 1854, we know Letitia had moved in with the Elliff family on their property on Cow Creek Ranch. In 1961, Bess A. Clough wrote a biographical sketch of her grandfather, Hardy

¹⁰² Bess A. Clough, "Hardy Cryer Elliff, A Pioneer to Southern Oregon, Arrived on Cow Creek June 1852," October 26, 1961, Catalog 2011.1.44, Folder 1, Glendale, Douglas County Museum Library Archives, Roseburg, Oregon.

¹⁰³ Clough, "Hardy Cryer Elliff," Douglas County Museum Library Archives.

¹⁰⁴ It would've taken about a week of travel from Letitia's Soap Creek Valley homestead to the Elliff's Douglas County land claim. Clough, "Hardy Cryer Elliff," Douglas County Museum Library Archives.

¹⁰⁵ Carson vs. Smith, "Letitia Carson formal complaint to Greenberry Smith," February 27, 1854; Letitia Carson vs. Greenberry Smith, "Jury rules in favor of Letitia Carson for 1200," October 21, 1856, Benton County Probate Court, Oregon State Archives, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/64>.

Crier Elliff, referring to Letitia lovingly as Aunt Tish throughout it. Clough writes that “Aunt Tish” and her son, Jack, were freed slaves who came and stayed with Melvina for a year or so, helping with the birth of Melvina’s eldest girl, Alice, in the fall of 1854.¹⁰⁶ As Clough explained, Letitia was welcomed because her grandmother was expecting her first child in October and needed help and desired company, as she was often left alone.¹⁰⁷ This account is further confirmed by Jennene Johns, who lives on the current-day Elliff family ranch. In an undated essay, Johns wrote, “Letitia was called Aunt Tish by everyone in this community, and she served as a community midwife, probably helping with the delivery of some of the Elliff children.”¹⁰⁸ Despite few primary accounts of her midwifery, these memories place Letitia as a long-term family caretaker who stayed with and helped the Elliffs for at least an entire year. Through midwifery and postnatal labor, Letitia was a beloved pillar of her community and has been remembered by families for decades as a woman who established intimate relationships with settler women.

Letitia’s intimate and sustained relationships with the Elliffs and possibly other families in the Cow Creek area contributed to the impact and success of her community-building labor. Scholarship on both Western white midwives and Southern Black midwives illuminates that the key to community-centered work was the relationships that midwives cultivated with the women they worked for. As anthropologist Gertrude Jacinta Fraser notes, “Birth had been considered perhaps the most intimate event in a woman’s life, to be shared with a midwife and a few female

¹⁰⁶ Clough, “Hardy Cryer Elliff,” Douglas County Museum Library Archives.

¹⁰⁷ “Oregon State Highway Commission, Melvina Baker Elliff,” Catalog 2011.1.44, Folder 1, Glendale, Douglas County Museum Library Archives, Roseburg, Oregon, 10.

¹⁰⁸ Jennene Johns, “Letitia Carson - Oregon’s Pioneer Black Woman,” Letitia Carson Digital History Collection, *Resources*, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/201>.

friends and relatives.”¹⁰⁹ Established as a constant across midwifery practice, intimate mother and patient relationships were most often fostered through their presence during traumatic nineteenth and twentieth-century birth and the prioritization of postpartum care.

Letitia’s midwifery work was most likely conducted as needed, as she filled community demands and made ends meet while waiting for her eventual payout from the Smith lawsuits. Notably, Letitia’s occupation was never recorded as midwife in her sporadic census filings. She is only present in the Oregon census in 1850 and 1870. In 1850, her occupation was left blank below David, who was listed as a farmer. Many women’s occupations were left blank among her neighbors in that census, so it could have been due to the actions of the census taker.¹¹⁰ In 1870, she was listed as “keeping house.”¹¹¹ Her absence in the 1860 census is notable but unexplained, as she is not listed with the Elliff family. It is possible she wasn’t counted because of her nomadic years before land ownership. Nevertheless, her presence in census records was infrequent and never stated midwife as her occupation.

This trend fits with the greater manifestations of midwifery in rural Oregon during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Midwives were often neighboring women with just enough experience to aid in the birth and postnatal care that was crucial for laboring women. As Catherine Thomas Morris, who came to Oregon in 1851, remembered, “When I was a girl, if a woman got sick she didn’t have to hire a trained nurse. Her neighbors came in, did the housework, took her children to their homes to care for till she was well, brought her homemade

¹⁰⁹ Fraser, *African American Midwifery in the South*, 158.

¹¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, 1850 United States Federal Census, Benton County, Oregon, *Ancestry*.

¹¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 1870 United States Federal Census, Douglas County, Oregon, <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/7032686:7163>.

bread and jellies and other things.”¹¹² Kenneth Clayton, whose grandfather claimed Douglas County land in 1850, recalled, “I don’t think anybody ever had a doctor when a baby was delivered. They always had a midwife.”¹¹³ Midwifery was an established and widely unrecorded tradition in Southern Oregon when Letitia moved to Douglas County. Despite the social taboos that obscure many of the details of midwifery and maternal care, these oral histories illustrate the constant presence of midwives, their necessity, and their enduring capacity for care. Using these as a framework for the world that Letitia entered, we can understand how she came to midwifery and emerged as a crucial community figure in rural Southern Oregon. She would’ve come into the midwifery role naturally, as she was a neighboring woman with the experience of her own rural births. Further, she would have likely worked for little or no money, possibly laboring for trade or, in the case of the Elliff family, shelter.

Other oral histories from Douglas County recount the labor of midwifery, noting its unknown origins. According to Leona Mathews Hill, born near Roseburg in 1885, “my mother had ten children and not a doctor in attendance.”¹¹⁴ When asked if a midwife was present, she responded, “She had some neighbor woman usually who acted as a midwife. My grandmother, Mathews, was a professional midwife. She has roamed all around here.”¹¹⁵ How Grandmother Mathews acquired her midwifery expertise was unclear, as Leona explained, “I don’t know how those old-timers learned what they did. They just knew somehow or other, I guess, from each

¹¹² Catherine Thomas Morris, quoted in Fred Lockley and Mike Helm, *Conversations with Pioneer Women* (Eugene, OR: Rainy Day Press, 1981): 98, 99.

¹¹³ Star Eatherington, “Oral history: Kenneth and Alice Clayton, Kenneth,” 26 September, 1978, Oregon History Collection, Southern Oregon Digital Archives, <https://digital.sou.edu/digital/collection/p16085coll23/id/8520/rec/3,7>.

¹¹⁴ Star Eatherington, “Oral history: Leona Mathews Hill,” 28 August, 1978, Southern Oregon History Collection, Southern Oregon Digital Archives, <https://digital.sou.edu/digital/collection/p16085coll23/id/10144/rec/1,2>.

¹¹⁵ Eatherington, “Oral history: Leona Mathews Hill,” Southern Oregon Digital Archives, 2.

other.”¹¹⁶ Gent Redfield, born on Cow Creek in 1854, stated, “I was 78 years old before I ever spent any money on doctors...When I was a boy, the Indians showed me what roots and herbs to take if I was ailing.”¹¹⁷ As Redfield recalls, the Indigenous people of Southern Oregon, the Cow Creek Umpqua and Klamath people, aided settler understanding of medicinal herbs. Letitia would have also likely expanded her earlier understanding of healing plants and medical knowledge through the support of surrounding Indigenous communities.

Letitia’s knowledge was likely obtained from a myriad of different sources: her enslaved childhood as she bore witness to the births of other children and the intergenerational nature of midwifery, her own delivery of Martha and Jack in rural, doctor-less landscapes, and her experience with settler mothers in Oregon territory. As outlined in nineteenth-century midwifery handbooks, midwives held medical knowledge that aided mothers during pregnancy, labor, and the post-partum period. An understanding of pregnancy diagnosis, fetal development, health, and positioning, female reproductive systems, common diseases among pregnant women, and the process of labor was necessary for birth workers.¹¹⁸ Any additional grasp of medical complications, such as eclampsia and hemorrhage, would have benefited midwives. This medical knowledge and skill reinforced Letitia’s relationship with expectant women as midwives

¹¹⁶ Eatherington, “Oral history: Leona Mathews Hill,” Southern Oregon Digital Archives, 2.

¹¹⁷ Gent Redfield, quoted in 1938 Frank Brown interview, Catalog 2011.1.44, Folder 1, Glendale, Douglas County Museum Library Archives, Roseburg, Oregon, 3.

¹¹⁸ Edward Reynolds, *Practical Midwifery; Handbook of Treatment* (W.W. Wood & Company, NY, 1892), <https://archive.org/details/practicalmidwif00reyn/page/n13/mode/2up>; George R. Southwick, *A Domestic Handbook of the Diseases of Women and of Midwifery* (Boston, MA, Hygienic Publishing Co., 1892), <https://archive.org/details/domestichandbook00sout/page/n13/mode/2up>.

cultivated an intrinsic and evolving connection with the mothers that not only enhanced their practice but also allowed them to be a link between women and greater communities.¹¹⁹

Regardless of geography, nineteenth-century childbirth was an emotionally and physically traumatizing experience that formed an intimate bond between the women who attended and experienced these deliveries.¹²⁰ Feelings of fear, loneliness, depression, and physical danger characterized birth. What was Melvina Baker Elliff feeling as she prepared to deliver Alice in the fall of 1854? Overlander Georgiana Bruce Kirby, who settled in California in 1850, suffered from loneliness during her 1852 pregnancy. “She found the absence of female companionship particularly trying and doubted ‘that anything whatever could relieve or comfort me under my present very depressing condition of health.’”¹²¹ Western women desired companionship, compassion, and care that could support them through the unknowns of rural childbirth. Midwives were the answer.

During the nineteenth century, postpartum care was often prioritized over prenatal care and became a weeks-long commitment that involved learning and completing the daily tasks of mothers and wives in Western settler communities. Historian Sylvia D. Hoffert echoes this sentiment of increased dependence on postpartum assistance; while all obstetric services were necessary, frontier women had become accustomed to doctor-less deliveries, but deeply desired domestic assistance post-birth.¹²² In the weeks after delivery, midwives committed to both

¹¹⁹ The connection between midwives and the natural world is discussed widely throughout literature by scholars such as Valerie Lee, Diane Glave, Jennifer J. Hill, Katrina Hazzard Donald, Gertrude Jacinta Fraser, and Laurie A. Wilkie.

¹²⁰ Hill, *Birthing the West*, 30.

¹²¹ Hoffert, “Childbearing on the Trans-Mississippi Frontier, 1830-1900,” 276, 77.

¹²² Hoffert, “Childbearing on the Trans-Mississippi Frontier, 1830-1900,” 279.

physical and emotional work, completing chores, childcare, and any other labor that was left to frontier women. Hill's vivid description of postpartum care illuminates the range of tasks that midwives helped with, simple things like watering animals or preparing meals, but also more life-saving responsibilities, such as protecting children from the woodstove or wandering away.¹²³ This extended post-partum period was also recorded in the tradition of Southern Black midwifery that Letitia was likely raised in. Black Southern midwives not only provided birthing services but also brought meals to the women, did their laundry and housekeeping, and stayed with them following birth to teach them how to mother. Letitia lived with the Elliffs in the months before and after Alice's birth, ensuring that postpartum care was emphasized. This labor required intimate trust. Postpartum work formed concrete and lasting bonds with women; as much as they were patients, they were also neighbors, friends, and companions. The intimacy cultivated during this period was a common occurrence among midwives and female community members, suggesting that Letitia would have experienced and provided postpartum support.

Midwives were by mothers' sides, acting as a respite and a connection to a greater network of female community support. The dispersed nature of rural communities in both the Western and Southern states posed a challenge for parturient women and their caretakers. Midwives were invited into intimate moments and forged familiar friendships across the community. As Hill notes, "Inviting another woman not only to see but possibly touch the almost always covered genitalia invited a deep sense of intimacy, not simply because of the close physical contact but also because of the trust placed in a birthing companion who would make no judgments and show a willingness to help in ways that might expose vulnerability."¹²⁴ Empathy,

¹²³ Hill, *Birthing the West*, 51.

¹²⁴ Hill, *Birthing the West*, 50.

knowledge, and intense bonds made midwifery a powerful, community-building occupation. The Black women midwives who fulfilled these difficult, emotionally, and physically demanding roles were part of a greater system of links between women and their communities.

In the fall of 1855, the relationship between Indigenous communities and white settlers had once again become notoriously violent in Southern Oregon. The Rogue River Wars, a series of deadly conflicts between white settlers and Indigenous communities, had been periodically erupting since the early 1850s. Prior to colonization, an estimated nine thousand five hundred Indigenous people lived in the Rogue River region, speakers of Takelman and Shastan languages to the east and speakers of Athapascan languages to the west and along the coast.¹²⁵ Since early fur trapping days, when Northwest Company and Hudson's Bay Company expeditions first traveled south, tensions between white settlers and Natives had been rising. As white settlement throughout the valley rapidly increased during the Gold Rush, conflict continued to escalate.¹²⁶ In 1853, following another eruption of warfare, the Table Rock Treaty was signed with the United States government to resolve conflict by moving all Natives onto the Table Rock Indian Reservation. Neither white settlers nor Indigenous people acknowledged the authority of the treaty, and tensions rose. In 1855, white settlers murdered Indigenous people settled at the mouth of Little Butte Creek in an attack called the Lupton Massacre.¹²⁷ In its wake, violence once again erupted in the main and final Rogue River War. In July 1855, Lt. Benjamin Allston, a West Point-trained U.S. Army officer stationed at Fort Lane, revealed, "All of the troubles with these

¹²⁵ E. A. Schwartz, "Rogue River War of 1855-56," *Oregon Encyclopedia*, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/rogue_river_war_of_1855-1856/.

¹²⁶ Mark Axel Tveskov, "A 'Most Disastrous' Affair: The Battle of Hungry Hill, Historical Memory, and the Rogue River War," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 118, no. 1 (2017): 45.

¹²⁷ Tveskov, "A 'Most Disastrous' Affair," 45.

Rogue River Indians have been caused by the whites themselves, and a great many of them admit it.”¹²⁸ The wars ended in June 1856 as most Natives were forcibly moved to the Coast Reservation, later called the Siletz Reservation.¹²⁹ After the Rogue River Wars, there were fewer than two thousand Indigenous survivors counted on the reservation.¹³⁰ When Rogue River warfare resumed in 1855, Letitia was still living and working with the Elliffs in Cow Creek.

Hardy Eliff had served as a Captain in the Oregon Militia during the 1853 Rogue River War and continued his involvement in the conflict as it worsened again in 1855.¹³¹ With the abrupt renewal of warfare, the Elliffs transformed their home into “Fort Elliff” for local families during the beginning battles.¹³² As the wars continued, Grandfather Elliff took Melvina, baby Alice, Aunt Tish Carson, and small son Jack to the Galesville Stockade, where they spent nine months.¹³³ The fact that Letitia arrived alongside the Elliff women and children at the Galesville stockade provides a glimpse into Letitia’s relationship with the family. At one point, Johns related, “Eight young Indian Bucks came along and wouldn’t leave, even after they were given food. About this time, “Aunt Tish,” as Letitia was called, came out where the Indians were. She was a very large and very black woman. When they saw her, she scared them, and they left. Evidently, they had never seen a black woman before. The story passed down from the Hardy

¹²⁸ Mark Axel Tveskov, “Black Pioneers, Indigenous Renegades, and Confederate Officers,” In *Conflict Archaeology, Historical Memory, and the Experience of War* (University Press of Florida, 2023), 127.

¹²⁹ Schwartz, “Rogue River War of 1855-56.”

¹³⁰ Schwartz, “Rogue River War of 1855-56.”

¹³¹ Zybach, “The Search for Letitia Carson in Douglas County,” 15.

¹³² Zybach, “The Search for Letitia Carson in Douglas County,” 15.

¹³³ Clough, “Hardy Cryer Elliff,” Douglas County Museum Library Archives; Bess Adams Clough, interview, December 6, 1938, “Pioneer interviews, volume 4, Reminiscences of Southern Oregon Pioneers, Catalog MG66, Douglas County Museum Library Archives, Roseburg, Oregon.

family was that they believed she saved all their lives that day, to which they were very grateful.”¹³⁴ In moments like these, Letitia acted as a celebrated nurturer in addition to her role as the community midwife. This encounter places Letitia as a protector and conjures a complex legacy entangled with popular ideas about hyper-masculinized and fearsome Black women's bodies while also espousing inherent anti-Indigeneity. Within this complexity, Letitia is remembered as the woman who saved their lives. This illustrates her intimate ties to the family and that they viewed her as more than a midwife—a woman who was a companion and protector that benefited the family during wartime.

Letitia was not the only Black settler with a complex position between white and Indigenous people in Southern Oregon. According to anthropologist Mark Axel Tveskov’s meticulous research of Black settlement during the Gold Rush in Oregon, there were numerous Black settlers across the Rogue River Valley. Their experiences with violent, anti-Indigenous war efforts were not homogenous; they varied with complexity and nuance, much like Letitia’s encounters. Some, like Bill, a Black settler from Yreka, California, accompanied Benjamin Wright on his “murderous expedition against the Modoc, and was among those who returned to Yreka with his rifle decorated with the scalps of slain Indigenous people.”¹³⁵ A nameless Black man vocally objected to the murder of Modoc people carried out by Benjamin Wright, Bill, and other colonists, and was publicly whipped as punishment.¹³⁶ Other Black settlers in Yreka were almost the victims of violent colonists after hundreds of white settlers lynched two Indigenous men and then turned to attack the homes of the Black townsfolk. In the Indigenous community of

¹³⁴ Johns, “Letitia Carson,” Letitia Carson Digital History Collection, *Resources*.

¹³⁵ Tveskov, “Black Pioneers, Indigenous Renegades, and Confederate Officers,” 131.

¹³⁶ Tveskov, “Black Pioneers, Indigenous Renegades, and Confederate Officers,” 131.

Tututni in Southern Oregon, another nameless Black man was killed by the Tututni after he bandaged up an injured white woman and comforted her during her capture.¹³⁷ Clearly, Black settlers were present during the Rogue River Wars, as violent vigilantes, vocal opposition, and comforting healers.

A fundamental aspect of Letitia's impact on early settler society was the extensive capacity of care she engaged in, not only as a midwife but also as a companion, protector, and holder of precious medical knowledge. Letitia, while staying with the Elliffs for at least a year, was adopted by the family as an aunt, despite differing racial and familial origins. She stayed with them after the birth of Alice through the war, proving her connection beyond midwifery. As seen in her lawsuits against Smith, Letitia had proven good relationships with her neighbors. This continued after she moved to Douglas County. Here, her valuable position as a midwife and healer forged close connections with mothers and families in white settler communities. She had personal experience with the trials of rural birth, which culminated in her central position within the settler ecosystem of the West.

South Myrtle Creek

Letitia's life between the Rogue River Wars and her 1863 Homestead Act claim is not well documented. During this period, several significant historical moments occurred that shaped conceptions of race in Oregon Territory. In 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case that free or enslaved African Americans could not become American citizens or bring suit in a federal court.¹³⁸ Later that year, Oregon adopted its state constitution by popular

¹³⁷ Tveskov, "Black Pioneers, Indigenous Renegades, and Confederate Officers," 132.

¹³⁸ Timothy S. Huebner, "'In Defiance of Judge Taney': Black Constitutionalism and Resistance to *Dred Scott*," *Journal of Supreme Court History* 45, no. 3 (2020): 215.

vote and made it illegal for Black people to become permanent residents, own property, engage in business, or file a suit in an Oregon court of law.¹³⁹ Oregon was, by design, becoming increasingly anti-Black. At the same time, the federal Homestead Act, which Congress signed into law in 1862, allowed citizens to claim land by improving it for five years.¹⁴⁰ In 1863, Letitia filed a Homestead Act claim for 153.98 acres on South Myrtle Creek in Douglas County, Oregon, despite not being a citizen of the United States.¹⁴¹ This was a radical act. While the Homestead Act allowed “freed slaves” to claim land, she notably did not identify herself as such and applied as a widow instead.¹⁴² On June 19, 1868, Letitia received the certification of her homestead, but Black people were still constitutionally prohibited from residing in the state, and the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment wasn’t announced until a month later on July 28th.¹⁴³ After being ousted from her Benton County homestead and spending time as a community midwife in Cow Creek, she left behind her community to own her own land, starting over once more. Letitia was once again a homesteader, solidifying her connection to personal community in South Myrtle Creek.

¹³⁹ Nokes, “Black Exclusion Laws in Oregon,”; *The Oregon Constitution and Proceedings and Debates of the Constitutional Convention of 1857*, art. XVIII, sec. 4, <https://records.sos.state.or.us/ORSOSWebDrawer/Record/9479966>.

¹⁴⁰ Blake Bell, “Homestead National Monument of America and the 150th Anniversary of the Homestead Act,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2012): 72.

¹⁴¹ This point about Letitia’s citizenship status not being confirmed until after her Homestead was certified was not realized until historian Darrell Millner brought it to my attention in 2024.

