

April 2015. Vol. 19, No. 1. – Interpreting, Documenting, and Preserving the Precarious Journey of African Americans in Oregon – Kimberly S. Moreland

Today, I honor the memory of those brave settlers of Oregon, and pay tribute, as well, to the native Americans already inhabiting this land before pioneers like my great-great-grandparents arrived here in the mid-1800's. Such dreams those pioneers had for this territory. Some instinct drew them here, a fate, a pulling, a desire for deep and lasting change in their lives. They embraced that change. They sought it out. Theirs was a quest for new horizons, for new beginnings. For a new homeland. They rode. They walked. They staved. They forged. And they died. But they kept their eyes westward. They gave us Oregon.

~ [Barbara Roberts](#), 1991 Inaugural Message as Governor of Oregon

Oregon has long acknowledged, portrayed, archived, and celebrated its pioneer heritage. Settlers and explorers of Western European descent have been the focus of most mainstream pioneer narratives. Deeper within state history, we find that Oregon's social and economic growth was also built, despite exclusion laws and discriminatory practices, through often unrecognized contributions by Black settlers, slaves, immigrants, and emigrants to this state and nation. The all-volunteer organization, Oregon Black Pioneers (OBP), seeks to promote more complex and diverse pioneer stories. OBP is reclaiming these rich stories through exhibitions, historic preservation, and community events that assist to commemorate, interpret, and educate about Black pioneers who were drawn here seeking change, questing for new horizons and new beginnings. Understanding this pioneer precedent is evermore significant as Oregon experiences rapidly changing demographics, gentrification of historically Black neighborhoods, and ways in which decisions are made within, about, and for communities. We are pleased to present the OBP model in this issue of *CultureWork* as arts and culture workers around the country grapple with similar questions about ways in which to best represent new historical stories within previously established narrative frameworks.

