



# Difficult Times in Lane County

Oregon has not been a welcoming place for people who are not Protestant and of European descent. Beginning with the territorial legislature in 1844, laws have been enacted excluding residence in the state and ownership of land by people of color, and also making interracial marriage a criminal act. The Oregon Territorial legislature in 1844 banned slavery, which was a growing and controversial issue in the eastern United States, but at the same time, legislators banned adult African-Americans from living in Oregon. They passed the infamous “Lash Law”, which stated that any black person residing in Oregon was to be subjected to a whipping every 6 months until he or she left the state. The law was never enforced because it was so harsh; a new territorial law was enacted substituting forced labor as the penalty for remaining in Oregon. But the prejudice behind the legislation remained.

When Oregonians ratified their state constitution in 1857, prior to Oregon’s admission to statehood in 1859, they again voted both to ban slavery and to exclude African-Americans from living in Oregon. Thus Oregon became the only state admitted to the Union with an exclusion law in its constitution. The exclusion law, supplemented by other discriminatory legislation such as determining the number of circuit court judges by counting only the number of “white” residents, was not repealed until 1926. Legal language restricting ownership to “whites only” in certain real estate subdivision covenants remained in effect until 1988, and offensive racial terms in the state constitution were not deleted until 2002.

Not surprisingly with these obstacles, the number of African-Americans in Oregon has always been small. But African-Americans have lived in Lane County over the years and have contributed to community life. Some came as slaves with European-American settlers, because despite the exclusion laws, no one was

inclined to force white residents to give up their “property.” Others arrived as free citizens and were allowed to stay; there are a number of cases of white citizens petitioning for exemptions from the exclusion law for their friends. Unfortunately, there is little documentary history of African-American life in Lane County. (Stories of two early African-American residents are told in the next display panel.)

There are occasional references to black families living in Lane County prior to the repeal of the exclusion law in 1926. Early residents remember a family surnamed Stone who lived behind the residence of Eugene banker and merchant Charles Lauer, on property owned by him, in the 1880s or 1890s. But by 1929, there were only 5 African-Americans recorded as living in Eugene, the largest community in the county.

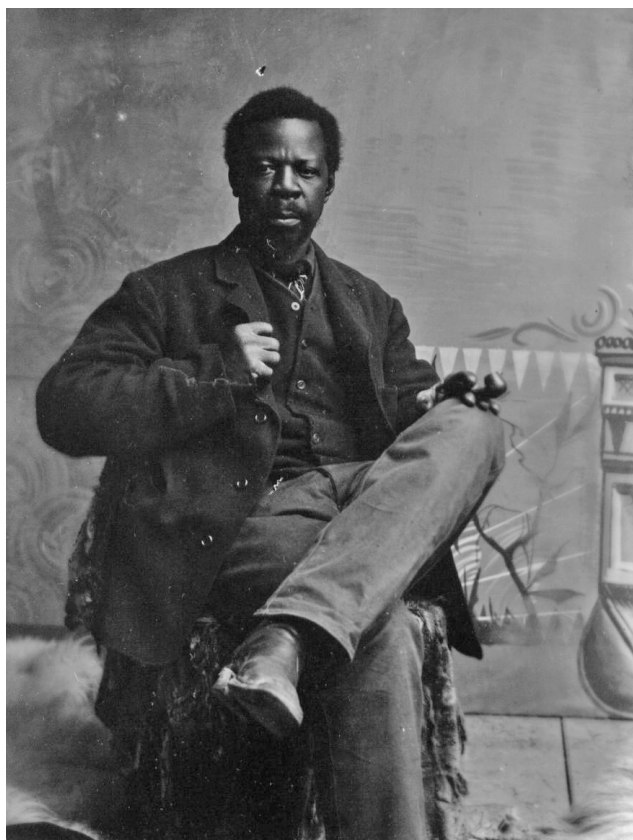
African-Americans began moving into Lane County in the 1930s and 1940s, as Southern Pacific Railroad expanded and provided more jobs. They experienced severe discrimination in housing. Few residents would rent or sell homes to them. Thus they were forced to live in a “Tent Town”—a village of houses with canvas roofs, no running water and no septic facilities, on the banks of the Willamette River under the Ferry Street Bridge. The harsh circumstances did provide for a very close-knit and supportive African-American community. However, when a new bridge was built over the river in 1950, county officials forced residents of “Tent Town” to move—some did not even have time to retrieve all of their belongings.

This time, they were relegated to an area of mud flats on West 11th Avenue. The situation there was so poor that it drew criticism from the Portland Urban League, which called “the Eugene situation disgraceful and horrible.” There had been individuals and groups who had attempted to address the issue over the years, but housing continued to be the most serious of many problems facing African-Americans in Lane County throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Vestiges of the West 11th community still exist, in the form of St. Mark’s Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, a hub of black community life for many years, and Sam Reynolds Street (formerly Sam R Street), named for one of the prominent black family members of Eugene.

African-American performers and visitors, including artists such as Ella Fitzgerald and Marian Anderson, also experienced discrimination in Lane County. Because they were not allowed to stay in local hotels, local black families welcomed the visitors into their homes. The Mims and Washington families were particularly noted for hosting anyone in need of accommodations.

African-American residents have brought many gifts to Lane County, serving as faculty at the University of Oregon, as professionals in many capacities throughout county government and local businesses, as workers who help build and develop our resources, and as volunteers in many non-profits and local organizations. But many still find this area a difficult place to live and quickly move on to cities they find more open and welcoming. The unfortunate legacy of the Oregon’s early exclusion laws is still with us.



Above/Arriba: Charles Cato poses for a studio portrait. Date unknown. Charles Cato posa en un retrato de estudio. Fecha desconocida.

Opposite Page/Página de Enfrente: Photograph of unknown musician. c.1895. Fotografía de un músico desconocido. c.1895.