¹⁴² Letitia Carson, Homestead File No. 103, June 17, 1863, Douglas County, Oregon, Land Office: Records of the Bureau of Land Management, National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

¹⁴³ Letitia Carson, Homestead File No. 103, June 19, 1868, Douglas County, Oregon, Land Office: Records of the Bureau of Land Management, National Archives Building, Washington, DC; *Article XIV*, U.S. Statutes at Large 15 (1867-1869): 706-709, https://www.loc.gov/resource/lalsalvol.llsal_015/?sp=742&st=image&r=-0.347,0.979,1.543,0.787,0.

South Myrtle Creek, named for an abundance of myrtle trees, is surrounded by rolling, green hills, “good farming and stock country and a fine climate.”¹⁴⁴ The land was relatively easy to farm and free of frost, so crops needed only a bit of protection during most winters.¹⁴⁵ It is unclear exactly when Letitia moved north to Myrtle Creek, but it is possible that she did so in the direct aftermath of her last lawsuit against Smith in 1856.¹⁴⁶ After winning her case, she may have quickly bought the land from a squatter, as evidenced by survey notes indicating a home was already built on the property.¹⁴⁷ Squatting had become increasingly popular because land acquisition was slow-paced and expensive. Squatting, or buying the rights from previous squatters, as Hardy Crier Elliff had done in 1852, became a cheaper, easier way to obtain land while waiting on homestead or donation land claim documentation.¹⁴⁸ Though it had been illegal in the early nineteenth century, it became recognized as a form of legitimate ownership, and the Homestead Act itself was representative of the increased acceptance and federal sanctioning of squatting.¹⁴⁹ Regardless of how Letitia came to the land, she claimed more than one hundred fifty acres of it in 1863 and spent the rest of her life caring for her farm and her neighbors.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ “Myrtle Creek,” *Roseburg Review* (Roseburg, OR), January 8, 1886.

¹⁴⁵ “Myrtle Creek,” *Roseburg Review Supplement* (Roseburg, OR), January 8, 1886.

¹⁴⁶ Carson vs. Smith, “Jury rules in favor of Letitia Carson for 1200,” October 21, 1856.

¹⁴⁷ U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management General Land Office Records, Original Survey Township No. 29, South Range No. 3 West Willamette Meridian (February 1858), https://glorerecords.blm.gov/details/survey/default.aspx?dm_id=334304&sid=gih2vif0.nxl#surveyDetailsTabIndex=1; U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management General Land Office Records, County Surveyor’s Record, Douglas County, Oregon Township No. 29, South Range No. 3 West Willamette Meridian (1858).

¹⁴⁸ Clough, “Hardy Cryer Elliff,” Douglas County Museum Library Archives.

¹⁴⁹ Muhammad, Sichko, and Olsson, “African Americans and Federal Land Policy”; John Suval, “‘The Nomadic Race to Which I Belong’: Squatter Democracy and the Claiming of Oregon,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 118, no. 3 (2017): 331.

¹⁵⁰ Letitia’s total acreage for her Homestead File Claim was 153.98 as opposed to the traditionally allotted 160 acres. There is no definite explanation for this discrepancy. It is possible that she claimed slightly less acreage because of a strangely drawn border with an existing neighboring claim.

Letitia's life in South Myrtle Creek provides further insight into her homesteading narrative and community engagement. Picking up where she left off in Benton County, Letitia used the homesteading knowledge from her previous homestead with David and likely some agricultural practices absorbed during her enslaved childhood. From 1863 until her certification in 1868, Letitia spent her days improving upon the land, raising plentiful livestock, planting her orchard, and building several additional buildings. Testimony from her Douglas County neighbors confirms that Letitia constructed a one-and-a-half-story log home with two doors and two windows, a barn, a granary, and a smokehouse, and she planted an orchard of approximately one hundred fruit trees.¹⁵¹ Additionally, she raised a new herd of cattle and hogs, just as she had done in Benton County. Considering her additional buildings, it is likely that she used her land to support herself and her community, possibly through food sharing, as she may have stored and preserved excess food in her granary and smokehouse. Her land improvements were affirmed by her neighbors, Joshua Wright and James G. Clark, both witnesses to her land claim, despite her ineligibility as a non-citizen.¹⁵² Wright and Clark's declaration of proof was certified by Addison Flint and registered by John Kelly. Both men attested with their signatures that Wright and Clark were "persons of respectability."¹⁵³ Though the specifics of these relationships are undocumented, we know from their repeated testimony that Letitia was a valued and treasured community member with strong, persistent ties to her surrounding neighbors in both Douglas and Benton Counties.

¹⁵¹ Letitia Carson, Homestead File No. 103, June 19, 1868, Douglas County, Oregon, Land Office.

¹⁵² Letitia Carson, Homestead File No. 103, June 19, 1868, Douglas County, Oregon, Land Office.

¹⁵³ Letitia Carson, Homestead File No. 103, June 19, 1868, Douglas County, Oregon, Land Office.

Letitia's labor prompted the certification of her homestead, and in 1868, she became the first Black woman in Oregon to own land.¹⁵⁴ Her work illustrates the impact of Black women settlers, often overlooked in stories that center on white families. Caring for one hundred fifty acres was an immense amount of work for a single woman. Though there was an initial structure on the land indicated in the 1858 survey, Letitia worked to build a new one and several outbuildings. Like other homesteaders, she would have had to find a water source, clear the land, prepare it for farming, raise entirely new herds of cattle and pigs, and tend to crops, like her hundred-tree orchard. The cost of homesteading was deceptively complex. The bare necessities: a simple house, a plow, a water well, fences, seeds, and animals were all required for successful farming and could cost as much as \$1,000 (\$35,000 in 2025).¹⁵⁵ Labor had its price as well. For white men in tight-knit homesteading communities, labor was shared and more easily acquired. For Letitia, a single Black woman living at the far end of South Myrtle, it is easy to imagine she faced difficulty in securing supplies or consistent help with labor on the farm. Despite these difficulties, Letitia ultimately built a successful farm and homestead. The 1869 Douglas County Tax Roll showed Letitia with thirty-nine cows, four pigs, and a horse.¹⁵⁶ She had rebuilt her initial herd even larger, turning the two cows she bought back from Smith into a thriving herd of thirty-nine. In the 1870 census, Letitia appeared as a housekeeper and landowner with real estate

¹⁵⁴ According to Dr. Zybach, she is "among the very first 71 people in the entire US so recognized, and perhaps as high as No. 14 on that list. She is also the only black woman in Oregon known to have successfully completed such a claim, and one of a very few such black women across the entire US, despite totals of more than 3 million applicants and 1.6 million successful claims before the Act ended in 1934." Zybach, "The Search for Letitia Carson in Douglas County," 4.; Letitia Carson, Homestead File No. 103, June 19, 1868, Douglas County, Oregon, Land Office; Letitia Carson, Homestead File No. 103, October 1, 1869, Douglas County, Oregon, Land Office: Records of the Bureau of Land Management, National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

¹⁵⁵ Muhammad, Sichko, and Olsson, "African Americans and Federal Land Policy."

¹⁵⁶ 1869 Douglas County Tax Roll, Myrtle Creek, Douglas County Courthouse, Roseburg Oregon.

valued at around \$1,000, and personal property valued at \$625, together almost \$40,000 in 2025 dollars.¹⁵⁷ The creek surrounding her homestead has long been known by South Myrtle residents as “Letitia Creek,” exemplifying her legacy and impact on the land.¹⁵⁸

While Letitia improved upon her claim, she simultaneously built relationships with her neighboring community through caretaking, likely an extension of her midwifery work. Though her midwifery work was undocumented during this time, she was still remembered by many Myrtle Creek residents as a community midwife. Mrs. Wayne Snyder of Myrtle Creek recalled Letitia’s midwifery, saying that she traveled around the area as far as Azalea, twenty miles south, to do her midwifery.¹⁵⁹ There are surely other stories of her midwifery and caretaking waiting to be uncovered.

Moses and Sarah Dyer arrived in Myrtle Creek in August 1852, becoming some of the first settlers in South Myrtle.¹⁶⁰ They had five children: Laura, William, Margaret, Hezekiah, and Douglas.¹⁶¹ Sarah passed away in 1858, when Douglas was just three weeks old. According to reminiscences, the children were cared for by family and neighbors after Sarah’s death.¹⁶² Around this time, Letitia had just moved into the area and was likely looking for new employment after working as a domestic servant for the Elliff family in Cow Creek. Dora Dyer,

¹⁵⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, 1870 United States Federal Census, Douglas County, Oregon, <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/7032686:7163>.

¹⁵⁸ Another nearby creek is now being renamed "Jack Creek" replacing the racist name, “Negro Creek.” Douglas County’s now "Jack" Creek is about two miles long and flows into Cow Creek 11 miles south of Canyonville. Dr. Zybach asked the board to rename the creek for Jack Carson. Bob Zybach, Email to author, October 17, 2022.

¹⁵⁹ Ellnora Young, “Stephen’s Cemetery Note,” August 1994.

¹⁶⁰ Blanche Newton, *Golden Leafs of Time: Histories of the Alumni of Myrtle Creek, Volume 1* (Myrtle Creek, OR: self-pub), 93; Moses True Dyer, Index Collection: *Pioneer Index*, Oregon Historical Society; Portland, OR.

¹⁶¹ Newton, *Golden Leafs of Time, Vol. 1*, 93.

¹⁶² Newton, *Golden Leafs of Time, Vol. 1*, 93.

who married into the Dyer family, remembered that Letitia found work with the Dyer family, caretaking for the children to help Moses after the death of his wife. “She had an orchard way up South Myrtle, her property is just above Diane Chaney’s property...she was the nanny for the Dyer kids, and there was a whole bunch of them.”¹⁶³ Blanche Newton, who wrote a three-part anthology of local Myrtle Creek history, *Golden Leafs of Time*, confirmed that her “Aunt Bess believed that Letitia helped Moses True Dyer with some of his children.”¹⁶⁴ From the time she left Benton County, Letitia found herself constantly laboring for others as a caretaker, domestic servant, and midwife, helping deliver and raise children in the Myrtle Creek area.

Other memories of Letitia complicate her legacy, confirming her care for children while also illuminating the complexity surrounding her race and white settlers' skewed perception of her as a Black woman. Arrena Brewer Newton recorded her story in *Golden Leafs of Time*, taking note of the first time she ever met Letitia. “When I arrived home my mother had company. It was an elderly black lady; she was the only one in the area. I was so afraid of her, just as much as if she had been a bear. She was always trying to kiss me, so I crawled under the house to get away from her.”¹⁶⁵ While we don’t know the purpose of her visit, it does illustrate her activity within her community, that she was welcomed into the homes of her white neighbors. Arrena’s reaction adds layers of complexity to Letitia’s presence as she runs, scared from Letitia’s expressions of affection. In this, it is clear that Letitia was a loving and caring person who offered displays of physical affection and comfort, even to children she had never met before. At the same time, she is confronted by white fear and cast as a threat, even in the

¹⁶³ Dora Dyer, interview by Hailey Brink, February 21, 2025, unpublished.

¹⁶⁴ Blanche Newton, *Golden Leafs of Time: History of Buck Fork Cedar Grove Schools and Their Community, Volume 3*, (Myrtle Creek, OR: self-pub), 180.

¹⁶⁵ Newton, *Golden Leafs of Time, Vol. 1*, 145.

pureness of her actions. As Letitia was beloved by her community, she was also regularly reminded of the tensions between her authority as a healer and caretaker and her sometimes unwelcome novelty as a lone Black woman in white settler spaces.

Letitia's daughter, Martha, had her first child on November 26, 1864.¹⁶⁶ With Letitia's experience as a midwife, it is very likely that Letitia was not only present at the birth but also serving in her familiar role as a community midwife. Martha married Narcisse Lavadour, of the Walla Walla Tribe, in January 1868, the same year Letitia's homestead claim was certified.¹⁶⁷ In September 1869, Martha and Narcisse had their first child, and Letitia's second Oregon grandchild, Agnes Marie Lavadour.¹⁶⁸ Again, Letitia would have likely been present and may have acted as the midwife. Martha and Narcisse had several children throughout the 1870s; Ira in 1871, Ada in 1873, Francis Albert in 75, and Ida in 77.¹⁶⁹ By then, Letitia had seven grandchildren and may have been present and likely the midwife at any or all of them. There are many unknowns, but also many possibilities. Her grandchildren lived nearby in Douglas County. Did they come to visit her? Did she babysit them the way she cared for other mothers' children during illness or childbirth? In 1885, the Slater Act was passed, providing individual land claims for Walla Walla, Cayuse, and Umatilla tribal members on the Umatilla Reservation in north-

¹⁶⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, 1870 United States Federal Census, Douglas County, Oregon.

¹⁶⁷ "Martha Carson Marriage Certificate," January 19, 1868, Letitia Carson Digital History Collection, *Oregon Documents*, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/exhibits/show/letitia-in-douglas-county/item/76>.

¹⁶⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, 1870 United States Federal Census, Douglas County, Oregon.

¹⁶⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, 1880 United States Federal Census, Douglas County, Oregon.

Eastern Oregon.¹⁷⁰ In 1886, just two years before Letitia's death, Narcisse, Martha, and their seven children moved to the reservation.¹⁷¹

Near the end of her life, Letitia deeded her South Myrtle property to her son and "five dollars to Martha Jane Carson."¹⁷² Letitia continued to work and live on her homestead until her death on February 2, 1888, when she was around seventy years old. She was buried in Benjamin Stephens' family cemetery in South Myrtle. The relationship between Stephen and Letitia is undocumented, but Stephens had a nearby land claim, just a mile or so up the road from the Dyers. Two of Stephens' children, William Ervin Stephens, born in 1857, and Samuel Robinson Stephens, born in 1858, could have been delivered by Letitia.¹⁷³ Her headstone is tall, crafted from white marble, and engraved with a decorative frame and a drooping willow tree. While her birthdate is incorrect and her name is misspelled, the prominence of Letitia's headstone indicates that she had a close, important relationship with the Stephens family. When discussing Letitia's burial, Newton wrote, "I have always heard that she was a hard worker...She was much loved by her community, and it is said that they bought her gravestone."¹⁷⁴ Clearly, Letitia was a beloved member of South Myrtle.

As a Black woman homesteader and midwife, Letitia immersed herself in the social environment around her, building strong links to settler landscapes and communities in rural

¹⁷⁰ U.S. Congress, *An Act Providing for Allotment of Land in Severalty to the Indians Residing Upon the Umatilla Reservation*, 48th Cong., 2d sess., 1885, Chap. 319, 340-343.

¹⁷¹ *Indian Census Rolls*, 1892, Roll: M595_616; Page: 10; Line: 19; Agency: Umatilla.

¹⁷² The notation regarding Martha was likely a legal formality of some type to clear title to the property so it couldn't be clouded by competing heirs at the time of Letitia's death. "L. Carson Warranty Deed," July 31, 1884, Letitia Carson Digital History Collection, *Oregon Documents*, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/84>.

¹⁷³ Newton, *Golden Leafs of Time*, Vol. 3, 137.

¹⁷⁴ Newton, *Golden Leafs of Time*, Vol. 3, 177.

Western Oregon. Through homesteading, Letitia engaged in careful and conscious land use through subsistence farming, raising livestock, tending her orchard, and preserving and storing food for cold Oregon winters.¹⁷⁵ Stewarding land also connected Letitia to her neighbors and strengthened her role within her communities, in both Benton and Douglas counties. As a midwife and caretaker, Letitia extended her physical labor to settler mothers and families, helping them through terrifying, intimate moments of childbirth and child raising in the uncertain, ever-changing landscape of Oregon territory. What began in enslavement and continued on the Overland Trail was nurtured by later endeavors as a landowner and community midwife, co-constituting and advancing her knowledge and impact.

¹⁷⁵ Land stewardship mustn't be conflated with ownership; the land use they engaged in was purposeful and careful work that transformed their environmental landscape into agricultural or community-based spaces. As White argues, there is an intrinsic problem with not seeing working in nature as an appreciation of nature. Transforming nature can be respecting and valuing nature. Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?' Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 171–186.

Chapter 4: “The Well-Earned Reputation of ‘Sib’” Black Homesteading and
Midwifery in Lakeview, Oregon, 1888-1918



Silvy Harbor, c. 1895. Photo file #473, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

“But we must learn a hundred trades, without apprenticeship or aids,
and practice all with equal skill, tis their good pleasure, our good will.”¹

Helena Gillespie

Silvy Harbor’s hands cultivated hay every season for six years under the high desert sun, cradled infants in intimate post-birth moments, and nursed countless feverish settlers, aiding in a shifting social landscape in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Oregon. Silvy lived in Lakeview, among the sagebrush and juniper where, as one neighbor observed, “the herders still follow their bands of sheep to the mountains in the summer and back down again in the fall in the centuries' old cycle...The coyote still slips through the sage, alert and hungry. The earth abides.”² She arrived at a crucial moment, moving into Lake County just as Lakeview was platted and incorporated into a small, yet thriving, town. From the time of her first recorded patient (1902) to her last (1915), Silvy helped birth fifty-two babies, all photographed and noted in a photo album that remained in the possession of her son, Bert.³ In an oral history with Bert in the 1960s, the interviewer observed that, “she brought a lot of babies into the world.” Bert replied, “Oh hell yeah.”⁴ Beyond midwifery, Silvy was also a homesteader and small business owner. As a healer and homesteader, Silvy shaped the social character of her greater community through her homesteading, midwifery work, and interpersonal relationships.

¹ Helena Gillespie, quoted in Myres, *Westering Women*, 247.

² Willard “Bill” Leonard, “A Boyhood with Sheep in the Oregon Desert, Part 3,” ed. Frank Haines, Reggy Drinkwater, and Pete Allens, *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (1976): 173.

³ “Conversations with early residents of Lakeview,” Oregon, SR 9675, Reel #3, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland.

⁴ “Conversations with early residents of Lakeview,” Oregon, SR 9675, Reel #3.

Early Life

Silvy's early life is largely unknown. The 1900 census reveals that her parents were born in Missouri, and that Silvy was also born there in 1856, but other details are scarce.⁵ Given the location and timing of her birth, it is very likely that Silvy was born into slavery. As noted earlier, Missouri relied less on large-scale plantation enslavement and instead profited off small hemp or tobacco farms.⁶ While we cannot say for certain what Silvy's childhood looked like, she likely lived on a small-scale farm and worked as a domestic servant or field hand, possibly doing both jobs as needed.⁷ During her early life, she was also likely exposed to both environmental and health-based traditions within enslaved communities. As historian Diane Glave writes, enslaved children witnessed and absorbed environmental practices by watching their parents labor and, later, by participating in field labor themselves.⁸ At the same time, the practice of Black midwifery was prevalent among enslaved women. Silvy likely observed this practice as a young girl. Moreover, the tradition of Black midwifery was intergenerational. Cultural anthropologist Holly Mathews states, "Most midwives learned their trade through long apprenticeships to older, established midwives, usually their kinswomen....In this way, the traditions of midwifery were passed from generation to generation and continuity in belief and practice were maintained."⁹ It is possible that Silvy aided community midwives, continuing the

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, 1900 United States Federal Census, Lakeview, Lake, Oregon.

⁶ Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 2; Smith, "'To Hue the Line and Let the Chips Fall Where They May,'" 696.

⁷ When explaining the work of enslaved women in Kentucky, historian Ellen Eslinger states, "First, although enslaved women seldom did heavy work, such as felling trees or plowing, some spent much time working among the crops." Eslinger, "Farming on the Kentucky Frontier," 28; Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 2.

⁸ Glave, *Rooted in the Earth*, 94, 95.

⁹ Holly F. Mathews, "Killing the Medical Self-Help Tradition among African Americans: The Case of Lay Midwifery in North Carolina, 1912–1983," in *African Americans in the South*, ed. Hans A. Baer and Yvonne Jones (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 62; Donald-Hazzard, *Mojo Workin'*, 137-8.

physical and emotional labor of birth work into the next generation of enslaved and later freed women. Midwifery was intrinsically environmental as well. According to anthropologist Gertrude Fraser, Southern Black midwives were expected to have “some knowledge of the techniques of biomedicine and also to be able to call on God and use the herbal remedies and patent medicines at her disposal.”¹⁰ Silvy’s early life thus likely introduced her to agricultural practices and midwifery traditions, aligning her to the land and community care as she moved west.

While these early years are sporadically recorded, it is clear that Silvy had limited work opportunities and faced instability in early settler communities once she came west. Between 1869 and 1872, Silvy traveled west and briefly settled in San Joaquin County, California, re-entering the archival record with the birth of her son, Bert, in 1872.¹¹ Bert’s father is unknown, and it is likely he died early on or was never involved, as Silvy lists herself as a widow in later documents and census records. The 1960s oral history with Silvy’s son Bert reveals that she arrived in San Joaquin Valley by train.¹² Bert shared that Silvy did not disclose the nature of her travels, but he later confirmed that Silvy traveled with a family named Harbor or Harper. Upon arriving in San Joaquin County, Silvy worked for a family there, but it is unclear which family and in what capacity. A few months after Bert’s birth, Silvy and her son moved northeast to Surprise Valley, California, alongside that unknown family.¹³ Five years later, in 1877, Silvy and Bert visited Lakeview for the first time, traveling there with the Snider family for the first Fourth

¹⁰ Fraser, *African American Midwifery in the South*, 43.

¹¹ Marie Lee, Lake County Museum, email to author, October 18, 2023.

¹² “Conversations with early residents of Lakeview,” Oregon, SR 9675, Reel #4, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland.