Regards,

Julie Voelker-Morris

Robert Voelker-Morris

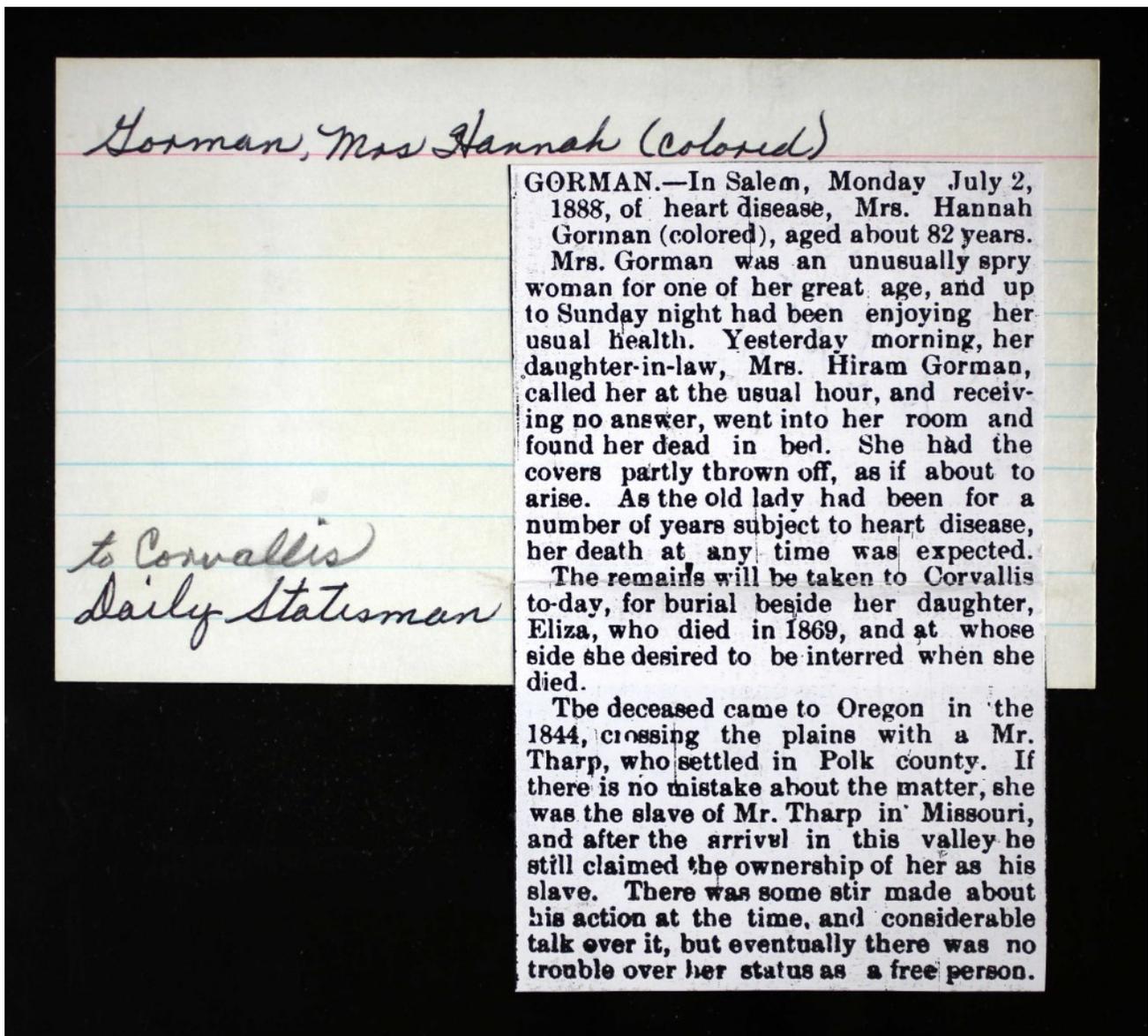
Editors

Interpreting, Documenting, and Preserving the Precarious Journey of African Americans in Oregon

[Kimberly S. Moreland](#)

Introduction

While there is some documented evidence of African Americans exploring the area of what would become Oregon, the permanent settlement of African American pioneers in Oregon occurred during the growth of the Oregon Territory. As the waves of White migrants came to Oregon in 1843, a number of African Americans were among them. Fleeing from slave states, these early White settlers enacted a code of laws in the provisional government that banned slavery yet excluded free African Americans in the Oregon Territory. These fear embedded exclusion laws were primarily influenced by "the Cockstock Affair of 1844" which involved a confrontation among an African American (Saules) and a member of the Wasco Indian tribe (Cockstock) that caused the death of two white settlers and Cockstock (Nokes, 2013, p. 53). Three months after the incident, the passage of the 1844 exclusion act was enacted, and people who brought their slaves to Oregon were required to remove those slaves within three years. Oregon's provisional government and territorial legislature continued a series of racist exclusion laws that were voted for and ratified in the state constitution of 1857. On February 14, 1859, Oregon became the only state admitted to the Union with exclusion laws in its constitution (McLagan, 1980, p. 57).



Against the milieu of racist legislature, African Americans, whether freeman, emigrant, or enslaved immigrants, lived in isolation and with the fear of expulsion. The enforcement of exclusion laws were attempted by White settlers and contested and protested by emigrants, enslaved immigrants and free African Americans that came to the territory. The following quote by Jesse Applegate, ex-Missouri farmer and founder of the Applegate Trial, spoke volumes about the attitude towards free Blacks in the Oregon Territory:

“Being one of the Poor Whites from a slave state I can speak with some authority for that class—many of those people hated slavery—but a much larger number of them hated free negroes worse than slaves”(Oregon Black Pioneers, 2011, p. 2).

This attitude against free Blacks may have influenced the attempted expulsion of African American businessmen in 1851. “The citizen of each state should be entitled all privilege and immunities of citizens in the several states” was the defense used for Jacob Vanderpool and the Francis brothers by their attorneys in 1851 to contend their rights to live in Oregon (Nokes, 2013, p. 56-57). Despite having three people defend his character, Jacob Vanderpool, a sailor from West Indies who settled in Oregon City, was expelled. In another situation, the Francis brothers, O.B. and Abner Hunt, along with Abner’s wife, Synda, were exempted from the exclusion law when 211 people petitioned on their behalf. The Francis petition argued that the danger of the Blacks and Native Americans threatening any unified attack on Whites had passed (Oregon Black Pioneers, 2011, p.10). Abner Hunt Francis, a well-known abolitionist, wrote a letter to his good friend Fredrick Douglass expressing his profound disappointment in the racist environment he encountered in the Oregon territory. He stated:

“That even in the so-called free territory of Oregon, the colored American citizen, though he may possess all the abilities and qualifications which makes a man a good citizen is driven out like a beast in the forest, made to sacrifice every interest to him, and forbidden the privilege to take the portion of the soil which government says every citizen should enjoy” (as quoted in Nokes, 2013, p. 57).

