

PAST: BLACK



The first Black men in Oregon arrived as slaves of early pioneers or were mountain men working in the fur trade or as wagon train guides. James Douglas, perhaps the most well-known early black settler, became Chief Factor at Fort Vancouver and was later elected Governor of Vancouver Island. This powerful position, however, was an unusual one for Blacks to hold at the time.

In the mid-1800s, Oregon banned slavery, but settlers were determined to make Oregon a white homeland. The First Black Exclusion Law, known as the “Lash Law” required all Black people in Oregon to be publicly whipped with 39 lashes every six

months, until they left the State. This law was quickly repealed, but another was established in 1849. This was also repealed but again, in 1857 Oregon’s constitution excluded Black people from having legal residence. They could not own property, vote, or use the legal system. These laws kept potential Black families who had the means and desire to resettle in the West from coming to Oregon.

The Donation Land Act of 1850 further excluded Blacks by granting land only to white settlers, including those who had taken a Native wife. The idea of a white state was now embedded in public policy. The inability to own land created an immediate caste system that would last for generations, marginalizing people of color. Further laws were created prohibiting interracial marriage (with the

exception of taking a Native American wife). These laws, and others, stayed on the books well into the 1950s.

The first Black neighborhood was formed with the rise in Black workers being allowed to come to Portland to help work the railroad. The prestigious Portland Hotel also hired Blacks in the restaurant and entertainment facilities. Families found a home in what is now the Old Town/China Town area. Although the Black Community began to thrive with businesses, clubs, and restaurants, discrimination continued in the 20th Century. Red Lining and restrictive covenants kept Blacks in the NE District and Sundown Laws kept them away from rural areas. By the 1920s there was also a strong presence of the KKK, led by those holding political power, adding to the lack of safety and freedom for the Black community.

World War II brought Portland into the center of the shipping industry and Black workers were recruited to move here. From 1940 to 1944, the Black population in Oregon increased from about 2,000 to 22,000. Vanport was built as a federal housing project for the workers and their families, providing the basics needed in a community - grocery stores, a post office, and schools.

After the war ended, money stopped flowing into Vanport, and it began to run down, city officials called it “a slum”. Action was taken to begin demolishing buildings and removing residents. On Memorial Day of 1948, the heavy winter run off broke the dikes and VanPort flooded. Over 15 feet of water came rushing in and within 45 minutes the entire city was covered in water. Thirteen lives were lost and the people who still lived here (mostly Blacks) lost everything.

A great number of the evacuees went to Albina. Soon more than half of Portland’s black community lived in the Williams area after being displaced from the VanPort flood. The displacement gave birth to a new dynamic community and in the 1950s the Humboldt/Albina neighborhood became a vibrant place with black-owned businesses, jazz clubs, and eateries. Families raised their children here in relative safety, owned homes, and built a life together with others. This

period in the Albina area has been referred to as “The American Dream for Blacks”.

However, it did not last.

In 1966, urban renewal set into Portland, impacting the Albina District heavily. Memorial Coliseum and Interstate 5 both were built across parts of the historic Albina Neighborhood. Over 900 homes were taken over by eminent domain and leveled. The (primarily black) residents were displaced yet again having been given just a few thousand dollars for their home, destroying any hope of passing on generational wealth.

In the 1960s riots erupted here during the civil rights movement and following the death of Rev Martin Luther King JR. Businesses began dying off with fewer customers feeling safe to enter and a slowing of the economy.

In 1971, another construction project took out over 300 more homes for Legacy Hospital. Running out of money for the full plan, one entire block still sits empty. This empty space had taken away vital businesses for the black community as well as their homes.

The downturn in the economy of the 1970s hit Portland just as hard as other cities and this, coupled with the lack of resources and dishonest practices of the government and banking systems, caused the area to begin to run down.

The crack epidemic of the 80s and 90s also hit hard and with the drug wars, gangs settled in, taking advantage of the challenges many young people in the neighborhood were facing. An increase in police brutality also created places of pain for the Black community as sons and daughters were harmed, imprisoned, or killed.

The previous divestment in the neighborhood increased and with an uptick in violence, some people wanted out. Property values dropped so low that an estimated 10% of homes were simply abandoned. From 1970 -2014, Black homeownership decreased at approximately the same rate as white homeownership increased.

Wealthy investors knew the time to buy was in a downturn and offered pennies on the dollar; people with no other options were taken advantage of by people who had the cash to pay small amounts for houses that in the long run were much more valuable. For example, a home that sold for \$6,000 in the 1990s is now worth nearly \$1,000,000.

Slowly revitalization projects turned into full blown gentrification. In 2006, subprime loans had been given twice as often to Blacks and Latinos, causing the Albina area once again to be deeply impacted in the housing crash that came soon after. Mortgage prices doubled overnight and rent skyrocketed. Many had no choice but to leave the area, once again experiencing a displacement of mostly Black families and breaking further apart what sense of community had been left. Many life-long residents have moved to the outer east of Portland or other more affordable neighborhoods.

PRAYER POINTS

- *Pray for the rebuilding of a strong Black community in the Portland area as many have been displaced through gentrification
- *Pray for safety on the streets and an end to rising gun violence in the community
- *Pray for Black-owned businesses to thrive
- *Pray for racial reconciliation and healing from generational trauma

Read about two black women in the early 1900s with very different stories

<https://www.streetroots.org/news/2019/01/11/lillian-and-lena-two-black-women-early-1900s-portland>