¹³ *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), August 25, 1960. See Appendix, Figure 2 for a map of Surprise Valley and surrounding towns.

of July celebration. Silvy worked for the Sniders at Willow Ranch, just north of Surprise Valley, during those years.¹⁴ Three years later, in the 1880 census, Silvy was living in Alturas, California, working as a servant for David Knos, a hotel proprietor from Ohio.¹⁵ During the winter of 1881 and 1882, Silvy and Bert visited Lakeview again for a few months, and Silvy worked as a cook at the Tenbrook Hotel.¹⁶ Finally, in 1888, Silvy moved to Lakeview permanently, following fourteen-year-old Bert, who had moved in 1886.¹⁷ During the 1870s and 1880s, Silvy jumped from job to job, following the white families she lived and worked with in order to secure stable housing and income. It wasn't until she permanently settled in Lakeview, after she had homesteaded and sold her land, that she was able to find more stable work, later transitioning from domestic labor to midwifery at the turn of the century.

Lakeview emerged at the foothills of the Warner mountains and expanded westward toward Goose Lake, for which it is named.¹⁸ In 1889, a year after Silvy arrived, the town's population was between 800 and 900 and rapidly increasing; the town incorporated that February.¹⁹ By that time, the Klamath and Modoc people had been removed to a reservation on the coast.²⁰ The violent displacement of Indigenous people made the settlement of Lakeview possible and cleared the land that Silvy would later homestead and operate her home hospital. In

¹⁴ *Lake County Examiner*, August 25, 1960.

¹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, 1880 United States Federal Census, Alturas, Modoc County, California, *Ancestry*, <https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/6742/images/4239981-00046?pid=14265317>

¹⁶ *Lake County Examiner*, August 25, 1960.

¹⁷ *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), February 3, 1966.

¹⁸ See Appendix, Figure 3 for an aerial photograph of early Lakeview.

¹⁹ Businessmen of Lakeview, *Lake County, Oregon: Description of Its Climate, Soil, Resources and Its Desirable Opportunities for Home-Seekers and Those Seeking Profitable Investments*, 1889; Sam Stern, *Bernard Daly's Promise: The Enduring Legacy of a Place-Based Scholarship*, (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2022).

²⁰ *Lake County History: The First 100 Years, 1876-1976* (Lakeview, OR: Lake County Historical Society), 10.

1890, Lake County had nine Black people out of a population of 2,604.²¹ Throughout the 1890s, Lakeview continued to grow as a center for sheep and cattle ranches in Southern Oregon. Homesteaders and ranchers enjoyed cheap land, plenty of water, mail and telegraph services, 35 sheep, 3 horses and 10 head of cattle per capita, and no hospitals.²² Silvy arrived at a critical moment in Lakeview's history just as it was developing as the county seat.

Homesteading

Upon settling in Lakeview in 1888, Silvy began a new life of homesteading, business ownership, and midwifery that lasted until her death in 1918.²³ It is unclear where she worked until 1892, when she applied for a homestead in Lake County, just outside of Lakeview. From March 1893, when her application was approved, to July 1898, Silvy improved upon her land, working with it, learning from it, and altering the landscape of sagebrush, bunchgrass, and pine. Her homestead became a bridge between her and her surrounding community, allowing her space to cultivate crops that she could sell and share with cattle and sheep herders and opportunities to develop relationships with neighbors, who would later testify as witnesses to her homestead claim. Homesteading allowed Silvy to directly engage in the development of Lake County and resulted in profits that she later used to purchase her boarding house and, later, her home hospital in Lakeview.

²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Eleventh Census of Population: Sex, General Nativity, and Color, Vol. 1, https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1890/volume-1/1890a_v1-13.pdf.

²² Leslie Schwab, Julie Osborne, and James B Norman, *Lakeview Downtown Historic District, E, F, and G Streets, between Second Street North and First Street South, Lakeview, Lake County, Oregon, HABS No. OR-176: Photographs, Written Historical and Descriptive Data* (Seattle, WA: Historic American Buildings Survey, National Park Service, 2001).

²³ See Appendix, Figure 4 for a map of Lakeview, Oregon.

While Black homesteaders were not included in the initial Homestead Act, by the time Silvy applied in 1892, Black people had achieved citizenship and could thus qualify. Considering that Silvy was a single, older Black woman new to town, homesteading miles away from the town center, it is hard to imagine how she cleared the sagebrush, built herself a home and fence, and cultivated crops such as hay.²⁴ According to witness testimony, she must have forged relationships with nearby neighbors who helped her in some capacity, though the intricacies of these relationships are not documented. Additionally, Silvy's past likely contributed to her agricultural ability, as enslavement established a knowledge of farming that possibly allowed for her successful claim. As the professor of agricultural and resource economics Andrew Muhammad notes, while Black homesteaders in the South (the only comparative data available) were only a fraction of the total homesteader population, they were often more successful in certifying claims than white homesteaders were and succeeded 35 percent of the time, while whites succeeded at 25 percent.²⁵ Though Silvy's likely agricultural experience was based in a different natural landscape, basic knowledge of farming and livestock would have aided her in this new venture.

In Lake County specifically, homesteaders were up against harsher conditions such as extreme weather and a high desert environment. Once they arrived on the land, the first task was to build a dwelling, which proved challenging. Juniper was abundant but grew too small, hard, and gnarled to produce suitable logs. Pine and tamarack grew far away in the Warner Mountain

²⁴ Silvy Harbor, Homestead File No. 1753, July 16th, 1898, Lakeview Land Office, Records of the Bureau of Land Management, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

²⁵ Muhammad, Sichko, and Olsson, "African Americans and Federal Land Policy," 104. This article is focused mainly on homesteading in the South, but without scholarship on Black homesteading in the West, this research is the closest comparison.

foothills and were not easily transported.²⁶ Supplies could be hauled to Lakeview only during the summertime, because dirt roads became mud- or snow-covered the rest of the year.²⁷ Settlers built small homes, usually only one or two rooms. Silvy lived there alone, so she likely constructed only a small dwelling. According to her homestead claim, she built “houses and a barn” worth one hundred dollars, likely referring to her home and other buildings used for storage.²⁸ Charles Stauffer, who wrote about early twentieth-century homesteading in Lake County, details the appearance of these homes: “They took on the browns and grays of the landscape as they weathered.... [H]omesteaders often finished the interior walls with a covering of some kind, including purchased wallpaper, ‘blue building felt’ or newspaper.... Beds were simply rough frames or flat shelves, covered with straw ticks for mattresses.”²⁹ Silvy’s barn, a separate and impressive feat, was also a common building for homesteaders to provide shelter for animals and excess crops.³⁰ We can infer that Silvy raised livestock because she built a barn, and her land is described as grazing and pastureland by her witnesses.³¹

Beyond shelter, finding water and clearing land were other complex tasks for high-desert homesteaders. The arid desert made water scarce and subject to fluctuation, with Lake County

²⁶ Charles W. Stauffer, “Homesteading the High Desert: Oregon’s Lost Creek Valley 1910 to 1920,” (master’s thesis, Marylhurst College, 1988), 33, 34; Barbara Allen Bogart, *Homesteading the High Desert* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987).

²⁷ Willard Leonard to Mrs. Elizabeth Buehler, Oct 16th, 1975, Willard Leonard papers, Mss 1595, folder 1, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland.

²⁸ Silvy Harbor, Homestead File No. 1753, July 16th, 1898, Lakeview Land Office, Records of the Bureau of Land Management, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

²⁹ Stauffer, “Homesteading the High Desert,” 35, 36.

³⁰ Stauffer, “Homesteading the High Desert,” 35, 36.

³¹ Silvy Harber, Homestead File No. 1753, July 16th, 1898, Lakeview, Oregon, Land Office; Records of the Bureau of Land Management, National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

having a total of 13.92 inches of rain in 1895.³² In addition to digging a well, Silvy had to clear her 160 acres to prepare for farming. Through the homesteading process, Silvy gained a thorough understanding of her land. One witness, James Petre, described the land as “grazing land or meadow” and stated that she cultivated at least one-fourth of her land (forty acres) each season.³³ Her other witness, Elsworth Russill, noted her land to be “farming land,” cultivated every season with hay crops and pasture.³⁴ In her testimony, Silvy states that she cultivated “about two-thirds every season...Mostly meadow land. Hay + Pasture.”³⁵ On meadow land, native vegetation consisted of “a dozen species of grasses, including bunchgrass and wild rye, various wildflowers, rabbitbrush, Woolley sage, greasewood, and sagebrush.”³⁶ Sagebrush was the most difficult to remove, and many settlers chose to burn it or dig it out with a hoe.³⁷ Once the land was cleared, Silvy still had to fence and plant it. Fencing was required by the homestead law but also protected crops from grazing livestock. This process was difficult, especially alone, but juniper provided hard and durable fence posts.³⁸

Silvy’s solitude and the unpredictable weather patterns of the high desert complicated farming. The hay she grew was likely ryegrass; it was a popular choice because of its frost and

³² “Lake County, Oregon Weather Data,” NY database.com, Democrat and Chronicle, <https://data.democratandchronicle.com/weather-data/lake-county/41037/1895-12-01/?syear=1895&eyear=2024#summary>.

³³ Silvy Harbor, Homestead File No. 1753, July 16th, 1898, Lakeview Land Office, Records of the Bureau of Land Management, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

³⁴ Silvy Harbor, Homestead File No. 1753, July 16th, 1898, Lakeview Land Office, Records of the Bureau of Land Management, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

³⁵ Silvy Harbor, Homestead File No. 1753, July 16th, 1898, Lakeview Land Office, Records of the Bureau of Land Management, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

³⁶ Stauffer, “Homesteading the High Desert,” 39.

³⁷ Stauffer, “Homesteading the High Desert,” 39.

³⁸ Stauffer, “Homesteading the High Desert,” 38.

drought resistance. Silvy could have cultivated the rye through dry farming, a technique that allowed homesteaders to produce somewhat stable yields even in desert conditions.³⁹ The high elevation allowed for severe frost to occur throughout the year, threatening even heartier crops like rye.⁴⁰ Highly variable temperatures, limited rainfall, and harsh winter snow would have also posed challenges to Silvy's agricultural success. Dr. Bessie Rehwinkle, an early twentieth-century doctor who homesteaded alone in Wyoming, recalled, "160 acres of the best land in a wilderness is not yet a home or a farm. To make it that requires years of hard labor, sacrifice, resourcefulness, courage, vision, determination, and a high degree of pluck and perseverance in the face of reverses and failure."⁴¹ As a single woman homesteader, Silvy would have persevered through a lot in the five years that she improved upon her land, especially considering the harsh desert conditions and high elevation.

Although the historical record documents only pasture lands, it is likely that she planted and maintained a kitchen garden to sustain herself.⁴² Many Lake County Homesteaders primarily produced cash crops rather than subsistence farming, but personal kitchen gardens were common. The high desert landscape did not offer many natural foods such as fruits, nuts, berries to homesteaders. In these kitchen gardens, they mostly raised weather-resistant crops that could withstand the harsh desert conditions and variable frost such as cabbages, rutabagas, and turnips, with some raising peas, radishes, and onions. Alongside these gardens, homesteaders like Silvy

³⁹ Stauffer, "Homesteading the High Desert," 39, 40.

⁴⁰ Stauffer, "Homesteading the High Desert," 40; Businessmen of Lakeview, *Lake County, Oregon: Description of Its Climate, Soil, Resources and Its Desirable Opportunities for Home-Seekers and Those Seeking Profitable Investments*, (Commercial Clubs of Silver Lake, Paisley, Lakeview [and] New Pine Creek, 1912), 3.

⁴¹ Wyoming prairie was also high elevation with little rainfall, making it comparable to the climate that Silvy homesteaded on in Lake County. Bessie L. Rehwinkel, *Dr. Bessie: The Life Story and Romance of a Pioneer Lady Doctor on Our Western and the Canadian Frontier* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 70, 71.

⁴² Stauffer, "Homesteading the High Desert," 41.

also kept hogs, cows, and chickens to produce fresh food.⁴³ We can imagine Silvy's small home, barn, and pastureland with a dedicated garden space, where she was able to produce basic fresh foods.

Though there are no known remnants of Silvy's homestead, her Homestead Act file provides insight into how she claimed her land.⁴⁴ Initially, none of her four witnesses appeared to testify.⁴⁵ Eventually, Silvy and her witnesses testified, and on January 26, 1899, she was granted her claim.⁴⁶ Her witness testimony does not provide a clear display of support. While they eventually testified, she had to wait for six days for them to appear; we can imagine her showing up at the Lakeview Land Office only to be disappointed day after day. Her witnesses claimed to have other business commitments, and after six days, only two of the four appeared to testify, despite promising Silvy they would support her. The reason for their delayed support is not clear, but it does suggest that neighboring white settlers did not always encourage Silvy as a Black woman homesteader. Perhaps they resisted testifying because of her race or gender; perhaps there is undocumented interpersonal conflict. It is also possible that her witnesses were all indeed

⁴³ Stauffer, "Homesteading the High Desert," 41.

⁴⁴ Silvy Harbor, Homestead File No. 1753, January 26th, 1899, Lakeview Land Office, Records of the Bureau of Land Management, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

⁴⁵ She said, "July 11th, 1898, on which my final proof on such entry was advertised to be taken, I personally appeared [sic] before the U.S. Land Office to make such proof but none of my witnesses came; but they had promised me to come and testify but none appeared, [sic] but were prevented by business duties; that on each day thereafter I was likewise present, and not until this July 16th, 1898, did any of my witnesses come, and this is the reason why I did not make proof on the date advertised." Silvy Harbor, Homestead File No. 1753, July 18, 1898, Lakeview, Land Office, Records of the Bureau of Land Management, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

⁴⁶ Silvy Harbor, Homestead File No. 1753, January 26th, 1899, Lakeview Land Office, Records of the Bureau of Land Management, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

preoccupied with “business duties.”⁴⁷ In this unknown, it is important to recognize the possibility of faltering support for Silvy and to consider how that may have impacted her.

Though both Bert and Silvy had moved together to Lakeview, she lived on the homestead by herself. Alone on the land, Silvy had to manage any difficulties she faced. Native animals such as jackrabbits, antelope, bears, squirrels, mice, gophers, skunks, foxes, badgers, bobcats, and coyotes would have all made their presence known as threats to crops or Silvy herself.⁴⁸ Dangerously cold winters and dry hot summers would have also threatened Silvy’s safety on the land. Despite this, she was able to clear, cultivate, and claim her acreage. As homesteader Rehwinkel recalled, “The feeling of being a landowner was a new and exhilarating experience to me. To be able to say that this fine stretch of land is my own, my very own, does something to one’s ego. It gives one a sense of security, of stability, of belonging, and of being a part of the land itself. One no longer lives in a community, but has become an integral part of it.”⁴⁹ Silvy’s experience as a Black woman complicates Dr. Bessie’s initial observance; she likely experienced this freedom and security in a different way than white women homesteaders. Silvy, once considered property herself, subject to servant roles, and stripped of her rights, now owned her own land that she had cultivated and transformed.

Silvy’s homesteading is complicated by the fact that her voice is often absent from the archive and that the structure of homestead documentation was very specific, requiring only certain details. Because of this, her motivation for homesteading remains blurry. Silvy lived on

⁴⁷ Silvy Harber, Homestead File No. 1753, July 18, 1898, Lakeview, Land Office, Records of the Bureau of Land Management, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

⁴⁸ Stauffer, “Homesteading the High Desert,” 41.

⁴⁹ Rehwinkel, *Dr. Bessie*, 57.

her land her land for seven years, only two years beyond what was required to be granted ownership of her acreage. We don't know why she claimed land, or why she sold it quickly after. Any number of things could have pushed her off the land and into town. There was a culture of livestock killing, known as the Central Oregon Range Wars, that threatened farmers and their herds.⁵⁰ Maybe she didn't receive necessary help from her neighbors as suggested by their delay in testifying. It's possible that farming 160 acres of desert land as a single woman was too much work for the small return in profit or that the land was simply too arid for successful farming at all. Perhaps homesteading was a strategic maneuver to ensure profit, padding her pockets for her later real estate investments in Lakeview. It's also plausible that she simply wanted to move and start a midwifery business closer to the town center. Unfortunately, there's no way to know Silvy's motivations. Without this information, we can only observe that Silvy was a successful homesteader, who raised livestock and farmed pastureland and improved upon her claim. In this way, homesteading was a way for Silvy to contribute to the development of Lakeview. It was a bridge between her and neighboring settlers, who were all claiming and altering the land to support the settler colonial transformation of Oregon. Homesteading also provided her a valuable resource that she used to make money that later allowed her to purchase her boarding house and home hospital in town.

⁵⁰ "Central Oregon Range Wars," Oregon History Project, Oregon Historical Society, <https://www.oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/historical-records/central-oregon-range-wars/>.

Business Ownership

In February 1900, after seven years of living on her homestead, Silvy sold all 160 acres to Pierce Combs and moved back to the town of Lakeview.⁵¹ From 1900 to 1902, when she established an in-home hospital and newborn nursery, Silvy owned and operated many small businesses in Lakeview, further illuminating her connection to the townspeople and her deep-rooted ties to early Lakeview settlement. It is unclear where Silvy lived in these first months, but we know that she opened a bakery in the town's business district shortly after moving back to Lakeview.⁵² On May 22, a fast moving fire swept through the downtown, and the business district burned to the ground, destroying over fifty establishments, including Silvy's.⁵³ Though the extent of the damage is unknown, it is likely that her bakery was only partially destroyed, because she transformed it into a boarding house, called The Exchange, that same year.⁵⁴ The Exchange was open for a short but significant period in Lakeview's history, contributing to fire relief efforts by boarding townsfolk who would later become her patients.

The 1900 census, recorded in June, provides further insight into this period of Silvy's life. Living on Water Street in Lakeview, she is listed as a Black, widowed woman and head of household. Notably, she could read and write, a significant change from her 1880 census entry,

⁵¹ I was unable to uncover very much on Pierce Combs. According to a newspaper clipping from the *Alturas Plaindealer and Modoc County Times*, Combs fought in the Modoc War and lived in Lakeview for only a few years until 1901, so he wouldn't have lived on the land he bought from Silvy for very long, if at all. He was a cattle herder and later lived and died in Klamath Falls, OR. "Death of Old Pioneer of Tule Lake," *Alturas Plaindealer and Modoc County Times* (Alturas, CA), November 6, 1935; Silvy Harbor, Deed of Sale to Pierce Combs, February 17, 1900, Deed book 13, p. 156, Lake County Clerk's Office, Lakeview, Oregon.

⁵² *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), February 3, 1966.

⁵³ Schwab, et. al., *Lakeview Downtown Historic District*; Jeff LaLande, "Lakeview," *Oregon Encyclopedia*, <https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/lakeview/>. See Appendix, Figures 5 and 6 for photographs of Lakeview from before and after the May 1900 fire.

⁵⁴ *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), February 3, 1966.

which indicated she could do neither.⁵⁵ The 1900 census also indicates that she rented her home.⁵⁶ She listed her occupation as “restaurant,” and living with her were two white male boarders, Edward R. Bunting and John Tannehill.⁵⁷ Bunting was a day laborer just passing through Lakeview, later living in Nevada.⁵⁸ Tannehill was a carpenter who ended up settling in Lake County as a farmer near Goose Lake.⁵⁹ While their pasts are lost to time, their names in the 1900 census indicate the success of Silvy’s boarding house and her resilience just twenty days after the most destructive fire in the town’s history.

Silvy labored, physically and emotionally, to ensure the upkeep of her business, as shown through newspaper advertisements and contemporary understandings of boarding house ownership. Later records indicate that she owned the Exchange, suggesting that she may have acquired and sold her homestead as part of a strategic scheme to acquire the land at little cost, patent it, then sell at a profit so that she could purchase property in town. The *Lake County Examiner* first advertised the Exchange on November 8, 1900: “Sib’ Harber gives an excellent meal at The Exchange, on Main Street for 25 cents. Everything neat as a pin at The Exchange. Read her announcement in this issue.”⁶⁰ A few pages later, her advertisement read, “Everybody likes a good meal and all know Sib. She superintends all the cooking herself. . . .Go there for a fine meal. Special inducements offered for board by the week or by the month. Sib Harber

⁵⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, 1900 United States Federal Census, Lakeview, Lake, Oregon; U.S. Census Bureau, 1880 United States Federal Census, Alturas, Modoc, California.

⁵⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, 1900 United States Federal Census, Lakeview, Lake, Oregon.

⁵⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, 1900 United States Federal Census, Lakeview, Lake, Oregon.

⁵⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, 1930 United States Federal Census, Reno, Washoe, Nevada.

⁵⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, 1910 United States Federal Census, Lakeview, Lake, Oregon.

⁶⁰ “County News,” *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), November 8, 1900.

Proprietress, Main St. Lakeview, Door north of Coulter & Co's Meat Market, 25 cents.”⁶¹ These advertisements ran monthly from November 1900 through February 1901. Notably, the first line ends, “all know Sib.” Although this is a self-promotion, it still speaks to the renowned nature of her character and her presence in Lakeview, which was largely built around her earlier work in the restaurant and service industry before she opened her hospital.