Oregon Black Pioneers

Despite a beginning of constant discouragement and forced disengagement from civil liberties and freedom, incredibly, a small population of African American pioneers determined to contribute to the historical development and advancement of the State of Oregon. This is the part of Oregon history that the [Oregon Black Pioneers](#) (OBP) organization celebrates and imparts to the general public. Oregon Black Pioneers, an all-volunteer nonprofit based in Salem, Oregon believes that the African American experience is a missing element of Oregon’s history. Its inclusion provides a greater understanding of the past and present as well as what the future holds for the state of Oregon. Founded in 1993 and incorporated in 1994, the OBP was established by several individuals motivated by a desire to celebrate and reveal the rich history of Oregon’s African Americans. The Oregon Black Pioneers mission is to educate the general public by commemorating, recognizing, documenting, and interpreting the prolific journey of African Americans in Oregon. Utilizing exhibitions, lectures, publications, and historic preservation to interpret and document Oregon’s African American history, the OBP has formed collaborative partnerships with organizations like the Oregon Historical Society, Salem Multicultural Institute, State Historic Preservation Office, Willamette Heritage Center, Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center, and other heritage organizations. Motivated by the belief that African American youth, in particular, are empowered to embrace their own future through knowledge of their history and the revelation of the strength and courageous actions of their ancestors, the OBP reaches out to school districts for their support and partnership.

Visual Interpretation

Visual interpretation through exhibition is one of the OBP primary methods for sharing and documenting Oregon’s African American history. The OBP has been honored to debut three exhibitions at the [Oregon Historical Society](#) (OHS). The first, *Perseverance* (2011), provided an historical overview of Blacks in Oregon. The second entitled *All Aboard: Railroading and the Black Community* (2013) focused on the work and lives of African American railroaders, porters, and the community that grew around Portland’s Union Station from the late 1800s to the 1940s. OBP’s current exhibit, *A Community on the Move* (2015) highlights Black life in Portland from the 1940s and 1950s with emphasis on displacement and the re-settlement of African American North/Northeast Portland. Designed in partnership with [Alchemy of Design](#), this original and compelling exhibition draws on personal photographs, historic artifacts, and hands on experiences to illuminate Portland’s vibrant Black community. As Portland struggles with the challenges of how present-day gentrification impacts historically Black neighborhoods, this timely exhibition underscores the

importance of acknowledging and understanding that this history is critical to our collective future. Due to its popularity *A Community on the Move* will be on display from February 1 through October 4, 2015. Desiring to extend the dialogue beyond the exhibition, a series of complementary community dialogues were organized throughout the city of Portland.

Beyond short-term exhibits, the OBP has produced two publications that document the precarious journey of African Americans in Oregon. *Perseverance: A History of African American in Marion and Polk Counties* (2011) and *Images of America: African Americans of Portland* (Moreland, 2013) represent a consummation of research collected over the years. Sales from the books help fund programming and operations.

Historic Preservation

Several years ago, the Oregon Black Pioneers (OBP) received several requests to assist in the preservation of historic sites associated with African American heritage. The properties of interest consisted of three (3) early settlement era residences located in the Mid-Willamette Valley cities of Salem, Brownsville, and Corvallis. Formally recognizing historic sites associated with African Americans in Oregon is sometimes met with resistance because it brings to the forefront Oregon's historical anti-Black sentiment towards African American settlers. All of the aforementioned properties were once occupied by African American pioneers who traveled across the Oregon Trail, in most cases, with their former slave owners and, though faced with many obstacles, became landowners in their respective communities. Inspired by these amazing discoveries, the OBP established a Historic Properties Committee that seeks to collaborate with community partners to protect and preserve significant African-American properties and places. Working in partnership with the [Oregon Heritage Commission](#), which includes the State of Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), the OBP launched a crowd-sourced property survey, *Preserving Oregon's African Americans Historic Places*, designed to document historic places associated with African American history. The goal is to help people document, preserve, and share all Oregon heritage. Kuri Gill, Grants and Outreach Coordinator for the Oregon Heritage Commission, part of Oregon Parks and Recreation Department stated that,