Owning and operating the boarding house and restaurant was a significant task that required constant effort. Silvy would have had to wake up early to prepare the morning meal, sweep, set the table, serve breakfast, and plan the other meals for the day. After breakfast, there was baking to be done, prep for other meals, and all of the janitorial tasks: cleaning, making beds, washing laundry, ironing, and mending holes in the linens. After this, there was still an evening meal to prepare and, inevitably, the work of checking in new boarders, and of course planning for the next day.⁶² In the wake of the fire, Silvy's business likely became a refuge to townsfolk, a place where they could stay and have a meal. In this way, the visitors and day laborers in the majority white town of Lakeview relied on Silvy, a Black woman, for shelter, food, and basic necessities, such as a safe place to sleep.

As a restaurateur and boardinghouse-keeper, Silvy cooked and hosted community events. Even by 1900, a few years before she officially opened her home hospital, she already boasted a well-earned reputation through her community ventures. In October 1900, she catered a banquet for the First Judicial District Circuit Riders; the *Lake County Examiner* noted, “While the feast—and it is properly so called—was not in strict accord with the printed menu, it was one that did

⁶¹ See Appendix, Figure 7 for the advertisement. “The Exchange (Advertisement),” *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), November 8, 1900.

⁶² Myres, *Westering Women*, 245.

credit, even to the well earned reputation of ‘Sib.’”⁶³ That Christmas, Silvy hosted “a fine Christmas dinner” at The Exchange.⁶⁴ This again implies that Silvy fostered a sense of community. In February 1901, The Exchange closed; Silvy leased it a month later to Mrs. L.S. Linville and Mrs. Frank Barnes, “two of the best cooks in the country.”⁶⁵ Though the Exchange had closed its doors, Silvy would soon begin a new service-oriented business: her home hospital.

Healing and Midwifery

After many entrepreneurial efforts, Silvy was able to purchase her third property in April 1901 and swiftly transformed her home into a hospital.⁶⁶ From 1901 through 1915, Silvy owned and operated a hospital, nursery for newborns, and maternity ward out of her home on North H Street in Lakeview. Here, she consciously constructed an environment that ensured and maintained community health for all Lakeview residents, including some of the town’s most prominent families. Silvy established close, enduring familial relationships with the expectant women in Lakeview through her hospital and home care, but her care expanded to all Lakeview townsfolk. One resident, Jeannie Carroll, remembered, “There was no hospital in Lakeview in the early 1900s, so Aunt Sib’s nursery was not only for maternity cases but for sick people. In 1913, she helped nurse my own father for about three weeks. In fact, I think surgery was performed in her house. ... [I]t has been said she could tell a woman was pregnant before the

⁶³ “First Occasional Banquet of the First Judicial District Circuit Riders,” *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), October 25, 1900.

⁶⁴ “Local Pick-Ups,” *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), December 20, 1900.

⁶⁵ “Miscellaneous,” *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), February 21, 1901; “Modoc County Exchanges,” *The Alturas New Era* (Alturas, CA), March 8, 1901.

⁶⁶ A.L. Howell, Deed of Sale to Sybil Harbor, September 13, 1910, Deed book 24, page 132, Lake County Clerk’s Office, Lakeview, OR; U.S. Census Bureau, 1910 United States Federal Census, Lakeview, Lake, Oregon; “Lake County Exchanges,” *The Alturas New Era* (Alturas, CA), April 19, 1901; *Lake County Examiner*, February 3, 1906.

woman was aware of it.”⁶⁷ In an oral history interview with Silvy’s son, Bert, the interviewer, Willard Leonard, recalled the time when Silvy operated in the town before the introduction of Dr. Bernard Daly in later years. “Well, I guess she was one of the first doctors. I don’t know when Dr. Daly came to this town, but she was a midwife before women ever thought of having Doc Daly around.”⁶⁸ Leonard fondly recalls Silvy’s care: “Your mother nursed me when I had scarlet fever. She was an awful kind woman, Bert.”⁶⁹ Though there are few records of Silvy’s midwifery and healing work, a cross-geographical analysis of Southern Black midwifery and white Western midwifery during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century helps provide insight into Silvy’s work. Ultimately, Silvy’s midwifery and healing work came in many capacities and was crucial to the early settlement of Lakeview.

In the early twentieth century, birth was risky and made complex by external environmental factors and the uncertainty of rural life. In 1900, about 760 people lived in Lakeview, though the population grew steadily to 1,253 by 1910.⁷⁰ In those years, the streets were mud, the sidewalks consisted of wooden planks, and horses provided the most common form of transportation. The first train wouldn’t come until 1915, and until then they were 150 miles from the nearest railroad.⁷¹ Of course, no rural town had telephones, electricity, or a

⁶⁷ Marie Lee, Lake County Museum, email to author, October 18, 2023.

⁶⁸ “Conversations with early residents of Lakeview,” Oregon, SR 9675, Reel #3.

⁶⁹ “Conversations with early residents of Lakeview,” Oregon, SR 9675, Reel #3.

⁷⁰ Schwab, et. al., *Lakeview Downtown Historic District*; U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistics for Oregon*, 1910, Washington, Government Printing Office; Willard Leonard to Elizabeth W. Buehler, June 17, 1975, folder 1, Willard Leonard papers, Mss 1595, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland.

⁷¹ Willard Leonard papers, Mss 1595, folder 1, Letter to Ms. Pricilla Knuth, Feb 1, 1976, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, Oregon; Willard Leonard to Elizabeth W. Buehler, August 2, 1975, folder 1, Willard Leonard papers, Mss 1595, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland.

municipal water system at this time.⁷² The comforts of modern hospitals were nonexistent, and expectant women were left with family and—if they were lucky—a competent midwife. Despite there being other doctors in town, Silvy was the only midwife and undoubtedly helped white settler families with many deliveries.⁷³ Historian Sylvia D. Hoffert illuminates the difficulty of this environment in her writings on Western settler childbearing, noting that many fearful women kept journals to leave behind something for their families in case of maternal mortality.⁷⁴ Suffering from depression and loneliness, deprived of their material comforts, and struggling with increased physical vulnerability, frontier women underwent a tumultuous birthing experience. Settlements dotted a vast landscape, and neighbors were often too far away to sustain close relationships.

As Silvy's labor was social physical, and emotional, it also expanded beyond traditional notions of midwifery to other healing and hospital work. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, midwives undertook a wide array of responsibilities beyond childbirth. Rural families emphasized post-partum care as new mothers often relied on midwives and neighbors to complete chores, care for other children, and essentially run the household for a few days to weeks after birth.⁷⁵ Elizabeth Rice, a nurse who worked in the Fort Rock Valley one hundred miles north of Lakeview during the early twentieth century, stayed with the mother and baby for three days after birth.⁷⁶ Because Silvy had her own home hospital and maternity ward, it is likely

⁷² Willard Leonard to Elizabeth W. Buehler, June 17, 1975, folder 1, Willard Leonard papers, Mss 1595, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland.

⁷³ *Lake County Examiner*, February 3, 1966.

⁷⁴ Hoffert, "Childbearing on the Trans-Mississippi Frontier, 1830-1900," 276.

⁷⁵ Donald-Hazzard, *Mojo Workin'*, 142; Hill, *Birthing the West*, 46.

⁷⁶ Helen Parks, *Portraits: Fort Rock Valley Homestead Years* (Lake County, OR: Fort Rock Valley Historical Society, 1989), 79.

that, while she sometimes traveled for cases, she also had mothers come and stay with her.⁷⁷ As Leonard and Carroll recalled, Silvy's work went beyond that of a midwife, and she also labored as a healer and nurse to Lakeview citizens.⁷⁸ In 1902, Ray Garrison, "a well known young man of Lake county," suffered a bullet injury and was treated at Silvy's hospital. A newspaper clipping announcing his injury illustrates that she housed patients who were not just pregnant mothers but people with varying medical emergencies. It also shows that her hospital was equipped to treat them properly; the last sentence confirms this, saying he is at "Sib Harber's residence and is getting along nicely."⁷⁹ While we don't have Silvy's first-hand recollection to illustrate her experience, Dr. Rehwinkel, who worked in a similar geography and time period, remembers, "In my examination room I always had two collapsible cots in readiness, which could easily be converted into emergency hospital beds. ... I had to function as doctor, nurse, and dietician, and also take care of the laundry for the linens used."⁸⁰ Silvy's work would have been similarly constant and exhausting as she operated her hospital.

A crucial aspect of exploring Silvy's healing is understanding what her home hospital looked like. Her home on North H Street in Lakeview is still standing.⁸¹ Largely unchanged from its initial construction, it is a small, one-story building.⁸² A porch greets visitors with two strong,

⁷⁷ Midwives would often bring meals to pregnant women and do their laundry and housekeeping, later staying with them in the postpartum period to teach them how to mother and do other essential household chores and childcare tasks. Onnie Lee Logan and Katherine Clark, *Motherwit, an Alabama Midwife's Story* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989).

⁷⁸ "Conversations with early residents of Lakeview," Reel #4, Oregon Historical Society Research Library; Lee, "Sybil Harber and Her Son, Bert."

⁷⁹ *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), June 12, 1902.

⁸⁰ Rehwinkel, *Dr. Bessie*, 83-85.

⁸¹ See Appendix, Figure 8 for a photograph of Silvy's home in August 2024.

⁸² See Appendix, Figure 9 for a map of where Silvy's home was.

tall pillars framing the front door. Garden beds and front-facing windows look out over a small front yard, fenced from the sidewalk. The woman who lives there today wrote, “The house is in original condition, complete with the wavy glass windows. Just recently, I discovered a cubby hole in the kitchen, where screens allowed outside air to enter and leave, cooling pies and breads. I also just re-wallpapered the bedroom that Sybil and Ted Conn are pictured in. I found bits of the wallpaper shown in the photo.”⁸³ Perhaps Silvy, who baked and cooked for early Lakeview residents at her bakery and boarding house, continued preparing food for others in her home. Silvy’s house was uniquely residential and public, providing maternal and other health care to Lakeview residents. In this way, it must be imagined along the lines of the traditional comforts of early frontier homes and home hospitals.

Silvy’s practice was widespread and well known. Ted Conn’s family was one of the oldest in Lakeview; his father helped start the town and held a powerful position as a well-established attorney.⁸⁴ In 1908, Silvy helped deliver the next generation of this wealthy and significant Lakeview family. In fact, the only surviving image we have of Silvy engaging in midwifery work, from 1908, shows her holding Ted Conn as an infant, likely only a couple of days or weeks old.⁸⁵ Silvy sits in an elaborate rocking chair, wearing a plaid dress with a high collar and long sleeves, puffed at the shoulder. A white apron, frilled against her chest, blends into the white baby blanket wrapped around Ted. Her head, slightly tilted, looks at the camera

⁸³ Sam Stern, “Diversity, Difference, and Social Justice,” June 21, 2020, <https://blogs.oregonstate.edu/lakeview/2020/06/21/diversity-difference-and-social-justice/>.

⁸⁴ Willard Leonard to Elizabeth W. Buehler, October 16, 1975, folder 1, Willard Leonard papers, Mss 1595, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland.

⁸⁵ See Appendix, Figure 10 for photo of Silvy holding Ted Conn; Students at Paisley High School, “Reflections, short stories of old Lake County: an attempt to capture the culture and history of the good folks who live behind the sagebrush curtain,” 1982, PAM 979.159 P149r, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, Oregon.

with eye contact and a faint smile; she appears proud and content. Her hands support Ted's small body on her lap; he moves, and his little head rests against her. In the background is a bed with fluffed pillows and an ornate iron frame, and a crib rests beside her. Floral wallpaper clads the wall behind them, and the border of a painting or small window drifts out of the frame. This photograph allows us to envision the intense circumstances that solidified intimate bonds between the midwife and the child, and by extension the mother, exhibiting an intricate community of feminine care among Black midwives in the American West, even if primary source evidence is scarce.

Through social, physical, and emotional labor, Silvy claimed healing authority in a space where Black people were few in number and historically unwelcome. Her well-known reputation was established even before she opened her hospital. What began through homesteading and bakery or boarding house ownership continued to evolve as she practiced medicine and midwifery. As the gender scholar Valerie Lee reminds us, "Midwives whose hands linked generations through the miracle of birth were seen in their communities as models of strength, wisdom, and power."⁸⁶ This was certainly true of Silvy, who worked as a midwife for some of the most notable and wealthy Lakeview families. Equipped with special knowledge, Silvy occupied a crucial space in this young community and, through that, was able to establish power in extremely intimate and vulnerable spaces birthing white children and tending to injured white clientele.

⁸⁶ Lee, *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers*, 35.

Oregon State Insane Asylum

In May 1912, Silvy was unexpectedly “adjudged insane” by white male doctors in Lakeview and sent to the Oregon State Insane Asylum (OSIA) in Salem.⁸⁷ She spent seven months in Ward Thirteen and later recovered and returned to Lakeview.⁸⁸ Her release was likely accelerated by a letter she wrote to the superintendent requesting that she be sent home as soon as possible.⁸⁹ But in April 1918, she was re-committed and stayed there until her death in November of that year. These years at the Oregon State Insane Asylum (later Oregon State Hospital) provide insight into the complex nature of Silvy’s authority, the potential impact of racial and gender bias, her material belongings, and her character as recorded by hospital staff.⁹⁰

Three newspaper clippings from 1912 follow the story of Silvy as she was “adjudged insane,” sent to the state hospital in Salem, and then returned back to her home in Lakeview. Each clipping includes praise for Silvy, once again confirming how beloved she was, her impact on her community, and her indispensable service in both hospitality and health care. On May 2, the *Lake County Examiner* announced her commitment:

“The many friends throughout Lake and Modoc counties of Mrs. Sib Harber will be deeply pained to learn that she has lost her mind yesterday and was adjudged insane by the examining physicians, Drs. Hall and Daly. During the past Winter her health has not been good, and it is presumed that that fact is the cause of her insanity. She imagines that she is afflicted with a contagious disease and that ‘spooks’ are surrounding her. She is

⁸⁷ “Mrs. Sib. Harber Adjudged Insane: Unfortunate Woman Will Be Conveyed to Stole for Treatment,” *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), May 2, 1912.

⁸⁸ Discharge Paper for Sib Harber, November 20, 1912, Oregon State Insane Asylum Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem.

⁸⁹ Letter from Sibyl Harber to Dr. Steiner, Nov. 19, 1912, OSIA Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem.

⁹⁰ In 1913, the name changed to the Oregon State Hospital (OSH). The recorded notes from hospital attendants, nurses, and other staff must be read with an understanding that Silvy, as a Black woman experiencing a mental health crisis, was viewed a certain way by the white, mostly male staff. Diane L. Goeres-Gardner, *Oregon Asylum* (Charleston, S.C: Arcadia Publications, 2013), 29; Goeres-Gardner, *Oregon Asylum*, 49.

being tenderly nursed by loving friends until a nurse arrives from Salem to convey her to the State hospital. During her long residence in Lakeview she has given her services whenever she was needed and by her sympathetic nature has endeared herself to many of the best families here. That she should thus be afflicted in her declining years is cause for pangs of grief in the hearts of all. It is feared that her ailment will be permanent, although hope that such will not prove the case, and that with proper treatment she will regain her reason and return to Lakeview to spend the remainder of her life surrounded by friends of former days.”⁹¹

The wording of this announcement emphasizes her beloved position: Her “many friends” will be “deeply pained” to learn of her condition. She was “tenderly nursed” and her mental illness caused “pangs of grief in the hearts of all.”⁹² The event was shocking and saddening for many residents. A week later asylum superintendent R.E. Lee Steiner came personally from Salem to accompany her to the asylum, treatment surely reserved for patients of certain importance. “The doctor is an old-time friend of Mrs. Harbor’s,” the *Lake County Examiner* observed, “and he considered it a special privilege to be able to render her every assistance possible in her hour of need.”⁹³ Another announcement, published on May 15th in the *Alturas New Era*, alerted residents of Surprise Valley, where she once lived, of Silvy’s departure, again illuminating her far-reaching significance not only in Lakeview but also nearby towns.⁹⁴

Initially built in 1883, OSIA has a long and complex history of patient abuse, overcrowding, mismanagement, and general mistreatment.⁹⁵ By 1900, the asylum had become a mostly self-sufficient community whose patients supplied necessities through their labor on the

⁹¹ “Mrs. Sib. Harber Adjudged Insane,” *Lake County Examiner*, May 2, 1912.

⁹² “Mrs. Sib. Harber Adjudged Insane,” *Lake County Examiner*, May 2, 1912.

⁹³ “Mrs. Sib Harber Taken to Salem: Supt. Steiner Came Here to Accompany Patient to State Asylum,” *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), May 9, 1912.

⁹⁴ *The Alturas New Era*, “Local and Personal,” *The Alturas New Era* (Alturas, CA), May 15, 1912.

⁹⁵ Diane L. Goeres-Gardner, *Inside Oregon State Hospital: A History of Tragedy and Triumph* (Charleston: The History Press, 2013), 16, 29.

Cottage Farm, in the sewing room, and on other on-site jobs.⁹⁶ Silvy likely sewed linens and clothing for patients, made baskets, washed dishes, or picked berries and fruits.⁹⁷ When she first arrived in 1912, the asylum was so overcrowded that patients had to sleep in corridors and smoking rooms.⁹⁸ In 1911, a Black couple was hired to work in the kitchen at the Cottage Farm. Ten hospital attendants signed a statement in protest against this couple entering the white workspace, ““We the employees of the hospital farm consider it an imposition and disgrace to have colored people working the positions that they do and we object most strenuously.””⁹⁹ Steiner ended up firing several of the employees, including A.C. Dilley, supervisor of the Cottage Farm, for participating in the protest.¹⁰⁰ Dr. R.E. Lee Steiner, superintendent from 1908 to 1937, crafted new rules to decrease patient abuse, but the problem of racial and gender discrimination, combined with ableism, continually made the asylum an unsafe place for many patients and staff of color.¹⁰¹

Silvy’s 1912 visit to the Oregon State Insane Asylum is well documented in institutional records provided by the Oregon State Archives, though the cause of her “attack” remains unclear. On May 1st, physician T.V. Hall of Lakeview examined Silvy and brought her to court before Judge Bernard Daly, who also worked as a physician in town. Together, they decided “That the said Sib Harber is an insane person, and that she be conveyed to the Oregon State

⁹⁶ Goeres-Gardner, *Oregon Asylum*, 29.

⁹⁷ See Appendix, Figure 11 for a photograph of women working in the field at the OSIA Cottage Farm. Goeres-Gardner, *Inside Oregon State Hospital*, 114; Goeres-Gardner, *Oregon Asylum*, 56.

⁹⁸ Goeres-Gardner, *Inside Oregon State Hospital*, 23.

⁹⁹ Goeres-Gardner, *Inside Oregon State Hospital*, 142.

¹⁰⁰ Goeres-Gardner, *Inside Oregon State Hospital*, 142.

¹⁰¹ Goeres-Gardner, *Inside Oregon State Hospital*, 130.

Insane Asylum at Salem.”¹⁰² Despite her success and community involvement, Hall believed her mental capacity to be “under average.”¹⁰³ For treatment, she was given “Bromides & Sedatives.”¹⁰⁴ Stitching evidence together from newspaper clippings and institutional accounts, it seems as though Silvy was experiencing “hysteria,”; she was described as “noisy and restless,” as well as seeing “spooks” surrounding her.¹⁰⁵ An official diagnosis and treatment are not included in her institutional documentation, but there is mention of “prone cerebral syphilis,” today called neurosyphilis. Neurosyphilis is an infection of the central nervous system that can occur at any time after contraction as a complication of syphilis.¹⁰⁶ It tends to manifest confusion, personality and mood changes, and other psychological and physical effects.¹⁰⁷ Neurosyphilis thus seems most likely, but there are other possibilities such as dementia or hormonal disruption. Given what we know about her later 1918 visit and diagnosis of uterine cancer, it is also quite possible that this illness was present during her initial commitment but went unnoticed by doctors who held stereotyped beliefs about her behavior based on gender and race. Most likely, the cause of her “insanity” was a combination of several factors, including undiagnosed syphilis, which developed into neurosyphilis, and additional complications of race

¹⁰² Admission Record for Sybl Harber, May 1, 1912, OSIA Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem, Oregon.

¹⁰³ Admission Record for Sybl Harber, May 1, 1912, OSIA Records.

¹⁰⁴ Admission Record for Sybl Harber, May 1, 1912, OSIA Records.

¹⁰⁵ “Mrs. Sib. Harber Adjudged Insane,” *Lake County Examiner*, May 2, 1912; Admission Record for Sybl Harber, May 1, 1912, OSIA Records.

¹⁰⁶ Tuan Ha, Prasanna Tadi, Stephen W. Leslie, Laurence Dubensky, “Neurosyphilis,” StatPearls, updated April 21, 2024, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK540979/>; “Neurosyphilis,” National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, NIH.gov, reviewed July 19, 2024, <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/health-information/disorders/neurosyphilis#:~:text=Neurosyphilis%20is%20an%20infection%20that,muscle%20coordination%2C%20and%20bladder%20disturbances>.

¹⁰⁷ “Neurosyphilis,” Cleveland Clinic, reviewed February 28, 2023, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/24772-neurosyphilis>.

and gender biases that kept her from adequate care, despite her significant role in her community.

Hall and Daly admitted Silvy on May 8th, 1912. Upon arrival, her personal state was described as “well nourished and clean,” and her clothing was similarly “good + clean.”¹⁰⁸ Importantly, she had with her many items of clothing and accessories, suggesting she was well-to-do and fashionable for her time. With her she brought: 1 telescope, 2 pr spectacles, one black braided hat, one boa made of fur, one worsted dress with a jacket and skirt, one cotton skirt, one white flannel skirt, one pair of knit drawers, one pair of stockings, one pair of shoes, four handkerchiefs, one jabot lace collar, one skinned dark collar, one waist collar cream wool, one waist collar white cotton, one black elastic belt, and one corset cover.¹⁰⁹ The abundance and fabric of these items allude to Silvy’s social and economic status. In a time when collars and skirts defined women’s fashion, she boasted multiples of each.¹¹⁰ The materials were a mix of luxurious lace and everyday materials like cotton and wool. Notably, her boa was made from fur. She also owned a large enough luggage trunk to transport her well-stocked closet five hours northwest to Salem.¹¹¹

Silvy spent seven months in the asylum, slowly improving until she was released, largely on account of her own advocacy. Early in May, one nurse wrote of her: “‘Noisy & restless.’ An

¹⁰⁸ Admission Record for Sybl Harber, May 8, 1912, OSIA Records.

¹⁰⁹ Admission Record for Sybl Harber, May 8, 1912, OSIA Records.

¹¹⁰ Otto Charles Thieme, “The Art of Dress in the Victorian and Edwardian Eras,” *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 10, (1988): 14–27; Helene E. Roberts, “The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman,” *Signs* 2, no. 3 (1977): 554–69; Ann Beth Presley, “Fifty Years of Change: Societal Attitudes and Women’s Fashions, 1900-1950,” *The Historian* 60, no. 2 (1998): 307–24.

¹¹¹ This is just a glimpse into Silvy’s material belongings. Who knows what she left at home? It is unlikely she brought her best dresses with her to the asylum, but more likely brought more comfortable favorites. On the other hand, perhaps she did bring her best clothes, as a symbol of status in this new and unfamiliar place.

old negro nurse + midwife, seems demented, + confused.”¹¹² Initially, she was described as violent, but this behavior lessened as she remained in the asylum: “Had a attack of histeria yesterday, is up today was not in the yard saturday, is not as violent as she was when first received on this ward. May 20, 1912.”¹¹³ In May, Superintendent Steiner wrote to Bert saying, “Your mother is better, but still somewhat disturbed at intervals.”¹¹⁴ Notes and letters from June through August recorded her steady improvement and regular communication between Bert and Dr. Steiner.

On November 19, Silvy wrote a panicked letter to Steiner saying, “‘Dr. Steiner’ I am so homesick I dont know what to do. You said I could go home now: If you will please be kind enough to let me go I would like to start next Thursday as that I can be home by Thanksgiving, it is getting so late and the other is as cold that I have not sufficient wrapps to travel Sibyl Harber.”¹¹⁵ The next day, Silvy was discharged and sent on a train to California for the winter.¹¹⁶ Clearly, her voice carried weight and power; she stood up for herself and was released the next day, proving her claims to autonomy were still viable even after several months of commitment. Bert thanked the superintendent for his “friendship and accommodations” and, later, for the “kind treatment of my mother.”¹¹⁷ On the day she was discharged, the supervising nurse stated, “Patient was good to work, kind harted, always willing to help with patients that are helpless,

¹¹² Admission Record for Sybl Harber, May 8, 1912, OSIA Records.

¹¹³ Admission Record for Sybl Harber, May 8, 1912, OSIA Records.

¹¹⁴ Letter from Medical Superintendent to Bert Harber, May 9, 1912, OSIA Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem.

¹¹⁵ Letter from Sibyl Harber to Dr. Steiner, Nov. 19, 1912, OSIA Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem.

¹¹⁶ Discharge Paper for Sib Harber, November 20, 1912, OSIA Records.

¹¹⁷ Letter from Bert Harber to Dr. Steiner, November 3, 1912, OSIA Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem, Oregon; Letter from Bert Harber to Doctor, December 1, 1912, OSIA Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem, Oregon.

was discharged.”¹¹⁸ Even in the worst circumstances, Silvy pushed through and spent her time helping others, nursing, and healing as she always had.

In November, Silvy returned to Lakeview and quickly re-opened her home hospital and began caring for patients. “The many friends of Mrs. Sib Harber will be pleased to learn that she has fully regained her health and is now on her way home,” reported the *Lake County Examiner*. “She will probably reach here tomorrow or Saturday evening, and will undoubtedly receive a warm welcome.”¹¹⁹ Silvy temporarily stayed with Mrs. Gordon Garrett, a white woman who lived four doors down from her on North H Street, further proof of her extensive community connections and close friendships with white settlers.¹²⁰ For the remainder of the winter, she stayed in Northern California.¹²¹ While she was away at the hospital and later with friends in Plymouth, California, she leased her home to Mr. and Mrs. W. F. Grob.¹²² Just two months after her return, Silvy was running her home hospital again. *Lake County Examiner* newspaper clippings recount the story of one patient, J. U. Carroll (Jeannie Carroll’s father), who was driven down by Dr. S. S. Thayer and brought into Silvy’s care from nearby Paisley.¹²³ Later that month, “Doctor Smith and Everett ... performed two operations on J. U. Carroll who is at Sib Harbor’s. His case is reported to be a very critical and complicated one.”¹²⁴ A year later, George Reid, a well-known Lake County resident, died at Silvy’s hospital, offering insight into the difficulty of

¹¹⁸ Admission Record for Sybl Harber, May 8, 1912, OSIA Records.

¹¹⁹ “Brief Mention,” *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), November 21, 1912.

¹²⁰ “Section One Page Eight,” *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), November 28, 1912.

¹²¹ “Thursday March 6, 1913,” *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), March 6, 1913.

¹²² “Brief Mention,” *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), April 17, 1913; “Thursday March 6, 1913,” *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), March 6, 1913.

¹²³ Lee, “Silvy Harbor and Her Son, Bert.” “Brief Mention,” *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), June 12, 1913.

¹²⁴ “Brief Mention,” *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), June 19, 1913.

cases she dealt with and the longevity of her healing practice.¹²⁵ Even after her time in the asylum, Silvy offered critical community care to her white neighbors, who entrusted their care to her.

During the early twentieth century, midwifery was increasingly threatened by the increased medicalization of childbirth and medical racism (propelled by white male doctors) that expelled Black midwives from their practice.¹²⁶ Black midwives, long-trusted champions of birth work, were seen as a threat to “modern” physicians, who desired to gain control of the reproductive sphere and do away with midwifery.¹²⁷ They were characterized as “folk healers” or “granny midwives,” a pejorative categorization of centuries-long healing traditions.¹²⁸ This shift from Black midwives to white doctors was not inevitable. Anthropologist Gertrude Jacinta Fraser has noted, “Women did not make choices in a free market of birth services in which midwife and doctor competed fairly. Doctors actively worked to convince women that their primary choice lie elsewhere than with midwifery care and inexpensive births.”¹²⁹ Here, there was an interesting paradox of power that speaks to the complex authority that Silvy claimed. Black midwives had enough influence to have an intense impact on their community and to be perceived as a threat to physicians. As communities recognized this power, doctors challenged and dismantled it, leaving midwives and their history gradually silenced and removed from American reproductive practice. Midwives increasingly became “part of a superstitious past” and

¹²⁵ “The Passing of the Pioneer,” *The Spokesman Review* (Spokane, WA), March 12, 1915, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/568056317/>.

¹²⁶ Craven and Glatzel, “Downplaying Difference,” 330.

¹²⁷ Fraser, *African American Midwifery in the South*, 83, 129.

¹²⁸ Brandt, *Women Healers*, 3; Goode and Rothman, “African-American Midwifery,” 278.

¹²⁹ Fraser, *African American Midwifery in the South*, 89.

treated as ignorant and inferior, despite being seen as direct competitors to delivery room doctors.¹³⁰

This was part of a nationwide trend but could be seen in Lakeview during Silvy's last years. White male doctors in Lakeview, like Dr. Bernard Daly, Dr. Chas. A. Ballard, and Dr. T.V. Hall, were respected, while nationally, the increased medicalization of midwifery stripped women—especially Black women, due to deep-rooted misogynoir—of their healing authority. Doctor Daly had arrived in Lakeview just a year before Silvy but gained more success, wealth, and lasting recognition than Silvy did. This happened for many reasons: he had a medical degree, the benefit of a privileged race and sex, and opportunities to invest and build relationships with wealthy white townsmen that would not have come easily to Silvy as a Black woman. While Daly lived in Lakeview he served a number of community roles as a doctor, banker, rancher, state representative, state senator, candidate for the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives, county judge, circuit judge, regent of Oregon State Agricultural College, member of the school board for thirty years, and businessman.¹³¹ In published histories of Lakeview's medical providers, Silvy's name is not there. Dr. Daly is discussed frequently. There are many reasons why he is remembered and Silvy is not. Some are motivated by race, gender, privilege, and class. Both Silvy and Daly arrived at a crucial moment in Lakeview history, just as it was becoming a town. They both occupied critical roles as business owners and healers. Yet, Daly went on to accomplish more, was afforded more leadership roles, and occupies a greater space in the memory of medicine in Lakeview.

¹³⁰ Fraser, *African American Midwifery in the South*, 122, 136.

¹³¹ Forrest E. Cooper, *Introducing Dr. Bernard Daly* (Lake County Historical Society, Oregon, 1986), 79.

In April 1918, six years after she returned home, Silvy reportedly had a second “attack” of “mental excitement,” and Dr. Chas A. Ballard sent her back to the Oregon State Hospital.¹³² Upon Silvy’s arrival, her hair had greyed, and she was 67 years old, suffering from headaches, hallucinations, and illusions, similar to her first experience.¹³³ In a hospital photograph, the lower half of her face has small, white patches of facial hair along her lips and chin, traveling down her neck.¹³⁴ The nurse noted her as “noisy, restless, depressed, destructive, violent” on April 9th.¹³⁵ From April to September, she seemed to improve, even assisting with ward work like she had during her first commitment.¹³⁶ In July, the attending nurse wrote, “Is quite old but in good general health for one of her age. This is her second confinement in this institution. She recovered rather promptly from her first attack, which was one of mental excitement. Her present attack appears to have been similar in every way, but a few days after being received in the institution seemed to have regained control, since which time she has continued to be quite rational in her conduct and conversation.”¹³⁷

¹³² According to documentation, she had begun exhibiting symptoms in mid-March. Admission Record for Sybl Harber, April 5, 1918, Oregon State Hospital Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem; County Court Insane Commitment, Notice of Insanity, March 30, 1918, Oregon State Hospital Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem.

¹³³ This time she brought with her one grip sack and one ring “1 eye glasses & case, 1 eye glasses. Wd Mulvey Hall 1 cloak, 1 corset, 1 corset cover, 1 pr. Knit drawers, 7 handkerchiefs, 1 jacket & skirt, 1 night gown, 1 muslin petticoat, 1 pr. Shoes, 1 pr. Stockings, 1 shawl, 1 union suit, 1 vest, 1 waist. 1 ring, retained. 1 tooth brush.” Her clothing was described as medium condition and clean. Her personal condition was “well-nourished + clean.” County Court Insane Commitment, Certificate of Examining Physician, April 1, 1918, OSH Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem, Oregon; Admission Record for Sybl Harber, April 5, 1918; List of clothing received with patient on admission, April 5, 1918, OSH Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem.

¹³⁴ I chose to not include the picture of Silvy in this work because it is an institutional photograph, not unlike a mugshot, that feels violating of her experience and her ability to consent to it being shared. In all other photographs we have of her, she is wearing elaborate dresses, her hair is done, she appears organized and has put a lot of time and effort into maintaining a certain level of appearance. Here in this photo, this has all been stripped from her. She is caught mid-smile, and her eyes are bright, looking off to the side. County Court Insane Commitment, Certificate of Examining Physician, April 1, 1918.

¹³⁵ Admission Record for Sybl Harber, April 5, 1918.

¹³⁶ Admission Record for Sybl Harber, April 5, 1918.

¹³⁷ Admission Record for Sybl Harber, April 5, 1918.

But on October 2, she began to have severe symptoms: vomiting, abdominal pain, and increased temperature.¹³⁸ On October 31, her condition rapidly worsened; she had swelling in the lower abdomen and was sent into surgery to remove a tumor in her uterus. In early November, she died eleven days after her operation.¹³⁹

Had she been experiencing the hormonal effects of uterine cancer since her first commitment in 1912? The symptoms she experienced during both commitments indicate hormonal disruption.¹⁴⁰ The facial hair shown in the 1918 hospital photograph further suggests that she was experiencing a hormone imbalance, yet her case went undiagnosed until her surgery and death eleven days later. In fact, her procedure is described in vastly different ways across different records. One says, “A very large fibroid uterus which had undergone cystic degeneration, the cyst being filled with blood and pus, was removed.”¹⁴¹ Another calls it a tumor.¹⁴² A third notes that she had a full “Hysterectomy.”¹⁴³ It is impossible to say for sure how

¹³⁸ Admission Record for Sybl Harber, April 5, 1918.

¹³⁹ Prior to Silvy’s death, hospital officials and her son, Bert, exchanged a couple of letters. In the first, R.E. Lee Steiner writes to Bert in April saying, “Your mother is improving some. Of course they had a hard trip out but she stood it very well. I want to thank you for those lovely wild plums. You bet they tasted good. I will keep you informed as to your mother’s condition should she become seriously ill.” The second was written by an assistant physician a day before Silvy’s death: “I am instructed by the Superintendent to inform you that Sib Barber is not getting along well. She had been quite ill for several weeks and was found to be suffering from quite a large tumor of the uterus which was inflamed and contained pus. This was successfully removed a little over a week ago and up until yesterday the patient seemed to be getting along quite well, but today she is quite weak, is somewhat delirious and we think that her condition is rather grave and that unless she soon improves she will not long survive.” Letter from Superintendent to Bert Harber, April 18, 1918, OSH Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem; Letter from First Assistant Physician to Bert Harber, November 9, 1918, OSH Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem; Announcement of Sybil’s Death, November 10, 1918, OSH Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem; Death Certificate for Sibl Harber, November 10, 1918, State Registered Number: 574, Salem.

¹⁴⁰ Laura C, Telepak, Sally E Jensen, Stacy M Dodd, Linda S Morgan, and Deidre B Pereira, “Psychosocial Factors and Mortality in Women with Early Stage Endometrial Cancer,” *British Journal of Health Psychology* 19, no. 4 (2014): 737–50.

¹⁴¹ Admission Record for Sybl Harber, April 5, 1918.

¹⁴² Letter from First Assistant Physician to Bert Harber, November 9, 1918, OSH Records, Oregon State Archives, Salem.

¹⁴³ Admission Record for Sybl Harber, April 5, 1918.

long Silvy had been experiencing uterine cancer or the hormonal complications of a tumor. It is also impossible to say that any one thing led to her death at the hospital. Women were overlooked and unheard when it came to medical issues. Historically, they were more often institutionalized for hysteria and mental excitement, and doctors failed to deliver diagnoses based on real symptoms. Medical understanding of women's bodies was severely lacking during this time, even more so for Black women. It is also known that OSH routinely abused and mistreated patients, lacked organization, and was culpable in many patient deaths. It is likely that all of these factors contributed to her death.

The abrupt end to her life at OSH sheds light on the complexity of her medical authority and place in society. Despite decades of service to her community in Lakeview, she was still sent away when she began to suffer from symptoms of mental illness. Upon her arrival at OSIA and later OSH, these symptoms were often unheard, and she continued to suffer until her death.

Silvy Harbor impacted the West in the land she tilled, the food she produced and shared, the children she helped birth, and the community health care she provided. Yet, she is not recognized or remembered as a crucial figure of the evolving American West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Four years before Silvy's death, she was still serving her community through food.¹⁴⁴ She catered the Ladies of the Recreation Club banquet feast, including "turkey prepared by Mrs. Sib Harbor and served in southern style," which "proved the most popular dish, and when the banqueters had finished the absence of the turkey was very conspicuous."¹⁴⁵ She spent her time in Lakeview in constant service to her community, even

¹⁴⁴ "Brief Mention, Club Entertains," *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), January 8, 1914.

¹⁴⁵ "Brief Mention, Club Entertains," *Lake County Examiner*.

after her experience at OSIA. She was a truly beloved community pillar who cultivated community through homesteading, food, hospitality, and healthcare, shaping the early environment of Lakeview.

Silvy is occasionally remembered in local reminiscences and included in small Lakeview museums, but she and other Black women are largely absent from the shared historical understanding of the West, which centers white pioneer men and women as heroes and conquerors of the frontier. I have spent the last two years searching for Silvy in archives online and across the state, in conversations with Lakeview residents, and in countless emails to people who carry her memory. The work to uncover her story is laborious and never complete. At Oregon Historical Society, I searched through local histories of the town from the early twentieth century until today, and still, her name was mentioned only in one source, and it was one sentence in an entry about Bert, her son.¹⁴⁶ It is not surprising that this is the case, but it is disappointing. It is a bit strange because she was mentioned frequently in local newspapers during her lifetime. But in local histories, she is missing. Memory is not linear nor all-inclusive, and we cannot expect everyone to make their way into lasting collective historical consciousness. But Silvy was not like other settlers; she accomplished so much more and dedicated her life to feeding, housing, healing, helping, and birthing others. The absence of her memory cannot be untangled from her race and gender, especially when white male doctors, such as Bernard Daly, remain so prominent.

Ultimately, Silvy Harbor's life offers a case study through which we can understand the greater impact of Black women's physical and emotional labor. From her early life in Lakeview

¹⁴⁶ *Lake County, Oregon: History and Genealogy* (Lakeview, OR: Lake County Historical Society, 2000).

to her death in 1918, Silvy carved out unexpected authority through healing, homesteading, and business ownership, despite overwhelming misogynoir. Childbirth activist and author Sheila Kitzinger theorized, “Birth is not just a matter of pushing a baby out of your body, a demonstration of bio-mechanics, but [it] concerns fundamental human values.”¹⁴⁷ Rural pioneer births were certainly not just a matter of pushing a baby out of one’s body; these births were often dangerous, violent, and therefore community-dependent. These emotionally and physically traumatizing experiences necessitated extensive medical knowledge from specialized community members such as Silvy. Through healthcare and homesteading, Silvy illustrates early manifestations of Black resistance and community care in Lakeview, Oregon.

¹⁴⁷ Sheila Kitzinger, quoted in Hancock, “Regulating Birth,” 123, 4.

Chapter 5: Memory Activism and Museums: Reviving Black History and Collectivizing Historical Consciousness in Oregon Institutions

“Historical visibility is everywhere related to social power.”¹

Stephanie McCurry

When I looked out on Letitia Carson’s Benton County land, I saw no evidence of the first Black women in Oregon Territory. No discernable remains, decrepit foundations, or landmarks bear the story of the woman who once stewarded the Soap Creek Valley homestead. Instead, the land has been subsumed by Oregon State University’s expansive land ownership as an extension of their College of Agricultural Sciences. What was once a cabin accompanied by gardens, livestock quarters, and an orchard is now a small portion of a vast beef cattle operation.² The same can be said of her Douglas County homestead. Though this is the site of the first Oregon homestead owned by a Black woman, today it is a family owned ranch and orchard with no visible memorials to Letitia.³ There are eerily similar silences in Lakeview, Oregon, where Silvy Harbor also established an extensive community presence through her stewardship of her

¹ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York; Oxford University Press, 2023), 37; Miles, *All That She Carried*, 58. Memory activism” refers to the idea, that remembering those whose past has been erased by collective amnesia “is an act of resistance.” “Memory Activism,” Vanport Mosaic, <https://www.vanportmosaic.org/>.

² “Soap and Berry Creek Ranches,” College of Agricultural Sciences, Oregon State University, <https://agsci.oregonstate.edu/anrs/beef-cattle-ranches/soap-creek-and-berry-creek-ranches>. For a more detailed description of Letitia’s initial homestead see the Letitia Carson Digital History Collection <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/>.

³ I would like to extend thanks to the current owners of Letitia Carson’s Douglas County homestead, Kristin Koons and David Stucky, for hosting multiple visits for researchers, authors, and those interested in her story who want to see where she lived in Douglas County. I went there in June 2024 and was able to explore the land and understand the environment in which she lived.

homestead and her operation of a bakery, a boarding house, and the town's only hospital. Silvy's bakery is now the local Safeway, and her hospital blends in among other homes on the edge of the downtown. The historical memory of these places has been swept away.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Oregon and its memory institutions were firmly founded on ideals of white supremacy, racial hierarchy, and a romanticized vision of the pioneer West as a heroic, white, civilizing accomplishment.⁴ This framework followed Oregon museums in the early twentieth century, as structural and systemic racism consciously and unconsciously excluded people of color, especially Black women, from museum material. Collections, displays, exhibits, publications, programming, education, and outreach all focused on white men (and later women) and their perceived accomplishments for much of the twentieth century. In the 1970s and 1980s, following the ideological shifts implemented after the Civil Rights Movement and intersectional feminist activism, organizations like the Oregon Historical Society began to include marginalized histories in their exhibits and journal articles. Individual historians like Darrell Millner and Quintard Taylor championed this push for inclusion. The tides were shifting. Black women's voices began to re-enter the established narrative of the West and push through the pioneer narratives that dominated museum spaces. During this time, Letitia's story was published in local historical society journals. Silvy's memory was not shared but kept through local memory, faded newspaper clippings, and the occasional photograph. An underlying structure of white supremacy that began with early pioneer societies continually shaped and influenced academic scholarship, leaving Letitia and Silvy's stories neglected.