"We hope that Oregonians will take a moment to help us capture this historical information before it disappears. Even the littlest tip can open up a whole new opportunity to document the history of all people in Oregon, not just those who already appear in the history books." (Gill, 2015, personal communication)

"We hope that Oregonians will take a moment to help us capture this historical information before it disappears. Even the littlest tip can open up a whole new opportunity to document the history of all people in Oregon, not just those who already appear in the history books." (Gill, 2015, personal communication)

Preserving the remnants of African American historic places can be very challenging because the stories about the people who lived in the building are often more substantive than the architectural features of the building. Brent Leggs, National Trust Field Officer and one of the authors of *Preserving African American Historic Places* commented that, "African American sites are often small and unadorned structures. For the most part they are not as grand and visually impressive as traditionally recognized places such as homes of the political leaders or wealthy industrialist" (Leggs, Rubman & Wood, 2012). A case in point is Oregon's latest entry in the National Register of Historic Places, the Hannah and Eliza Gorman house located in Corvallis, Oregon. This very modest early settlement-era home is an amazing discovery and poignant testament to the humble beginning of African Americans in Oregon. Hannah and



Ninie Mae Locke dressed for work, 1943



Hannah and Eliza Gorman house, Corvallis, 1855

Eliza Gorman, a mother and daughter, traveled from Missouri across the Oregon Trail with the John Thorp/Tharp/Sharp family in 1844. It is highly likely that Hannah and Eliza were enslaved emigrants. Hannah Gorman's obituary published in the Daily Statesman on July 4, 1888 stated that,

The deceased came to Oregon in 1844, crossing the plains with Mr. Tharp, who settled in Polk country. If there is no mistake about the matter, she was the slave of Mr. Tharp in Missouri, and after the arrival in this valley he still claimed the ownership of her as his slave. (*Daily Statesmen*, 1888)

The 1888 Polk County Observer vital statistics identified Hannah Gorman as a slave of Captain John Sharp (Tharp). Captain John Thorp/Sharp/Tharp settled in an area between what is now Independence and Corvallis, Oregon. In 1857, Eliza Gorman purchased land from William Dixon, founder of Corvallis, and his wife Julia for \$200.00. A modest one-story was built on two lots. Later, in 1866, Hannah and Eliza purchased another lot and built a two-story addition (Benner, 2015).

Working with a team of community partners, historians, and volunteers, the crowd-sourced property survey, <http://www.makeoregonhistory.org>, seeks information about African American historic sites and places from 1844 to 1984. These places can be buildings anywhere in Oregon where African Americans worked, played, worshipped, and lived. These places can be sites where important events happened, cemetery burials, or monuments created, installed, or inspired by African Americans. Places with geographical associations are desired as well. Recognizing that much has been lost, these places can be standing or not. The general public can submit information on a user-friendly online database created by the State Historic Preservation Office especially for this project. To date, the survey has identified several cemetery burials including Civil War veteran Louis Napoleon buried at the historic Westport pioneer cemetery and Hiram Gorman is interred at the [Salem Pioneer Cemetery](#). Other submissions include the homes of Cora Ann Cox who came to Oregon via the Oregon Trail; the location of the Soap Creek Valley settlement of David and [Letitia Carson](#); the residence of Buffalo Soldier Alfred J. Franklin; the location of the [Smoke Jumpers of the 555th Battalion](#) (Triple Nickles) who were stationed in Pendleton during WWII; the log cabin of George Fletcher, a Pendleton Round Up people's champion; and, a single building in Portland that housed Dr. John Marshall's medical practice. This building later became the [Black Panther's dental clinic](#) and the original office building of the [Skanner News](#), one of the oldest Black newspapers in Oregon. Another submission is the three (3) generation [Dean's Barbershop and Beauty Salon](#) located in the once thriving Black community and rapidly gentrifying [Eliot Neighborhood](#). The property was built as a barbershop and salon and has remained in family ownership for the last sixty (60) years. More submissions are needed! By visiting www.makeoregonhistory.org the general public can submit any information about sites, places, cemetery burials, monuments, and geographical places associated with African American heritage. No submission is too large or too small.