⁴ The term "memory institutions" is quoted from Kristen Wright and Nicola Laurent, "Safety, Collaboration, and Empowerment," *Archivaria* 91 (Spring/Summer 2021): 38-73 and refers to museums, historical societies, pioneer societies, and all other institutions that were cultivating historical memory during this period.

How does local memory translate to collective historical memory? How have histories of Black women Oregonians been shared despite the overwhelming monolith of white pioneer memory? As author Michael Dyson states, “one of the most powerful ways of challenging and ultimately destroying the ideology of white supremacy, the myth of white superiority, and the narrative of white domination is to unearth sites of resistive memory, history, and practice.”⁵ Letitia and Silvy have shown us this, but how is their memory and those of all Black Oregonians unearthed through resistive memory, history, and practice?

To further explore these questions, this chapter looks closely at the founding, central ideologies, and methodologies championed by the Oregon Black Pioneers. Founded in 1993, Oregon Black Pioneers (OBP) has introduced a uniquely contemporary museum experience that exists outside the traditional static museum space and instead centers the world outside of the museum: communal places, digital spaces, and scholarship that has long gone overlooked by conventional Oregon museums and historical societies. Above all, this work has been done primarily by determined Black women who uplifted the stories of Black Oregonians, effectively disrupting both common notions of the American West and the traditional foundations of museums.

Local Memory

Letitia and Silvy’s stories have, for most of their existence, been known only locally. During their lives, their absence from documents resulted from social taboos surrounding gender and pregnancy as well as overt racism and misogyny toward Black women.⁶ In turn, Black

⁵ Michael Eric Dyson, *Open Mike: Reflections on Philosophy, Race, Sex, Culture and Religion* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003), 135.

⁶ Carter, “‘Sometimes When I Hear the Winds Sigh,’” 152.

women were not included in early museum spaces or memorials to Oregon pioneers. This continual neglect was not permanent. In the 1980s, Letitia's name began appearing in local Douglas and Umpqua County publications. Silvy's story, however, has still yet to make it out of local publications and into the state-wide sphere of historical understanding.

There are many historians whom we can credit with the recovering of Letitia's story in an iterative process in which scholars built on previous work. Eventually, archival research revealed the details of her lawsuits and landownership. In 1980, *The Umpqua Trapper* published a biographical sketch written by Oregon pioneer descendent Bess A. Clough about her grandfather, Hardy Crier Elliff.⁷ Clough mentioned Letitia throughout the essay and was the first to bring her name into historical scholarship. Her piece was an unexpected yet notable departure from the silence surrounding Letitia. It took over one hundred years for her name to be brought back into the historical literature.

Two years later, in 1982, historian Quintard Taylor wrote "Slaves and Free Men: Blacks in the Oregon Country, 1840-1860" for the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, a piece that radically shifted understandings of Black history in Oregon by providing short biographies for significant Black settlers.⁸ Taylor discussed Letitia's story near the end of this piece:

A second case involving slaves who used the legal process to establish their rights came in 1854, when a black woman, Luteshia Carson, sued the estate of her former owner. She hoped to "recover the value of her services" after working for him from 1845 until his death in 1852. The case heard by Judge Williams was tried before a jury which could not reach a verdict.⁹

⁷ Clough, "Hardy Cryer Elliff," Douglas County Museum Library Archives, 26.

⁸ Quintard Taylor, "Slaves and Free Men: Blacks in the Oregon Country, 1840-1860," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (1982): 153-70.

⁹ Taylor, "Slaves and Free Men," 168.

Taylor challenges the neglect of Black women, but the spotty and inconsistent archival record hinders the accuracy of his account of Letitia's story. The *Oregon Statesman* article from November 18, 1854, misreported Letitia's first lawsuit and misspelled her name. Here, Taylor is not to blame; rather the issue lies with the archive. Historians rely on archival sources, but archives are produced, shaped, and preserved through centuries of white supremacy, illustrating the deeper systemic issues tied to the suppression of Black women's stories. The newspaper's coverage of Letitia was a blip in the white-centric coverage of the Willamette Valley, which was as incorrect as it was anti-Black. Still, it was the only report of Letitia from any news outlet or publication at the time. Thus, it became the principal primary source for both Taylor and, later, George B. Abdill when they crafted their pieces on Letitia. Taylor concluded his article by reminding readers that women like Letitia were not passive during this time of Black exclusion, they fought for their rights and notably "thwarted the designs of those groups that wanted to institute slavery in the region as well as those who wanted to prevent the migration of both slaves and free blacks."¹⁰ Taylor's piece marks a departure from previous academic coverage of Black Oregonians, and Letitia's story had finally been welcomed into scholarly conversation on Oregon history. While her revival was delayed by neglect following a pattern of white pioneerism, vocal historians like Taylor recognized and amplified Black women's stories.

Recovering Letitia's story did not stop there. Shortly after Taylor, amateur railroad historian George B. Abdill published a longer piece on Letitia in *The Umpqua Trapper*.¹¹ Abdill wrote a three-page synopsis of what was known about Letitia in 1982, piecing together the

¹⁰ Taylor, "Slaves and Free Men," 170.

¹¹ George B. Abdill, "Letitia Carson, Pioneer Black Woman," *The Umpqua Trapper* 18, no. 3 (1982): 67-71.

disparate mentions of her and digging further into her story. His article expanded Letitia's story in local publications and presented audiences and historians a point from which to grow their knowledge of this obscured pioneer woman. Even at this point, the fact that her lawsuits were successful was yet waiting to be uncovered. Ten years later, Bob Zybach would dig deeper than Abdill and Taylor to uncover hundreds of archival sources with a more complete story of Letitia's struggle and eventual victories. In the late 1980s, Zybach was looking through the Benton County archives, and the estate of David Carson stood out, prompting him to explore further and uncover Letitia's legal actions against Greenberry Smith.¹² Thus by happenstance, Letitia's story was discovered by a researcher who would extract her narrative from the depths of the Oregon State Archives. The archive is influenced and incomplete, but it also holds answers. The inclusion of Letitia's story in works by Clough, Abdill, Taylor, and Zybach points to increasing awareness of Black Oregon history, growing from a greater movement to include more diverse stories of the frontier.

By the twenty-first century, Letitia's story began to draw the attention of public historians and community members who desired to learn more. In 2019, Oregon Public Broadcasting released a documentary, *Oregon's Black Pioneers*, which included Letitia. This thirty-minute Oregon Experience episode shared Letitia's story more widely than ever before, resulting a new awareness and several community projects that elevated her status within collective historical understanding. In the 2020s, the Oregon Black Pioneers, in partnership with Oregon State University others, launched the Letitia Carson Legacy Project (LCLP), including a digital

¹² Email from Bob Zybach to Kathryn Bogle, Oregon Websites & Watersheds Project, January 6, 1991, http://www.orwww.org/History/Letitia_Carson/Library/Correspondence/Zybach-Bogle_19910106.pdf.

archive of Letitia's primary sources.¹³ Though the LCLP, many significant changes have happened: the renaming of an elementary school to Letitia Carson Elementary, regular trips to her Benton and Douglas County homesteads, a traveling exhibit by the Oregon Black Pioneers, and the annual Letitia Carson Legacy Symposium.

Telling Letitia's story has not come without its challenges. For years, Zybach and others tried to get her legacy recognized. In 2014, he proposed the designation of Stephen's graveyard, Letitia's burial place, as a Historical Cemetery and applied for grant funding to restore the cemetery, which lay in ruins due to the passing of time and acts of vandalism.¹⁴ Despite community support and significant historical connections, the Oregon Commission on Historic Cemeteries denied his grant application. Today, her gravesite is kept from the public on privately owned property, and her headstone is still in need of repair. Further, only in 2022 did Zybach succeed in changing the name "Negro Creek" to "Jack Creek," after Letitia's son, after a long fight. These roadblocks illustrate the continued difficulties of resurrecting Letitia's story. Even in an evolving environment that was more accepting of diverse historical narratives, it was an uphill battle to memorialize Letitia.

Silvy's media treatment and presence in contemporary historical memory differ from Letitia's but ultimately resulted in a similar erasure. Silvy was a beloved community member, often mentioned in the local *Lake County Examiner* as a friend of many. Her role as a midwife is hardly mentioned. Instead, we read brief mentions of ill men in her care.¹⁵ As historian Christa

¹³ Community partners include the Black Oregon Land Trust, the Oregon Black Pioneers, the Linn-Benton County's NAACP Branch, and Mudbone Grown, a Black-owned family farm.

¹⁴ Bob Zybach, "Historic Cemeteries Grant Documents," Oregon Websites & Watersheds Project, 2014, http://www.orww.org/History/Letitia_Carson/Library/Correspondence/Gill-Zybach_20140502.pdf.

¹⁵ "No Title," *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), June 12, 1913.

Craven notes, Black midwives were erased both in historical memory and in medical practice as late twentieth-century medical racism expelled Black midwives from mainstream medicine.¹⁶ Silvy is not mentioned in local historical society journals or books on Black history in Oregon. There were no twentieth century historians who picked up her story and began to popularize her narrative through research and publication. Unlike Letitia, she does not have an Oregon Public Broadcasting documentary, digital archive, or well supported project dedicated to telling her story. In 2016, contemporary Black midwife Shafia Monroe addressed this erasure in her symposium keynote lecture at the Oregon Historical Society on “Birth, Healing, and Women of Color.”¹⁷ “Just the fact that I had to go so far to find a midwife of color — that’s the history of Oregon, from how I know it. You have the picture that you saw, that the Oregon Historical Society is using [referring to her 1895 portrait] — I researched years ago and found out that’s the only record we have of a black midwife being in Oregon, who’s also a nurse. It does not mean that there are not other black midwives in Oregon. It’s just that we cannot find them.”¹⁸ Though Letitia and Silvy’s treatment differs in many ways, racism, misogyny, and social taboos coalesce to cultivate flawed public media and memory, which then continued into the creation of Oregon historical legacies, museums, and shared historical memory.

Though Letitia and Silvy’s treatment differs in many ways, erasures cultivate flawed historical memories. In many cases, this forgetting appears permanent. As historian Jennifer Hill reminds us, “The majority of these women were forgotten by history and remain so, in a reality that seems irreversible. For those women who delivered babies, even in the twentieth century,

¹⁶ Craven and Glatzel, “Downplaying Difference,” 330.

¹⁷ Monroe, “Birth, Healing, and Women of Color,” 234.

¹⁸ Monroe, “Birth, Healing, and Women of Color,” 234.

their legacy of knowledge, compassion, service, and struggle disappeared with their deaths.”¹⁹ Black midwifery is especially fragile and invisible within collective historical memory, facing the erasure of racism, misogyny, and social taboo. Black midwives navigate many paradoxes. Their labor is necessary for the birth of white babies but they are denigrated as “granny” midwives practicing novelty or folk medicine with unclean and unprofessional underpinnings.²⁰ Whereas Black Southern midwives struggled against misrepresentation, Black midwives in the West went entirely unrecognized, leaving Letitia and Silvy’s stories even more abstracted from collective historical consciousness.

Additionally, the enduring legacy of Black exclusion laws fostered a conception of Oregon’s history as white. Some historians assumed that only a few Black settlers arrived in Oregon.²¹ But Black exclusion laws were hard to enforce across a vast territory with provisional law enforcement systems, and communities like Lakeview and Douglas County valued the community and care that Black pioneer women cultivated. As Letitia and Silvy illustrate, there were more Black pioneers than initially thought. African Americans not only settled in Oregon but were critical agents of change in the nexus of this shifting environment in the West. They represent the underpinnings of a white and whitewashed society and inhabit a complex role as Black community midwives and caretakers in predominantly white communities. Despite this

¹⁹ Hill, *Birthing the West*, 87.

²⁰ As Valerie Lee says, ““To be constructed as “ignorant” and “filthy” in the language of educated health personnel, yet as “wise woman” in those communities to whom she renders service had to have taken a toll on the grannies’ psyches.” Lee, *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers*, 37.

²¹ It is important to not overgeneralize all Western historians here; there are many later historians such as Quintard Taylor, Susan Armitage, Darrell Millner, Bob Zybach, and Margaret Jacobs who have forged the discourse surrounding Black women’s history in the American West. Additional organizations such as Black Past and Oregon Black Pioneers have also contributed to the uncovering of Black Oregon history.

decades-long forgetting, we must recognize and reinsert the power of Black pioneer midwives into our understanding of the American West.

In the case of Letitia and Silvy, there is an opportunity to resurrect their narratives and keep them from the common fate of an archival death sentence.²² Oral and written histories from descendants and relatives of Letitia and Silvy illustrate the impact and scope of their community care. Though primary source evidence is sparse, these stories from local Oregon residents trace the labor of Silvy and Letitia and indicate the magnitude and longevity of their impact as community midwives. The mention of them decades later illustrates that these women, their birth work, and their health care were a transformative force in their small Oregon towns. They are remembered in their communities today because they were at the nexus of care in these early settler towns.

Recovering Their Stories: The Oregon Black Pioneers

The amplification of these women's stories from small-scale, local memory to recognition in state and nationwide historical scholarship and museum spaces would not have been possible without the Oregon Black Pioneers. Letitia's story, initially uncovered by Clough, Taylor, Abdill, and Zybach, was later given a platform through digital media and museum initiatives produced by OBP. Silvy's story has yet to enter this realm. But the opportunity to share her story lies in the ongoing work of OBP to build a space in which Black pioneers can be recognized. Oregon's museum spaces, as much as they are evolving today, were founded upon white supremacy and anti-Blackness. As historian Andrea Burns remind us, "Museums, of course, have never functioned simply as repositories for dusty artifacts. Rather, they and their

²² Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2.

collections are a product of social relations, both past and present.”²³ Further, she writes, "Museums devoted to African and African American history represent alternative or ‘free’ spaces carved out of a cultural landscape that has consistently marginalized minorities.”²⁴ Oregon Black Pioneers, a memory institution without a dedicated museum space, offers an alternative arena for Black history to be told, outside the confines of historically white owned and operated spaces.

Oregon Black Pioneers began as a dream for an approach to Oregon history that de-centered the commonly held narrative of the white pioneer and began to tell the statewide history of Black people in Oregon.²⁵ Jackie Winters, Carole Davis, and David Burgess founded the organization in 1993. Winters went on to become an Oregon state senator, Davis was Deputy Superintendent of Salem-Keizer Public Schools, and Burgess served as a marine, state government employee, and former president of the Salem chapter of the NAACP.²⁶ The original members found inspiration in the Seattle-based group the NorthWest Black Pioneers, an organization that was dedicated to telling the history of Black people in the American West. That group started a sister organization in Oregon and originally named it the Oregon NorthWest Black Pioneers, later dropping the NorthWest to shorten the name. With this name, they reclaim the pioneer designation, challenging common assumptions by amplifying stories of Black settlers.

²³ Andrea Burns, *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 4.

²⁴ Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 4.

²⁵ Angela Yeager, “Commemorating a Northwest Journey,” *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), June 24, 2005.

²⁶ Oregon Black Pioneers, “Oregon Black Pioneers Organizational History 1993-2023,” <https://oregonblackpioneers.org/oregon-black-pioneers-organizational-history-1993-2023/>.

Contrasting with older memory institutions in Oregon, OBP is a museum without an institutional home. In lieu of a brick-and-mortar space, OBP focuses on the extra-museum world of traveling exhibits, consultation work, digital collections and displays, publications, programming, education, and community collaboration. Their dedication to “illuminate the seldom-told history of people of African descent in Oregon” has culminated in what scholar Ruth Phillips has called the second museum age.²⁷ She argues that the “truly exciting and innovative potential of the second museum age lies in the advanced programs of socially responsible research and representation that they can support and embody.”²⁸ Until this new museum age, the institutional representation of Black people in Oregon history has been lopsided compared to the presence of whites or Indigenous peoples in museums. Now, the OBP is leading an effort to revisit the untold histories of Black people in the American West; this is the story of how they did it.

The early years of OBP were a whirlwind of grassroots organizing led by Black politicians and businesswomen across the state. Though they lacked the brick-and-mortar space that other museums operated, they established themselves as a presence in the community through annual celebrations, small exhibits, community partnerships, and scholarship funds for local students. According to *Statesman Journal* archival records, the first wave of the OBP’s yearly galas took place from 1994 through 1997 at Mission Mill (now the Willamette Heritage

²⁷ “Oregon Black Pioneers Organizational History 1993-2023,” Oregon Black Pioneers.

²⁸ Ruth Phillips, “Re-placing Objects: Historical Practices for the Second Museum Age,” *Canadian Historical Review* 86, no. 1 (March 2005): 85. Amy Lonetree also speaks to the power of Phillips’ “second museum age,” stating that it makes museums more open and community-relevant sites, and a new museum theory and practice is developing alongside this work.” See Amy Lonetree, “Decolonizing Museums, Memorials, and Monuments,” *The Public Historian* 43, no. 4 (2021): 22.

Center) in Salem.²⁹ Though they didn't own their own museum space, they partnered with Mission Mill to mount exhibits and organize community gatherings. Each year, the gala raised money for the Oregon NorthWest Black Pioneer scholarship fund, which provided scholarships for recent graduates of Salem's high schools.³⁰ In January 1994, less than a year after their founding, they hosted their first exhibit at Mission Mill, focusing broadly on Black pioneers in the Northwest who helped shape communities.³¹ The exhibit also showcased OBP's first publication, a small booklet of information about the pioneers exhibited at Mission Mill.³² From this initial exhibit stemmed an annual event that they celebrated until 1997.³³ In 1996, they established their first board of directors.³⁴ Shortly after, the organization became inactive as founding members moved on, and the initial momentum surrounding the group slowly faded.³⁵

Local businesswoman Willie Richardson, who had been involved in the early days of OBP, did not want to see it fade away.³⁶ In the early 2000s, she began to reconstruct the organization with the help of Marion County Historical Society board member Gwen Carr and many other helpful people. As Richardson reminded Oregonians in 2005, "History tells us where

²⁹ Dan Postrel, "Black Pioneers group awards scholarships," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), June 12, 1997.

³⁰ "Mission Mill show features African-American pioneers," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), Jan 10, 1994.

³¹ "Mission Mill show features African-American pioneers," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), Jan 10, 1994.

³² "Mission Mill show features African-American pioneers," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), Jan 10, 1994.

³³ "Mark your calendar," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), Jan 6, 1995; "Annual Oregon Northwest Black Pioneers Celebration," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), Jan 8, 1995; "Black Pioneers," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), Jan 7, 1996; Hank Arends, "Display Highlights Black Role in State," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), Jan 29, 1996; Binh Ha Hong, "Mission Mill Event Hails Black Pioneers," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), Feb 3, 1996.

³⁴ "Oregon Black Pioneers Organizational History 1993-2023," Oregon Black Pioneers.

³⁵ "Oregon Black Pioneers Organizational History 1993-2023," Oregon Black Pioneers.

³⁶ Unfortunately, all of the initial board members and many of the initial members of OBP have passed away with no formal oral histories conducted. In preparation for this research, I was able to conduct an oral history interview with Gwen Carr, one of the members of the revived board of 2003-2004, and her comments inform much of the following work.

we've been, but it also tells us where we are going.”³⁷ Richardson was reckoning with racial history that Oregon museums and historical societies had long overlooked. She did this while also reminding people of OBP's initial mission: accessibility of information. Under Richardson, OBP revived its 501(c)(3) status and elected a new board of directors, launching the revitalized organization into a period of “intensive, research-focused activities, including presentations on the Black history of Salem, the Willamette Valley, and eventually the entire State of Oregon.”³⁸

The revived board was one of true grassroots organizing led by Black women. As Carr remembers, they were thrust into the museum world with no archival possessions or museum home; everything they learned was by doing. “I guess it's kind of the naivete when you're in something, and you don't know what it really takes to do it,” observed Carr when I interviewed her in 2024. “The fear is not there. You know what I mean? So you're not scared. You just wanna do it, so you need to figure out how to do it.”³⁹ One hundred years earlier, OHS had established a state museum space that celebrated white pioneer heroism and “civilizing” efforts. OBP tells a different story, more grounded in the revitalization of marginalized historical memory and honoring the legacy of overlooked people.

Their first-ever exhibit with the revived board took place at the Reed Opera House in Salem. It was here that they were first met with the reality of being a memory institution with no home museum or archival collections. As Carr remembers, “We decided we were going to do an exhibit, and we didn't have anything to exhibit. We had no artifacts, we didn't own anything. We

³⁷ Angela Yeager, “Commemorating a Northwest Journey,” *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), June 24, 2005.

³⁸ “Oregon Black Pioneers Organizational History 1993-2023,” Oregon Black Pioneers.

³⁹ Gwen Carr, interview by Hailey Brink, November 19, 2024, transcript and recording in possession of the author.

didn't have any pictures, nothing.”⁴⁰ In these early days, they were encouraged to seek out non-traditional museum spaces for their first exhibits, libraries and public places that had large audiences without the pressure of the professional museum world. They were offered “a really funky little space” at the Reed Opera House.⁴¹ “It was almost like a pass-through area,” Carr observed, “but they were looking for people to come and do like exhibits or art shows and whatever there.... [W]e were able to talk to them, and they agreed that we could use it.”⁴² Carr was able to partner with the Mission Mill Historical Society and Independence Heritage Museum to borrow archival objects that fit into their exhibit. For Carr, it was a world of cold calls and kind answers. ““Hey, we want to do this exhibit, we don't have anything you know, would you guys be willing to loan us some stuff?”...Went over there, we picked out some stuff, and in the end, we had an exhibit.”⁴³ Through perseverance and community connections, OBP successfully installed their first exhibit with the revived board.

Carr and Richardson were met with constant kindness and generosity along their journey, a true indication that Oregon was in desperate need of an organization that finally centered Black history. As Carr recalls, “I guess I didn't hear anybody say to us, you shouldn't do this. You know, everybody was very supportive ... that became a big thing. ‘How can we help?’”⁴⁴ Even with no compensation, community members collaborated with OBP because it was the right thing to do, and they could sense the greater importance of finally centering this topic. This kindness allowed OBP to settle in their first office space, which later developed into a close and

⁴⁰ Carr, interview by Hailey Brink, November 19, 2024.

⁴¹ Carr, interview by Hailey Brink, November 19, 2024.

⁴² Carr, interview by Hailey Brink, November 19, 2024.

⁴³ Carr, interview by Hailey Brink, November 19, 2024.

⁴⁴ Carr, interview by Hailey Brink, November 19, 2024.

powerful relationship with OHS, a formative part of their journey toward becoming the organization they are today. Richardson had been a long-time customer of Pioneer Trust Bank in Salem. As Carr remembers, “Like I said, this one [Richardson] was fearless. So she went right to the top to say, ‘Hey, you know, we need some office space, you got an office, can you help us find office space, or can you give us a cut rate or whatever?’ So that's how we got that office. So when we opened the office, which was very small, probably the size of this area right here [gestures to her dining room where we were sitting], it was basically a desk, we invited everybody, and that was another thing, I guess I learned from Willie, when you're gonna do something, invite everybody.”⁴⁵

On a long shot, they invited the director of the Oregon Historical Society, George L. Vogt. He showed up and invited Carr to attend a tabling event at OHS. Sitting in OHS, Carr became curious about what it would take to put up an exhibit in that museum space. “So when I got back, I said, ‘Willie, we got to get up to that Oregon Historical Society.’ And she said, ‘Like that big old place? We don't have anything to put in it.’ I said, ‘I know, but you know, we need to kind of start down that road of linking up with these museums and stuff.’”⁴⁶ Even with no archival possessions or museum space, Carr and Richardson were set on establishing their museum presence, and their determination worked. A few months later, they were approved for their first exhibit at the Oregon Historical Society. Carr’s anecdotes on the early days of OBP speak to the power of Black women’s organizing, the significance of community kindness, and

⁴⁵ Carr, interview by Hailey Brink, November 19, 2024.

⁴⁶ Carr, interview by Hailey Brink, November 19, 2024.

the growth of crucial relationships between established museums and new, growing historical institutions.

The Oregon Historical Society exhibit ushered in another wave of organizational growth and museum collaboration. Its setting was the mezzanine space, measuring just 700 square feet. After being up for only a month or so, noted Carr, “OHS came to us and said, ‘Hey, are you guys interested in doing another exhibit up here?’ And we were like, yeah, what you got in mind?” This time, OHS doubled their exhibit space. In total, OBP and OHS have collaborated on four exhibits to date, all powered through the determination of Black women like Carr and Richardson, who persevered and paved the way for Black history to be told in historically white museum spaces.

Simultaneously amid the initial Mission Mill and OHS exhibits, OBP created books, exhibits, traveling exhibits, monuments, fundraising events, plays, an Oregon Public Broadcasting documentary, radio interviews, art exhibits at Bush Museum, and community-based storytelling. Additionally, they consulted with and guided other small museums and historical societies. Their passion project and the main driver of their book, *Perseverance: A History of African Americans in Oregon’s Marion and Polk Counties*, was the uncovering of marked and unmarked Black graves at the Salem Pioneer Cemetery. Forty-three Black people, including Silvy, had been buried there, with many of their life stories going untold and unrecognized in Oregon’s museum scene.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ See Appendix, Figure 12 for a photograph of Willie Richardson at the Salem Pioneer Cemetery kneeling near the monument they erected. “Black pioneers honored,” *Corvallis Gazette-Times* (Corvallis, OR), Jan 29, 2007; Capi Lynn, “Ceremony to honor African-Americans buried in Salem Pioneer Cemetery,” *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), Feb 1, 2007.

While writing the book, the volunteers with OBP decided to also create a monument to honor the legacy of the Black Salem residents buried in the cemetery. To raise funds, they put on theater productions and performances centering Black women and their stories.⁴⁸ At the same time, they installed two exhibits, one on minority trailblazers at the Salem Public Library and another at the Mission Mill Historical Society.⁴⁹ Later that year, they hosted a cultural performance with historian Velma Maia Thomas at the historic Elsinore Theater in Salem.⁵⁰ In 2009, they installed another exhibit at the Reed Opera House, this time at the World Beat Gallery, rather than the funky little space where they had first exhibited.⁵¹ All of these things exist outside the traditional museum space. It was this extra-museum work that cemented their existence as a historical society and paved the way for the new museum age. While past Oregon museums have focused on the collection and physical space as the heart of the museum, OBP conversely refocused its work on people and their individual histories through non-traditional museum work.

Importantly, the Oregon Black Pioneers came of age in the digital world. Unlike older historical societies and museums that had to learn how to incorporate the virtual space into their physical museums, the online realm was always a part of OBP's vision. As Carr stated, "A big thing for us was to provide information that was easily accessible all over the state or all over the country....[I]nitially, that was one of the things that we said, access was very important to us.

⁴⁸ Ron Cowan, "Salem Women Explore Religion, Fashion, and Self in Play," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), Oct 10, 2006; "Oregon Northwest Black Pioneers Presents a Staged Production of I Dream a World," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), Oct 21, 2009.

⁴⁹ Gabriela Rico, "Exhibit Honors Minority Trailblazers," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), May 9, 2005; "Mid Valley Arts: 'Revealing Marion County History' Will be Unveiled at Mission Mill," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), May 15, 2005.

⁵⁰ C.A. Fisher, "Performance on Culture Scheduled," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), June 25, 2005.

⁵¹ Capi Lynn, "Contributions of Six Men Showcased," *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), Jan 26, 2009.

More important than having a spot.”⁵² While institutional independence was a double-edged sword, which brought financial struggle and slowly increasing acknowledgment of their organization, it also left them free to explore Black history across Oregon museums. As Carr states, “You know, that kind of attests to the importance of what you're doing... You're not just doing a museum where people come and they see certain things ... We always saw what we were doing as honoring those folks who were, by and large invisible... You had to make them visible. And the way that you made them visible for us, it became important to make them visible where they were.”⁵³

Continuing their work outside the traditional museum space, they also began consulting for smaller museums and historical societies that valued and respected their work. They soon found that empowering small museums across the state meant so much more than opening their own museum space. In these early years, they held bus tours that traveled around Oregon to tell Black history.⁵⁴ On one bus tour they stopped at the Brownsville Pioneer Museum (now the Linn County Historical Museum) for a bathroom break. Bus tour members were confused —where was the Black history here? Brownsville had not incorporated Black history into their exhibit space and was still in the rut of white pioneer history. Realizing that they needed to tell Black history alongside their existing narratives, Brownsville curators contacted OBP to learn how to incorporate this history. OBP consulted with them and helped establish Black history narratives alongside the existing exhibits. There was power in this guidance and, again, in the absence of an institutional home. It was here at this intersection of historical society and consultation that they

⁵² Carr, interview by Hailey Brink, November 19, 2024.

⁵³ Carr, interview by Hailey Brink, November 19, 2024.

⁵⁴ Carr, interview by Hailey Brink, November 19, 2024.

were able to create inclusive stories across the state, from the High Desert Museum in Bend to the end of the Oregon Trail Interpretative Center in Oregon City, helping museums that had stories to tell but just didn't know how to tell them.

Today, the Oregon Black Pioneers thrive as the first Black-centered historical society in Oregon. They still don't have a traditional museum space, but they continue to collaborate with museums and other historical societies across the Pacific Northwest. In July 2020, they hired their first paid staff member, Zachary Stocks, as the executive director of the organization, officially transitioning the OBP from a volunteer-only institution. Today they offer various online exhibits and other endeavors that celebrate Black history, such as History Maps, lesson plans, and a radio show and podcast called *The Register*.⁵⁵ In 2021, OBP established the Letitia Carson Legacy Project (LCLP) to bring Letitia's story to light. Additionally, their website lists digital exhibits on Black pioneers, Railroading and Portland's Black community, Oregon's Civil Rights movement, and the Albina District in Portland.⁵⁶ They also have created a video series in collaboration with the High Desert Museum, titled "Meet the Sewells," which introduces viewers to prominent Black settlers in Eastern Oregon.⁵⁷ In addition to the digital world, OBP created several traveling exhibits, such as Racing to Change, which was initially shown at the Oregon Historical Society and has since traveled around the state.⁵⁸

Though Black healers and homesteaders are neglected, digital public history championed by OBP presents an opportunity to reinsert these women into our understanding of the American

⁵⁵ "Oregon Black Pioneers Organizational History 1993-2023," Oregon Black Pioneers.

⁵⁶ "Exhibits," Oregon Black Pioneers, n.d., <https://oregonblackpioneers.org/exhibits/>.

⁵⁷ Oregon Black Pioneers, "Meeting the Sewells," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9BaRmHGfR0&t=1s>.

⁵⁸ "Racing to Change: Oregon's Civil Rights Years," Oregon Black Pioneers, <https://oregonblackpioneers.org/exhibit/racing-to-change/>.

West. The LCLP has a Digital History Collection that houses nearly 400 primary and secondary documents related to Letitia and contains several exhibits that tell the story of Letitia's life and the LCLP as a whole. By visiting this website, the curious historian, educator, student, or online explorer can learn Letitia's entire history through digitized primary material and secondary scholarship. It is not perfect. Telling the history of Black women healers is a recovery effort that will always be unfinished. Nevertheless, digital public history presents a beginning, a promising place to start telling stories that have been severely underrepresented or entirely omitted from collective historical understanding.

The Letitia Carson Digital History Collection can serve as a template for future digital history projects, which could be used similarly to inform a curious and unknowing public of Black women pioneer stories. Physical museum spaces are limited by a lack of funding, exhibit space, and systemic anti-Blackness that threatens the possibility of diverse and non-traditional pioneer stories. It is complicated by the consistent failure of memory. The opportunity of digital history spaces is, in contrast, limitless and can use memory as a tool. As the sociologist and historian Karen Fields and Barbara Fields write, this work is "a continuing guerrilla war in which memory is not only a source of information about the past but also a force in creating the future."⁵⁹ Memory activism, the act of bringing their memory back into collective historical consciousness, can be accomplished through digital collections and exhibits, allowing us to share a centuries-long history of matriarchal community care and elevate Black women within collective public memory. Creating a digital collection of Black women pioneer primary sources,

⁵⁹ Karen E. Fields, and Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2012), 271.

biographies, and secondary scholarship could greatly increase their visibility and their inclusion within the popular conception of the American West.

OBP exemplifies the idea that second-wave museums and memory institutions can succeed without an institutional home. Established institutions often repeat tired narratives of the American West. As Amy Lonetree and Jon Daenke remind us, the concept of heritage and history are both evolving linguistic and analytical frameworks, “the study of heritage is no longer about simply preserving the past, but rather the social, political, and economic dynamics of utilizing the past in the present and in efforts to shape the future.”⁶⁰ The non-traditional approach employed by the Oregon Black Pioneers invites multiple new methods of education: temporary traveling exhibits, digital humanities, publications, and performance. All of these methods exist in a different, complex, and newly negotiated relationship with standard museum space, spearheaded by a new wave of museum inclusivity that seeks to establish equity and deconstruct the white-centric narrative that has long clouded museum education and legacies.

Looking out at the Oregon landscape today, the story of white pioneers is more visible than anything else (in land ownership, history museums, curriculum), but there is a deeper story of Black women in the American West that is revealed only through an exhaustive exploration of Western history. White colonial pioneers are often seen as tamers of a wild environment, controlling and settling the West through brute strength and will. This is a myopic view that excludes the midwifery, homesteading, and community care that Black women contributed to settler communities. Community resistance and resilience have deep roots. As Letitia and Silvy illustrate, Black women have been dedicated to community and curative care for hundreds of

⁶⁰ Jon Daehnke and Amy Lonetree, "Conversations in Critical Cultural Heritage," *The Public Historian* 41, no. 1 (2019): 13.

years. Revitalizing these stories through digital history illuminates a long-erased yet enduring story of resilience that contributes to a better understanding of the oppression we fight against today.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

“The history of Africans in America is brutal, but we have made art out of pain, sustaining our spirits with sunbursts of beauty, teaching ourselves how to rise the next day.”¹

Tiya Miles

Letitia and Silvy made a lasting impact on the West in the land they tilled, the animals they raised, the food they produced and shared, the children they helped birth, and the community health care they provided. Yet, they are not recognized or remembered as crucial agents of the evolving American West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through healthcare and homestead, they illustrate early manifestations of Black resistance and community care in Oregon. Birth, while often overlooked, is a crucial space for examining relationships of power, intimacy, and inequality through healing authority.² Homesteading offered social and monetary support. Letitia’s used her Benton and Douglas County land to farm and raise livestock, likely profiting off her agricultural goods. Silvy’s homestead was a more temporary venture, but she made a profit when she sold the land, lessening the later cost of her multiple real estate investments in Lakeview. These accomplishments occurred all while navigating the complex position of Black womanhood on Indigenous land during the expansive proliferation of white settler colonial violence and Black exclusion laws. Ultimately, Black women settlers were fundamental community figures who employed physical and emotional labor to shape the Western environment. Though archival and academic silences erase these

¹ Miles, *All That She Carried*, 12.

² Hancock, “Regulating Birth,” 124.

narratives, we can and must reinsert the work of these women back into our understanding of the American West.

Silvy and Letitia's histories are not homogenous in their contribution to Oregon development, nor were they the only Black woman midwives and homesteaders in the West. As historian Quintard Taylor argues, Black Western women stood at the forefront of change.³ Other Black women settlers also contributed significantly to their respective communities, and their stories have yet to be told. In Portland, Emily Height worked as a nurse midwife and owned several boarding houses across the West. In Albany, overlander Amanda Gardner Johnson labored as a caretaker for the Deckards, a white family that had initially enslaved her in Missouri.⁴ Rose Jackson worked as a laundress for Dr. William Allen and helped his family survive their first winter in Oregon Territory.⁵ Black women midwives and homesteaders also lived and worked across other states in California and Washington. They built communities, cared for settlers, stewarded the land, and shaped the social fabric of early colonial landscapes. Time and overlapping influences of racism and misogyny have fragmented their stories, leaving behind only partial primary sources. As we move forward, it is crucial to continue investigating the role that Black women played in the development of the West. We must uncover, critically explore, and share these stories to disrupt the misshapen perception of the American West.

³ Taylor and Moore, *African American Women Confront the West*, 17.

⁴ Angela Reiniche, "Amanda Gardener Johnson, the Oregon Trail," National Parks Service, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/amanda-gardener-johnson-the-oregon-trail.htm>; Fred Lockley, *Conversations with Pioneer Women* (Eugene, OR: Rainy Day Press, 1981), 210.

⁵ "Rose and John Jackson," Black in Oregon, 1840-1870, Oregon Secretary of State, <https://sos.oregon.gov/archives/exhibits/black-history/Pages/families/jackson-rose.aspx>.

As historian Peggy Pascoe noted, history is a conversation between the past and the present that allows us to travel through time to understand the possibilities of our own society, and societies before us.⁶ It may seem like Black nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century midwives have no tangible connection to Black birth and birth-work today because Black Western midwives were not providing only for Black mothers. However, the racism that challenged and complicated Letitia and Silvy's labor is the same that is fueling Black maternal mortality across the US today. Medical racism follows us into the modern day and is especially visible within the mortality rates for Black mothers and the continual erasure of Black medical contributions. A historical erasure of Black doctors, midwives, and access to medical care has made it more dangerous for Black laboring women today to have safe births. The ancient practice of midwifery, at one point championed by Black women, has been threatened, but its history can remind us of the power and healing authority that these women hold. I argue that we can learn how modern-day problems were created and how we can solve them by looking at the historical precedent of Black midwife contributions and erasure from memory. Black women have always engaged in community resistance and resilience. We must revitalize their stories to illustrate an enduring history of resilience that contributes to a better understanding of the oppression and to open dialogue about race, gender, labor, and power in delivery rooms today.⁷

In March of 2025, I visited Silvy's gravesite at the Salem Pioneer Cemetery, but there was nothing to mark her place.⁸ The Oregon Black Pioneers listed her as one of the forty-three Black pioneers buried there in both marked and unmarked graves in their book *Perseverance: A*

⁶ Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), xxiii.

⁷ Craven and Glatzel, "Downplaying Difference," 333.

⁸ See Appendix, Figure 14 for a photograph of where Silvy is buried at Salem Pioneer Cemetery.

*History of African Americans in Oregon's Marion and Polk Counties.*⁹ Considering Silvy's legacy, I expected to find a headstone but instead an unmarked expanse of grass, surrounded by other plaques in plot number 773, sprawled beneath my feet. Despite her beloved presence in Lakeview, Silvy was buried, likely by the Oregon State Hospital, in an unmarked grave five hours north of her hometown. Other pioneer graves are ornately decorated, some with tall obelisks, pedestals, and monuments to signify their importance, others with simple, yet respectful raised markers. Silvy had the honor of being buried in the pioneer cemetery, but where was her recognition?

Letitia's gravesite faces a similar erasure, tucked away on private property on South Myrtle Creek. Neighbors buried her in a community cemetery, owned by neighbor Benjamin Stephens, alongside South Myrtle residents and possible friends. Unlike Silvy, they marked Letitia's with a white marble stone engraved with a weeping willow and ornate aesthetic details framing her misspelled name. At the bottom, a small quote reads, "'No pain, no grief, no anxious fear can reach the peaceful sleeper here.'"¹⁰ The cemetery is small and not well maintained in the wake of Stephen's death. Alongside the other settler tombs, Letitia's grave became overgrown with moss and ferns. At some point, her marble marker was broken into three pieces, possibly by vandals or simply the passage of time. For decades, the broken marker rested atop dead leaves and pine needles, small plants growing up between the cracks slowly reclaiming the material and pulling it further into the earth. Letitia's biographer, Bob Zybach, made connections with the family that owned the property and visited twice to work on restoring her marker. Nonetheless, today, her headstone still rests behind the private property fence. While white settlers are

⁹ McCarthy and Stanton, *Perseverance*, 124.

¹⁰ See Appendix, Figure 15 for a photograph of Letitia's gravestone at Stephens Cemetery.

honored with extravagant and often grand gravestones, both Letitia and Silvy are subject to different treatment, rendering their burial sites neglected, much like their stories.

Over time, institutions like the Oregon Historical Society and the Oregon Black Pioneers have evolved to uplift and highlight Black women's voices, but more work is urgently necessary. When people consider the American West, and Oregon more specifically, whiteness comes to the forefront of the narrative. Museums, scholarship, and mainstream media overemphasize and memorialize white settlers. People see Black women settlers as an anomaly within this population, and this constant celebration of pioneerism pushes their stories aside to make more room for the tired, repetitive rhetoric of the white pioneer. Deconstructing the white memory of the West is a formidable task because of the grand scale of the pioneer narrative. Museums and academic history present just one way that we can work to tear down the popular conception of the West. Beyond this, I think that the nontraditional museum work done by the Oregon Black Pioneers can guide us to engage in other non-traditional and emerging forms of public history education, including digital history, social media, television and documentaries, podcasts, and short-form media like zines.

Digital history provides a promising future for sharing the memory of Black pioneers, but historians must carry the work out attentively and cautiously in this age of misinformation and artificial intelligence. In the spring of 2024, the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art showcased an exhibit called "Policing Justice," to illustrate the impact of police brutality and offer a reimagining of public safety. Part of their exhibit paid homage to early Black Oregon pioneers to shed light on the often-neglected history of Black people in the state. They featured

photographs of two Black pioneer women, Letitia Carson and Rachel Beldon Brooks.¹¹ Notably, there are no known photographs of either woman. How did they manage to obtain these long-sought-after images? They were both generated with Artificial Intelligence (AI). The photos appeared alone, with no indication of an artist or that they had been produced by AI. I was able to trace the provenance only by emailing the exhibit curators. They responded that they would add language to indicate their provenance, but I had visited during the last week of the exhibit at PICA. What did the other hundreds of visitors think when they walked past these images situated at the entrance of the exhibit? To what extent were these images shaped by an artist? Were they mischaracterizations guided by perceptions of dark-skinned Black women from that period? Ultimately, the photographs raise many questions about the use of digital tools in the telling of history and the growing impact of AI in educational spaces. How do we envision women whose images are lost to history?