Early Oregon History Tour

A special project that complements the crowd-sourced property survey is the [African Americans of Early Oregon history tour](#) (info about the tour and tickets here). On May 16, 2015, in collaboration with the [Best Oregon Tours](#), the Oregon Black Pioneers have designed a 7-stop tour departing from Portland's [Unthank Park](#) named after Portland civic leader Dr. DeNorval Unthank and travels to the [Golden West Hotel](#) established in Portland by William D. Allen in 1906. The tour then heads south stopping at the historic Salem Pioneer Cemetery where forty-three (43) African Americans are inscribed on the memorial stone placed by the Oregon Black Pioneers and dedicated to the City of Salem in 2007. The tour visits two Brownsville sites: the [Linn County Museum](#) and the [Cora Ann Cox house](#), a modest one-story home of gothic revival style. Cox's house is significant in that Cox came to Oregon in 1853 as a slave of Emeline Johnson; in 1864, Cox paid Johnson \$10.00 for approximately 36 acres of the land, situated in the middle of the Johnson Donation Land Claim. The final two stops in Corvallis will include the recently nominated National Register of Historic Places, [Hannah and Eliza Gorman house](#) and the Letitia and David Carson Homestead settled by an interracial couple who traveled across the Oregon Trail to Soap Creek Valley. Knowledgeable local historians will narrate each stop.



Final Thoughts

The Oregon Black Pioneers (OBP) exists to interpret, research, and document Oregon's African American history through exhibition, historic preservation, presentation, and research. The OBP's vision is to be the premier resource for Oregon's African American culture and heritage information. The OBP aspires to preserve this largely unknown and rich heritage and culture through collections and programs that promote scholarly research and public use. The OBP envisions becoming a center for study of Oregon's African American life, heritage, and culture. Recognizing the vision will not materialize without a collaborative effort of many; the Oregon Black Pioneers encourages you to join us in filling in the missing parts of Oregon's history. For more information about the Oregon Black Pioneers and our upcoming events please visit our website: www.oregonblackpioneers.org.

[\[Back to Top\]](#)

Author Note

Kimberly S. Moreland, MBA, MURP, AICP

Kimberly is the owner of Moreland Research Support Services, and she has 15 years of professional urban planning experience, specializing in long range community involvement and historic preservation planning. She serves on the board of directors of the Oregon Black Pioneers, the Bosco Milligan Foundation, and the Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center. She has been actively involved in documenting the history of Portland's African American communities since 1993. Working alongside a history advisory committee, she produced a history document entitled *Portland African American History from 1805 to the present*. In January 2013, on behalf of the Oregon Black Pioneers, she authored an Arcadia Publishing pictorial history book entitled, *Images of America: African Americans of Portland*. An exciting project that consumes a large portion of Kimberly's time these days is the *Preserving Oregon African American Historic Places Survey* developed by the Oregon Black Pioneers (OBP) in partnership with the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office. The project collects information about places, buildings and structures with association with Oregon African American history.

[\[Back to Top\]](#)

References

Leggs, B., Rubin, K., & Wood, B. (2012). *Preserving African American historic places*. Washington, DC: National Trust for Historic Preservation.

McLagan, E. (1980) *A Peculiar Paradise: A History of Blacks in Oregon, 1788-1940*. Portland, Oregon: Georgian Press.

Moreland, K. S. (2013). *Images of America: African Americans of Portland*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing.

Nokes, G. R. (2013). *Breaking chains: Slavery on trial in the Oregon Territory*. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press.

Oregon Black Pioneers. (2011). *Perseverance: A history of African Americans in Oregon's Marion and Polk Counties*. Corvallis, OR: Nelson of Meadowlark Publishing Company.

[\[Back to Top\]](#)