Artificial intelligence comes with no financial burden, but plenty of ethical considerations. In 2022, the Salem Art Association commissioned artist Jeremy Okai Davis to paint portraits of early Black Oregonians and exhibit them at the Bush House Museum.¹² He painted ten vibrant and colorful portraits, including paintings of Letitia and Silvy.¹³ All of the subjects had photographs that inspired his paintings, except for Letitia. For her portrait, he relied on a photograph of her daughter Martha, who many say looked like her.¹⁴ He depended on

¹¹ See Appendix, Figure 13 for a photograph of the AI generated images.

¹² “ReEnvisioned: Contemporary Portraits of Our Black Ancestors | Jeremy Okai Davis,” Salem Art Association, <https://salearm.org/events/reenvisioned-jeremy-okai-davis/>.

¹³ Capi Lynn, “10 Oregon Black pioneers brought to life in exhibit at Bush Barn,” *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), February 8, 2025, <https://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/news/local/2025/02/08/portraits-of-oregon-black-pioneers-on-exhibit-at-bush-barn-in-salem/78182969007/>.

¹⁴ See Appendix, Figure 16 for a photograph of Martha, Letitia’s daughter.

Oregon Black Pioneer employees to help further his research.¹⁵ Davis took time and consideration in the creation of each portrait, carefully choosing the colors, clothing, and symbolism. “‘I’ve considered the gravity of these paintings,’ said Davis ‘It’s a welcome weight on my shoulders.’”¹⁶ He especially focused on the eyes of his subjects and found similarities throughout the photographs, explaining that they “‘had this quiet strength through adversity that came through in the photos.’”¹⁷ Davis’s commissioned portraits were an almost \$100,000 investment.¹⁸ Thoughtful, artist-created representation is worth investing in and produces more accurate and inviting results than the unfamiliar and uninformed AI images of Letitia and Rachel. Artificial intelligence is environmentally destructive, vapidly unaware, and dangerously depicting historical figures with little guidance. Instead, initiatives to envision Black pioneers should incorporate digital tools carefully and partner with artists to bring images of Black settler women to life.

At this juncture of the preciousness of historical memory and the neglect of Black stories, Letitia and Silvy are abundantly important. Considering all the aspects of Letitia and Silvy’s lives, we are met with extraordinary examples of early settlement in Western Oregon, stripped of all the customary celebratory narratives of white supremacy, pioneer heroism, and frontier domination. It is crucial that we share their stories as a reflection on the current status of Black women’s access to safe and secure healthcare. Letitia and Silvy, in their continual resilience,

¹⁵ Capi Lynn, “Confronting Racism: Bush House Unveils Paintings of Oregon Black Pioneers,” *Statesman Journal* (Salem, OR), April 15, 2023, <https://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/entertainment/arts/2023/04/15/salem-oregon-bush-house-museum-paintings-black-pioneers/70099753007/>.

¹⁶ Lynn, “Confronting Racism.”

¹⁷ Lynn, “Confronting Racism.”

¹⁸ Lynn, “10 Oregon Black pioneers brought to life.”

provide people with inspiration and strategies to overcome contemporary discrimination and barriers to access. Digital history, as exemplified by the Oregon Black Pioneers, offers a way to tell these stories. Just as historians have questioned the archive and held it accountable for lapses and skewed representation, we must apply the same critical interpretation to digital representations of history. The digital world is not going away, and when used carefully, it can be a tool to tell stories that have long been neglected.

Midwifery and land stewardship co-constituted their community care; birthwork or land ownership alone could not have resulted in such profound social impact. As midwives, Letitia and Silvy not only moved into intimate spaces but took charge, establishing a voice, reputation, and authority. As homesteaders, they also formed bonds with surrounding settlers, connecting with neighbors who served as witnesses for the certification of their respective homesteads. Their stories, each remarkable in their own ways, offer insight into the complex inner lives of Black women settlers: their relationships with white settlers, the strategic legal and financial decisions they made, the animals and crops they raised, the children they delivered and cared for — all in a state that legally rejected their existence as Black women until the late 1860s. Despite the danger and violence threatened by exclusion, they carved niche positions within settler societies and became indispensable and beloved community members, standing strong in their roles as healers and homesteaders.

Appendix



Figure 1: “Letitia Carson Pioneer Apple Tree.” June 12, 1999. From Letitia Carson Digital History Collection, *Historical Images Collection*. <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/416>.

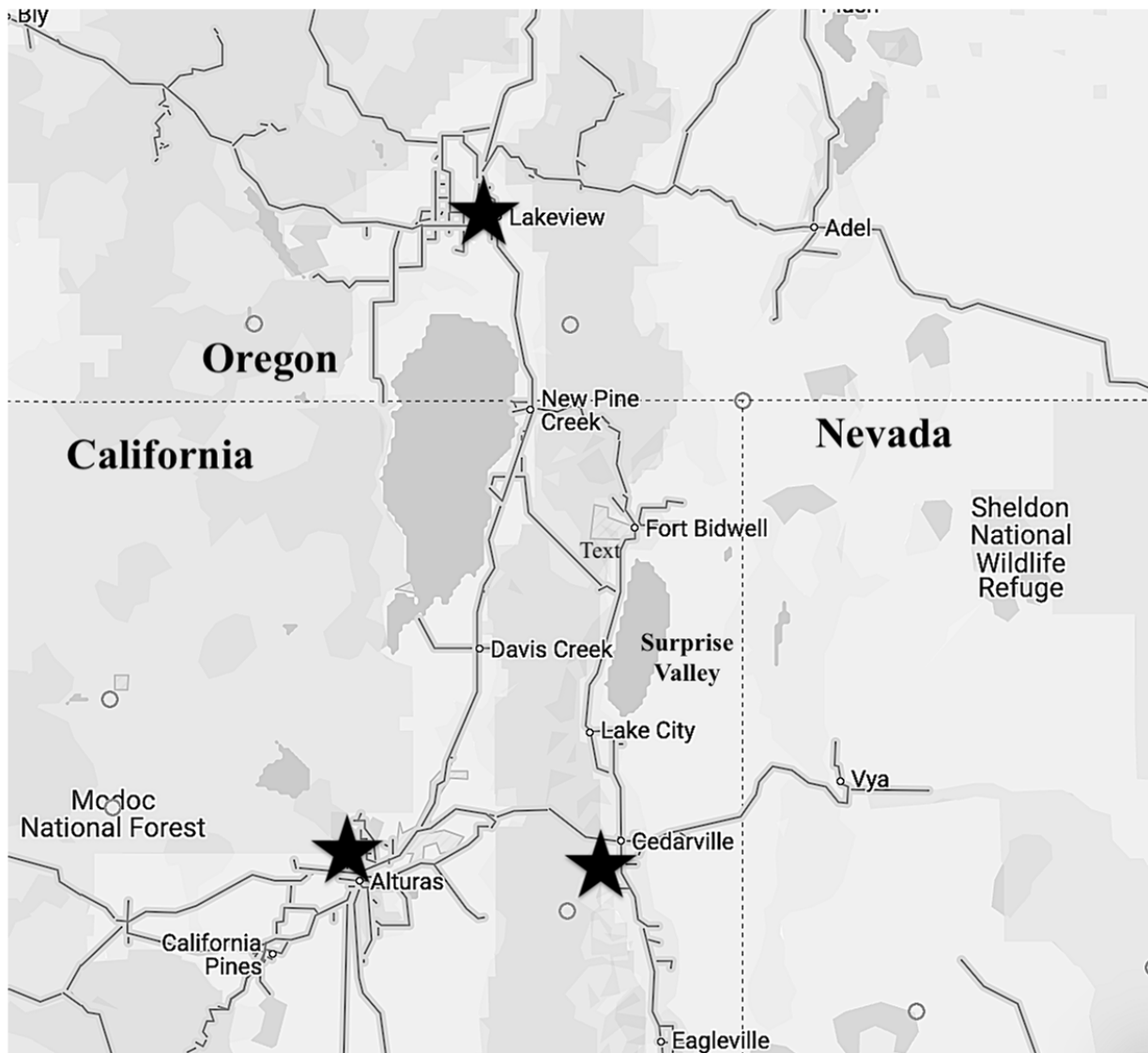


Figure 2: Map of Surprise Valley and Lakeview, Oregon, showing where Silvy lived (starred on the map), created by author using Google Maps.



Figure 3: Aerial view of Lakeview, Oregon. From the Oregon Historical Society Research Library, 24761.

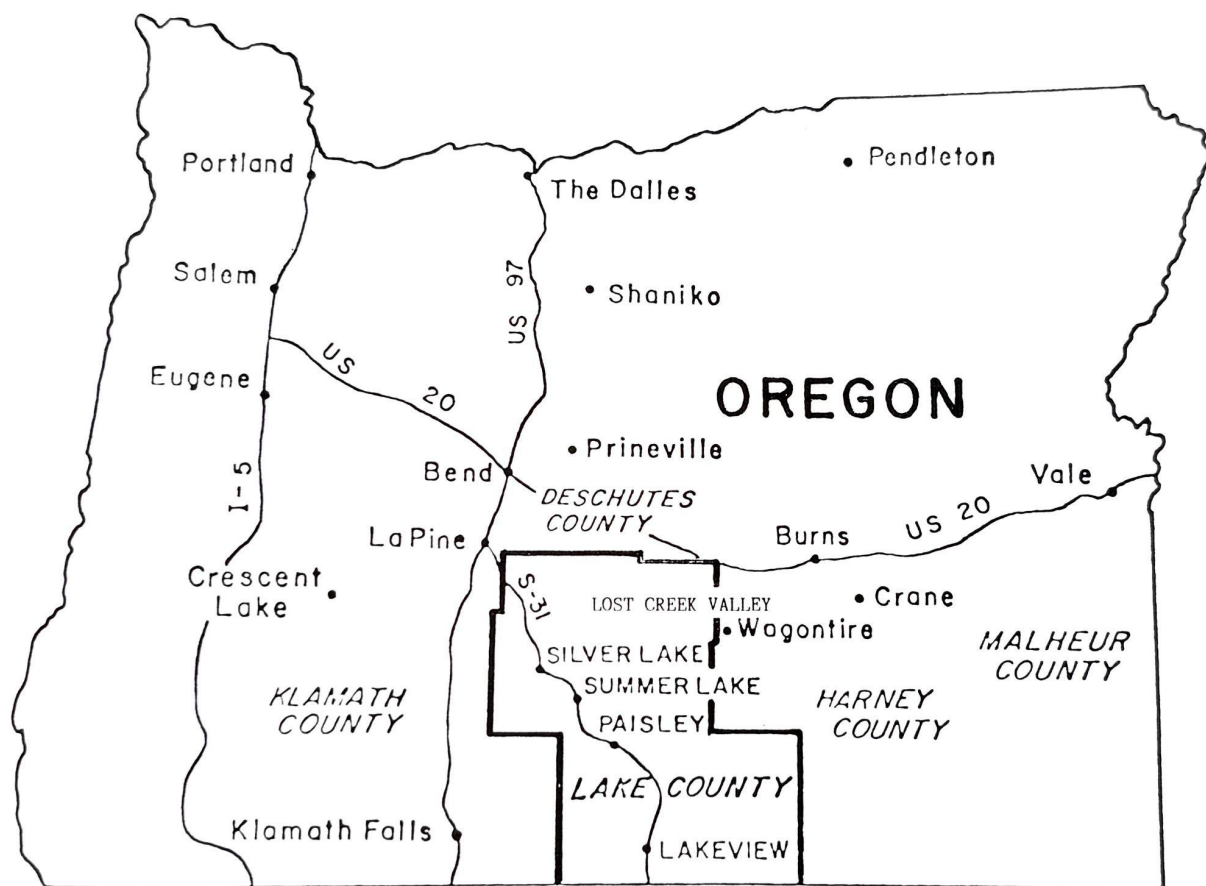


Figure 4: Map of Lake County, Oregon. From Barbara Allen Bogart, *Homesteading the High Desert* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987).



Figure 5: Lakeview before the fire, January 26, 1900. Lakeview, Oregon, Photo file #632-A, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.



Figure 6: Lakeview after the fire, May 26, 1900. Lakeview, Oregon, Photo file #632-A, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

Everybody likes a good
meal and all know Sib



THE
EXCHANGE
25 CTS.

She superintends all o
the COOKING herself

Go there for a Fine Meal
Special inducements of-
fered for board by the
week or by the month

SIB HARBER, Proprietress

Main St., Lakeview Door north of Coulter & Co's Meat Market

Figure 7: Silvy's Advertisement. *Lake County Examiner* (Lakeview, OR), "The Exchange," November 8, 1900.



Figure 8: Photograph of Silvy's home, taken by the author in August 2024.

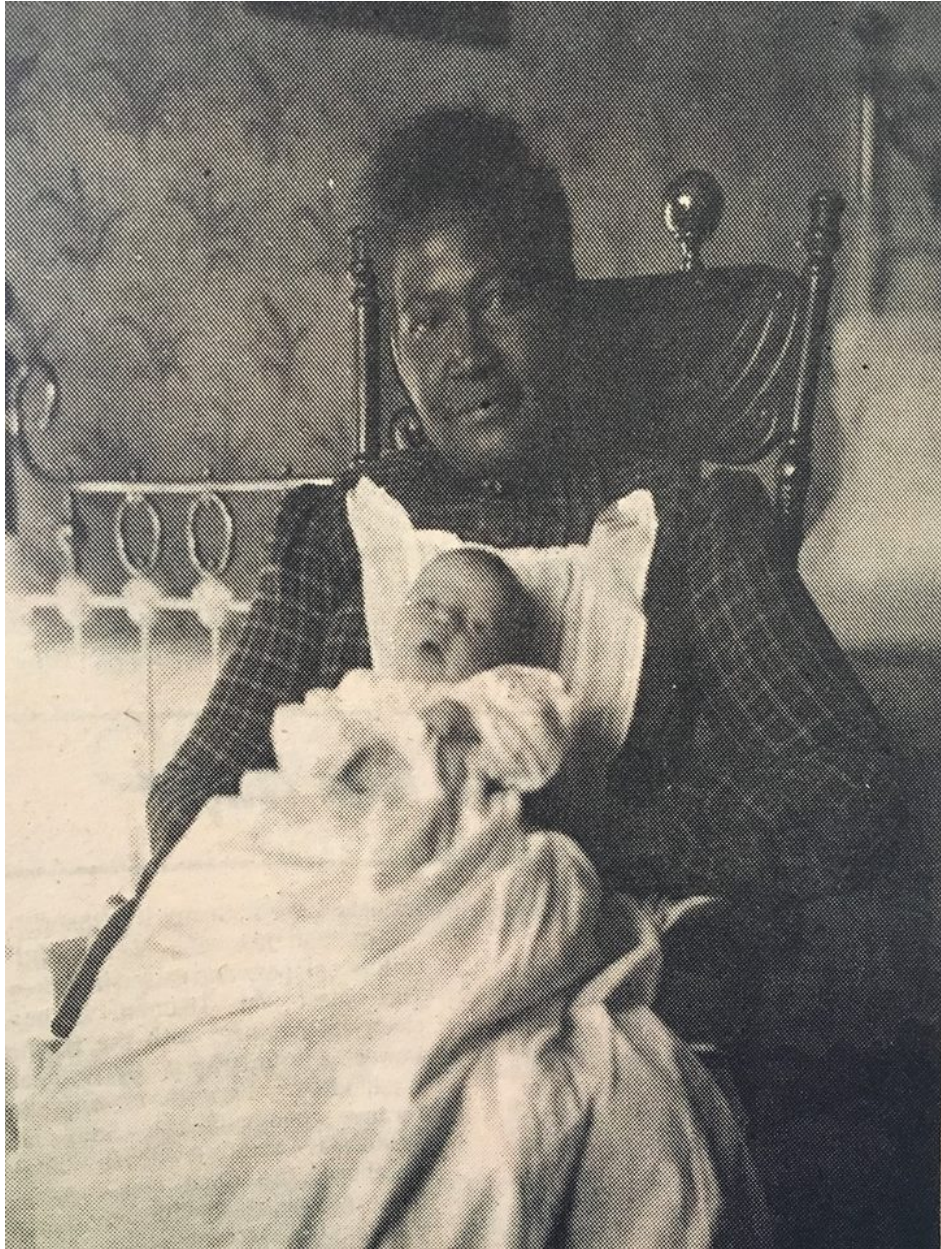


Figure 10: Silvy Harbor holding Ted Conn. Photograph. Lakeview, Oregon, c. 1908.



Figure 11: Women working in the field at the Oregon State Insane Asylum Cottage Farm. From Diane L. Goeres-Gardner, *Inside Oregon State Hospital: A History of Tragedy and Triumph* (Charleston: History Press, 2013), 56.



Figure 12: Oregon Black Pioneer leader Willie Richardson visits Salem Pioneer Cemetery, where her nonprofit organization placed a headstone for the 43 Black pioneers who are buried there, including Silvy Harbor. Capi Lynn, “Photos: Salem’s Willie Richardson,” Statesman Journal, January 27, 2023, <https://www.statesmanjournal.com/picture-gallery/news/2023/01/28/photos-salem-willie-richardson-obituary-oregon-black-pioneers-salem-keizer-public-school/11133981002/>.

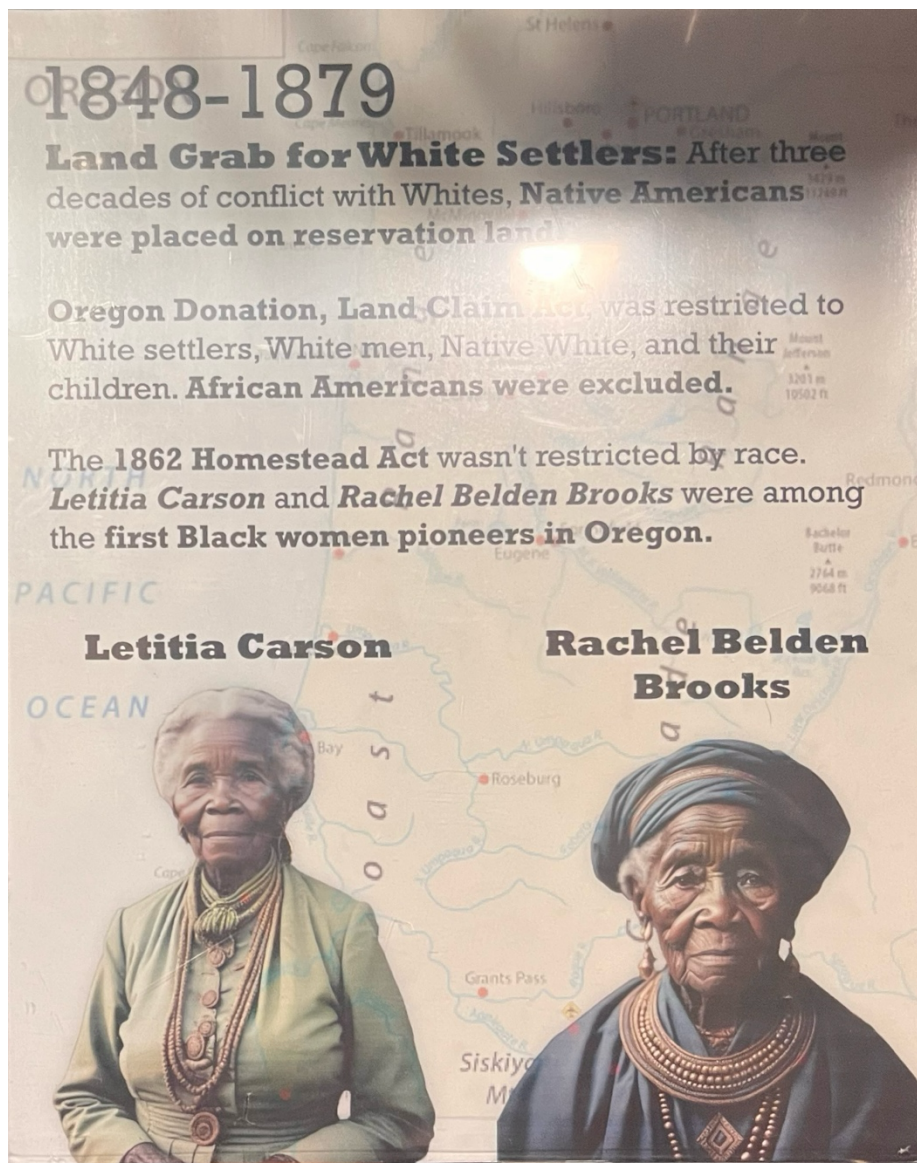


Figure 13: Photographs of the AI-generated images, taken by the author in May 2024.



Figure 14: Photograph of where Silvy is buried at the Salem Pioneer Cemetery, taken by the author in March 2025.



Figure 15: Photograph of Letitia's gravestone at Stephens Cemetery. Bob Zybach, "Letitia Carson Gravestone," December 4, 2014, Letitia Carson Digital History Collection, *Contemporary Photos*.



Figure 16: Letitia's Daughter, Martha Carson. Letitia Carson Digital History Collection,
Historic Images.

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